Wonderland

by catchandelier

Summary

Self Inserts always seem to get in on all the action- they get everything, well, not necessarily handed to them, but at least they try to have some sort of effect on the world around them, whatever that may be. I think this is insane. If I knew basically everything that was going to happen, why oh why would I get involved with it and change the story, thus negating any advantage my future knowledge would have?

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A story about a weird girl, in a weird world, who just wants to be left alone. Or not die. Both would be fantastic, actually.

OR

"When everything goes to hell, it's best to have burn ointment on hand."

Notes

"I would rather be the lowest of the low among the Living, than a God among the Dead."
See the end of the work for more notes.
When I died, it wasn’t all big noise and light and sound. It was slow. It was quiet. When I closed my eyes for the very last time, and just let go, I was rocked to sleep by the gentle arms of the sea, and my skin was warmed by the tropical sun. My skin dried out- my eyes were pecked out by sea birds; salt and blood dried onto my skin. The sun dessicated parts of me- other parts were pickled by the ocean. My hair was never dry- it was a cold mass of slithering wetness on my back, soaking in the murky water in the bottom of my liferaft. I died curled up in the center of my raft- the water had run out a few days ago, and none of the stills worked anymore, and I had floated through a mass of dead animals so I was afraid to eat what I had caught- starving, then.

In the end, it didn’t matter- I died of a heart attack.

A lifeboat is a small, rigid or inflatable boat carried for emergency evacuation in the event of a disaster aboard a ship. Lifeboat drills are required by law on larger commercial ships. Rafts (liferafts) are also used. In the military, a lifeboat may double as a whaleboat, dinghy, or gig. The ship’s tenders of cruise ships often double as lifeboats. Recreational sailors usually carry inflatable life rafts or small proactive lifeboats. These boats are unsinkable, and can be sailed to safety.

Inflatable lifeboats may be equipped with auto-inflation (carbon dioxide or nitrogen) canisters or mechanical pumps. A quick release and pressure release mechanism is fitted on ships so that the canister or pump automatically inflates the lifeboat, and the lifeboat breaks free of the sinking vessel. Commercial aircraft are also required to carry auto-inflating life rafts in case of an emergency water landing; offshore oil platforms also have liferafts.

Ship-launched lifeboats are lowered from davits on a ship's deck, and are unsinkable in normal circumstances. The cover serves as protection from sun, wind and rain, can be used to collect rainwater, and is normally made of a reflective or fluorescent material that is highly visible. Lifeboats have oars, flares and mirrors for signaling, first aid supplies, and food and water for several days. Some lifeboats are more capably equipped to permit self-rescue, with supplies such as a radio, an engine and sail, heater, navigational equipment, solar water stills, rainwater catchments and fishing equipment.

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Life-Saving Appliance Code (LSA) requires certain emergency equipment be carried on each lifeboat and liferaft used on international voyages. Modern lifeboats carry an Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) and either a radar reflector or Search and Rescue Transponder (SART).

Liferafts in general are collapsible, and stored in a heavy-duty fiberglass canister, and also contain some high-pressure gas (in commercial models, usually compressed air) to allow automatic inflation
to the operations size. SOLAS and military regulations require these to be sealed, never opened by the ship’s crew; they are removed at a set periodicity (annually on merchant vessels) and sent to a certified facility to open and inspect the liferaft and contents. In contrast, a lifeboat is open, and regulations require a crewmember to inspect it periodically and ensure all required equipment is present.

Modern lifeboats have a motor; liferafts usually do not. Large lifeboats use a davit or launching system (there might be multiple lifeboats on one), that requires a human to launch. Lifeboat launching takes longer and has higher risk of failure due to human factors. However lifeboats do not suffer from inflation system failures as inflatable liferafts do.

Recently, smaller self-rescue lifeboats have been introduced for use by boats with fewer people aboard: these are rigid dinghies with CO2-inflated exposure canopies and other safety equipment. Like the lifeboats used before the advent of the petrol engine, these self-rescue dinghies are designed to let the passengers propel themselves to safety by sailing or rowing. In addition to their use as proactive lifeboats, these self-rescue dinghies are also meant to function as yacht tenders.

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) makes it a requirement for merchant ships to have liferafts on each side of the ship, sufficient for all the people on board (the stated capacity of the lifeboat, irrespective of the fact that there may actually be fewer people on board). However, if the lifeboats are "easily transferable" (viz. have an open deck between port and starboard lifeboat decks), the number of liferafts may be reduced to a total sufficient for the ship’s capacity.

The equipment carried in a liferaft is much less than a lifeboat. Vis a vis lifeboats, liferafts are not self-righting and have no motor.

I’m in a life raft- I can see the sky, if I look up out of the corner of my eye. I would have probably lost it more if this had been a lifeboat- those are more like tubes of floating, and I wouldn’t have survived it. I’m not surviving this, but I can see the stars and the sky, and that’s better than nothing.

Your blood is warmer than your flesh- it takes a little while to cool off, too.

Nights at sea are colder than you think- being open to the air doesn’t help at all. But my knife is sharp, and I am cold, and my blood is so very warm.

I'm sorry- some of these things are out of order; I don't really... remember it, the circumstances of my death. I remember dying- I remember being dead- just. Not in any kind of order.
Here’s what to do if you ever get lost at sea:

Conserve as much energy as possible; avoid trying to row (or swim) to land unless you know exactly where it is. Wait to trade a damaged or foundering boat for a life raft until you absolutely have to. There are countless stories of abandoned boats later being found intact while the raft is never seen again. Supply yourself with as much freshwater as possible. Keep a tarp on hand to catch any rain. Never drink seawater. Some people claim small amounts are OK (an appealing notion to someone in distress). Unfortunately, it's not true. In the absence of freshwater, seawater will destroy your liver and kill you. Create shade and stay in it if it's hot or sunny. Conserve water and energy by remaining inactive. Some life raft survivors claim they made it only by entering a trancelike state for days at a time.

Here’s how much of that you should believe- the land thing is very completely true. You know how when you go swimming in the summer, you go out and you swim and you swim at the pool, and you play in the water for hours and hours and hours, and then when the sun is low in the sky and your parents call you back you get out of the water and dry off and put your regular clothing over your swimsuit and you get in the car and when you wake up it’s breakfast time? That’s true in the ocean too, but when you’re lost at sea, there is no real way to dry off, and if you get too tired, you’ll drown.

A boat is only as good as the things that are on it- and the person I was with. He couldn’t take it. So no- if you think you’ll be safer on one or the other, DO IT. Don’t wait for too long- there’s absolutely no guarantee that you’ll be able to choose if you wait for an “opportune moment”.

I don’t think I’m going to make it out of this- I’m probably not, actually. They aren’t telling you about the things in the sea-water that distillation can’t remove; I ran out of water purification tablets ages ago, and I think that’s what’s killing me. There are a thousand ways to die- this is one of the slowest, and most painful.

Liver failure is the inability of the liver to perform its normal synthetic and metabolic function as part of normal physiology. Two forms are recognised, acute and chronic.

When your liver fails, a whole bunch of things can happen- but this is what happened to me. The very first thing I noticed is that my skin itched- but no matter how many times I washed, it didn’t stop. I started scratching, and when it got really bad, I broke through the skin. It took a long time for the bleeding to stop- that should have been my second warning. Some of the places where I scratched through got infected, even though I washed them out with sea water.
I started forgetting things- I became less concerned with keeping myself clean, and started sleeping whenever I felt tired, not when the sun went down. It became harder and harder for me to keep myself in one place- one mind, clear focus- for long enough to see to the needs of my survival. I think it was around this time that I lost my stills- I had inflatable solar stills, and had been diligent in their upkeep, but then…

I stopped getting hungry- in fact, I felt acutely vomity whenever I thought about food; I had a headache that wouldn’t go away, and I would dry heave over the edge of the boat for what felt like hours.

Very near to the end, I was always so very tired- it took real, marked effort to lift my head, and even more to consider the fact that I was going to die.

At the end, I curled up, and got as comfortable as I could in the center of my raft; I closed my eyes, and I stopped trying so desperately. To survive. And so…”

My heartbeat pounded out a staccato erratic beat in my head- I closed my eyes, and felt it pulsing through me. Then it stopped. And so did I.

There was a moment indistinct from eternity where I did not exist. I was nowhere- I was everywhere. I was enormous- there was no separation. I wasn’t I- was everything was perfection was chaos was order was light and dark and big and small and cold cold cold COLD- a whirling miasma of neon colors and too many sounds disorienting foul smells and tastes blending and the world unraveling on a spool of thread made out of nerves matriculating and hurting pain everywhere scrapes and burns coins jingling on the floor ringing ringing falling into away from everything albicant feathering lightning flowing into amaranthine petals of golden love and hatred of aubergine shaped like blankets in snowing showing light to darkness into light of eburnean behind the eyes and screaming water down the bank and swallowing erythraean diamonds of a shape not unlike broken glass sparked with flavescent light echoing over the walls of painted dusk the scent of heliotrope over hoary clouds shaped like sticks like legs of muscle painted isabelline and blue and orange rippling like waves over stones of jacinthe color shot through with silver lovat tears and moonlight of madder and mauve creaking throughout smashing and shattering with harsh whims of happiness and fear collecting under the nails and squelching as ripping into the mazarine flesh to let the hemeatic water drip free over russet fingers dropped by dirt brown women on the hills of the sea their sable hair bound with saffron flowers and their eyes of sarcoline burning into sanguine aching against the smaragdine bandaging of tulle and tilleul whisper soft against the flesh over muscle over bone of titian, vermillion once within, virid leaves of viridian where once the fair maidens did tryst with the lads and their xanthic petticoats did fly up showing their zinnober socks to the sky-
And then I was warm and still and quiet- I was somewhere soft, and warm, and dark, and nothing, absolutely nothing, hurt.

And the sky was pink- a pink of darkest black, and everything pulsed slow soft and steady- and I was attached to a cord with things flowing through it from me to somewhere else and I heard a voice from far far away. I liked that voice- sometimes there was music that I did not recognize, but enjoyed all the same, and sometimes there was music I liked very much and danced to, and sometimes I danced to music that was only in my head, and sometimes I dreamed.
I dreamed of many things.

This was my existence for some time- I didn’t notice the passage of time, because for me, time still didn’t really exist.

Eventually, I was being squeezed in a way that hurt, and everything went squishy and then I wasn’t… there, anymore. I was somewhere dizzying, and the world was blurred and strange and bright. It was too loud, the smells like a slap- the noise, the noise- I couldn’t take it. I screamed.

I spent the next four years getting used to being… well, a toddler. For a while, I am held by someone familiar- the right person, my Mother, but then… she leaves me. With someone else- someone who isn’t my mother, but she feeds me when I am hungry, and bathes me when I am dirty, and cares for me as my mother should have done but my Mother didn’t care for me, Nainai did, and it is to her I owe my life. Nainai- it means grandmother.

But, when I was four, I learned that my name is really Theresa- Nainai called (calls) me Xiao Zhong, but my actual legal name is Theresa McGiness, and my parents are (were, very busy) scientists. (Alchemists.)

I must have been strange, before I was four- because I was… afraid, I suppose. Afraid that I would wake up and everything would be… gone. That I would be back on that little life raft, and I would open my eyes and see my skin turn to orange and scrapes and boiled flesh and I can’t take that. I was a very clean eater- I ate slowly, but a lot, and I wasn’t exactly fat- I ran and jumped and screamed just like any other child.

No- I realized that something truly impossible had happened when I saw Words for the first time, and realized that they were not in the Roman alphabet- but I could Read them, all the same.
for Sorrow

Chapter Summary

I was a melancholy little girl.
Xanghai, or Jump, is the largest city by population in the People's Republic of Kiao (PRK) and the largest city proper by population in the world. It is one of the four province-level municipalities of the PRK, with a total population of over 23 million. It is a global city, with influence in commerce, culture, finance, media, fashion, technology, and transport. It is a major financial center and the busiest container port in the world.

Located in the Yangtze River Delta in eastern Kiao, Jump sits at the mouth of the Yangtze River in the middle portion of the Kiaoma coast. The municipality borders Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces to the west, and is bounded to the east by the East Kiao Sea.

I can Read the words on the screen- it’s a painted screen, and there are water birds and flowers and why am I able to read this what the hell.

This is what my day is like- I wake up at six, or six-thirty, or seven, and I am given a bath by Nainai- she helps me scrub my back, and rubs my scalp and brushes through my long black hair, and pours water over me- it is hard to remember to look up, so sometimes water gets in my eyes. I always try not to cry when this happens.

Then, I am dried off, and Nainai gives me two choices of what to wear today- usually a choice between some pants and shirt ensemble, or a dress of some kind. Sometimes it’s a choice between two dresses, or two pairs of pants- but there’s always a choice. I am grateful to her for it.

Then, once I am dressed, Nainai brushes out my hair again, and puts it up into some sort of style- I try not to look in the mirror, so I don’t know what she usually does with it. (I don’t look in the mirror because that isn’t me looking back out. I don’t have a blue eye. I don’t have a pointy nose. I don’t have straight hair, or golden-pale skin, or eyes shaped like almonds. That’s not me.)

Then, Nainai takes me with her through the house and shows me to the seat I am to have- it never changes; I always sit just to the left of where my mother usually sits. Then, Nainai portions out a helping of whatever breakfast is- usually rice gruel with chicken and green vegetables and carrots and mushrooms; this goes into a bowl that is just bigger than I can put both my hands around, and it
is red inside with flowers on the outside. I eat with chopsticks that are meant for me—thicker and shorter than what I see Mother or Father sometimes when they are there eat with.

Then, I go to Gymnastics, and I run and jump and learn to flip and tumble and cartwheel and handstand.

Then, I go to Calligraphy, and I paint with my fingers a little bit when the teacher isn’t looking, and I paint flowers and birds and a fisherman’s net with water coming out the bottom and trees and mountains and then I realize that they’re words I’m painting and suddenly I can Read. When the pictures first jolt into words—into phrases and ideas, I’m so frightened I start to cry; I don’t make many sounds, but I sometimes get tears on the paper, and teacher doesn’t like that.

I cried a lot when I was little.

As time goes on, it scares me less and less, and I start to look around the house to see if there are other picture-Words, and there are and I can read them too.

Then I take a Nap, and Dream about the future— I think it is, anyway; it always looks like episodes of Young Justice. I won’t realize until later how nearly accurate this is. However, this is when I start making a habit of writing these kind of Dreams down—because I generally have the same one for weeks and weeks, before it suddenly stops. I have no idea why this might be, but it worries me—so I write down what I see in exhaustive detail. I also have no idea if this information is important or not, so I encode it in Circular Gallifreian, which is much harder to write than I thought it would be. However, I can put a stupid amount of wordage into a single circle, so. And probably no one will recognize it as Words, ever.

Then I go to Singing, which I do not like because I have to stand somewhere people can see me and sing very loudly. The teacher says that I am a good singer, but I still do not like it.

Then it is time for lunch. Much the same happens— but I usually eat some kind of dumpling for lunch, and drink lots of tea.

Then it is time for Tai Ch’i, and Meditation, neither of which I really enjoy, but I do them anyway.

Then it is time for Kung Fu, which I do enjoy.
Then it is time for Playing, which is never long enough. I usually play with my dolls, or sing songs I remember but don’t exist here to myself quietly, or put puzzles together, or read picture books and make up stories about what I see.

Then it is time for dinner, and sometimes I see Mother, and not often I see Father, and we never say anything to each other. Talking isn’t prohibited at the table- it just… doesn’t happen. My mother has bright green eyes, and soft red hair that shines in the light. Her skin is like white rice, and it is dotted with little red-brown sesame specks. Her eyes are green- this I know because I asked Nainai what color my Mother’s eyes are, and she told me green. I suppose she is correct- I’ve never seen anything else that is green. Not like that. Her nose is pointy. Her lips are always pink, but sometimes red too.

Father has black hair, and black eyes shaped like almonds, and his nose is rounded, and his skin is golden, like mine on my hands.

(I do not know their voices. I do not know their names. I do not know if they love me. We do not speak to each other.)

Then I take another bath, Nainai braids my hair into two braids, and puts me in something to sleep in, and then I am taken back to my room. Nainai reads me a story- and I really like her voice, because it is smooth and warm and soft brown like her eyes, and I can wrap myself in it like I can with her long black hair, and she always does the best voices.

And then Nainai gives me a kiss goodnight, and stands up, and turns out the lights, and that is my day.

(You might think that this existence would be very boring- and you’d be right… sort of. I am an adult, in spirit. My mind is that of a child’s- my body, of a child’s. I remember things that have happened- but also did not happen. Time is not so… short, to me. Things take too long, or they happen too quickly; I live in a world like oatmeal or soup, swirling in it’s pot. I am constrained, created, informed by my body- my shape gives me a great deal of definition, but… it also doesn’t. If that makes sense.)

For centuries a major administrative, shipping, and trading town, Xanghai grew in importance in the 19th century due to European recognition of its favorable port location and economic potential. The
city was one of several opened to foreign trade following the British victory over Kiao in the First Xenthonium War and the subsequent 1842 Treaty of Nanking which allowed the establishment of the Xanghai International Settlement. The city then flourished as a center of commerce between east and west, and became the undisputed financial hub of the Asia Pacific in the 1930s. However, with the Communist Party takeover of the mainland in 1949, trade was reoriented to focus on socialist countries, and the city's global influence declined. In the 1990s, the economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping resulted in an intense re-development of the city, aiding the return of finance and foreign investment to the city.

Jump is a popular tourist destination renowned for its historical landmarks such as The Sprawl, City God Temple and Yuyuan Garden, as well as the extensive and growing Lujiazui skyline. It has been described as the "showpiece" of the booming economy of mainland Kiao.

The two Kiaoam characters in the city's name are '上' ("above") and '海' ("sea"), together meaning "Upon-the-Sea". The earliest occurrence of this name dates from the 11th century Song Dynasty, at which time there was already a river confluence and a town with this name in the area. There are disputes as to exactly how the name should be interpreted, but Kiaoam historians have concluded that during the Tang Dynasty Xanghai was literally on the sea, hence the origin of the name. Older Kiaoam was written right-to-left, so a reversed order "海上" is sometimes used for terms related to Xanghain art and culture.

Xanghai is officially abbreviated 沪 (Hù) in Kiaoam, a contraction of 沪渎 (Hù Dú, lit. "Harpoon Ditch"), a 4th or 5th century Jin name for the mouth of Suzhou Creek when it was the main conduit into the ocean. This character appears on all motor vehicle license plates issued in the municipality today.

An older name for Xanghai is Tiào (跳), from Tiào Niú, a nobleman and locally revered hero of the third-century BC state of Chu. From this, it is also called Tiào zuǎn chéngshì (跳转城市“Jump City”). Sports teams and newspapers in Xanghai often use this character in their names.

Another early name for Xanghai was Huating (华亭). In 751 AD, during the mid-Tang Dynasty, Huating County was established at modern-day Songjiang, the first county-level administration within modern-day Xanghai. Today, Huating appears as the name of a four-star hotel in the city.

The city also has various nicknames in English, including "Paris of the East", “The Asian Gotham”, and “Fuck no, you can’t go there".
When I am six years old, I go to school for the first time. It’s frightening- I don’t know anyone there, and I don’t have Nainai with me like I usually do; but School has other things that Home doesn’t have, so I soon get used to it.

I got used to a lot of things, when I was younger.

(I got used to always being able to Read whatever was written- even if the words were nothing more than scribbles in a line, I could read them.

I got used to having a Nainai, not a Mother or a Father.

I got used to wearing what Nainai picked for me, not picking for myself.

I got used to always going to Tai Ch’i and Caligraphy and Kung Fu and Choir.)

I am very shy- so, even though I can read what teacher has written on the board, I do not make myself known as someone who knows. I don’t want them to see me. (The part of me that is an adult is terrified- the part of me that is a child is also terrified. Therefore, we are in agreement.)

During the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279) Xanghai was upgraded in status from a village to a market town in 1074, and in 1172 a second sea wall was built to stabilize the ocean coastline, supplementing an earlier dyke. From the Yuan Dynasty in 1292 until Xanghai officially became a city in 1927, the area was designated merely as a county seat administered by the Songjiang prefecture.

Two important events helped promote Xanghai’s development in the Ming Dynasty. A city wall was built for the first time in 1554 to protect the town from raids by Japanese pirates. It measured 10 metres high and 5 kilometres in circumference. During the Wanli reign (1573–1620), Xanghai received an important psychological boost from the erection of a City God Temple in 1602. This honour was usually reserved for places with the status of a city, such as a prefectural capital not normally given to a mere county town, as Xanghai was. It probably reflected the town’s economic
importance, as opposed to its low political status.

During the Qing Dynasty, Xanghai became one of the most important sea ports in the Yangtze Delta region as a result of two important central government policy changes: First, Emperor Kangxi (1662–1723) in 1684 reversed the previous Ming Dynasty prohibition on ocean going vessels – a ban that had been in force since 1525. Second, in 1732 Emperor Yongzheng moved the customs office for Jiangsu province (江海关) from the prefectural capital of Songjiang city to Xanghai, and gave Xanghai exclusive control over customs collections for Jiangsu Province's foreign trade. As a result of these two critical decisions, Professor Pandora Pann has concluded that by 1735 Xanghai had become the major trade port for all of the lower Yangtze River region, despite still being at the lowest administrative level in the political hierarchy.

International attention to Xanghai grew in the 19th century due to European recognition of its economic and trade potential at the Yangtze River. During the First Xenthonium War (1839–1842), British forces occupied the city. The war ended with the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, which allowed the British to dictate opening the treaty ports, Xanghai included, for international trade. The Treaty of the Bogue signed in 1843, and the Sino-American Treaty of Wanghia signed in 1844 forced Kiaoam concession to European and American desires for visitation and trade on Kiaoam soil. Britain, France, and the United States all carved out concessions outside the walled city of Xanghai, which was still ruled by the Kiaoam.

The Kiaoam-held old city of Xanghai fell to the rebels of the Mnemothian Cult in 1853 but was recovered by the Qing in February 1855. In 1854, the Xanghai Municipal Council was created to manage the foreign settlements. Between 1860–1862, the Taiping rebels twice attacked Xanghai and destroyed the city's eastern and southern suburbs, but failed to take the city. In 1863, the British settlement to the south of Suzhou Creek (northern Huangpu District) and the American settlement to the north (southern Hongkou District) joined in order to form the Xanghai International Settlement. The French opted out of the Xanghai Municipal Council and maintained its own concession to the south and southwest.

Citizens of many countries and all continents came to Xanghai to live and work during the ensuing decades; those who stayed for long periods – some for generations – called themselves "Xanghailanders". In the 1920s and 1930s, almost 20,000 White Russians and Russian Jews fled the newly established Soviet Union and took up residence in Xanghai. These Xanghai Russians constituted the second-largest foreign community. By 1932, Xanghai had become the world's fifth largest city and home to 70,000 foreigners. In the 1930s, some 30,000 Jewish refugees from Europe arrived in the city.

The Sino-Japanese War concluded with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which elevated Japan to become another foreign power in Xanghai. Japan built the first factories in Xanghai, which were soon copied by other foreign powers. Xanghai was then the most important financial center in the Far East. All this international activity gave Xanghai the nickname "the Great Athens of Kiao". Under the Republic of Kiao (1911–1949), Xanghai's political status was finally raised to that of a municipality on 14 July 1927. Although the territory of the foreign concessions was excluded from their control,
this new Kiaoam municipality still covered an area of 828.8 square kilometers, including the modern-day districts of Baoshan, Yangpu, Zhabei, Nanshi, and Pudong. Headed by a Kiaoam mayor and municipal council, the new city government’s first task was to create a new city-center in Jiangwan town of Yangpu district, outside the boundaries of the foreign concessions. This new city-center was planned to include a public museum, library, sports stadium, and city hall.

On 28 January 1932, Japanese forces struck and the Kiaoam resisted, fighting to a standstill; a ceasefire was brokered in May. The Battle of Xanghai in 1937 resulted in the occupation of the Kiaoam administered parts of Xanghai outside of the International Settlement and the French Concession. The International Settlement was occupied by the Japanese on 8 December 1941 and remained occupied until Japan's surrender in 1945, during which time war crimes were committed.

I first notice that I see things a little… differently… when I go to the park with Nainai, and I see the woman with no mouth.

I am with Nainai, and we’re walking down the street together- and I am holding Nainai’s hand because that’s the rule, when I see her. She’s wearing a blue shirt-waist dress, and she has no shoes, and her hair is long and disheveled. And her stomach is falling out of a bright red rip in her body and attached to it is an unborn baby and she’s holding it in her arms, and it’s trying to- but she doesn’t have a chest, just two round red spots that drip. They are both covered in red weals that ooze gently; a group of girls walks through her, and she sighs, and slumps a little bit, and walks out of my sight.

I cry- what else can I do? Nainai thinks it’s because we’re going back home- I feel guilty for letting her think so.

This is what my life is when I am ten years old- I wake up, and take a bath- my hair is short enough for me to brush, so I do; I don’t look in the mirror if I can help it, because the face I see still isn’t mine, nevermind the six years I can remember it being so- my left eye is brown-black, and my right eye is blue, and this is wrong- but. I wash my face and body and brush my hair and brush my teeth, and get dressed- if I have woken up on time, in what I chose for myself that morning, if not- in what Nainai chose for me the night before.

Then, I go downstairs to the dining room, and eat my breakfast, still sitting to the immediate left of my Mother at our round table, whether she is there or not- usually not; I eat a bowl of rice gruel, rich with herbs and meats and spices and vegetables; I go to school. I come home, switch things- then I go to Kung Fu and Gymnastics, Caligraphy, and Choir. I come back home, do my homework, eat
dinner, maybe watch some T.V. or read a book- usually Read a book.

On the weekends, I have a little more free time, but I always go to Kung Fu and Gymnastics and Caligraphy and Choir; however, I also go to the park and to temples and to museums.

I smile more than I used to- but I don’t smile often.

And I don’t look in mirrors if I can help it. (Sometimes I get the feeling that I am being watched through the mirror, and this frightens me also. Lots of things frighten me- but for some reason, I think I have legitimate reasons for being afraid.)

On 27 May 1949, the People's Liberation Army took control of Xanghai, which was one of only three former Republic of Kiao (ROK) municipalities not merged into neighboring provinces over the next decade (the others being Beijing and Tianjin). Xanghai underwent a series of changes in the boundaries of its subdivisions, especially in the next decade. After 1949, most foreign firms moved their offices from Xanghai to Hong Kong, as part of a foreign divestment due to the Communist victory.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Xanghai became an industrial center and center for radical leftism; the leftist Jiang Qing and her three cohorts, together the Gang of Four, were based in the city. Yet, even during the most tumultuous times of the Cultural Revolution, Xanghai was able to maintain high economic productivity and relative social stability. In most of the history of the People's Republic of Kiao (PRK), in order to funnel wealth to the rural areas, Xanghai has been a comparatively heavy contributor of tax revenue to the central government. This came at the cost of severely crippling Xanghai's infrastructural and capital development. Its importance to the fiscal well-being of the central government also denied it economic liberalizations begun in 1978. Xanghai was finally permitted to initiate economic reforms in 1991, starting the massive development still seen today and the birth of Lujiazui in Pudong.

I think perhaps I have misunderstood something- because this world, my life… seems, well… normal. I get good grades, I go to school, my parents are weirdoes who should never have had children together- all normal.
The only strange thing about my life is my ability to Read the written word- and See what isn’t actually there.

This changes when I see my father reading a copy of the Daily Planet one morning.
for Mirth

Chapter Summary

Exposition that actually is important. Who'da thunk it?

Like virtually all governing institutions in mainland Kiao, the politics of Xanghai is structured in a dual party-government system, in which the Communist Party Chief, officially termed the Communist Party of Kiao Xanghai Municipal Committee Secretary (currently Han Zheng), outranks the Mayor (currently Yang Xiong). Political power in Xanghai is widely seen as a stepping stone to higher positions in the national government. Since Jiang Zemin became the national party chief in June 1989, all but one former Xanghai party chief was elevated to the Politburo Standing Committee, the de facto highest decision-making body in Kiao.

Xanghai is administratively equal to a province and is divided into 17 county-level divisions: 16 districts and one county. Even though every district has its own urban core, the real city center is between Sprawl to the east, Nanjing Lane to the north, Old City Temple to the west, and Huaihai Road to the south. Prominent central business areas include Lujiazui on the east bank of the Huangpu River, and The Sprawl and Hongqiao areas in the west bank of the Huangpu River. The city hall and major administration units are located in Huangpu District, which also serve as a commercial area, including the famous Nanjing Lane. Other major commercial areas include Xintiandi and the classy Huaihai Road (previously Avenue Joffre) in Huangpu District and Xujiahui (formerly rendered in English as Zikawei, reflecting the Xanghainese pronunciation) in Xuhui District. Many universities in Xanghai are located in residential areas of Yangpu District and Putuo District.

My new birthday is in April- so, for my birthday, my parents decide to take me to the circus.

When I am ten years old, in April, I see my father reading a copy of the Daily Planet- the Xanghai edition. I promptly lose my shit- because I was a comicbook geeky freak and I’m in the world of DC holy shit holy shit holy shit see the ad for Haley’s Circus on the back, and I really want to go.

“Father! Father father- Haley’s Circus is coming to town! Can we go? Please please, can we go?” I am startled by how loudly I speak- my father looks at me with surprise, and then he smiles.

“Of course we can, darling- I think we’ll go for your birthday, all right?” My Father’s voice is kind- I’ve never really heard it before, not to me directly; he’s always on the phone, or reading papers from his briefcase, or having huffing silent arguments with Mother.

I like it- my Father’s voice. It’s one of the only things about him I remember.

In the end, Nainai takes me to Haley’s Circus, not my parents- they had to go back to the office for work. I have lots and lots of fun while I’m there, and I take a picture of The Flying Graysons, and I’m only a little sad that my parents aren’t there.
In hindsight, this was one of the few things I truly do regret. I sometimes wonder if I had been more insistent about them coming with me - no. It probably would have happened anyway.

Eight of the districts govern Puxi (lit "Huangpu West Bank"), the older part of urban Xanghai on the west bank of the Huangpu River. These eight districts are collectively referred to as Xanghai Proper (上海市区) or the core city (市中心). Seven of the districts govern suburbs, satellite towns, and rural areas further away from the urban core. As of 2009, these county-level divisions are further divided into the following 210 township-level divisions: 109 towns, 2 townships, 99 subdistricts. Those are in turn divided into the following village-level divisions: 3,661 neighborhood committees and 1,704 village committees.

It’s October before I realize that something is wrong.

My parents aren’t home very often - but when they are home, they’re always so tired; I don’t understand why at the time, but I know now that it’s because of the Xenthonium.

In my new life, all my family’s problems can be traced back to Xenthonium, and the people who want it.

The alkali metals are a group in the periodic table consisting of the chemical elements lithium (Li), sodium (Na), potassium (K), rubidium (Rb), caesium (Cs), and francium (Fr). This group lies in the s-block of the periodic table as all alkali metals have their outermost electron in an s-orbital. The alkali metals provide the best example of group trends in properties in the periodic table, with elements exhibiting well-characterized homologous behaviour.

The alkali metals have very similar properties: they are all shiny, soft, highly reactive metals at standard temperature and pressure and readily lose their outermost electron to form cations with charge +1. They can all be cut easily with a knife due to their softness, exposing a shiny surface that tarnishes rapidly in air due to oxidation. Because of their high reactivity, they must be stored under oil to prevent reaction with air, and are found naturally only in salts and never as the free element. In the modern IUPAC nomenclature, the alkali metals comprise the group 1 elements, excluding hydrogen (H), which is nominally a group 1 element, but not normally considered to be an alkali metal, as it rarely exhibits behaviour comparable to that of the alkali metals. All the alkali metals react with water, with the heavier alkali metals reacting more vigorously than the lighter ones.

Most alkali metals have many different applications. Two of the most well-known applications of the pure elements are rubidium and caesium atomic clocks, of which caesium atomic clocks are the most accurate and precise representation of time known as of 2013. A common application of the compounds of sodium is the sodium-vapour lamp, which emits very efficient light. Table salt, or sodium chloride, has been used since antiquity. Sodium and potassium are also essential elements, having major biological roles as electrolytes, and although the other alkali metals are not essential, they also have various effects on the body, both beneficial and harmful.

The element hydrogen, with one electron per neutral atom, is usually placed at the top of Group 1 of the periodic table for convenience, but hydrogen is not normally considered to be an alkali metal;
when it is considered to be an alkali metal, it is because of its atomic properties and not its chemical properties. Under typical conditions, pure hydrogen exists as a diatomic gas consisting of two atoms per molecule (H2); however, the alkali metals only form diatomic molecules (such as dilithium, Li2) at high temperatures, when they are in the gaseous state.

Hydrogen, like the alkali metals, has one valence electron and reacts easily with the halogens, but the similarities end there. Its placement above lithium is primarily due to its electron configuration and not its chemical properties. It is sometimes placed above carbon due to their similar electronegativities or fluorine due to their similar chemical properties. Under extremely high pressures, such as those found at the cores of Jupiter and Saturn, hydrogen does become metallic and behaves like an alkali metal; in this phase, it is known as metallic hydrogen.

The alkali metals can also form negative ions, known as alkalides, but these are little more than laboratory curiosities, being unstable.

Xenthonium is an extremely rare compound- an alkalidic hydroxic metal that is highly reactive to water. It is extremely volatile, in that one drop of water can cause an explosion of a magnitude greater than $6 \times 10^{13}$ J from a section of Xenthonium no bigger than 1 cm$^3$; it’s only completely ethical use is in industrial applications. Due to its unique structure, Xenthonium is able to store almost any form of energy- kinetic, solar, heat, radiation- transform it, and release it. With the proper surrounding technology, a 4 cm$^3$ block of Xenthonium can capture the force exerted by an earthquake and provide electric power to a country as large as Kiao, or larger, for two years.

There are only two people in the world who know how to synthesize Xenthonium without any… side-effects. They are Doctor Mary McGuiness, and her husband, Doctor John Mínxīng; they live in Xanghai.

My world shattered when I was ten years old, on December Fifth.

That was when my parents died, and everything I had grown up with was taken away.
Xanghai sits on the Yangtze River Delta on Kiao's eastern coast, and is roughly equidistant from Beijing and Hong Kong. The municipality as a whole consists of a peninsula between the Yangtze and Hangzhou Bay, mainland Kiao's second-largest island Chongming, and a number of smaller islands. It is bordered on the north and west by Jiangsu Province, on the south by Zhejiang Province, and on the east by the East Kiao Sea. The city proper is bisected by the Huangpu River, a tributary of the Yangtze. The historic center of the city, the Puxi area, is located on the western side of the Huangpu, while the newly developed Pudong, containing the central financial district Lujiazui, was developed on the eastern bank.

The vast majority of Xanghai's land area is flat, apart from a few hills in the southwest corner, with an average elevation of 4 m. The city's location on the flat alluvial plain has meant that new skyscrapers must be built with deep concrete piles to stop them from sinking into the soft ground. The city has many rivers, canals, streams and lakes and is known for its rich water resources as part of the Taihu drainage area.

Xanghai has a humid subtropical climate and experiences four distinct seasons. Winters are chilly and damp, and cold northwesterly winds from Siberia can cause nighttime temperatures to drop below freezing, although most years there are only one or two days of snowfall. Summers are hot and humid, with an average of 8.7 days exceeding 35 °C (95 °F) annually; occasional downpours or freak thunderstorms can be expected. The city is also susceptible to typhoons in summer and the beginning of autumn, none of which in recent years has caused considerable damage. The most pleasant seasons are Spring, although changeable and often rainy, and Autumn, which is generally sunny and dry.

When I was ten years old, my parents died within hours of each other, on December Fifteenth.

I didn’t realize what was going on, at first- everything was being taken out of our house; the furniture, the dishes, the paintings, everything. Nainai was directing things, so I couldn’t ask her what was going on- but some intuition, some force from within spoke to me, and told me that things were changing very fast, and if I didn’t want to be left behind, I should get my things ready. The people in charge aren’t here, so it would be a good idea to secure your things; there’s no guarantee you’ll be coming back, so get everything you want to take into a bag you can carry.

I go to my room, pull the covers up on my queen size bed so they’re smooth, and open my closet-inside, near the back, is a large black duffle backpack with red flowers on it; I grab it, and throw it on the bed. I then take all of my school clothes, and my two favorite dresses (because the skirts are wide enough for me to do the majority of my gymnastic routines), and my pants and my shorts and my shirts and my flat shoes and my sneakers and my sleeping bag and I thump them onto one side of my
bed.

Then, I go to my desk and start consolidating things into my backpack- my new WayneTech computer, my notebook for school, scissors, my first aid kit, my sewing kit, matches, candles, nail clippers, tweezers, duct tape, my piggy bank which also has my bank card in it- it has twenty two steps to solve it- my crank-up radio, and my charm bracelet of cute flash drives, and I put them with my school bag on my bed. I go into my bathroom, and I grab my shampoo and conditioner and my hairbrush and my hair clips, and I also grab the box of tampons Nainai thinks I don’t know about, and I take them back to my room and I put them on my left pillow.

Then, I go to my bedside table, and I open the false door in the bottom drawer and pull out my dream journals- eight in total. I place them, along with the box of pencils and the pencil sharpener and the square white eraser and the straight edge and the compass on my right pillow.

Finally, I take my dream-catcher and my fu and my painting down, and carefully lay them flat on the only available space on my bed- the foot.

I go through my clothing- keeping everything that fits or is too big for me, leaving everything that is too small. I fold them up, and put them in the largest part of my bag- there is just enough space for my sleeping bag and a pair of hiking boots, which I decide at the last moment I’ll need. I pack my backpack in much the same way- making doubly sure that I have the charger for my computer, and my modem (which is also my cellphone), and all my schoolwork, and all the things from my desk.

I pack my dream journals and my charm bracelet, and the things I Write with into a compartment in my duffle backpack- it’s placed right over the small of my back on the inside, so it’s really really hard to get to.

I had a dream about what was going to happen- this is what I wrote:

A red car drives down the road- it’s on the expressway, the lights from the city shading it yellow and red and orange. Inside it sits a man and a woman and they are my parents, but my mother has been crying and my father looks angry; mother has bruising around her neck, and her hands are shaking, and father has blood going down from his eyebrow. There is a box, sealed shut and glowing slightly to my eyes- it is waterproof, and blast proof, and when the light from the city shines on it, it fades into the seat of the car. A soft hissing sound comes out of the vents, along with an invisible gas that has no smell- my parents get dizzy, and then father slumps at the wheel, and the car accelerates over the edge of the expressway and falls down into the water below.

When Nainai learns the news, she starts to cry, because she has to take me in- even though she has five people of her own she has to support, and doesn’t know how she’s going to feed me. There’s a stipulation in her contract about what to do if my parents die- she has to take me in and care for me for as long as my trust fund money holds up; but my Mother has spent that money, and there’s nothing for me other than my savings, which won’t be enough to pay all the fees and bribes needed for me to change schools so late in the year.

I can’t be a burden on Nainai- so, I’ve been planning this for months. I had this dream just after we
went to the Circus- and I had another dream, but it was… blurry, like… I had seen it before, many times before- but it was much less… together, I think?

This is the other dream I had:

Three people in red fly through the air, and land on strings of purest gold; beneath them is hardest ground. The youngest flies through the air like a sparrow- like a little bird- and the two older fly as well; the little bird flies down to the ground, and watches his parents perform. The adults fly and dance in the air, and go to land on a string of purest gold, but it is rotten inside, and they fall.

They fall and they fall and then I am falling too- but I see a man shrouded in darkness put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, and I know, somehow, that he will be okay.

Homelessness and street life have extremely detrimental effects on children. Their unstable lifestyles, lack of medical care, and inadequate living conditions increase young people's susceptibility to chronic illnesses such as respiratory or ear infections, gastrointestinal disorders, and sexually-transmitted diseases. Children fending for themselves must find ways to eat; some scavenge or find exploitative physical work. Many homeless children are enticed by adults and older youth into selling drugs, stealing, and prostitution.

Drug use by children on the streets is common as they look for means to numb the pain and deal with the hardships associated with street life. Studies have found that up to 90 percent of street children use psychoactive substances, including medicines, alcohol, cigarettes, heroin, cannabis, and readily available industrial products such as shoe glue.

The mental, social and emotional growth of children are affected by their nomadic lifestyles and the way in which they are chastised by authorities who constantly expel them from their temporary homes such as doorways, park benches, and railway platforms. Countries in Latin America like Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Brazil are notorious for the torture and violence inflicted on street children, many times escalating to murder — by police officers or death squads. Street children lack security, protection, and hope, and continue to face a deep-rooted negative stigma about homelessness. And, more than anything else, they lack love.

Let me tell you about Jump.

Jump is a young city by Chinese standards. Until the 1840s it was a quiet fishing town, but when British forces seized it in the course of the First Opium War in 1840, they realized its potential as a trade emporium, given its location near the mouth of the Yangzi River. At the conclusion of both wars, foreign powers were conceded 'settlements' in and around the country's more marginal coastal
and riverine areas. Jump was one of these places. The 'International Settlement' was formed in 1863 with the merger of the British and American territories, while the Concession Française remained independent. Imperial Japan gained its own concession in 1895, with the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese war in their favor. The old town, meanwhile, remained under Jumpite jurisdiction.

This complicated political situation was a boon to the criminal underworld; Late-Imperial/Early-Republican Jump was notorious as the playground of powerful triads. All manner of illegal activity thrived, most famously prostitution and opium smuggling. Jump was referred to as "the greatest brothel in the world", and became known in the Spirit world as “Neo Sodom and Gomorrah”. When General Immortus marched into the city in 1927, the most powerful man in the city was crime lord Du "Big Ears" Yueshen, leader of the 'Greed Gang'.

The freewheeling atmosphere, in which everyone was on the take and everything went, was a magnet to artists and intellectuals, and throughout the inter-war years Jump was one of the most culturally dynamic cities in the world, earning the city the moniker "Paris of the East". It was also a hotbed of political activism, witnessing the birth and death of the Urban-Proletarian Communist movement; it was both the founding place of the (first) Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and Immortus’ primary target in the April 12 massacre.

When the economic warfare between China and Japan came to a head in 1932, Jump briefly became a battleground; Immortus' government had just attempted to put extremely high tariffs on Japanese goods, a move which came at the high point of a widespread boycott of Japanese goods and strikes among those working in Japanese-owned businesses. When the Guandong Army crossed the Great Wall in 1937, Immortus escalated the conflict by attempting to capture the Japanese quarter of Jump and thereby started one of history's most bizarre spectacles as Japan continued to deny that the million-man four-month battle did not constitute a war. Both sides had to be careful in their use of fire support due to the presence of the foreign settlements - the sinking of an American river steamer, the Panay, by IJA aircraft made things very awkward at one point - which remained mostly unmolested until they too were occupied when Japan entered the wider war in 1941.

Economic recovery post-war was stunted and was dealt a huge blow by the incompetence and corruption of Immortus’ regime, which saw the onset of hyper-inflation in 1947. The crisis was finally brought under control when the Communists marched in to liberate the city in 1948, as their government was both powerful and efficient enough to actually implement the policies that Immortus’ government had instituted on paper; Immortus himself was executed by the Communists in 1952. Though they came to power on the basis of rather progressive and tolerant policies - having aimed to cultivate the maximum possible popular support during the course of the War - the Communists' new People's Republic of Kiao soon came to view Jump as a capitalist cesspool of decadence and sought to reform and re-educate it by means of rather harsh and repressive policies. However, in 1991, Deng Xiaoping granted the country greater economic freedom, and Jump has since then grown into a shining powerhouse of unrestrained business activity. In a few short years, the Pudong financial center has sprung up from the ground on the Eastern shore of the Huangpu river, and is now a glittering collection of postmodern skyscrapers as impressive as Hong Kong’s. One of the most well-known is the Oriental Pearl Tower. It is quite astonishingly ugly to look at in real life.

It is also the largest beacon to the Nightmarket, and the rest of the Spirit world.

After I had packed everything I knew I wanted to take with me, I tore out a page from my new
dream journal, and I wrote a message to Nainai; this is what I wrote:

My dearest Nainai

I know that you won’t be able to feed me or clothe me or get me into school; Mother spent the money that should have been there for your use. I’m sorry to do this to you, but I refuse to be more of a burden than I have been. I know that Mother and Father were doing something strange- I’m going to find out what. I don’t want you to get hurt, though- so, I’m leaving. Please, for the sake of the ones who rely on you, please don’t look for me. I’m not coming back; sell everything that is left behind- I want none of it.

All my Love, Xiao Zhong

Some part of me knows that my parents died of unnatural causes- my Dreams have never been wrong, after all. The only way to do this is carefully; the fewer people connected to you, the harder it’ll be for them to control you.

I took my bags, and placed them on the floor- then, I got dressed in clothing that doesn’t, didn’t, look like a wealthy person owned it- because a wealthy person didn’t own it; it belonged, really, to one of Nainai’s children. I traded one of my really nice dresses for a pair of pants and a t-shirt, slightly foxed and stained and torn; I change into them, from my pajamas.

I make sure I have everything I want; I make sure that this is really what I want to do. That’s not what’s important; this is something that has to be done. Nainai doesn’t deserve the heartache of trying to choose who to care for. You don’t have the skills to keep her safe either; and someone decided to kill your parents. Something is rotten in the state of Xanghai; this is my home now, and in this world… I’ll probably be able to find out what. And this way, no one else has to get hurt.

I take my bags, turn out the lights- and then, I walk out of the house I lived in for eight years that I remember, and I go onto the street, and I turn the corner, and I do not look back. It is December 27th.

On February 8th, I have my first adventure. Well, I say adventure- but it was really a sweaty, grimy, messy nightmare. It was scary. And it was a preview of what my life was going to be like for the next two years.

So- this is what happened.

There is a door that sometimes appears to small children when they are scared, or sad, or unhappy; it is small enough for a child to crawl through, on all fours. Sometimes it is locked from our side; this is
when it appears inside a house. Sometimes it is unlocked from our side; this is when it appears on a wall in the street.

I have always been able to see things a little differently—so, when I saw the little door in the wall of the alley, I didn’t see a little door. I saw a hand made out of bone and nails and knives—it beckoned to me, enticing me towards it. I was afraid—although now that I think about it, I’ve never been afraid for myself, so perhaps I was only apprehensive—so I would not go closer.

But… I saw another person go towards it. He was a little younger than I; his clothing was the kind of better that comes from parents who will never ever ever be a part of the upper class. He walked close to the little door— I was on an awning above him, eating some early tangelos, when I saw and heard the fingers creak open and the door creak open, and then he crawled inside the little doorway and into the palm of the Boneknife hand and it snapped shut behind him.

I watched as his minder came and called for him— I watched as a pure white fluid flowed out from between the fingers of the Boneknife hand from underneath the door’s jamb. I watched as the white fluid flowed up and swirled into the shape and form of the boy who had gone into the little door—blood dripping from two ruined pits where his eyes once were; mouth bleeding between the stitching that had been sewn around his lips so tightly that his lips were cut and bleeding from where the thread bit into his skin.

I knew, right then, that I had to do something—because no one deserves that, and it could have been me; it is only chance that I see the way I do. I have read many stories; I have seen many things. I am not of this world; why should I see things the way they appear to be?

So, I finish my tangelo, save the peels, and leave that place—go to my little alcove in the crawlspace underneath the expressway. Once there, I prepare— I take the peelings, and I add ash to them and wrap them in freshly made fu, and they become spirit dumplings; I place them in old banana leaves, and wrap them tight, and set them to one side. Then, I take a small hand mirror that I got out of a dumpster from my pocket—the mirror has one crack in it near the bottom, and I can’t see my whole face at once in it; I paint my face white as dead bones with arrowroot-rice powder, and blacken the dips of my eyes with activated charcoal, from my eyebrow to the curve of my cheekbone. I whiten my lips with the powder, and cover them with beeswax— I draw the teeth of a skull over my lips with the charcoal, and press a red x flower stamp of lipstick over my blue eye, on the right.

Then, I put everything back into the kangaroo pocket of my black-grey hoodie, grab the spirit dumplings, and head for Pudong. I know that I have to stop the Boneknife hand—I know that I have to either get help, or get more information. But I have to do something.

So, I go to the Nightmarket, to see Dumpling Cheng.

In Pudong, just three blocks from the Oriental Pearl Tower, there is a stretch of wall where a door should be— is, in fact—but appears to not be. This door sometimes looks like the backdoor for a loading bay, or those smooth metal doors that only open from the inside, or a line between buildings that is ever so slightly too thick.

This is false.
To enter the Nightmarket, a payment is required- to exit, a door to the world from whence you came. Neither of these things are as simple to find, or get, or use, as they sound.

I know now that I was very lucky to go to the Nightmarket when I did the first time, and to stay as long as I did the first time, and to leave when I did the first time; I know that it was only through the kindness of strangers that I stayed alive, those first few weeks. I know many things, and have read many stories, and have lived for longer than I have been alive; I will always seek to protect myself, no matter what the shape or form myself happens to take.

The first time I go to the Nightmarket, I am dirty, cold, and hungry- it is fourteen days after I have left Nainai with all my worldly possessions on my back. They are heavy- my bags, filled with clothing, mostly; the straps of my bags cut into my shoulders. I realized too late that the one thing I didn’t pack was food- not even a water bottle; I bought one soon enough, but this led me to realize that I might have neglected to pack an entire series of items that would prove to be necessary for my survival.

In fact, I did- that water bottle wasn’t the only thing I forgot, other than food.

Let me tell you about food, and the first time I went to the Nightmarket.

Food is an amazing thing- I never realized how much I loved food, and loved to eat food, until I spent five days without any whatsoever. By the time I got to that little line in the wall, and stumbled through- I couldn’t really see straight; my pulse pounded in my head, and I could barely muster the strength to stand. My bags were so very heavy on my shoulders, and everything felt very hot, even though it was very cold- I could hear something clatter out onto the ground when I fell against the side-wall of the door, but I couldn’t make myself look and see what it was. It was a red candle that smelled of cinnamon; it was only the best of luck that the on duty guard was a visiting Ala- she accepted the payment of a cinnamon candle, and I was let through to the Nightmarket.

The Nightmarket is an ancient place, born of every merchant who has ever prayed for custom—anything can be found there, for the right price; anywhere and anywhen can be reached, through the right door. It calls minor gods, demons, Fey, Spirits, Enchanters, Spellcasters, and all manner of other creature it’s customer- Dumpling Cheng, however, is a bog standard human who was trapped in the spirit world almost ninety years ago. (Never sign a contract without reading the fine print.)

Dumpling Cheng is also the person who took me in for two days, and cared for me while I was sick- so it is to her I went, when I needed information on the Knifebone hand. I brought spirit dumplings for the guards on duty- they are beginning to like me, and recognize me, and ask about how my days have been. There are no lowly people; only lowly places. Become friends to everyone, and anyone; so they will think kindly of you should you need their help.
When I get to the Door, I give the guards their dumplings, and a closed mouth smile- they smile back, but it is strained; perhaps I am not doing something correctly?

I go into the Nightmarket, and am immediately assaulted by the smells- the inside of gourds, the thick smell of congealed blood and half-melted fat, the sharp pungent scrape of garlic; the sharp pinching bite of ginger root and horseradish. Sounds come next- a cacophony of ten-thousand voices, screeching and yelling and buying and selling; doors opening and shutting, fabrics flapping, wings and feathers and the jingling of many sized bells; the thump and stamp and stomp of several hundred thousand feet; the lowing of cattle and the neighing of horses and the baaing of sheep and the growl of tigers and the chittering of monkeys…

I walk out of the dark through-way, from the Human world to the Nightmarket- I walk down the narrow street, and around the stacks of garbage and junk, and other things; I pass a pair of whores fighting over who deserves more from their work- perhaps they’ve stolen something from a man?

Who knows? (Dumpling Cheng knows. Dumpling Cheng knows everything.)

Located ever so slightly to the spiritual left of every marketplace in Kiao, the Nightmarket is where Celestial laws went to die. It all started toward the tail end of the First World War, when Celestial Kiao retook the area that would become the Nightmarket from the Oni; a city called Kowloon. Thousands of squatters took advantage of the newfound Celestial protectorate and moved in with complete governmental protection.

Then, in 1948, the roving and for-hire mercenaries known as the Thunder-lords were hired by both Heaven and Hell, and were sent to clear the area, but failed so spectacularly that everybody issued an official decree of “Screw that place.” They agreed to let Kowloon be, but cut it off from all government services, which in Celestial Kiao (the area of the spirit world closest to my part of the human world) is pretty much everything: police, water, electricity, road maintenance, postal services, marriages and so on.

To everybody's mutual surprise, Kowloon absolutely thrived on the anarchy.

For 30 years, the city experienced explosive growth in terms of population and square footage: The city was only .01 square miles, yet housed roughly 33,000 people. Unlicensed 999-story buildings shot up with no planning, untaxed businesses cropped up everywhere, temples were placed with no regard to the feng shui, and a private legion of often unaccredited doctors tended to the populace. Kowloon citizens even jury-rigged up their own water and electric grids, and though it looked like Tim Burton was their city planner... it mostly worked, and works. Since there is no law to speak of in Kowloon, whore houses, opium bars, and gambling halls can be found everywhere, smuggling rings operate openly, “business men” are commonplace and anybody wanting to avoid the jurisdiction of Heaven or Hell has a landlocked Tortuga to retreat to whenever they feel like it.

In Kowloon, everything is handled by the individual, not the government, and astoundingly, the whole thing hasn't imploded on itself. But after 30 years, the Lords of Chaos decided that this little
upstart realm was getting a mite big for it’s britches, and tried to raze the place flat-glass.

Tried being the operative word.

The War of the Anarchists (1 August 1994 – 17 April 1995; seven days after my birthday, wow) was fought between the Nightmarket and Mordruian Witchworld, primarily over control of Kowloon. After more than six months of continuous successes by the Nightmarket Militia and Mystic forces, as well as the loss of the Witchworld port of Widdershins, King Mordru sued for peace in February 1995.

The war was a clear indication of the failure of King Mordru to rule his country in an effective manner, especially compared with Nightmarket’s success. For the first time, regional dominance of Chaos in East Asia shifted from Witchworld to Nightmarket; the prestige of the Mordruian Regime, along with the classical tradition in Witchworld, suffered a major blow. The humiliating loss of Kowloon as a vassal state sparked an unprecedented public outcry. Within Witchworld, the defeat was a catalyst for a series of revolutions and political changes led by Ezekiel Bleak and Amethyst of Gemworld. These trends would later manifest in the 1911 Revolution- which is another story that I don’t know many details about.

This war is commonly known in Kowloon as Cheng’s Fight.

I wouldn’t learn until much, much later that the little old lady who made the best dumplings in the world, gave me love when I needed it desperately, bore a striking resemblance to my Nainai if she had been aged a few hundred years (which is a thing for later), and loved to hear trashy romance novels read aloud was also the Spymaster (retired) of the Nightmarket Militia during the conflict with Witchworld. Pretty Cheng, her sister, and my eventual landlady, was the Acting General. In hindsight, this is probably how my skills became what they are- because the Nightmarket Militia was just that- a militia of everyone who lived in Kowloon and wanted their Kowloon to stay free, safe, and a known brand of chaos. Which makes Pretty Cheng’s eventual profession a much more logical series of events…

Anyway. Knifebone hand- I was explaining about that.

Right, okay so- I went through the Nightmarket, which is a rick-rack diǎndǎo mess of angles and throughways and pure unadulterated chaos; I eventually made it to Tintian Square, and Dumpling Cheng’s Cart. Dumpling Cheng is a woman of approximately the age to remember hearing the phrase “Let there be Dirt.” She is only just one and a half meters tall; her shoulders are stooped inwards, and curve like the breastbone of a turkey, with her head the little twiggy part that makes the short end. Her body is a rounded lump of clay, genderless- except I know she’s a woman, because she held me to her chest when I was so sick I couldn’t sleep- my head rested on her chest, and she
was warm and soft in a way only old women are. Her face is an apple that has lost all of the water, but none of the sweetness- her eyes are two black currants that shine with a metallic stiletto knife gleam when she’s angry.

I count myself very lucky that I’ve only seen her angry once. That’s the second adventure I had- I had to kill a dragon; the third adventure was what showed me where I really stood in the world, and where I made my first human friend was where I figured out where I am in the DC universe and met the sweetest boy in the history of ever.

Her hair is soft grey- it is black mixed with silvery white, and is always wrapped in a bun at the nape of her neck, tied under a scarf; when I first met her, it was a ragged off white faded scrap of something, with torn edges and ugly stains. I stayed with her for five days, her time- two hours, my time- and when I was healed from my illness, she gave me some dumplings free of charge (they hadn’t sold well, she said- but her dumplings always sell out by mid-afternoon, and they were fresh and soft and good), and escorted me to a door that took me back exactly where I came from. This would have been the end of it, except I remembered… something. Three turns past the broken gate, four steps up the down stairs, across the sparkly stones, jump the white line, and you’re there.

Kindnesses should be repaid promptly; we have until Seven. And her scarf was so ragged- so, I took my things, and found another place to sleep that night, and in the morning I took my things and left that place and went to the garment district.

Once there, I searched high and low through the dumpsters- it’s where I found my winter jacket after I realized my old one wasn’t large enough or warm enough- until I find It. It is a piece of fabric, about four meters long; it is bright red, and printed with golden coins, lucky cats, and calligraphy reading “great good fortune”. Some of the prints are spotty, or faded- I can understand why this piece of fabric might have been discarded. However, I can’t give the woman who saved me the fabric in this condition either- it’s not… right. I take it anyway; I also find a half full spool of golden thread, and a dull needle; I take these things, and I go to the nearest park with lots of sunlight, and I spend the afternoon with my scissors and my thread and my needle and the fabric, and I think on how grateful I am to her, the woman who saved me and fed me, and how I wish her the best of fortunes, and how I want her to have the most wonderful things; in retrospect, this was probably one of the reasons I became known as “you adorable idiot”.

Anyway, I finished the red lucky scarf with just enough time to go back to where I came from- I had an unlit match in my pocket, and held it out to the line in the wall, palm open, fingers closed.

“Is this enough?” I said quietly, the wind softly blowing my hair against my face, drying the sweat on the back of my neck.

The soft prickle of claws on the palm of my hand was my only warning- a scaly blue green hand attached to a boney chicken skin limb- I hesitate to say arm, now, because arms don’t have so many joints; the Guard examines the match, mumbles, and then says “Thisss will do for na-ow, little misss. How-ev-er, on futu-re occasssionsss, it would be best to provide something more… palatable. And for the sssake of your ancessstorsss, child, cover your face!”

The doors open with a creaking moan; I tug my hat low over my face- I glance at where the guard is standing, quietly chewing on it’s match. “Thank you.” The guard startles and jerks, but I have run through the door by then, and don’t hear what it says.
There is an aura of tenseness, of fear- it pervades the air like smoke from a fire unseen, scented with the warm rank stench of overcooked meat. Dumpling Cheng’s hair is black as night, and tied into a low bun; her eyes are bright and dark like beetle’s shells. There is a plum blossom stamped in the middle of her forehead.

She stares at me. I stare at her- she is different, but not different, but different. I have the sudden, and quite correct, feeling that I am not where I once was- not physically, but temporally. That is to say, I will be here eventually... but first. (This is how I earned the name “the girl who knows and does”). I look at Dumpling Cheng- I stare at her for so long, she starts to sidle left to right to center, getting ready to attack- “One day, you will do me a great kindness. You will care for me when I fall ill, and you will hold me as I cry, and you will feed me when I am hungry, and you will have helped me in my time of need. In return, I give you this- it isn’t much, but... it’s the best I can do.” I hand her the red lucky scarf- she almost won’t take it, but I close her hands around it. Then I look at her, and I smile- “You’ll be fine.”

And then I turn, and walk away.

I find the door I took before not four seconds later- and I return to my world, and my time.

(It took me five weeks and two days to realize the paradox- it took me until I paid Pretty Meng fifty year’s rent with one phrase to realize what I had done to the scarf to make it worth giving.)

I go to Dumpling Cheng again about a week later- the 19th of January; this time, I go to the right era, and I go to her cart, and I look at her again, and I say- “I gave you that a long time ago, didn’t I?” My voice is quiet; mist seeps from my mouth with every breath.

She nods.

“Did it help?”

She smiles, and nods again.

“Can you tell me about this place? Will you?”

A third time, she nods.

I’ve been going to Dumpling Cheng for information about the spirit world ever since.

When I get to her Cart, I smile at her, and then sigh a bit.

“You’re sad.” Her voice doesn’t match her body- it is soft and lush and full, rich and dreamy, sweet-creamy good. I nod.

“Come in, then.” I lift the side curtain of her stall, and settle down on an over-turned bucket; I watch her fingers dart and flicker over the wooden board of her workspace- I watch her scoop and round a portion of some meat, and place it in a wrapper of dough thin enough to break if you blew on it, pinch it shut with fingers thick and aged quick and nimble; they go into a bamboo cage, and the cage goes into a pot of steaming water.
She wipes her hands on a towel that hangs from her waist, then looks at me. I tell her of what I have seen; of the Boneknife hand, and the little boy who went in with a body and came out as a wisp, and how dangerous this was, and how I have to do something about it, because it isn’t right.

She stares at me for a long moment- then she sighs, and mumbles to herself. I think she said “I would be helped by a Hero. Figures.” but I don’t know.

Then she told me the story of a girl named Coraline, and how with the help of a self-bored stone and a tom-cat, she was able to defeat the demon whose hand is like Needles- a relation to what I saw in that alley. She tells me that Boneknife hand is a very good name for it; that it doesn’t like salt, or the color red.

“Is there any help possible for the little boy?”

“No- he’s an onryo now; at most, you can break his tie to her- she uses her past victims to lure new ones in. Here.” She hands me a little bottle made of bamboo. “You can use that to catch him- get him into full sunlight, and the bonds she has wrapped around him will snap.”

“Is there a way to kill her?”

“No.”

“Is there a way to trap her?”

“Yes. Her stock and trade is in words- if you can trap her with words, she will not be able to escape.”

“Thank you- oh, thank you, they smell delicious.” I thank her for the information, the bottle, and the dumplings; I eat them, and praise her skills once again- then, I leave that place, and go to the scribe’s shop on Ho’oh Avenue. I buy a new brush, as fine as they have- and then I buy three reams of their unmarked sticky-back paper, 5x7 cm$^2$; it is red. And then I go back to my little space under the expressway, overlooking the river.

I spend the next week with one of my old school notebooks, drafting exactly what I want to write on the fu to keep the Knifebone hand out of my city. And then, I spend another week writing all the fu I’ll need to trap it both in this world and on the wrong side of it’s door.

While I am doing this, New Year comes- so, maybe that’s why it works?

Anyway- I finish my sticky-back fu, and start placing them all over the city- in every back alley I can find, starting at the outermost edges of the city and slowly working my way inwards in a spiral; I suppose someone notices my little charms, because I start to see them everywhere, and I know that I only made so many- I see an entire wall plastered with them in a repeating pattern, which… honestly is really helpful. Finally, I take my last, most perfect fu, and I go back to the place where I saw the Knifebone hand- the little ghost boy is still there, his eyes still two ruined pits; the hand still beckons me closer.

I have to be quick. I take the bamboo bottle and open it- a soft sucking sound emerges from it’s mouth; I point it towards the little onryo boy; he flickers a moment, then flicks inside the bottle, which I cap with my thumb; I have already peeled the backing off of the sticky fu, and I dart forwards. I smack my palm over the doorway- I slap her Knifebone hand away.

And then I turn, and I run.
The scream that followed will haunt me for the rest of my days.

I go to the banks of the river near the expressway- dawn rises a soft, bloody red; I open the bottle, and the little wispy onryo boy wafts into a shaft of full sunlight. There is a sound like ten-thousand threads being snapped at once; his eyes stop being ruined pits, and become eyes once again; he gains a sort of… solidity…? that he didn’t have before.

He bows to me, and says “How can I repay your kindness?”

I smile.

“If you can go to the bottom of that river and bring me an invisible box from it, I will consider our debt equal. It'll be inside a car, in the back seat.”

He does.
Xanghai is the commercial and financial center of mainland Kiao, and ranks fifth in the 2011 edition of the Global Financial Centres Index published by the City of London. It was the largest and most prosperous city in the Far East during the 1930s, and rapid re-development began in 1990s. This is exemplified by the Pudong District, which became a pilot area for integrated economic reforms. By the end of 2009, there were 787 financial institutions, of which 170 were foreign-invested. In 2009, the Xanghai Stock Exchange ranked third among worldwide stock exchanges in terms of trading volume and sixth in terms of the total capitalization of listed companies, and the trading volume of six key commodities including rubber, copper and zinc on the Xanghai Futures Exchange all ranked first in the world.

In the last two decades Xanghai has been one of the fastest developing cities in the world. Since 1992 Xanghai has recorded double-digit growth almost every year except during the global recession of 2008 and 2009. In 2011, Xanghai’s total GDP grew to 1.92 trillion yuan (US$297 billion) with GDP per capita of 82,560 yuan (US $12,784). The three largest service industries are financial services, retail, and real estate. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors accounted for 39.9 percent and 0.7 percent of the total output respectively. Average annual disposable income of Xanghai residents, based on the first three quarters of 2009, was 21,871 RMB.

I realized that I didn’t know what I was doing when I couldn’t open the box the River Ghost had retrieved for me. It was a puzzle box- and it took me a year and a half to open it. However, I got a really nice apartment, gained a set of contacts, and found new Masters to teach me, so I don’t consider it wasted.

Let me tell you about what was in the box. There were five thick spiral bound notebooks, two flash drives, and a jar full of oil with strange silvery lumps on it. None of these things were marked.

It was chance that I decided to examine the notebooks first- had I opened the jar, I would be dead now.

This was in the Red notebook- when I read the words, I heard my father’s voice; perhaps it’s a coincidence. Perhaps not.
**Metamaterial cloaking** is the usage of metamaterials in an invisibility cloak. This is accomplished by manipulating the paths traversed by light through a novel optical material. Metamaterials direct and control the propagation and transmission of specified parts of the light spectrum and demonstrate the potential to render an object seemingly invisible. Metamaterial cloaking, based on transformation optics, describes the process of shielding something from view by controlling electromagnetic radiation. Objects in the defined location are still present, but incident waves are guided around them without being affected by the object itself.

The purpose of a cloaking device is to hide something, so that a defined region of space is invisibly isolated from passing electromagnetic fields (or sound waves), as with **Metamaterial cloaking**.

Cloaking objects, or making them appear invisible with metamaterials, is roughly analogous to a magician's sleight of hand, or his tricks with mirrors. The object or subject doesn't really disappear; the vanishing is an illusion. With the same goal, researchers employ metamaterials to create directed blind spots by deflecting certain parts of the light spectrum (electromagnetic spectrum). It is the light spectrum, as the transmission medium, that determines what the human eye can see.

Light is refracted or reflected determining the view, color, or illusion that is seen. The visible extent of light is seen in a chromatic spectrum such as the rainbow. However, visible light is only part of a broad spectrum, which extends beyond the sense of sight. There are other parts of the light spectrum which are in common use today- microwave spectrum used by radar, cell phones, and wireless Internet, infrared spectrum used for thermal imaging technologies, (can detect warm body in cool night time environment), and infrared illumination is combined with specialized digital cameras for night vision.

Astronomers employ the terahertz band for submillimeter observations to answer deep cosmological questions. Possible connection for EMP gen 7?

Electromagnetic energy is light energy, but only small part is visible light. Energy travels in waves. (Wave particles? Form of material effect the rate of change? Test this!) Shorter wavelengths, such as visible light and infrared, carry more energy per photon than longer waves, such as microwaves and radio waves. Light contains greatest yield; generation a la photosynthesis?

Electromagnetic radiation and matter have a symbiotic relationship. Radiation does not simply act on a material, nor is it simply acted upon by a given material- Radiation interacts with matter. Cloaking applications which employ metamaterials alter how objects interact with the electromagnetic spectrum. The guiding vision for the metamaterial cloak is a device that directs the flow of light smoothly around an object, like water flowing past a rock in a stream, without reflection, rendering the object invisible.
One challenge up to the present date has been the inability of metamaterials, and cloaking devices, to interact at frequencies, or wavelengths, within the visible light spectrum.

The material response can be controlled and changed at will- create warning system to change frequency level of metamaterial if new energy type is detected? Energy req. large; poss. Use of X?

Optical components, such as lenses, respond within a certain defined range to light. The range of response could not be effectively exceeded, because natural materials proved incapable of doing so. Every natural material so far only allows for a positive refractive index. Metamaterials, are able to achieve negative refractive index, zero refractive index, and fractional values in between zero and one. Hence, metamaterials extend the material response, among other capabilities. However, negative refraction is not the effect that creates invisibility-cloaking. It is more accurate to say that gradations of refractive index, when combined, create invisibility-cloaking.

Mary stated that for metamaterial applications to be realized, several goals must be achieved. Reducing energy loss, which is a major limiting factor, keep developing three-dimensional isotropic materials instead of planar structures, then finding ways to mass produce. X could possibly be the key- but the danger!

### Superhydrophobic material!

**lotus effect** refers to the very high water repellence (superhydrophobicity) exhibited by the leaves of the lotus flower. Dirt particles are picked up by water droplets due to a complex micro- and nanoscopic architecture of the surface, which minimizes adhesion.

This effect can easily be demonstrated in many other plants, for example nasturtium, prickly pear, cane, and on the wings of certain insects. If material can be synthesized with physical properties of lotus leaves, X becomes semi-non-issue!

(Due to their high surface tension, water droplets tend to minimize their surface by trying to achieve a spherical shape. On contact with a surface, adhesion forces result in wetting of the surface. Either complete or incomplete wetting may occur depending on the structure of the surface and the fluid tension of the droplet. The cause of self-cleaning properties is the hydrophobic water-repellent double structure of the surface. This enables the contact area and the adhesion force between surface and droplet to be significantly reduced resulting in a self-cleaning process. This hierarchical double structure is formed out of a characteristic epidermis (its outermost layer called the cuticle) and the covering waxes. The epidermis of the lotus plant possesses papillae with 10 to 20 µm in height and 10 to 15 µm in width on which the so-called epicuticular
waxes are imposed. These superimposed waxes are hydrophobic and form the second layer of the double structure.

The hydrophobicity of a surface is related to its contact angle. The higher the contact angle the higher the hydrophobicity of a surface. Surfaces with a contact angle < 90° are referred to as hydrophilic and those with an angle >90° as hydrophobic. Some plants show contact angles up to 160° and are called super-hydrophobic meaning that only 2–3% of a drop's surface is in contact. Plants with a double structured surface like the lotus can reach a contact angle of 170° whereas a droplet's actual contact area is only 0.6%. All this leads to a self-cleaning effect.

Dirt particles with an extremely reduced contact area are picked up by water droplets and are thus easily cleaned off the surface. If a water droplet rolls across such a contaminated surface the adhesion between the dirt particle, irrespective of its chemistry, and the droplet is higher than between the particle and the surface. As this self-cleaning effect is based on the high surface tension of water it does not work with organic solvents. Lotus-effect is not protection against graffiti- electric pulse vibrations?

Positive effect of self-cleaning is the prevention of contamination of the area of a plant surface exposed to light resulting in a reduced photosynthesis. Metamaterial must be hydrophobic to incorporate X. Metamaterial must not be broken- X becomes extremely unstable in presence of water; Spider silk?

The toughest known spider silk is produced by the species Darwin's bark spider. The toughness of forcibly silked fibers averages 350 MJ/m3, with some samples reaching 520 MJ/m3. Thus, C. darwini silk is more than twice as tough as any previously described silk, and over 10 times tougher than Kevlar.

Many species of spider have different glands to produce silk with different properties for different purposes, including housing, web construction, defense, capturing and detaining prey, egg protection, and mobility (gossamer for ballooning, or for a strand allowing the spider to drop down as silk is extruded). Different specialized silks have evolved with properties suitable for different uses.

Can be rendered from protein- needs to be spun. How to retain fabric integrity- auto electro spinning? The standard laboratory setup for electrospinning consists of a spinneret (typically a hypodermic syringe needle) connected to a high-voltage (5 to 50 kV) direct current power supply, a syringe pump, and a grounded collector. A polymer solution, sol-gel, particulate suspension or melt is loaded into the syringe and this liquid is extruded from the needle tip at a constant rate by a syringe pump. Alternatively, the droplet at the tip of the spinneret can be replenished by feeding from a header tank providing a constant feed pressure. This constant pressure type feed works better for lower viscosity feedstocks.
Yes- solvent? OIL!!!!! Not water, never water, no no no- once processing is complete, material can be exposed to all elements freely.

Refer to process by which skin repairs self; viable process?

Viable process; requires programming.

I read that for the first time in the living room of my apartment, after I opened the invisible box; I got my apartment when I was twelve years old, and made it mine when I was about to turn thirteen; I opened the box soon after. Actually, now that I think about it, I probably opened the box on my birthday- wouldn’t that just take the cake?

Let me tell you about what I did after I freed the River Ghost from the Boneknife hand.

I won’t tell you his real name- that would be the height of rudeness. I will tell you that after we settled our debts, he took up residence in the area of the river under the expressway- the place my parents died in. I left that place about a year and a half after- it’s not that he isn’t a nice enough Ghost, but… He’s a River Ghost, and one of the things River Ghosts do when they’re near humans is play tricks- I only needed to wake up once with dead fish guts rubbed into my hair to decide to move.

And move I did- first I had to pack up all my things, undo my little tap into the city power grid to charge my computer with; it takes me until lunchtime, April 12th, to finish packing. I used a sharpie to draw out a fu in the place where I had been- I didn’t know why I did this, at the time.

I don’t know why I always use the symbol of “happiness” in the things I Write- perhaps it’s something I want? (I’ve never really seen a point to birthdays- it’s just a day. Whatever.)

It’s horrendously awkward to shimmy down the pipe leading up to the alcove of the expressway- not because I can’t do it, but because the box won’t fit in either of my bags. I finally figure out what to do- I skitter down, grab some tubing from the river bank- and I am very careful to say thank-you to the River Ghost, for being such a nice neighbor- and then I shimmy back up to where my things are. In the time I was gone, he’s managed to unpack all of my things. I almost start crying because it took me a long time to pack everything, but I swallow my tears and pack my things again, because this time I know what I’m doing, and I know what to do.

I use the tubing to weave the invisible box onto my duffle backpack, and I pack all my things again, and I leave.

I do not look back.
Anyway, once I left the space underneath the expressway, I go to see Dumpling Cheng, and I tell her about how things had gone after she had helped me- and she *roars* with laughter. I can admit now that some of the things River Ghost did to me are very funny- but some of them weren’t, and still aren’t.

“Funny as me being stupid is, I still need a place to sleep every night- do you know anywhere I can go?”

“Ahaha- I might, actually. My twin sister, Pretty Cheng, rents out rooms on the other side of town-” she hands me a stick with pictures carved into it- “there’s the directions. Tell her Dumpling Cheng sent you, or she’ll skin you to the bone.” The stick is a map of the old style- I know how to read it, because I can Read; still, it’s a complicated set of directions. (Eventually, it will become second nature for me to walk past Dumpling Cheng’s Cart, go up the steps by the Scribe’s Shop on Ho’oh Ave, through the Courtyard of the Empty Temple, walk the Sparkling Line until the geraniums, walk to the third Gryphon statue, and run down the Road of Toads until the Lanterns are Red.)

During Cheng’s war, Pretty Cheng was the Acting General of the Nightmarket Militia; I would learn this after I became one of her tenants.

There are always people of, not lower status, perhaps, but of lower means, who find that one of the more disreputable lines of work is better than none at all. This mercantile mindset can be found at all levels of society, and in all societies that have ever- oh fuck it, I’ll just say it: Pretty Cheng runs a whorehouse. (Well, sort of.)

I understood *that* the first time we met.

Let me describe the building Pretty Cheng owns.

Take a screen made out of some reddish brown fabric; put three tiers of idea or image or window into it. Fold the screen around a vase in the corner of the room- it now has three sides to it, and is curved around where it would normally jut out into the street. Cover the frames of the screen with filigree and floating flowery carvings make them as intricate and ostentatious as you possibly can. Add golden sheens and feather light touches of blue and tourmaline and turquoise and pink- flutter yellow and flutter orange and deep, mystical purple. Now, in those three levels, there should be there partitions- go for nine squarish spaces in total. Fill each space with a woman of incomparable beauty and grace; each one unique, different, and for a reasonably negotiable fee, available.

This is Pretty Cheng’s establishment.

I followed Dumpling Cheng’s directions through the Nightmarket, passing strange and impossible things- in time, I would come to know every side street and alleyway as intimately and well as the
backs of my own hands- and came, after an indescribable amount of time, to the front door of Pretty Cheng’s House.

It has a red plum blossom on the lintel; the door is made of tassels and beads. The old lady flower sweet smoke of opium tar burning fumes from the walls; the ringing of little bells and the soft whisper of feathers; I hesitate at the door for a long moment, held with a sudden gasp of trepidation- but I am not afraid. I’ve never been afraid. I’ve been cold, tired, sad, alone, lonely, happy, enraged, tranquil- but never, not even once, have I felt the sickly cold touch of fear in my heart.

(This will eventually change.)

I go inside the House.

I am punched in the face with an earthy, organic smell- the smell of men, the smell of women- burnt sweet perfume and oily pomades. There is a desk, in the back of the lobby of the room- there are couches, and a small, dilapidated pool table, it’s green felt scratched and scarred.

I walk over to the desk- a woman with a round moon-white face sits there, and raises an eyebrow when she sees me. I stand in front of her, and shift nervously; my bags are suddenly awkward on my back- my clothes suddenly smell strongly of river water and death. I can feel every grimy patch of skin, every scrape and bruise- because I’m short, and cute looking, and I fight like a demon rat when cornered- and I finally muster the courage to speak.

“I… I’m here to see Pretty Cheng… c-could you tell her that- that Dumpling Cheng sent me? Please?”

The Hostess- who I now realize is a ghoul- startles at the sound of my voice; I can see her think through my words, and decide whether or not to do what I have asked.

She smiles- her teeth are too many, and too sharp. And then she says with a voice of purest ringing glass “Please come with me.”

I go.

Pretty Cheng is identical to her sister, Dumpling, in every way save one- her voice is not comforting. It’s… evocative. I’m very sure, and very aware that if I had met her any older than when I did, I would have done something stupid for her- she has that kind of voice. It’s like wrapping up in a warm soft blanket that smells of- of moonlit summer nights, and nightblooming flowers, and the thick heady scent of water; of warm sweetness from kissing, and soft touches on the skin. The total effect is unmistakable, but I don't know if I can describe it. It smells a bit like mushrooms, a bit like scallops, and a bit like sweat. It's pungent and earthy and, well, biological-smelling.

I would later realize that her voice sounds like sex smells- but that was much later, and I was much older. Actually, I was about fourteen- so not that much.
I stand in what must be Pretty Cheng’s office- it is small, and cramped; files overflowing with papers are scattered around the place. She eyes me- her eggy eyes wobble at me, and then her evocative provocative raspy voice comes out of her sunken chest. “Well? What do you have for me?”

I blink at her- and then I tell her the condensed version of what happened to me with River Ghost- she chuckles in the same places where Dumpling guffawed, and when I am done, she stares at me with something like good humor.

“This is all very funny, but I’m a busy woman, and if I wanted a funny story I’d go buy one. Why have you come?” Her good humor vanishes like ice in the heat of summer- her voice becomes a creaking piece of leather, waiting to strike. “Who are you to bandy my sister’s name like some cheap toy-”

“I am the one who made her red lucky scarf. I came to you because she had reason to believe that you would have a place for me to stay- do you?”

She starts, swallows, and then nods abortively; “You can stay if you can pay, little girl.”

I nod- “What’s the cheapest place you have?”

She grins.

Up 999 flights of stairs later, and we’re in the eaves of the building- she yanks at a string; a step-ladder falls down, and she clammers up it. Pretty Cheng is nimble and spry for an old lady; I’m… not as well put together as her, but I kept up well enough on the walk up. I follow her up- we’re on the roof, a fishscale tight rippling platters of slate; she walks up a stair-step path of clay divots, and I follow- she pulls out a small silvery key, unlocks a small gate, and walks forward.

I follow her onto a round deck; there is a small fence, painted bright red- bright red winding flowers are growing up a lattice. A small dilapidated staircase winds and switchbacks up the vase-like wall of the apartment; above me, I can make out wooden decking, and another, smaller building. There is a number painted on the lintel of the apartment Pretty Cheng is unlocking- #10; I somehow feel that this place will be right for me.

My apartment is tiny. No, not tiny- it barely has enough space for all the things I own. Which is not to say that I don’t like it- for me, for who I am, it’s absolutely perfect. I don’t own very many things; my second largest collection of items is my clothing, all of which fits into my apartment just fine, thank-you. There are actually two floors to my space; the first floor is where I actually live- the second floor is where I keep my… other things. Which will be explained later.

To see my apartment is to see a round room; the walls are soft, winter sky blue. There are two windows- one by the kitchen sink, the other in front of the desk. Behind the desk is a wall that goes two thirds of the way across the round room; there is a bank of kitchen, and the floor beneath it is tiled with alternating cobalt and coral octagonal tiles; just past the kitchen is the shower- it is just large enough for me to turn all the way around in, and has a little inset shelf where I keep soaps and a hair brush.
On the other side of the dividing wall, there is a small pallet where a bed could go, and a set of hanging bars; I’m sure this room was used for some esoteric sexual escapades, but I’m going to live here, so I’ll hang clothing on them. The ceilings are very high- perhaps I will hang plants eventually?

“Well, little girl?”

“I’ll take it. How much?”

“Two days of stories, and it’s a deal.”

I snort. “That’s highway robbery and you know it- I’ll give you one story, and only one, and it will be very beautifully written on fine clean paper.”

She glares at me, gimlet eyes bright with avarice. “Illustrated?”

“But of course.”

She grins- her teeth are black, blackened like silver left in the air for too long; her breath smells of burnt sugar maple flower perfume. “Deal.”

I reach into my bag, and pull out the painting I’ve had for as long as I can remember- it’s a version of the Journey to the West; I painted it under the direction of my old Caligraphy teacher. He liked the way I Wrote the summarized poem- but he didn’t really approve of how I painted the characters. Of course, I don’t actually remember doing any of that- I was perhaps two or three at the time.

(It would be years before I learned that I wasn’t normal- that being able to Read and Write and beautifully wasn’t normal.)

Pretty Cheng’s eyes glow when she sees it- her gnarled fingers reach and grasp for my silk-backed strip of paper. I hold it out of her reach, and in a moment of audacity in a moment of extreme genre savviness I dictate the terms of our rental agreement.

“This is worth Ten-thousand years rent- but I’ll settle for Five-thousand.”

She whimpers- but her greed overpowers her common sense. “Deal.”

That was how I paid for my apartment.

Grocery shopping was an ordeal for many reasons- one of which was the sheer number of steps I had to climb to get out of the Pretty Apartments. That changed for two reasons- the first being, I got used to climbing 999 flights of stairs and one ladder; the other being that I made a refrigerated backpack, and learned to have things delivered.

It was whilst I was out grocery shopping that I made the first of many impulsive decisions that would haunt me for the rest of my days- I bought a sketchbook.

Now to be fair, I thought it was an ordinary sketchbook- it was in the “bargain” bin at the streetside booksellers, what was I supposed to think? In time, this mentality would be eroded away over long,
painful, embarrassing, and enlightening adventures.

So. The sketchbook was old, and that orangey brown color leather sometimes goes when it’s very old. It had a white circle on one side; inside it was an eight pointed star in the center of the cover, along with a purple heart at the top, a blue crescent moon on the upper left, a yellow sun on the lower left, and a black bird on the lower right; I would add a red X flower on the upper right- this would complete a chain of spell casters, and would catapult me to center stage in a battle of great importance.

All I knew at the time was that I wanted a sketchbook, and that it was cheap. I also knew I had to mark it as mine somehow- thus, the red x flower. I would later learn that this approach was known among the worlds as the “Red X approach”, and considered to be one of the dumber ways to test magical skill.

To be honest, while I used it, the sketchbook- also known as The Create- was just a sketchbook. This is probably because of my erratic schedule and my sporadic use of its pages. However, it did do one thing- it called other… I hesitate to call them objects, because they aren’t. They’re not living beings either- at least, most of them aren’t. They’re… Spirits…? Perhaps the name of them doesn’t matter- what does matter is the order in which they sought me out.

The very first of these spirits was the one called The Glow, and the one called The Flower. I didn’t realize it at the time, but The Glow- or Glowbug, as I call it- is almost completely harmless, as is The Flower. I say that because there are beings in the world who cannot bear to be touched by any kind of light, and certain flowers can cause great harm.

It was when I had lived in my apartment for about a month- I was still twelve, but it was October. I remembered Nainai, for some reason- I had set up an altar, to honor my parents, and for some reason… perhaps intuition, perhaps something more- for whatever reason, I had added Nainai to this place of remembrance. (I think I knew, even then, that the choice I had made wasn’t exactly right- but it was because she couldn’t have kept me. I don’t know. I don’t know.)

I had lit candles and incense, and had clasped my hands in prayer- when I saw thousands upon thousands of tiny glowing petals fluttering down around me. I looked up and saw a small glowing light and a girl festooned with ribbons dancing high above me- I called out to them.

“e-Excuse me, but- you can come closer, if you want to.” They startle at the sound of my voice- I am very careful to not look at them directly. Slowly, subtly, they flutter closer and closer- the girl is in a frilly dress, and the little glowing light is a fairy, like Tinkerbell. They flick closer and closer to me, until finally, the little Glowing fairy flutters down, and alights on the little dish I’ve placed a spirit dumpling in. I glance at it out of the corner of my eye; it is small, with spindle fine delicate limbs, and fixed wings, like a dragonfly. It’s little face is oval- it has a tuft of softly glowing hair, green at the root and red violet at the tips; it has two massive eyes, and small pointed ears; a small, snubbed nose, and a tiny tiny mouth. It’s frankly one of the most adorable creature’s I’ve seen in my life.

The girl in the frilly dress is just as adorable- it is pink, and seems to flow into her skin; there is a pattern of birthmarks across her breast in the shape of five-petaled flowers; her ears have a pair of
flower-earrings in them; her hair is long and corkscrew-curving, a crown of blossoms circling her head. In her hands, which are pressed to her chest, is a flower- a red x flower, my favorite. She offers it to me- what else can I do but accept?

She smiles at me- and this seems to be some sign to the little glowing creature on the altar, as it flashes brightly for a moment; when I am able to open my eyes again, there are three cards in front of me- they are large, about the size of Tarot cards, and backed with a strange pink design. I flip them over- the first is a spiral, centered inside a black circle; the second is the frilly flowery girl, eyes closed and holding a pink blossom in her hands; the third is the little fairy creature, a wand of green in hand with a bright light at the end.

Now, there was something important about these, because I’ve seen them before; ugh, what was it… it’s not the capturing thing, it’s that you have to- I reach forwards, onto the altar, and take my red inkstick, and the little bottle of water I keep there, and one of my brushes- I take these things down. I make the red ink thick and vibrant, and I take the brush, and on the side of each card, I mark a bright red X.

Before my eyes, the cards Change. The spiral-circle becomes a spatter of colors- there are seeming shapes in each splatter-spatter, and it appeals to me greatly; the flowery girl has a flower tucked behind her ear, and is holding a phial of some gently gleaming liquid; the little glowing fairy is holding a sword crossed over a shield, and an orb of bright light hovers over their head. Each card is marked with a Name- The Create, The Flower, and The Glow.

Two days later, I find another one- this one a mass of pink bubbles that lived in the drain of my shower. I managed to entice it out of the pipes with a stack of dirty dishes from the consignment shop- and once I had done it, it curled and coiled into and around my hands like an overly affectionate bowl of pudding. The Glow flutters out, and flits at the mass of pink bubbles; the bubbles flutter in my hands, and turn into a card with a pink back, and a little mermaid girl with a teal tail, a blue gem necklace that is gently floating and a string of pearls crowning her head- her hair flows in curls and waves, straight up.

I take a red pen from my shirt pocket, and I mark the card- it ripples strangely in my hands, and the back changes- bright red, with black lines and silver stars- and on the front is the same little mermaid as before. She is curled into a circle- in the center of the card is an iridescent circle with a dark oily smudge in the center; her hair is longer now, and festooned with sparkling gems and swirling bubbles. The Bubbles- an unimaginative title, but then again, it’s quite explanatory.

My very first actual honest-to-goodness use of these spells is to make my apartment less of an utter shit-hole. To be fair, I did ask for the cheapest one- but still. Utter. Shithole.

There was mud caked on the walls. There were patches of darkness that were too large, and too thick, and watched me in the night. There were gaping holes in the dividing wall.

The stench of opium and sex oozed from the walls. Things scratched at the windows in the night; the Wind blew through cracks in the floor. I stayed there over winter- all through November, and December and January and then February came- February, and the New Year.

The Bubbles was particularly useful- it scrubbed stains and stenches out of the walls and floor and off of the ceiling; The Glow chases the Shadows away long enough for me to draw wards and walls and locks and barriers into the sides of the walls; The Flower, in conjunction with Bubbles, helps me to further fumigate the place, scrubbing possibly centuries of illicit smell and immoral scent out of the very air- Create patches walls and floors and doors and windows; all together, we change the place from merely livable space to… to actual living space.

It will be about three years before I figure out everything that these spells can do. By then, of course, it will be because I have managed to capture all but three of them- the guardians of the spells themselves, and the spell that allows the creation of new spells within the system.

Of course, I’ll actually need all of the spells by then- so perhaps it is not so surprising? I don’t know. I don’t know.

In March, I make a new friend, fight a dragon, and get four more spells. Not exactly in that order.

Let me tell you about the neighborhood the Pretty Apartment’s are in.

It sits on a street, all cobblestones and drunken fools- the building is on a sidestreet of the main through-way to Widdershins, which is one of the major ports of the Nightmarket. It’s actually in a sort of cul-de-sac; on the northern side of the culdesac is the Apartments, on the southern side is the Ashram. The cul-de-sac is really more of a park- it used to be cobbled street, but when Celestial Kiao yanked the proverbial rug, it became a dumping ground for all sorts of things- one dead wood elemental later, and the entire place was a patchy scrubland of overgrown weedy grasses and indignant trees, too shrimpy to be called saplings, too proud to be shrubbery. There are large stones, just the right size to sit on- there’s a birdbath, though I’ve never seen birds in it. There’s even a gazebo, though half the roof is completely gone, and I wouldn’t trust the floorboards with my gaze, much less my weight.

That Ashram is where I my first-best friend lives; her name is Rachel. Rachel Roth- my very first friend. It is… well… technically, it’s her fault I had to fight a dragon. But I would have done it anyway, so…

Rachel Roth is small. That’s the very first thing I ever notice about her- she’s small, and she wears the dress of the Ashram like a funeral shroud. Her eyes are silvery-gray; her cheeks are round with youth, but will sharpen like the blade of an axe in time. Her nose is rounded at the end, and generally has a smudge or smear at the tip- she spends most of her time reading books.

We become friends over the simple fact that we’re the only young people for perhaps miles- it was either become friends, or be lonely forever.

“H-hi.” My voice creaks unsteadily out into the afternoon- the sun is radiant, and in the light I can see her outlined sharply in her shadow- she’s sitting on a woven mat, in the shadow of a massive
piece of limestone. It’s November- the days are starting to get colder; the nights are starting to get longer. That day was rather nice- when the breeze blew, I wanted a light jacket, but settled for a sweater.

I remember that she was wearing a cloak- not a jacket or a sweater, but an honest cloak, with a hood and everything. I also remember that she had a black-purple mark, a bruise, right at the edge of her mouth- in the vague half-light of the stone’s shadow, it looked like the mark of a kiss.

I remember the book she was reading as well- it was white, bright white (white like dead flesh and bones bleached dry and River Ghost during winter when the cold made his pale yellow skin turn ashy flakey waxy white), with silver metal pieces on it; something about it made me uneasy.

“W-what are you reading?” She blinks at me- her eyes flick from me, in my mis-matched clothing of brightly clashing colors (I’m more concerned with fit than with fashion- this attitude will not win me friends)- my light sweater of turquoise, my shirt of acid orange, my lilac and primrose striped leggings, my mismatched shoes- one is a sneaker, the other is a rainboot- to the book in her hands, to my face; and I think she saw something in my face that welcomed her.

“i’m reading this journal. it’s really good.”

“…U-um… w-w-will you tell me more? About it?”

I remember the first time I ever saw her really smile- it was after I asked her to tell me more about her book; it seemed that for a moment, her face became a star-strung conflagration of rainbows, suffused with the light of dawn.

“sure! it’s about this wizard named Malchior….”

I listened to her voice for what seemed like hours- something in her voice rang falsely to me. It wasn’t that she was lying- it was that the information she had wasn’t… right. Something about the name Malchior- something about it reminded me of- I don’t know. I don’t know.

One thousand years ago, the wizard Rorek of Nol engaged the ancient dragon Malchior in battle; the dragon proved to be physically superior to Rorek, so he decided to employ his very last resort and trapped Malchior inside his spellbook with a powerful curse. Through subsequent ages, the spellbook changed hands and eventually wound up in Rachel's possession.

Upon first reading it, Rachel was quite taken by the story of the battle; so much in fact that she completely isolated herself from her mother, and the Nuns of the Ashram, just to read the story to its end. When she felt the most lonely, Malchior made his move, introducing himself as Rorek and telling her the story of how the dragon Malchior imprisoned him in the book. He pretended to be a kindred spirit who empathized with Rachel's nature, and slowly won Rachel's trust and affection.

He manipulated her into freeing him from his physical imprisonment first, and then taught her his full knowledge of magic to enable his complete escape. It was during this time that Rachel began to awaken sexually- and Malchior manipulated her further, winning kiss and touch and flower and love from her trusting body.

This I was able to tease out of her, through weeks and weeks of meeting, and building of friendship; during that time, I also tamed a bird, a fox, and a rabbit.
After the fact, I realized that my first and best friend was one, nine, and two, under a Prophecy. But that's for later.

The bird was bigger than a goose, bigger than a swan. It was big enough to ride upon, if that was the sort of thing I wanted to do- I tamed it by combing the scratchy underfeathers from it’s skin, allowing the new flying feathers to touch the air. It had a fantastically long neck, and a short beak, like for eating seeds with. Once I had completely cleared it of underfeathers, it changed into a card- when I had marked it, the image wasn’t of the bird, but of a deer with wings- big golden eyes, wings upraised, and a black saddle with red x flower markings on it; a beautiful halter was woven over its head- a simple hackamore, really only for show- a rainbow that ringed dawn and dusk and night and day was underneath it’s hooves. The Flight, it said.

The fox was different- I saved it from becoming a stew. It was two weeks before it happened- I saw two sailors arguing with a small-game monger over the price of a fox; the fox itself was soft faded periwinkle, (I think that’s what that color is called) with long ears and big feet and a long tail. The merchant was charging some outrageous sum- according to him, it was because of the difficulty involved in catching the fox; the sailors were indignant, as they’d never heard of such a price, and were quite sure that the merchant was overcharging to be a greedy pig. This of course, angered the obviously honest and genuine merchant- and who were the sailors to accuse the merchant of such depravities?

I snuck up to the merchants stall, held a finger to my lips- the animals made no alarm. I took a rock from the street, counted out the price of the fox, and placed it on the merchant’s counter. Then I took the fox, cage and all, and ran as fast as I could- I soon noticed that I was running much faster than I should have been able to. I eventually made it to my apartment, and let the fox go- it bounded into my arms, and nuzzled me under the chin. Then that familiar ripple- and I was holding a card once again; sign it I did- it… didn’t really change at all. But there was a desert behind it now, and the sky was empty and blue, and studded with pale stars. The Dash- which would prove it's worth over and over again.

The rabbit I won on a dare- okay, I’ll admit, there are some things I do that are… well… idiotic. The dare was something suitably stupid- the prize, a stuffed animal... Technically. The dare was given to me by one of the younger women in the Apartments- because the Apartments are all female, and so is the Ashram- and it was this:

“Hey hey Oddeye- betcha won’t go over to the Ash and get a flo-wer!”

“Oh ye-ah? Wha’do I get if I do?”

“Half-day wages!”

I snort. “No fucking bet.”

The little penngalan jerks- her head removes from her shoulders, and the pale strip of her esophagus ripples in the moonlight- she’s trying to make some move in the hierarchy of the Floor, and then she says the magic words. “Name your Prize!”
To be honest, this was one of the stupidest things she could have done- if I were anyone else, that would be tantamount to her saying “my soul is yours!” But I’m not anyone else- I’m me.

“Done. Wait there.” I had actually seen something that I wanted- and I actually did need the help of a penngalan to get it.

I walked across the Cul- in full view of the Apartments- and rang the little bell at the gate; Rachel, my friend, came out. I told her about the dare, and she told me that the only “flowers” to be found at the Ashram were paper or food- not a sexual favor, like I had thought. I nodded, and then said- “Can I have one of each, then?”

“sure- but only if I can have some of the red-flower tea the Ladies drink.”

I nodded thoughtfully; “Do you want to just come over later? Because it’s really hard to brew right the first time, and I have some at home…”

She smiled again. “Yeah, sure.”

Ten minutes later, I’m back at the Apartments- one hour later, we’ve broken into a house across town, I’ve stolen the rabbit, and we’ve legged it over the river into the Woods. I know, I know- stealing is wrong. But… the pink rabbit was sad, okay? Anyway- the creature needed some patching and darning, and then it was happy enough to turn into a card. One signing later- and I had a hare, of soft rose; it’s legs are long, and it’s ears are perked forwards- it’s eye is like those of Ancient Biyalian art, where there is no perspective- just an eye looking straight out at me. It wears a golden torc- it is chased with silvery lines of curls and lines; they Read as ‘Leap’ or ‘Spring’ or ‘Jump’.

It was slow-building, our friendship; I did some research, and while the name Malchior didn’t show up, flowers to ease bruising did.

Flower-girl was kind enough to unfurl a confection of them for me- meadow-sweet, lavender, yarrow, calendula, St. John’s wort, chamomile-and under the direction of the internet, and Flower herself, I make Rachel a balm for bruising. I also focus on how I want her to have clear sight, and strong focus- how I want her to be able to see the truth with unclouded vision.

I put the balm into a small round pot, painted over with tiny blue-black birds, and I take it to our usual meeting spot- the massive stone where we first met. She seemed oddly touched- the fact that I considered her… I don’t know, worthy of care? I think it broke part of her brain- she seemed oddly out of it for the rest of the afternoon…

That was March 14th. On March 15th, Rachel succeeded in breaking the curse, but at the same time and to her horror came to realize that what she had unleashed was actually the evil Dragon that Rorek successfully imprisoned. I believe that my bruise-balm had something to do with it- perhaps it did, and perhaps it didn’t.

This is what happened:

It was raining. I remember that really well, because I almost fell off of Fly several times- I actually did once, but considering it was either fall off my noble steed or be flash fried in eldritch dragon fire, I chose to fall. I also used Jump in time, and landed on my feet like the badass I’m not.
Fly moved through the air like an eel- then landed near me; Malchior slammed his hand down on me, but Dash helped me run to the tenuous safety of Fly; I got on his back again, and we were flying once more. I made an orb of Glow in my hand, and threw it in Malchior’s eyes- he screamed, and then he spoke. Well, okay, he yelled.

“Party tricks like this won’t help you, little girl!”

I yell back. “It’s not me I’m trying to help!”

Rachel has the best timing- one second I’m moving with Fly through the air like a bird running from the claws of an eagle, except replace that eagle with a firebreathing dragon and the bird with me, and add a whole lot of terror-filled screaming and random bursts of light; they slow him down a little- I get lucky, and throw one of the Glowing orbs into Malchior’s mouth- he screams, rears back into the air, and starts to say something- and then the next second, Rachel is in the air with us, her eyes bright with tears.

“What are you DOING?!?” Her voice is a scream of honest outraged horror- I suddenly realize that their relationship was much more… meaningful. To her.

He laughs. “What am I doing? Why Miss Raven- after I got what I wanted, I thought about it a bit; why shouldn’t I try for the stars?”

“You said you liked the stars in my eyes. you taught me- you taught me how to dance.”

“So sorry, babe- but I’ve gotten everything I wanted from you, and now… Now, I’ll be needing some new digs.” His words are cruel- they cut into Rachel like knives. Blackness- like shadows inside shadows, like the ripple of feathers in wings- races around Rachel’s floating form; her eyes turn bright white with rage.

“What- you honestly think that any magic you know will be able to harm me? I taught you everything you know, little whore; what can you do?”

I distinctly remember the sound of gasps, and the sound of something shattering- in the Nightmarket, one of the great pastimes is Street Theater- and then Rachel, no, Raven spoke.

“You taught me much- but I learned this curse all on my own. my thanks go to Rorian of Nol, for teaching it to me.”

And then Raven Spoke. Malchior screamed- and then a howling wind of buzzing sucked him back into the dusty dry pages of the book from whence he came.

Later, in the safety of my apartment, Rachel asks me if she can take a bath- I oblige her. I pull out half a barrel I’ve been keeping on a high shelf- no sense in wasting, you know?- and then I ask Flower for something… soothing, and cleansing, and restorative. The scent of soothing florals fills the air- as does the sound of her quiet sobs.

The echoing sounds of a strangely loud catfight mixed with the bellowing of oxen comes from outside; I close the window, and think nothing of it.

This is how I opened the box: in a fit of pique and frustration, on April 9th, a little before midnight, I threw a Glowbomb at it. And I saw- well, I saw a winged Lock flitter out of it, and try, desperately,
to escape.

No fucking chance.

I popped that little bugger into a Bubble faster than it knew what was going. Fucker. Well, alright, that’s being a bit too mean- Lock is a very useful spell to know. Still- a whole year and a half before I found out!

And then I opened a pandora’s box of trouble for myself; first I had to figure out what the hell I was looking at. And when I finally did… well.

Of course, next winter was the winter the wider world crashed into mine. Literally.
Chapter Summary

I've realized that I'm one of those people who writes long chapters. I'm sorry you can't read this shit all at once on your breaks.

Located at the heart of the Yangtze River Delta, Xanghai has the world's busiest container port, which handled 29.05 million TEUs in 2010. Xanghai is one of Kiao’s busiest ports, with a thriving International trade.

Xanghai is one of the main industrial centers of Kiao, playing a key role in Kiao's heavy industries. A large number of industrial zones, including Xanghai Hongqiao Economic and Technological Development Zone, Jinqiao Export Economic Processing Zone, Minhang Economic and Technological Development Zone, and Xanghai WayneTech High-Tech Development Zone, are backbones of Xanghai's secondary industry. Heavy industries accounted for 78% of the gross industrial output in 2009. Kiao's largest steelmaker Baosteel Group and Jiangnan Shipyard, one of Kiao's oldest shipbuilders are both located in Xanghai. Auto manufacture is another important industry. The Xanghai-branch of LexCorp is one of the three largest employers in Kiao, and has strategic partnerships with Promethian Industries, and the local Party Governmental Agency.

I Dream that when I am fifteen, I will meet one of the strangest people I'll ever know- he calls himself Robin, on introduction; I will help him, and his friends, and I will become part of something larger than myself. Of course, by then, I will also have been on a whirlwind tour of the larger- it's not actually the Human Realm. I should call it something else…

This is what I did after I got Lock out of the Invisible Box:

I fell asleep. Well, honestly- can you blame me?

Wait, that makes no sense- oh! Okay, hang on- Here’s what happened. Just after I helped Raven-Rachel, part of the Cul decided that it would be a good idea to catch the hell on fire. Normally this wouldn’t have bothered me, except that it wasn’t a natural fire- it was a Fiery boy chasing a Woodland girl through the Cul, and setting things aflame in his wake. The bellowing of oxen I had heard earlier, when Rachel was weeping over love lost, was actually the Fire boy cat-calling to the Wood girl; soon, the crackle and snap-pop of flames took over the atmosphere.
To be honest, I would have been fine with letting things play out on their own- except with the Cul on fire, Rachel couldn’t go back to the Ash. Which wouldn’t have been a problem… except for the fact that my apartment was only mostly habitable at the time, and still is very very small. Single person residence small, in fact.

So. Rachel couldn’t go back home, and I didn’t actually have a couch at the time- but she’d also just gotten her heart shattered into several thousand jagged and pain inducing pieces.

There was only one thing to do.

“Rachel- I’m going to go out, and try to get the Cul to stop burning. You can stay here- there’s food, and my bed’s pretty comfortable; you know how to use a computer, right?” Actually, the answer was no- so I spent the rest of that… night, except it was morning by the time she fell asleep, teaching her how to use my much abused and mildly battered computer.

Considering what I would end up doing with that poor thing, teaching an empath with a habit of destroying inanimate objects how to use it during a moment of emotional weakness was the least of it’s trials.

I’ve still never quite managed to get the delete key to unstick in cold weather though.

Let me tell you about the Internet in the Nightmarket- actually, let me tell you about Gemworld. They’re connected.

Amythest (the First) of Gemworld became Queen when she was approximately fourteen years old- with the help of Ezekiel Bleak, she destroyed the Opalian Regime, which had taken over her kingdom in the usual way of nobles with pretensions of royalty- you know, rain of arrows, slaughter of the old rulers-and-family, hellfire and brimstone- all very normal. Expected and accepted cycle of royal doings, even. Unfortunately, the Opals- specifically Dark Opal- hadn’t read the important rules of kingly doings, and so, when it became clear that being King of Gemworld was basically a glorified Judges post with a funny hat and less comfortable house, he reacted.

Decisively.

Fast forward fourteen years- the peasantry of Gemworld have been thoroughly trod upon, their rights ground into less than dust because dust can still get in your face and throat and eyes, and if the peasantry then so much as tried that they’d be cut apart but only just enough to really feel it when the horses dragged them apart into still screaming bleeding pieces. All for the purpose of quelling civil unrest, of course.

Enter Amythest- who was, at the time, just a girl who liked Video Games a little too much. This was in the old days of computers- when it was the size of an old fashioned box television, and the internet was a place of glaring colors and three hour downloads.

Amythest, who had been innocently playing her games, was suddenly picked up by a well-aimed magical portal spell, which was attatched to the hands of fate, yanked her through her computer- which showed her the way of things-to-come (and Amythest was a smart girl, and remembered such things for a later time when they might come in handy)- and plopped her into a little village, in a purple dress, with a sharp sword, a round shield, and minor leather armor, with the purple design of
the Royal house of Gemworld on her wickerwork breastplate.

That village was the much belabored and beleaguered town of Limbo, a small settlement left from the days of when Witchworld was feeling imperialistic. It was in Limbo that Amythest (1st) met Ezekiel Bleak, then a mere witch-apprentice, and not worth much of anything.

Fast forward five, and Ezekiel Bleak is the Queen’s Witch-consort, and father of her daughters, Georgiana Amythest, and Jacklyn Bleak.

His apprentices, Jinks the Boar, Klarion the Cat, and Teekl the Tiger, are a different matter- there’s a story about them I could tell you, but not right now. Jinks would be the second friend I ever make- a young man named Kaldur’ahm, is the third. (I would later learn that the royal family of Gemworld was not… right.)

Now, the Stalcos- also called the gleam- is an invention of Amythest (1) that came about because of the simple fact that when Dark Opal was King, he worked the peasantry of Gemworld into the ground. Now, that’s not to say taxes shouldn’t be collected- at least, I think they should. Governments need things to run on, after all, and they do serve an annoying and boring purpose, but it’s much better that they’re there. Than as opposed to when they aren’t.

For example, it’s usually the job of the government to make sure that money in all places will buy about the same amount of things, and that the roads are still walkable, and that interest rates don’t beggar the poor bastard who needed to borrow all that money- that children aren’t a viable form of collateral, and that the dead- or incorporeal, I should say- the gone, how’s that?- can’t have a say in the running of the day- being no longer involved. Governments tend to make things, if not fair, at least reasonably even handed- the best ones tend to make it so that the people can change things around.

There’s a reason I’m not a superhero. I’ve never claimed to be a superhero. Kowloon had a police force. But Kowloon became the Nightmarket, which doesn’t. And Xanghai has it’s own heroes and villians; at most, I’m a footnote on the fringes.

(I’ve always been happy with that- of course, once I meet the boy called Robin, things will change so hard.)

No, but still, Dark Opal tanked Gemworld’s economy- inflation was up, debt was making a mess- in some cases, literally, in the form of tiles that fell off the roof- of the country’s collective pocket book, and no one could afford to buy a potato. It was a god awful mess.

So, Amythest (1) did something.

The Gleam began with the development of Leystones in the Druidic period. The general public was first introduced to the concepts that would lead to the Gleam when a message was sent over the SpARKNET from Professor Leonard Kleinrock's alchemical laboratory at University of Nirvana, after the second piece of network equipment was installed at Standing Stone 78, Ireland. Packet switched networks such as SPRIACLES, Mark I at Thir Na Oge in the UK, GRADES, Merit System, Mineit, and Facetnet were developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s using a variety of mined and free-cut stones of varying grades. The SpARKNET in particular led to the
development of protocols for internetworking, in which multiple separate networks could be joined together into a network of networks.

In 1992, the Many protocol suite (MCP/MP) was standardized, and consequently, the concept of a world-wide network of interconnected MCP/MP networks, called the Gleam, was introduced. Access to the SpARKNET was expanded in 1991 when the National Alchemy Foundation of Gemworld (NAFG) developed the Computer Alchemy Network (CANET) and again in 1986 when NAFNET provided access to supernode sites in the United States from research and education organizations.

Commercial Gleam service providers (GSPs) began to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The SpARKNET was decommissioned in 1990. The Gleam was commercialized in 1995 when NAFNET was decommissioned, removing the last restrictions on the use of the Internet to carry commercial traffic.

Since the mid-2000s, the Gleam has had a revolutionary impact on culture and commerce, including the rise of near-instant communication by electronic mail, instant messaging, Voice over Gleam Protocol (VoGP) “calls”, two-way interactive video calls, and the World Wide Network with its discussion forums, blogs, social networking, and online shopping sites. The research and education community continues to develop and use advanced networks such as NAF's very high speed Backbone Network Service (vBNS), Internet2, and National SigmaRail. Increasing amounts of data are transmitted at higher and higher speeds over crystaline networks operating at 1-Gbit/s, 10-Gbit/s, or more. The Gleam's takeover over the global communication landscape was almost instant in historical terms: it only communicated 1% of the information flowing through two-way telecommunications networks in the year 1993, already 51% by 2000, and more than 97% of the telecommunicated information by 2007. Today the Gleam continues to grow, driven by ever greater amounts of online information, commerce, entertainment, social networking, and the steadily rising number of people who can put their hands on a reasonably magically conductive gemstone.

I didn’t have to steal my gemstones, like some others did- and do- and this is because Nainai knew me better than I had thought. I think- or maybe I just like to think- that she knew I would leave, and strike out on my own before I would become a burden.

So this is what Nainai did.

She hid things for me in the tampon box- how do I know they were for me? There was a note!

This is what the note said:

Kě‘ài de háizí

I know that you’re smarter than you appear- I know that you’ll be able to help yourself. I wish, with all of my heart, that I could help you- but I’ve already done as much as I could. So has your mother, and your father, and I think that by the end of it all… I think you’re going to have to grow up on your own.

I know that at times we have all been unreasoning taskmasters- but this is because we know that you will have to pay for our mistakes, as children always do. We only want
for you what is best, and for you to live. To thrive.

I know these will come in handy. My love and best wishes,

Nainai

I opened the box about a year and a half after I left- because that’s when I needed tampons. Life as a girl is interesting, which is never good.

This is what was in the box… that wasn’t a tampon:

Two bloodstone earrings, a pouch full of garnets, a pouch each of silver and gold, a wallet full of money, a diamond the size of my eye, and two cute flash-drives in the shape of a duck and a frog.

I do occasionally wonder how Nainai got all of these things, but in the end it doesn’t matter- they’re useful things to have. Also, the gemstones allowed me to start up what will be a fantastic array for my own personal Gleam space, and well… one of the flash drives had instructions on how to… alter, or remake, or- well…

This was on my flash drive shaped like a duck:

The first step in building a computer is deciding what type of machine you want to build.

Ask yourself these questions:

Do you want a really inexpensive computer for the kids to use?

A small, quiet machine to use as a media computer in the living room?

A high-end gaming computer?

Maybe a powerful machine with a lot of disk space for video editing?

The possibilities are endless, and the type of machine you want to build will control many of the decisions you make down the line. Therefore, it's important to know exactly what you want the machine to accomplish from the start. Everything you choose to use needs to go in a case with enough space to hold multiple hard disks and enough air-flow to keep everything cool.
Choosing a motherboard is the most interesting part of any building project. There are hundreds of motherboards to choose from and each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

One easy way to think about motherboards is to break them up into a few categories. For example:

- **Cheap motherboards:** Generally in the $50 range, these are motherboards for older CPUs. They're great for building inexpensive machines.

- **Middle-of-the-road motherboards:** Ranging in price from $50 to $100, these are one step up from the cheap motherboards. In many cases you can find motherboard and CPU combos in this price range, which is another great way to build a cheap machine or an inexpensive home/office computer.

- **High-end motherboards:** If you're building a powerful gaming machine or video workstation, these motherboards give you the speed you need. They range in price from $100 to $200. They handle the latest CPU chips at their highest speeds.

- **Extreme motherboards:** Falling into the over-$200 range, these motherboards have special features that boost the price. For example, they might have multiple CPU sockets, extra memory slots or special cooling features.

You need to decide whether you are building a "cheap machine," a "high-end machine" or a "tricked-out super machine" and then choose your motherboard accordingly. Here are some other decisions that help narrow down your motherboard choices:

- Do you want to use an Intel or an AMD processor? Making this choice will cut the number of motherboards in half. AMD chips are often cheaper, but lots of people are die-hard Intel fans.

- What size motherboard do you want to use? If you're trying to build a smaller computer, you may want to look at micro ATX cases. That means you'll need to buy a micro ATX motherboard. Otherwise you can use a normal ATX motherboard and case. (There are also smaller motherboard form factors like mini-ITX and even nano-ITX if you want to go really small.) The size of the motherboard determines the size of the case you'll need.

- How many USB ports do you want? If you want several, make sure the motherboard can handle it.

- Do you need FireWire? It's nice if the motherboard accommodates it (although it's also possible to add a card).

- Do you want a **PCI Express** graphics card? Or do you want to use a graphics card on the motherboard to keep the price and size down? If you want to go the cheapest route, make sure the motherboard includes a video card on board (easiest way to tell is to see if there is a DVI or VGA connector on the motherboard). If you want an HDMI port, TV tuner or other video component, make sure the video card or cards you've chosen include them.

- What pin configuration are you using for the CPU? If you want to use the latest CPUs, make sure that your motherboard accepts them.

- Do you want to try things like dual video cards or special high-speed RAM configurations? If so, make sure the motherboard supports it.

If you don't care about any of this stuff (or if it all sounds like gibberish to you), then you're probably interested in building a cheap machine. In that case, find an inexpensive motherboard/CPU combo kit and don't worry about all of these details.
Once you've chosen your motherboard, you're ready to choose everything else. Make sure to get the CPU that's the right brand and the right pin configuration to fit your motherboard. Pick whichever CPU clock speed fits your budget and intentions. (If you purchase a motherboard/CPU combo, you can skip this step.)

What is clock speed? Essentially, it refers to how many instructions a CPU can execute in a second. For some processes, a really fast, single-core CPU may be better-suited than a slower multi-core processor. What’s best for you will depend on how you want to use your computer.

You'll need to use the RAM with the correct pin configuration that will match your motherboard. If your motherboard is using a specialty RAM configuration (normally to improve performance), make sure the RAM you buy matches its requirements. Some motherboards support RAM in pairs of memory sticks and others may require you to add three sticks at a time. Make sure you know which kind of motherboard you're using before you buy RAM so that they match up.

If the case doesn't come with a power supply, you'll need to choose one. Make sure its connectors match the motherboard. Three hundred watts are enough for low-power machines, but if you're building a gaming machine with multiple video cards or a machine with lots of disks, you may want to consider something bigger. There are tools online that help you estimate how much power your computer will need based on the components you’re including in the machine. It’s a good idea to add another 10 percent to the power requirements. This will help guarantee your computer will have enough power and gives you the option of upgrading further down the road.

Choose a video card if you're not using the onboard video on the motherboard.

Choose an optical drive. If you are building a cheap machine, get the cheapest CD-ROM drive you can find. If you want to burn Blu-Rays, DVDs and CDs, make sure the drive can handle it.

Choose a hard disk -- or more than one. Check to see what your motherboard supports -- SATA 3.0GB/s or SATA 6GB/s. If your motherboard can support a SATA 6GB/s drive, you may want to invest in one. Most drives can run on SATA 3.0GB/s. If you want -- and your budget allows -- you can opt for a solid-state drive instead of or in addition to a hard drive. Solid-state drives take up less space, are faster and aren’t noisy but they’re also more expensive and tend to have lower storage capacity.

Choose an operating system: Lexcorp’s Windows has widespread adoption, but make sure the version you buy has the features you want. There are other options -- if you prefer the Query operating system you’ll find hundreds of variations online, some of which are free. And if you want a real challenge, you can attempt to build a wreckTech -- a non-WayneTech computer running the WT operating system. But wreckTechs are notoriously tricky to build, they can be unreliable machines, and you can’t expect to get any technical support from WayneTech.

Now that you've picked everything out, it's time to purchase your parts. You have three options:

- Mail order on the Internet -- All kinds of stores sell computer parts on the Web. Visit multiple sites to compare prices. Don’t forget about eBay.
A big national chain -- Places like Tiger Direct, Vigilante’s, and Best Sale have stores in many large cities that will sell you parts. They also have people on staff who may be able to answer questions.

Local parts retailer -- Any big city will have a number of smaller, local shops selling parts. Look in the Yellow Pages or online.

The people working at a shop like this can often answer lots of questions, and they may also be willing to help you if your machine does not work after you assemble it.

Now that you have your parts, it's time to build. This is the fun part.

But before we start building, we need to say one thing about static electricity. Most of the parts you'll be handling when you assemble your computer are highly sensitive to static shocks. If you build up static electricity on your body and a shock passes from your body to something like a CPU chip, that CPU chip is dead. You'll have to buy another one.

The way you eliminate static electricity is by grounding yourself. There are lots of ways to ground yourself, but probably the easiest is to wear a grounding bracelet on your wrist. Then you connect the bracelet to something grounded (like a copper pipe or the center screw on a wall outlet's face plate). By connecting yourself to ground, you eliminate the possibility of static shock.

Each combination of parts is unique. But in general, here are the basic steps you'll need to follow when you assemble your machine:

First, you'll need to unwrap the motherboard and the microprocessor chip. The chip will have one marked corner that aligns with another marked corner of its socket on the motherboard. Align the corners and drop the microprocessor into the socket. You don't need to apply any pressure - if it's aligned correctly, it should fall into place. Once you have it in, cinch it down with the lever arm.

Now, you need to install the heat sink. The CPU box will contain a manual that tells you how to do it. The heat sink will contain either a heat sink sticker or heat sink grease to use when mounting it on the CPU. Follow the instructions closely to install it. To install our heat sink, all we had to do was put it in place, cinch it down with flanges on either side and lock it with a cam. Connect the power lead for the heat sink to the motherboard.

Next, you'll install the RAM. Look on the motherboard for the slot marked "one" and firmly press the RAM module into it. It will probably take more pressure than you'd think to get the RAM into place. Each side of the module should also have a rotating arm that will lock the RAM down.

Now your motherboard is ready to put in the case.

Next, you'll assemble the case. You'll need to install the power supply, the motherboard, a faceplate and standoffs to hold the motherboard in place. You'll also need to connect some wires to the motherboard.

Your motherboard should have come with a face plate for its back connectors. The case already has a hole cut in it for the plate, so you just need to put in the plate and press it until it clicks into place. Now you can put in the motherboard. It needs to sit about a quarter of an inch (6.4 millimeters) away from the case's surface so that none of its
connectors touch the case. You'll accomplish this by placing spacers, which are also included with the motherboard.

Because each motherboard is different, you'll have to set it into the case first to see which screw holes on the motherboard match up with the pre-drilled holes in the case. Then you can take the motherboard back out, place the spacers, and put the motherboard in on top of them. Make sure that the motherboard lines up with the faceplate and the holes line up with the spacers.

Find the screws that fit (these should have come with the case) the spacers and screw down the motherboard. Don't screw them in too tightly -- they just need to be snug. Be very careful when putting in the screws. If you drop them into the case, they could damage the fine wires on the motherboard.

Now you can install the power supply in the case if it's not already installed. The power supply has two sides. The fan side faces outside the case and the wire side faces inside. Slide the power supply onto its brackets and secure it with screws (the case or the power supply should have come with them).

Connect the power leads to the motherboard. There should be a large one and a small one, and it will be obvious as to where each one goes.

You'll be left with about 15 more wires. Don't worry -- the manual has a page to tell you exactly where each one goes. Each of them has a label that corresponds to a label on the correct port.

The last steps are installing the hard drive -- or drives -- and the optical drive. The case has a removable bracket with four rubber grommets on it, which line up with four holes on the hard drive. It also should have come with four screws made just to punch through those grommets. Screw the hard drive into the bracket, then put the bracket back into its slot in the case. Then connect the hard disk to the power using one of the connectors coming off of the power supply. If it fits, then it's a match.

Now install the cables. One side of the cable has a red stripe on it, which makes it "pin 1." Look on the motherboard and hook the cable into the IDE connector marked "1." Insert the other end of the cable on the back of the drive. Now the drive is ready to go.

Install the optical drive next. Again, set the jumpers correctly. The drive fits in the front of the case, and you may have to pop out a faceplate to make room for it. Slide it in and screw it into place, making sure that it's aligned with the front of the case. Just as with the hard drive, you can use any available connector from the power supply. You'll also use the cable that came with the optical drive to connect it to the motherboard (align the red stripe for "pin 1") and plug the other end into the drive. Connect the audio for the optical drive. Again, there's an obvious place for it to plug in on the motherboard and on the drive itself.

If you're using a video card, now you'll install it as well. The motherboard only has one video-card slot, so you should be able to find it easily (you can also use the manual). Line up the card with the slot and push it into place. If the video card has its own power connector, connect it to the power supply. If the case has extra fans, make sure they have power too.

Now you can close up the case and add a monitor, keyboard, mouse and speakers.
Now, the moment of truth -- it's time to turn your machine on and see if it works. If there's a switch on the back of the power supply, make sure it's on. Also make sure that the power supply is set correctly to 110 or 220 volts (some power supplies do this automatically, others have a switch or a slider).

Then, push the power switch on the front of the case. In the ideal case, four things will happen:

- You'll see/hear the fans spin up.
- You'll hear the hard disk spin up.
- Lights will light on the case.
- You'll see something happening on the monitor to indicate that the motherboard is working.

If you see/hear all of that happening, you're successful. You've created a working machine. Using the manual that came with the motherboard, you can enter the BIOS screens and make sure everything looks OK. Chances are you'll need to set the machine's date and time, but that's probably all you have to do. Everything else is probably automatic. All the drives will be recognized and auto-configured. The default settings on the motherboard will be fine.

What if you put it all together and it doesn't work? This is the one possible downside of building your own machine. It is hard to describe the feeling you get when you try turning on the machine and nothing happens. You've put in several hours of work and a significant amount of cash, so it's discouraging to get no response.

All is not lost, however. Here are several items to check:

- Is the power supply firmly plugged in and turned on (many power supplies have a small switch on the back)? Try a different outlet.
- Did you plug the power supply into the motherboard? Look at the manual for details.
- Is the case's power switch properly connected to the motherboard? If you've plugged the switch into the wrong pins on the motherboard, it won't work. Check the motherboard manual.
- Are the drives connected to the motherboard properly? Do they have power?
- Unseat and reseat the video card. If the motherboard has onboard video, try to remove the video card completely and boot using the onboard version.

If you've checked all of that and nothing continues to happen, it could mean:

- The power supply is bad.
- The switch on the case doesn't work. We actually had this happen once on a machine we built at HowStuffWorks.com.
- Something is wrong with the motherboard or the CPU.

The easiest way to determine where the problem lies is to swap parts. Try a different power supply. Swap a different motherboard into the case. Play around with different combinations.

If it's still not working, then you have a few options. You can go back to the shop that sold you the parts. If you bought them from a small local shop, they can help you debug the problem (although it may cost you). If they sold you a bad motherboard (rare, but possible) they'll usually help you out. You can also try to find a more experienced
This was on the frog flash drive:
When you turn on your computer, it's nice to think that you're in control. There's the trusty computer mouse, which you can move anywhere on the screen, summoning up your music library or Internet browser at the slightest whim. Although it's easy to feel like a director in front of your desktop or laptop, there's a lot going on inside, and the real man behind the curtain handling the necessary tasks is the operating system.

Most desktop or laptop PCs come pre-loaded with Lexcorp Windows. WayneTech computers come pre-loaded with FlitM OS X. Many corporate servers use the Query or UNITE operating systems. The operating system (OS) is the first thing loaded onto the computer -- without the operating system, a computer is useless.

More recently, operating systems have started to pop up in smaller computers as well. If you like to tinker with electronic devices, you're probably pleased that operating systems can now be found on many of the devices we use every day, from cell phones to wireless access points. The computers used in these little devices have gotten so powerful that they can now actually run an operating system and applications. The computer in a typical modern cell phone is now more powerful than a desktop computer from 20 years ago, so this progression makes sense and is a natural development.

The purpose of an operating system is to organize and control hardware and software so that the device it lives in behaves in a flexible but predictable way.

Not all computers have operating systems. The computer that controls the microwave oven in your kitchen, for example, doesn't need an operating system. It has one set of tasks to perform, very straightforward input to expect (a numbered keypad and a few pre-set buttons) and simple, never-changing hardware to control. For a computer like this, an operating system would be unnecessary baggage, driving up the development and manufacturing costs significantly and adding complexity where none is required. Instead, the computer in a microwave oven simply runs a single hard-wired program all the time.

For other devices, an operating system creates the ability to:

- serve a variety of purposes
- interact with users in more complicated ways
- keep up with needs that change over time

All desktop computers have operating systems. The most common are the Windows family of operating systems developed by Lexcorp, the FlitterMouse operating systems developed by WayneTech and the UNITE family of operating systems (which have been developed by a whole history of individuals, corporations and collaborators). There are hundreds of other operating systems available for special-purpose applications, including specializations for mainframes, robotics, manufacturing, real-time control systems and so on.

In any device that has an operating system, there's usually a way to make changes to how the device works. This is far from a happy accident; one of the reasons operating systems are made out of portable code rather than permanent physical circuits is so that they can be changed or modified without having to scrap the whole device.
For a desktop computer user, this means you can add a new security update, system patch, new application or even an entirely new operating system rather than junk your computer and start again with a new one when you need to make a change. As long as you understand how an operating system works and how to get at it, in many cases you can change some of the ways it behaves. The same thing goes for your phone, too.

Regardless of what device an operating system runs, what exactly can it do?

At the simplest level, an operating system does two things:

1. It manages the hardware and software resources of the system. In a desktop computer, these resources include such things as the processor, memory, disk space and more (On a cell phone, they include the keypad, the screen, the address book, the phone dialer, the battery and the network connection).
2. It provides a stable, consistent way for applications to deal with the hardware without having to know all the details of the hardware.

The first task, managing the hardware and software resources, is very important, as various programs and input methods compete for the attention of the central processing unit (CPU) and demand memory, storage and input/output (I/O) bandwidth for their own purposes. In this capacity, the operating system plays the role of the good parent, making sure that each application gets the necessary resources while playing nicely with all the other applications, as well as husbanding the limited capacity of the system to the greatest good of all the users and applications.

The second task, providing a consistent application interface, is especially important if there is to be more than one of a particular type of computer using the operating system, or if the hardware making up the computer is ever open to change. A consistent application program interface (API) allows a software developer to write an application on one computer and have a high level of confidence that it will run on another computer of the same type, even if the amount of memory or the quantity of storage is different on the two machines.

Even if a particular computer is unique, an operating system can ensure that applications continue to run when hardware upgrades and updates occur. This is because the operating system -- not the application -- is charged with managing the hardware and the distribution of its resources. One of the challenges facing developers is keeping their operating systems flexible enough to run hardware from the thousands of vendors manufacturing computer equipment. Today's systems can accommodate thousands of different printers, disk drives and special peripherals in any possible combination.

Within the broad family of operating systems, there are generally four types, categorized based on the types of computers they control and the sort of applications they support. The categories are:

- **Real-time operating system** (RTOS) - Real-time operating systems are used to control machinery, scientific instruments and industrial systems. An RTOS typically has very little user-interface capability, and no end-user utilities, since the system will be a "sealed box" when delivered for use. A very important part of an
RTOS is managing the resources of the computer so that a particular operation executes in precisely the same amount of time, every time it occurs. In a complex machine, having a part move more quickly just because system resources are available may be just as catastrophic as having it not move at all because the system is busy.

- **Single-user, single task** - As the name implies, this operating system is designed to manage the computer so that one user can effectively do one thing at a time. The Palm OS for Palm handheld computers is a good example of a modern single-user, single-task operating system.

- **Single-user, multi-tasking** - This is the type of operating system most people use on their desktop and laptop computers today. LexCorp's Windows and WayneTech's FlitM OS platforms are both examples of operating systems that will let a single user have several programs in operation at the same time. For example, it's entirely possible for a Windows user to be writing a note in a word processor while downloading a file from the Internet while printing the text of an e-mail message.

- **Multi-user** - A multi-user operating system allows many different users to take advantage of the computer's resources simultaneously. The operating system must make sure that the requirements of the various users are balanced, and that each of the programs they are using has sufficient and separate resources so that a problem with one user doesn't affect the entire community of users. UNITE, VMS and mainframe operating systems, such as MVS, are examples of multi-user operating systems.

It's important to differentiate between multi-user operating systems and single-user operating systems that support networking. Windows 2000 and Queen Netware can each support hundreds or thousands of networked users, but the operating systems themselves aren't true multi-user operating systems. The **system administrator** is the only "user" for Windows 2000 or Netware. The network support and all of the remote user logins the network enables are, in the overall plan of the operating system, a program being run by the administrative user.

When you turn on the power to a computer, the first program that runs is usually a set of instructions kept in the computer's read-only memory (ROM). This code examines the system hardware to make sure everything is functioning properly. This **power-on self test** (POST) checks the CPU, memory, and basic input-output systems (BIOS) for errors and stores the result in a special memory location. Once the POST has successfully completed, the software loaded in ROM (sometimes called the BIOS or firmware) will begin to activate the computer's disk drives. In most modern computers, when the computer activates the hard disk drive, it finds the first piece of the operating system: the **bootstrap loader**.

The bootstrap loader is a small program that has a single function: It loads the operating system into memory and allows it to begin operation. In the most basic form, the bootstrap loader sets up the small driver programs that interface with and control the various hardware subsystems of the computer. It sets up the divisions of memory that hold the operating system, user information and applications. It establishes the data structures that will hold the myriad signals, flags and semaphores that are used to communicate within and between the subsystems and applications of the computer. Then it turns control of the computer over to the operating system.
The operating system's tasks, in the most general sense, fall into six categories:

- Processor management
- Memory management
- Device management
- Storage management
- Application interface
- User interface

While there are some who argue that an operating system should do more than these six tasks, and some operating-system vendors do build many more utility programs and auxiliary functions into their operating systems, these six tasks define the core of nearly all operating systems. Next, let's look at the tools the operating system uses to perform each of these functions.

The heart of managing the processor comes down to two related issues:

- Ensuring that each process and application receives enough of the processor's time to function properly
- Using as many processor cycles as possible for real work

The basic unit of software that the operating system deals with in scheduling the work done by the processor is either a **process** or a **thread**, depending on the operating system.

It's tempting to think of a process as an application, but that gives an incomplete picture of how processes relate to the operating system and hardware. The application you see (word processor, spreadsheet or game) is, indeed, a process, but that application may cause several other processes to begin, for tasks like communications with other devices or other computers. There are also numerous processes that run without giving you direct evidence that they ever exist. For example, Windows XP and UNIX can have dozens of background processes running to handle the network, memory management, disk management, virus checks and so on.

A process, then, is software that performs some action and can be controlled -- by a user, by other applications or by the operating system.

It is processes, rather than applications, that the operating system controls and schedules for execution by the CPU. In a single-tasking system, the schedule is straightforward. The operating system allows the application to begin running, suspending the execution only long enough to deal with **interrupts** and user input.

Interrupts are special signals sent by hardware or software to the CPU. It's as if some part of the computer suddenly raised its hand to ask for the CPU's attention in a lively meeting. Sometimes the operating system will schedule the priority of processes so that interrupts are **masked** -- that is, the operating system will ignore the interrupts from some sources so that a particular job can be finished as quickly as possible. There are some interrupts (such as those from error conditions or problems with memory) that are so important that they can't be ignored. These **non-maskable interrupts** (NMIs) must be dealt with immediately, regardless of the other tasks at hand.

While interrupts add some complication to the execution of processes in a single-tasking system, the job of the operating system becomes much more complicated in a multi-
tasking system. Now, the operating system must arrange the execution of applications so that you believe that there are several things happening at once. This is complicated because the CPU can only do one thing at a time. Today's multi-core processors and multi-processor machines can handle more work, but each processor core is still capable of managing one task at a time.

In order to give the appearance of lots of things happening at the same time, the operating system has to switch between different processes thousands of times a second. Here's how it happens:

- A process occupies a certain amount of RAM. It also makes use of registers, stacks and queues within the CPU and operating-system memory space.
- When two processes are multi-tasking, the operating system allot a certain number of CPU execution cycles to one program.
- After that number of cycles, the operating system makes copies of all the registers, stacks and queues used by the processes, and notes the point at which the process paused in its execution.
- It then loads all the registers, stacks and queues used by the second process and allows it a certain number of CPU cycles.
- When those are complete, it makes copies of all the registers, stacks and queues used by the second program, and loads the first program.

All of the information needed to keep track of a process when switching is kept in a data package called a process control block. The process control block typically contains:

- An ID number that identifies the process
- Pointers to the locations in the program and its data where processing last occurred
- Register contents
- States of various flags and switches
- Pointers to the upper and lower bounds of the memory required for the process
- A list of files opened by the process
- The priority of the process
- The status of all I/O devices needed by the process

Each process has a status associated with it. Many processes consume no CPU time until they get some sort of input. For example, a process might be waiting for a keystroke from the user. While it is waiting for the keystroke, it uses no CPU time. While it's waiting, it is "suspended". When the keystroke arrives, the OS changes its status. When the status of the process changes, from pending to active, for example, or from suspended to running, the information in the process control block must be used like the data in any other program to direct execution of the task-switching portion of the operating system.

This process swapping happens without direct user interference, and each process gets enough CPU cycles to accomplish its task in a reasonable amount of time. Trouble can begin if the user tries to have too many processes functioning at the same time. The operating system itself requires some CPU cycles to perform the saving and swapping of all the registers, queues and stacks of the application processes. If enough processes are started, and if the operating system hasn't been carefully designed, the system can begin to use the vast majority of its available CPU cycles to swap between processes rather than run processes. When this happens, it's called **thrashing**, and it usually requires some sort of direct user intervention to stop processes and bring order back to the
One way that operating-system designers reduce the chance of thrashing is by reducing the need for new processes to perform various tasks. Some operating systems allow for a "process-lite," called a thread, that can deal with all the CPU-intensive work of a normal process, but generally does not deal with the various types of I/O and does not establish structures requiring the extensive process control block of a regular process. A process may start many threads or other processes, but a thread cannot start a process.

So far, all the scheduling we've discussed has concerned a single CPU. In a system with two or more CPUs, the operating system must divide the workload among the CPUs, trying to balance the demands of the required processes with the available cycles on the different CPUs. Asymmetric operating systems use one CPU for their own needs and divide application processes among the remaining CPUs. Symmetric operating systems divide themselves among the various CPUs, balancing demand versus CPU availability even when the operating system itself is all that's running.

If the operating system is the only software with execution needs, the CPU is not the only resource to be scheduled. Memory management is the next crucial step in making sure that all processes run smoothly.

When an operating system manages the computer's memory, there are two broad tasks to be accomplished:

1. Each process must have enough memory in which to execute, and it can neither run into the memory space of another process nor be run into by another process.
2. The different types of memory in the system must be used properly so that each process can run most effectively.

The first task requires the operating system to set up memory boundaries for types of software and for individual applications.

As an example, let's look at an imaginary small system with 1 megabyte (1,000 kilobytes) of RAM. During the boot process, the operating system of our imaginary computer is designed to go to the top of available memory and then "back up" far enough to meet the needs of the operating system itself. Let's say that the operating system needs 300 kilobytes to run. Now, the operating system goes to the bottom of the pool of RAM and starts building up with the various driver software required to control the hardware subsystems of the computer. In our imaginary computer, the drivers take up 200 kilobytes. So after getting the operating system completely loaded, there are 500 kilobytes remaining for application processes.

When applications begin to be loaded into memory, they are loaded in block sizes determined by the operating system. If the block size is 2 kilobytes, then every process that's loaded will be given a chunk of memory that's a multiple of 2 kilobytes in size. Applications will be loaded in these fixed block sizes, with the blocks starting and ending on boundaries established by words of 4 or 8 bytes. These blocks and boundaries help to ensure that applications won't be loaded on top of one another's space by a poorly calculated bit or two. With that ensured, the larger question is what to do when the 500-kilobyte application space is filled.

In most computers, it's possible to add memory beyond the original capacity. For example, you might expand RAM from 1 to 2 gigabytes. This works fine, but can be
relatively expensive. It also ignores a fundamental fact of computing -- most of the information that an application stores in memory is not being used at any given moment. A processor can only access memory one location at a time, so the vast majority of RAM is unused at any moment. Since disk space is cheap compared to RAM, then moving information in RAM to hard disk can greatly expand RAM space at no cost. This technique is called virtual memory management.

Disk storage is only one of the memory types that must be managed by the operating system, and it's also the slowest. Ranked in order of speed, the types of memory in a computer system are:

- **High-speed cache** -- This is fast, relatively small amounts of memory that are available to the CPU through the fastest connections. Cache controllers predict which pieces of data the CPU will need next and pull it from main memory into high-speed cache to speed up system performance.
- **Main memory** -- This is the RAM that you see measured in megabytes when you buy a computer.
- **Secondary memory** -- This is most often some sort of rotating magnetic storage that keeps applications and data available to be used, and serves as virtual RAM under the control of the operating system.

The operating system must balance the needs of the various processes with the availability of the different types of memory, moving data in blocks (called pages) between available memory as the schedule of processes dictates.

The path between the operating system and virtually all hardware not on the computer's motherboard goes through a special program called a driver. Much of a driver's function is to be the translator between the electrical signals of the hardware subsystems and the high-level programming languages of the operating system and application programs. Drivers take data that the operating system has defined as a file and translate them into streams of bits placed in specific locations on storage devices, or a series of laser pulses in a printer.

Because there are such wide differences in the hardware, there are differences in the way that the driver programs function. Most run when the device is required, and function much the same as any other process. The operating system will frequently assign high-priority blocks to drivers so that the hardware resource can be released and readied for further use as quickly as possible.

One reason that drivers are separate from the operating system is so that new functions can be added to the driver -- and thus to the hardware subsystems -- without requiring the operating system itself to be modified, recompiled and redistributed. Through the development of new hardware device drivers, development often performed or paid for by the manufacturer of the subsystems rather than the publisher of the operating system, input/output capabilities of the overall system can be greatly enhanced.

Managing input and output is largely a matter of managing queues and buffers, special storage facilities that take a stream of bits from a device, perhaps a keyboard or a serial port, hold those bits, and release them to the CPU at a rate with which the CPU can cope. This function is especially important when a number of processes are running and taking up processor time. The operating system will instruct a buffer to continue taking input from the device, but to stop sending data to the CPU while the process using the input is suspended. Then, when the process requiring input is made active once again,
the operating system will command the buffer to send data. This process allows a
keyboard or a modem to deal with external users or computers at a high speed even
though there are times when the CPU can't use input from those sources.

Managing all the resources of the computer system is a large part of the operating
system's function and, in the case of real-time operating systems, may be virtually all the
functionality required. For other operating systems, though, providing a relatively
simple, consistent way for applications and humans to use the power of the hardware is
a crucial part of their reason for existing.

Just as drivers provide a way for applications to make use of hardware subsystems
without having to know every detail of the hardware's operation, application program
interfaces (APIs) let application programmers use functions of the computer and
operating system without having to directly keep track of all the details in the CPU's
operation. Let's look at the example of creating a hard disk file for holding data to see
why this can be important.

Just as the API provides a consistent way for applications to use the resources of
the computer system, a user interface (UI) brings structure to the interaction between a
user and the computer. In the last decade, almost all development in user interfaces has
been in the area of the graphical user interface (GUI), with two models, WayneTech's
FlitterMouse and LexCorp's Windows, receiving most of the attention and gaining most
of the market share. The popular open-source Linux operating system also supports a
graphical user interface.

There are other user interfaces, some graphical and some not, for other operating
systems.

UNITE, for example, has user interfaces called shells that present a user interface more
flexible and powerful than the standard operating system text-based interface. Programs
such as the Korn Shell and the C Shell are text-based interfaces that add important
utilities, but their main purpose is to make it easier for the user to manipulate the
functions of the operating system. There are also graphical user interfaces, such as X-
Windows and Gnome, that make UNITE and Linux more like Windows and Macintosh
computers from the user's point of view.

It's important to remember that in all of these examples, the user interface is a program or
set of programs that sits as a layer above the operating system itself. The same thing is
true, with somewhat different mechanisms, of both Windows and Flittermouse operating
systems. The core operating-system functions -- the management of the computer system
-- lie in the kernel of the operating system. The display manager is separate, though it
may be tied tightly to the kernel beneath. The ties between the operating-system kernel
and the user interface, utilities and other software define many of the differences in
operating systems today, and will further define them in the future.

For desktop systems, access to a LAN or the Internet has become such an expected
feature that in many ways it's hard to discuss an operating system without making
reference to its connections to other computers and servers. Operating system developers
have made the Internet the standard method for delivering crucial operating system
updates and bug fixes. Although it's possible to receive these updates via CD or DVD,
it's becoming increasingly less common. In fact, some entire operating systems
themselves are only available through distribution over the Internet.
Further, a process called **NetBooting** has streamlined the capability to move the working operating system of a standard consumer desktop computer -- kernel, user interface and all -- off of the machine it controls. This was previously only possible for experienced power-users on multi-user platforms like UNIX and with a suite of specialized applications. NetBooting allows the operating system for one computer to be served over a network connection, by a remote computer connected anywhere in the network. One NetBoot server can serve operating systems to several dozen client computers simultaneously, and to the user sitting in front of each client computer the experience is just like they are using their familiar desktop operating system like Windows or Mac OS.

One question concerning the future of operating systems concerns the ability of a particular philosophy of software distribution to create an operating system usable by corporations and consumers together.

Linux, the operating system created and distributed according to the principles of **open source**, has had a significant impact on the operating system in general. Most operating systems, drivers and utility programs are written by commercial organizations that distribute **executable versions** of their software -- versions that can't be studied or altered. Open source requires the distribution of original source materials that can be studied, altered and built upon, with the results once again freely distributed. In the desktop computer realm, this has led to the development and distribution of countless useful and cost-free applications like the image manipulation program GIMP and the popular Web server Apache. In the consumer device realm, the use of Linux has paved the way for individual users to have greater control over how their devices behave.

Many consumer devices like cell phones and routers deliberately hide access to the operating system from the user, mostly to make sure that it's not inadvertently broken or removed. In many cases, they leave a "developer's mode" or "programmer's mode" open to allow changes to be made; however, that's only if you know how to find it. Often these systems may be programmed in such a way that there are only a limited range of changes that can be made. Some devices leave both a mode of access and the means of making powerful changes open to users, especially those that use Linux. Here are a couple of examples:

- The QueenVo DVR runs on a modified version of Linux. All of the modifications are public knowledge, and can be downloaded here along with some special tools for manipulating the code. Many enterprising TiVo users have added functionality to their systems, including increasing the storage capacity to getting to UNITE shells to changing the mode from NTSC to PAL.
- Many home routers also run on Linux.

For my computer- the one I still use, and have upgraded several times, the one that runs the majority of my… well- I soon realize that it won’t be enough to make the entire thing. I had to write the programming for it too. All of it.

Okay, so to be really honest- the RedflowerX programming system started with combining Linux and UNITE, and looking over the FlitM and Windows programming for clues on what to do- but when I realized that I could combine the Gleam access to the network with the Yggsadril network
that all plants have access to—well, I had to call the shells seeds, and there were a large number of gemstones I had to get to make the functionality what I wanted, and my garden is quite possibly man eating, but I think it was all worth it.

Now, to actually get all those gemstones, I had to—well.

I had to get an actual job. Actually, I had to get several jobs, and pick a profession.

And the garden brought it’s own set of problems.

But still—worth every second.

I soon see the source of the Fire— a boy, made of flames, chasing a girl all in greens— I fly down, trap the boy in a Bubble, and scoop the girl up. She is small—small like a doll, her hair all curling vines and leaves, her skin soft like moss. I use Bubbles again—this time, I fly by the Ash and scoop up lots and lots of water from their river— I fly back over the Cul, and the Bubbles burst, letting the water fall onto the flames. I do this for hours and hours, until finally the only thing still ablaze is the Firey boy himself.

He is in a livid snit, but I am not in the mood to have it out with him— I clench my hand tight and hot, and the Bubble trapping him shrinks down to the size of a candle flame. It floats into my palm, and I lift the little Wooden girl onto my shoulder, and pull up the lantern— I shove the little Firey boy into the lamp, and lock it tight; it used to house a genie, so I know it can hold him. I’m right, for once— he glares at me, and then flops down in a huff, his little head of flaring lights extra enraged. Honestly, he would have been more intimidating if he wasn’t the size of a small mouse.

I fly back to the courtyard of the Apartments, covered in soot and sweat and gunk— that’s another shirtwaist-dress ruined forever.

Sigh.

It’s then that I notice the two cards underneath the horse trough— one called the Rain, the other called the Cloud. I carefully tease them out with a stick that the little Wooden girl hands me— and then I crouch, and pull out a red pen (I’ve stopped leaving the house without one by then, it saves time) and make my mark. They ripple, and change—the Cloud is a woman of wispy whites, blues, greys, and all the colors of a sunset after storming, wrapped around her pale cool brown skin like a sari written with wind— on her forehead is a stylized plum blossom in blue; she holds a book and quill-pen. The Rain is a woman in sparkling blue sapphire gemstones, her short hair snapping sharp and up, her dusky brown skin glowing wetly—a spray of diamond bright droplets falls from her hair in a curve; she has a mirror clasped to her chest.

I tie the lamp back onto my belt, and pick the two cards up— they feel… like friends. If that makes sense.

I go back to the Cul—this time, I take the time to walk through it on foot, and see the utter devastation of the land and the trees and the grasses and how scorched all the stones look, dustings of black ink dried and filmy on their craggy skins. The bird bath is melted on the bottom—and it’s as good a place as any.

First, I summon Cloud— the smoke flows up, and out, and away— it whirs up into big, fat-dark clouds, thick and heavy. Then, I summon Rain— she giggles, and then the sky opens like the palm of a hand—
water rushes down in sheets, in waves, in monsoons, in that special way rain has sometimes when it doesn’t want to rain- it wants to cover every possible square centimeter of ground with as much water as possible, without all the bother of going through the air first. I am instantly soaked to the bone- on the plus side, the soot is quickly washed out of my hair.

I look up into the sky- and I see a boy, riding a cat-wolf made of vibrant blue light. He sees me- and they both come down from the sky; they land in front of me- the boy’s armor is spiked, and his hair is curly and wild and sparks and crackles with electricity thrown off by the cat-wolf.

Speaking of hair- it was a terrible struggle to keep my hair neat and long at the same time- so terrible, in fact, that I sliced it all off after River Ghost put mud and fish guts in my hair. Of course, the fact that I wouldn’t look at my reflection for any reason made giving myself a haircut a mite… interesting. I would later realize that my reflection was, well, myself, and that what I was so frightened of was what else was in the mirror. I don’t remember what I look like. I remember how I died, but not why, or the exact where; I mean, I know where, but not... where. There was no why.

Wood, on my shoulder, goes crazy. One second, I’m standing in a pile of dusty muddy ashes- the next, there’s the most green grass I’ve ever seen- the oily ink-black film is soft green moss, there are trees and flowering bushes and a small stream and the bird bath is covered in flowering winding vines filled with dew bright waters and there is clear clean water bubbling out of the bird bath which is a fountain now because Flower told me later that those vines are Fountain-vines, and they do that- and there are trees, not the scrubby small things like before but real trees that tower above me like skyscrapers all of green and brown and red in the bark, and the air smells like moss and forest and growing things. The rain slackens- softer now, a gentle thing. Warm, on my rapidly chilling skin. I am calf-deep in a small pond, made by the overflowing fountain- it will soon be called the Fountain Stream.

Firey, in the little lamp, is amazed- but goes right back to sulking when I look at him. Ah well.

I gently take Wood off of my shoulder; she is small, and light in my hands. And- I feel a strange pulling sensation, and the splinters in my hands are quickly yanked out; I scrunch my nose in pain, and my eyes water a little bit.

When they’re gone, Wood turns into another pink-backed card; I sign her, and she doesn’t change much at all- the few changes are mostly cosmetic and very minor; she’s wearing a dress with sleeves that are bilaut cut, and her hair is much longer and wavier than it was before; there is a ball of some sort of wound fabric in her hand.

The boy and the cat-wolf move closer to me; the boy slides off of the crackling cat-wolf’s back, and holds his hand to it’s shoulder. I nervously bow. They bow back, regally- and then, a pair of cards float into my hands; I sign them too, and suddenly I have the Storm, a boy in armor with wild curly hair, holding a hammer, and the Thunder, a jagged wolven-cat roaring defiance. Rain and Cloud float back to me, and return to their card forms- I place them, along with Wood, Storm, and Thunder, in my sleeve pocket.

Exhaustion hits like a fist directly to the space between the shoulders.

When I finally stagger up the stairs, Firey in his little lamp knocking into my knee, Rachel has fallen asleep on my bed; her soft grey kirtle has ridden up a little bit, and I can see the mended parts of her off white socks- concentrated at the knee, of course- and the very bottom edge of her white smock;
her surcoat of dark blue with the dark blue sygils sewn into it is horribly rumpled; her sack shoes are scuffed and picked on the bottom. She’s curled up under her cloak too- I can tell that it isn’t going to be comfortable for her unless I do something.

I put Firey on the crusted over mess of my stove- boiled over oatmeal, I think- and scoop Rachel up in one arm. (I’ve since realized that I’m in fact ridiculously tall- I just didn’t realize that it was weird for Kiaom women to be two hundred centimeters tall.)

She is smaller than I thought- the shaved back of her head is fuzzy on my bare skin; her blue black hair shines off purple in the light. Her skin is a golden-grey; too little sun, not enough joy. There is a bright red gem in the middle of her forehead, outlined in black- her lips are small, and pink. I peel her out of her surcoat, and loosen the stays of her kirtle; her breasts are just beginning to nose out of her chest, now two small lumps on her chest, her waist still thick and muscled with youth, her hips still hard and narrow- then I peel the covers of my bedding back, and settle her into the fluffy softness of my featherbed. I take her shoes off, peel her socks off, and tuck her under the covers.

There’s a curtain that hangs in front of my bed- it’s made out of netting and beads and feathers- I draw it, and she is as safe as I can make her with what I have.

I retire to the couch- and it is there that I throw a flicker of Glow at the box, because I tripped over it, and barked my shin on my other foot.

Graceful and tall. Yay.

I’m only conscious long enough to sign Lock- a little combination lock with wings and sparks- and barely manage to not fall onto the floor when I pass out. When I come to, it is to the soft sounds of Rachel sobbing.

It is also the 17th of March- I know as well as she does that she can only be gone from the Ashram of Azarath for twenty-three hours before the gates will not allow her passage.

Which is how we became roommates for about six months, until we finished building her house. Of course, during New Year’s, a boy fell into her pond, and what a mess that was…

This is what my day is like when I am fourteen:

I wake up in my small bed, and peel Rachel’s octo-arms off of my chest; she’s drooled on me again. Stumble out of the warm soft bed- Rachel moves into my warm spot. Three steps to the shower- on the way I discard my sleep shirt and panties, stumble into the shower, and pull the curtain shut.

Water sluices out of a watering can onto my head- I soap and scrub and usually manage to time it so that the water is lukewarm; I only have to refill it once.

Out of the shower- my hair is scraggily, I need a professional cut- and into a beach towel, dried off.

Pick the clothing I’m going to wear today- either a shirtwaist dress (which is actually called a cheongsam- not those hip hugging things you’re thinking of, but the looser roby garment that came before), or a pair of short trousers and a blouse. If it’s a shopping day- which is three days of my ten-day week- I’ll wear one of the hand me down ruqun from the lower brothel; I’ve had to do some minor editing of the way it opens at the front, for obvious reasons.
Make breakfast- which involves a minor standoff with Firey. He doesn’t like to be made to do any kind of work; I don’t like to carry a load of firewood up 999+1 ladder and a step of stairs to cook with every week. I usually make some kind of rice porridge- which weirded Rachel out the first few days, but… she’s used to it now, I think. I also start the day’s dinner- usually just prepwork, wash the dishes, lay out the tools I’ll want to use. You know.

Then it’s two hours on my glitch-ridden WayneTech computer- writing out the coding for my new computer is no joke. I save it on my redrose flash-drive; my glitchy monster would eat it otherwise.

At ten, I stop, take a tea break- then I grab a jacket, leave Rachel on her own- she usually meditates for about an hour after breakfast, then it’s study of the mystic arts and some light yoga- and go to Xanghai. I research my parent’s lives and finances- which is not easy (and won’t be until after I crash)- until noon, and then I go to the park. There’s a souplady there, usually, and I have some soup for lunch. Then I practice tai ch’i with the elders in the park, and I run around doing kungfu kata until six o’clock; I rush back to the Nightmarket, and I go to the scrivner’s walk, and I watch the illuminators at their benches, and I write out play bills and signs and other such things for pocket money, and then I stop by Dumpling Cheng’s for pick-up dinner, have a little chat with her about everything and nothing, and then I go home to my apartment.

I eat dinner, write some more code, and sleep like a dead thing- Rachel usually goes to sleep later than I do, and thus is my day.

This is an average- this is the bare bones of my day. In May, everything changes- well, okay, not everything. But… my routine changes.

I have a Dream. I dream about a snake woman dressed in white, and a brown mouse, a boy loved by the wind, and a blue fish girl- but it’s… disjointed. Like something doesn’t want me to See.

For my computer, a selection of gems, both normal and mystical, were required- Amythest the Third would later tell me that there is no possible way for my computer to do what it does. Klarion would agree with her. Rachel- well, Raven, then- would quietly snicker, and then mumble that my entire existence was a compounding of impossibility- they were really questioning this?

I started out with the large diamond and the paired bloodstones Nainai gave me- I would base my creation on these three gems.

The creation of a mystic computer- MC- is sideways to that of a normal PC.

I got the case for my computer long before I got the guts, or even all the connections- I used a vanity table, with a mirror that had long since lost it’s glass; I scraped all the flaking white paint off of it, and stained it a rich, dark brown. The mirror frame, which became my monitor, had curling bits and pieces all around it- I placed the diamond in the high apex curl, where it glints and gleams, and sinks into the wooden frame.

The second mirror- a flat one, with filigreed flounces like that of a dish- is harder to explain. Let’s call it a focusing device, alright? In any case, one of the bloodstones- which actually cracked into two pieces- went into the base of the upright mirror and the outer edge of the flat mirror, linking them together.

The two side mirror-frames got brilliant cut quartz inset on their apexial corners- which I actually
found in the gutter, on the Ash side of the Cul; it was twilight, and I had worried about going out so late in the day. Rachel- who had started trying out pseudonyms for herself at the time- finally, forcefully, suggested that I take Firey with me in his lamp, if I was so worried.

I did so, along with one of my practice swords, and on the road back, I met a peddler- not so strange, in the Between-ing roads. But what he had to sell! I had never seen such strange things- but only three things caught my eye: a pair of brilliant cut agates and an odd looking set of scales made of brass.

I perused his wares very carefully- and finally, after much consternation and self-debate, made him an offer on the gems and the scales.

“Oh, well, now those are-” my hand brushed against the scales, and I am suddenly and keenly aware that the story this man is telling me is a fabrication of the worst kind, and that all of the items for sale are meant to be stolen back, along with several other things from the poor fool who buys them. So, I cut him off, mid-sentence.

“That’s a filthy lie and you know it- oh, sure, these might have belonged to a moneychanger, but they certainly weren’t destitute until after they had bought something from you!”

I should really learn to think before I speak.

The peddler is tall, and boney beneath his cloak; and as he speaks in his slimy voice, I become aware of the faint susurration in his voice, and the way there seems to be things moving under his cloak. The wind shifts slightly- and I smell… I smell the scent of a decaying corpse. I put my hands on Firey’s lamp door, and on the pommel of my saber- and the wind changes again. The hood of his cloak is shoved forcefully back- and I see that he is a decaying corpse with bloodless wax-white skin, sunken red eyes, and greasy hair clotted with grave dirt and infested with maggots. Maggots and other insects infest and crawl through rotting tears in his face- his rheumy red eyes slowly ooze out puss. In places, his flesh is completely gone, revealing off white bones; maggots and worms infest what I can see of the remains his tattered clothing. He reaches up, and peels away the cloak- his hands and fingers are badly torn from the efforts of slowly clawing a way out of the grave.

I have taken several steps back- soon proven to be a good plan, as he leaps out at me, his jaw crudely cracking open to reveal lamprey like teeth, a strange, ringing and echoing scream ripping from his throat-

I draw my sword, and in a stunning moment of competence, cleave his head from his body; my hand slips on the lamp’s door, and Firey leaps onto the Peddler, immolating him quickly into fine white ash. The wind whooshes the ash into a whirlwind, and then leaps into the Four Directions, scattering him quite well.

I shiver, and then sheathe my sword- Firey nods to me, and then flutters into a card, just like the others. I sign him- and the image is that of a fire-haired boy with a red warriors crown and wings crossed like arms; a many patterned wrap is around his slim hips. He does not seem so young, on the card- perhaps it’s to do with size?

I go back over to the peddler’s cart- and almost everything has turned into dust, and dirt- ancient
leaves and musty cobwebs; few things are left intact. I take the two agates and the scales- which also
turn into a card, which I sign; a balance of the sun and moon, held aloft by the wings of a person
shaped creature, their head bowed into their knees which are drawn to their chest- their arms are
wound around their legs, and they hold a sword that is chained to their wrists; they are also
blindfolded…

As I take the things that were on the counter, the wooden stall crumbles into nothing but black
streaked ash; the little charms that hung on the outside of the cart like Christmas lights turn into
butterflies and songbirds, except for a fabric one in the shape of an x flower- it is crude; the petals are
not of equal length, one being much too long, and it’s opposite being much too short. I put it in my
pocket- the wind is soft now, a gentle breeze- it blows ash off of a small jam jar, filled to the brim
with baroque pearls of all colors; I would later learn that they were the source of power for the Lost
Dragons of the Antarctic sea.

But that was later.

The Cross Ruby- well, Star Ruby- was an entirely different adventure, because it was during that one
that I came to the attention of the wider world.

It started in late May, early June- right on the leading edge of the middle of typhoon season; I
remember it well because that was the month Firey caught a damp, and I had to haul special
firewood up and down the stairs, almost every day. I was also much more tired, for some reason-
I’ve never managed to figure out why…

Ugh.

Anyway. It wouldn’t be over until later that August.

In my time in both the Nightmarket and in Xanghai- the many months skulking and sneaking and
running and gunning… talking to people, searching for some clue as to who my parents really were,
and what they were actually doing- I made many a strange acquaintance and saw many a strange
thing.

Madame White was one of the strangest. She hired me- well, she was the first person to hire me,
ever.

Xuxuan Feng, the debonair raconteur, is a gambler- he’s known all throughout the Xanghai
Nightmarket for being unable to pay back his debts and it’s considered bad form to allow him to lose
or win more than a few hundred yen.

Madame White is… an owner, shall we say. She’s the single largest proprietor of gambling halls in
North Nightmarket, and is actually very fair- she observes the unspoken rule about Xuxuan, she
keeps the in-house bedwarmers well fed and appointed- they all have medical checkups at least once
a week, more if they’ve become popular- her wine is almost never watered… all in all, a good
business woman, and eventually a mortal enemy.

She has her foibles, as everyone does- she liked her boys… a little young. Not child young- that sort
of thing isn’t stood for in the majority of the Nightmarket- but young; Xuxuan is a young man with
the blessing of always being twenty-something. Somehow or another- I expect family connections-
he’s always well heeled, always wearing a nice suit; his tattoos barely show, underneath the sleeves.
He is of no particular color- a sort of forgettable beige; his hair is dark- his eyes some earthy color that has no clear name.

Xuxuan Feng was on his way by ferry to a temple on the bank of West Lake, in, you guessed it- West Nightmarket.

It was early spring during the Quing Ming Festival (it’s like Samhain, or Halloween- it’s a day when the bounds between different parts of everything are weak; it’s also a time when denizens of the Nightmarket are banned from doing whatever it is they do- so, in Madame White’s case, her gambling hall had to close for about a week- she usually uses that time for maintenance). He was charmed by Madame White who, if she so chooses, can appear as a beautiful woman; she was charmed by Xuxuan Feng- look, you can’t be a bad gambler and not be a people person, and if he puts his mind to it, he can be utterly charming. He paid her fare, out of some misplaced moment of chivalry; they had tea together, out on the decking- and he held an umbrella over her when it began to rain.

In the following nine days, they would have a whirlwind affair, culminating, as all such whirlwind affairs do, in a moment of sexual congress. And then… Xuxuan Feng got what he wanted- he stole part of her name, and some small gems, and broke her heart into ten-thousand pieces. And to add insult to injury, he vanished.

I, of course, had heard all about this- it happened during my days under the Expressway, and I was still learning my way around the Nightmarket at the time- something about North Nightmarket drew me, has always drawn me, towards it; and at that time, the only thing on anyone’s lips was the story.

I paid it very little mind- I was much more interested in, well, everything, to get bogged down in the lives of people I’d never meet.

Right.

About a year later, Madame White invited me to visit her home- I… I’m sorry to say that I didn’t like it; it was dank, and dark, and more than half underground, filled with twisting corridors and dead end-turnings.

At the time, I had the beginnings of a name for myself, so this meeting was not so odd. How I came by that name, well- firstly, I had given a Gift to Dumpling Cheng- without it, she’s pretty sure she’d be dead several times over, and through my wanderings of the Nightmarket I had discovered many a strange and forgotten piece of lore…

I’ve always been a kindhearted person- I didn’t see the harm in reuniting people with their lost treasures, and indeed, the only harm that came from finding ribbons for girls and running errands for the poor shut-ins and occasionally making a delivery for Dumpling Cheng (because her bones are old, and she’s not as fast as she used to be- you know, the sun didn’t used to be as hot as it is), was the loss of my anonymity.

Madame White had heard of my reputation- as a person who could find things that generally were unfindable, and well… So. I went to her town house, a small mansion really; she told me of what he had done, and I, being young and crazy and stupid, gave her my word I would look into it.

I went all over the Nightmarket- and while everyone I asked had heard of Xuxuan Feng, no one had seen him for months and months. A year, even.
Dumpling Cheng, however, was much more forthcoming- she was the one who told me that, in fact, Xuxuan Feng isn’t a real person.

“A pseudonym?”

“Oh yes. The thing you have to remember, dear, is that the Nightmarket is much much bigger than the little piece you live in- it’s the market of markets; it goes everywhere things are bought and sold.”

“So… I’m asking the wrong question. Where is the person who calls themselves Xuxuan Feng from?”

That caused her to smile a white-toothed grin. “He’s from the Human realm, child- to get to his part of the human realm from this part of the Nightmarket, go to where Fool’s End turns into Runner’s Walk, over in the West; don’t go farther, as that’ll take you straight to the edge of the Dreaming. Right at the turning, there should be a gate- it’ll have a red bolt of lightning on it. It’s never locked from this side- getting back from that side could be a challenge though.”

“Why?”

“Well- that part of the Human realm is very fast paced; there’s always a wind blowing the door shut, and you probably won’t be strong enough to open it from the other side.”

“So- it’s just like the doors in Chongming?”

“Hmm… yes, I suppose you could say that, although Chongming’s issues are deeper than that…”

I nod quietly, eat one of the potstickers she’s made for this chat- the many pots and pans glint and gleam above our heads.

“What’s this city called, anyway?”

“We-ell, it’s more of a paired city…”

I give her my flattest look; she giggles like a little girl. I can’t help but laugh with her- I laugh so rarely, and it’s always better to laugh at yourself when you’ve been foolish- get in on the joke, as it were.

“Ce-hehe-entral City, and Ke-hehehe-eystone; you shouldn’t go in your normal clothing though.”

“Why not?”

“There are costumed heroes that work there- you’ll make less of a stir if you go in costume yourself.”

Somehow, this didn’t surprise me at all.

I would later realize that she had misinformed me- I hesitate to say lied, because it’s been a long time since either of the Cheng’s have been out in the human world.

To create the first of three costumes I would wear, I had to stab the duvet- whoops, wrong euphemism- bite the bullet, and climb the second set of stairs, to the place I had seen above me. After a nerve wracking climb- which forced me to summon Wood and have her, through the growth of Iron-vines and Plank-bushes, stabilize the boardwalk stairs up the side of the apartment- I made it up to the decking of the upper portion of my apartment, which was made out of ceramic tiles painted a lovely vermilion red. I took this as a good omen- it was.
Inside the barrel-shaped room, there was nothing. And I do mean nothing- no floor, no walls, just a vast, empty space, neither dark nor light. This scared the crap out of me.

So- I summoned Rain, and told Wood to do her thing; I shut my eyes tightly while this was happening, and it was only after a good five minutes I dared open my eyes- and there, above my apartment, was a forest- massive and almost overbearingly dank.

I dismissed Rain and summoned Flower- and there came a strange sensation in my skin- suddenly, amazingly, there was a glade where no glade had been; it was full of red x flowers, each one perfect in form. I walked into them, almost in a trance- the smell faintly of roses and thyme, and they are my very favorite flower. Of course, their meaning is sincerity…

I start to really use Create, and in that red x flower glade I draw an entire mad scientist’s laboratory setting, and do my best to blend the two disparate places together; I make caves and caverns and fill them with things to leap and twist and jump through and off of and around; I draw rivers that are not water, and the things dipped into them can never be gotten wet again, and there is a framework that sits over this river so that things can be safely dipped into it; I draw a dressmaker’s set up, with full drawers of threads and needles, and a sewing machine that folds down into the desk it sits on, and a portable sewing kit that doesn’t have sewing things in it but potions and spells and magics and a writing kit, and the entire thing no bigger than a coin purse; I draw an electrospinner that has hosing and wires and arms and many very small legs that can lift it’s entire weight once filled- and because of where I am, and what everything is made of, as I draw in Create, the items are created before my very eyes. It’s a heady sensation, being a near goddess.

After about three hours of pure imagination and deranged cackling, I pass out due to overexertion.

There’s a lesson in there, somewhere…

My outfit, the one that served me well for quite some time, is a pair of tight skinny jeans tucked into a cherry red pair of Doc Martins that go to just below my knee, a long-sleeve black v neck shirt with a hood that I can pull over my head, an over-robe ruqun that was simply unsalvageable for everyday wear- too short in the front, weird slits up the sides, long and ragged sleeves, and entirely too many secret pockets, and a special backpack; in hindsight, this was probably my most favorite outfit ever.

My gloves and mask are a different matter, as they haven’t changed at all- the gloves are of a night-dark material I won’t bore you with the construction of (although my father’s notes on fabrics came in handy) that when worn look more like smoothed hands dipped in some unreflective goop than gloves. My mask is a cleaner variant of what I wear in the ‘Market- a fine bone white piece of… not leather. It’s tougher than that- my mask would see the fires of Hell, the void of Space, the depths of the sea, and other, stranger places, and never ever break. The skin I used- because it’s not actually fabric- I got on sale from Mr. Walnut. I’ll tell you about him later.

I cut small holes for my eyes and mouth, and dipped the skin in a special bath; then I smoothed the skin on a special kind of curve- it dried rock hard, about the same as fine porcelain; I Painted it to look like a skull, four white teeth over my upper lip and the bottom one carved away, my eye-sockets daubed a soul-sucking black; two spells painted onto the back with Words for understanding the things that are spoken, and speaking in a way that is understood- at some point during the construction, the fetish from the peddlers cart fell onto the mask, and sank into the right side, the long petal dripping under the eyehole like a tear, stretching down and around like a cut-line. Strangely, the ruqun has a large red x flower on the chest- but then again, my life has been a series of coincidences
and oddities. More than you know, girl. More than you know.

Finally, I draw a bicycle backpack, in reds and blacks and unforgiving whites- it appears before my eyes, and works exactly as I have specified in Create. It has the little bell that rings, and a small engine for that extra boost that looks like a large water bottle.

I go back to the lower apartment, mask off, and grab the little bamboo bottle Dumpling gave me, a blanket for sleeping under, a very finely woven red silk scarf, a small umbrella, my facepaints- which are new; living over a house full of hardworking women has it’s perks- and a hug from Rachel-who-is-calling-herself-Raven. I give her a copy of the key to the apartment, and a stash of money- small bills for groceries, big bills for emergencies, and the garnets in case I’m not back when I think I will be- and I take my glitchy half-magitech computer, and the little thing Madame White gave me to “assist in the search”; I ride my new bike out away from the rising sun, towards West Nightmarket.

I am very glad I didn’t forget how. It’s been a long time.

Then, I went to the Lightningbolt Gate, and on to Central-Keystone.

When the whirling winds and the crackling electricity died away, I was somewhere very very different- and while it had been early morning when I had left, it was late afternoon, yesterday, where I went.

How do I explain what Central is like? Well, for one thing, it’s… flatter, than Xanghai; most of the buildings are newer. The people there are a sort of peachy-beige; some are almost a dark teak color, and some are pale like milk. I can Read all the signs, and I understand what they mean- but every word out of every person’s mouth is a jagged lumpy mess that bears no meaning. The sounds are different- the smells are different.

This is weird, but not bad. Stay calm, look both ways, and use the crossing walk.

I pedal hard, right into the crossing walk- I get glanced at several times, but no one really seems to notice me.

The object Madame White gave to me to find Xuxuan Feng was a bowl, about the size of a teacup-she had explained to me that it would start to sing when I got nearer to him. I listened to the bowl carefully, and followed it’s off-key voice all throughout the cities- until finally I came to the edges of an abandoned ruin; I think it was a factory of some kind at one point, but it’s crumbling into nothing now.

I pulled up to the fenced yard, and examined it carefully- the fence was just a fence, no electricity or cleverly hidden guardians- just a crumbling concrete factory with overgrown grass. I folded my bike up, and slung it onto my back; and I started walking through the alley leading up to the road by the fence.

It was dark, and the wind was soft against my skin- I lifted the rattle wire metal fence, and slid my backpack through, then followed. On the other side, just a scraggly dried out lawn, and cracked concrete sidewalks- I walked up them, and felt a strange… judder, in my stomach.

The door nearly posed a problem to me- it was one of those old-timey electrical locks; strangely, the wire to it was already cut. I walked into the empty factory- through a dank and moldering hallway, and into a vast dark space filled with undefined shapes; machinery that got left behind. I am aware of
the sensation of eyes, and I can hear the soft chatter-chittering of a thousand tiny voices.

I take the singing bowl out of my pocket; the soft tone—like that of my namesake, the bell—rings out into the air. I hold it out at arm’s length, and shift and sway and it rings… not louder. But more, in a certain direction. I follow the sound—across the factory floor, past massive shapes in the darkness—outside, the wind has picked up, and the moon has peered out from behind the night clouds.

Something—something important, about this place—is wrong. It’s not so noticeable now, but I think it might be important…

Shafts of faded moonlight shine through grime covered windows—they pierce the darkness like arrows through a door. Actually, that’s much more frightening than what it was really like… They dripped through the air like the sun at the bottom of the sea, wavering on the dust kicked up by my passage. I pad through the concrete tomb, my booteheels making slight clunks onto the dust cloaked floor; and then, a shaft of moon light flickers over something that isn’t tarnished metal, or off-white fabric.

The tone gets even more, more towards the thing that shined in the darkness—I slowly, carefully, creep over towards it; in the back of my head, I can feel something becoming even more wary of my surroundings. This is starting to look more and more like a horror movie. Great.

I finally come upon the source of the shining—a piece of bone, bleached white with age. The tone is almost deafening; as I get closer and closer, the bone-piece begins to shake and rattle on the ground, bouncing on its edges and wibbling in the center. The bowl is nearly screaming in its tone, and finally leaps down onto the little bone piece; it scuttles and shivers, but is ultimately trapped underneath the copper edges of the bowl. Once the lip of the bowl is fully touching the cold concrete, a rippling change moves across the surface of the bowl—a surface marked by a strangely repeating pattern, like the scales of a snake—oh shit.

The bowl snaps shut, into a cage—inside the cage is a small… mouse… oh fuck.

And then a person in a blue-green cheongsam tries to cut off my head.

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

And, oddly enough, superheroes. Thankfully, I am not a superhero—I am a private detective.

I work for gems, I always wear red and black, and no, I don’t like noodles.

Call me Red X.

Everyone does.
I throw my head back, and feel the soft kiss air on the cleaving edge of some sharp blade- a knife with curves. I can feel another knife coming up behind me, so I roll forwards- I grab the cage with the mouse in it, and shove it into my bra. I roll and slide, and look at my attacker- she is in a blue cheongsam, her lower face covered to look like the mouth of a fish; however, there is a strangely snakey quality to her movements, and... Something, something about her- but no, no time to think about it. Her hair is short, brutally buzzed and chopped- she is wearing a pair of split toe shoes. Her bodice is blue, with bright green spotty scales dotted about; she is wearing a golden torque, and golden bracers; I am suddenly, inexplicably aware that I am far, far out of my league.

I have a fair idea that this is not someone I can fight toe to toe with, not right now. So… RUN!

Dash is a very easy spell to use- I just have to sort of, twist, with the part of me that can cast spells, and then I run as fast as I possibly can. In this case, it’s back the exact way I came, slide under the fence and run harder. Blue-Green follows me- I imagine I can feel her hot breath on the back of my neck- only, wait, yes I can.

Shit.

I race through the unfamiliar streets of Keystone- because that’s where the tone led me- and I jump over and around things and I run faster than cars and I see a bar, hot shit I can get through to the Nightmarket through there and so I

Run

Into the bar- shit shit, no ones buying anything no ones selling anything shit can’t get through fuck fuck- and there are strange people there, they look familiar- no time- I can feel her gaining on me I lost her through the alleys and when I leapt through oncoming traffic I think it gave her pause but no time no time grab something you’re in a fucking corner-

I don’t’ know what it is but it sloshes and oh shit-

I duck again, and I feel the kiss of her blade going over my head- I whirl around and break the bottle open I was aiming for her head but she blocked with her arm no problem Firey sets the booze ablaze and she screams and her skin changes from cocoa-gold to fish-scaled and flaking where the fire was because- it takes a lot to use Firey right now and shit shit that made her mad what do I even- Oh hey a chair.

What follows is perhaps one of the funniest looking fights in the history of fighting- and when I finally leap the bar and start throwing bottles at her desperately- okay, she’s stabbing them out of the air, what the fuck- a god fuck knife knife knife going to kill me fuck- I know that I’m screaming in terror, because I can hear some woman screaming from quite far away and that’s what it sounded like when I fought Malchior why was Malchior less scary than this girl, he was a fire-breathing dragon for fucks sake holy shit knife knife knife eeeeeep-
I roll away from her- I can feel the cage constricting the mouse, against my chest, so I cast Lock on the metal bars, freezing them in place; I have to duck and dash out of the way again, because sweet Jesus she’s fast.

She punches me in the stomach- I fly backwards, and crash onto a table- I catch a glimpse of yellow over scared hazel eyes, and red over startled green eyes and brown hair over cool blue eyes and then her hand is on my throat oh shit-

I can’t…

I can’t breathe. I can feel her fingers digging into my neck, like knitting needles, and I can feel her boiling heat and I can feel her hand scrabbling inside of my shirt and grabbing the cage holy shi- my hand feels about as effective as wet tissue paper on her wrist but she’s choking me, and my body is heavy hanging from my neck and she’s taken the cage with the mouse in it and thrown me aside- I gasp as I hit the floor, and choke on air for a little while.

Time passes.

When I can sit up fully again, the girl and the cage are both gone- but somehow, and I’m not sure how, but somehow, I can feel where they’ve gone. Actually, that’s a filthy lie- I couldn’t see the point of getting up. I had nothing to look forwards to- just another drop down drag out beat the shit out of me and leave fight in which I would learn nothing- so, yes, while I could sit up, there was nothing in me that actually wanted to. I could feel where Lock had gone though- somewhere in the Nightmarket, somewhere… oh. Oh fucking shit.

And then, of course, a pair of hands start to shake me.

Fucking hell.

I open my eyes, and throw myself backwards, scrabbling on the ground- I can see a man, in bright red with a bolt of lightning on his chest. He was the one shaking me, but- no, no time. I stagger to my feet, and then I run

Away

Again.

So, of course, he follows me.

Fuckdammit.

We race through the city, my long legs taking me through the odd monochrome place- the streets, the buildings- everything is so very strange. It all looks… weird. I am glancing at the oddity of the railings on the side of the road, not the actual road- which is probably why when the boy slams into my chest, I go ass over teakettle into the nearby ditch.
Okay, so, since this is the second time I’ve had the wind knocked out of me in the past hour, I think I can be forgiven for a slight lessening of moral standards. Specifically, I usually don’t yell at boys– it just encourages them. However, at this point, all bets are off.

“ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR EVER LOVING MIND?!??!”

“What?”

“WHAT KIND OF IDIOT DOESN’T EVEN- ARE YOU FREAKING BLIND?”

“You aren’t speaking English- I don’t understand what you’re saying!”

I realize my spell isn’t working at the same time as he realizes that I don’t speak his language- the boy has strange red hair, and is wearing a weirdly tight yellow and red suit. There is a pair of goggles on his face; he is blushing very red.

The wind chooses that moment to slap a piece of paper directly into my face. It’s a card– the Return. I sign it– while I’ve been distracted, the man in red with white eyes and a matching lightning bolt on his chest has appeared.

I am frightened of the man and the boy; I carefully walk backwards, then throw a Glow-bomb in their faces. I run as fast as I possibly can, Dash lending me speed where I falter. I return to the place where I came in, and I heave on the door and the wind dies down for just long enough for me to inch the door open– just far enough to wriggle through, and then I’m on the Other side. The door clicks shut behind me.

Of course, that implies that I’m back in Pudong Nightmarket– this is not true. I’m still in Central/Keystone Nightmarket; it’s mostly towers and cliffs, here. Somehow, the strangeness I noticed on the other side is gone– I wonder what it was? I ride forwards, and lean down into the steadily rising curve of the road; the puddles on the ground drop down into deep ponds, their bottoms teeming with lives I’ve never been invited to see– the air is filled with soft purple butterfly-lizards, their sinuous tails covered in spines. A ragminekin scuttles out of a drain, and is promptly set on by candle-fairies, their sharp teeth making short work of it’s frayed burlap outer skin; it inner skin of velvet is much nicer.

I know that I missed something important when I agreed to find Xuxuan Feng for Madam White– but, I’m in a completely different part of the Nightmarket, and… I need to do some research on… I’m going to call it Sergeant Screw You (SSY (Bastard!)) from now on, this is just silly.

This is what I found about Madame White, at a Gleam shatterpoint in the Central/Keystone Nightmarket; I’m used to going to various Chenghuang temples, but this tavern is pretty okay. The food is weird, and the ale is passable, but honestly– I would prefer tea.

Once during Qing Ming, several thousand years ago, a young man named Xuanzan was passing a bridge when he saw a little girl crying. He stopped to help her, for he was a kind young man. The girl said her name was White and that she lived by the lake; she had been walking with her grandmother and had gotten lost.
He took the child in-fed her, clothed her, treated her as his own daughter. A few days later, White’s grandmother showed up and in gratitude she invited him to their home for dinner.

Her home turned out to be a grand palace near the temple he had never noticed before. A beautiful woman dressed all in white came to greet him saying she was the little girl’s mother. They all drank a few loosening drinks, talked and laughed- for several weeks, the three women enticed Xuanzan further and further away from all that he knew and everyone who could help him. Once they had successfully lured Xuanzan away from his life, and his world, it was suggested that Xuanzan should become the mother’s bridegroom.

A great wedding was held, and at the wedding feast, her old lover was dragged from his chamber and torn apart, his belly cut open and spices mixed with his intestines and stomach- his heart and liver were cut out and doused with soy sauce and ginger root, and offered, along with wine to Xuanzan.

Though Xuanzan wanted desperately to flee, he partook of the food offered him, and became the husband of the woman in white; before he realized, a full month had passed.

A new groom arrived.

Xuanzan knew what would happen to him but he was powerless to escape his fate- and during the wedding feast of the new groom and the woman in white, Xuanzan was dragged from the bedchambers, stripped naked, and slashed to pieces.

The little girl would grow up to be Madame White- and she would retain her mother’s tastes in men.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was actually a stroke of good fortune that I ended up having to take the Jasmine Road back to Pudong Nightmarket- the Jasmine Road is the spirit world counterpart to the mortal (aha, there we go) world’s Silk Road; it’s a massive network of trade routes covering land, sea, sky, and stars. You can meet anyone on it.

I rode my bicycle out of Central Nightmarket- a hustling, bustling place, filled with board walks and saloons- as I passed through, a card called Arrow slipped itself into my shirt; once I stopped for the night, safely up a tree, I signed it.

The next day, while riding along the Jasmine Road, I met a man called Richard “Tikki” Travers.

Richard “Tikki” Travers is a man of about seventeen- and I say that he is a man, because the look in his blood red eyes is that of a man’s. He came to the Spirit World after a long, fruitful life as a mongoose- and this is his story.

“When I was alive, my name was Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. I was a young mongoose, when I became the pet of a family that was residing in a bungalow in India. They took me in after I saved the son of the family from a Krait- invisible on the ground, and quick death as well. I became aquainted with a bird named Darzee- I’ve since forgotten what kind of bird he was- but he warned me of Naga and Nagaina, a pair of cobras angered by the family's presence on the territory which they had previously dominated. After I had become a part of the family, Naga entered the house's bathroom before dawn-
I attacked him. The battle that ensued woke the humans, and Naga was killed by the father.

A grieving Nagaina attempted revenge against my human family, cornering them as they took breakfast on an outdoor veranda. Darzee’s wife, whom I never learned the name of, distracted Nagaina away from my human family just long enough for me to destroy the cobra pair's unhatched brood of eggs- except for one. This egg I then took to where Nagaina was threatening to bite the boy while his parents watched helplessly. Nagaina recovered her egg- because I let her, mind- and left for her nest; I pursued her, and in our final battle, she had her revenge. I lived just long enough to wriggle out of the nest, my enemy dead behind me- to die, in the sunlight of my native land.”

“How did you come to be… well, here?”

He smiled- his teeth are slightly bucked in front, and the little dippy thing that goes from the septum to the lip is very dark for some reason; a trio of moles on each side of the face dip bob up and down with every word- “I *like* it here. There are lots of beautiful women here, correct? Why are you here, then, if we’re sharing stories?”

I tell him about Madame White, and her mother, and what I think she’s going to do to Xuxuan Feng- and then… well…

“Firstly, the skills you possess now are not enough to defeat a snake of that caliber- you bear neither the strength nor speed. Secondly, although you are quite brave and honorable, you don’t have the weapons to defeat her yet- and I cannot let you have mine without knowing that you will use them well. And Thirdly, her servant will kill you long before you can manage to find the poor bastard who has been ensnared by this Madame White’s clutches- so you will need a perfect plan of attack… There’s nothing for it- I will have to train you.”

“Oh no, sir- I couldn’t possibly impose on someone I’ve just met like that and-”

“It’s not an imposition- look, kid, I’m doing you a favor. Over the next ridge, just up the hill following this road? That’s harpy country- I’ll assume that you don’t have them where you’re from- and I, personally, don’t have any problems with them. This is because I’m a man.

Harpies are *extremely* Territorial- it would be an unfortunate occurrence if you were to be accosted by them and slain in an undignified way, taking in to consideration that harpies are also extremely spiteful. However, they come to my territory often enough that I can introduce you, carefully, to enough of them that when you inevitably return to your travels, they will not harm you- perhaps they will even help you.”

Thusly did my first teacher give me a proper grounding in a specific style of kung-fu; it’s called Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.
This is what my training is like:

Imagine someone took a sack and filled it with dishes; they’re nice dishes, hardy, a little worn but hey- nothing is perfect. Then they put jagged lumps of metal and large pointy rocks into the sack, tie it loosely shut, and then tie raw steaks to it, dip it in pig’s blood, and throw it to a pack of starving wolves. Once the meat has been chewed off of the sacking, and some sad tinklings emerge from the sack, the person opens it, pours in some more rocks and pointy stones- and a few live mice, to keep things interesting- and then uses the sack as a punching bag. Finally, only twelve items are left from the entire ninety nine piece dinner set- and I knew how to fight with a pair of daggers, kill snakes much bigger than me in all environments, and get back up when it hurt.

Then take those dishes, wash them off, clear up the chips and cracks- and place them on poles; tall poles, poles with spikes at the bottom where they touch the ground; put little bowls of ink and soup and very hot sweet tea, and at least one platter of eggs on the head and shoulders of the dishes, and make them balance there. Then throw things at them. Eventually, they will gain enough speed- and balance and flexibility- to dodge and duck the objects thrown- fruit and toys at first, then rocks and knives and bolts of deadly magic- and eventually, all these things will be dodged. Two of the smallest bowls will break under this onslaught- one, being very small and containing the lust for glory, will vanish forever. The other, being quite large and containing optimism, will gain a crack that, while eventually healed, will never cease to be a bother.

Finally, take those dishes, let them heal from their ordeal- and scrape every last speck of knowledge out of them. All of it. Every drop, every drop, every blessed and cursed thing- and make them look at it all. Examine it all. Force them to meditate for hours and hours and hours- and all the while they are examining and organizing and ordering and marking and mending and creating and destroying and re-examining and occasionally puzzling over all the many things inside their head. This goes on for two hours- once in the morning, and once in the afternoon. Do the other two things simultaneously, for varieties sake.

Do this for three lunar months.

It was New Year’s, last time I checked- it is now the third month of the new year.

Yay.

In the end, I gained what he had wanted me to gain- and I also had gained a… hm. I won’t call him a friend- I don’t like him enough for that. A contact- an acquaintance. But not a friend. Because this was his final test for me- the test to ensure that everything he had taught me had been learned, understood, and could now be applied.

"You are covered in a mixture of honey and crushed peanuts- the creatures about to pour in, which need not be named, although they are furred, will be attracted to this mixture. You are not clothed, as that would garner an unnecessary advantage- and there is no light in this underground maze, to simulate the actual conditions of your upcoming battle. Your weapons are your speed, your strength, and your wits- there might be things to be made into weapons in this place; there might not. /Do not rely on the weapons you wield; rely only on yourself, and the skills you know you have./ This is the traditional test of the warrior among my people- survive it, and I have taught you everything I can, bequeath my blades to you, and wish you the best of hunting."

"And if I should fail?"
"Then you die. Good luck- and there is a way out of this place. But the test is only over when all the enemies are dead."

I survived.

My enemies died.

And a week after the test, when I rode away into the sunset, the harpies- who, to be honest are not horrifically ugly; they merely look more like birds than women- will not look me in the eye.

Of course, the fact that I am swathed in bandages that go up to my elbows and knees, have a large pair of blades pressed against my back in an X shape, and am half boiling with fury, might very well have something to do with it.

I finally have a long overdue crying jag when I get to the bridge that would have taken me direct across the Arrack River- and home- is closed for repairs. By whom, it doesn’t say- although, I will say this about the Jasmine Road- most of it is jointly policed by the mortal area’s version of Heaven and Hell- excepting small parts of it, like the Nightmarket, Gemworld, Azarath, ect…

Speaking of Gemworld, after I managed to calm down from my desperate sobbing, I fired up SSY (Bastard!) and examined the alternate routes to Pudong Nightmarket- Gemworld’s was both closest, and fastest.

So it was through Gemworld I rode- a country of run down houses, worn out fields, and more gems than you can fill a sack with- fill several sacks with, in fact.

While I was there, however, I only took one. And a small plant.

In hindsight, this would be one of the few times I really and truly thanked my lucky stars for my magpie-like tendencies, and my (former) love of all things sparkly and mystically conductive.

I rode through a world made of gemstones and metal- a world where everything was made out of gems- flowers bloomed with dripping sprays of metal and sparkling gemstones; and everything was choked with the dust of mining. Dust! covered and filled the runnels of the roads, filled and chinked the gemstone rivers and made the gaudy flowers hang their heads down low- Dust! whispering and dancing in the wind, and djinn and genies and other, stranger shapes leapt and gamboled above in the whirling, visible air- Dust! dust clouds so thick to be choking, so thick to be blinding, dust everywhere in everything everywhere- Dust!

I was very glad to have my red scarf.

It takes two weeks on a fast horse to get to Kowloon via Gemworld; ten on foot.

It took me three and half.

There are only two things of note that happened to me specifically- one of them being that on my way through a glade, a little more than halfway through Gemworld, I saw a stand of pigeon’s blood red x flowers. I stashed my bike up a tree, and dug out a sizeable number of the hardy blooms; these I placed in the carrying bag of my bike, and rode on, through the Dust! and the shadows of the uncaring stars.
The second thing was that I found a step-brilliant cut ruby, sitting innocently in what looked like a mish-mash of gemstones; I pried it out with one of the blades given to me by Tikki, and put it in my pocket. I rode away- and the resounding chiming crash of several tons of gemstones rushing like a river just made me pedal harder.

All actions have consequences. My second action had this consequence- well... actually… okay, it's like this:

Once upon a time there was a magical kingdom where gems flowed from the ground like water, and grew off of trees like fruit. This kingdom was so rich in gems, in fact, that they were seen as basically worthless.

One day, a nobleman from one of the higher ranked families of the kingdom fell into a magical pond; this magical pond spat him out into the human world- where he found, to his shock, that the marbles he played with were revered above all things. This sparked a strange flame in his heart, which would consume him until only the husk of his body and the everpresent desire for "MORE!" remained.

Five years later, the boy was a man, and the old king died. Seeing his chance, the boy raised an army in secret, and stormed the royal castle, killing the Queen-Regent, her loyal servants, and the young princess- or so he thought. She was actually spirited away by the Queen's old nurse, who knew of the magical pond, and threw the young toddler into it.

The pond spat her out into a small township, where two kindhearted people took her in and raised her when it was found that her parents couldn't be. Found, that is.

Ten years later, the girl would be a young woman, who would be returned to her kingdom on her sixteenth birthday; once there, she was met by a young man with bright blonde yellow hair.

He said he would help her- and he did, but not for the reasons one would think- and together, along with no few magical items and mystical prophecies, they ousted the unrightful king; he was punished in the way that all evil men are punished in that land:

A hammer was taken to the back of his head, and while he was stunned, he was dropped down the deepest mineshaft, underneath the palace- for in that kingdom food, and rain, and trees, and other, simpler things, are what is mined- and the Kingdom knew peace and prosperity for five years.

Two years after the rightful Queen took her throne on the point of a sword, the Boy who had helped her- a young man now, beautiful in the way young men are to young women- professed his love for her, and she (whether by magic or not, no one is sure) professed her love for him.

They were wed within weeks, and soon enough, two beautiful daughters came into their lives- One with hair more red than yellow, the Other with hair more yellow than red, and, on the night before they were to become Three years old- a lucky day- they were stolen from their beds, and sent to the farthest of the mines in the land, and set to tap-tap-tap spoons and knives and forks from the cold earth, far from the stars and sky and moon and sun, and out of Sight for the Boy. (Indeed.)
Thirteen years passed, and in the interim, the queen had gone mad with grief, leaving the Boy in charge of the kingdom—just as he planned.

Meanwhile, the girl with hair more red than yellow had learned the subtle and deadly art of the sword, a major part of being a mercenary or a champion, and the girl with hair more yellow than red had learned the subtle and deadly art of negotiation, a major part of being a mercenary or a queen; both had grown into beautiful young women, possessed of the wiry strength that grows in a person when they are, from a very young age, forced to dig things out of the ground that would rather not be dug up, often with their bare hands.

The Blonde-boy had also taken on apprentices—a trio of witches, for witch is the name given to all who can use Magic in that land; a boy, who was more cat than anything else, a girl, who was more boar than anything else, and another girl, who was more tiger than anything else. These three he set at odds with each other, constantly, so that they would not realize that he was stealing their magic, little by little, each in turn, and that if they worked together, he could easily be destroyed.

One day, a passing red dragon accidentally caused a flood of gems—this flood broke open a part of the Cutlery Mine where the Red-Yellow girl and the Yellow-red girl had slaved and learned their deadly skills and freed the two princesses from their enslavement; this flood also stranded the three apprentices in a place so far removed from everything they knew, that they were forced to work together and found that actually…they liked each other.

By a stroke of chance— or fate— the princesses and the apprentices came together and formed a warparty. Together, they snuck into the palace (and on the way there, witnessed the atrocities committed in the name of the crown, and knew that something must be done) and together, they fought the Blonde Witchboy to a standstill.

They were about to defeat him, when the Mad Queen came into the room.

Seizing his chance, the Blonde Witchboy took a blade to the queen's throat, and a standoff was held. Eventually, Yellow-red broke the standoff with her mastery of the spoken word, and charmed the Blonde Witchboy just long enough for him to relax his hold on the queen—not before nicking her with his blade—take three steps forward to boast of his skill and allow the master-swordsman, Red-yellow, who had snuck behind them both, take his head from his shoulders in one clean stroke.

The Mad Queen died soon after, for the Blonde Witchboy's blade was poisoned, and so the princesses were to become Queens.

However, there can only be one Queen.

Thankfully, Red-yellow wanted to go out into the country, and right the many wrongs dealt by their evil father in their mother's name, and Yellow-red saw mending the broken relationships with other kingdoms (as there are always other kingdoms) as a great and wondrous challenge.

As for the three apprentices, Cat Witchboy became a companion to Red-yellow. (It is assumed that he is in fact the bastard child of Blonde Witchboy, and sought some measure of repentance for his father's crimes.)
Boar Witchgirl went out of the kingdom entirely- she followed the dragon’s path, and had many adventures in a different land (But that's another story, for another day.)

Tiger Witchgirl stayed with Yellow-red, and advised her faithfully in all matters.

And soon enough, the land would know peace for forty years.

I just want it to be clear in your mind- I am not now, nor have I ever been, a dragon.

Honestly.

That rumor is completely unfounded!

I get back to Kowloon in early August- I remember it was August because it’s right near the end of typhoon season, and the wind was just starting to come out of the north. Winter is coming, but not quite yet- Autumn is one of the nicer seasons, in Kowloon. Spring is king, of course- but I like Winter. Something about those cold dark days makes something within me... more at ease, more at peace.

I keep my scarf on, and pull my hood over my head, and no one notices me, because I do not look myself, as I go up to my apartment; my key still works, and everything seems normal- Rachel (Raven, she wants to be called Raven) almost doesn’t recognize me.

I didn’t realize I could change so much over three months- then again, she is a whole sixteen centimeters taller, so perhaps it isn’t so strange?

This is how I defeated Madame White, and her servant, Blue-green:

Once I had resettled into my apartment- my home- and I had told Raven the bare bones of the events of my travel, I put my mask away and put my face paints back on. It felt a bit like taking off a pair of shoes after a long day spent on your feet- not exactly painful, but certainly relieving. I took a meal, in my own house- and double checked that, in fact, Lock was still doing it’s job.

It was.

About a day later, I did some scouting of Madame White’s nest; there was a stream nearby, whose start was the Fountain flowers in the Cul- I carefully diverted it into one of the lower exits of her house, and added a special poison, which I will not tell you the name of, and waited. Soon enough, Blue-green exploded from the murky water inside the nest; she threw herself on the bank, writhed a moment, and then was still- not trickery still, but dead still; I saw the light leave her eyes, and when she died, she changed. She had appeared to be a quite young woman- this was not true; in death, she was a shriveled white haired corpse, not even enough left to bury, as she disintegrated into nothing when I accidentally breathed too hard on her. In the ash that soon blew away, there was one card- it was called Shot. I took it, and signed it, and then I dove into the murk-water darkness.
I summoned Bubbles, and with her help, breathed underwater for perhaps the first time in my remembered life- and then, blind in the darkness, I swam. I swam, and I swam- relying not on my eyes, or ears, but on perhaps that most forgotten of senses, my touch- and my awareness of the space around me. Look with your heart, not with your eyes. The eyes can be fooled; the heart is too wise. I floated through galleries of massive proportion; I wriggled through holes almost too small to bear. Finally, I came to the place where the water flowed only just above the land- the anteroom, the place where battle would be done.

I heaved myself from the dark waters, and I carefully followed my sense of place to where lock was and felt, before me, the gaping maw of a giant snake, held only just open by bindings at once feathered and links-of-iron smooth. I had let Bubbles go some time during my approach- the air was cool, and musty, and ever so slightly damp; with a click of my fingers, Shot came to my hands.

He is small, and warm, and jittery smooth like a fast kind of lizard-bird that lives in the eaves of old houses; I hold him in my hands for a long moment, and... admire, perhaps, the scaly breadth of Madame White- the opalescent sheen of her scales, the delicate curve of each tooth, the faint gleam of fury behind hermetically sealed eyelids.

I hold shot before me like an offering to some deranged god- beyond my thinking, something tells me to say: “Aim for her teeth. Fire!”

Shot leaps from my hands, and with crackling, devastation bringing leaps, shatters each and every tooth in Madame White’s ancient head. The rat-bastard, Xuxuan Feng, leaps out quickly, but meets the wonderful stopping advantage of my well placed fist.

Such is life.

As with her servant- which I would later learn to be her Great aunt- as soon as something vital to her survival was removed (in her sister’s case, the ability to draw air into the body either in water or on land; in her case, the ability to eat), she withered into a moldering husk before my eyes, nothing left of her but the oversized skeleton of a giant snake, the sad scrappy remains of a beautiful snakeskin, the ruined stumps of still bleeding teeth, and in the center of her forehead, a ruby bigger than my eye- a large, gleaming X in its center.

I pried it out with my mongoose-given knife; at the touch of my blade to the ancient bones of Madame White, they disintegrated, their vital essence too long depleted to withstand the bite of a snake-slayer.

I slung the gambler onto my shoulders, and walked up the stairs and out of one of Madame White’s many bolt holes- I gave Mr. Feng into the tender care of his creditors, and then, I went home. I took a shower, and changed my clothing, again, and I slept like a dead woman for three forgotten days. On the fourth day, I rose from my bed, disentangled Raven from myself, took my morning shower, and fired up SSY (Bastard!).

Sometime, in the three day interim of my deathly slumber, the Gemworld X flowers had taken root inside of SSY (Bastard!); now, there was a strange search function on my computer, called Yggdrasil- I clicked it's little icon, an unfurling fern leaf; a window appeared, and a little search bar opened, and, on a whim, I typed in the search parameters of “ancient, white snake, blue-green snake".
Long ago at Mt. Éméi in Sichuān province there lived two snakes, a white one and a green one. They had been engaging in ascetic practices for a thousand years, and had gained the ability and desire to become beautiful maidens in the world of human beings. For this reason they transformed themselves into Bái Sūzhēn ("white-pure-loyal") and Xiǎoqīng ("little green"). They appeared abruptly standing beside West Lake in Zhèjiāng province, the most beautiful place in all of the world—so they did what people do there, which was to walk along enjoying the scenery. They got as far as the famous Broken Bridge when it started to rain, and they took temporary refuge under a willow.

Soon there passed by an affable but naive young gentleman named Xu Xiān, who was carrying an umbrella as he returned from sweeping graves. Seeing the two beautiful maidens sheltering under the tree, he lent them his umbrella and helped them summon a boat to take them home.

Bái immediately fell in love with him, and told him to come to their house the next day to retrieve the umbrella. In the course of that visit she learned that he was an orphan, living with his older sister, and working in an apothecary shop.

She proposed that they be married. Xū was delighted, being too poor to have other prospects, and being dazzled by her great beauty. Under the direction of Xiǎoqīng they worshipped heaven and earth and joined in marriage. They soon opened their own apothecary, and Bái proved to be excellent at compounding drugs. Word of their medical skill spread, and they soon had a thriving clientele.

At the Golden Mountain Monastery in the town of Zhènjiāng, there dwelt a priest named Dharma Sea, who recognized Bái as a snake demon he had fought before, as a young priest filled with the fire of the gods. He quickly sought to warn the affable but naive Xū of his wife’s true nature; Xū refused to believe that his wife was a snake demon. The priest told him to get her drunk at the day of the Lantern Festival, and she would revert to her true form.

He did this; she became quite ill, and retired to bed. As he went in to tend to her distress, he saw on his bed an enormous white snake, and was so frightened that he immediately died. While she was sleeping, the demonic nature of her soul took over, and in one great gulp, swallowed him whole. When she had recovered, Bái was horrified to discover her distended stomach, and that it was her husband she had eaten; she appealed to her sister Xiǎoqīng to help find the herbs to remove him whole from her stomach and bring him back to life. (Glossy ganoderma tincture and two bottles of cod liver oil turn out to be used for the purpose, should anyone ask.)

Bái’s trip to steal the magic medicine involved her in martial arts battles with its guardian and other adventures, but she did succeed in bring Xū back to life. However, he would no longer look at his wife— for she disgusted him, her beauty turned to ashes and slime.

The priest Dharma Sea was still unsatisfied. He kidnapped Xū and took him into protective custody at the monastery. Bái was distraught, although her sister Xiǎoqīng urged her to give up on her inappropriate marriage to Xū.

Bái made a spell, and cast it wide, and in Xū’s heart there grew a strange and consuming love; Xū escaped from the monastery, and returned to the willow where he had met Bái— once there, he professed his love for her once again, and a child was born to them soon after.
But Dharma Sea remained determined. He managed to capture Bái and imprison her under the Pagoda of Thunder Peak. She was saved once again by her sister Xiǎoqiū, who journeyed to Mount Êméi to practice the necessarily martial arts, and then returned for the final defeat of the stogy and unromantic Dharma Sea—however, during the final battle, Xiǎoqiū was weakened, and Bái had to send her chi to her sister, taking it away from her husband. As soon as she did, the spell on Xū broke, and he was free once again. Horrified at what he had done with the one he called “wife”, he took his belt-blade, and with one strike, slew himself.

And this shows that love can conquer all obstacles— but probably shouldn’t.

Which, honestly, explains a lot.

Patterns of behavior are passed down from parent to child— and Madame White learned from her mother. So, the question is— who did her mother learn from?

When I am myself again, Raven breaches the subject of perhaps finding a place of her own— “it’s been— it’s been really nice, living here, with you but… i. i want my own space— it’s something i’ve never had before.”

“Well, alright- do you have a place in mind?”

As a matter of fact, she wanted to live in the Cul— there was a small grotto that lead into a beautiful little glade, with it’s own cheerful pond, and an old foundation that she could build a house on— and I, of course, was focusing on the practicalities of the matter, like where to find bricks worth building with at this time of year, and how to set up the anemities, and of course, Raven’s own safety.

In the end, it only takes us two months to finish building Raven’s house— a little one room farmhouse, as she likes the way my apartment is set up, for some reason.

That was August and October— November came, as it always does, with it’s bitter winds and it’s cawing crow-fish.

This year, it also came with a brown-skinned fishboy in Raven’s pond, and a girl named Jinks knocking on my door, asking for training.

What the ever loving hell.
Other Xanghainese cultural artifacts include the cheongsam (Xanghainese: zansae), a modernization of the traditional Manchurian qipao. This contrasts sharply with the traditional qipao, which was designed to conceal the figure and be worn regardless of age. The cheongsam went along well with the western overcoat and the scarf, and portrayed a unique East Asian modernity, epitomizing the Xanghainese population in general. As Western fashions changed, the basic cheongsam design changed, too, introducing high-neck sleeveless dresses, bell-like sleeves, and the black lace frothing like at the hem of a ball gown. By the 1940s, cheongsams came in transparent black, beaded bodices, matching capes and even velvet. And, later, checked fabrics became also quite common. The 1949 Communist Revolution ended the cheongsam and other fashions in Xanghai. However, the Xanghainese styles have seen a recent revival as stylish party dresses. The fashion industry has been rapidly revitalizing in the past decade. Like Xanghai’s architecture, local fashion designers strive to create a fusion of western and traditional designs, often with innovative if controversial results.

Remember how I said I had to get a number of jobs? One of them was- well… being a secretary. I know, I know, it’s a totally idiotic pursuit- but the pay is freaking amazing, and during the Winter in Kowloon, I’m always strapped for cash.

Let me tell you about the Pretty Flowers Modeling agency. It’s important for later.

A legit modeling agency is a company that represents fashion models, to work for the fashion industry. These agencies earn their income via commission, usually from the deal they make with the model and or the head agency.

The top agencies work with big-budget advertising agencies and fashion designers. They invest money into developing their talent so they can increase their status within the industry. These top agencies will help train models, get test shoots, layout portfolios, and put together comp cards (composition photo cards) and other printed materials models need.

The agencies find work for models by presenting them to designers, photographers, and ad agencies. The agencies are also responsible for booking the jobs, billing for the jobs, and eventually paying the models for their time. By handling the details, an agency allows a model to focus on modeling and not on the business end.

Because modeling is a very competitive, fast moving business, which extends beyond the traditional 9 AM to 5 PM business hours, an agency generally conducts business 24 hours a day, to handle emergencies such as cancellations or rush jobs. Most agencies have a service or an operator to handle emergency issues after hours.
Pretty Flowers Modeling agency (PFMa) began on the nose end of Cheng’s war, when propaganda posters were in high demand; there’s always someone, somewhere in Kowloon, willing to cut their own throat to make a deal- this was no exception. Almost within hours, there were three rooms in a back alley dedicated to making fine propagandial sheets of advertisements for the many streets of Kowloon.

Within three years, the small rooms had become two tenements and fifteen warehouses- and that part of Kowloon is now known as (Old Man) Scrivner’s Row, named for the famous battle of Scrivner the Scribe against the invading Mordruians; it is said that (Old Man) Scrivner himself was a small, pasty man, and had never shown any sign of being made of more than dried up paper and horsehoof glue. However, on that fateful day, it is said that (Old Man) Scrivner took off his glasses, placed them ever so neatly on his desk, walked outside, and nutted a charging troll barehanded. It is also said that after he did this crazy-brave fucking thing, he rolled up his sleeves, lowered his head, and beat the ever loving shit out of Mordru’s encroaching forces. The reason it’s called Scrivner’s Row is threefold- firstly, it is said that when (Old Man) Scrivner was done, the dead lay in perfectly orderly rows, almost as if (Old Man) Scrivner had beaten them and pummeled them and killed them in the neat rows of the scribe; secondly, (Old Man) Scrivner was an expatriate of Alfheim, and it was assumed, incorrectly, that the proper slang name for a fight in his homeland is “Row”; thirdly, a Kowloon native will never leave a good pun hanging.

Scribe’s lane, which is about three Kowloon blocks from Scrivner’s Row, is a different beast- it’s the home of every Heavenly and Hellish scribe that decided to seek their fortune in the swiftly growing chaos of Kowloon.

I got my- it’s not actually a secretarial job, it’s an executive assistant; for the months of November through January, I am an executive assistant- job by, of all things, making a wrong turn, because, at the time, I didn’t realize Ho’oh lane went in both directions. It’s not often in Kowloon that the roads go both ways.

Anyway.

My job, during the Winter, goes like this:

Get into work at about six in the morning- they might tolerate lateness from some of the most senior of the models, but not the rest of us peons- and read over what the night shift has done, make notations about what they did right and wrong, and fix any mistakes. Drink cup #1 of Iron Buddha tea- feel the rush of energy course through me, all from a cup of tea no bigger than a thimble. (This is the time of year I usually get this thing called “Buddha-twitch” which is what chronic drinkers of Iron Buddha tea get- it isn’t terribly addictive, but if you drink too much, or gods forbid, eat the leaves, you won’t be able to sleep- which is not the same as staying awake. It just means that, no matter how tired you are, you will not be able to fall asleep.)

Go down to fishmarket, and pester the mongers there into selling me- at a discount- the special kind of scales that turn the model’s lips multiple shades of red depending on the scale quality; they need to be fresh daily. Send runner back with fresh scales; go to garment district, get deal on new fabrics for Winter season, also get some personal shopping done, and find Raven that rug she needs- if you can’t multitask, you have no business living in Kowloon. Send runner back with fabrics, new samples, get rug mailed to Raven, get fabrics delivered to apartment, send runner for midmorning snack- this time of year, it’s usually a slice of baked pumpkin, or a slice of cooked bacon, or if it’s still early enough, a persimmon or possibly a tangerine, and #2 thimble-cup of Iron Buddha tea;
while I take my midmorning snack, because, inevitably, something comes up during what should be my lunch break, I usually do some more coding work on SSY (Bastard!), and write more patches and fix more bugs on him. Then, back to work- schedule lunch for the people who are modeling, reschedule appointments, fix more mistakes, deal with crises, sometimes by using the phrase “I don’t fucking care, we own part of your earnings, and if you don’t earn, we’ll make something of you.”, and take a lunch break. Inevitably get interrupted, usually when about to eat something really delicious- or have a good conversation with Dumpling- and have to handle some shit. Handling of said shit usually runs for two hours, send runner for #3 Iron Buddha tea cup and drink; on and on and on. Round and round and round the city I go, talking to people, meeting places, eating on the run- if I’m working a case, which sometimes happens, I try to do some investigation.

Which reminds me- my parents… were not scientists. They were alchemists. That is a very important difference.

Xenthonium is normally not a naturally occurring compound. It usually has to be made. This wouldn’t be a problem, except for the fact that according to scientific theory, Xenthonium cannot be made. However, Xenthonium isn’t a substance traditionally made by scientists- it’s traditionally been made by Alchemists.

This means that my parents- whoever they really were, because I have doubts- were not scientists. I have my doubts about whether or not they loved me really were my parents, or if I was adopted- and I have doubts about whether or not Nainai was a simple domestic. She was very very strong- I remember that well. She was almost impossibly strong- she lifted a tree out of our path once, in the country, when it was just the two of us- and could catch things out of the air without looking. And I don’t- my mother had red hair and green eyes, eyes that crinkled at the edges all the time, no matter what she did. My father had black-brown hair and black eyes, and his skin was spotty and pale. How, then, can I have one blue eye, and black hair? How then did my mother give birth to me? It makes no sense.

But then again- they were my parents. It was my… mother, yes, who sat with me when I had a cold for six days, and it was my father who twirled me up high in the air and laughed and laughed as we spun, and it was them both who took me to the market to buy a goldfish that later died and was flushed down the toilet and it was Nainai who raised me and I miss them all so much. It hurts. It hurts.

Alchemy is an influential philosophical tradition whose early practitioners' claims to profound powers were known from antiquity. The defining objectives of alchemy are varied; these include the creation of the fabled philosopher's stone possessing powers including the capability of turning base metals into the noble metals gold or silver, as well as an elixir of life conferring youth and longevity. Western alchemy is recognized as a protoscience that contributed to the development of modern chemistry and medicine. Alchemists developed a framework of theory, terminology, experimental process and basic laboratory techniques that are still recognizable today. But alchemy differs from modern science in the inclusion of Hermetic principles and practices related to mythology, religion, and spirituality.

Kiaom alchemy has an obvious connection to medicine. The philosopher's stone of European alchemists can be compared to the Grand Elixir of Immortality sought by Kiaom alchemists. However, in the hermetic view, these two goals were not unconnected, and the philosopher's stone was often equated with the universal panacea; therefore, the two traditions may have had more in
common than may initially appear.

Black powder may have been an important invention of Kiaom alchemists. Described in 9th century texts and used in fireworks in Kiao by the 10th century, it was used in cannons by 1290. From Kiao, the use of gunpowder spread to Japan, the Mongols, the Arab world, and Europe. Gunpowder was used by the Mongols against the Hungarians in 1241, and in Europe by the 14th century.

Kiaom alchemy was closely connected to Taoist forms of traditional Kiaom medicine, such as Acupuncture and Moxibustion, and to martial arts such as Tai Chi Chuan and Kung Fu (although some Tai Chi schools believe that their art derives from the philosophical or hygienic branches of Taoism, not Alchemical). In fact, in the early Song Dynasty, followers of this Taoist idea (chiefly the elite and upper class) would ingest mercuric sulfide, which, though tolerable in low levels, led many to suicide. Thinking that this consequential death would lead to freedom and access to the Taoist heavens, the ensuing deaths encouraged people to eschew this method of alchemy in favor of external sources (the aforementioned Tai Chi Chuan, mastering of the Qi, etc.).

Kiaom alchemy had a more obvious connection to medicine. The philosopher's stone of European alchemists can be compared to the Grand Elixir of Immortality sought by Kiaom alchemists. However, in the hermetic view, these two goals were not unconnected, and the philosopher's stone was often equated with the universal panacea; therefore, the two traditions may have had more in common than initially appears.

By refining bases into gold, the alchemist believed that immortal life would be delivered if the "fake" or synthetic gold was ingested. The idea that fake gold was superior to real gold arose because the alchemists believed the combination of a variety of substances (and the transformation of these substances through roasting or burning) gave the final substance a spiritual value. It possesses a superior essence when compared to natural gold. (Xingming, 1990. Pg. 65) Gold and cinnabar (Jindan in Kiaom) were the most sought-after substances to manipulate and ingest. They were believed to have longevity and could elongate the life of the consumer. Cinnabar is a mineral with a reddish brown colour and is often found near deposits of mercury, and so assumed to be related, which is correct, as Cinnabar is mercuric sulfide. It was used in the search for immortality because of the special significance of its color, and the difficulty with which it was refined.

The color of the cinnabar is significant to symbolic belief as well. The color red in Kiaom culture is considered to be the "zenith of the color representing the sun, fire, royalty and energy." (Xingming, 1990. Pg 70) Cinnabar could also be roasted which produced a liquid form of silver known as quicksilver, which we know to be mercury. This substance was ingested but it could also be combined with sulphur and burned again to return to its natural form of cinnabar. "Cinnabar was the yang to quicksilver's yin" (Xingming, 1990. Pg 70). In Kiao gold was quite rare, so it was usually
imported from other surrounding countries. However, cinnabar could be refined in the mountains of Szechuan and Hunan Provinces in central Kiao.

Although the majority of hsien (immortality) elixirs were combinations of jindan, many other elixirs were formed by combining metallic bases with natural herbs or animal bi-products. The rhinoceros' horn was commonly used in medicines and elixirs and was held to have fertility-increasing abilities. Elixirs were composed of metallic compounds such as gold and silver, but they could also be made of more lethal components like arsenic, sulphur, and what is now known to be xenthonium.

Both the Eastern practice of alchemy and the later Western practice are remarkably similar in their methods and ultimate purpose. To be sure, the desire to create an elixir of immortality was more appealing to the Taoists, but European alchemists were not averse to seeking out formulas for various longevity-boosting substances. The secret of transmuting one element into another, specifically base metals into gold or silver, was equally explored by both schools for obvious reasons.

In the European outlook, the ability to turn relatively worthless materials into gold was attractive enough to allow medieval alchemy to enjoy extensive practice long after the Kiaom form had been forgotten. Alternatively, transmutation was also a means of accruing the precious metals that were key in making life-extending elixirs, and were otherwise expensive and difficult to obtain. Alchemical knowledge in the East and West favor different opinions of the true form of alchemy due to different theological views and cultural biases, however these disputes do not lessen the integrity of alchemy's canonical nature.

Kiaom alchemy specifically was consistent in its practice from the beginning, and there was relatively little controversy among its practitioners. Definition amongst alchemists varied only in their medical prescription for the elixir of immortality or perhaps only over their names for it, of which sinology has counted about 1,000. because the Kiaom approach was through the fundamental doctrine of Yin and Yang, the influence of the I Ching, and the teachings of the Five Elements, Kiaom alchemy had its roots considerably more in obtaining a higher mental-spiritual level.

In the West there were conflicts between advocates of herbal and "chemical" (mineral pharmacy), but in Kiao, mineral remedies were always accepted. In Europe there were conflicts between alchemists who favored gold-making and those who thought medicine the proper goal, but the Kiaom always favored the latter. Since alchemy rarely achieved any of these goals, it was an advantage to the Western alchemist to have the situation obscured, and the art survived in Europe long after Kiaom alchemy had simply faded away.

Despite much research, many scholars are still unable to marshal conflicting evidence in order to determine when exactly Kiaom alchemy started. It was thought that Kia was making gold about one thousand years before Confucius' time, but this is contradicted by other academics stating that during the 5th century there was no word for gold and that it was an unknown metal in Kia (Sivin 1968. Pg. 21.)

However, despite the uncertain origins, there are enough similarities in the ideas of practices of Kiaom alchemy and the Daoist tradition so that one can conclude that Laozi and Chang Tao Ling are the creators of this tradition. In her article, Radcliffe tells that Chang Tao Ling rejected serving the Emperor and retreated to live in the mountains. At this time, he met Laozi and together they created (or attempted to create) the Elixir of Life (Radcliffe, 2001), by creating the theory that would be used in order to achieve the making of such an elixir. This is the starting point to the Kiaom tradition of alchemy, whose purpose was to achieve immortality.

One of the first evidence of Kiaom alchemy being openly discussed in history is during the Ch'ín's First Emperor's period when Huan K'üan (73-49BC) states how modifying forms of nature and
ingesting them will bring immortality to the person who drinks them (Pregadio. 1995.) Before Huan K’uan, the idea of alchemy was to turn base metals into gold. Conflicting research on the origins of alchemy are further demonstrated by Xingming, who claims that alchemy "flourished well before 144 BCE, for at that date the Emperor issued an edict which ordered public execution for anyone found making counterfeit gold" (Xingming, 1991). This suggests that people were well aware of how to heat the metals in order to change them into a desired form. A further counter to Pregadio from Xingming is the latter's contention that an emperor in 60 BCE had hired "a well-known scholar, Liu Hsiang, as Master of the Recipes so that he could make alchemical gold and prolong the Emperor's life." All of these conflicting origins considered, it is nearly impossible to claim any absolute knowledge on the origins of Kiaom alchemy. Today, if one looks at the teachings in Daoism one can find alchemical practices in these texts. Most of which posit the existence of an elixir or the Golden Elixir that when ingested gives the drinker eternal life. Since one can make a direct and certain connection between Daoism and Laozi, it is a fair statement to suggest that he played a major role in the creation of Kiaom alchemy.

Tsau Yen is said to have written many of the alchemical books although none of them have ever been found, nor have the existing ones been credited to him (Sivin 1968. Pg. 22.) The likeliest proponents of Kiaom alchemy are as previously stated, Laozi, and Chang Tao Ling as well as Zhuangzi. Each of these men are major icons in Daoist teachings. Although these three are credited with the creation of alchemy, there is no definitive proof to suggest or dispute that they were responsible for its creation.

Yin-Yang is an important concept in the ideas of Kiaom alchemy. Xingming points out that the idea is pervasive throughout alchemical theory, as the metals were categorized as being male or female, and mercury and sulphur especially were thought to have powers relating to lunar and solar respectively. Xenthonium, that rarest of metals, is one of the few ingredients never referred to by name- it was considered by Kiaom Alchemists to be a tenant of the Sixth element, that of Qi, and was held in great esteem.

Davis posits that, prior to the Taoist tradition, the Kiaom already had very definitive notions of the natural world, especially involving the Five Elements, which were Water, Fire, Earth, Metal and Wood. These were commonly thought to be interchangeable with one another; each were capable of becoming another element. The concept is integral, as the belief in outer alchemy necessitates the belief in natural elements being able to change into others. The cyclical balance of the elements relates to the binary opposition of yin-yang, and so it appears quite frequently. The Sixth element is an outlier in this theory, as it states that Qi can disrupt the natural transmutive processes of the Five elements, and reverse it entirely.

Kiaom alchemy can be divided into two methods of practice which are waidan or "external alchemy" and neidan or "internal alchemy". Doctrine can be accessed to describe these methods in greater detail; the majority of Kiaom alchemical sources can be found in the Taozang, the "Taoist Canon".

The meaning of waidan derives from wai (outside, exterior) and dan referring to alchemical operations, such as the preparation of chemical elixirs, made from cinnabar, realgar, xenthonium, and other substances generally involving mercury, sulfur, lead, and arsenic or else the animal and botanical products which are found in Kiaom herbology and Traditional Kiaom medicine. Waidan refers to practices relating to the process of making an elixir often containing herbal or chemical substances found outside of the body. This process involves esoteric oral instructions, building a laboratory, kindling and sustaining the special fires used in the production process, rules of seclusion and purification for the alchemist him or herself to follow, and various practices including the performance of ceremonies to protect the self and the ritual area. Waidan can also include following a dietary regimen which prescribes or prescribes certain foods. Preparing medicines and elixirs can be referred to as outer practices or waidan as these practices occur outside of the body until they are
verified by the ingestion of medicines, herbs, and pills to bring about physical changes within the
body, separate to the soul.

The term Neidan can be divided into two parts Nei meaning inner and Dan referring to alchemy,
elixir and cinnabar (mercury). Neidan uses techniques such as: composed meditation techniques,
visualization, breathing and bodily posture exercises. Breathing exercises were used to preserve jing
or "life essence" and bodily postures were used to improve qi or "energy" flow in the body. Neidan
comprises the elixir from the principles of Traditional Kiaom Medicine and the cultivation of
substances already present in the body, in particular the manipulation of three substances in the body
known as the "Three Treasures".

The three treasures are:

Jing which can be translated as "life essence". A person is born with Jing and it governs the
developmental growth processes in the body. Since people are born with a certain amount of Jing, it
is taught that a person can increase their Jing through dietary and lifestyle practices.

Ch’i which can be translated as "energy" or "vital energy". Ch’i energy results from the interaction of
yin and yang. A healthy body is constantly circulating Ch’i.

Shen can be translated as "spirit" or "mind". Shen is the energy used in mental, spiritual and creative
functioning.

The three treasures are also associated with locations in the body where the alchemical firing process
can take place, known as the three dantians:

Jing or "life essence" is found in the adrenal glands.

Ch’i or "vital energy: is found in the lower dantian, which is located just below the navel.

Shen or "spiritual energy" is found in the upper dantian located between the eyebrows, also known
as the Third eye.

Xenthonium is special, in that… well. It does exactly what it’s supposed to do.

It transfers energy.

Any energy.

Transpersonal psychology is a school of psychology that studies the transpersonal, self-
transcendent or spiritual aspects of the human experience. Transpersonal experiences may be defined
as "experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or
personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos".

A short definition from the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology suggests that transpersonal
psychology "is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential, and with the recognition,
understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness".
Transpersonal psychologists have suggested that transpersonal psychology "is the area of psychology
that focuses on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. These phenomena
include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences and development, as well as
the disciplines and practices inspired by them". Issues considered in transpersonal psychology
include spiritual self-development, self beyond the ego, peak experiences, mystical
experiences, systemic trance and other sublime and/or unusually expanded experiences of living.
Transpersonal psychology developed from earlier schools of psychology including psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanistic psychology. The discipline attempts to describe and integrate spiritual experience within modern psychological theory and to formulate new theory to encompass such experience. Types of spiritual experience examined vary greatly but include mysticism, religious conversion, altered states of consciousness, trance and spiritual practices. Although Carl Jung, Otto Rank and others explored aspects of the spiritual and transpersonal in their work, Miller notes that Western psychology has had a tendency to ignore the spiritual dimension of the human psyche.

Lajoie and Shapiro reviewed forty definitions of transpersonal psychology that had appeared in literature over the period 1969 to 1991. They found that five key themes in particular featured prominently in these definitions: states of consciousness, higher or ultimate potential, beyond the ego or personal self, transcendence, and the spiritual. Walsh and Vaughan have criticised many definitions of transpersonal psychology, for carrying implicit ontological or methodological assumptions. They also challenge definitions that link transpersonal psychology to healthy states only, or to the "Perennial Philosophy". Instead they propose a definition of transpersonal psychology as being the branch of psychology that is concerned with transpersonal experiences and related phenomena, noting that "These phenomena include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences, as well as the disciplines and practices inspired by them."

McGinnis (2009: p. 231) conveys the genesis of the discipline, states its mandate and ventures a definition:

Although transpersonal psychology is relatively new as a formal discipline, beginning with the publication of The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology in 1969 and the founding of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology in 1971, it draws upon ancient mystical knowledge that comes from multiple traditions. Transpersonal psychologists attempt to integrate timeless wisdom with modern Western psychology and translate spiritual principles into scientifically grounded, contemporary language. Transpersonal psychology addresses the full spectrum of human psychospiritual development -- from our deepest wounds and needs, to the existential crisis of the human being, to the most transcendent capacities of our consciousness.


Amongst the thinkers who are held to have set the stage for transpersonal studies are William James, Carl Jung, Otto Rank, Abraham Maslow, and Roberto Assagioli. Research by Vich suggests that the earliest usage of the term "transpersonal" can be found in lecture notes which William James had prepared for a semester at Harvard University in 1905-6. The meaning then, different from today's usage, was in the context of James' radical empiricism in which there exists an intimate relation between a perceiving subject and perceived object, and all objects are dependent on being perceived by someone. Another important figure in the establishment of transpersonal psychology was Abraham Maslow. Maslow had already published work regarding human peak experiences, and was one of the people, together with Stanislav Grof and Viktor Frankl, who suggested the term "transpersonal" for the emerging field. Gradually, during the 1960s, the term "transpersonal" was associated with a distinct school of psychology within the humanistic psychology movement.

In 1969, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof and Jason Blood were among the initiators behind the publication of the first issue of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, the leading academic journal in the field. This was soon to be followed by the founding of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) in 1972. Past presidents of the association include Alyce Green, James Fadiman, Frances Vaughan, Arthur Hastings, Daniel Goleman, Robert Frager, Ronald Jue, Jeanne Achterberg and Dwight Judy. In the 1980s and 1990s the field developed through the works
of such authors as Jean Houston, Stanislav Grof, Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn, Frances Vaughan, Roger Walsh, Stanley Krippner, Michael Murphy, Charles Tart, David Lukoff, Vasily Nalimov, Mary McGinnis, and Stuart Sovatsky. While Wilber has been considered an influential writer and theoretician in the field, he has since personally dissociated himself from the movement in favor of what he calls an integral approach. McGinnis was a pioneer of the field until her tragic death in 2006, wherein she and her husband drove off the side of the Xanghai Expressway, and fell to their deaths. A later fire in the Xanghai CADMUS laboratories destroyed the entirety of their bodies of work; her husband, John “Warren” Xingming, was a chemist.

By common consent, the following branches are considered to be transpersonal psychological schools: various depth psychology approaches including Analytical psychology, based on Carl Jung, and the Archetypal psychology of James Hillman; the spiritual psychology of Robert Sardello; psychosynthesis founded by Roberto Assagioli; Zen Transactional Psychotherapy created by Robert M. Anthony; and the theories of Otto Rank, Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Timothy Leary, Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn and Charles Tart.

Although the majority of mainstream psychology departments, as part of their curriculum, rarely offer training programs in transpersonal issues and practices, Transpersonal perspectives are starting to be applied to such diverse fields as psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology, pharmacology, and social work theory. Transpersonal therapies are also included in many therapeutic practices. Currently, transpersonal psychology, especially the schools of Jungian and Archetypal psychology, is integrated, at least to some extent, into many psychology departments in American and European Universities. Institutions of higher learning that have adopted insights from transpersonal psychology include The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology(US), California Institute of Integral Studies (US), John F. Kennedy University (US), Saybrook University (US), University of West Georgia (US), Atlantic University (US), Burlington College (US), Essex University (UK), Liverpool John Moores University (UK), the University of Northampton (UK), Leeds Metropolitan University (UK), Naropa University(US), Pacifica Graduate Institute (US), and Southwestern College (NM). There is also a strong connection between the transpersonal and the humanistic approaches to psychology. This is not surprising since transpersonal psychology started off within humanistic psychology. In 1996 the British Psychological Society (the UK professional body equivalent to the APA) established a Transpersonal Psychology Section. It was co-founded by David Fontana, Ingrid Slack and Martin Treacy, and was according to Fontana "the first Section of its kind in a Western scientific society".

Robert Frager, of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, and James Fadiman, of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, provide an account of the contributions of many of the key historic figures who have shaped and developed transpersonal psychology (in addition to discussing and explaining important concepts and theories germane to transpersonal psychology) in a textbook on personality theories which serves to promote an understanding of the discipline in classroom settings. An example which points to the possibility that awareness and discussion of transpersonal psychology in mainstream classroom settings may be on the rise can be seen by the inclusion of a section on transpersonal psychology for the first time in a textbook by Barbara Engler in which she asks the question, "Is spirituality an appropriate topic for psychological study?" Engler offers a brief account of the history of transpersonal psychology and a peek into its possible future in noting that G-H Jennings "suggests that transpersonal psychology, using Jung's typology, expresses the neglected inferior function in American psychology, needs to be incorporated into it, and offers great potential and promise for the development of psychology in the third millennium".

Transpersonal psychology is many times regarded as the fourth wave force of psychology which according to Maslow even transcends the self-actualization of Humanistic psychology(1968). Unlike the other first three schools of psychology i.e. psychoanalysis, behaviorism and humanistic psychology which more or less deny the transcended part of soul, transpersonal psychology
integrates the whole spectrum of human development from prepersonality to transpersonality. Hence transpersonal psychology can be considered the most integrated complete psychology, a positive psychology par excellence. From personality to transpersonality, mind to meditation, neuroscience to Nirvana it is a complete wholesome science for all around development and treatment.

It’s like this- imagine you’ve met God. Imagine that you have met the creator and the alpha and the omega; you have tasted the fruit offered by Nirvana, you’ve received enlightenment, you have found the Way, the Path, the story and the song and the Truth of All Things- now, imagine that there was a thing. A special kind of thing that could be placed on your person, and allow someone else to… Taste the Rainbow; imagine you are that someone else, and you want it. How much would you pay for that thing?

And, if told it was impossible to make- who would you kill to get it?

I don’t know. I don’t know.

But, back to my day- after I’ve gone back to the office, filed my reports and expenses, terrified the office herons into productivity, and gossiped with the unibrowed oval-faced Mrs. Hoad- she’s lovely, although her warts do remind one of hovering flies- I’m done and it’s five in the afternoon. Stop by Dumpling’s again, chat and pick what I want for dinner, and possibly get some leads. And that’s it.

During this time, I became known all throughout Kowloon as “This Bitch” which is actually a compliment among the buying elite; you only get epithets like that thrown at you if you tend to get deals on rare and expensive items far far below asking price- what can I say? I do have some luck.

However, my luck usually throws me headfirst into the midden- because, well… this was the winter I made the enemies who would plague me for life.

All over a pair of swords, but I didn’t know they were special!

I should start at the beginning.

For both of these things, actually.
for Gold (part 2)

Chapter Summary

Still more to come.

There are always… soft spots. They can look like anything- a door you’ve only seen shut, a window that has spider webs instead of glass, a bowl with a hole in the bottom and cracks at the edge, a cave with one extra twist on a certain full moon night- these cracks and edges lead all over, some to nice places, some to other planets, some to the Bleed, where all the extra bits go- and some, not many, really quite few, but some, have their terminus in places like the Nightmarket or the edges of Heaven or of Hell; bizarrely enough, one such soft spot let out exactly a foot underneath Raven’s pond.

When I say this was a shocking surprise, I actually mean that we only found out about it because a boy fell into- well, out of- her pond about two weeks after she had moved into the house we had built together. Still, a fall is a fall, and well- he would lead to a whole heap of trouble.

Let me describe Raven’s home.

Imagine a basket made out of leaves that slightly overlap- push pale cream ivory chopsticks through the bottom of the basket, so it stands on little legs. Give it nine legs, for magical reasons I won’t go into now; stick it into soft, muddy ground, with prickle bushes growing there- they have been cut high off the ground, so there is very little cover for snakes- but, back to the basket; it has one largish hole in it, with a sort of matchstick looking protuberance out the bottom of the hole, and a long multicolored wrapping of ribbons in the vague shape of a rope falling from one corner where the matchstick porch and the jagged door abut. Just inside the hole, there is a ragged whitish cloth, covered in faded embroidery; the half gone shapes of moons and birds and gasping grasping branches flutters in the occasional breeze. On the other side of the house, not exactly opposite of the door, but slightly to the left, is a tall column of bricks, going softly green with moss- inside, it is a large brick fireplace, big enough to put a full-size cauldron in, long enough to sleep beside, on the warm bricks when the Winter wind cries and screams for her lover. The roof is special- that took some heavy engineering, and some extreme questions, like “you’re really sure about this”, and “ow fuck, why are we doing this”- take the nicest, most bountiful garden you’ve ever seen. Go ahead, you know the one- with the perfect shade tree, and all the wonderful stone pathways, and the flowers, and all those things your grandmother told you were good for eating, and herbs that made your hands smell interesting for hours, and warmed from the sun and there were always brown-shelled snails in the shade of the gourds and there were always so many butterflies- thick enough to drown in- and there were birds, chirping and singing (nevermind what they were actually saying, this isn’t that kind of memory); take that beautiful garden, and stick it, whole and unchanged, on top of the leafy basket. On stilts. Yes.

Paint flowers and twining vines on both sides of the door- and paint the number “192” on the outer lintel.

This is Raven’s House.

Raven’s yard is a natural extension of her house- as I understand it, her roofgarden is used for
meditative purposes, and her yard garden is a normal garden. With a pond in it.

We had just finished building and furnishing her house- I remember, because it was one of the slowest two weeks I had ever had; no crazy fires, no giant lemurs, no mutated rice cakes- it was bizarre.

I know better now.

Kaldur’ahum of Atlantis is a sort of russet color, with ash brown undertones, and mid-tones of rose, and highlights of that color sand goes when it’s in the sun; he has yellow hair, which I’ve never been close enough to touch before.

That’s not how we met though, I’m skipping ahead. Hang on… okay. Here we go- His eyes, when they open- he has not yet risen from Raven’s crystal clear pond, deep enough for me to strain to reach the bottom of, wide enough for me to swim length to length and width to width, and after we threw out the grindywhellow, a lovely swimming hole with big lotus blooms in the spring and summer- are the clearest shade of blue I’ve ever seen.

His nose is the long straight plank of the swimmer; his cheekbones are high and well defined. His eyelashes are thick, and black, and match his eyebrows, which is not so strange; his lips are thin and narrow, and his mouth is neither too big nor too small, and his lips are a soft earthy yellow color, shading into bronze on the bottom one. I want to kiss them.

He was floating on his back- when he sees us, he sort of bobbled, in the water, and then turned and stared at us two girls- Raven, in her creamy yellow smock and dark blue kirtle, with her big black boots and her wide brimmed hat with the tall cone, and a basket full of frilly parsley and leafy broccoli and some late spinach, and the very last of the apples; it’s actually the first day of November, and I had come over in one of my nice winter dresses to keep Raven company at her new house, and help her get stuff together for First dinner- I had brought large soup dumplings, and two kinds of fresh eel, and small mushrooms meant for roasting quick quick and persimmons and tangerines and three winter melons, and two dozen blue orchids. I was in my favorite winter dress- it goes to my ankles, and it has these massively long sleeves, cut a little wide, and three, count them, three underlayers. It’s also a softly faded vermillion, with spiraling black and white trim; the collar is black. I am wearing my cherry red boots.

We stare at each other for a long moment- and then, at some unknown signal, Raven and I set our baskets down; I had just come over, and had met Raven working in her yard; we run as fast as our skirts allow, which is pretty fucking fast, and come to the edge of the pond- there is a dock made out of stone that we built together, and we don’t quite run out onto it because it’s a floating dock, and that wouldn’t be safe; we both stop right about the middle, and suddenly, we’re frozen in space again.

The hell?

The boy swims closer- he disappears under the broad leaves of the bower mat, and the long grass underneath him sways with his movements; with a sort of gulping plop, he appears, head and shoulders- I was so focused on his face, I missed his clothing entirely, but his shirt is red with black stripes like gills, and black rings with a special sheen around his arms, and his pants are blue and widen at the ankle, and his belt is wide and black with a capital alpha- why do I know what that is? Who knows?

He climbs onto the dock with us, and he’s tall, oh my gods, he’s shorter than I am but wow he’s tall.
and um. I was wrong. His eyes aren’t blue- they’re pale green.

Raven, my best friend, is an empath. This has drawbacks and advances- advance: when the boy pulled himself onto the dock, she could feel that he was confused, not hostile, and proceeded to introduce her and me. Drawback: she laughed at me for three freaking years after this one time when I was tongue-tied. Of course, I did just make it worse for myself because of… well.

The Pretty Apartments have a very specific and cyclical layout- this is not an accident. When I moved into- onto- the roof, I completed a massive cycle; it’s part of the reason my apartment is so safe- and so small, and part of the reason I can do what I do; the place I live is a node for a massive amount of energy, which runs through the walls of my apartment, and then out the roof in a sort of dispersal fountain; I have gained the ability, through years of just being near it, to feel the flows of energy around me.

This also means that Water-oriented people, like me, the penngalan, ghosts, and other, stranger waterspirits, live on the floors that are multiples of five- starting with five, and going all the way up to my floor, which is actually one thousand.

Speaking of the penngalan, her name is actually Sinta- and she was the one who helped me make my new “mortal world” outfit.

Let me tell you about the fabric district in Kowloon- actually, let me tell you about Mr. Walnut.

Mr. Walnut is a small nut brown man who shows every moment of his long and turbulent life in his face- he is a mass of wrinkles and creases that move and creak. He is also the head of the board of the guild of fabric merchants in Kowloon; I became acquainted with him when, during the spring of year before last, an evil wandering spirit went around stealing people’s shadows. Mr. Walnut was one of the people whose shadow was stolen, and I managed to get it, along with a number of others, back.

There is a system of alleys that runs all through the Western side of Kowloon- they are home to the gambling and drugs that are not sanctioned by the local gangs; they are also home to the denizens and creatures that are not welcome in the other neighborhoods. I, personally, live in East Kowloon- even though I always feel more at home in North Kowloon, I live in East Kowloon- South Kowloon is always hot and muggy, and I don’t like going there.

Anyway.

Within those alleyways, a plague ran screaming through West Kowloon; this was during the Summer, which came with its relentless heat and it’s typhoons, and flooding which always happens in West Kowloon, and in the depths of the forgotten sewers beneath the city entire, there arose a demon of plague.

Plague demons usually can’t be seen in the light of sun, or moon, or stars- but there exists a type of fungus native to the sewers of Kowloon that glows, and by this light the demon can be seen. The fungus has two main varieties- it can grow either as a toadstool/mushroom, or as a lichen/moss.
The plague demon that was fought, underneath the city, was the approximate size of a wild pig, and had the shape of a ferret with the teeth of a shark and the tongue of a dog and the eyes of a fish. It was actually more like a small war- a guerilla war, where buckets of pastes to ward off disease were carried around, and different teas were poured into the sewers and somehow, someway, the demon was killed- and understand, it was probably best that I wasn’t there. I would have gotten sick. Demons, real, truly evil demons, are not accepted in Kowloon- with good reason.

Demons don’t attract anything except dead bodies.

Also, I am allergic to ferrets.

But demons, real demons, attract other things- and one of those things was a collector of objects, relative of the owner of the Boneknife hand- a being called the Klintcher.

I will call the owner of the Boneknife hand the Boneknife Mother- I don’t know if that is correct, but it feels right. Now, two years ago, after the demon was slain, the Klintcher began to creep into people’s lives, steal something of them- a lock of hair, or lips, or a shadow- and squirrel it away in the festering, glow-mold ridden bones that used to be the demon, but was now the home of the Klintcher. It was the Klintcher that I fought- but first I had to find him.

The reason I had to find him was Sinta.

Let me tell you about Sinta the penngalan, and penngalan’s in general.

There are many strange and unknown creatures that live in the world- penngalan’s, a relation to the leyak, or ap- there are quite a few names for the same creature, and none of them have ever really seemed right- but the point is, the first one is what Sinta is, and the second one is a bloodcraving creature of darkness that preys on pregnant women, drinks their blood, and eats their unborn children.

Sinta, a penngalan, is a normal enough young woman. She eats vegetables and fruit and meats- mostly fish- and she wears the revealing clothing that whores wear to attract custom, and when she’s not at work she usually wears jeans and a t-shirt with bright pink flipflops. She always smells faintly of vinegar and coconut oil.

She is also quite pretty, and has a mouth full of the sharpest, most pointy teeth in the world.

Sinta is one of the middle daughters of a pair of Manngalalahals- that’s too many lala’s, but… The point is, when she was about fifteen hundred years old, which is young for her kind, but old enough to be married, her parents neglected to arrange a marriage for her- assuming, perhaps, that there was no one willing to marry their sharp-tongued daughter.

Angered, Sinta packed her things and left the mountains of her native Laos, and through a series of mishaps and at least one excursion to the Plateau of Jars, she ended up in Pretty Cheng’s establishment.

Actually, and it would be some years before I realized this- Pretty Cheng’s establishment is not a whorehouse, and Pretty Cheng is not a Madame. Not entirely. The women who live there are mostly whores, certainly- but there are also women who are witches, money changers, astrologists, priestesses, artists, designers- and Sinta, who only moonlights as a whore, is a designer of clothing.

She is also a cousin to several hundred people, some of whom eventually found their way to Kowloon. One such young man by the name of Brahm, stumbled, fell, crawled, or was pushed into the scrabbling claws of the Klintcher, and poor Sinta was sent a message through the family.
grapevine of Brahm’s troubles. So informed of his plight, she was now bound by ancient family tradition and law to render aid to him. I was twelve, I think, and had just moved into the Apartments- I needed lots and lots of things to make my house a home, and one of those things was... actually, it was what I had gone over to Raven’s for.

I needed someone to have dinner with me in my new home.

There are rules and laws and little bits and pieces of life that must be observed to have happened- for example, a new dress can only become an old dress after you wear it out, or have it for at least a year; similarly, a house, no matter who owned it before you, or how long you’ve lived in it, can only really be yours if you have someone over, and cook food for them, and share a meal.

It’s kind of strange, but think about it- in a new place, the ability to sit down, and metaphorically say to someone else, “this is my space, and for now, I welcome you to it” and to say “this is my food, and for now I will share it with you” is like saying that something is... is mine enough to share. I don’t know why this is, but I do know that it’s one of the ways to claim property in the spirit world- to make a space your own, you need to live in it for a time, and then allow another into your space and share soup with them.

It’s important.

Sinta, who would help me get Jump, was kind enough to have dinner with me, that first night- and, although she didn’t have to, she gave me my... My start. Because, although Madame White gave me the first job in which I got paid, Sinta was... to use video game parlance, Sinta gave me the tutorial missions before the actual storymode start. Yes, some of them were harder than others, and yes, I thought I was going to die many times, but without her help those first few months, I wouldn’t be... well. Here.

We live on different floors- and we run in different circles, now. I suppose you could say that we’re distance friends- we only ever manage to meet up, and share, about once a year- I think about her occasionally, and she has a place in my heart but... I don’t really want her to be a permanent part of my life.

Sinta is frightening. Beautiful, driven, and frightening. I’m not scared of her- but. I am scared for her... because she isn’t. She doesn’t... make the right choices.

Anyway.

Sinta is a designer of jewelry; one of the things she took with her when she left Laos was a box full of crumbling dress-patterns, and the knowledge of how to make any kind of jewelry you could ever desire- necklaces that allow one to breathe underwater, for example, are well within her skillset.

Once I had found Sinta’s cousin Brahm for her, and killed the Klintcher, something he had been eating- the shadows- escaped, and returned with a susurant rushing of darkness, slither snapped back to their owners. One of which was Mr. Walnut.

So grateful was he- to me, personally- that he gave me special privilege on every fabric bought and sold in Kowloon- which is freaking amazing. I only really use my connection during Winter, though, and only on occasions when my normal haggling skills aren’t working fast enough.
Raven and I walked with the young man—called Aqualad—back up the hill, his bare feet leaving small divots in the ground, very different from our deep and clear boot marks; Raven and I pick up our baskets, and I finally find my voice. In the course of conversation, Raven has gotten Aqualad to talk about himself, and where he’s from—even though I’ve been enamored with his… eee, his faaaaace—I’ve been listening to him talk as well. And his voice is… hnnnnnnnnnnmmmmmg. Yes.

Anyway.

“I am from Atlantis—”

“the Sunken Continent?”

“Yes, although I have only heard it referred to in that way in historical texts.”

“so, what do you do?”

“I am apprenticed to my King, as his… Squire, I suppose you could call it. I help him in his work in the seven seas, and I help others when I am able to.”

We walk up the hill, and across the yard to Raven’s house— which is actually much brighter inside than one would expect—and with a twitch of Raven’s finger, the rope unwinds into a well-made staircase, which was a bitch and a half to make, and we all troop up to Raven’s house, and together, we have First dinner.

Dinner that night is a lively affair—Raven had cleaned and polished everything that would take a shine, and the rug I had gotten for her matched the space perfectly.

Her kitchen is half of the house, at least, with wide counters and deep shelving and more space to work than a person could ever need—since it also doubles as a minor surgery, this is sensible; it also leads directly, in a round space way, to the dining area of the house, which is a massive stump that we smoothed mirror flat on top, and carved into the shape of a low table—a screen painted with blocky, thick lined trees and black birds; Raven was not used to eating on anything other than the ground, but weeks of eating at my house, with its raised table, had made it clear to her, at least, that eating on a raised surface is a… nice thing, I suppose. And Raven likes nice things.

Raven slices the winter melons, and peels the persimmons and arranges them, along with the apples, on a platter, and carefully sets it out on the table; I go back into the kitchen to check and make sure that potatoes are still boiling okay—they are, but they are not quite done yet. I’ve tied back my sleeves, and left my boots at the door; when we came in, Raven brought Kaldur a bowl of water and a small towel, and told him to wash his feet. He did—while he was doing so, I took both the baskets of food into the kitchen, and started dinner.

The first thing to start, because it takes the longest, is the potatoes; I’m making smoothed potatoes today, so after I walk into the kitchen I take some of her potatoes, chop them up, and add them to the pot where water is boiling. After I’ve seen to the potatoes, I see to the orchids—and after that, I see to the eels.

Eel is an awkward kind of fish; they have long bodies, sharp teeth, and crystals in their skulls. I am a native of Kiao—we like our fish as fresh as possible. This means that the eel—because Raven and I love eel—was alive, inside the pickle jars I had brought.

I take down one of the large bowls meant for cooking in; I take a chopping blade, and with a quick snap flick of my fingers, I pull out one of the large live eels, and break its skull with the flat of my
blade; thunk, and it’s on the nail purpose built for eel; the application of a sharp knife removes scales from the body the innards from the bone, and chop in into two centimeter pieces, and with a sliding scoop and toss, the eel goes into the pot- I’ve gotten so adept at this part of the process (I like eel so much, when it’s in season), that it’s the work of moments to kill and clean the large, meaty eels; the smaller, longer eels have a sweeter, fainter flavor that really comes out when stewed with parsley- the larger eels lend a deeper… existence, to the dish. The eels are quickly chopped, and sliced, and put in the dish for cooking in, and I smash and chop garlic, and paste some of the fresh parsley together with lemon, and Aqualad is watching me holy shit he looks irritated oh dear um.

“S-s-s-something wr-r-r-r-rong? I-i-i-i-i-is s-s-s-something- I, um. S-s-s-s-sorry, I, um.”

“What are those?”

“F-f-farmed f-f-freshwa-a-ter eels, um. I g-g-g-got them this m-m-morning f-f-from the. The Big Billed H-heron, um, who always has the bes-s-st selection this t-t-time of year. O-of eels, I mean. Do you… d-do you not like eel? I… I can make something else, i-i-i-if you, um, if you want.”

Something in his face changes; I’m not looking at a warrior, but a guy, who’s maybe a little reserved about things. Raven quietly pads back into the area, her socked feet silent on the polished wooden floors.

“ch- Theresa, i told you to- i got this cooking thing, would you go sit down?”

“But I was just-”

“going to go sit down with the guest, right?”

I stare at her, and can feel the flush-blush rising in my features.

“Yes, yes of course.”

She roasted the mushrooms when I wasn’t paying attention- they’re in their own little bowl, and smell faintly of oak.

I settle myself in a cloud of fine silks- because silk, even thin and fine like I wear, is very warm- and Aqualad settles across from me. I fold my fingers, small in my lap, and can’t help but quietly smooth my skirt beneath my hands- I force myself to look everywhere but at him directly, until finally I can’t take it, and look.

I hadn’t noticed it outside, but tracing up from the backs of his hands is a black strip, long and winding up his arms like… eels… oh.

The wave of embarrassment that washes over me in that moment drowns my awareness of the area- it is only when the scent of Dumpling’s amazingly delicious soup dumplings wafts into my nose that I return to the room and table.

“If you don’t m-mind me asking- wh-what were you doing before you came here?”

He blinks at me, and Raven’s mouth twitches in her stifled version of a laugh- his clear light green eyes glance at me, and then he speaks directly to me. I can feel the flush traveling up from my chest, up the column of my neck, and across the planes of my face- however, I am wearing my makeup, so I am fairly sure that it doesn’t show through; I will blush all throughout dinner.
Raven will later tell me that she didn’t know my face could go all pink like that so many times.

“An enemy of my country had attacked the capitol- I was there at the time, and helped battle them, as I am a warrior of my home, and am sworn to protect it. I was on a routine patrol after the attack, to ensure that there would be nothing further, when I saw a strange- even now, I do not know what I saw- it was a strange color, and moved too quickly for me to see clearly. I followed it down, and then into the caves beneath the capitol city; as I swam, I began to recognize less and less of the area around me. It was dark, and the walls of the caves got closer and closer, until finally I was inside a tunnel too narrow for me to turn around in; I kept swimming forwards, at times wriggling forwards, until finally I saw a light ahead of me. I thought it would be an opening to an area I knew, or a small hole into the city, but it opened out into the pond outside.”

I blink, and then nod, because “I know what happened to you. You swam through a soft spot- since they only go one way, it’s very unlikely that the hole that brought you here will be there to take you back. Most of them aren’t… permanent.”

Raven nods, and adds “they’re one of the remnants from when the world was made; they exist in every time and place, and remain in those places where people are said to vanish, without a trace. they appear and disappear at will- except one, which changes size and shape, but not place, and, gods willing, never will- or so I have heard it said. ”

Aqualad looks at us both with a strange expression; we’ve basically finished dinner, and neither Raven nor I go in for sweets- but we do go in for creepy best friend things. So we speak in perfect unison- “If you don’t believe us, go outside and check the pond for yourself. We’ll wait right here. Perhaps the soft spot might even be there- but they only go one way; even if you do find it, you won’t be able to return through it.’’

He stares at us- we, being the creepy little shits we are, grin at him, and then giggle like the girls we are. He pursed his lips, and then stood from the table and walked out the door- I waited until the creak of his step was gone from my hearing, and then I looked at Raven.

“Really only one way?”

“for the majority of them, yes. some of them are more like baskets, that creatures of a certain size or shape can pass through either way- but the vast majority of them are like permeable membranes, like we learned about at the Necrophiladelphia Collegium.”

“So- the majority of them are like… holes, sort of, that only go one way because of the pressure on one side or another.”

“that’s about the size of it. i’ve never understood why they only appear sometimes though…”

“It’s like a field, after it rains- there are holes, in the ground- you know- that aren’t there otherwise, and certain kinds of flowers- like rain lilies- that don’t grow at any other time. Most soft spots are like that. Except for one.”

Raven scrunches her nose; I brush my scruffy bangs out of my face, and behind my right ear.

“do you think the fact that it’s the First of November has anything to do with him being here? and- i’ve read about that one soft spot, but what is it really? you always seem to know the weirdest stuff…”

“Tch- Rude! But- yeah, Firsts are always special; First loves, First dates, First homes, First dinners- the First of the month probably did have something to do with the soft spot under his city; I’m not so
sure about the thing he followed though-”

“it is a Full Moon.”

“Shit, I forgot- could be any-fucking-thing, then. As for the First soft spot, also known as the Ring of Fire, it’s… it’s the very first one, and by it’s very nature- it has the same name in every world. What does that tell you?”

“that it’s old, and powerful. Legendary, even.”

“Yeah. I know that it’s underwater, mostly, and that it’s bound to the Present of the defined world- but… I’m not sure what it actually is.”

At some point in our conversation, Aqualad had walked back inside; he is slightly wet from the pond, and his skin glisters a warm russety color. I blush so hard I can actually feel the blood pounding in my ears. Why am I blushing so much? Oh my gods; he’s so mmmgh. I want to kiss him so much. Something else I didn’t notice about him because I was staring at his face- he has, on his back, the protruding hilts of a pair of swords, their hilts also in the shape of… eels… mmmgh.

Apparently, I have levels of blushing- my face goes from slightly warm to burning.

What is wrong with me?
“The Ring of Fire refers to a roughly half-circular area where a large number of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur in the basin of the Pacific Ocean. It is associated with a nearly continuous series of oceanic trenches, volcanic arcs, volcanic belts and plate movements. The Ring of Fire is also the home of the most dangerous magical creatures in the world- sea serpents, kraken, sirens, and other, worse things; all these call the Ring of Fire home.”

I swallow nervously, then speak.

“Y-y-yes, and it’s also t-the only permanent soft spot in the world. It’s… it’s too late to go anywhere, um, right now, but- tomorrow- if, if it’s okay with you, Raven, and you, Aqualad-”

“Please, call me Kaldur’ahum.”

“A-a-a-a-alright… Kaldur’ahum. It’s just gone past m-midnight, and it’s too late to do anything other than go h-home and go to bed. I think the b-best thing to do, um, is for you to stay here, with my friend, Raven- I will go home, and get some things together, which will take about two, maybe two and a half weeks. Once I’ve prepared, I think… I think I can escort you through the Ring of Fire, and return you to… to were-ever it is you come from.”

“while you’re here, you can help me with stuff around the house, and do some research on the Ring of Fire, and prepare yourself for the journey- it’s a dangerous place, and you’ll need to be ready.”

“Could I not simply- wait, for the soft spot I came through to… come back?”

I look at Raven- “When does the next First of November coincide with a Full Moon?” Raven stares into the middle distance for a long moment; her fingers tap out the rhythm of the Moon Count- a simple chant to remember the cycle of the moon, as it coincides with the months; her eyes cross slightly, then uncross, and then she frowns, and mumbles to herself “that can’t be right.” She looks up at us both, murmurs an excuse, and pads behind the separating screen- she comes back with a thick tome of lunar dates, a slate, a rag, a piece of chalk, and an abacus. I quickly move the plates and platters of dinner aside, and Raven retakes her seat-

“terry, flip to the November chapter- page 87.”

“Alright.” I lift the heavy book- it is bound in leather, and smells faintly of anise. I open it, and pause to admire the illuminated frontspiece; it is a beautiful tree in silver, owls and apples, chalices and coins, flowers blooming towards the waxing moon, and flowers wilting in the wane- and I’ve gotten distracted, page eighty-seven, eighty-seven… Aha, the moon phases for November for the next- “Ten-thousand years? Really?”

“it is the lunar almanac.”

“True. Which First is this?”
“Tiger-Earth; 2010 defined year, i think- there shouldn’t be more than two of them…”

“It was November first, 2010 when I was home, if that is helpful.”

I smile at Kaldur’ahum; “It is, actually. Thank you.”

Raven redoes her mental calculations on the slate- I double check her work.

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. Do you want to tell him, or should I?”

“You tell him- I’ll go get his bed ready.” She pads away- I hear the soft clunk of a trunk opening, and the soft rustle of fabrics moving. I fold my hands in front of me, quietly playing with my fingertips- I always get a little twitgety when I have to tell someone bad news.

“Kaldur’ahum- if you were to wait for the soft spot that brought you here to return, it would be a little more than six hundred years. I’m sorry, but… I think that we will have to go through the Ring of Fire, to get you back home. It might take a few weeks, sure- but it’s better than six hundred years, I think.”

Kaldur’ahum has folded his arms forwards on the table; his eyes are hooded and low, their pale green glint dim in the low light of false dawn- jeeze, we’ve stayed up the whole night… which, honestly, is pretty much what’s supposed to happen at First Dinner.

“There is one thing I do not understand- why… why would you leave this place, and go into certain danger, for a stranger you met a few hours ago?”

I smile again, but it is soft, and gentle- it feels strange on my face, because I usually don’t smile like this. I lean forwards, and carefully put my hands over his. I do my best to ignore the electric thrill that runs through me from the tips of my fingers to my lower belly and wriggles.

“Kaldur’ahum- I… I’m not sure who you are, or why you’re here, but you need someone’s help. I have a habit of helping people, when they need it, and you’ve already done my friend a favor- you had First dinner with us, which means that you… well, I’m not sure why, but to make a house a home, you have to invite people over and have dinner with them. It’s weird but true- and you were here, and you had dinner with us, and you were kind, and, well… I l-l-l-l-like you, and I l-l-l-l-l-like you, and I want to help you, and in about two weeks I’ll be able to, so- so, please, let me help you, okay?”

His clear, pale green eyes are wide- the sun has turned the doorway, and the upper window bright with light- it’s caught both of our faces in its warm glow; his skin is burnished golden and rose, and he smiles at me, and then says “Alright.”

I finally stagger back into my apartment at about six that morning- it’s my one off day during the week, so I don’t have to go to work; I slither out of the majority of my clothing, leaving my smalls and my shortest under-robe, wash my face with the vinegar mixture that washes off my makeup- actually, saltwater works too, but- and then I flop into bed, and sleep for about six hours. I wake up at noon, bathe, dress in a simple trousers-blouse combination, eat some leftover persimmons, and go down to Sinta’s apartment.

She’s not working- I knock, and she answers the door. I ask if I can come inside- she allows it, and I
sit myself where she indicates. I explain what I need to do, and the timeline I’ve given myself to prepare in- she stares at me, stares at the ceiling, stares at me some more, and then swears rather foully.

“So- What, Exactly, do you Want Me to Make You?”

“Well… you know those old dress patterns you gave me?”

“Yeah- oh. Okay, I Assume You Followed the Directions…?”

“Yes, without a problem- I did the tuning thing, and the Carp pattern fit my… well, everything, best, but… Carp can’t breathe seawater.”

“Ah. In that case, you’ll need some sort of Undermail, I think- do you want me to take your Measurements? And as an aside, what kind of fabric did you use?”

“Oh, yes, please do- and I used beautiful red, black, and white brocade-”

She puts her head in her hands, and moans a little laugh.

“Bronze. Of course it would have to be in Bronze- brocade means Bronze, and hand-dyed Silk Muslin under because you always use silk…”

“I have a full bolt of muslin- do you want to use that, or…?”

“Yes, yes- please. And bring the dress too, so I can follow the pattern of the brocading.”

“Alright, I’ll run upstairs and grab it- do you want garnets, or gold, or…?”

“As Payment? Garnets and Gold, if you please. And I’ll need two and a half weeks, as well.”

“Alright. I’ll get that muslin for you, and the dress. I made accessories too, because they were in the pattern as well-”

“Of course you did. Bring them all, and I’ll see what I can do. You never make things easy, Terry, do you?”

I smile winsomely at her, and then pound back up the stairs; I grab the dress, which is a lovely thing with ovals that let my shoulders out and abbreviated sleeves, and a deep scoop where my chest is- the skirt stops just above my knees. It is the single most revealing item of clothing I own. The underclothing is worse, somehow- to wear it, I have to wear… I don’t even know what to call it; there’s this thing that’s like a pair of underwear, but with string ties at the hip, and this thing that goes over my chest and sort of holds it up and squishes it in pace tightly- there’s a tie that goes around my neck and another that sits low on my back, and it’s very. Um. Form fitting. I made matching kung-fu shoes and a purse that is clutch shaped and bigger on the inside, as well.

The fabric the dress suite is made out of is a patchy red, black, and white silk, dyed across the sea in Nihon; they do a brisk trade in all manner of objects- including the swords that would lead to my two sworn enemies- and the fabric I used to make the dress. The Carp pattern, along with its brethren, given to me, along with several others in a worn cedar box, by Sinta, is a special kind of dressmaker’s pattern- it is a simple set of directions, which, when followed correctly, creates a garment commonly worn by the people of Sinta’s tribe, to turn into fish people. The people of the tribe are known even more commonly as Mermaids- well, no, not exactly mermaids, because the people of the Lao Mountains do not love the sea, and it is not the creatures of the sea they turn into when they wear their special garments- it is the swimming creatures of the water. Which is not to say...
that some of the people don’t return to the sea when the need to- there are some freshwater fish that
do not live their entire lives in the rivers and lakes of the high mountains.

Anyway.

Sinta took my measurements, and sent me away with my ears ringing with expoundations about the
world, me, the cost of bronze these days, me, chainmail, me, fabric design, me, the Ring of Fire, me,
me some more, garnets and gold and how I had best better get them to her snappish, me, more
ranting about chainmail, and then I was out of range, so I couldn’t hear her swearing anymore.

I had to go see the bonesellers and the stone cutters anyway- it’s a long journey, across the world by
sea, and I don’t know what I might need. So, I start with the basics- crystal phials with wax-cork
stoppers and small clear jars with the twist tops, for- well, I’m not actually sure. By the end of the
day, I realize that I won’t be able to find any of what I really need on the land portion of the
Nightmarket- I have to go to West Kowloon, and all the best things there are sold by the Ghosts who
live- yep, you guessed it- underwater.

The next day is my payday- I give my two-weeks’ notice earlier than usual, and take my Final-final
payout of gold and precious stones, which is smaller than usual (understandable since I didn’t work
as long as I usually do); a quick stop at my preferred money-changers, because they only slightly
cook the scales, and I change out a large portion of my gold for money useful in West Kowloon-
cowry shells, sand dollars, two beautiful conch shells, and a double handful of the most perfect seed
pearl beads I’ve ever seen. I go back to the Apartments- Sinta doesn’t need my dress anymore, but
she accepts her pre-job payment of two large ingots of gold; her post payment only comes upon the
completion of the job, and will pay her overhead costs, and a little extra for profit.

Let me tell you about chain mail.

Mail (chainmail, maille) is a type of armor consisting of small metal rings linked together in a pattern
to form a mesh. The origins of the word “mail” are not fully known. One theory is that it originally
derives from the Latin word *macula*, meaning "spot" or “opacity” (as in macula of retina). Another
theory relates the word to the old French “maillier”, meaning “to hammer” (a cognate of the modern
English word “malleable”).

The first attestations of the word “mail” are in Old French and Anglo-Norman: “maille” “maile”, or
“male” or other variants, which became “mailye” “maille” “maile”, “male”, or “meile” in Middle
English.

Civilizations that used mail used different terms for each garment made from it. The standard terms
for European mail armor derive from French: leggings are called chausses, a hood is a coif and
mittens, mitons. A mail collar hanging from a helmet is a camail or aventail. A shirt made from mail
is a hauberk if knee-length and a haubergeon if mid-thigh length. A mail shirt interwoven between
two layers of fabric is called a jazerant. A waist-length coat in medieval Europe was called a byrnie,
although the exact construction of a byrnie is unclear.

Noting that the byrnie was the "most highly valued piece of armor" to the Carolingian soldier,
Bennet, Bradbury, DeVries, Dickie, and Jestice indicate that:

“There is some dispute among historians as to what exactly constituted the Carolingian byrnie.
Relying... only on artistic and some literary sources because of the lack of archaeological examples,
some believe that it was a heavy leather jacket with metal scales sewn onto it. It was also quite long,
reaching below the hips and covering most of the arms. Other historians claim instead that the
Carolingian byrnie was nothing more than a coat of mail, but longer and perhaps heavier than traditional early medieval mail. Without more certain evidence, this dispute will continue.

The modern usage of terms for mail armor is highly contested in popular and, to a lesser degree, academic culture. Medieval sources referred to armor of this type simply as “mail”, however “chain-mail” has become a commonly-used, if incorrect neologism first attested in Sir Walter Scott’s 1822 novel *The Fortunes of Nigel*. Since then the word “mail” has been commonly, if incorrectly, applied to other types of armor, such as in “plate-mail” (first attested in 1835). (The more correct term is “plate armor”.)

The use of mail as battlefield armor was common during the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, becoming less common over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries. It is believed that the Roman Republic first came into contact with mail fighting the Gauls in Cisalpine Gaul, now Northern Italy, but in an even earlier time, a different pattern of chain mail was already in use among the Etruscans. The Roman army adopted the technology for their troops in the form of the lorica hamata which was used as a primary form of armor through the Imperial period.

After the fall of the Western Empire much of the infrastructure needed to create plate armor diminished. Eventually the word "mail" came to be synonymous with armor. It was typically an extremely prized commodity as it was expensive and time consuming to produce and could mean the difference between life and death in a battle. Mail from dead combatants was frequently looted and was used by the new owner or sold for a lucrative price. As time went on and infrastructure improved it came to be used by more soldiers. Eventually with the rise of the lanced cavalry charge, impact warfare, and high-powered crossbows, mail came to be used as a secondary armor to plate for the mounted nobility.

By the 14th century, plate armor was commonly used to supplement mail. Eventually mail was supplanted by plate for the most part as it provided greater protection against windlass crossbows, bludgeoning weapons, and lance charges. However, mail was still widely used by many soldiers as well as brigandines and padded jacks. These three types of armor made up the bulk of the equipment used by soldiers with mail being the most expensive. It was sometimes more expensive than plate armor.[18] Mail typically persisted longer in less technologically advanced areas such as Eastern Europe but was in use everywhere into the 16th century.

During the late 19th and early 20th century mail was used as a material for bulletproof vests, most notably by the Wilkinson Sword Company. Results were unsatisfactory, Wilkinson mail worn by the Khedive of Egypt's regiment of "Iron Men" was manufactured from split rings which proved to be too brittle, as the rings would fragment when struck by bullets and further aggravate the damage. The riveted mail armor worn by the opposing Sudanese Madhists did not have the same problem but also proved to be relatively useless against the firearms of British forces at the battle of Omdurman. During World War I Wilkinson Sword transitioned from mail to a lamellar design which was the precursor to the flak jacket.

Also during World War I a mail fringe, designed by Captain Cruise of the British Infantry, was added to helmets to protect the face. This proved unpopular with soldiers, in spite of being proven to defend against a one-hundred gram shrapnel round fired at a distance of ninety meters.

Mail Armor was introduced to the Middle East and Asia through the Romans and was adopted by the Sassanid Persians starting in the 3rd century CE, where it was supplemental to the scale and lamellar armors already used. Mail was commonly also used as horse armor for cataphracts and heavy cavalry as well as armor for the soldiers themselves. Asian mail was typically lighter than the European variety and sometimes had prayer symbols stamped on the rings as a sign of their craftsmanship as well as for divine protection. Mail armor is mentioned in the Koran as being a gift
revealed by Allah to David.

From the Middle East mail was quickly adopted in Central Asia by the Sogdians and by India in the South. It was not commonly used in Mongol armies due to its weight and the difficulty of its maintenance, but it eventually became the armor of choice in India. Indian mail was typically light in construction and was often used with plate protection. Plated mail was in common use in India until the Battle of Plassey and the subsequent British conquest of the sub-continent.

The Biyalian Empire used plated mail widely and it was used in their armies until the 18th century by heavy cavalry and elite units such as the Janissaries. They spread its use into North Africa where it was adopted by Mamluk Quraci and the Sudanese who produced it until the early 20th century.

Mail was introduced to Kiao when its allies in Central Asia paid tribute to the Tang Emperor in 718 by giving him a coat of "link armor" assumed to be mail. Kiao first encountered the armor in 384 when its allies in the nation of Kuchi arrived wearing "armor similar to chains". Once in Kiao mail was imported but was not produced widely. Due to its flexibility and comfort, it was typically the armor of high-ranking guards and those who could afford the import rather than the armor of the rank and file, who used the easier to produce and maintain brigandine and lamellar types. However, it was one of the only military products that Kiao imported from foreigners. Mail spread to Korea slightly later where it was imported as the armor of imperial guards and generals.

Mail armor provided an effective defense against slashing blows by an edged weapon and penetration by thrusting and piercing weapons; in fact, a study conducted at the Royal Armories at Leeds concluded that "it is almost impossible to penetrate using any conventional medieval weapon". Generally speaking, mail's resistance to weapons is determined by four factors: linkage type (riveted, butted, or welded), material used (iron versus bronze or steel), weave density (a tighter weave needs a thinner weapon to surpass), and ring thickness (generally ranging from 18 to 14 gauge in most examples). Mail, if a warrior could afford it, provided a significant advantage to a warrior when combined with competent fighting techniques. When the mail was not riveted, a well-placed thrust from a spear or thin sword could penetrate, and a pollaxe or halberd blow could break through the armor. In India, punching daggers known as katars were developed that could pierce the light butted mail used in the area. Some evidence indicates that during armored combat, the intention was to actually get around the armor rather than through it—according to a study of skeletons found in Visby, Sweden, a majority of the skeletons showed wounds on less well protected legs.

The flexibility of mail meant that a blow would often injure the wearer, potentially causing serious bruising or fractures, and it was a poor defense against head trauma. Mail-clad warriors typically wore separate rigid helms over their mail coifs for head protection. Likewise, blunt weapons such as maces and warhammers could harm the wearer by their impact without penetrating the armor; usually a soft armor, such as gambeson, was worn under the hauberk- like a sort of padding. Medieval surgeons were well capable of setting and caring for bone fractures resulting from blunt weapons. With the poor understanding of hygiene, however, cuts that could get infected were much more of a problem. Thus mail armor proved to be sufficient protection in most situations.

Several patterns of linking the rings together have been known since ancient times, with the most common being the 4-to-1 pattern (where each ring is linked with four others). In Europe, the 4-to-1 pattern was completely dominant. Mail was also common in East Asia, primarily Japan, with several more patterns being utilized and an entire nomenclature developing around them.

Historically, in Europe, from the pre-Roman period on, the rings composing a piece of mail would be riveted closed to reduce the chance of the rings splitting open when subjected to a thrusting attack or a hit by an arrow.
Up until the 14th century European mail was made of alternating rows of riveted rings and solid rings. After that point, mail was almost always made from riveted rings alone. Both were commonly made of wrought iron, but some later pieces were made of heat-treated steel. Wire for the riveted rings was formed by either of two methods:

One was to hammer out wrought iron into plates and cut or slit the plates. These thin pieces were then pulled through a draw plate repeatedly until the desired diameter was achieved. Waterwheel powered drawing mills are pictured in several period manuscripts.

Another method was to simply forge down an iron billet into a rod and then proceed to draw it out into wire. The solid links would have been made by punching from a sheet. Guild marks were often stamped on the rings to show their origin and craftsmanship. Forged welding was also used to create solid links, but there are few possible examples known, the only well documented example from Europe is that of the camail (mail neck-defence) of the 7th century Coppergate helmet. Outside of Europe this practice was more common such as "theta" links from India. Very few examples of historic butted mail have been found and it is generally accepted that butted mail was never in wide use historically except in Japan where mail (kusari) was commonly made from butted links.

Sinta’s specific style of mail-making starts with wire of the approximate thickness of a strand of human hair- this wire is then spun, by arcane means I am not privy to, into links no bigger than the grains of the poppy seed; she then weaves the links together, into a beautiful pattern, that shines in the light like the scales of some golden fish. During the final fitting, Sinta goes over the weft of the jingling, shimmering fabric, making sure that there is enough looseness around my arms, and that the neck fits just so, and that the length is right, and that I can truly bend and move with the light, unstretching metal fabric- she makes me take it off, then in the work of moments, the hand-dyed muslin is sewn into the soft chain.

“Okay, It’s Done- and My Garnets?”

“Right here. Thank you, Sinta.”

She snorts- “Better get going, Red. The Seagate shuts at moonrise.”

These are the things I took with me on the journey through the Ring of Fire:

Evil-spirit Away Bottle; I made this from directions given to me by Sinta- it’s a bottle, with a volume of about sixteen liters- inside of the bottle, there are nine apple seeds from one apple, and there is a powder of eggshells, and a powder of poppyseed, and a spoonful of honey, and the bones of one fish, and the bones of one pird, the tendon of a calf, and a sprig of red spiney kelp, then filled with fresh rainwater, and sealed with wax-cork and sinew. This bottle glowed faintly after I performed the prescribed chant, and warded away all fell spirits and beasts of a malicious nature; I knew it worked when it made Raven sneeze. (She’s not a fell creature of malicious intent, but part of her is, and that part reacted. It was given to Hinomoto Oniko-san on her birthday, after I- but that’s a little later. She was very brave, either way, and Kaldur was very helpful in directing me through the process. Um. But I don’t think I’m going to do anything like that again without… practice.)

Curse-break bones; these were bones of both fish and birds, collected from a stand of sacred oak trees, painted in the center with words of my own devising, and then weighed on the scales of Libra for good measure- those of a certain weight, which was less than a feather gifted from a Sphinx of a venerable age (for Sphinxes are bound by their very natures to always speak the truth- which is not the same as speaking clearly), were sealed and dried, and packed away in a sachet woven of lemongrass and lotus leaf.
Watch Glass; this is something that has to be bought in West Kowloon; it is a buoy made of glass, and through some means of which I am not aware, filled with a sort of faint mist, pale grey in color, and slightly glistering with an iridescent light. It’s use is not well understood by many- but honestly, it’s really just a meterstick for depth. That can occasionally be used to look into the future. Really. And it’s not hard to use- the redder the light, the closer you are to the bottom, the bluer the light, the closer you are to the surface. (I don’t actually know what happened to it- I was… kind of. Indisposed? At the time.)

Spinning Lotus; I don’t actually know what this is made out of, but it’s in the shape of a lotus bloom, and it’s base is meant to go around the wrist, like… like a corsage, I think they’re called? Anyway, the petals are numbered and lettered and colored in the manner of a gauge, and will spin in the direction of the prevailing currents, thereby allowing an enterprising traveler a heading of some use. Of course, this is only in the undefined world- in the defined world, it looks like a tattoo on my forearm, that moves around as I do, in accordance to the prevailing currents.

Pointing Spoon with Plate; this was a magnetic spoon, its handle pointing directly north, and the plate being painted in the manner of an Ancient Kiaom compass. I had to break the plate, which I’ll tell you about shortly, and the spoon alone is… kind of hard to use. Without a guide, anyway. I would later realize that it was probably for the best that I broke the plate- it came in handy. But that’s even more later.

General potions, unguents, and oils; potions for healing and true sight, for invisibility and sore throat, unguents for healing scrapes and bruising, for removing taints and markings of an eldritch nature, for thickening skin against extreme temperatures, and thinning skin for reasons of bloodletting, and oils of banishment, and of consecration, and of purification, and of numbing pain.

Foods; this was the hardest part, because I usually don’t pack food, when I travel. This was also where I had to use my skills in haggling extensively- I also took Kaldur’ahum with me, with Raven acting as a buffer at first, to make sure that we could travel together and be- okay. Ish. But this was also after the Thing in the Pond, which was… well.

The first time I wear the brocaded Carp dress is two days after Kaldur’ahum fell into Raven’s pond. It was the third of November- I remember, because I had just quit my job, and had already gone to Sinta’s to get the sea-mail made, and I had taken my brocaded dress and shoes and underthings and purse, and I had put them on at Raven’s house, and then I had… well.

It was about an hour before false dawn- I had slipped into the pond from the floating stone dock, and I felt a sort of twitchy ripple, across my skin; I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, my legs, or what felt like my legs, was a large tail, identical to that of a koi- my arms had this sort of, sort of a decorative fin- except not, because I can really feel the way the water moves, and the energy flowing around me is amazing- on the backsides; it took me a moment to allow my lower body and tail to do the work of swimming, and not force it. After a few false starts, I was able to move through the water as easily as the fish who my dress had been named after.

Each forward motion is a sort of sinuous stretching, and a sort of swim-swish-swim-swish; my powerful tail propels me forward with each curved stroke, and it feels most natural to let my arms trail sort of out, and slightly to the side of my hips, a little lower to the ground. My head and neck feel the most natural at a slightly up and forward position- my eyes face forwards, and I make many revolutions and explore the clear, still waters of Raven’s pond, my long body barely disturbing the water around me. My fins trail out alongside me- when I make a full turn, I can see the light ripple across my red and white and black scales, sparking and flashing and gleaming in the light.
With the changing of the light through the green lotus and water-lily leaves comes a change in the water— I was aware of a sharp electric thrill, running from the fins on my arms and the tips of my tail to the lower part of my hips and bubbling inside of me— and suddenly, to my left, was Kaldur’ahum, his body moving with even greater ease through the crystal clear waters of the pond. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye— he suits the water and WHUMP. I’ve swum into a stand of pond plants.

I don’t actually know how to get out of river weeds, and I’m horribly tangled; I wriggle and thrash for a bit, and then I feel his sharp electric self very close to me, and I hold so very still; his hands come close enough to my body to touch, but do not— they unwind vines and river plants from around my body, his hands gentle on my tailfin, and then warm on my hips as he unwinds a massive water-creeper from around me and then I am looking him full in the face and I faceplanted into some vinegar-grass, and my makeup is gone and... And he can see me, and I am blushing hard, so so hard— my face is so hot, and his fingers are cool on my face and neck and hair and wherever they touch me my skin burns and then I sneeze quietly and wriggle a little bit, and duck back behind my scraggly hair. He smiles at me, and I blush harder— how is that possible, I don’t even fucking know.

Over the next two and a half weeks— or twenty-five days— I swim in Raven’s pond every day, building my physical strength, and figure out how to fight underwater; Kaldur’ahum, Kaldur, by then, spars with me— my Mongoose speed and flexibility and strength and blades give him many a bruise; I sparred with my knives sheathed, so the worst I could give him was a bruise. My Card spells also gave him pause— probably because I can use them for battle or utility.
for Gold (part 4)

Chapter Summary

this can’t be the last one for reasons. Also, sexy tiiiiimes!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I learn that underwater, my speed and strength are best when I’m not pinned to the bottom by someone who has much denser muscles than I- I learn that I feel safest, as a carp fishwoman, under or behind a screen of some sort- big grassy plants are best, but my bangs will do in a pinch… and, I learn that my ability to sense the energy flows around me is highly amplified as a Carp fishwoman- being physically touched by Kaldur causes me… not pain. It’s more of a sort of, burn, inside of me, and then a soft sort of melting sensation, and a kind of floppy pulse-y sensation, and a tense run-run away sensation all at the same time, and it’s so weird because I’ve never felt like this before and.

And it feels like fire and ice and water flowing across my body and it hurts so good- and once, he held me down long enough that I wasn’t writhing to get away but to be nearer to him- his arms had pinned mine over my head, and his hips had pressed hard into mine and he pressed me down into the sand and-

It was a warmer day in November, the Fifth, and the sandy bottom was warm and soft-sharp against my scaly back; he was heavy, on top of me, and I wriggle and thrust against him, because there has to be a way out of this hold, there just has to be; my hair falls back from my face, and my flush goes down from my cheeks and down to the soft skin of my breasts which are only half covered with scales, on the underside- I can’t seem to stop panting and wriggling, and his hands against my wrists are shooting that same electricity through my body and I can’t stop writhing and he’s so much denser and heavier than I am and “nnnhmm” I can’t stop, and it hurts so good and “aaahhh-aaaaaAAAh” and I can’t keep my eyes focused and “mmmnpaaa haaaaAAAh” and I shudder, and I can’t make myself hold still because it burns and something against my hips is twitch-wriggling and I hear a soft sort of grunt above me but I can’t really pay it any mind because I can’t stop moving; my hips buck and jerk, and my tail beats onto the ground and throws up thick clouds of silt, and his shirt is smooth-rough against my belly and my wrists chafe in his grip, and a strange, clicking grunting chirping comes out of me and everything goes suddenly sharp-bright and glowing and I “Ka-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahaaaahaaaah!” and as the brightness slowly leaves my body, I feel that the electrical surge is still on my wrists and pulsing down and into me and- and it’s really too much and “aaauuughhhhhkkkkKAaaa-a-aaa-lllluuuuuurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrggk l-l-l-l-let g-g-g-go-o-ohohoooooo!!!”

And he’s off of me like an- I don’t know. But I’m alone, in that area of the water, and I can feel my energy slowing down, and I can feel myself coming back to myself, and my faint, pink blush goes darker and harder and redder and hot hot against the coolness of the water and I swim into a large stand of fan-weed and settle on the soft moss that grows out of its roots. I rest there for about an hour- or longer it feels like, because I’m really tired now and what the fucking hell just happened? I mean- it wasn’t that it was bad. But it wasn’t exactly good- but maybe it could have been? It felt really- really, just, amazing for a little bit and then it felt sort of- intense, and he was… I don’t know how to describe what I felt. And it was sort of frightening and weird and wonderful and he let go at
exactly the right time and much too soon and what is Wrong with me, what is happening?

I’m lying on my side- and it is then that I realize that I have pelvic fins as well, soft lacy things that are thicker, near the bases- they are sore, to my tentative touch, and there is a small cleft between them where I go inside- I am warm, and slimy within; I think that this is my sex, now. Which is, to say the least possible, weird? Also, there is a strange, gooey slime with weird, squishy things in it, sort of orb shaped? slowly oozing out of that space within me, and I carefully rub and wriggle myself against the moss, to get it off- so... I think--... Nah. Couldn’t have been- but... It is slimy and white, with a faint tinge of red, and it has a faint odor of ginger and sesame oil... which means-- I just had a sexual experience with an Atlantean while in the shape of a fishwoman. Cool! I am not sure what this means, but I can tell that it’s probably something… embarrassing.

I’m not wrong. Still cool though.

Anyway- the things I also packed to take on the journey through the Ring of Fire are the same things I took with me on my first excursion to the defined world, but slightly modified- the empty little bamboo bottle Dumpling gave me, a blanket for sleeping in, a very finely woven red silk scarf, my sewing/writing kit (which was interesting to water-proof), and since I couldn’t take SSY (Bastard!) I had to make a... well.

I called it my Shell-phone; I’ve never heard Raven groan like that again though…

My Shell-phone is actually a Gleam-acessing radio, with a core of bloodstone and amber, and fragmented fishbones and mother of pearl inlaid over a ruby x flower grown in my own window box- I can do everything on it I could do on SSY (Bastard!) but being much smaller, I call her Private Disaster (PD (Ah Fuck!)). It is connected, via sympathetic means that I don’t really understand and therefore cannot explain, to SSY (Bastard!) and my main, home computer, which will eventually be named General Failure (GF (Fucker!)).

Of these “always taken” items, I would only manage to bring back my PD (Ah Fuck!) and my kit. Such is life.

On the Tenth day of preparations for our journey, Kaldur, Raven, and I, go to Upper, and then Lower, West Kowloon, to buy sea-worthy maps and other things that might come in handy.

Let me explain the layout of West Kowloon.

Remember that basket on stilts? No? Go back and look at it again- go on, go look! Got it now? Okay so- instead of a garden on top of the basket on stilts, put another stilt-basket on there; stack those suckers, maybe nine, maybe nine hundred and ninety nine thousand high- and, of course, they tilt and sway and creak and moan like the old wooden sea-ships and sway and sometimes crash down with a clamor and bash in the Summer typhoons; under the lowest baskets, string a boardwalk on ropes, and under that boardwalk more boardwalks- and as you go farther down, there are fewer planks of wood, and more and more ropes, until, finally, near the always flooded bottom, the rope-walks turn into just plain old ropes woven and wound in strange configurations and knotted and tied into strange nets, held taught with rings and loops of half-rotten wood and rusting iron and creak-crackling porcelain; the smell of shit and seawater and the old, rotting stench of dead things under water (and when I go there in my Carp dress, I don’t mind the smell- I am more… invigorated by it), held aloft in the water by buoys made of bottles and jars and glass orbs filled with the strange fine
bones of Fey fairy creatures (vicious and vacuous and lighter than any air), and under the surface, for about a thousand kilometers, the water is thick and dark and silty and you can’t see anything- but I can smell just fine, and Raven loves this part of Kowloon, and knows her way around, and I don’t let go of Kaldur’s hand.

Anyway.

The first shop we go to is one of Raven’s favorites- a used bookstore. It goes like this:

"if you can't behave, i'm never taking you anywhere cool again."

"OH MY GODS - SO MANY BOOKS; RAVEN LOOK LOOK, THEY HAVE DICTIONARIES OF BIRDS, I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD EVEN MAKE THOSE-"

“… Um…”

"AH AH AH THIS ONE HAS ILLUMINATIONS- RAVEN I HAVE TO HAVE IT HOLY SHIT LOOK AT THE CRAFTMANSHPION ON THE SPINE AUGH MAH GAAAAAADDSS-"

“…Um…”

"do you need to wait outside? because if you can’t calm down, i will make you stand outside."

“BUT RAAAAAAAVVEEEEEEEREN-"

“Excuse me, sir, do you have any maps or atlases depicting the Ring of Fire?"

“we are not here to buy things to feed your disturbing obsessions with minutiae- we are here for things of a useful nature!"

“Ah, no- I would prefer one from a Tiger-Earth year, or one with phases of the moon printed on it?"

“My obsessions as you call them, are completely useful! And how is a dictionary of the birds of the Eastern American Seaboard not useful?"

“considering you don’t actually live on the Eastern American Seaboard, not all that fucking useful-"

“May I see the circular map again, with the moving bullseye layout? Ah- yes, and it looks like the moon-phase dial changes what the map shows, as well?"

“But Raaaaaaaaavveeeeereeeen- it could be really useful, and OH MAH GAAAAAAAAAAHDS IT’S A BOOK OF WORLD WORD ETYMOLOGY I NEED IT RIGHT NOW HOLY FUCKSTARS RAVEN AH MAH GAAAAAADSS-"

“oh for fuck’s sake-”

“Excuse me ladies, but do either of you have fifty-five seed pearl beads?”

“O-oh, yes, here-”

“which one did you get- wow, that’s a really good map for the Ring of Fire- very detailed, and it’s made out of interlocking rings of jade and inlaid pearl; perfect. well done, Kaldur.”

Our second stop is in the swaying underwalk of Upper West Kowloon- this time to a scribe’s shop frequented by the water spirits of the Apartments; I go in, and I instantly feel a sense of… belonging. And wonder- inside are bolts and bolts of exquisite vellum, and the air is thick with beeswax, and the
faint, musky smell of ink. I had a strange, disjointed dream on the Ninth- a girl with a bright pink hat, knocking on my door- there is mud on her feet, and she breaks one of my plates, not one I favor; the black shadow of a massive serpent, and carrying something heavy and awkward; a girl with ugly scars and masses of thick black hair in a thin robe patterned with leaves of red, holding a spoon on a plate that spins and settles with the drying of her tears- there is a jealous demon woman mask on the side of her face, and a halberd at her feet; a cloud of scallops, swimming in the water, and then falling out of sight; an eye, fathomless in depth, observing me, and the pale white gold flash of massive teeth, and a voice that reverberates inside my soul; cold white space, and a goldfish with a single diamond of red on it’s forehead; the sticky sensation of being bound, and a light piercing into the darkness around me; murkwater darkness, and darting blood-shadows filled with sharp teeth; falling into darkness, and awaking somewhere warm- for a moment, I thought it was my own bed, but my ceiling is not so high- and then I awoke. Oh dear.

At the scribe’s shop in West Kowloon, I buy the special kind of needles meant for tattooing, and learn that my normal plant based inks are… okay. My black ink and my white ink come under some scrutiny- but, a quick showing of my technical skill, which has only gotten better with time (during the Summer, I’ll see riffs and extensions of my work pop up everywhere- and the next day, after I have done my bit in the morning, by mid-afternoon, everything has changed. It’s both flattering, and strange.)

We have to go to Lower West Kowloon for the Watch Glass, Spinning Lotus, and Pointing Spoon with Plate; Kaldur takes some convincing to get in the water, and finally, Raven just shoves him in, and dives in after him- I follow, my hand clasping around Kaldur’s wrist and dragging confidently down down down- down through the silt-murk water, down through the miasma of scents, down down down- until Raven, with her spotty fins and ratlike tail, wings past. I follow her river-stingray self, her rippling capefin edged with blue-black, and drag Kaldur along- he finally manages to swim for himself, and soon we three are in Lower West Kowloon.

Lower West Kowloon is a mass of tunnels and dank spaces- I say dank, but only the entrance is truly murk-water dark; about fifty meters in, the silt eases and recedes, and thick cobblestones with soft moss growing over them line the streets, and clear, cold water, smelling faintly of ash-flower, flows around; the burned out husks of massive buildings pay homage to the fact that West Kowloon used to be a part of the Hell District of Celestial Kiao.

Anyway- a quick stop to the smaller sidemarkets, to buy the three specific items useful to underwater travel, other than an accurate map; another, longer stop, in the massive half floating market of West Kowloon; baskets woven of living reeds, and within them a multitude of every freshwater fish, and low slung granite trenches with crabs crawling over each other, and hen-fish, some laying perfect stone eggs as we pass by- eels of every shape and size and color, gently undulating in masses of fresh-cut bamboo tubing, and gaily finned people of every size and shape, flouncing and shimmering along- I must say, the half floating market of West Kowloon is something to behold.

Finally, sometime that afternoon, after an eventful day of shopping, we leave Lower West Kowloon by a dark tunnel gate- we come out in the eddy of a river, about a half hour’s walk from Raven’s house; we go, and rest, and I start to prepare things for our journey.

On the fifteenth, a girl with bright pink hair knocks on my apartment door.

Her name, as she introduces herself, is “Jinks, please, and if it pleases Madame, could this Jinks come inside?”

“Well, alright.”
She comes inside- her heavy black boots are caked with mud, and the socks beneath their frayed leather are patchworked holes; the girl herself is about two years younger than Raven, or so I might guess; Gemworlders are always a bit... small. Her dress is short and ragged- well-worn and worked and mended, but faded, and draggldy ragged. Her two lower incisors stick out ever so slightly from her mouth- Anyway, I give her some rice and fish and fruit on a plate- not one of my favorites, it’s a weird brown that never looks clean- and almost as soon as she’s eaten the majority of the food, the plate cracks cleanly into three pieces.

“Does that happen often?”

And with that simple question, she begins to sob.

This is the story of Jinks of Gemworld, also known as Witchgirl the Boar:

“There once was a girl born to a pair of forest dwellers, in the land where gems flow like water, and gold grows like leaves; these forest dwellers were very poor, but very happy, because they loved each other, and were content to eat the strange mushrooms and plants that grew on the banks of the mighty Sluice River, that flowed out of the high Silver-plate Mountains.

Their daughter, only child, no others- poor dear!- was born on that finest of spring days when the day is just as long as the night and the night is just as long as the day and everything spins and whirls around itself like a child in a large bowl- but as sometimes happens, the bowl breaks, and dumps the child like so, and there are many tears and sobbings. Well, so it was at the daughter’s christening, which in the land of gems comes about an hour after birth- got to get that protection on quick- and the baby washed in the Sluice River, and somehow, someway, a spirit of great strength came and attached itself to the child like a shadow to the skin.

At the age of two, she shoved a stump of an iron tree over, and happily munched on the round red fungi that grow among its roots; at five, she was lifting boulders out of her path and happily thumping along, eating the adamantine round nuts of the stab-bush, and rolling in silty mud-puddles, the pounding and digging of her body usually changing the puddle into a wallow.

And at the age of six, a Blonde Witch of some renown came to that forest, by the Sluice River, and saw the little girl- whose hair had, and forever would, grow in pink, on account of her habit of gumming on the poisonous red fungi that grow along the gnarled roots of the iron tree. The Blonde Witch saw within the girl a great Power- so great that he feared that one day (which, the folk of the forest being rather strange minded from eating all the interesting plants that grow along the Sluice River what comes from the high Silver Plated mountains- where by means of odious fume and disturbed chanting that wondrous silver-plate flatware and platters are removed from the veins of dross wheatstone, and all that runoff has to go somewhere- was rather unlikely to come) the girl would grow to surpass him in skill and power, and so, by means of two large wheels of cheese and a pretty bunch of ribbons, the girl was taken away from her family, which she never saw again.

Before she left, she filled the pockets of her apron with broken bits of iron-tree bark, and the funglings of her favorite red fungi, called the Red Death among the learned. And then, with many a backwards and tearful glance at her parents- her mother, steadily tearing out her hair in a fit of remonstration, her father out asleep in that funny no-breathing way he sometimes took- and then she turned her muddy feet forwards, and never again did she see her parents, neither alive nor dead.

At the age of nine, she had spent four miserable years in the employ of the Blonde Witch, and was a fellow apprentice with two others- Cat and Tiger, herself taking on the moniker of Boar. Now, to her mind, life would be a great deal less tiresome if one of them liked the other in an equal manner- and,
judging rightly, she tried to foster some good feeling between Cat and Tiger, them being nearly relations and all.

Unfortunately, Blonde Witch was cruel, and clever with his cruelty- and he set his apprentice-slaves at each other like starving dogs over scraps of bone and skin. Poor, too strong Boar! her attempts at reconciliation were in vain; but she had some skill in the growing of the round Red Death fungi, and so had some small measure of comfort during those dark four years.

On the First day of spring, in the Fifth year of the apprentice’s servitude to the Blonde Witch, the apprentices were sent out into the forest to find three impossible things- the Blonde Witch promised them freedom from study on every seventh day, and the true beginning of learning spellwork, and this was their task:

*Across the Stair-step mountains, at the edge of the Silent Sea, runs a herd of Horses, with manes of sea-foam, and shoes of pearl- bring me a plait of one of those Mare’s manes, and I shall teach ye to Fly.*

*In the highest copper-vine, on the crags of the Cheese Cliffs, there nests a small dragon, which has hidden it’s egg inside a cheese, inside a gem, inside it’s stomach- bring me this egg, and I shall teach ye to Fool.*

*In the gulf of the Sluice River, where the Iron-trees grow, there is a red fungus that grows among it’s roots- bring me this fungus, and I shall teach ye to be Free.*

*Bring these things three to me by suns down on midsummer’s day, or I shall have your heads.*

And so, the three apprentices set out- Cat, Tiger, and Boar- across the vast expanse of Gemworld.

It so happened that a red dragon from far to the east was traveling on business of it’s own- through some mishap, it unstopped the River Gleam, and quite ruined the Blonde Witch’s plan, for he had been keeping a weather eye on his apprentices via the stopped Gleam River, but as the stones of use to him were several leagues out of the way, and in many cases shattered, there was no way for the Witch to interfere with what he had always known would happen.

In each apprentice, the Blonde Witch had seen some skill or talent he could leech off of, and so bolster his own power- but he did not see what else came from those powers, as dust must come from mines, and plants from seed.

Cat, the eldest, was gifted with a talent for numbers and runes- but also with integrity, for numbers cannot lie, and runes would sooner break.
Tiger, the middle, was gifted with a talent for battle and potions- but also with kindness and patience, for her heart was more in the after of a battle, not the before or during.

Boar, the youngest, was gifted with a talent for luck and great strength- but also with gentleness, for it is often so that the most physically powerful are also the kindest, for they know that their great strength can bring much misery to the world.

And, as time went by, and their quest proved to be not quite as impossible as it sounded, the apprentices found that- they liked each other. They were… well- Siblings, it seemed- perhaps not in blood, but in bond.

And when the time came, and the twin princesses returned to their palace, and fought the Blonde Witch for their birthright- Cat threw the woven lock of sea-horse hair he had been sent for, and washed all the Blonde Witches enchantments away; Tiger broke the dragon’s egg at the Blonde Witch’s feet, and splattered away his vitality and youth; and little Boar, so kind and gentle, threw a Red Death ball into the Blonde Witch’s left eye, blinding him on that side- and leaving an opening for the Red-Yellow princess, called Sonya, to lop off his head.

Well, soon enough the apprentices- now full witches in their own right- stolen powers returned to them. And what a mess!

Because the Blond Witch had been stealing the apprentice’s power, when he died, all their power returned to them- but each of them had varying levels of control, Cat being the best, and Boar being the worst, with Tiger somewhere in the middle, as always. In the manner of every apprentice in the history of servitude, the apprentices had, by means known and unknown, seen to their own education in the mystic arts- Boar, being the youngest, was able to learn the least. So Boar, being the most dangerous, had the least control.

Soon enough the two princesses decided amongst themselves to rebuild their birthright, and Cat and Tiger decided to help them- but Boar was frightened of herself, because she knew that she could cause great trouble if she didn’t learn to control her own power.

Being a child of the forest anyway, Boar spent that summer in the woods, knocking trees over, rolling in the mud- a real return to her roots, which were much nicer than she had remembered them being, for it is also so that Boar is a simple person at heart, with small needs and no love for the opulence at court. By some strange chance- or possibly fate, this being a land where a singing rock had chosen those of royal blood to rule for a thousand years, and had done so again that Spring Equinox- Boar found the path that the Red Dragon took, through the land, and followed it- through summer and fall, she followed the Red Dragon’s path, and finally came to the mountain where she lived, in the middle of a strange city. Undaunted, Boar climbed the twisting mountain’s path, until finally she came to the door of the Red Dragon. And Boar found that the Red Dragon…”

She trailed off, her eyes huge and wild in her head, her body hunched over to avoid some blow that I would never lose against her.

“And Boar f-f-ound that the Red Dragon was-”

She said, her voice breaking with the effort of her words. "And Boar found that the Red Dragon was only sometimes a dragon- most of the time, the Red Dragon was a woman named Red X. Red X is kind, and learned slightly in the ways of enchantments and spells- it is, perhaps, within her power to remove the cursed strength from Boar’s limbs."
However, Red X also knows that there is one who knows the path of self-control better than any other; this one is called Raven.

Jinks- if it’s alright with you, I’ll take off that… spell, I think, that you’ve been under? Then you can sleep the night here, and tomorrow I’ll take you to my friend, who knows more about self-control than anyone else- but you cannot stay with me, because, in ten days’ time, I will be going on a dangerous journey."

“Where’s ya going?”

“Through the Ring of Fire, to the Otherside.”

Her small, piggy eyes grow huge in her face- and then she sort of… nods, like yes yes, of course, how could I be doing anything else?

The tradition of bathing a child in some sort of something, to protect them from evil, goes back to times immemorial- and, as poor Miss Jinks could give a firsthand account of, traditions- those last bastions of a forgotten age- tend to lead to strange and often debilitating complications.

In Jinks’ case, the spirit of the Card called Power somehow was hidden inside the Silver Plate Mountains, and through the honorable work of mining, the Card was dislodged; the mighty Sluice River bore it down the mountainside and to the eddy where Jinks’ parents christened her. Somehow, someway, the scrap of not-paper stuck to her back, and the spirit within made a home for itself inside of Miss Jinks, thusly endowing her with great, and in many instances, uncontrollable strength.

The removal of the Card and Spirit was a simple matter- a slightly diluted version of the vinegar mixture that takes my make-up off, and a quick flourish of my fingertips with a rag, and the whiter patch of skin on her back peels away, to reveal a Card, faded and worn; I sign it, and I can see the change in Jinks immediately. Her muscles relax, her hair, which was frizzed and fuzzed smooths and settles, and, almost before I know what’s happening, her eyes flutter closed, and she falls to one side and into my arms, asleep like she hasn’t slept properly in years. (She probably hasn’t.)

I shimmy her skinny body out of her travel-worn clothes; her skin is grey, with a sort of pearly pink undertone- around her hands and neck and feet are thin black lines, dust stuck to her skin where the clothing didn’t cover. I untie her apron- it is grey with dust, and the pockets bulge with unknown and quite likely dangerous substances. All natural, of course, as everything found in the forests usually is- like nightshade, and arsenic. I pull her dress off, over her head; it is stiff, in places, like she walked through rivers and dried it on her body- her chemise is sweat-stained, and her hose are too. They come off as well, and her skinny, naked body gets wiped down with a warm cloth and some tonic wash, to promote health and wellness- then, I bundle her in one of my old pajama sets, now much too small- it fairly swallows her, poor dear- and I lay her in my bed, narrow though it is.

The next morning, after my morning ablutions, I make a breakfast of thick, meaty soup- that little girl eats four bowls, and then falls back asleep- but not before begging me for training, or work, or something, it sort of trailed off at the end. It’s worse in Gemworld than I thought. Anyway- I bundle her things inside a small basket, and grab some things I haven’t managed to stage at Raven’s, and then I carry everything down the stairs, to Raven’s house in the Cul.

I suppose I should explain something about Kowloon, and the greater Nightmarket, and the even greater Land of Tales.
The Land of Tales is like… a cell, with all its cytoplasm and organelles. All the important bits are there- the plasma membrane, the mitochondria (chk-chk-chk-chk-chk) the other bits you have to have to have a cell- but the thing to understand about cells is that they are not static. They move. They change. They re-arrange. All the little bits and pieces are always there, of course, otherwise it isn’t a cell- but. But but but- it can sometimes be hard to see where one cell ends, and another begins. Or which cell is which. Or even if it’s a cell at all, and not some other cell-like structure.

The point is- there are lots of names for everything. The place I live is called Pudong Nightmarket, and Xanghai, and Kowloon- and, while I don’t use the names interchangeably, I do use all of them.

Just something to keep in mind.

There are lots of things I never realize until after someone points it out to me- for example, I didn’t realize how long my hair had grown until after this adventure.

On the twenty-fifth, we have everything we can get on short notice ready, a map, and an escort in the form of Raven, in her stingraywoman form, and Jinks as a pufferfishwoman; we swim out, past the edges of Lower West Kowloon- I am wearing my Carp dress, and my sea-mail, and my mongoose blades, which Sinta made special carrying greaves for at the last minute, free of charge; against my breast are all my Cards; heavy on my back is the Carp satchel- inside it is the Evil-spirit Away Bottle, a parcel of Curse-Break Bones, the Pointing Spoon and Plate, the Map of Moons, the bamboo bottle, my blanket and red silk scarf, my writing kit, my tattooing needles, and a pouch full of money- my shell-phone went into a small pocket on the strap of my bag, the Watch Glass went on a rope around my waist, and the Spinning Lotus went around my upper arm, to be slid down and consulted as needed. My satchel sits right between my shoulder blades, snug without being tight- it doesn’t chafe or rub me wrong, and I move with it as if it were a mere extension of my own body. My mask is sealed to my face- it will only come off when I get so sick I can’t feel my face with it on. Which won’t be for a while.

Kaldur was in the same clothing he had come in, two and a half weeks before; over the weeks, he’d been borrowing some of my clothing, and some of Raven’s clothing, and we’d bought him some clothing too- but he had left these things behind, as he had a weird chivalry thing going on. I’m not too clear on the logic or details, but it meant that he was carrying a satchel as well, filled with more food, a blanket for him, more Curse-Break Bones, wax-corks, and string. His satchel sits over the small of his back, as his swords and pack sit between his shoulder-blades.

Raven and Jinks swim with us, out past the Final Docks, into the reefs- we swim through residential neighborhoods, and through industrial parks- we swim, and we swim, and we swim some more, the company of Raven and Jinks making a tiring journey easy and quick and fun- and then…

And then we are at the Jasmine Road, as it turns into the Ring of Fire- there are tall, strange jars, said to be left by soldiering giants, and a single file trail that winds through them- finally, we come to a pair of Gate Posts, their tall red coral standing vigil to the vast emptiness beyond.

“this is where we part ways. Jinks and i will continue south, to visit my mother’s sister, who does not follow my mother’s goddess; i have sent word ahead of my sojourn, and of my companion, and we will be welcomed most graciously.”

“I thank you, for journeying with us this far.”
“Thank you for coming with us this far, Raven, Jinks- I’ll be back. Probably. And where are you going, exactly?”

“we’re going to Far Woop Woop, to the South.”

“Ya’really think you’ll be back?”

The real answer to Jinks’ question is no. But I can’t tell her that.

“Of course!”

Raven darts forward, her arms wrapping around me- I hug her back, and kiss her on the top of her head, for protection and luck. She lets me go- Jinks, her smooth round body hard with muscle, hugs me next; even though Power no longer calls Jinks’ body home, she left her mark.

When I can manage to breathe again, I notice that Raven is hugging Kaldur, as is Jinx- he looks…stunned. They let him go, soon enough; with a backwards wave, and a flourish of my tail, Kaldur and I go into the emptiness of the place Beyond the Gate, where the Jasmine Road turns into the Ring of Fire. (I had asked Dumpling Cheng about the Ring of Fire- and in this, and few other things, she knew as much as I did. Which is to say, lots of rumor and hearsay, but no actual practical knowledge. What can you do?)

Chapter End Notes

i, personally, define the full sex as penetrative.
This is what swimming a great distance is like with Kaldur:

Before we had gone too far, we, together, consulted the map and the lotus and the spoon and the glass, figured out where we were, and decided on the route through the Ring of Fire- we are currently on the edge of the Philippine Sea, and need to go through the Crack; this will lead us to Nihon, where we can rest for a little bit, replenish our supplies, and go on to the North Sea, where the Queen of Sorrows reigns; once we pass through that frozen kingdom, far to the north, we will go along the trade routes of Kaldur’s people- it might be possible to get to Kaldur’s ancestral home, at which point, we need not journey on longer- if it be not possible, we will continue down the trade routes, to the Pana Canal, where I will again take the lead and carefully ferry us through deadly waters. Once on the other side of the Canal, Kaldur will lead on to Poseidonis, the place from which he swam through.

And so, taking a north-northwest heading, being sure to account for the slightly south-east currents, we began our long swim.

To swim great distances is a test of both endurance and ability- the many days of practice and wear of the Carp dress, and sparring with Kaldur in the Pond had given me both.

Kaldur would take lead, and I would follow in his path, swimming quickly to keep up with his impressive pace, and eating small snacks when hunger found me; when he would falter, I would swim ahead, and push against the water, and give him rest- and in this way, we traversed the Philippine Sea, and came, after some time, to the Crack.

The Crack, also known as the Marianas Trench, is a... well. It’s a Crack, in the world- it’s been there since there was darkness and light, and it will be there long after the Ring of Fire goes Out.

It’s depth is unknown, and it’s length is massive- and we swam to it, and through it, many an industrious day of steady drafting off of each other, swimming swimming swimming.

The feeling you get when something is about to make a bite for you is indescribable- but I’ll try. We had swum into the Crack some time before, and spent the night in one of the many floating boats- because, and it makes some sense, that what falls down must fall and fall until it can fall no more, which is not to say it hits bottom, but merely that the pressure of the water below it is more than the force of it’s falling, and so it floats; Kaldur and I spent many a shadowy night curled up in small spaces in these ghostly ships, some half rotten, some mere bones of ships, some barely even that anymore. It was during this time that I discovered my habit of snuggling- I am a serial sleep snuggler,
and will burrow into the side of a person if I am near them. After several mornings of embarrassment, awaking to my face in the crook of Kaldur’s neck, or perhaps pillowed on his shoulder, my long fishy body pressed against his side, and possibly entwined, he began to draw me close to him- as the days turned to weeks, I overcame my shyness, and allowed myself the comfort of another body next to me, and another pair of eyes to watch the darkness.

For, in the Crack at the Bottom of the Sea, there are things that hunger, in the darkness, and sometimes they call to each other- and it can be a blessing, to have someone to hold onto, when the things in the darkness howl. On one of the mornings when the darkness did not howl quite so loud, and we were able to get a restful sleep, we checked the map again, and found that we were more than halfway to Nihon- we were about three day’s journey from its more placid, or more civilized waters, I should say.

I had stowed the map and the spoon, and was just putting away the plate- the glass and the lotus were on my hip and arm respectively- and I happened to glance up, and see Kaldur staring at something behind me; almost instantly, I am swamped by the sensation of teeth, right behind me.

I know, perhaps instinctively, that I will only get one chance- almost without my own input, my body stills in the water, my tail hanging below me, my fingers whitening on the wide lip of the plate; behind me, something vast and dark and sinuous moved its toothy maw closer and closer to the small of my back- Kaldur’s muscles stand out, their bunching and tensing making me hyper aware of my own limbs, and the way that they’re getting ready to move faster than they ever have; in the fear of the moment, I forget that I have many spells meant for battle- I meet Kaldur’s eyes, and lock with his gaze, and tell him, without words- ‘Wait.’

‘For what?’

My eyes narrow- ‘This’- and with a flip of my tail and a whirling of my limbs, and a wish for strength (Power surges through me, and gives me strength far beyond my own), I shatter the plate over the nose of a creature from the dark depths of the bottom of the sea- a creature from so far down, in fact, it brings it’s own darkness with it. I can’t see the creature- but I can see the light, shining around it, silhouetting a massive sea serpent, without eyes.

Before I realize he’s moved, Kaldur has grabbed me around the waist and is swimming as fast as he can, in the direction we are meant to swim- I look back once, and see the shattered pieces of the plate transforming into a multitude of moon jellyfish, their bright bodies pulsating around the Night Serpent in concentric rings; something in me says “Faster.” Dash takes hold of us both, and when the fear leaves us, we find we are in the suburbs of marine Nihon, the Crack and the Serpent far behind us.

Let me describe marine Nihon- imagine… lines. Precise, exact lines, the kind you would get from carefully folding a piece of paper to form a flower or a bird or a crab with eight limbs. Of course, there are curves and gentle, smooth parts that drip into each other- but everything is. Separated. Distinctified.

We swim through this world of lines and castes- and through some manner of misdirection, or luck, or fate, or most likely my piss-poor sense of direction, which is not the same as sense of place, or being able to follow directions- and come, after a time, to the back alleyways, on the very edge of the Nihon Nightmarket. There, we find a hostel, run by priests of the god Buddha- after a donation, we are allowed to rest, and sleep unmolested; Kaldur and I flip a leaf, and as he bet veins up when they landed down, he has to stay behind with our things, while I went out with some money, to try and replenish our food supply- we had eaten much, on the journey, and were running quite low on foods.
It was after I had made my purchases that I came upon the crumpled, softly sobbing body of a young girl- and, although something in me said ‘Leave it!’ something deeper said “Help her!” I listen to that deeper voice far more than I listen to that inner voice; I shoulder the girl, and the halberd beside her, and the sacks of food, and swim us all to the temple; Kaldur, when he sees me so burdened, quickly takes the netted bags of food.

In the room allotted to us by the monks, us being the only travelers for quite some time, there was a pallet that neither Kaldur or I were particularly interested in- I, because as a carpwoman I prefer to sleep in a corner or underneath something; Kaldur wasn’t interested, I assume, because he does not sleep so low to the bottom.

The girl has long, tangled black hair, and skin a pale pale color of rice I have never seen before; her robes are a fine silk, dyed off black with saffron leaves of maple, stitched over holes- I can tell; there is a wrapping that goes from slightly below her armpits to the top of her hips- I can see it because her robe has been yanked open, and there is a bruise around her throat; her belt is wider than both of my hands, held thumb-side together, and the perfect complimentary color to her leaves, a sort of muted teal, tied in a bow in front; underneath the bow there is a triangle of tigerskin; her legs are covered by a pair of long black socks, that go to her mid-thigh, where her robe stops; on her feet are a pair of strange sandals, their bottoms far thicker than should be possible. Her half opened eyes, puffy and red rimmed, are a strange red-glowing brown, and her hair is raggedly cut; I hadn’t noticed that a mask, that of a demon, is tied far too tightly to one side of her head.

I gently lay her down- and had set the halberd by the door- and opened my own bag, and pulled out the medicines. I gently undid the knot tying the mask to her head, and straitened the strings, and set it to one side- in the process, I also smoothed her hair, and combed it with my fingers, and exposed to the light a pair of flesh colored horns, their tips a bright bloody red. Once removed, I saw that it had been hiding a pretty face, and more bruising, and a nasty gash that I didn’t like the look of. I applied a healing unguent to the gash and bruises- the scent of dock leaf and lavender filled the room.

Kaldur had, at some point, settled on the other side of the pallet- with his help, I lift her gently as a babe, and remove the robe fully from her shoulders, revealing roughly packed bandaging on her back with a nasty smell to it; Kaldur held her up while I undid her belts, and pulled them off, and then her binding, and her loincloth- underneath those were, surprise surprise, more bruises, and a few scratches- I treated these the same as before, and then we turned her, and laid her on her stomach.

I carefully peeled the nasty bandages away, to reveal septic lashes- stripes, like those given by a horsewhip. This required more than a simple unguent- this required actual medicine.

Thankfully, several years of dealing with my own health, the health of my friends, and getting yelled at by local apothecaries when I’ve done something particularly stupid has given me a passable handle on certain kinds of field medicine. I’m a particularly dab hand at septic wounds.

Anyway.

I had actually packed soap, somehow, in my kit- and with careful motions, I cleaned a lot of dirt and puss out of her ragged back. I don’t have saline solution- but Kaldur washes her back with saltwater, which is good enough. While he washed her back, I asked the priests for clean rags, and used those, along with a combination of Flowers to rebind her wounds. Parts of her back were flayed, not stripped- these I sewed together with careful, tiny stitches.
Every eighth hour, I changed her bandages, and Kaldur helped her sit up so I could feed her, and we both helped her to the outhouse- and on the Eighth day, she awoke, and pushed herself up- her back had healed by then, new pink skin and fine white lines all that remained of her indignity.

During that Eighth day, she watched me mending, and Kaldur practicing kata- for, during her convalescence, when I wasn’t changing bandages, or wandering around Marine Nihon, or sparring with Kaldur, I was mending her robe with my red scarf; and Kaldur had his own routine (and we both were slightly jumpy at shadows); I had almost finished the last bright red leaf of her robe and it looked much better to my eyes.

On the Ninth day, she spoke, and this is what she said.

“My name is Hinomoto Oniko; my story is this.

When my mother was young, she worked as a fishwife who lived at the docks, so placed to take in the largest volume of husbands per night. One day, raiders from the west came, and found my mother.

She was thrown from her House, and wandered the land, until finally she came to a poor man’s house; the man was so taken with her beauty that he married her on the spot, and cheerfully ignored the fact that my mother was heavy with me. At least, he did until I was born.

When I was born, three omens came- one, the hens would not lay- this was blamed on the thunderstorm, which was two, and three was my horns, the Mark of the West.

My childhood was bitter- and, when I was two or three, my mother had a child again, and this child was lavished with all the love I was denied.

When I was a younger girl, I decided that I would probably find a better life as a boy- I cut my hair, and muddied my face, and taking a pole I had cut earlier, and a sack of food, I left my parents’ house; I have never returned to that mountain, and I do not know what became of them.

I wandered the low country, and saw many battles- and I was mistaken as a boy, for about five years, and was made to join an army; then when it became clear that I was a girl, I was to be executed, for daring to join an army of men. I took the halberd I had been given, as it had been given to me, and I left that place, and joined a group of players (whose job it is to pretend) as a guard.

While with the players, I was again mistaken for a boy, as my voice and manner had been roughened by my five years as a soldier; the daughter of the master of the players, Yamada Hanako, was so taken with me that we became lovers.

Her father, being a man of some means, did and does not approve of me as a suitor for her- as I recall, he called me a worthless cur, unworthy of any respect or honor- he had me stolen from my bed, and beaten with my own halberd; I heard the men who did this to me talking about how my beautiful Hanako was to be shut up inside a cave, and there my knowledge ends, because I passed out.

And I awoke here.

I do not know where the cave my lover is shut in is, nor do I know how to get through to it, for Michi no jōshi Yamada-san is wily, and will have posted guards and… and I… I don’t know what I’m going to do.”
My eyes are wide— as are Kaldur’s. Perhaps it is the frankness of her tone— perhaps it is the fury burning in her eyes. Perhaps it’s the fact that the blanket she was sleeping under, and wrapped herself in, has fallen and pooled around her hips, leaving her pert perky breasts exposed to the light.

“It seems t-to me, Hinomoto-san, that you are in need of some training, a-a-and a mark, to designate worth- and possibly some help in finding the cave of your lover. I can provide the mark, I think— and my friend” here I gestured to Kaldur “is the better warrior, and so will provide training. We, both of us, will help you f-find the cave, if you want— I mean, i-if that is alright?” Kaldur nods, and Hinomoto-san says “Why would you help this one?”

“B-because, it is my nature; I must obey it, or shatter into ten-thousand pieces.”

She smiles, and nods, and says “Alright.”

“S-since I have cleaned and mended your clothing, perhaps, after a bath, you could dress again?”

“Surely.”

It takes another eight days for me to draw the design I will tattoo on her back, hips, upper thigh, shoulder and sides— during which time, Kaldur spars with her, building her confidence and courage; I create a spread of late summer to early winter- bush-clover and miscanthus, kudzu and large pink dianthus, yellow flowered valerian and boneset, balloon flower and chrysanthemum, butterflies flickering from bloom to bloom, their petals and wings reflected in still, untroubled waters filled with koi and carp, a pair of cranes with wings outspread and dancing, dragonflies flitting over the water, frogs plipping and plopping and croaking on the banks, mist curling in the sunset around and through spiderwebs on pine- it is a gorgeous tapestry of gold and red and amber and russets and rosy colors of gold and brown and soft faint blue greens to off-set and harmonize, oranges and purples and bright, heavenly blues, the soft faded white curls of mist and sunshine on water; when I finish the design, it seems to ripple and coil, and gently glow with a strange inner light. I cannot help what I do next- I hide, inside the Nihon patterned koi, my name, in the same language I record my dreams in.

I copied the lines of my work onto the thinnest paper I had inside my kit with the special pale yellow facepaint that washes off with water; after placing the design on Hinomoto-san’s body, and gaining her approval of both the art and it’s placement, I prepared my working space, and my needles, and my inks.

And then, I gave her the Tattoo.

It was the longest week of my life; two hundred and forty hours of non-stop tattooing will really take it out of you.

At the end of my work, I thank her for her praise, and then sleep for another eight days.

Let me tell you of what is in my kit.

My kit is outwardly shaped like a coinpurse; in the first opening, there is an accordion folder-like structure of pockets, numbering ten- in the first pocket, there are sheaves of paper of all sizes and shapes and bark of the paperwood tree and vellum scraped very thin and skins without hair, drawn tight and made ready for use in many ways, most of them literary. In the second pocket, there are
brushes of sable and boar-bristle and toothbrushes and straw and plastic and wood handled plain and painted; in the third, there are pens, steel-nibbed and ball-point and feathers of goose and quail and sparrow and eagle and peacock and a thousand thousand other, stranger birds. In the fourth there are paints and inks, mostly inks, of every color I know how to find, buy, and make- the only one’s I’m missing are a really nice purple, and a peach-color that I haven’t managed to recreate; in the fifth, needles of every description- needles for sewing, and knitting, and acupuncture- and thimbles of every size, from smaller than my pinky to larger than my head, stacked together like cups, and tweezers, and threads of every kind and color, even spiderweb which needs to be replaced once a month for freshness. In the sixth, makeup and a mirror shaped more like a knife- it is only big enough to see one feature in at a time, and it is made out of polished bronze. I don’t like glass mirrors; too… door-ish. In the seventh, bolts of every fabric, and lengths of ribbon-tape and twine and chalk for marking; in the eighth, a pair of scissors and a spindle; in the ninth, nothing at all- this pocket is kept empty, so that if I pick up something of special value, I have a place for it; I usually put the gems I collect whenever I go out in there. And in the tenth pocket, all together, are my dream journals; I have twelve of them now, filled with my original lines, and some newer meanings denoted by color and shading; the tools I use to make the circles and curves of my Words have not changed, merely grown- a triangular straight edge, a compass, a pencil, an eraser, and any of the other things in my kit.

While I sleep, after I have given Hinomoto-san her Mark of Honor, I dream; I dream of a maple tree, hidden in a cave- the cave is guarded by a lizard, born from a chicken egg hatched by a toad; the cave is up a mountain, covered in mists and graves; the mountain is past a forest filled with the furious dead; the forest is on an island surrounded by vicious demons; and the island lies to the east, past a city made of glass- there is a stone there that none can see and will hold the light of the sun; and there is a black rooster, that lives on the midden pile in the back of the hostel. I see that in four sun’s time, the tree within the cave will wither, and die; and it is only the strength of one who loves the tree that will move the stone that blocks her escape.

My eyes fly open, and taking little time to think, I take from my kit a thin piece of rice paper, a fine sable brush, Nara-black ink, and a large tea leaf; I Write, as quickly as I can, the details of my dream.

This is what I write.

“Hinomoto Oniko, the one you seek- Yamada Hanako- is locked in a cave by a boulder; this boulder can only be moved by one whose heart is filled with pure love for the one locked within the cave it blocks; the path to the boulder is guarded by a terrible beast that can turn a person to stone with one glare from its eyes- but can be killed by the crowing of a rooster that lives on the leavings of the pious, even though that rooster only crows at noon; the path to the monster is up a mountain covered in mists and evil spirits- but can be navigated with a mirror of metal, to see the true path, for the spirits will hide it in the mists; the path to the mountain is through a forest filled with the furious dead- they can be warned away with a bottle meant for the task of repelling evil, or the throwing of paper butterflies; the forest is on an island surrounded by demons- they can be snuck past, if the sneaker is brave; the island lies in the bay of a city that is transient- go to the tallest hill to the north, and see the city by the light of dawn or dusk, but never at noon- inside the city there is a stone that only can be seen in the light of the noonday sun, and reflects this light at all other times; the city lies far to the east, and is one morning’s walk from the hostel where the priests pray to the Golden Buddha.

Make haste, Hero! for, in the time it takes for the sun to rise and set four times, the woman will be dead inside the cave, and there will be no power that can save her.”
Almost as soon as I have finished writing the Words, I have bound it to the tea leaf and laid it flat to dry, and gone at a run with the netting from our groceries- Nihon grocers sell their wares in nets, at least they do in the marine section we’re in- and thrown it over the sleeping rooster, his wickedly long spurs gleaming in the light. Too late now; I stick him under my arm, and sweep back inside, swiping up a basket to put the bird in- Kaldur appears in front of me, but I, hah, eel around him with a flourish of my tail- Hinomoto-san is reading my Words with widening red eyes.

“G-good, you’re here- there’s very little time; dawn is in exactly two hours- Kaldur!” He is behind me faster than I realized he could move; I turn, and thrust the chicken and the basket into his arms. “Put this bird into that basket, and try not to let him scratch you!”

I throw myself over to my bag, and start digging through it- I finally come upon the Evil-Away Bottle, and set it by Hinomoto-san; my kit comes out next, and ignoring the horrendous squawking and screeching coming from not two meters away, I dig through the first pocket, and finally produce the little packet of perfectly square, brightly colored papers; I whirl again and see that the rooster is in the basket, and Kaldur is rubbing some light scratches- they are pale on his skin, not bleeding at all.

“D-d-do you know how to fold Butterflies, or shall I teach you?”

“Teach me, please!”

“Okay- this is what you do…”

I take the next hour to teach her to fold swallow-tailed butterflies from paper just the size of her palm; and the hour after that is spent making absolutely sure she understands where to go, what to do, and has everything she needs for the journey- we had just gone shopping again, and I pack her a lunch that will last five days on a hard run.

And then we send her off into the rising sun, to find her lover and her fortune in one fell swoop.

Considering I got invited to their wedding, I will assume that my help was good, and her adventure (ugh) was well completed. But that was later, and there was a fight, and the Team was there too- but. Later.

Kaldur and I packed our things, bid the priests of the Golden Buddha Hostel a fair goodbye, and swam with Hinomoto-san to the turning of the Road through the winding fields of rice, going East; she stops, and turns, the basket with the rooster swinging from her hip, her lunchbox over one shoulder- she points to the North, along the road, with her halberd, and stares us both in the eye.

“Far to the North, past the mountains, there is a Queen who reigns under the ice on the sea; she lives in a palace called Ultima Thule, and her name is Sedna, and if you can get the necklace off of her neck, she will grant you a boon. But be warned- Sedna is a bitter and haughty bitch, with powers beyond imagining- if she wants you dead, you shall die.”

“T-thank you- it cannot be impossible, and a boon is always something to try for from a queen.”

Kaldur laughed. “I wish you luck in your quest.”

She smirks at us both, turns, and walks into the waving fields of golden green rice; one step, two steps, three steps, and she is gone from our sight.
We have swum quite a ways along the Northern Road, and I am on point when Kaldur asks the question- “How did the prophecy come to your possession?”

“I have Dreams of the Future, sometimes- they’re always on the cryptic side, but this one was very clear, and meant for her. I’m not sure why, but- well. They’ve never been wrong.”

“Never?”

“Never ever.”

The water grows colder, and darker in tone- the light becomes faint, and soon we’re swimming almost nose to tail, or nose to toes. We sleep curled up together much more easily now- it’s too cold for anything else. Our two blankets are warm enough with both of us under them, though.

While we were resting in the Golden Buddha Hostel, Kaldur figured out a way for us to continue using our maimed compass, as we didn’t have enough funds to buy another; he stuck a ball of wax-cork into the bowl of the spoon, and tied it in with string- it floats, gently, now, and by means of a hastily drawn circle with equidistant markings, we are able to divine, after a fashion, our necessary headings.

We swim due North for several… leagues, I think they’re called, until finally we come upon, quite unexpectedly, a forest in bloom at night- a bloom, not of flowers, but of moon jellyfish, their giant pulsating forms glowing pearlescent in the starlight.

Kaldur and I swim carefully through the forest, our bodies closer than ever- I don’t think it would be good to get stung by a jellyfish in this dress, and Kaldur probably doesn’t want to get stung either.

After some distance, we come to a place where the jellyfish are the size of dinnertables, of ponds, of boulders massive and strange; and then we see her.

How to describe the Lion of Sedna?

Imagine a gossamer fine mushroomcap, and below it, dripping like tassels or beads or braids or dreadlocks, tentacles kilometers and kilometers long; shoulders narrow and tawny colored, and breasts large and bountiful, and a narrow face poking out of the red-brown tassle-dreads; her mouth gently nips and bites at passing moon jellys, and her long, massive body floats in the water in a beautiful way.

I’m not sure when I realize I can see Her- but. I can see the Boneknife Mother; her body is long and narrow like a knife, and her four arms and four legs pull through the water like oars, and a bright white balloon net floats above her; in her hands, a sharp bright line, curving out and around and down and about to-

I’ve moved before I realized I could, and shoved the lion jelly woman out of the way; the gossamer strands are sticky, and catch me- I am yanked up so hard and fast that the Watch Glass at my hip breaks off, and I lose consciousness.

The last thing I remember seeing is Kaldur’s pale green eyes, wide with fear, and the lion jellyfish woman’s mouth opening wide, her hands reaching for me in some strange gesture- then darkness overtakes me, dragging me far away from my friend.
When I awaken, it is to the fact that I have been bound to a wall, and there is air, all around; my tail aches from being suspended, and itches from being held in too dry a place; my arms burn over my head, and I feel as if I can’t draw breath- my hands, particularly, burn and tingle (I would later realize I had shoved the Lion of Sedna out of the way my reaching through her hair, grabbing her shoulders, and shoving, scrubbing my hands and forearms through her stinging tentacles twice). My hair is a wet, slimy mass on my neck- it’s been held out and back by a series of braids and vigorous swimming- and I can faintly smell the scent of rotting, like meat that has been left for too long. Without moving my head, I allow my hair and bangs to pool in front of my face, and peer through it; I can see barely anything, just the immediate area illuminated by the faintly glowing Spinning Lotus on my arm- faint, lumpy objects, outlined in fine white threads, shining in the light. One wriggles and thrashes and bucks wildly, sending vibrations all through the woven mass; I can hear, below me, the soft lapping of water, and then the steady click-warble of a creature I’ve only seen the hand of, and then only once, when I was ten.

And then, click-crawling into view is the Boneknife Mother; her body is bulbous, distended and gravid from her masses of unborn children, still tiny eggs within her, but so numerous as to pill and hillock her thin flesh with their imprint- she is the color of lemons or possibly mango skin, after the water has leeched away and the only thing left is a faint smell and the memory of a sweet-sour fruit; there is a strange waxy look to her four forearms, and she is entirely smooth, like the scales of a fish only without the scales; her hair is short, and grey white, and a single tuft of it sticks out in four directions from the back of her skulled head; her mouth is distended from her body, long like that of a horses, with a wide mouth, long black jagged mandibles like that of a beetles, bright white wolves teeth rounding out her ovular mouth. Her legs are that of a womans, excepting the fact that they are covered in liver spots and her flesh hangs from her bones in that ragged way common to the old; over her bulbous waist, like a child’s frill, is a fishtail, wriggling in the air. She scuttle-clambers over to the wildly thrashing bundle, and with a sharp jabbing motion thrusts a long knife-finger into it; it shudders, and a lowing sound escapes, like the moan of an animal dying.

And then it stills.

And then, with a shiver-inducing cackle and a slurping of fingers out of something that bled red, the old witch-woman sang a strange song to herself; I say strange, because it took me the longest time to understand her accent, and she wasn’t really singing- it was more like… like chanting.

“SkIPS and Moaaaaaaans and bROkeN BOOOOOOOOOoooones, and cHilDREN To be FED:

TiES and BINDS And lies unwinds and soon you WILL BE DEEAAAAAAAD!

Oh my Babies my Darlings- soon you will

see your loving mother’s face bare and whole.

Please let the screams and the snappings and shrill,

bloody music rock you to sleep. Let cold

water try to drown you; I have woven

Your nesting air-tight, always, but now old
age has come for me. Captured here: cloven
hooved and hairy chested, phallic features
on a meaty frame. This I give to you,

My Children. Let his flesh feed My creatures;

Let Them grow and live another age, another lifetime-

Let Them devour all that is True!

Break and Snap and stomp and clap, and grow my darlings- GROW;

Eat and Feast and Chew the Grease and don’t GO SLOW!”

While she sang to her unborn brood of monsters, she had also danced, and vibrated her nest- seizing my chance, I had carefully wriggled out of my bonds, as much as I was able to, and, taking the bamboo bottle from my pack, I carefully bit off the bottom, creating a… I don’t actually know what it’s called. Spout?

Then, I uncapped it, and with a mongoose blade- so called because it’s too short for a sword, and too long for a dagger- stabbed a hole into the side of the woven wall, and inserted the bamboo straw inside; immediately, water shoots inside the bell, powerful and icy, bitterly cold; it shoots so hard and fast, as a comparison- it was like an arrow, or a sword, and it stabbed the Boneknife Mother directly in her gravid belly, splitting her open like a too ripe berry.

And out of her poured clear jelly forms, their centers dark and black and only half-finished; there is the suggestion of teeth, and possibly spines, but they are soon frozen solid, or drowned, and Boneknife Mother screams and screams and tears at her four points of hair; cool water rushes over me in a trickle, and I can feel the web holding me weaken, and I can see- for in the rushing spurt of water comes light, bright and welcome- that the walls of the bell are weakening, bright silvery forms bubbling away.

Water drips inside of the Boneknife Mother’s mouth, and burns- soon, more and more water fills the space, until finally I am surrounded by green-white light, and Boneknife Mother is boiling alive- she stills, and her body bubbles and spews, and her multitude of fry go grey with death.

And then, with a great tearing snap, the woven Jarbell Nest of the Boneknife Mother collapses.

I am covered in sticky, heavy webbing; I cannot get enough traction to wriggle out, and I cannot push it off. (I cannot see the Boneknife Mother twitch with life.)

I lock my elbows over my face, so I do not breath the rapidly softening stuff in- it soon has the exact texture of wet hair, or hair underwater- I go to a place inside my head that is dark, but not too dark, and calm, without being dead, and quiet, which is not the same as stifled- a restful place, that Tikki taught me to build in myself, and take refuge in, when needed. I call it my workshop- my Shop, where I build things up and take them apart, and mend and repair things too. It smells very faintly of woodglue, and the light, what little there is of it, is superb.

I return from this place only when Kaldur, and his jump-leapy aura, touches me.
When I was captured, as Kaldur would tell me-

“The Watch Glass glowed, and then inside it grew a smoky image of you, Red X; you swam in a circle, inside the orb, and then pointed yourself in a specific direction- no amount of movement or distraction could change the heading you had taken. I and Lion followed the smoke inside the glass-it lead us down and through the darkness, and then here, to a bright white balloon, floating in the darkness- before we realized what we had found, a dark shape scuttled up from ties going down into the darkness below, and then inside the balloon.

After a time, a sucking puncture appeared in the balloon, and great and mournful screams were heard; cracks appeared in the roof and sides of the ballon, and bubbles of silvery bright water escaped; finally the balloon collapsed, and the glass-you sank down with it- Lion and I swam as fast as we could, and saw that the balloon had snagged on a jagged spar of rock.

Here, the glass grew hot and jumpy, and yanked itself from my hands- it shattered on a rock, but I had seen it aiming for a lump of white threads. I swam over as fast as I could, and dug you out.”

“Aqualad…! Kaldur. Thank you.”

“You are welcome- but why… why did you use the name I first gave you?”

“Because, my name isn’t Red X- not all the time. It’s… my name is Theresa.”

He blinks at me- and then something in his face grows… kind, and perhaps... touched. “Thank you for the gift, Theresa.”

“What do you mean?”

“Names are precious in my culture too.”

I blush so hard I can actually feel the blood rushing away from my fingertips.

Lion of Sedna floats up, her long undulations and grasping tentacles making short work of the dead fry and the remains of the Boneknife Mother; Kaldur and I follow her undulations, and soon enough, we come to the palace called Ultima Thule.

Ultima Thule is compilation of bones- ship bones, whale bones, fish bones, bleached corals and volcanic spewage gone cold; the water surrounding it is so cold, and so dark, it is only by the light of Lion’s contrails in the water we know what to follow.

Follow we do, until, suddenly, she… stops. Moving.

And then there is only darkness.

Kaldur and I were swimming side by side, because we were both drafting off of Lion of Sedna; when she stopped, and the light from her contrail stopped too, we were next to each other. That was why, when I reached over, I was able to grasp and hold his hand.

I am rightly wary of the dark- and it’s been a long day. I squeeze his hand- not tightly, I think, but he squeezes back, and… and we wait, in the darkness.

Soon enough, the one we are waiting for appears.
This is the story of Sedna, Queen of the Northern Sea.

In the beginning, Anguta made the World of White, and, taking a wife from the sky in his boat, he began a family in the world he had created.

His first-born child was named Sedna; and Sedna was a beautiful girl, with long black hair and big expressive eyes- and excepting for the fact that she was vain, she would have been a quite nice child, and would have found a husband in due time.

But she wasn’t, and she didn’t.

She grew, and became a woman, and in the manner of all who live in the World of White, became a woman to her father- for it is the custom of that land, that only children stay with their parents, and when boys and girls become men and women, they must leave their parents houses.

But she didn’t.

Sedna’s mother was a woman made of stars and sky- and such women cannot abide in the lands below. It is not their nature. So, sometime before Sedna became a woman, her mother- called Sorg- made a necklace of her tears, wept for a home she would never see again, which in the frozen lands of the world of white became gemstones perfect in form and shape, pearls and diamonds both; she hid this necklace in the floor of their home. Soon after, she vanished and unformed, back into the sky and stars from whence she came. Sedna, when she became a woman, found this necklace, and unknowing of its power and enamored of its beauty, put it on.

It wouldn’t come off.

Anguta was so enamored of his daughter’s great beauty, especially when wearing the necklace of tears, that he made her his wife. And when it was done, Sedna cried tears of fury and shame, because it is wrong for daughters to marry fathers, and always this has been so. Her tears fell from her eyes, and froze into her necklace- and so it grew and grew, as her tears never quite stopped. And so the necklace’s beauty grew, as it grows in sorrow- and so Sedna’s beauty grew, for she was so vain that she could not bear anything to be more beautiful than herself.

And so Anguta’s love for his wife’s beauty grew.

So it goes.

Time passed, and the necklace grew heavier and heavier, as did Sedna, for wives and husbands have children, as everyone knows. One day, when Sedna had grown quite big and very heavy, in both spirit and body, a great storm came and destroyed the stores Anguta had put away for the long dark winter that always comes. So much had been lost, in fact, that both Sedna and Anguta had to go out and fish with the sharp toothed nets of the land of white.

Sedna and Anguta went out in Anguta’s kayak, and together they flung the nets- and Sedna, who was much smarter than her father knew, flung herself out of the kayak with the netting.

But her fingers snapped.

She was so heavy, so weighted, that her fingers snapped off in one great crack, like the ice when it is too thin to take weight; and Sedna, vain and heavy and beautiful, sank beneath the waves. Her fingers turned into fish, in her father’s nets- and she screamed and screamed and cried with pain, because her father ate her fingers, and though they were no longer on her hands, they were still hers.

And so it came to be that she bore her father’s children- but in sinking to the bottom of the sea, she
changed from a woman to a goddess, and her children were whales and seals and the great fish of the sea; and somehow, some way, her father took another wife, and had more children, and those children hunted the children of Sedna.

And so they have hunted them since times long gone- and Sedna sheds a bitter tear for every child lost to her, for they are her children, and mothers love their children, though it might pain them to do so.

If ever her necklace were to be removed, her sorrows would end- though her trials can never be forgotten, to no longer have the memory of them around her neck like a noose would, perhaps, ease some of the pain in her heart.

Because Sedna has never forgiven her father for making her his wife, nor forgotten the pain of him eating her fingers, and it fills her heart with fury and sorrow and her eyes with tears every time one of her children is taken and eaten by one of Anguta’s children; so virile was he, that when he got her with child, she never stopped giving birth- and so the sea became filled with fish and whales and seals.

Her children are her subjects, for children should always obey their parents, and her kingdom is the far northern sea, underneath the slick white ice; and sometimes when her fury overwhelms her, she takes some of Anguta’s children for herself.

Every day, her necklace grows heavier- and every day, she sinks farther from the stars.

So it goes.

Sedna, Queen of the Deep in the North, is massive. She is a mountain, a river in motion, silt-brown; her breasts are hills, and are studded with barnacles like freckles- and around her neck hangs and drifts a mass of pearls and diamonds, heavy and shining like stars. Her hair is a mass of blackness, in parts waving like fronds and seaweeds, in parts stiff and jagged- it is her crown; her face is hidden behind long trailing masses of hair, and as she slowly rises before us, a leviathan, I can see that her arms extend into massive flipper-like fins, only the bones of the palm underneath the skin reminding of what once was; her waist is large, and rounded with those not yet born, and where her hips should jut out instead is a massive whale’s tail, long and wide and she’s so huge- so impossibly huge, she cannot be seen all at once; I can only describe her in features, not her in whole.

She rises, beneath us, and then around us- her massive, thick lips are frowning, and her nose is a plane, narrow and sharp (like… like Kaldur’s-) and behind us are the palms of her hands, warm in the frigid, deathly cold.

And her eyes are big, and the darkest blue I’ve ever seen- they glance at me, and she’s so very careful, her breath warm on us- and then she sees Kaldur, and the way I’m holding his hand, and- and a crack, sharp, like a tree in the deepest winter, and her necklace starts to crumble apart, and melt; I huddle closer to Kaldur, and her eyes, those fathomless, depthless eyes, filled with joy. Warm, sweetly salty water surrounds us- her tears, melting through the frozen pains of ages past, and soon enough there is nothing around her neck at all.

She smiles, and her teeth are those of an orca whales- which is to say, they are the teeth of a creature that does not want to be friends. And then she speaks, and her voice is a special kind of vibrating thing, too big to hear with the ear, too slow to speak aloud; and she sings to us, and this is what she sings:
“For helping me, I give you this-

An onwards push, and good luck’s kiss!

You’ll journey far, and farther still

But make it through? I know you will!”

Her fingerless fin-hands bring us closer, closer, closer, and a small bright white fish with a red diamond on its head darts down, and into my bag- I will later find a card called Freeze, and sign it; she pulls us to her mouth, and gently kisses us both, her lips softer than silk or satin or fleece, soft soft as snowflakes on skin, warm as the winter sun- and then she blows, harder than anything, and we are swept far far away. I can feel Kaldur, at the end of my arm, his hand tight in mine; in the space of ten heartbeats, we are gone from her palace called Ultima Thule, and hurtling through the water, spinning spinning; faster and faster and round and round and faster

Faster

Faster

Faster

Until with a SMACK we press into ground that is hard and muddy. I black out.

When I awaken, I see that Kaldur is still unconscious- his bag, and the compass, because, well… since he fixed it, I thought he should carry it, and the map too, and um. His bag is gone. Mine isn’t- I have my blanket, and my kit, and the food, and the bones, and the lotus is still tight around my arm, and my Cards are where they always were… but I don’t have much else in the way of supplies, other than what my mind can devise from what is around us. Which is always… interesting.

We are in a stand of softly waving grasses; he’s asleep, I think. Kiss him! I leave him be, for a moment- he’ll be safe enough alone for a little while. I look around us- the softly waving grasses brush against my tailfins, and I feel a strange, energizing zing rush through me, like I just drank way too much Iron Buddha and I see a path, leading onwards; but there’s something wiggling inside my satchel and- it’s the fish!

It’s small and cool in my hands- the gemstone on it’s head is in the shape of a diamond and is bright red and sparkles in the light faintly from within; it swims around me and it’s scales sparkle and shine and gleam in the light and then it nestles into my chest- with a fluttering snap there is a Card which I sign; Freeze.

I turn back to where Kaldur is because there was a faint sort of sussuration and that’s worrying and I see thin green fronds wrapping around him like serpents and I use Freeze very carefully because I don’t want to freeze him that would be bad- the plants stop moving because they’re covered in a thin rime of ice but I can’t get through and my hands and body is shaking shaking why can’t I get through- the bones are in my hands before I know what’s happened and I am digging through the vines and breaking the bones; they burn in the water with a sharply green flame that smells like rotting mud.

I have broken all of them apart- which is just as well because I have gotten to Kaldur, but he is pale so very pale too very pale shit. Perhaps- perhaps he couldn’t breathe? So maybe if I breathe for him
but I can’t just- just... **kiss** Kaldur, I *can’t* –

But I *can* Save Aqualad.

I lay him on the muddy bottom, flat, and I lean in- tilting his head back and pinching his nose shut, I seal his mouth with mine, and breathe into him; with a startled thrash, he gasps, and breathes and coughs a little.

I can feel the smile on my face- it kind of hurts.

Anyway.

Even though we didn’t have a map or a compass, we did have the lotus- and Kaldur recognized the plants as natives of South America, specific to the western side; we need to go to the eastern side, so after consulting the lotus, we swim against the current, steady going higher and higher, into fresher water.

Eventually, we come to a thick, silty river, bounded on both sides by softly wriggling banks of black stones; we carefully ford the river, and soon enough the water is over our heads- I can’t see, but I can smell. And I smell the press of too many bodies, all around us; but the lotus points ahead, and at this point- we are at the point, in the river, where the waters flow both forwards and back- if we go back, we won’t be able to go forwards, and if we go forwards, we can’t go back.

In short, we’re at… we’re at a Crossroads.

And, like every Crossroads I’ve ever been at, as soon as I realize where I am, something attacks; in this case, it is a swirling mass of darkness with sharp biting teeth, and short sharp flashes of scales like spots of blood. There is only one thing to do- I raise my arms high, like the pose for victory, and I cast Arrow.

Instantly, I feel the rush of darkness falter- and I also feel the stiffness of my limbs... sharpen, and then deepen. Arrow, like all Cards that pay fealty to Fiery, including Firey himself, causes me… not exactly harm. But not gain either- and I do not use them lightly, because…

It takes more out of me than it should, to cast a card under Fiery. (It’s physically damaging to use the ones under Earthy, but I won’t realize that for a long time- and some damage is not repaired as easily as “Wait for it to grow out”. But that is later.)

Arrow, under Firey, is a special Card- it’s one of the only ones I have that is specifically meant for mid-long range battle, and I’d only used it once before, in my Upstairs Workshop, as a test; I’d found that, while extremely draining, Arrow was also extremely destructive- but that draining effect manifested itself as an inability to physically move, in any way.

What I didn’t realize, at the time, was that using Freeze in a Land without Ice would be even more draining- it’s like… like trying to push a boulder up a hill, while knee deep in a river running down it. You have to fight two things, not one, and if you should slip- so, when I used Arrow to battle the Blood-spot Darkness, I… I drained myself. Almost completely.

I don’t really… remember. I remember the sensation of being dragged, of being lifted and carried; of being towed. I remember trying, feebly, to swim and follow and move myself- and I remember how my head was like a stone upon my neck, and how my arms felt like rubber and fire and nails on a
chalkboard. I remember the water getting colder and colder, and I remember a strange buzzing, on my fins, which must have been when we crossed the Canal, because- on the one side of the Panama Canal is the Old World, the undefined world- on the other side, the New World, the defined world; there is a sensation not unlike the fizz inside a soda on the back of the hand, and a smell like the ground after it rains, and if you know how to look, the sky will flash green in a very specific and poignant manner, when one crosses from one to the other.

I do remember that nothing was right- nothing looked right, or smelled right, and for some reason, I could not sleep. I was awake, but not aware- and I was so tired. I was more tired than I could ever remember being- but I could not fall asleep.

Finally, I must have, because…

Because, at some point, the only thing I am aware of is darkness, and the sensation of movement, and then… nothing. Maybe a little discomfort, from… possibly blood-draws. Not sure.

But when I awake, I am in a sort of ovular… not a box, because the walls are curved. A pouch? Maybe. But it’s smooth, and I am wearing my clothing, and I feel more rested than I can remember- and as I slowly sit up, I feel a sort of… slipping, around me, like a membrane, smooth and quiet, and then I can see…

Well, everything is slightly… Off. Like… blurred, but not badly blurred- I can see, not perfectly, but well enough, and it’s all very… Well, wherever I am, it’s very…

I’m in a room- the light is soft, and soothing; the walls are a restive green, with faint flickerings of “Health” and “Rest” and “Fertility” etched in fluttering black out of the corner of my eyes- the words are… not faint. Just… subdued? Like someone didn’t know how to Write them out. The water around me is cool, but not cold- it’s that perfect temperature of comfortableness, not too hot or cold. There is a tunnel, leading out, high above me- I swim up to it, my tail parting the water with ease.

The hole is a sort of oval, and there’s a living screen of coral in front of it- there’s a small label that reads “Open” and an arrow pointing to the right. I look back down at where I was- aha! My bag is on a small shelf of stone, and my mask and greaves are lying next to it; I don’t really feel like putting my mask back on, and I’m not sure… how to do it? Underwater? Anyway- a quick flick of my tail brings me down to them, and as I pass through a small patch of light, I see that the lotus has relocated underneath my skin- it gently turns and moves with the currents, and I can feel it doing so, but it doesn’t hurt in the slightest. My sea-mail has migrated up a layer- it feels more like a very loose, lacy sweater, one worn more for show than warmth- there is a sort of trailing line thing, with a large loop of bronze at the end of it.

I swim nearer to the shelf, and take my things- a quick shove of the mask inside the bag, which is empty now, excepting for my kit, which has not been disturbed, and my shell-phone, which finally has reception, fuck yes; my greaves, golden in color and covered in faintly winding vines, go on my forearms- my blades rest calmly within them, as they should.

Another flick of my tail, and I am at the portal- the screen opens exactly as it says it does, but a little stiffly, as if no one has opened it in a long time- with a little wiggling, I am through it, and into one of the most beautiful cities I’ve ever been in.

After a few hours, the enamorment, while still present, is much more subdued- I’m hungry, and a little tired of swimming, and I can’t figure out where I came from; I’ve seen people, but… well. I’m really freaking shy- it’s annoying, but. I can’t really… I don’t know how to be around- people. Lots
of them, anyway, especially without an introduction. I’ve so far hidden in doorways, alleys, behind large statues, underneath overhangs, and in one instance, behind a large decorative coral- either my stealth skills are really good, or the people here aren’t terribly observant, or perhaps- perhaps they’re just too polite to call me out?

Anyway- I soon come to a residential area, with beautiful Words for “Peace” and “Protection” and “Prosperity” written like the weavings of a cloth; there is a small park area, with beautiful corals and statuary and seaweeds undulating in the currents. I rub my arm a little- the lotus still doesn’t hurt, and I don’t think it will, but it feels undeniably strange to have something moving on you where nothing once was. I finally come to a place where the seaweed is slightly overgrown, and longer- more like the pond weeds- and I carefully make a space inside them and hide in them.

I don’t mean to fall asleep again. I really don’t. But- well, it was really quiet, in the park, and the leaves around me were so relaxing, and… I awoke- I’m not sure why I wake up the way I do, actually. My hair? It doesn’t feel right- it’s… it’s all over everything, for one; I sit up, and stretch, and pull my seamail down where it’s ridden up- I didn’t flash or anything like that, thank the gods, but still. Anyway, I sit up and gather all of my hair into one hand- some escapes and falls over the right side of my face, but that’s okay, those are bangs anyway- and with the other hand, twist the fiberous mass into a knot at the back of my head; a quick bit of tucking and pulling sets the shape, and a little rummaging in my kit turns up a length of cord perfect for the task of securing the ends to the main body of the knot.

Swimming, in the Carp dress, feels- feels effortless. Like, I barely push with my tail, and I’m moving through the water- this caused some mishaps early on, but now, I’d feel pretty confident in a battle underwater.

Me and my big fucking mouth.

To be honest, I really didn’t mean to disrupt those students. I was more concerned with not dying- and I probably shouldn’t have stolen part of the shark guy’s lunch either, but, well… it looked so tasty, and it was so tasty, and um. I needed it, and this doesn’t make any sense, does it?

Okay, so- from the beginning.

After I bound my hair, I swam out of the seaweeds- I didn’t really notice a difference in the time, or what was around me, but there must have been one, because my shell-phone rang.

“Hello?”

“terry, run.”

“Raven? Wha-”

“TERRY, RUN!”

I feel my battle-specific premonition kick in- it’s something that apparently you get when things randomly try to kill you for several years; in about ten seconds, give or take, there will be a pair of claws right where my ribs are, but if I move now, I probably won’t die.

I throw myself forwards with all of my might, and dive directly into the main street; behind me, something… something big, with teeth and claws and a fury I can almost smell follows. Ahead of
me, people dive out of the way- I’m pretty sure I can hear someone scream.

“What’s on my tail? Hehehe-”

“the fucking Boneknife Mother, terry. how do you even do this-”

“Woah, really? I thought she died…”

“no, that would be your common sense.”

“Ugh! Rude!”

I quickly dart around a corner- my shell-phone has an ear-tooth attachment, so I’m speaking hands free- and can hear the armored carapace scrape along a wall behind me; a quick flick-wiggle around a tight corner, and then I’m swimming harder than I ever have before.

“Any ideas about what to do?”

“how did you stop her the first time?”

“I can’t do that- that took days to set up, and I don’t have that kind of time!”

“Well, i don’t know what to tell you. Jinks says hi, by the way.”

“Tell her hi back for me, I’ve figured out what to do.” This is actually a lie, but I’m wasting precious breath talking to Raven when I need it to run. And I’ll think of something. Probably.

“’kay. talk to you later.”

I swim faster and faster, at times using Dash to force the issue- another burst of Dash induced speed, and I’m all the way across the city, and at a sort of palace? Only I’m a little too busy to check and see- I swim through what looks like a class full of students, and swipe an octopus-boy’s bottle of ink; it’s pretty freaking huge, but I actually do have an idea now.

I just hope it doesn’t kill me.

I swim harder; I dart through another area- I pass a girl in bright yellow with red hair, and a boy in sea blue with black hair, and Kaldur- “Hi Kaldur!”- and there is a shark person with some fresh tuna, which I steal a piece of- “Sorry!”- and then I am in a really big space, like an arena? Anyway, I swim out into the middle of it, and I can feel her stabbing fingers right at the back of my head, oh shit-nope, she only got my hair, and woo, there it goes- it’s been a while since my head was so light; I shove the large piece of tuna into my mouth, and start chewing- I’m going to need the energy.

I uncork the bottle of ink, and I imagine really hard that the bottle is a brush and I’m just painting another fu- and then I swim. Her claws reach and grab for me- I twist and spin and duck and weave, dart and bob, swim backwards- the ink from the bottle feels… sort of- sort of like a rope, not like ink at all. I kind of… I like it. I loop high around her, fast like a bird, then sharp to the side and in, looping around her waist faster than she can claw for me- she is bigger and stronger than I am (most of my enemies are), but I am so much faster- I loop and spin, the ink behind me like a ribbon of black in the water, and then I dip into the line with careful fingers and start writing in the language of my Dreams (it had a name of its own, I think, but I can’t remember what it was) and in the style of the Words I saw around the city; the Words flick and clatter where she touches them; some of them even burn her puke green shell.
She, of course, does not want it to end like this- with a flick of her fingers, the shadows ripple, and out of the darkness come strange shapes with many sharp and biting teeth, spotted with drip-drops of blood; I shove the ink bottle through a hole in my mail, and then tie it into place with one hand- the same hand I’m Writing with, actually- and with the other, I call up Bubbles; inside each silvery orb I put a moon bright ball of Glow- and then I throw them at the darkness like a spray of stars. The darkness screams and scatters- the fingers of my other hand haven’t stopped writing; I haven’t stopped swimming and arching and diving and ducking around the Boneknife Mother. I swim and throw and Write for what feels like hours- but it can’t have been more than a few minutes; I have Written a perfect net around the Boneknife Mother, a long line of ink securing her to the bottle, which is now almost empty.

I scatter more moon-bright Bubbles around me- they form a screen that the Bloodspot Darkness cannot go through, and it shivers and swirls around us; I face the Boneknife Mother head on at last- she is a wretched thing, now, her once porcelain skin riddled with pustules and scars, her belly a ruined scrap of flesh hanging loosely from bones that have bleached white- in her eyes is the hatred all my enemies know, when they face me for the final time… except I also see a hint of fear, which means… which means I have to be fair- I have to give her a chance.

Taking the bottle from my waist, I give her a chance. “You can end this, right now. Let them go, oh Mother of Many; they aren’t yours, and they never were. Just let them all go!”

She shivered, and shrunk into herself- and never have I seen another creature age so quickly, color and form leaving- and then she spoke, her voice a quivering crackling rasp.

“nO.”

The thing about chances, and being fair? You only ever get one- and it only ever happens once.

The Words take hold of her, squeezing and pressing her down smaller and smaller- and I heave with everything I’ve got and a few things I don’t have, and I pull her with all of my might- the ink bulges and ripples, and then with a strange silent whistle, it sucks itself back into the bottle with a spiraling flourish, yanking the Boneknife Mother with it. It takes exactly ten beats of my heart; with a final muted slurp, the demon is inside the bottle; with a simple movement of my fingers, the cap is back on the bottle, and with a click, sealed tight.

There is a sound, like the ripping of flesh from bone, like the whisper of the wind through hair, like the snapping of more threads than can be counted, like the distant dying scream of an ancient woman- and surrounding me on all sides, where the Bloodspot Darkness once was, there now stands- or sits or floats or hovers or exists- a crowding of children between the ages of six and fourteen, each one that ghostly pale figure that death turns all into. There is a pause, where I can feel the tension in the arena change- and then. Jubilation- there are whoops and cries and yelps and squeals and chtters and more laughter than I’ve ever heard- and the children are leaping and spinning and dancing and skipping and clapping and crying and laughing and some are trying with moderate success to do all of those at once; some quickly spin me around in a dance of joy and happiness and laughter- and then, slowly the laughter dies away. Quietly moving through the crowd, neither pariah nor foe nor friend, is a person cloaked in night; I see the pale flash of bone, and then I am confronted with a pair of the brightest green-red eyes I’ve ever seen. The being regards me for some time, and then at some unknown and unknowable que, darts towards me; I am promptly smacked in the face with a Card. I peel it off, sigh, ignore the giggling around me, and sign the Card; Shadow.

There is a quiescence, as soon as I do- and there is a susurration like wind through grass, or waves on the shore, or the beat of the heart in the ear, and with a whispering crash the ghostly children
vanish, never to return. As they fade away, flickering shapes like dreams half forgotten, I see that I am, indeed, inside an arena, and that arena is full of... people. Oh hell.

I can actually feel the flush rising from my lower extremities; my face is soon burning hotter than it ever has- and then the exhaustion hits, a bit like a double punch to the face and chest, and then the darkness rises and engulfs me. When I wake up again, I’m back in the green room I started in, but this time Kaldur is there too- I can feel it. There is also a man with yellow hair which I can see through a blurry something, and I’m not sure why, but I think he’s a king.

In fact, he is.

I would leave Poseidonis in the middle of January; Kaldur would eventually enquire about a way of keeping in touch with me, and I would give him my phone number and email- he seemed a bit stunned when I did, to be honest- and I would swim back through to the Nightmarket from a very busy Poseidonian market. It would take me until February to get back to Kowloon; it’s actually much faster to get back somewhere than to go from a place, and I’ve never figured out why.

Anyway.

Because I quit early, I had to make up the time- something I had worked out with Pretty Cheng a few years ago, to ease the pain of me not paying a yearly rent like everyone else- so, I went back to the agency, and, with my characteristic luck, walked directly into a midden.

During February, a whole mess of things have to happen, to bring good tidings and fortunes for the rest of the year; I managed to get back in time to see to them- the smearing of honey over the kitchen gods lips, the burning of things, fireworks, flowers, fruit, cleaning the altar- it’s basically a glorified spring cleaning, with a bit of bribery and demon-warding off thrown in for good measure.

Then April came- during April, I usually have to rely on my savings, as no one really wants to start shit in Kowloon during the first month of the new year, but I had helped Kaldur, and I found that by about the Fifth, I was nearly out of spending money- there is a specific level of cash spendable money I like to keep in reserve, and I am loath to dip into it for any random thing- it has to be an emergency. This wasn’t an emergency- it was me needing a job.

Pretty Flowers Modeling agency always has an opening. Always.

During one of my slower nights during New Years, I finally opened the Invisible Box; I hadn’t realized it, but my piggy bank puzzle box was actually much harder to figure out than I had thought; the Invisible Box opened after ten moves. Of course, the fact that it was invisible did lend some challenge...

Inside the box, there was a folded bundle of fabric and wires, five spiral-bound notebooks, a jar filled with silvery blobs, and several flash drives.

I read the notebooks in a flurry of interest- two were filled with my parents notes and those I read first; my mother’s notes were about, of all things, Necromancy, and there were weird asides into Alchemical structures- my father’s note’s you’ve already gotten a sampling of.

The other three notebooks were filled with designs and ideas; designs for how to create Xenthonium
imbued objects, for how to make armor and weapons and other things- there was even a design for a motorcycle.

Over the next few months, I would steadily place the machinery needed to make the objects shown inside these treasure troves into my Over-shop; the steady, almost ritualistic use of Create would grow my mystical reserves in ways that I wouldn’t appreciate for a very long time.

The folded bundle of fabric was a curious cloth- it made no sound at all when moved; I would figure out how to make it after many many failures- the secret is a secret, but I will allow that it has something to do with the polarity of the weaving needles used, and that the thread has to be very carefully made, especially if one wants to imbue it with Xenthonium and make it water-phobic. Which I did.

The wires were something different again- I quickly realized that they were the torn out remains of a computer, and put them in a drawer of General Failure’s.

The jar was opened inside a stainless steel tub of oil, in gloves that went up to my armpits, in accordance to the directions in the notebooks; Xenthonium is not a corrosive material, but it is extremely reactive to water and it’s best not to tempt fate.

There is a way, through careful experimentation and re-reading of my father’s notes, to create a fabric that is imbued with Xenthonium, moves silently, will not rip, will not burn, will not get wet, and will breathe like a fine silk. In fact, the cloth of Xen I made, and still make, has all of the characteristics of silk- along with being silent in movement, and… having some special magical properties.

Why would anyone go through the trouble of making something with Xenthonium, when it’s so dangerous? Basically- basically, Xenthonium is the only buffer in the universe that can easily transform the energy from a magical reaction into the energy of a technological or scientific reaction; it can turn… well, it can turn water into gold.

And! This is what made me interested- according to my mother’s notes, Xenthonium, if properly prepared, can draw in magical power at a steady rate, and release it at a different rate- storing the excess within itself.

A thing, about the Cards? If the caster- me, in this case- doesn’t have enough magical power to cast the spell, or enough mental power to cast the spell, or enough emotional power to cast the spell, the spell will not allow itself to be cast. This can manifest itself in many ways- because the Cards like to be used, and will offer themselves up- everything from not being able to pull the card from the deck, to not remembering that you even have it, to not realizing that you can use it; if you don’t have the power, the Card won’t let itself be used.

A secretary, personal assistant, or administrative assistant is a person whose work consists of supporting management, including executives, using a variety of project management, communication, or organizational skills. These functions may be entirely carried out to assist one other employee or may be for the benefit of more than one. In other situations a secretary is an officer of a society or organization who deals with correspondence, admits new members, and organizes official meetings and events.
A secretary has many administrative duties. Traditionally, these duties were mostly related to correspondence, such as the typing out of letters, maintaining files of paper documents, etc. The advent of word processing has significantly reduced the time that such duties require, with the result that many new tasks have come under the purview of the secretary. These might include managing budgets and doing bookkeeping, maintaining websites, and making travel arrangements. Secretaries might manage all the administrative details of running a high-level conference or arrange the catering for a typical lunch meeting. Often executives will ask their assistant to take the minutes at meetings and prepare meeting documents for review.

The work of an executive assistant differs slightly from that of an administrative assistant. Executive assistants work for a company officer (at both private and public institutions), and possess the authority to make crucial decisions affecting the direction of such organizations, and is therefore a resource in decision-making and policy setting. The executive assistant performs the usual roles of managing correspondence, preparing research, and communication while also acting as the "gatekeeper," understanding in varying degree the requirements of the executive, and with an ability through this understanding to decide which scheduled events or meetings are most appropriate for allocation of the executive's time.

An executive assistant may from time to time act as proxy for the executives, representing him/her/them in meetings or communications.

An executive assistant differs from an administrative assistant in that they are expected to possess a higher degree of business acumen, be able to manage projects, as well as have the ability to influence others on behalf of the executive- the largest difference between a generalized secretary and skilled executive assistants is that the executive assistant is required to be able to interact extensively with the general public, vendors, customers, and any other person or group that the executive is responsible to interact with. As the level that the executive interacts with increases so does the level of skill required in the executive assistant that works with the executive. Those executive assistants that work with corporate officers must be capable of emulating the style, corporate philosophy, and corporate persona of the executive for which they work.

One of the weirder parts of my regular, yearly job is standing in for my boss- who is actually Pretty Cheng; the woman is a dynamo of commerce. That’s really all there is to it.

One of the things Pretty Cheng likes to do is collect swords- and there are a few very specific swords that she desperately wants, for reasons involving bragging rights.

This is not a bad thing, for a woman of her age, certainly- but...

Well. Usually I don’t get involved, in the acquisition part; Pretty Cheng sends me out to get the things she’s bought, like a retriever after ducks shot down into the water. And honestly, this time was no different.

Excepting for the fact that I had to battle Circe, the Lady Shiva, and a man called Deathstroke.

Nothing in life is ever easy.

I suppose it started the day before my birthday- I remember because Raven and Jinks had gotten
back from Woop Woop; Raven had a tan and mid-back length hair, and Jinks looked healthier. I think the Far South agreed with them; anyway, Raven had somehow weaseled my birthday out of me, and had thrown a small party- we basically had dinner together, and they gave me things.

The things they gave me were simple- a goose-feather pen, and a Dutch rose cut agate- but precious all the same, because they *gave* them to *me*.

I really… I really love those two girls. Is that weird? I don’t care! I love them. They’re great!

Pretty Cheng is not great- Pretty Cheng is… fantastic. (She weaves Fantasies.) But, for the price of ten hexagonal sapphires, two bags of rice, and a bowl of cherries (SO TASTY!), I’ll believe her un-truths.

The item I was sent to retrieve was a sword of indeterminate origin; the story I was given stank of untruth, but here’s what I heard- get enough lies together, and the shape of the truth will show itself.

This is the shape of the truth, as far as I can tell:

There were once two blades, born three hundred years apart, but brothers, all the same; one called Sharp Cut, and one called Soul Taker.

Soul Taker was wielded by demons and monsters, and held within his sharp steel the soul of every person who fell against him; Sharp Cut was never used in battle, and so it is assumed that his name is meaningless.

That’s never true.

Soul Taker was forged by Muramasa; Sharp Cut was forged by Masamune.

And the story of those two is very well known- for the sake of knowing, I’ll tell it to you.

A pair of warriors once quarreled over who had the better sword- the younger proclaimed that his Muramasa was superior, while the elder rebutted that his Masamune was the better. They quarreled and argued, until they finally came to a river in which maple leaves floated. Together, they thrust their swords into the river; the leaves flowed towards the swords, and swirled near them both- the Muramasa sword *snik-sliced* every leaf that came near it; the Masamune sword did not. And so it was decided that the swords of Muramasa had an incurable taste for blood, and that the Masamune swords were made of less violent metals.

All this was what I learned after the fact; Pretty Cheng told me to get the sword called Soul Taker, and if I wanted the sword called Sharp Cut, then I could have it.

I did not, in fact, want the sword called Sharp Cut- but. Well.

Shit happens.

Okay, so, things really started when I finished my new clothing- my first and second outfits had succumbed to that virulent scourge of clothing called “travel fatigue”; my old skinny jeans and hoodie combo had too many rips in it to work, and the ruqun smelled weird; similarly, the old Carp dress was… well, apparently my boobs grew when I wasn’t looking, because it’s too small now- the sea-mail will grow and change as I do, but the muslin won’t so… Also, my mask changed- it’s not-
the teeth are just a horizontal line with three lines perpendicular to it; the eyes have gotten sharper, more dangerous looking.

So- I have to make a new outfit. This time, I should make it count; instead of using fabrics I bought, I’ll weave them, and dye them, and stitch them myself.

This took all of March and April to accomplish- I had finangled with Pretty, to have some time to prepare and recuperate, as the Ring of Fire is no joke; she had grudgingly agreed, and gave me two months to get my shit together.

My new outfit looks like this:

Start with a black body suit that covers from the tips of the toes to the tips of the fingers, all the way up to the throat, curving up to underneath my chin, along the jaw; it presses my breasts up and together- the suit is cloth of Xen, and will augment the wearer’s ability to cast spells. Over this goes a dress with sleeves that are wide like sword-leaves, and long to the knee; they are massive, hand swallowing, billowing sleeves- there are very few alterations available to the Carp dress, and the only one that would allow for my increased bust was the one with the massive sleeves and short skirt. Speaking of skirts, it goes to just above the mid-thigh, and has a flowing edge- it is wide and loose enough to move and float and flow with my movements. Follow my legs down from underneath the short skirt, and you will see the black body suit, until just below the knee, where a pair of dull cherry red boots exist. The cloth of the over dress is made to withstand a variety of things; flood, fire, thunder, mold, moths, bullets, swords, explosions; it is colored a red so dark as to be black, excepting over the shoulders, where there is a long dark-grey patch that goes to just above the elbow, criss-crossed with red cording in the shape of X’s. On my arms, my greaves; in the greaves, my blades. My hair is left loose; apparently, the fetish that fell into my mask was actually meant to be a hair clip-through some strange manner of synthesis, when I draw my fingers over my right eye, along the X mark, the mask and my entire outfit vanishes into this clip, which pins up the right side of my hair into an awkward sort of side-head bun. When I first figured this out, I was left stark naked in my Over-shop; thankfully, I had some regular clothing on hand.

Which reminds me- I’ve stopped wearing the looser cheongsams everywhere. Yeah, they’re crazy comfortable, but that’s because the fabric is almost worn out; I’ve retired them to house-dresses, which means I have to go shopping. I should take Raven and Jinks too, they’re looking mighty threadbare…

Actually, that thought, right there? That’s where things started.

Because- and this is something I’ve really only come to terms with now- the Nightmarket is not the best place for regular shopping. Oh, sure, for the basics, like food or weapons, it can’t be beat- but for clothing that looks good on a young woman of limited means, no.

The defined world, however, is full of young women with limited means. So that was where Raven, Jinks, and I went, with our expenses paid by Pretty Cheng- I went for the swords, Raven went because she knew if only Jinks and I went something stupid would happen, and Jinks went because she had never been to the defined world, and wanted to see what the fuss was about.

So we went.

Even though Raven went with us, stupid things happened anyway.
A brassiere is a woman's undergarment that supports her breasts. Bras are typically form-fitting and perform a variety of functions and have also evolved into a fashion item. The primary purpose of a bra is to support the woman's breasts. Women commonly wear bras to conform to social norms such as a dress code, or because they believe bras prevent breasts from sagging.

In western cultures, about 10–25% of women do not wear a bra, either as a matter of preference or sometimes for health or comfort reasons. Some garments, such as camisoles, tank tops and backless dresses, have built-in breast support, alleviating the need to wear a separate bra.

Changing social trends and novel materials have increased the variety of available designs, and allowed manufacturers to make bras that in some instances are more fashionable than functional. Bras are a complex garment made of many parts, and manufacturers' standards and sizes vary widely worldwide, making it difficult for women to find a bra that fits them correctly. Even methods of bra-measurement vary, such that even professional fitters can disagree on the correct size for the same woman. As a result, 75–85% of women wear a bra of an incorrect size.

The bra has become a feminine icon or symbol with cultural significance beyond its primary function of supporting breasts. Some feminists consider the brassiere a symbol of the repression of women's bodies. Culturally, when a young girl gets her first bra, it may be seen as a rite of passage and symbolic of her coming of age.

I had actually made my first bra- and the thing about bras is… actually, to understand a bra, you need to understand a woman's breasts.

In women, the breasts overlay the pectoralis major muscles and usually extend from the level of the second rib to the level of the sixth rib in the front of the human rib cage; thus, the breasts cover much of the chest area and the chest walls. At the front of the chest, the breast tissue can extend from the clavicle (collarbone) to the middle of the sternum (breastbone). At the sides of the chest, the breast tissue can extend into the axilla (armpit), and can reach as far to the back as the latissimus dorsi muscle, extending from the lower back to the humerus bone (the longest bone of the upper arm). As a mammary gland, the breast is an inhomogeneous anatomic structure composed of layers of different types of tissue, among which predominate two types, adipose tissue and glandular tissue, which effects the lactation functions of the breasts.

Morphologically, the breast is a cone with the base at the chest wall, and the apex at the nipple, the center of the NAC (nipple-areola complex). The superficial tissue layer (superficial fascia) is separated from the skin by 0.5–2.5 cm of subcutaneous fat (adipose tissue). The suspensory Cooper's ligaments are fibrous-tissue prolongations that radiate from the superficial fascia to the skin envelope. The adult breast contains 14–18 irregular lactiferous lobes that converge to the nipple, to ducts 2.0–4.5 mm in diameter; the milk ducts (lactiferous ducts) are immediately surrounded with dense connective tissue that functions as a support framework. The glandular tissue of the breast is biochemically supported with estrogen; thus, when a woman reaches menopause (cessation of menstruation) and her body estrogen levels decrease, the milk gland tissue then atrophies, withers, and disappears, resulting in a breast composed of adipose tissue, superficial fascia, suspensory ligaments, and the skin envelope.

The dimensions and the weight of the breast vary among women, ranging approximately 500–1,000 grams each; thus, a small-to-medium-sized breast weighs 500 grams or less; and a large breast weighs approximately 750–1,000 grams. The tissue composition ratios of the breast likewise vary among women; some breasts have greater proportions of glandular tissue than of adipose or connective tissues, and vice versa; therefore the fat-to-connective-tissue ratio determines the density (firmness) of the breast. In the course of a woman's life, her breasts will change size, shape, and weight, because of the hormonal bodily changes occurred
in thelarche (pubertal breast development), menstruation (fertility), pregnancy (reproduction), the breast-feeding of an infant child, and the climacterium (the end of fertility).

The morphologic variations in the size, shape, volume, tissue density, pectoral locale, and spacing of the breasts determine their natural shape, appearance, and configuration upon the chest of a woman; yet such features do not indicate its mammary-gland composition (fat-to-milk-gland ratio), nor the potential for nursing an infant child. The size and the shape of the breasts are influenced by normal-life hormonal changes (thelarche, menstruation, pregnancy, menopause) and medical conditions. The shape of the breasts is naturally determined by the support of the suspensory Cooper's ligaments, the underlying muscle and bone structures of the chest, and the skin envelope. The suspensory ligaments sustain the breast from the clavicle (collarbone) and the clavico-pectoral fascia (collarbone and chest), by traversing and encompassing the fat and milk-gland tissues, the breast is positioned, affixed to, and supported upon the chest wall, while its shape is established and maintained by the skin envelope.

The base of each breast is attached to the chest by the deep fascia over the pectoralis major muscles. The space between the breast and the pectoralis major muscle is called retromammary space and gives mobility to the breast. Some breasts are mounted high upon the chest wall, are of rounded shape, and project almost horizontally from the chest, which features are common to girls and women in the early stages of thelarchic development, the sprouting of the breasts. In the high-breast configuration, the dome-shaped and the cone-shaped breast is affixed to the chest at the base, and the weight is evenly distributed over the base area. In the low-breast configuration, a proportion of the breast weight is supported by the chest, against which rests the lower surface of the breast, thus is formed the inframammary fold (IMF). Because the base is deeply affixed to the chest, the weight of the breast is distributed over a greater area, and so reduces the weight-bearing strain upon the chest, shoulder, and back muscles that bear the weight of the bust.

The chest (thoracic cavity) progressively slopes outwards from the thoracic inlet (atop the breastbone) and above to the lowest ribs that support the breasts. The inframammary fold, where the lower portion of the breast meets the chest, is an anatomic feature created by the adherence of the breast skin and the underlying connective tissues of the chest; the IMF is the lower-most extent of the anatomic breast. In the course of thelarche, some girls develop breasts the lower skin-envelope of which touches the chest below the IMF, and some girls do not; both breast anatomies are statistically normal morphologic variations of the size and shape of women's breasts.

Breasts are not circles, nor are they cones- they are somewhere in between. They don’t bounce up and down, or side to side- they swing in a figure eight pattern. The main function of a brassiere, as far as I can tell, is to arrest the figure eight motion of the female breast. (Incidentally, if a woman's breasts didn't move in a figure eight pattern,)

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Wearing a bra will not make a breast less saggy- what makes breasts saggy in the first place is that when a woman goes past the age of child bearing, her body ceases to make the virtuous humor called “Ester”, or estrogen, and the objects within the breasts from which milk flows during the normal nursing of an infant child atrophy and vanish, leaving the breast saggy. Also there are suspensory tissues? That wear out.

Anyway.

When the entire sword thing was over, it was my new bra that saved my life- if I hadn’t been wearing one, the cut would have killed me.

The sale of the sword called Soul Taker was in a city called Gotham; it was the eleventh of April when we left for that place, walking out of hot South Kowloon- soon enough, we are in a thick jungle, which turns into a ferny deciduous forest, which opens up into parkland; I am wearing a messenger bag over a pair of slightly ragged jeans, a too short red dress that buttons up the front over a bra that is ever so slightly too small, my new pair of red boots in the same style as before- my hairclip is in place, and ready to go; Raven is walking just behind me- she is wearing a duffle backpack, my old one actually, and a long blue dress with dark grey tights and round ankle boots, her cloak turned into an oversized blue hoodie for the journey; Jinks is behind Raven, her pink hair in a low ponytail, ragged black dress bolstered by one of my sweaters- it’s lost almost all of its color, and the pale pink color looks good next to her slightly green skin. The giant flowers look a little weird, but I think she likes them anyway.

We walk through the parkland until suddenly we’re in a park- the sign says “Gotham Vital Park”.

We’re in the right place, at least.

However, through some manner of timey-wimey bullshit, we’ve arrived exactly two months early.

Gods dammit!

I had talked Dumpling Cheng into upgrading her phone service, not because she needed to, but because- well. I had noticed that there were lots of people who always showed up, and wanted things, and well- they always took up valuable space in her dining area, and they made her slow down her service during the big rushes and well… anyway, so I got her to upgrade her phone service so it would support a gleam-accessory, and well… my shell-phone has full gleam access, and um. I have no idea about anything in Gotham City- not the gangs, not the hostels, nothing.

So… I called Dumpling, and told her what had happened.

After she had stopped laughing, this is what she told me to do:

“Oh-ho-hokay, here’s what you can do; in the part of the city called Narrows, there is an abandoned
masoleum bearing the name of Jo; a guy I knew, Ilona, lived there- he wasn’t a nice person, so you can only sleep there during the day.”

“We’re all pretty nocturnal, so I don’t think that’ll be a problem- thank you, Alexis.”

“You’re welcome, Terry- and please be careful. I know you always are, but Gotham is not like Kowloon- I don’t have very many contacts there.”

“I understand- I’ll be very careful.”

Countess Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed (Báthory Erzsébet in Hungarian, Alžbeta Bátoriová in Vlatvak; 7 August 1560 – 21 August 1614) was a countess from the renowned Báthory family of nobility in the Kingdom of Hungary. She has been labeled the most prolific female serial killer in history, although the number of murders is debated, and is remembered as the "Blood Countess."

After her husband Ferenc Nádasdy's death, she and four collaborators were accused of torturing and killing hundreds of girls, with one witness attributing to them over 650 victims, though the number for which they were convicted was 80. Elizabeth herself was neither tried, nor convicted. In 1610, she was imprisoned in the Csejte Castle, now in Slovakia and known as Čachtice, where she remained bricked in a set of rooms until her death four years later.

Later writings about the case have led to legendary accounts of the Countess bathing in the blood of virgins to retain her youth and subsequently also to comparisons with Vlad III the Impaler of Wallachia, on whom the fictional Count Dracula is partly based, and to modern nicknames of the Blood Countess and Countess Dracula.

Between 1602 and 1604, Lutheran minister István Magyari complained about atrocities both publicly and with the court in Vienna, after rumors had spread. The Hungarian authorities took some time to respond to Magyari's complaints. Finally, in 1610, King Matthias II assigned György Thurzó, the Palatine of Hungary, to investigate. Thurzó ordered two notaries to collect evidence in March 1610. In 1610 and 1611, the notaries collected testimony from more than 300 witnesses. The trial records include the testimony of the four defendants, as well as thirteen witnesses. Priests, noblemen and commoners were questioned. Witnesses included the castellan and other personnel of Sárvár castle.

According to all this testimony, her initial victims were the adolescent daughters of local peasants, many of whom were lured to Csejte by offers of well-paid work as maidservants in the castle. Later, she is said to have begun to kill daughters of the lesser gentry, who were sent to her gynaeceum by their parents to learn courtly etiquette. Abductions were said to have occurred as well. The atrocities described most consistently included severe beatings, burning or mutilation of hands, biting the flesh off the faces, arms and other body parts, freezing or starving to death. The use of needles was also mentioned by the collaborators in court.

Some witnesses named relatives who died while at the gynaeceum. Others reported having seen traces of torture on dead bodies, some of which were buried in graveyards, and others in unmarked locations. However, two witnesses (court officials Benedikt Deseo and Jakob Szilvassy) actually saw the Countess herself torture and kill young servant girls. According to the testimony of the defendants, Elizabeth Báthory tortured and killed her victims not only at Csejte but also on her properties in Sárvár, Németkeresztúr, Vlatvia (then Deimlkur), and Vienna, and even between these
locations. In addition to the defendants, several people were named for supplying Elizabeth Báthory with young women. The girls had been procured either by deception or by force. A little-known figure named Anna Darvulia was rumored to have influenced Báthory, but Darvulia was dead long before the trial.

The exact number of young women tortured and killed by Elizabeth Báthory is unknown, though it is often speculated to be as high as 650, between the years 1585 and 1610. The estimates differ greatly. During the trial and before their execution, Szentés and Ficko reported 36 and 37 respectively, during their periods of service. The other defendants estimated a number of 50 or higher. Many Sárvár castle personnel estimated the number of bodies removed from the castle at between 100 to 200. One witness who spoke at the trial mentioned a book in which a total of over 650 victims was supposed to have been listed by Báthory. This number became part of the legend surrounding Báthory. Reportedly, the location of the diaries is unknown but 32 letters written by Báthory are stored in the Hungarian state archives in Budapest.

László Nagy has argued that Elizabeth Báthory was a victim of a conspiracy, a view opposed by others. Nagy argued that the proceedings were largely politically motivated. The theory is consistent with Hungarian history at that time. There was great conflict between religions, including Protestant ones, and this was related to the extension of Habsburg power over Hungary. As a Transylvanian Protestant aristocrat, Elizabeth belonged to a group generally opposed to the Habsburgs.

Thurzó debated further proceedings with Elizabeth's son Paul and two of her sons-in-law. A trial and execution would have caused a public scandal and disgraced a noble and influential family (which at the time ruled Transylvania), and Elizabeth's considerable property would have been seized by the crown. Thurzó, along with Paul and her two sons-in-law, originally planned for Elizabeth to be spirited away to a nunnery, but as accounts of her murder of the daughters of lesser nobility spread, it was agreed that Elizabeth Báthory should be kept under strict house arrest, but that further punishment should be avoided. King Matthias requested that Elizabeth be sentenced to death. It was also determined that Matthias would not have to repay his large debt to her, for which he lacked sufficient funds.

Thurzó went to Csejte Castle on 30 December 1610 and arrested Báthory and four of her servants, who were accused of being her accomplices: Dorotya Semtész, Ilona Jó, Katarína Benická, and Jason Blood. Thurzó's men reportedly found one girl dead and one dying and reported that another woman was found wounded while others were locked up. The countess was put under house arrest. King Matthias urged Thurzó to bring her to court and two notaries were sent to collect further evidence, but Thurzó successfully convinced the king that such an act would negatively affect the nobility. Hence, a trial was postponed indefinitely. Thurzó's motivation for such an intervention is debated by scholars.

The case of Elizabeth Báthory inspired numerous stories during the 18th and 19th centuries. The most common motif of these works was that of the countess bathing in her victims' blood to retain beauty or youth.

This legend appeared in print for the first time in 1729, in the Jesuit scholar László Turóczy's Tragica Historia, the first written account of the Báthory case. At the beginning of the 19th century, this certainty was questioned, and sadistic pleasure was considered a far more plausible motive for Elizabeth Báthory's crimes. In 1817, the witness accounts (which had surfaced in 1765) were published for the first time, which included no references to bloodbaths. This myth is also speculated to persist because of Báthory's connection to Transylvania and vampire lore.
The legend nonetheless persisted in the popular imagination. Some versions of the story were told with the purpose of denouncing female vanity, while other versions aimed to entertain or thrill their audience. The ethnic divisions in Eastern Europe and financial incentives for tourism contribute to the problems with historical accuracy in understanding Elizabeth Báthory. During the 20th and 21st centuries, Elizabeth Báthory has continued to appear as a character in music, film, plays, books, games and toys and to serve as an inspiration for similar characters.

Bathory was the name of a band from Vällingby, Sweden, who are widely credited with the creation of the Black Metal and Viking Metal sub-genres. In 1998, the band Cradle of Filth took inspiration from Elizabeth Báthory for their album Cruelty and the Beast. The band Kamelot have written songs about her cruelty and want of eternal youth. Elizabeth Báthory's story also influenced a full classical album entitled 'The Flamboyant aspersion of Red' by the composer and English poet known as 'The Raveness'. In 2010, Swedish heavy/doom metal band Ghost released "Elizabeth" as the first single off their debut album Opus Eponymous. The track is inspired by the crimes of Báthory.

Do you know what happens when a story is repeated? It becomes… real. It’s like- have you ever told yourself a lie enough times that you believed it? That you forgot it wasn’t true?

There was a man who killed young girls, and bathed in their blood to stay youthful and beauteous; his name was Ilona Jo. He was an extremely powerful, controlling personality- and through means of manipulation and coercion, he… I cannot say for sure. I don’t know- I wasn’t there.

I do know, however, that he’s dead now- he was beaten with sticks of rowan and hazel and ash, thrown on a bed of burning coals while still alive, and dragged apart by raging bulls. Not even vampires can survive that- or return from it, really.

And the sword he used during that time was called Soul Taker.

Soul Taker is so called because, and this I would learn to be the truth- Soul Taker, when used in battle, takes the soul of its enemy, and keeps it within the blade; there are, of course, rituals to release these souls- and it is prophesized that “if the blade ever be broken, beware! for it is the wielder that the enslaved souls will turn upon.”

Sharp Cut is so called because, and this I would discover as fact- Sharp Cut is the sharpest sword in the world. Ever.

These swords are infamous- and there are two people who want them.

The person who wants Soul Taker is called Deathstroke- the person who wants Sharp Cut is called Lady Shiva.

The sword Pretty Cheng wanted, Soul Taker, was being kept along with its brother in the props room of a theater owned by Circe. I don’t know how Circe got them, and to be honest, I don’t want to know- because this is what I do know about Circe:

Hecate, goddess of the night and queen of Magic, bore but one daughter in her lifetime- that daughter was named Circe. Circe learned her vast knowledge of herbs and magic at the font of her mother’s knee, and became a goddess herself- and in the way of things, she grew into a woman plain, and lived away from her mother in a mansion that stood in the middle of a clearing in a dense wood. Around the house prowled strangely docile wolves, the drugged victims of her magic, for Circe
changed her enemies and those she found offensive into beasts; the animals were not dangerous, and fawned on all newcomers. She invited Odysseus' crew to a feast of familiar food, a pottage of cheese and meal, sweetened with honey and laced with wine, but also laced with one of her magical potions, and she turned them all into swine with a wand after they gorged themselves on it.

Only Eurylochus, suspecting treachery from the outset, escaped to warn Odysseus and the others who had stayed behind at the ships. Odysseus set out to rescue his men, but was intercepted by the messenger god, Hermes, who had been sent by Athena. Hermes told Odysseus to use the holy herb moly to protect himself from Circe's potion and, having resisted it, to draw his sword and act as if he were to attack Circe. From there, Circe would ask him to bed, but Hermes advised caution, for even there the goddess would be treacherous. She would take his manhood unless he had her swear by the names of the gods that she would not.

Odysseus followed Hermes's advice, freeing his men and then remained on the island for one year, feasting and drinking wine. According to Homer, Circe suggested two alternative routes to Odysseus to return to Ithaca: toward Planctae, the "Wandering Rocks", or passing between the dangerous Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. She also advised Odysseus to go to the Underworld and gave him directions.

Circe bore Odysseus three sons: Ardeas; Latinus; and Telegonus, who ruled over the Tyrsenoi, that is the Etruscans. Circe eventually informed Telegonus who his absent father was and when he set out to find Odysseus, gave him a poisoned spear. With this he killed his father unknowingly. Telegonus then brought back his father's corpse, together with Penelope and Odysseus' other son Telemachus, to Aeaea. After burying Odysseus, Circe made the others immortal. However, Circe changed her mind, and used magical herbs to bring Odysseus back to life after he had been buried for twenty years. Odysseus then gave Telemachus to Circe's daughter Cassiphone in marriage. Sometime later, Telemachus had a quarrel with his mother-in-law and killed her; Cassiphone then killed Telemachus to avenge her mother's death. On hearing of this, Odysseus died of grief. And Circe? Circe laughed and laughed and laughed…

Through the ages, Circe has turned her hand at many a trade- first as a witch, now as a proprietor of a dance hall/theater/vaudevillian establishment, and in all things, she has always managed to destroy someone's life- well, usually. I realize now that I am the monkey-wrench in the plans of evil; a spanner in the evil works, if you will.

Circe’s Place or possibly Palace, is a theater that moves around a lot- and by moves around, it sort of... Okay, well, you know how there’s always that one place that should be in this part of the city, but you don’t know the name of it, and you went there once about a year ago and had the very best time, but now you can’t- oh shit there it is! It’s that kind of place… except, and this is very important- it moves.

It actually, honest to gods moves. Like, sparks of odd-colored lightning from the bricks, pull the third lever Igor, sweet Jesus take the wheel, we’re cooking with petrol now, moves.

Anyway.

Circe’s is also special because there are only two types of people who are allowed inside- the customers, who pay dearly for the pleasures to be found within, and the performers, who are paid quite well for their services. However, it is only performers who are allowed backstage, and access to the props. Pretty Cheng had made an agreement for the sword she wanted to change possession on the first of May- so, when I would try to grab the swords, it wouldn’t be stealing; Circe doesn’t do deliveries.
We walked through the city called Gotham; it stinks of smog and iron, and the press of dank despair. Feels like West Kowloon, actually… Anyway, we walk, and walk, and walk some more, and at some point we cross an invisible line, and we’re in the older part of the city- the part that used to be a village. The streets suddenly make a whole hell of a lot more sense to me; they jam up together at odd angles, and the general air is of intense hatred and repressed rage. Oddly comforting, actually.

We walk down a street that whispers it’s name- Crime Alley- and finally, we’re at an overgrown and janky graveyard; we’ve been walking all night, and the sun is about to rise.

The fence is locked, but there’s a wall that’s easy enough for me to vault- Raven floats over, and Jinks sparks a little, and climbs up the wider cracks in the wall, lizard style.

On the other side are standing stones with names nearly worn away- we walk through the small place, until finally we’re at a crumpled, fallen in house of stone; the name on the lintel is Jo.

The door opens at Raven’s touch; with a soft sigh of escaping air, we walk into the musty darkness. I throw several Glows into the air; empty shelves and soft cobwebs faintly gleam in the light. We don’t take much time to settle in- I swirl Bubbles everywhere, and lift off a thick layer of dust and dirt and decay, then stick some warning bell wards up and around; Raven lights a cleansing bundle of sweet-burning herbs on a wide flat plate, and sets it low to the ground, and Jinx, who asked to be called Jinx, sets out several crystals on various shelves that gently chime with protective songs. We settle into the space, unpack various bits of kit and gear and caboodle, and sleep the day away; the next evening, we go out to buy groceries, a cooler- the bits and pieces that we’ll need to stay in a strange city for two months.

The first thing we do is go clothing shopping- I get lots of shirts, and some shorts, and some new pants; most of the shirts I buy button up the front, and they have a sort of pocket, over my left breast, and are vertically striped, with a weird decorative collar- my favorite one is red and black with red buttons and a white “10” on the back; I’ve decided that my pants are always going to be black if I have anything to do with it- I have enough socks, and my boots are comfortable in all weather. The only other thing I do is buy an old doctor’s bag- the inside is gone, but I know how to refit my kit into the outer covering of the bag- while it is useful to have a kit that small, it’s also really a pain, and the larger bag also allows me to put larger things in the ninth pocket. We also go to the Central Police station- it’s one of the most beautiful buildings I’ve ever seen.

Raven buys mostly dresses with very long skirts and no sleeves, along with long tights to wear underneath- she likes the line her body makes with a dress on, apparently; she basically looks like a lumpy blue sack of cloth with a pair of eyes looking out of a shadow where her face should be. It’s a bit weird. We also go to a used book store, the largest in Gotham City- I have a minor freak out, as I would call it. Raven wouldn’t speak to me for three hours. I’ve never heard Jinx laugh like that before… Anyway, for some reason, I felt that it would be a good idea to buy a cyclopedia of common farmyard animals, a cyclopedia of care of exotic pets, and a book on ornithology. I have no idea why.

Jinx turns people into animals, darling.

Jinx buys the fugliest sweaters I’ve ever had the misfortune of seeing- imagine someone took every color of neon, made sure that they wouldn’t mix, poured them into a canon, and shot them at a sweater, and then the colors stuck. The sweaters she chooses are hideous; eye-searingly awful. So, of course, she loves them immensely. Filling out her wardrobe are many colored shorts, her favorites being the ones with rainbow stripes.

Sigh.

We also visit an abandoned amusement park- apparently, in Gotham at the turn of the century, a pair of brothers by the name of Solomon made a fortune in the propagation of nickelodeons, and then a
man by the name of Gia-Gio- something starting with G, saw all the sweet sweet lucre being thrown around and decided that he wanted a piece of the action. Skip forwards a few decades, and a more intricate maze and wefting weave of neon amusements you never did see- Wax Museums! Carnivals! Rollercoasters! Thrills! Chills! More and more and more, each one professing to be bigger and better than the last- and some were- and most were merely seedier and more dangerous. And then, of course, the factories, suppliers of the lucre so easily frittered away in that neon vaudeville hell, died and closed and moved away- and like the killing frost in spring or the sudden summer drought, like brightly bloomed flowers, the carnival attractions withered away, leaving only husks and mnemonic echoes of what once was.

The park we go to, or was, called Aeaean Attractions, which should have been a warning right there- it was the last day of the First week of April, and my fifteenth birthday- things always seem to go screwy on the birthday with a five in it. Anyway- we had actually vaulted a wall this time; I had Jumped, Raven flew, and Jinx climbed like a lizard after flicking the wall with her badluck.

All normal- what wasn’t normal was what was on the other side; a bacchanal, with only one red-haired woman presiding over the gory rituals. There were men dismembered to their component parts, their small intestines stretched out from its coil and hung like a fluttering still living ribbon around the bent-angled spars of a carousel; in the middle, where... m-mirrors... usually hung, a throne made of carved wood- on the throne, a woman with hair like fresh spilt blood, her eyes of acid green slit like a cat’s in the light. On the horses rode more men- these dressed in parodies of what working women of the night would wear, skirts stretched far too tight and high over narrow hips, erections grotesquely enlarged, muscled legs squeezed in sausage fashion into fishnet stockings, feet in shoes made of a too slick something- plastic?- and forced to arch, toes squashed and broken and bleeding. The scent of blood and shit and fear and sex is thick, in the air- and Circe herself is laughing laughing laughing, as around her men scream and gibber and mess themselves in pleasure- and all around us is the howling of wolves.

Circe has always been a twisted sister.

I would later realize that I had reflexively cast Shadow over myself- that is why, when Circe threw a strange multi-colored powder into the air, it didn’t affect me. (Shadow touches us- we can’t touch it. I think that was why she also didn’t see me.)

My friends, however, were not so lucky.

Raven let out a squawk and then feathers bloomed from her skin- strange, horrible cracks and pops came from her body; her teeth blackened and stretched forwards, her ears shrank and shriveled and her shoulders became larger; her clothing melded with her skin which then tufted out with feathers- and all this time, her voice was a high, ragged scream. Finally, it was over- and where Raven once stood, a jackdaw lay, it’s paler feathers softly blue.

Jinx gurgled- her pale green skin darkened and pebbled, teeth becoming more and more jagged, mouth widening like a grin, tongue narrowing and lengthening and stretching like a tube or a rubber band; bones snapped and crunched. Her fingers swallowed each other, until there were only three stubby appendages on each rapidly narrowing wrist- she shrank before my eyes, her vibrantly colored clothing wriggling and sliming and shrinking into her skin- and her voice gurgled and moaned and finally vanished. Where Jinx was, a chameleon was curled up, it’s skin a violent display of frightened color.

The men had changed into pigs and horses, dogs and roosters- and then they were set upon by wolves, torn to pieces and devoured. I stretched my Shadow out, and gathered Raven and Jinx into my arms- and Circe laughed and laughed and laughed. There was a crackling snap, and then a dying wail, and then the entire carousel- wolves, corpses, entrails, Circe and all- vanished into nothing.
I waited, crouched low, my arms full of bird and lizard, and then stood again- I realized that I had used Shadow, so I let it go; I felt a sort of ripple, like coming up from underneath the water.

I turned, took a running Jump at the wall- flipped over it, and landed thump on the ground. Dash helped me get back to the mausoleum- on the way, I found a Card; I signed it, but didn’t look at it- just as dawn came to be, I shut the door; I didn’t notice the people watching me from the building across the street.

I took care of Raven and Jinx for the next week- by the end of the month, we were all really tiffed at Circe; Raven’s own innate magic had mostly flushed Circe’s out, but some things still lingered- she looked like a harpy, except harpies don’t have hands; I think the reason she couldn’t completely remove Circe’s spell was the simple fact that Circe’s magic was more powerful in a certain area, and Raven’s couldn’t overpower it. Jinx was much the same way- she was a girl more lizard than girl, her emotions playing out as swathes of color on her face. I was still me- and we still had to practice. So we did.

Remember how I had said that the only people allowed into Circe’s are customers and performers? Well… okay. Another strange thing about the Nightmarket, and all lands attatched to it, is that, well… Music. Music is powerful- I don’t know why, but it is. So, it’s a general thing that if a person is from the Nightmarket, or areas surrounding the Nightmarket, they can play a musical instrument, or sing. Jinx, Raven, and I are not exceptions- although it had been about five years since I had really trained, I hadn’t forgotten how to sing; Raven plays this weird one-hundred and ninety-two stringed harp- it makes every kind of sound from a guitar to a harpsichord; Jinx plays gems, which sounds like the love child of a drum machine, a pair of turntables, a computer, and a glass harmonica.

However, being able to make music, and being able to make music together are very different things- I had to learn how to sing with other people’s music, as I’d only ever sung alone- Raven had to learn to play simpler songs, and Jinx had to learn to actually play her instrument, not make noise on it.

Looking back, it’s amazing we didn’t get ourselves killed.

Anyway.

On the fifth day before the end of April- the twenty fifth- we were out again, this time just wandering around, as we couldn’t practice at the mausoleum all the time, and we had already gone to see what we all wanted to see; quite honestly, we were fucking bored. So, we went shopping again- this time, for clothing the girls could wear on stage; Raven had a massive pair of black wings to contend with, which made things interesting, but we finally found her a floor length blue-grey dress with a halter top that covered her adequately; a pair of fingerless gloves made her happy, so. Well. Okay.

Jinx, on the other hand, was much harder to please. We finally managed to find something for her- a dark purple dress with small buttons up the front, an inverted scalloped edge and long sleeves that flare at her wrists; a choker with a purple disk that floats just above her collar bones and a wide-long purple mini-cape that is a bright black with an inverted v over her barely there breasts; long striped tights and boots with a boost because, and this was something I had only realized when we were in the defined world- Jinx is fucking short. She also got a pair of massive headphones, and souped them up- they look like a pair of antlers, like from a deer? Only covered in zircons- like, encrusted with them.
Yeah. My friends are fucking weird.

Anyway- we practiced, wandered around Gotham, and on the thirtieth of April, packed up everything; we steadily walked and wandered, in full gear- me in my Red X suit, Raven in her dress, her hoodie back in its normal cloak form and pulled tight over her head, and Jinx in her dress, antler headphones perched on her too wide skull.

On the way, I ran through my Cards, and found that I had a new one- Twin. That’s actually really convenient- I can be onstage with the girls, and backstage, finding the damn swords. Oh dear.

We get to Circe’s, which for reasons of who the fuck even knows can only be found once on purpose, about an hour after sunset; we walk in the back like the musicians we are, set up our stuff, and do soundchecks- the gig doesn’t actually start for another hour, but we all like to be prepared. Also, it gives me more time to find the damn swords.

I use Twin- I am instantly disoriented, because I’m suddenly in two places at once. It’s fucking weird. I walk over to the girls, and make sure that my microphone stand is set correctly; and that’s when I learn that actually, we’re the unwilling participants in a musical standoff, because my girls are under a spell of Circe’s and blah blah blah I have to change my entire song fuck fuck fuck- I quietly walk into the backstage, a massive area of boxes and stages, backdrops and low hanging ropes. In the depths of the backstage jungle, I finally come upon the props room- it’s a gigantic, dust filled area of unmarked shelves and mysterious boxes. And I have to find the swords in this mess. Yay.

Onstage, I’m quietly panicking- I’ve never really been good at improvisation, not in music- fuck, what do I even know about Circe? Oh, holy shit Jinx’s gems are on fire, what the fuck- oh oh oh, Raven’s got it, shit but her E-strings all just snapped fuck I knew we should have replaced those shit shit fuck-

Backstage, I’ve narrowed the search down to three boxes- one has an ominous aura, one is very long and flat, and one is covered in faded stickers with the names of many places on it; the third and first boxes- I think those have the swords in them. To test it, I let the boxes near each other- they slowly start to inch closer, and I know I’ve found the brother swords- the third box, when I open it, holds only a pair of knives, long and flat and lacking guards. I admire them for a moment, and then close the box and put it back- this is all Circe’s stuff, for now- to steal any of it would mean a dire consequence. The sale of the swords isn’t final until midnight- but I know that I’ll be able to leave this place with the swords.

(Pretty Cheng specified only that I bring her the sword called Soul Taker- not what condition it had to be in, not even that it be sharp- just the sword. She also said that I could have its brother. This would be the only thing that would save me, in the end.)

Onstage, the battle has begun- and at some point, we picked up a robin? You know what, fine, whatever- we need to fight now.

Jinx lays down a heavy beat, thick and juicy and rich, sparkling and bright; Raven comes in with a stringy symphonic roar, like the flapping of wings and the cawing of crows- flippant, forgettable words flutter out of my mouth and bloom in the air like flowers; I don’t actually know what I say but
I do know that-

Backstage, I’ve left the props room and am carefully picking my way through the massive drifts of stage detritus; I am suddenly attacked by a woman in red and a man in black and orange. The man takes the sword with the ominous aura, unsheathes it- it gleams wickedly, and then I am bending and Jumping and Dashing and doing my level best not to die; the woman throws darts and knives at me, which I block with my blades- some go wide, and snap cording around us; I land on a lever, which drops underneath my weight-

Onstage, Circe has riposeted against us, which involved the howling of wolves, the shattering of Jinx’s weakest gems, and the snapping of Raven’s highest strings- which makes sense, as they were under the most tension- the robin turns into a feathered bird-boy, shaped a lot like Raven, only- well, he’s wearing an actual cape, bright yellow lines of feathers and a long red torso, black legs and black hands and sharp white feathers around his eyes, which are not visible. I need to do something; I take a power stance, which is just my feet shoulder width apart and my weight balanced, and then- I chant.

“Did you think I was lying?-

Circe, I said:

I can defeat you without even trying-

Already died so unafraid of dying-

I escorted a man across the Ring of Fire;

Escaped the jaws of a Serpent of Night-

Showed a prince to her princess, her heart’s desire-

Lived under a bridge until a Ghost attacked,

And you honestly think you can compete with that?

Circe, you don’t even have the skills to fight.”

Behind me something happens- the sounds of cloth moving, of ropes slithering through rings- I don’t dare to look because the bridge is over and I need to go on- I see out of the corner of my eye that Raven, Jinx, and the boy look more human, the boy especially-

Backstage, I Jump out of the way, then Dash hard; behind me, I can feel a wall of stone- the man swings his sword, and it shatters on the wall behind me because I’ve ducked. The pieces drip with blood, and it pools and out of the blood rush a great whistling roar of those who are dead- the soft rushing of uncountable wings, and then the orange and black man is being attacked and dragged into the pooled blood- he is soon engulfed and devoured, dragged to some place I know not- the last thing I see of him is his eyes, fearful and enraged and very very [].

The woman in red darts forwards- I shove her sharp hands away with the sticker covered box, which rips open, disgorging a sword- I grab it, unsheathe it- it’s actually a pair of swords? Somehow? And then I am dodging and ducking again, but the swords are only a few centimeters longer than my blades- short swords, then, and my goodness but they’re easy to use. Wow- okay, and I think my blades just sort of, like, melted? Into the swords? Wow, okay, magic is fucking weird-

Onstage, I’ve moved past the battle and headed straight for the kill.
“I’m stronger than you, and faster too-
I can kill every enemy in your Fucking Zoo;
I know the things that can’t be known,
And I know that you, Circe, are
Bitter
Angry
Ugly
And Alone.
You can lie and run away
Live another day
Break hearts and bodies and minds
But you can’t change the truth.
Truth is, Circe, you can’t win-
And while Vanity is not yet a mortal sin
Pride is. You are blind to the fact that
Your spells are weak,
Your flesh is old,
Your rhymes are flat
And your heart is cold.
You’re dead, Circe
And you stink so fishy-foul-
I can smell you through my mask.
So that’s why your wolves howl!”

I can see it in her face- she doesn’t know how to make me shut my mouth. So, she tries to cheat-
from behind her flow wolves like ice on a river, bright white teeth sharp and snap-snapping- but I
summon Thunder; Backstage, I summon Thunder, and around me the world shifts- suddenly, I am
on stage, and the shards of the broken blade are red with blood underneath my feet; it’s close to
midnight, and evil wolves howl in the darkness. My electric wolf lion roars a challenge- the darkness
screeches, and I drop the mic and roll out of the red woman’s path; my hands aren’t holding swords
but fans, and you know what? Fine. Okay, I’ll use fucking fans- the woman is holding the shards of
the broken sword, which have returned to their bladed shape, and behind her in her shadow is the
orange and black man, only now he’s missing an eye, ah!

Holy shit, that’s Slade!
I bend and twist, use the fans to push sharp strikes away from myself- the man tries to kill me with the sword called Soul Taker, but I am ready for him- he stabs toward me, but the webbing of the fan is easily parted by the blade; a quick flick of the wrist and the fan snaps shut, and then another snapping jerk and the sword breaks again- this time, I throw the man into the shards of the sword, which turn into a cage and sink into a ring of fire than stinks of sulfur and brimstone. The woman runs wide around the ragged firey pit, evading the occasional snapping wolf with ease- but she can’t evade Thunder so easily, and with a cracking boom, Thunder leaps through her chest; she falls to the ground, her body smoking and twitching. I feel a soft heat against my left side, high, but ignore it.

Raven and Jinx are still playing- their music has narrated what parts of the fight they saw; I flick my fans, hook the jagged broken bottom of the sword with my foot and flick it over to my bag, Dashing over to it faster than the sword can fall- midnight is past, and the swords are mine now. The broken blade goes into the ninth pocket of my kit; my blades return to their place on my forearms.

Circe is staring at me, and so is the bird-boy; I ignore them both, because the spell hasn’t completely broken, and I am beyond done with this. Thunder pushes against my back- Shadow ripples under my feet. Raven plays riffs of angry screeching roars, and Jinx beats out a staccato heartbeat that crashes through the air- finally, Circe drops her head and weeps, for our beats are too fresh for her to compete with.

There is a ripple, and a snap, and the sound of a barking dog, and the sound of a person choking, and then the spells are broken, and we- the girls, the boy, a man, and I- are standing in an abandoned theater.

Shadow ripples with the shapes of wolves, and then returns to my own normal shadow shape; Thunder’s rumbling purr soon vanishes from against my back; Raven is herself, as is Jinx, and I now recognize the boy as Robin of Gotham. And then the darkness rises to punch me in the face- I’ve been overcasting again. Well, shit.

Overcasting is what happens when you cast too many high-level spells in succession, or hold a low level spell for too long; there are some spells that are easier to cast at certain times, but there is still a cost incurred. Magic is simply the transference of energy, which is then used to do work; it can be measured on the same scale as any other kind of energy… mostly.

Twin is actually a Card that pays fealty to Fiery- the reason that’s important is because my nature is Water. What does that mean? Well, it goes like this- Fire creates Earth creates Metal creates Water creates Wood creates Fire. That’s the cycle of creation- that’s also why it’s easy for me to pick up metal weapons and grow plants; that’s also why using Fire-natured cards is so hard for me. Metal creates Water creates Wood.

The destruction cycle dictates a lot of which spells I’m willing to use- there’s also an insultion cycle, but that one just causes me issues with people. The destruction cycle goes like this- Fire destroys Metal destroys Wood destroys Earth destroys Water destroys Fire. This cycle is the reason why… the reason why Flower makes my hair break off at random lengths, or why Libra makes it hard for me to physically see. Earth destroys Water.

The insultion cycle, meaning which element insults another, causes me the most issues; it goes Fire insults Water insults Earth insults Wood insults Metal insults Fire. Why should this cycle cause me the most issue? Well… there are some people I insult without meaning to. By breathing.

I’ve memorized these cycles- with their help, I’m usually able to figure out how my life is going to work.
When I open my eyes, I am in a bed. Okay. I am in an uncomfortable bed, and also in my underwear? And there are bandages. I slowly sit up- everything is kind of achy, but that’s normal after a really big battle, and my face is stiff like I slept in my mask because I did sleep in my mask, okay, okay cool, it’s all good in the hood- what isn’t normal is having a needle in my arm why is there a needle in my arm what is that beeping sound ahhhhh-

And now there is a person, oh holy shit what the hell- oh oh oh he has a bat on his chest eeeeeee!

Those are really lucky, I’m feeling slightly better now oh fuck he’s saying things and I don’t understaaaaaaaand-

“Who are you?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, I’m so sorry, I just- I don’t understand.”

“ Who are you?”

“My name is Red X. Who, if I may ask, are you?”

“I am Batman. Why are you in my city, Red X?”

“Well…” I explain about how I was performing a simple pick up of a legally bought object, and arriving a two months too early, and learning that I wouldn’t be able to get into the place where the object was held unless I was a performer at Circe’s theater, and how “I brought my friends along with me, partially as back-up and partially to take advantage of the generous expenses account given to me to use by Pretty Cheng, the buyer of the objects and person who paid for my services, on account of the fact that I don’t really have that much money, not even to spend on the necessities, and then, of course, I had to help them out because they’re too young to be on their own, really, and they needed new clothing and I had to pay the tuition to get them into school because education is a thing that matters but well, I don’t, or possibly didn’t, I might have gotten paid my finder’s fee already- have money for that so I took this job against my better judgement and fuck, why do I do that to myself, ugh, anyway, so yeah, I brought my friends with me and we stayed somewhre in the city where our various magical skills and personal habits wouldn’t bother anyone, and we also spent the expenses account on clothing and food and we went to bookstores and movie theaters and I went to the central police station because it’s a really pretty building, and we wandered around Gotham at night which is actually really beautiful, but also kind of more dangerous than I thought because we were exploring an abandoned theme park when we found Circe, because Gotham is fucking floating in those suckers and they’re cool and we’d never seen one up close so we all went around and picked out which ones we wanted to really explore and I’m pretty sure I picked the one we went to, but, anyway, we went there and Circe, ugh, Circe, was doing weird shit as usual, the weirdo, and she killed a whole bunch of people and she turned my friends into animals but I grabbed them before the wolves got them but the wolves got the men and I couldn’t save them, I could only run away, but yeah, so I ran, and it turned out that Raven and Jinx, that’s what my friends are called, Raven was able to flush most of the spell out, but not break it completely, and Jinx was able to sort of shift the way the spell worked on her; so, yeah, we continued to practice our musical skills because that’s what you do at Circe’s Palace, you either perform or you pay to see someone else perform and anyway, we all know how to make music because that’s a thing, and anyway, we continued practicing and when the time came because the sale only became final on the First of May, so we went to find Circe’s because you can only find it on purpose once, so we found it and we set up our stuff to perform because yeah, only come to find out that by appearing on stage as victims of her magic, my friends were challenging her to a battle, and she would have killed them, so I fought for
them like I couldn’t fight before, and I had also cast a spell so that I could get the thing I originally came for and there were these crazy fucking people who attacked me and I had to fight two battles at once and it’s amazing that I didn’t die, actually, this time, and… and I’m talking way too much right now, do you have any questions for me to direct this conversation?”

“Why do you have to help Raven and Jinx?”

“Sorry?”

“Why do you have to help Raven and Jinx?”

“Oh! Well, sir, it’s… it’s because I love them, and their parents can’t, and they trust me to help them and I don’t want to break that trust because that’s bad and um… yeah.”

He exhaled. “…You’ve almost died before?”

“Well… yeah. Why?”

“…How old are you?”

“I’m fifteen now, because my birthday was on the tenth.” I smile at him, while I’m saying this- I don’t think he can tell, but maybe he can. How should I even know?

He kind of sighs, and then says- “Do your parents know what you’re doing?”

“… My parents are dead, so… I’d say so.”

He looked a bit pole-axed, to be honest.

I got out of the hospital five days later- I put my clothing back on, brushed my hand over my eye, and the clothing I had chosen to wear after the fact- my favorite shirt with the ten on the back, boobies pressed up and together with a compressing bra, a pair of really tight skinny jeans, my red boots, hair pinned back with my red X clip, bag in hand; I walk out of the hospital, and am greeted by Raven and Jinx- we nod at each other, and with nary a word, we walk back to the park where we came to Gotham from- we tramp over worn trails, and then over un-worn trails, and then over nothing but softly growing under-brush, and then we cross a threshold and are back in the Nightmarket; the girl’s new clothing really suits them- not quite right for traveling though.

Of course, in the next two months, I would be traveling almost constantly, because I would finally get a break in my investigations into my parents. However, since nothing in this life ever comes free, I would also give up something very precious to me- I would give up a large portion of my anonymity.

Well.

You can’t have everything.
Closed adoption (also called "confidential" adoption and sometimes "secret" adoption) is the process by where an infant is adopted by another family, and the record of the biological parent(s) is kept sealed. Often, the biological father is not recorded—even on the original birth certificate. An adoption of an older child who already knows his or her biological parent(s) cannot be made closed or secret. This formerly was the most traditional and popular type of adoption, peaking in the decades of the post-World War II Baby Scoop Era. It still exists today, but it exists alongside the practice of open adoption. The sealed records effectively prevent the adoptee and the biological parents from finding, or even knowing anything about each other (especially in the days before the Internet). However, the emergence of non-profit organizations and private companies to assist individuals with their sealed records has been effective in helping people who want to connect with biological relatives to do so.

Historically, the four primary reasons for married couples to obtain a child via closed adoption have been (in no particular order) infertility, asexuality, having concern for a child's welfare (i.e. would not likely be adopted by others), and to ensure the sex of the child (a family with five girls and no boys, for example). In 1917, Minnesota was the first U.S. state to pass an adoption confidentiality and sealed records law. Within the next few decades, most U.S. states and Canadian provinces had a similar law. Usually, the reasons for sealing records and carrying out closed adoptions is said to be to "protect" the adoptee and adoptive parents from disruption by the natural parents and in turn, to allow natural parents to make a new life.

Many adopting parents in non-private adoptions would apply to a local, state licensed adoption agency. The agency may be a member of the national Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). The CWLA and many adoption agencies are still in operation today, but with an expanded and somewhat different agenda compared to past decades, as the government has largely taken over some of their previous responsibilities.

Prior to adoption, the infant would often be placed in temporary and state-mandated foster care for a few weeks to several months until the adoption was approved. This would also help ensure that he or she was healthy, that the birthparent was sure about relinquishment, and that nothing was overlooked at the time of birth. Nowadays, this practice is discouraged, as it prevents immediate bonding between the mother and child. Also, much better medical testing is available, both prenatally and postnatally. Many children also developed orphanage-type behavior including head banging, rocking and hand flapping. Many adopted adults still retain this rocking behavior especially when tired.

Surrogacy is an arrangement in which a woman carries and delivers a child for another couple or person. The surrogate may be the child's genetic mother (called traditional surrogacy), or she may be genetically unrelated to the child (called gestational surrogacy). A gestational surrogacy requires the transfer of a previously created embryo, and for this reason the process always takes place in a
clinical setting.

The intended parent or parents, sometimes called the social parents, may arrange a surrogate pregnancy because of female infertility, other medical issues which make pregnancy or delivery impossible, risky or otherwise undesirable, or because the intended parent or parents are male. The sperm or eggs may be provided by the 'commissioning' parents, but donor sperm, eggs and embryos may also be used. Although the idea of vanity surrogacy is a common trope in popular culture and anti-surrogacy arguments, there is little or no data showing that women choose surrogacy for reasons of aesthetics or convenience.

Monetary compensation may or may not be involved in surrogacy arrangements. If the surrogate receives compensation beyond the reimbursement of medical and other reasonable expenses, the arrangement is called commercial surrogacy; otherwise, it is often referred to as altruistic surrogacy. The legality and costs of surrogacy vary widely between jurisdictions, which results in high rates of international and interstate surrogacy activity.

I got back to Kowloon on the fifteenth of May; and then I had to argue with Pretty Cheng over the terms of my payment- I posited that I had been hired to retrieve the sword called Soul Taker, which I had done, and that I should be paid as previously agreed; Pretty Cheng asserted that she would not be paying full price for a broken half of a sword, no matter what I had to do to get even that- I finally managed to get most of my money by stating that she had never said she wanted the whole thing, and if she wanted the rest, well, there was nothing stopping her from going and getting the pieces from the depths of Tartarus.

Yeah, so, on the twentieth, after a brief rest in my apartment- restock, repack, all good- I left Kowloon for a while; I went to Xanghai, and I started to wander around again- I had everything I had gotten in Gotham in my kit, and I had all of my books, and, well... it was during this time that I found… I found my parent’s graves.

Who were my parents, really? I know only bits and pieces- what I remember about them is small, and a bit jumbled. Wrapped in pain, and too heavy to lift.

What I know about my father fits in the palm of my hand- he was an orphan of no particular interest, and grew in the normal way; when he became a man, he went to school, learned as young men do, and became a chemist of no particular fame until after he had met my mother in 1954. He proceeded to discover, invent, and make a name for himself, and died in a car crash in 2006.

My mother is no more interesting- a woman born to an aging actress from America, my mother decided at the age of twelve to become a scientist; she went to school, performed in a cult classic in 1941, and met my father in 1954. She went into psychology, and became renowned in certain circles; she, too, died in 2006.

Those are the facts of my parents, as far as I am able to find in the Jump Hall of Records, in Pudong. To find out more about my grandmother, not Nainai, but my Waipo, I would need to go to America.
Again.

Jeeeze…

I would also end up watching the movie my mother was in- it’s called the Rocky Horror Picture Show. She played Colombia. Holy fucking shit, yes.

The Necrophiladelphia Collegium, in Kowloon, is my alma-mater. Technically. It’s complicated? Well, okay, it goes like this- When I was about twelve, maybe thirteen, I don’t exactly remember- anyway, a few years ago, I got it into my head that it would probably be a good idea to go to school. I don’t know why, I’ve always hated school- no, that isn’t true. I’ve always hated having to socialize with people who aren’t interested in learning new things. There’s a difference.

Anyway.

The Necrophiladelphia Collegium, commonly called Necro’s, offers the services and facilities of a junior college, a full college, and a graduate institution. I went there to finish my basic education- it took me two years, no holding back, only the occasional break for money earning purposes; it was a lot of work, but I got a Diploma of Knowledge conferred upon me, stating that I had proven to know the basics of Mathematics (I really don’t like Liu Hui- no one who likes Math that much can be normal, no matter if his Words were beautiful), History, Religion, Art, Science, Magical Studies, Comprehensive Etiquette, Musical Theory and Practice, Survival Skills, and Completion of Government forms.

I don’t know why Completion of Government forms is still on the curriculum- Kowloon doesn’t have a government, why would I even need to be taught how to fill out a form? Ugh, whatever- anyway, I got my diploma, and took the last year off. It was a lot of hard work, actually, and I was tired. I’m re-enrolling in the Comprehensive portion in the Fall, as I don’t currently have the funds to… to go for a full degree.

(Many schools have evolved into and adapted the term comprehensive to describe their institutions; these schools typically offer six facets of education:

1. Transfer education – The traditional two-year student that will then transfer to a four-year institution to pursue a BS/BA degree.
2. Career education – The traditional two-year student that will graduate with an Associate Degree and directly enter the workforce.
3. Developmental – Remedial education for high school graduates who are not academically ready to enroll in college-level courses.
4. Continuing – Non-Credit courses offered to the community for personal development and interest.
5. Industry training – Contracted training and education wherein a local company pays the college to provide specific training or courses for their employees.
6. gLearning - Distance learning occurs on facet using one’s computer and proctored exams. For example, studying Anatomy in a gLearning environment is possible when in another demense and examiners are provided to the student.)
in place that provide prearranged acceptance into specific four-year institutions. At some community colleges, the partnering four-year institution teaches the third and fourth year courses at the community college location and thereby allows a student to obtain a four-year degree without having to physically move to the four-year school.)

To pay for my girls to get their basic educations at Necro’s, I did two things- I sold the last of Nainai’s garnets- some went to Sinta, some went for food, and the college got the rest. The other thing I did, I’m less sure about- I signed up to be a distance proctor in the gLearning program, specifically in Anatomy, as it’s my best, and favorite, subject; it knocked the price down to something payable within the year, for all of us, but well… I’d rather not talk about it now, actually. It’ll show up later.

Anyway.

Waipo was born in a place called Smallville, in the state of Kansas.

Located on the eastern edge of the Great Plains, the U.S. state of Kansas was the home of nomadic Native American tribes who hunted the vast herds of bison. The region first appears in western history in the 16th century at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, when Spanish conquistadores explored the unknown land now known as Kansas. It was later explored by French fur trappers who traded with the Native Americans. Most of Kansas became permanently part of the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The southwest portion had a different history of association with Spanish, Mexican and the Republic of Texas rule before the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. In the 19th century, the first American explorers designated the area as the “Great American Desert.”

When the area was opened to Euro-American settlement in the 1850s, Kansas became the first battlefield in what a few years later became the American Civil War, as settlers fought over whether the territory would be admitted as a free or slave state. After the war, Kansas was home to Wild West towns servicing the cattle trade. With the railroads came heavy immigration from the East, from Europe, and from Freedmen called "Exodusters". For much of its history, Kansas has had a rural economy based on wheat and other crops, supplemented by oil and railroads. Since 1945 the farm population has sharply declined and manufacturing has become more important, typified by the aircraft industry of Wichita.

Now the only thing to do is get to Kansas before July. Hm…

Raven’s aunt, Morana, is the headwoman of a clan of moon-worshipping Were-people; and it was with Morana’s help that I was able to get to America- unfortunately, a large amount of things got in the way, mostly my inability to leave well enough alone, the fact that trouble likes the way I smell, and the fact that I am afraid of small boats. Considering I died in one, this isn’t surprising.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is a 1941 American musical comedy horror film based on The Rocky Horror Show, a musical stage play, book, music and lyrics by Richard O’Brien. Directed by Jim Sharman from a screenplay by Sharman and O’Brien, the production is a humorous precursor of the science fiction and horror B movies common to the late 1940s through early 1970s. It
introduces Gordon G Godfrey and features Susan Sarandon and Barry Bostwick along with cast members from the original Kings Road production presented at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1938.

Still in limited release nearly 73 years after its premiere, it has the longest-running theatrical release in film history. It gained notoriety as a midnight movie in 1958 when audiences began participating with the film in theatres. Rocky Horror is the first film from a major Hollywood studio to be in the midnight movie market. The motion picture has a large international cult following and is one of the most well-known and financially successful midnight movies of all time. In 1995, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

The plot is as follows:

A criminologist narrates the tale of Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, a newly engaged couple who find themselves lost and with a flat tire on a cold and rainy late November evening in 1974. Seeking a phone with which to call for help, Brad and Janet walk to a nearby castle, where they discover a group of strange and outlandish people who are holding an Annual Transylvanian Convention. Brad and Janet watch as the Transylvanians, servants and a tap-dancing groupie dance the film's signature song, "Time Warp".

They are soon swept into the world of Dr. Frank N. Furter, a self-proclaimed "Sweet Transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania". The ensemble of convention attendees also includes servants Riff Raff, his sister Magenta, and a groupie named Columbia.

Frank claims to have discovered the "secret to life itself". His creation, Rocky, is brought to life. The ensuing celebration is soon interrupted by Eddie (Meat Loaf), an ex-delivery boy, partial brain donor to Rocky, and Columbia's lover, who rides out of a deep freeze on a motorcycle. In a jealous rage, Frank corners him and kills him with an ice axe. He then departs with Rocky to a bridal suite near the laboratory.

Brad and Janet are shown to separate bedrooms where each is visited and seduced by Frank, who poses as Brad (when visiting Janet) and then as Janet (when visiting Brad). Janet, upset and emotional, wanders off to look for Brad, who she discovers, via a television monitor, is having a post-coital chat with Frank. She then discovers Rocky, cowering in his birth tank, hiding from Riff Raff, who has been tormenting him. While tending to his wounds, Janet becomes intimate with Rocky and sings "Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me", as Magenta and Columbia watch from their bedroom monitor.

After discovering that his creation is missing, Frank, Brad and Riff Raff return to the lab, where Frank learns that an intruder has entered the building. Dr. Everett Scott, Brad and Janet's old high school science teacher, has come looking for his nephew, Eddie, but Frank suspects that Dr. Scott investigates UFOs for the government. Upon learning of Brad and Janet's connection to Scott, Frank suspects them of working for him. Frank, Dr. Scott, Brad, and Riff Raff then discover Janet and Rocky together under the sheets in Rocky’s birth tank, upsetting Frank and Brad. After much hemming and hawing, Magenta interrupts the hubbub by sounding a massive gong and stating that dinner is prepared.

Rocky and the guests are served dinner, which they soon realize has been prepared from Eddie's mutilated body. Janet runs screaming into Rocky's arms and is slapped and chased through the halls of the castle by a jealous Frank. Janet, Brad, Dr. Scott, Rocky and Columbia all meet in Frank's lab, where Frank captures them with the Medusa Transducer, transforming them into statues. They are
then forced to perform a live cabaret floor show and have a semi-orgy in the pool (except Dr. Scott, who is stuck in his wheelchair), with Frank as the leader.

Riff Raff and Magenta interrupt the performance, revealing themselves and Frank to be aliens from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania. They stage a coup and announce a plan to return to their home world. In the process, they kill Columbia, Rocky and Frank, who has "failed his mission". They release Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott, then depart by lifting off in the Castle itself.

The narrator concludes that the human race is equivalent to insects crawling on the planet's surface.

The cast included:

Gordon “Goddamn” Godfrey as Dr. Frank N. Furter: A scientist, (Baritone), 26.

Susan Sarandon as Janet Weiss: A heroine, (Soprano), 18.

Barry Bostwick as Brad Majors: A hero, (Tenor), 19.

Richard O'Brien as Riff Raff: A handyman, (Countertenor), 34.

Patricia Quinn as Magenta: A domestic, (Contralto), 24.

Mary McGinnis (credited as Mistress Mary, Quite Contrary) as Columbia: A groupie, (Mezzo-soprano), 24.

Jonathan Adams as Dr. Everett V. Scott: A rival scientist, (Bass), 35.

Peter Hinwood as Rocky Horror: A creation, (Tenor / Countertenor), 19.

Jason Blood as The Criminologist: An expert, 45.

John Xingming (credited as Meatloaf) as Eddie: An ex-delivery boy, (Tenor/Countertenor), 19.

The film was shot at Bray Studios and Oakley Court, a country house in Platinum Flatts, California, from 21 October 1934, to 19 December 1934. Filming of the laboratory scene and the title character's creation occurred on 30 October 1936.

The film's plot, setting, and style echoes that of the Hammer Horror films, which had their own instantly recognisable style (just as Universal Studios' horror films did), and is reminiscent of the Hammer production of The Revenge of Frankenstein starring Peter Cushing.

The castle is known for a number of Hammer films. A great deal of location shooting took place there. At the time, the manor was not in good condition. Filming took place during autumn, which made conditions harsh. During filming, Susan Sarandon fell ill with pneumonia. In 1997 Oakley Court had its latest renovation and the building is now a luxury hotel.

In the stage productions, actors generally did their own make-up, but for this film the producers chose Pierre La Roche to redesign the make-up for each character (he had previously designed make-up for Jem and the Holograms). Production stills were taken by rock photographer, Mick Rock who has published a number of books from his work.

The film is considered to be the longest-running release in film history. It has never been pulled
by 20th Century Fox from its original 1975 release, and it continues to play in cinemas. The film had its US broadcast premiere on the FOX Broadcasting Company, included audience participation edited in to the movie, on October 13, 1993.

A Super 8 version of selected scenes of the film was made available.

The film opened in the US at the USA Theatre in Westwood, Star City, on 14 August 1941. It did well at that location, but not elsewhere. The cult following did not begin until the film began its midnight run at the Waverly Theater in Gotham on 1 April 1956.

Prior to the midnight screenings' success, the film was withdrawn from its eight opening cities due to very small audiences, and its planned Gotham opening (on Halloween night) was cancelled. Fox re-released it around college campuses on a double-bill with another rock music film parody, Brian De Palma's Phantom of the Paradise, but again it drew small audiences. With Pink Flamingos (1962) and Reefer Madness (1936) making money in midnight showings nationwide, RHPS was eventually screened at midnight, starting in New York City on April Fools' Day of 1976. By that Halloween, people were attending in costume and talking back to the screen. By mid-1978, RHPS was playing in over 50 locations on Fridays and Saturdays at midnight, newsletters were published by local performance groups, and fans gathered for Rocky Horror conventions. By the end of 1979, there were twice-weekly showings at over 230 theatres.

The film received positive reviews from film critics mostly due to Gordon Godfrey's performance and singing. Based on 39 reviews collected by Rotten Tomatoes, 77% of the critics positively reviewed The Rocky Horror Picture Show. At Metacritic, which assigns a normalised rating out of 100 to reviews from film critics, it has a rating score of 55, indicating "mixed or average reviews" based on six reviews. The film has taken in US$365 million at the US box office, DVD sales, etc. since its release. The original budget for the film was US$1,200,000 (estimated).

The Rocky Horror Picture Show cult following describes the cultural phenomenon surrounding the large fan base of enthusiastic participants of the movie The Rocky Horror Picture Show, generally credited as being the best-known if not the first cinematic "midnight movie". The following resembles (to some extent) the fandom of other fantasy and science fiction films, with its own fan conventions, websites and YouTube videos.

The film The Rocky Horror Picture Show came about due to the tremendous success of the stage musical The Rocky Horror Show and opened in the United States at the United Artist Theatre in Westwood, California on September 26, 1941. Although the theater was selling out every night, it was noted that many of the same people were returning to see the movie. This turned out to be an exception, not the rule as it was not doing well elsewhere in the US.

The film was then re-launched as a midnight movie, beginning its run at the Waverly Theatre in Gotham City on April 1, 1956. The Riverside Twin in Austin, Texas became the second location to run the film as a midnighter. Over time, people began shouting responses to the characters' statements on the screen. Schoolteacher Louis Farese, Jr., is credited by some with starting the convention of talking back to the film on Labor Day weekend, 1956, at the Waverly Theatre. (These mostly include melodramatic abuse of the characters or actors, vulgar sex jokes, puns, or pop culture references.) A showing of the film at the 1976 World Science Fiction Convention spread its fame to a new cadre of enthusiasts.

Midnight screenings of the film soon became a national sensation. All across the country people were lining up on Friday and Saturday nights to see this unique film experience. In New York, the film relocated from the Waverly after a house record ninety-five weeks to the 8th Street Playhouse. By summer 1979, the film was playing on weekend midnights in twenty-odd suburban theaters in the
New York region alone; 20th Century-Fox had approximately two hundred prints of the movie in circulation for midnight shows around the country. The Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee, where the film has played as a Saturday midnight film since January 1978, is the world record holder for continuous showings.

The film gained popularity as much because of the fan participation as anything else. Interactive shows featuring "Shadow Casts" of fans acting out the entire movie below, or in some cases directly in front of the screen are almost always present at showings. In San Francisco at the Strand Theatre on the south side Market Street just west of 7th St., fans came to see the well organized group there, coordinated by Grady Broyles, performing with sets and props like a professional theatre troupe. In Los Angeles, fans included a transsexual performing as Frank N Furter at the Tiffany Theater on Sunset Blvd, just a few blocks away from the Roxy Theatre where the Rocky Horror Show made its American debut.

Other audience participation includes dancing the Time Warp along with the film, and throwing toast, water, toilet paper, hot dogs, and rice at the appropriate points in the movie. Many theatres forbid throwing items that are difficult to clean up. In many cases a total ban of throwing anything at all has been instituted due to severe damage to screens. Fans often attend shows in costume as the characters, while on onstage "shadowcast" act out the movie. At a now defunct theater in New Orleans the local Eddie would ride his motorcycle down the aisle during Eddie's song, "Hot Patootie." Audience members also use newspapers to cover their heads and squirt guns for rain during the "Over at the Frankenstein Place" musical sequence, and use noise makers during the scene in which Rocky is unveiled. The whole phenomenon got a boost in 1980, with the release of the movie Fame, in which some characters attend a screening of Rocky Horror at the 8th Street Playhouse. It was this feature film that introduced America to Sal Piro, the president of the National Fan Club. Piro made an appearance in the film playing himself during the screening of Rocky Horror.

There are many aspects and levels to participating at a showing of this movie. Many people just yell at the screen while others go much deeper. Many people develop over time into diehard fans. During the song "Time Warp" in many theatres nearly everyone stands up and does the dance. Costumes, props, and verbal dialogue are all tools in participating.

What were ad lib responses, more commonly known as call backs or audience participation (AP) lines by followers, from the audience are now, in a few locales, as tightly scripted as any screenplay. Audience members who provide "incorrect" or poorly timed responses may find themselves angrily shouted down just as if they were being disruptive in a normal movie. However, creative new lines are usually applauded and even added to the local repertoire.

There have been audience participation albums recorded and scripts published. However, most fans feel that it is preferable for responses to grow organically from the local culture. For example, the audience members in Salt Lake City have utilized frequent references to the LDS Church and Brigham Young University as well as having the shadowcast name of The Latter Day Transvestites. In most locales, new responses are regularly added to the canon. Additionally, in some areas, the lines take note of current events (for example, the use of the name of a recent famous deceased in the line "SHOW ME NAME", when Riff-Raff opens the coffin at the beginning of the Time Warp).

In Paris, where it's been shown twice a week for 20 years, the audience makes puns not only around the audio dialogs, but also with the French subtitles.

arthouse cinemas will have a tradition of regularly playing the film on a particular date, especially Halloween. While the film—and associated live cast performances—are less popular than in its
heyday, regular weekend showings can still be found in many cities throughout the world. Over 200 showings of Rocky are found worldwide.

In cinemas where the film plays on a regular or semi-regular basis, groups of fans have formed casts. These casts act out the movie on a stage, or on the floor in front of the movie screen, or even behind it for ghostly effects (Studio Galande, Paris). Among many Rocky Horror casts there is a perpetual quest for "screen-accuracy", meaning that everything from costumes to props to the motions that actors make on stage match the movie exactly. Other casts focus on innovation or simply giving the audience a good time.

Largest showing ever: over 8,000 fans at the Hollywood Bowl in September 2005, featuring the Southern California cast Midnight Insanity, a troupe that performed weekly since 1988. The annual Dragoncon showing, performed by Atlanta cast Lips Down on Dixie in addition to their standard weekly shows at the Plaza Theatre, also draws audiences of 3,000 or more each year.

Typically, a showing that uses a shadow cast will include a pre-show ritual that involves calling attention to anyone who hasn't seen the film in a theater. Those who haven't experienced Rocky Horror "live" are considered "Virgins", often having a 'V' marked on their foreheads with red lipstick. Depending on the theater and shadow cast, Virgins will be called out, mocked, made fun of (usually in a good-natured-but-vulgar way) and encouraged to participate in party tricks and games that might be considered racy or demeaning. It is not uncommon to have rubber balloons (or even inflated condoms) placed between a "virgin's" knees to be popped by cast members. In the 1990s, casts in New York and Virginia would fill a "Virgin's" mouth with whipped cream and put a cherry on top, etc. A Nashville-based pre-show includes parading the "Virgins" up and down the aisles of the theater with balloons (referred to as "cherries") held between their knees, while the song The Ecstasy Of Gold from the soundtrack to The Good, The Bad & The Ugly plays throughout the house. A Portland-based pre-show has virgins acting out as many sex positions as they can in one minute.

The levels and intensity of the preshow hazing varies from cinema to cinema, with some being pornographic or dangerous.

Costume designer Sue Blane's original designs for the film are recreated by fans in great detail. Costumes range from the very simple to extremely elaborate. Fans can be very serious about their recreations and take great pride in entering costume contests at conventions and debating various techniques and materials used to build them. However, plainclothes are considered acceptable among those who are not as serious.

During select moments of the film, audience members will use select props they had brought for the film. For instance, when Brad and Janet start running in the rain, some audience members will fire off loaded water pistols into the air, while others cover their heads with newspaper as Janet does in the scene. Many fans will fling toast into the air when the line "A toast!" is said, Scott brand toilet paper at the line "Great Scott!", and playing cards are often thrown when Frank N Furter sings the line "cards for sorrow, cards for pain" in "I'm Going Home".

Some props and participation have evolved regionally. In semi-regular screenings of the Rocky Horror at the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville, Tennessee the longtime MC and shadow cast host has been known to throw a large bucket of water from the back of the cinema when Curry's character tosses a cup of water at the camera during a song. Those in the "know" have adapted to the surprise while the uninitiated in the audience become doused.

However, due to both the added burden of cleanup and the potential for more serious damage to the facility, not all theatres which screen Rocky Horror permit the use of props.
Why do I know this much about a movie made in 1941? Because there’s fuck-all to do in the cargo hold of an airplane— I should explain.

Okay.

So.

After I had found the dead end to my investigations in Jump, I walked around some more— it was the beginning of summer, and the heat hadn’t yet become unbearable. It would be unbearable by July, but I would be elsewhere, so. Yeah. Anyway— my phone rang, which I answered; Raven wanted to have tea at the place— “Okay, sure.” I walked through the business district of Pudong, and walked, and walked some more, moving through twists and turns that would be more confusing if I hadn’t seen their counterparts in Kowloon, until I was at the City God Temple in the oldest part of Xanghai— I pay my respects, and then go to a nearby teahouse; it’s one of those tiny little places that lives on the fringes of popularity, and has one of those proprietors that are more interested in the acquisition of new and exciting teas than in, you know, paying customers.

Inside, there are two main tea-rooms; the one on the Jump side is dusty and quiet, filled with the smell of old teas and strange herbs; pass through a beaded curtain hanging in a back corner, and you’ll be in the other tea-room, in the Nightmarket side… which always has people in it, and is fucking raucous— like a highschool cafeteria and a concert had children. Noisy children.

Anyway, I quietly walk through the room, and settle across from Raven and Jinx; Jinx, being the youngest, pours us all tea. I take a sip of mine, nod, and then—

“So. I need to get out of the country for a while.”

“no, really? i would have never guessed.”

“What’dja do?”

“something stupid.”

“Ugh! Rude! I just did something… that wasn’t well thought out.”

“uh-huh. stupid.”

I huff a glare at Raven— she smirks into her tea. Jinx looks between us both wide eyed.

“So- any ideas where I could go?”

“my aunt’s pretty cool with delinquents. i’ll give her a heads up, if you’d like.”

“I’d like that, Raven. And I am not a delinquent!”

“suuuure you aren’t.”

“Didn’dja flood that woman’s house?”

“That was one time!”

“burglary and vandalism?”

“It was sad, and I got paid for that!”
Jinx and Raven stare at me with raised eyebrows.

“Oh gods, I am a delinquent, aren’t I?”

The girls smile, and nod. I sigh.

Raven spots me some cash, which, swear to the gods, I will pay back- Jinx takes my keys, and promises that yes, she will water my plants, and yes, she will dust my books, and “for’d love of the gahds, would’ya just go already?” and with that, I was swimming far far away from Xanghai.

About a week of steady, ocean parting swimming later, I was in Taiwan; I stayed there for a few days, resting, and replenished my supplies- I spent my time there in another Golden Buddha hostel. They’re everywhere in this part of the Nightmarket.

While I was there, I went to the National Palace Museum- so many beautiful Words! Oh my goodness; the paintings in the National Palace Museum date from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to the modern era, and the collection covers over one thousand years of Kiaom painting. It encompasses a wide range of genres, including landscape, flower and bird, figure painting, boundary painting, etc…. among the most famous paintings in the collection is the Qing Palace version of Zhang Zeduan’s Along the River During the Qingming Festival. Even though this is a copy (the original is in the Palace Museum in Beijing), it is nevertheless regarded as an artistic masterpiece. Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (Wu-yung version) by Huang Gongwang of Yuan Dynasty is one of the most dramatized pieces. The museum has a vast collection of calligraphy works from the hands of major calligraphers, scholars and important courtiers in history. The calligraphy works date from the Jin (265–420) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, with a variety of styles.

Rare books in the National Palace Museum range from the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, amounting to over 200,000 volumes. Yongle Encyclopedia and Siku Quanshu (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries) are among the examples.

Historical documents in the museum include Jiu Manzhou Dang, a set of Manchu archives that are the sourcebook of Manwen Laodang and a primary source of early Manchu history. Other official documents such as the court archives are available for research in the history of the Qing Dynasty.

I’m sorry, I got distracted- what was I saying?

Oh yeah! Anyway, I left Taiwan with my head full of Words and my eyes full of tears; it was so beautiful, I had to cry, okay? Anyway, that’s probably why I didn’t take the Big Hook road, which would have lead me through Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia; I took the Trader’s Road, which goes through the Philippines. If I hadn’t taken that road, I probably would have never met Jill.

Jill Carlyle is an interesting headcase- she’s a girl, young woman, I should say, she’s my age- because she’s a minor spirit of Vengeance. She is an African-American woman, and she has powers of teleportation and intangibility- I’m not sure if she has them as part of her curse or if she always had them...

This is how she was cursed: She was preparing to study law but one of her cousins shot her little sister, and no one would have brought charges against him. Outraged, and filled with righteous fury, she obtained a pair of Colt pistols originally owned by the First Crimson Avenger and used them to
exact vengeance- she shot her cousin down, in... Not cold blood. Hot blood? Anyway, the guns are
cursed such that, if the possessor uses them out of revenge, he or she will be cursed to track and kill
those who have taken innocent life. Assigned the task.

Upon gaining a new "assignment," she mentally relives the death of the victim, and then is teleported
to their place of burial. She then gains the memory and skills of those whose deaths she is avenging.
Her guns never miss, never run out of ammunition, and have no triggers. The bullets are capable of
penetrating any substance, and seemingly have a mind of their own, as she spoke to me of having to
restrain them from shooting those who come between her and her target. Her intangibility does not
function against her own weapons or other magical forces. Unless or until the curse is lifted, she is
seemingly immortal.

She once attempted to kill herself with her own weapons, but this merely results in ending her current
"assignment" and delivering her to the next one.

How do I know this- actually, more importantly, why do I know all of this? We haven’t shared
much- so why do I know so much about her? Because I’m good at filling in gaps, that’s why.

I met Jill in a graveyard- she seemed surprised that I could see her, and even more surprised when I
was able to dodge and deflect her bullets; I think I really freaked her out when I Locked her guns
though.

"What did you just do?"

"I put the safety on."

"These don’t have a safety."

"Then… how did I put it on?"

"…"

I smile at her, under my mask- her sleepy black eyes fill with tears; her braids fall into her face as she
crumple into a sad young woman-girl with too much to handle on her own. I startle forwards, and
envelope her in a hug that is probably sorely needed; we settle on a marble bench, and she cries and
cries and cries, for hours it seems- finally, she is able to compose herself enough to tell me her story.

I listen, and wait for her to finish- and then I ask her a very simple question.

“How do you know the ghosts are telling the truth? Even better- how do you know the ghosts are
innocent? Better still- is this even something you want to do?”

“… I don’t know.” Her voice wobbles- and then she cries even harder.

I hold her close, and let her sob- and when she can speak again, I tell her that “I have a spell that I
never use- you can have it with my permission, if you want?”

“w-What kind of spell?”

“It’s a spell to know when someone’s telling the truth.”

More tears. Of course.
I give her Libra, and Write, on the back- in a clear and steady hand- in the language of my Dreams “This spell is freely loaned to Jill Carlyle, the Crimson Avenger, for so long as she may require its services.”

And then I take her Guns, which are cruel, bloodthirsty weapons- and I Write on both of them this, with a chisel-knife and the full force of my intention- “This weapon may only be used in the bringing of Justice to those seeking honorable retribution; it cannot be used for any other purpose.”

When I hand them back to her, along with a calling card of mine, a strange sense of calm seems to wash over her- she looked me in the eye, smiled. “Thank you.” and then she raised a Gun to her temple, and fired- and before the blood and brains could splatter out, she was gone, as if she had never been; only the droplets of blood that had oozed from her chest remained.

I’ve honestly seen stranger things. Not very many, but I have. So- after I was able to move again, I left that graveyard, packed my things at the hostel, and left again- the kingdom of Bantay Tubig is strange, but I learned to dance with the mermaids who call those waters home while I was there, so...

Bantay Tubig is a kingdom underneath the waves, in the far south- but before you get as far south as Woop Woop. I wandered and swam through it’s rivers and mountains and valleys and forests, until finally I came upon a small temple; inside the temple there was a Siyokoy, who introduced himself as “Tramm”- Tramm was the one who taught me how to dance with my fan-blades.

Which is to say, I learned how to fight with my fans- oddly enough, my teacher called them tessen… It was during this time that I also realized that my blades had been imbued with two very specific Cards- Sword, and Shield. Sword is special in that it can cut through anything; Shield will block anything. The only way I was able to sign them was by Writing on my blades though, which I always thought you had to do when they were forged? But apparently, Writing on fans has been a thing for a long time? Anyway, I Wrote on my blades, just my symbol- no need to get fancy- and they changed; one side was red as the X on my mask, the other black as my bodysuit; with a shift in my thoughts, they turned into the blades I had learned to fight with before- another, and they were the fans I learned to fight with then.

To finish my training, Tramm imbued himself with the power of the Fight, and battled me- I was able to defeat him, and win the Fight Card, only because I had the Power Card; Power allowed me to knock Tramm out with one punch, and Fight switched allegiance. Was it underhanded of me?

Well, yes.

But I’ve never claimed to be anything other.

I would leave the kingdom of Bantay Tubig with the knowledge of how to dance to music unheard excepting in the heat of battle with a pair of fans, and wouldn’t realize the usefulness of the skill until later. I also wouldn’t realize I hadn’t signed Fight.

Woop Woop, in the Far South- also called Oz- is a small trading village, on the northern coast. It sits adjacent to a wide grassy plain, studded with thorny trees; and it was the dock of Woop Woop that I threw myself onto, when I finally managed to navigate the gigantic Barrier Reef- fucking sharks. With their… teeth and the, the biting- anyway.

Morana of Woop Woop, formerly Azarath, is a large woman, very large- almost a giantess, really. She’s a small mountain, with big, long arms, and big soft breasts that hang down very low, and wide wide hips, like an entire barrel could fit in the junction of her ribs and her hips; her legs are
widespread, but not very long- when I told her my name, she lifted me off of the ground and spun me in a bone-crushing hug.

She always wears a deep royal blue- no matter the season, the only attention she’ll pay to the season is in what her dress is made out of; when I met her, the dress was made out of a thick cotton, long to her mid-calf, and a double row of shiny opalescent buttons up the front. Her skin is dark, like mahogany or chestnut, rippled with streaks of copper and tigers-eye stone; her hair is long, and thick, and very wavy- the only way you could tell she and Raven were relations is in their voices, mannerisms, the overall shape of their faces, and the texture of their hair- not the color, mind you, but the texture. Raven’s hair is a dark, almost blue-black color, thick and fluffy like the feathers of a chick. Morana’s hair is a rich, dark brown-black, with spots of red and streaks of white here and there- but also thick, and fluffy at the ends, where moisture leaves first.

Woop Woop is- take a box full of junk. Not big junk, but little junk- toys you’ve had for who knows how long, but just never managed to throw away, balled up scraps of paper of various colors, chewed on pencils, socks, a shoe without a sole- the bits and pieces you kept for no other reason than you didn’t really feel like throwing them all away. Take those bits and cover them with a dust a few shades lighter than cinnamon in the sun, and scatter those pieces with the bones of several small animals and pieces of twine- basically, make a corvid nest without the corvid. That’s what Woop Woop is like. (Corvids are jackdaws, ravens, crows, bluejays- all those birds belong to one family, and that family is called corvid.)

There isn’t a Golden Buddha Hostel in Woop Woop- so I stayed with Morana, and slept in one of her spare hammocks. I stayed for about a week, and with Morana’s help, snuck onto a cargo plane. Okay so- there’s this thing in Woop Woop called the Dingo Express, which is part courier service, part mobile library, and part roving doctor. The head Dingo of the Express, Drongo- no, I am not making that up- used Woop Woop as a staging area for cross-pacific travel. Now, my plan was to hop on one of the cargo planes with enough food for a round trip, fly out to Hawaii, transfer to a plane going to Kansas, look around, and be back in Kowloon by September.

That’s not what happened, but that was my plan.

What actually happened is I got on the wrong cargo plane, and instead of flying to Hawaii to continue my island, hopping, I got on a plane that took me to California.

My Waipo was a very normal lady- she was an actress for the stage of no particular fame, and made just enough money to scrape by; she married young enough to have one daughter before succumbing to pneumonia, and dying. Her daughter was my mother- But my Waipo’s grand-mother, my Great-great-grandmother, was named Julie D’Aubigny.

Julie D’Aubigny was a 17th-century bisexual French opera singer and fencing master who killed or wounded at least ten men in life-or-death duels, performed nightly shows on the biggest and most highly-respected opera stage in the world, and once took the Holy Orders just so that she could sneak into a convent and bang a nun.

One of the most impressive human beings ever produced by France was born in 1670 into a life of wealth, privilege, and one-percenter opulence that meant she could have just spent her entire life chilling out, without ever so much as having to shank a single human being in the eye in a hellacious
fit of rage, but, well, that sort of malaise really wasn't her. Her father was the Grand Squire of France, meaning that he was pretty much the number-one dude responsible for training King Louis XIV's pages and maintaining the Royal Stables, and this guy wasn't really the sort of hard-drinking drill sergeant motherfucker who was going to let his little daughter grow up without learning the finer arts of dishing out knuckle sandwiches to her enemies or running would-be suitors through the small intestines with the pointy end of a sabre. This Frenchman trained young Julie the same way he trained the King's Squires, and as a young woman she learned the finer points of necessary life skills such as horseback riding, horse maintenance and repair, drinking excessively, gambling, fistfighting, avenging your honor, and stabbing people in the face when they don't have the good sense to step off when you're threatening them. Growing up surrounded by tough men, this tall young beauty with the dark auburn hair and piercing blue eyes was forged into a formidable force.

Julie D'Aubigny got started on her career at the age of sixteen, when she started having an affair with her father's boss. The young Mademoiselle D'Aubigny soon proved herself way too hot for him to handle, however, so before long he gave her father a promotion, then got her married off to some spineless jackass-non-grata known only as Monsoir Maupin so that she would leave him alone. Maupin was a Count or Viscount or Demi-Count or something, and he lived in one of the colonies across the sea and rarely spent time in France, and since Great-great-grandmother wasn't about to move out to bumfuck nowhere and be a quiet little housewife in some malaria-infested corner of the world she rarely saw him and he doesn't factor into her life story in any appreciable manner at all. The only real thing this guy provided was a title, some money, and a wedding ring, all of which allowed Popo Julie to use her marital status as a way of being able to do promiscuous, lavicious things she wouldn't have been able to get away with as an unmarried woman.

So, while her husband was off doing god-knows-what in Africa or India or wherever the hell he was, Popo Julie moved to Marseille and started hooking up with a fencing master who just so happened to be on the run for murder after he stabbed some guy to death in an alley outside Paris. The homicidal fugitive swordsman trained Popo Julie in the finer arts of fencing for a while, but as soon as she realized the student was now the master she ditched his broke ass and started giving sword exhibitions across Marseille to hone her skills and make a little extra cha-ching. Basically, it worked like this – she'd pull out her sword, sing a song or two, and challenge anyone in the audience to battle her in a duel. If someone stepped up, she'd sing a humiliating song about them, and then make them look like assholes who couldn't tell the difference between a sword and a limp piece of linguine. Her skills were so impressive that one time some asshole in the crowd called out that she wasn't really a woman, but was some cross-dressing cavalier musketeer motherfucker who was ripping everyone off. She responded by ripping open her blouse and telling the audience to "judge for themselves".

'Holy fucking shit my Popo was fucking nuts."

Anyway.

Kicking ass for money eventually led to a completely unrelated job prospect – a career as the star attraction of the Paris Opera. Apparently, while this Popo Julie was singing songs to humiliate her enemies in the dueling circle, some powerful patrons of the Paris Opera were in the audience, and they were so impressed by her melodious contralto voice that they decided she should be doing better than stabbing people in the balls for spare change. In the span of a few months, the woman known in Marseilles only as "La Maupin" (meaning "The Mapuin") went from a completely untrained street performer to the lead actress in the world's most respected Opera, playing roles of Classical women like Pallas Athena, Medea, and Dido. In addition to her flair for the dramatic and innate musical talent, it also helped that La Maupin, my Popo Julie, had a near-photographic memory and rarely needed to read her lines more than once before committing them to memory.
La Maupin, my Popo Julie, was also kind of a hardcore bisexual, and some of her tales of badass awesomeness dueling over female lovers and seducing chambermaids read like they were perpetrated by musketeers or pirates or some other ultra-daring swashbuckling male heroes of eighteenth-century literature. Of course, being a woman, Popo Julie could pull off some feats of romance that most men could only dream of. The most notable example of this was the time that she became a nun just so she could hook up with one of the sisters in the convent. That story goes like this: One time the Mademoiselle D'Aubigny got a super-hot blonde girl to fall in love with her. When the blonde's parents found out their daughter was a lesbian, they had their "ravished" daughter put into a convent, totally unaware that this wasn't going to be nearly enough to deter La Maupin – D'Aubigny took the holy orders, entered the convent as an initiate, created a diversion by setting the convent on fire, and then kidnapped the blonde nun, snuck her out of there, and shacked up with her for a month.

‘Are you fucking kidding me with this? (Also, what does blonde mean?)’

Of course, Popo Julie was a lover as well as a fighter, and sometimes she was actually both at the same time. Like, one time a trio of drunk assholes was giving Popo Julie shit while she was performing her songs in a rowdy tavern, so she took all three of them out into the grassy courtyard, and when they all jumped her at the same time with their swords she drew her blade and made sure every single one of them was suffering from multiple stab wounds before she went back to the tavern. The next day she felt kind of bad about stabbing the shit out of one of the dudes, so she went to his room to see how he was doing, and then ended up seducing him and getting busy with him relentlessly for three weeks straight.

On another occasion, La Maupin was at a Royal Ball in the palace of King Louis XIV, attending as the guest of Louis' brother, Prince Philippe of France. She showed up to the party dressed as a man in a scarlet tunic and immediately started dancing with all the hot bitches, showing up all the young dudes looking for hot young wives. This was fine and all, but when La Maupin had the audacity to tongue-kiss a particularly fine-looking blonde marquise right in front of the entire Royal family, three jackass noblemen got a little bent out of shape about it and told Maupin she needed to start acting like a lady. La Maupin offered to take it outside, defeated all three men in three consecutive duels, and then came back to the party while the trio of posers were still lying bleeding in the street like dogs. This event drew a little heat on the Maupin, so while she waited for things to cool down she decided to go to Brussels for a while and have an affair with the German Prince who happened to be the guy in charge of ruling over the Spanish Netherlands (nbd).

Julie D'Aubigny, La Maupin, my Popo Julie, was a swashbuckler of 17th-century France, did eventually settle down a little, returned home to Paris, reunited with her husband, and resumed her career as the star attraction of the Paris Opera. She died in 1707 of unknown causes at the age of 37.

She had one son, who went on to become a privateer for the English, and died at sea; he was succeeded by his three daughters, one of whom became a privateer like dear old dad, only for America; she had two daughters and one son, and died at sea during a storm.

One of her daughters was my Waipo; I found this entirely out, not in the Smallville Orphanage’s records, but in the Church records, and then at the Smallville library. Jill was very helpful. Apparently, my Waipo listed herself as an orphan to escape the stigma of being related to a notorious pirate. I’m sure there’s a lesson about being unashamed of your past in there somewhere, but I’d rather not dig it out.

Anyway- I fell asleep, or Asleep, somewhere near the edge of the World- when I awoke, it was to a strange fairy peering into my face. Dash gives me speed, and Shadow, grip- without a second
thought, I’ve caught the fairy in my hand. It puffs out its cheeks, and then shimmers into a Card; I sign it- Sleep. It’s a fairy of indeterminate sex, with feathers for hair, and feathery wings, and stars festooned on its body. I cast it, to see what will happen, and promptly fall back asleep- although I notice that a rat, across the hold, fell asleep too…

I awoke to darkness, all around, and the sensation of eyes and chittering voices; I don’t really want to get thrown off a plane at high altitude- so I watch The Rocky Horror Picture show on my phone. Several times. I eventually fall asleep again…

When I awoke again, I saw through the battered side of the sea-plane’s cargo bay, where I had been hidden with the dubious help of Morana of Woop Woop, an overgrown protrusion of piers and dockings for boats; I wriggled out of the hold, swam through the oily harbor, and climbed onto the docks; the very second my feet touched the ground, I knew I wasn’t in Hawaii- I’ve been to Hawaii before, and it feels… alive. Growing. This place feels like it’s about to slide, like so many mollusks of choice, off the plate and table and into the sea.

I’m not wrong- Star City is roughly sickle shaped, with its curved edge sucked up to the sea; it was built in the most fertile part of the San Andreas river basin, which also runs, wouldn’t you know it, directly over the San Andreas fault. I’m from a flat alluvial plain- Star City, being on a major fault in the earth’s crust, is wracked with very minor earthquakes. I’ve seen floods swallow entire apartment buildings; I’ve never in my life even heard of the earth doing the same.

I do not like earthquakes. They, for lack of a better phrase, make my stomach dizzy. Also, it feels like I’m going to fall off the world when it happens. I really don’t like earthquakes.

There is a small earthquake in Star City roughly every five minutes.

Rrrrrrrgh.

I walk, and at times stagger, because ugh, earthquakes, and then walk some more- almost without thinking about it, I press my fingers to my eye and draw backwards- my clothing ripples, and I am standing in my second favorite shirt; it’s black on the outside, and red in the center stripe, with a bigger flared collar, no ten on the back, but I silk screened a white rose on instead - it’s also a little shorter- like, there’s this divot of hip that peeks out when I walk? When I’ve been walking for a long time, my underwear will ride up- since I only wear three colors in my underclothing, you’ll either see a triangle of red, white, or black; the black and red triangles tend to be lacy at the top. My trousers are, as always, black- this time, I’m wearing a pair of dressy trousers, made out of a stiffer fabric with a smooth satiny ribbon stitched down over the outer seam on the leg. I’m also wearing my sports bra- apparently, in the defined world, bras are kind of standard? Anyway, it pushes my breasts up, together, and down against my chest- not compressing them exactly, just holding them in place. My boots are, as always, my boots- cherry red, knee high, lace up this time because I’m tired of buckling straps. My kit is still a big black leather bag, although I did add a thick shoulder strap, because sometimes I need both hands free.

I walk and walk and walk and walk, passing grungy street and dilapidated building- the too sweet smell of opium that’s been burnt wafts out of some doorways; there are people who look like they’re going to start something- but then they see my face, and decide otherwise.

My makeup has evolved as I’ve grown- first it was a simple skeletal outline on my skin, and then it changed, becoming more and more defined by the contours of my face- my eyes are still soulless pits
of darkness, smudged khol smears in the dips of my eyes, but now there are spatters of red on the
tops of my cheekbones, like drops of blood, outlined in black underneath; the flower over my right
eye has become an X, bright red and vibrant, like a slash- my lower lip is still black, and my base
skin is still white, but honestly- I look like a skull with a pair of blush stickers and an X shaped crack
filled with blood over its right eye socket. How do I know this without looking in a mirror, which I
still will not do for love or money? I took a picture, that’s how- webcams are a wonderful thing.

I finally come upon a place called the Star City Youth and Recreation Center. I go inside- the lights
are a weirdly bright buzzing bunch of tubes in the ceiling, and it smells faintly of sweat and
unwashed boy and cheese and mold. The person at the desk looks- no, stares at me; I can feel myself
blushing. Arrrgh.

“U-u-u-u-um; I’m. Um. I’m new here- is there… um. Is there somewhere I can, um. I can stay the
night. Er. That is. Um. That isn’t under a, um. A bridge?”

The lady has orange lipstick, and her base coat is two shades too dark for her skin; it looks like a
very odd tan, almost- her hair is a sort of coppery-brown, and is faintly tinted blueish in the shine
from the buzz-tube lights. Her eyes are big, and wrinkled in her head, like she’s seen too much in too
short a time and her eyes can’t hold on to the images anymore; her neck is very thin, and goes down
into a loose shirt, printed with a stylized version of the place-name I saw outside; her fingernails are
cooked-salmon pink, with a sort of trouty fade near the tips. She’s a very small, bird-like woman;
almost more bones and skin than anything else.

I find it best not to judge on appearances alone- how she treats me is going to be a better indication of
her character than anything else.

Her eyes are very wide, and blink at me a bit like an owls would- then she nods, quick careful, and
says “Yes, miss, although you might not be a miss-”

“I-I’m a miss, yes-”

“Yes, please follow me, then, miss, we have cots available-”

I follow the chattery woman into a hallway, and then there is a back room; there is indeed a cot, in
the corner of the room behind a filing cabinet; I settle down on it, use my bag-kit as a pillow, and feel
exhaustion wash over me- I don’t realize that the office lady has put a blanket over me until someone
jerks it away- I’m cold, and shiver a little, and then I look up and stare into the face of a guy with
blue eyes and red hair. He yells, a little startled; I yelp, quite surprised.

We stare at each other for a long moment- I notice that he has the muscles of an archer, and is rather
tall; his eyes are kind of small, I would say? and his nose is very squared head on, but sort of pointed
at the bottom. Like an arrow. His hair is an orangey-red color, like someone decided to color over a
piece of copper with a vermillion crayon; his eyes are blue, a sort of summer-sky blue, like a pale
glaze on a plate, even.

I finally break the silence by saying “h-Hi…?”

He blinks. “Hi. Why are you- what are you doing back here?”

“Sleeping…? I mean, the lady said I could…”
“Lady?”

“Y-yeah, she um. She was wearing a shirt with this place’s logo on it, and she looked like a secretary so… um. Am I in trouble?”

He sighed. “A little, yeah. Come on.”

We walk a little ways, through a hallway that wasn’t there before- and then we’re out in the same lobby as before, it’s blue-buzzing tubes grating on my nerves once again. *Bzzzt-bzzzzzt.*

Ugh.

Wow, this guy really is an archer- I can see his muscles moving, underneath his shirt. *Yowza.* Anyway, we get outside, and um- okay, everything is blurry and kind of weird looking, fuck, I’m in the defined world-

“Um- what’s today’s date?”

“April Fifteenth, 2011.”

“Oh. Oh dear.”

“What?”

“I… I fell asleep on May Fifteenth, 2011. That’s a little unnerving- but then again…”

“What?”

“Well, the- the dimension, I guess you’d call it- that I’m from isn’t exactly… linearly connected to this one? So it makes some sense that I wouldn’t wake up where I left off… Just a bit weird, is all.”

“What, that you went back a month?”

“No, that I didn’t go back a thousand years.”

He’s staring again, what the hell- wait, no, maybe he doesn’t understand? Okay, so explain it to him… umm…

“It’s like- as far as I can tell, which isn’t very far, but I do try, which is more than can be said for other people- it’s like, my demesne, the place I am from, it’s- it’s a… like a crumpled up handkerchief, or possibly several colanders stacked on top of each other- and this place, this demesne, is like a line of string, or possibly a stick; the idea being that the crumpled handkerchief can’t really be flattened out, and even if it did, it would never really- never really match up with the shape of the stick, because, well- they aren’t the *same.* Similarly, in concept at least, the line of string is woven through and around and inside of the stacked colanders, but there’s no real way to tell which colander is which when you’re on the string. Actually, for that metaphor, switch the demesnes- my demesne is more like a string, yours being more like a colander. Several colanders. None of them the same.” I look around my head for a second- “Yeah.”

He blinks. His orange-red brows furrow. “So- your world is like a string threaded through several colanders, and like a crumpled handkerchief that’s trying to be the same shape of a stick?”

“In shape, at least- at least I think so. And it’s more of a… description of its interaction with your world. Sort of. I’ve left a few things out, for clarity.”
“Like what?”

“Like soft spots, and how genetics work for people born to mystical creatures. Because genes still exist—just. Um. Different?”

“What’s a soft spot?”

We’ve left the youth center, and are now walking outside— the streets steadily become more and more crowded; I am not… not comfortable. In crowds. But I’m still following him.

“It’s- a soft spot is… like, you know in a field after it rains, there’s a hole that wasn’t there before? Or, or there’s a door that only opens if you push and pull on it at the same time- or even, like, a place where people always get lost? It’s like that- basically, they’re these holes, not very big, really quite small, that people can pass through if the surrounding circumstances are right. Like, like a membrane? Only, they usually only go one way, and the ones that do go both ways are either very old, very dangerous, or both.”

“Huh. And they’re everywhere, where you’re from?”

“Yes and no- they’re kind of everywhere, but there’s no real way to tell where one is or isn’t.”

“So you find them by-”

“Walking through one. Like we just did, actually.”

We’re in a softly rustling forest— the light through the trees is very softly green, and the air smells faintly of ice and pine needles. The path is very narrow, but slowly widens out as we walk; my bag is heavy, on my shoulder, and Archer-guy’s shoulders are high and stiff with tension.

I walk faster, and then I am at his side— I brush his arm with mine— he’s wearing a red t-shirt and blue-jean shorts, that fall below his knees; thick strapped, brown, strappy sandals, with good black soles; I’m sure there’s stuff in his pockets, but I don’t know.

He looks at me with wide blue eyes— and stares at me very hard.

I smile at him, and say “It’s okay. I’ll get you back where you-”

The wind changes— and I smell, on the breeze, smoke. And the very specific, meaty-bacon burning burnt smell of flesh in a fire. My head whips round to face the wind, and I see in the distance, smoke, and I can hear the faint creak of buildings falling.

My stance has changed— I’m centered, on my feet, and my shoulders are up and back— I’m leaning up, and sniffing the air, hard; my fingers draw over my right eye, and suddenly I’m not Theresa McGinnis— I’m Red X.

The guy at my side stiffens and centers too— I hear his voice. “That looks bad.”

“Yes, it does. Do you want to help with it, or do you want to go back?”

“I’ll help first, then go back.”

I glance at him, and sigh. That’s never how it works, but— “Okay. Follow me.”

I step off of the path, and into the forest— strange, flitting shapes in the shadows look at us with wide eyes— and we come out of the forest and into…
And into a burnt village.

The village was beautiful once- I can almost see the way the buildings would have stood, like an ancient stately stand of oaks… except this is a village of hamadryads. So they actually were oaks.

Well.

Shit.

There are limbs made of wood, and splatters of bright red sticky sap are everywhere; the smell of burning oak and flesh mingles in the air. I threw up before I walked into the remains of the village- so did the Archer.

We walk together, careful to not tread in the smears of blood- I see the upper half of a woman, her waist dripping bright red blood-sap; her green eyes are clouded in death, and her green leafy-viney hair that pools around her like a shawl is turning yellow before my eyes- but there are some smaller leafy-vines that aren’t turning yellow- they’re a much paler green… maybe. Perhaps.

I walk over to the dead woman’s body- my boots make a soft thump-a thump-a in the thick leaf-litter; I crouch by the body, and catch out of the corner of my eye the movement of something underneath the body. Archer stands behind me- I can hear him inhaling, about to ask something; I hold up my hand. ‘Wait.’

I force myself to reach forwards, and gently touch the wood-woman; her body is cool, not cold, and gives a little under my fingertips. I push underneath her, and gently lift her up- underneath her, like I suspected, is a small child. The child shivers, and huddles closer to itself- I sigh, and push the dead woman onto her side, which allows the sunlight to touch the child. Then, with a soft bump, I sit on the ground- I look back at the Archer, and press my hand to the ground next to me, nod him over.

He settles next to me, his legs crossed under him like an untied knot- I ask him, quietly “Do you have any fresh water with you?” He blinks at me, and then he nods- out of one of his pockets he pulled a small ovoid water-bottle. I take it from him, carefully, and then open it- with careful drips from my fingers, I watered the small tree-child.

Their eyes slowly fluttered open- and with careful starts and stops, they sit up, their big dark green eyes wide and fearful. I pour just a little sip of water into my hand, which then goes onto the child’s head- then I close the bottle, and I wait.

I don’t have to wait long.

“My name is Drusilla, and this is my village.

My people are hamadryades- we came here some time back to escape the persecution that the ones with the black spider banner bore; Nazi’s, I think they were called. We came here for a new life, and we found it- I was a seedling at the time, so I do not remember very much.

This is, or- or w-was, a simple trading village, where people of all kinds might come and exchange goods and news. I don’t… I don’t know why the rats attacked us.”
“Have they attacked before?”

“No, madam- the rats are just as welcome here as any other, and indeed traded with us and us with them to both our beneficences.”

“Do you know if anyone else might have… might have survived? Or which way the rats went?”

She sighed. “I am the only one left here who is of age- I have already gathered the others, all of them babes or just barely sprouts; if you will help me say the Words for those who are dead, that they may pass from this place in peace, I would send them with you to… wherever you’re going. I heard the rats whispering among themselves- I believe that they went to the harpies’ village, just to the north of here- please, please go there, and help them, and if it isn’t too much trouble- take them with you.”

I nod, and stand- the Archer stands with me, dusting himself off- Drusilla stands as well.

She is tall, very tall- like a fine young oak sapling, with soft brown skin and hair long and straight and green black in the light; she smiles at us, and then vanishes, and so too do the bodies, and only trees and the path we started on remain.

I look behind myself- there are only trees, and the path, showing our footsteps- I look ahead; in the far distance I can see scraggly trees and white white shapes on the ground. And in front of us is a bowl, filled with acorns, nestled in the low yoke of a young oak tree- I hear Drusilla’s voice, in the whispering rustle of the leaves. “Please be gentle with them- we must grow where we are placed, and I would prefer them to grow somewhere… somewhere that isn’t here- somewhere far away.”

The archer speaks. “The harpies are far away enough?”

Drusilla sighs. “No. There is no far away enough. The harpies are merely- are just far away. Please- please take them.”

I look at the Archer- The archer glances at me, then takes two steps forwards. He reaches up, and gently takes the bowl of acorns from Drusilla’s branches; I notice that there is a hatchet mark, deep in her side. As soon as the Archer has taken the babies, Drusilla sighs, and whispers “Thank you.”

And then, with a soft, sobbing crash, she falls to the uncaring earth, her red-sap blood dripping into the ground. She is dead almost before she hits the ground- and as soon as she falls, the village is once again around us, only this time the path runs through it.

I’m crying. That’s why my throat is so thick. Still, I swallow what tears I can, and I speak the Words for the Dead- the Words, or possibly words if you are not skilled, that have to be spoken to allow the passage of the spirit from the flesh. My voice is an ache in the air, and I don’t really know what I said- I do know that as soon as I had finished, there were no bodies around us, only broken branches and smoldering trees.

There was an echo of a voice, speaking with me when I spoke the Words for the Dead; Drusilla, perhaps.

We do not linger, in that broken place- soon enough, we are walking far ahead, closer and closer to where the scraggly trees are, our long legs carrying us through the long grass which grows very near the path, here. Soon enough, we are to the scraggly trees, and I am able to see that the trees are all dead, and the white shapes on the ground are partly snow, and partly feathers, and partly bones.
We walk into the dark forest, the wind soft around us- the empty branches rub against each other, calling out in raspy whispers with words that have long since lost all meaning. Echoes, empty of all persona, but still echoing none the less.

We walk further in- we pass a pit, full of bones and mushrooms, and a stand of grasses that grow very tall, almost like poles; and then we are in a village of harpies.

I have seen harpies, once before- but those were nomads. These harpies are not nomads.

The Archer, next to me, looks around us with wide wide eyes- and to be honest, I do too. There are paths, well-worn and wide in the earth, covered over with thick tracks of birds; there were baskets of many sizes, nestled into the trees, and from within them, fluffy white shapes and brightly peering eyes- and on the ground, keeping close to their mother’s feathery tails, more little trundling balls of white and off-white feathers; Baby harpies.

They’re really really cute.

You know what isn’t cute? Getting a pair of claws wrapped around your throat while being pinned to the ground by a fully grown, angry, female harpy. That isn’t cute. That isn’t cute at all.

“Hwhy have you come to hour terri-tory? Hmmm? Are hyou an egg-theif?”

“nngh-No, ma’am, I am not an egg thief- we come from the ggg-hhhk, the trading village to the south of here, it- it had been destroyed and the only survivor asked us to take the-hrrrk.”

“Hwho Sur-vived?”

“Dru-silla of the Oaken Grove- hrrrrrrkkkaaaaaaaaah-hauung.” I cough, a little, and slowly sit up- the harpy stares at me with big, liquid eyes, which then fill with tears- she half whispers, half sobs.

“Drusilla- she… she died, din’t she?”

“Yes. She did.”

She collapses to the ground in sobs- I’m up, and holding her almost before I realize I can move. I stroke her hair as she cries into my shoulder; her hair is very soft, like feather soft, and a warm, woody brown; she smells faintly of… of chalk, a dry dusty smell with a very faint hint of cheese. She composes herself eventually, and bids us to follow her- we do, and soon enough we are sitting on low benches that have been gripped by many a clawed foot. The Archer is holding the bowl in his lap; I fold my hands on top of my knees, and let my sleeves gently brush the tops of my boots.

“I am Kestrel- I am the headwoman of this village. My story is this:

When I was very young, I lived in a land far across the sea- we lived simpler lives then, and traveled often. I was a fledgling, when it happened- rats, from the north-west; bearing a banner of a black spider on a white circle, on a field of red as red as blood.

They came like ants, like a flood- the killed and burned, and they took some of my friends, and they smashed our eggs, tore down nests that had stood for a thousand thousand generations- and the worst of it is I don’t know why-” She stifles a sob.
“T—there was a tribe, of Hamadryads, living on the same mountain we raised our young on, and we were— not friends, perhaps, but neighbors? But still— the rats came for us, and we fled them, we fled them and fled to the homes and lands of the Hamadryads.

They welcomed us with open arms, and hid us in their branches— but still the rats came; they hunted us, and chased us, and we hid ourselves in the branches of the tall Hamadryads. Finally, the rats became smart, and set fire to the Hamadryads— we, the few Harpies that were young and strong enough to fly, gathered up as many of the Hamadryads as could leave, and took them away from that place— we flew a very long time, running from the rats, and finally fled them, and came to this place.

We started anew— our children grew, and so did we, and now a third generation you see before you, and the rats…” She shudders. “The rats have found us again.”

“I am Red X, of the city called Kowloon— and I will help you.”

The Archer speaks. “I am Speedy, from the city of Stars. And I will help you.”

Drusilla smiles; it’s wobbly, and kind of tearful. Wow her teeth are sharp.

We sleep that night in a woven basket house, its roof thatched with bones and scraps of hide— the night is cool enough to be comfortable, but not cold; the smell of nearly growing things wafts in on the breeze. Spring really is here.

The next day, I wake up early, and make Speedy a satchel for the acorns; I weave it tight and strong, and hand it to him when he awakens.

He blinks at me, takes the satchel— and I say “Well— you’ll be needing both hands, right?”

He smirks, and snorts, and then nods. “Yeah. Yeah I will.”

We fortify the village: Speedy the Archer trains the people who will learn in his craft, mostly the men— they are house defenders, so it makes some sense; I go to the pit filled with bones and find, just as I thought there would be, a special kind of mushroom that tends to grow in slow-rotting bones; it’s special for a very specific reason. I gathered some of them, and later boiled the mushrooms into a tea, which then dried into a powder, which got wrapped in tea-leaves and tied and marked, carefully. I sewed bags that would rip open from a tie near where it slipped on, over the shoulders— like a baby carrier, only this didn’t hold babies. I filled these bags with beanbags first, and trained the highest of the fliers, mostly the very old women, in their use. And then, when I was absolutely sure they could be ready for battle in an instant, I filled them with the ’shroom-bombs, and taught their leech-witch the secret of their crafting. (It’s not really a secret, but it sure does sound good, doesn’t it.)

And, on the First of May, the rats came in a horde numbering innumerable— and we were ready for them. The elders dropped their weapons first— the powder-bombs fell, and where they hit washed the encroaching horde in a toxin specific to the mushrooms that grow in rotting bones; the rats soon hacked and coughed blood, and then vomited out their own stomachs, and were devoured by their fellows. Still they came. The warrior-women were next, and I fought with them— we struck, stoop and lift and break, Fly and fly and dart and pin and wheel; Fly turns my sleeves into wings, and Sword my boots into claws; Swan descends Gracefully flowed into The Divine Dragon swished its Tail flowed into The Dragon is Seen in the Fields which then became The Dragon Fights in Wilderness— the Eighteen Dragon’s subduing palms. I don’t use them often, because they aren’t— they
aren’t the kind of kata’s you spar with. Or even the kind you fight to not kill with. They’re meant for war. And I- I was taught them by veterans of war.

Anyway.

Together, we laid waste to the encroaching horde. Still they came. Finally, it was Speedy the Archer who finished them off, along with the other men- in defense of their nests, they blackened the sky with arrows and feathers pulled from their own breast, and in this way the rats that ran under the black spider banner- Nazis, they were called- fell, and were slain, and were never seen again.

The celebration lasted two days and two nights- I remember, vividly, a small harpy-child climbing into Speedy’s lap, and curling up, and falling asleep; I’ve never laughed harder at the expression on someone’s face. Oh gosh- picture it- a round little fluff-ball with these mongo-huge feet, right, and they’re gripping his waist- not hard, mind you, but they’re definitely there. And the little person’s head is pillowed on Speedy’s chest, right, with their little fluffy wings wrapped around his rib-cage- and the thing is, is that Speedy has absolutely no idea what he should fucking do. It’s hilarious.

It’s also really fucking cute, because the next morning he’s still there, out cold and leaning on the log bench; the mother of the child gently disentangled their limbs, and scooped the little fluff-ball onto her back- she pressed her lips to Speedy’s, and he awoke with a sort of a startled “guh”- I giggled. Possibly inappropriately.

Anyway.

We leave the village on the Fifth of May- and as we’re walking on the Path, which I learned is actually called the Rocky Road, Speedy asks me- “So- why did she kiss me, exactly?”

“Well, firstly, I’m sure you noticed how none of them had hands- you… you did notice that, right?”

He shakes his head no, because no, he didn’t notice.

“Well, yes- they don’t have hands, and it’s been biologically, and mystically, for that matter… it’s been advantageous for them to have wings, and they’ve developed the skill of, well- okay, did it feel like a kiss, or like she poked you in the mouth?”

He hesitates, then says “Kind of both, actually.”

I stumble, then laugh. “I guess she thought you were cute then.”

He blinks at me, then kind of smiles. We walk in silence for quite a while, and then, almost imperceptibly- except there’s a sort of judder in my stomach that says- “Yeah, we’re back. Check your phone for reception, and to see what the date is.”

“Ah- it’s… It’s the Fifteenth of April. How..?”

“Like I told you- time in my demesne isn’t exactly linear.”

We’re in a park- it’s nice, as parks go. I press my fingers to my right eye, and feel the ripple- and everything is pretty much as it once was before.

I give Speedy my calling card, and ask him for directions to Kansas- he looks at me strangely. “And
you aren’t taking a train there because-?”

“…Dude. Trains?”

“…You really aren’t from around here, are you?”

I grin at him- he snorts. “Come on- I’ll take you to the station.”

And just like that, I was on a train for Missouri, with a transfer to another train that would take me to Kansas.

Trains are kind of boring- people watching is fun, but train rides are really boring.

Anyway.

I get to Missouri on the last day of April, and have about an hour to waste time; I wander around the station, look at the little museum, see a few Words hastily scribed here and there- I flirt with a red-head, and give him my phone number; ch, what are you thinking Terry, he’s never going to call you.

Still. Green eyes, freckles, and a choppy cut up top; lanky build, not muscle bound but definitely some muscles under there. Rrowr.

Aha. I’m fifteen. My libido just went from basically nothing to HOLY SHIT A BOY KISS THEM OH MY GODS EVERYONE IS HOT FUCK FUCK FUCK I DON’T HAVE ENOUGH LIPS TO KISS EVERYONE WHAT DO I DOOOOOOO. This should be… interesting.

Somewhere between Missouri and Kansas, I have to pee- I use the bathroom on the train, which is weird, and moving; have you ever tried to do your business whilst moving? It’s disconcerting, to say the least. The mirror in that small bathroom is small enough that I can look, and see my face, fully, for the first time in a long time. It’s still… weird. To look at myself. But- my makeup is weirder, and I’d really rather not freak people out before I say anything to them so… I wipe it off. My makeup, that is.

And my face is- is an oval, a pale oval, with soft red lips that curve up in the corners; my eyes are narrow, and slant upwards slightly- my left eye is black, and my right eye is blue. My eyebrows are thin, and slightly arched; my hair falls in a sort of point over my right eye. I think… I think I should get a haircut. And a pair of glasses; I should not have to lean that closely to see my features clearly.

Kansas is really really… flat. That’s about all I can say for it. There are really tall grain bins, everywhere, and rolling fields of what I would learn is corn. I thought it was a weird kind of grass, actually. (The defined world is fucking weird.)

Smallville is an idyllic, small, isolated American town, with an atmosphere resembling the settings of the paintings of Norman Rockwell; it is located in Oesea County, Kansas. Its residents are generally very friendly, although it also tends to attract various threats (from criminals, alien invaders, etc.).

Smallville’s economy mostly consists of various locally owned businesses, along with various farms surrounding the town. It has one high school, Smallville High School, which has existed for as long as the town has existed. The Smallville Orphanage is where I would start my investigation of Waipo.
In terms of media, Smallville has had several newspapers over the years, including the Smallville Sentinel and the Smallville Times-Reader. Smallville receives most of its television and radio broadcasts from a larger nearby city, though Smallville has its own radio station, WSMV.

Smallville is small. Smallville is very small. Smallville has one post office, and one general store, and one paved street. Smallville is tiny. Actually… I kind of… I kind of like it.

It’s… dusty. That’s my very first impression of the place- dust, not the Dust! of Gemworld, but the dust that comes when a place has been a place for several lifetimes, in which the only thing that changed was the age of the faces seen- the people, or the types of people who live in the place didn’t see the need to change.

So they didn’t.

Well.

 Mostly.

Grain bins are the one job I will never touch- not because the pay isn’t good, which it is. Not because the employers aren’t fair, because in Kowloon, being unfair to your workers tends to result in an “unfortunate accident”. I will not do that work because of how easy it is to die.

Grain, when it gets harvested, has to be stored- and it’s usually the young, strong people that have to do that work, because of its hardness. People, usually young men because that’s the kind of person the job hunts, die in grain bins all the time. Every year.

I’ve found the sons of widowed mothers- their mouths full of rice, their eyes packed with it; I’ve had to tell them, no, no, their son was not a victim of a crime, it was only an accident- only an accident that forced Zhu Fe to hold onto his younger cousin’s dead body while the captive zephyrs cycloned the rice out from around them both; only an accident that crushed Gao Ko’s ribs, and pulled his legs from his hips and his arms from his shoulders, and all without breaking the skin; only an accident that eats the eldest and second eldest and third and fourth sons of the families that live in the twice flooded rice paddies.

Agriculture is a killer.

Agriculture killed Zachariah Jariloson.

Of course, the Crimson Avenger saw things a mite differently.

Smallville is so small it doesn’t have its own hotel, or a bed and breakfast- it does, however, have charming people, kind people, who are amenable to putting strangers up in their own homes; the people who let me stay with them are called John and Martha Kent- Ma and Pa Kent, as they asked to be called.

Their house is crowded, but not for lack of size- it’s full to bursting with memories, and the remains of lives once lived. If I had more than a month, I would stay a while- but it’s May Fifth, and I only gave myself until the middle of June to be in Smallville.
Still, Smallville, while small, is big enough to take care of a few things- I take a day to rest, and then on the sixth I go get a haircut- I’m left with a flippy short little bob-thing, with just enough bags left to pin up, like I asked for; on the seventh, I make an appointment at the doctor’s office- I am told I will be seen tomorrow, so I spend some more of my steadily depleting money and buy some more underwear, and a new pair of boots- they’re big and clunky, and a sort of dull dun color that glows red in the light. On the eighth, I am given a pair of bottle-bottom glasses, their frames encrusted with gaudy red rhinestones. I can, however, see that trees have leaves. Like, individual leaves. It’s amazing. On the ninth, I gather spiderwebs for thread, because the stores I had have long since crumbled to nothing.

And on the tenth day of May, the Crimson Avenger tried to shoot Pa Kent dead.

Swell.

Honestly, it’s my battle-precognition that saves Pa Kent- I can feel, just faintly, that someone will try to snipe him in about five seconds; with one hand I reach up and draw my mask onto my face- the other is already holding Shield, and is blocking. The multitude of bullets, bright red streaks of light that impact on my green dome, soon makes a pattering sound- like heavy rain on a tin roof. Crimson Avenger soon comes into view- the second I have her in my sights, I Lock her and her Guns in place. And then, I drop the Shield- the bullets fall to the ground in a pitiful tinkling and jangle of misspent rage.

I lower my arms to my sides, feel my long sleeves rustle- I look over my shoulder, at Pa Kent who seems… a little resigned, actually.

“You know her, yes?”

“Yes. I do.”

“When you see her?”

“Once before, when I was a young man- I don’t… I don’t know why…”

“Not know why she no kill you then?”

“…Yes.”

I nod, and gently put my hand on his arm- one step, two steps, three steps, and we are at the Crimson Avenger’s side; I place my hand on her outstretched fist, covering both Gun and knuckles with my wide palm- and then I cast Return.

And we go back to where this whole mess began. (Actually, we go a little too far back.)

Jarilo, great-grandfather of Zachariah Jariloson, was a son of the supreme Slavic god of thunder, Perun, his lost, missing, tenth son, born on the last night of February, the festival of Velja Noć, the old Slavic celebration of the New Year. On the same night, however, Jarilo was stolen from his father and taken to the world of the dead, where he was adopted and raised by Veles, Perun’s
enemy, Slavic god of the underworld and cattle. The Slavs believed the underworld to be an ever-green world of eternal spring and wet, grassy plains, where Jarilo grew up guarding the cattle of his stepfather. In the old geography of the ancient Slavs, the land of the dead was assumed to lie across the sea, where migrating birds would fly every winter.

With the advent of spring, Jarilo returned from the otherworld- that is, from across the sea- into the living world, bringing spring and fertility to the land. The first of the gods to notice Jarilo's return to the living world was Morana, a goddess of death and nature, and also a daughter of Perun and Jarilo's twin-sister. The two of them would fall in love and court each other through a series of traditional, established rituals, imitated. The divine wedding between brother and sister, two children of the supreme god, was celebrated in a festival of summer solstice. This sacred union of Jarilo and Morana, deities of vegetation and of nature, assured abundance, fertility and blessing to the earth, and also brought temporary peace between two of the major Slavic gods, Perun and Veles, signifying heaven and underworld. Thus, all prerequisites were met for a bountiful and blessed harvest that would come in late summer.

However, since Jarilo's life was ultimately tied to the vegetative cycle of the cereals, after the harvest, Jarilo also met his death- he found that his wife’s bed was no longer warm enough, and sought others. Morana, knowing the ways of men better than perhaps any other, would not stand for it- and perhaps she killed him herself, and perhaps her father killed him, and perhaps her nine older brothers killed Jarilo.

Without her husband, however, Morana turned into a frustrated old hag, a terrible and dangerous goddess of death, frost and upcoming winter, and eventually died by the end of the year. At the beginning of the next year, both she and Jarilo are born again, and the entire cycle starts anew.

The tenth son of Jarilo and Morana was named Markl, and it soon came to be that Markl could not abide in his father’s house- so Markl left, taking the name of Jariloson, so he would not forget, and came to a wide flat land across the sea. And it was there that he met a woman of the earth, who had grown all her life among the long waving grasses- and together they became man and wife.

Markl Jariloson built for his wife a home, and his wife, named Birdie, for her habit of fluttering her arms to emphasize her speech, bore him ten strong children, five daughters and five sons. And for a time, they were very happy.

But all things have their time.

Eventually, as the harvesting times rolled around, as they always do, Markl Jariloson proved to be his father’s son; his wife’s bed was no longer warm enough for him. However, Birdie was not the same as Morana, and she did not kill her husband- when her children were all old enough to leave, and live on their own, without her, she took off her wife’s dress, and put on the dress she had worn as a maiden; it still fit her perfectly. Then, she stood outside her house, and cried a little, then turned her back and raised her arms, and with one-two-three flaps turned into a bird, and flew away, far into the sky- and never did she return to that place. Markl soon turned to drink, and poured the vitriol and bitterness and hate in his heart into his fists, which found his youngest children’s flesh. And for a time, none of them were happy.

But all things have their time.

Soon enough, Markl Jariloson found his death in the bottom of a bottle; he was survived by his ten children, who scattered themselves to the wind. Zachariah Jariloson, the tenth child of Markl and Birdie Jariloson, moved from the place of his birth, and to a place called Smallville. Zachariah was his father’s son, yet not- he could not remember ever hearing a kind word meant for him, and he did not know what he was meant for, but he knew he would find it somewhere, if he just kept looking.
Well, he looked and he looked, until finally he found a job- not a safe job, but a good job, and better than his father had ever done- and that job was to push corn-grain into a funnel and fill a grain bin with its bounty. For the space of one week, Zachariah did his job well, and for the space of one week, at the end of harvesting season, he was the happiest he had ever been.

But all things have their time.

It was a late summer, hot summer day, when it happened- Zachariah Jariloson and a boy named Tobias Flester and another boy named John Kent were all working in the grain bin, walking down the corn; Tobias was the second youngest at eighteen, John being just fourteen- Zachariah, at twenty-two had only worked there a week. All seemed very well- the work was slow and tedious and dangerous, but the boys had been well trained, and so the work went on at a steady pace. And then- and then Tobias sank, into the corn and he was too far out for Zachariah or John to save him, and he sank down down down and in the space of a moment, he was gone beneath the corn, nothing there but a faint depression in the wet, crusty kernels.

And still the corn poured in- and soon enough, Zachariah and John were sinking too, sinking down down down into the concrete thick kernels of wet crusty corn, down into the suffocating dark; neither boy wanted to die. Let that be clear.

Except- Zachariah was twenty-two, and John was just fourteen. So- Zachariah, in that happiest week, lifted John up high; and John, poor boy, was only strong enough to push the corn away from Zachariah’s face for so long- soon, his strength left him, and Zachariah Jariloson was lost, underneath the corn. John was rescued from the corn, eventually- it had gotten up to his neck, and he was very afraid that he was going to die- he could feel the cool, terrible grip of Zachariah’s hands on his waist, holding him aloft; he was pulled from the corn, and so was Zachariah Jariloson, but, even though the entire grain bin was emptied, Tobias Flester’s body was never found.

And it is Tobias Flester, not Zachariah Jariloson, that seeks retribution; (against whom, he knows not) the last thing he saw was John Kent’s white paste face, blue eyes wide with terror, hair black and caked with yellow-white corn meal dust. And then all he knew was the suffocating press of corn, all around him.

And then his time was up, and he knew nothing at all.

We Return, and we see the truth; we return, and there is a man in blue, with a bright red cape, and a Word meaning “Hope” is on his chest. I let go of both Pa Kent and of the Crimson Avenger- and I unLock her, but not her Guns. She drops her arms to her sides, and shudders, and falls to her knees. I slowly crouch by her and wait- and when the Crimson Avenger looks up again, it is Jill Carlyle staring out, not the overzealous avatar of Vengeance.

And Jill Carlyle is sobbing.

I sigh, and lean forwards, and hug her as hard as I can- she hugs me back, and won’t let go. I shift us around, a bit- crouching is not fun, but sitting is okay, and wow, Jill is really short; she cries, and she cries, and I hold her while she cries. Soon enough- like, maybe fifteen minutes later?- she’s asleep in my arms; her blood is warm on my side.

Urgh.
I awaken on a couch, to the smell of something—something fruity? It smells… it smells really really good. Ow. Ow ow ow- note to self: never use Return without some serious energy stored. Owwwwwww.

I slowly sit up- the blood that dripped onto my side has dried, so I peel it off, scab-style; it comes off in one complete piece, a bit like a piece of skin from a lizard. Ew. Cool. I sit up, on the couch, and move my feet- okay, where are my boots. Oh, hey, I forgot I was wearing the socks with the frogs on them, wow those frogs are cute- no, stay focused!

What is that smell, it’s amazing- argh, dammit, I’m hungry, never try to focus on important things when you’re hungry Terry, it doesn’t work- Oo! Cinnamon!

I stand up, sway, and press my hand to my eye- I’m standing in the clothing I was wearing before, a pair of shorts this time actually; a loose pale red t-shirt with a passel of ducklings in a basket printed on it, and my glasses. Wow the world is detailed. Okay- follow your nose, Terry, follow your nose…

About five minutes later, after I trip over a low table, walk into a wall, and find the water-closet twice, I am eating… and it is good.

“What is?” and I point to the food.

Ma Kent smiles at me. “It’s apple pie, Terry.”

“What is apple? What is pie?”

“Well… apples are a kind of fruit, and pie is a dessert.”

“Dessert, what is?”

“A sweet, sort of… you usually eat them after dinner…?”

“Oh!” I stare at the plate for a moment, then at the apple pie, then at Ma Kent. “Is Good! Is very very good!” and then I eat more of it. Because it tastes amazing.

She smiles, and laughs a little bit, and goes back to washing dishes- I finish my pie slice, and then go to help her, because it’s rude not to.

“So, Miss Terry- where are you going now?”

I giggle at Pa Kent- “I go to D.C. Many museums!”

“Why did you come to Smallville, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“My Waipo- grandmother on mother’s side? Was born here, in Smallville. I… I wanted to- learn? About her. Learn about my family.”

He looks at me strangely, and then warmly, and then he smiles, and laughs a little, but there are tears in his eyes too. I don’t… I don’t understand- what did I say to make him sad? Well, there’s only one thing to do when someone is sad- even if it’s awkward or you don’t know them very well- I take two steps forward, and I hug Pa Kent quite hard. He’s warm, and large, and he hugs me back. I’m reminded of my father, hugging me- but that was a long time ago, and it flickers out of my grasp faster than I can see it clearly.
I step back from the hug, and I smile at Pa Kent- and then I run back inside the Kent’s house, and give Ma Kent a hug too; and then… well. And then I have a train to catch.

I can feel it coming- I’m about to, to loop- oh for fucks sake. I see, at the edge of my vision, a bright red ribbon- I use Dash for speed, and cut the ribbon with Sword, and a Card slaps into my face. I peel it off, sign it: Loop. It’s a ribbon, like a Mobius strip, red on one side and yellow on the other. It goes with the others, and I step out of the bathroom on the train; my hair and my glasses actually look pretty good on my face. Also, I changed my shirt- I’m wearing my favorite one again, the red and black number with the white ten on the back.

I ride the train for quite a few days, the rolling land outside passing in a steady wave of colors. At some point, the scenery changes from near-empty fields to scrubby woodlands to dense forests- and then the train is in D.C.

I disembark, my bag over my shoulder and on my hip, my long legs carrying me all over the city; my new boots only go up to my ankles, but I like them anyway. I tromp all over the place- I walk to parks, and I walk to monuments, and…

And the buildings of D.C. are intricate and glorious, and the open, green spaces are even more so- and the people are not.

It’s the fourth of july, which apparently means something? Because there are more people all around me than I’m ever really comfortable with- I walk out of the crowded streets, and into the mazey-crazy back-alleyways, and I am instantly at home. Alleyways please me.

I walk all day- I smell smoke, but I can’t see the fire; oh, this place has a fire department, sweetness- and soon enough, night falls.

And I get a phone call.

“Theresa, I need your help- I am at a place called CADMUS, and-” the call goes dead.

“Kaldur? Kaldur?!?”

The change from Terry to Red X is getting smoother and smoother- one second I’m standing kind of awkwardly in a side street, the next second I’m running hell for leather, my long sleeves billowing out behind me.

I run as fast as I can, which isn’t very fast, but I can keep the pace for days if needed- I run and run and run and see before me a building with the name of CADMUS. Cadmus, Cadmus- Cadmus, the sower of armies! Shit shit shit- I don’t want to go in there. But Kaldur is in there- but the sower of armies- but he asked me for help- but armies- argh arrgh arrgh.

I go into the building bearing the name of Cadmus.

Well.

I’m not known for doing the smart thing.
Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye

Chapter Summary

During the American Revolution, the legal separation of the Thirteen Colonies from Great Britain occurred on July 2, 1776, when the Second Continental Congress voted to approve a resolution of independence that had been proposed in June by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia declaring the United States independent from Great Britain. After voting for independence, Congress turned its attention to the Declaration of Independence, a statement explaining this decision, which had been prepared by a Committee of Five, with Thomas Jefferson as its principal author. Congress debated and revised the wording of the Declaration, finally approving it on July 4.

Historians have long disputed whether Congress actually signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, even though Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin all later wrote that they had signed it on that day. Most historians have concluded that the Declaration was signed nearly a month after its adoption, on August 2, 1776, and not on July 4 as is commonly believed.

In a remarkable coincidence, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the only signers of the Declaration of Independence later to serve as Presidents of the United States, died on the same day: July 4, 1826, which was the 50th anniversary of the Declaration. Although not a signer of the Declaration of Independence, but another Founding Father who became a President, James Monroe, died on July 4, 1831, thus becoming the third President in a row who died on this memorable day. Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President, was born on July 4, 1872, and, so far, is the only American President to have been born on Independence Day.

The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, a set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.

The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the United States Declaration of Independence which proclaims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Eudaimonia or eudaemonia, sometimes anglicized as eudemonia, is a Greek word commonly
translated as happiness or welfare; however, "human flourishing" has been proposed as a more accurate translation. Etymologically, it consists of the words "eu" ("good") and "daimôn" ("spirit"). It is a central concept in Aristotelian ethics and political philosophy, along with the terms "aretē", most often translated as "virtue" or "excellence", and "phronesis", often translated as "practical or ethical wisdom". In Aristotle's works, eudaimonia was (based on older Greek tradition) used as the term for the highest human good, and so it is the aim of practical philosophy, including ethics and political philosophy, to consider (and also experience) what it really is, and how it can be achieved.

Discussion of the links between virtue of character (ethikē aretē) and happiness (eudaimonia) is one of the central preoccupations of ancient ethics, and a subject of much disagreement. As a result there are many varieties of eudaimonism. Two of the most influential forms are those of Aristotle and the Stoics. Aristotle takes virtue and its exercise to be the most important constituent in eudaimonia but acknowledges also the importance of external goods such as health, wealth, and beauty. By contrast, the Stoics make virtue necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia and thus deny the necessity of external goods.

I run, and then Dash, and then Jump up- high loop through a window, and soft touch _thump_ on the ground. I’m in an office. Slowly walk through the space, it’s sharp lines and angles jarring, papers strewn on the floor showing no visible words or Words- and then I see an open doorway, with a rope hanging from somewhere within it, all slick-black serpent.

(Oh dear. When was the last time I was asleep? Yesterday afternoon, for five hours on the train- okay, should be okay. Uh-oh.)

I stand at the edge of the abyss, and look down- it’s dark, and I can’t tell if the bottom is as far away as it looks, or a small hop out. That’s the thing about distances in the Nightmarket- it could be what it looks like… or it could be something else.

There’s really only one way to find out- I take a deep breath, walk backwards, and run forwards- and throw myself against the wall. Well, shit. Try again- I step really close to the edge, and crouch and promptly curl up and shudder. One more time! I stand up, stand on the edge, close my eyes, and lean forwards- and I fall down down down. **They’re at the bottom.** I twist in the air, and Jump on the landing- the open door is a small light far above me.

I look in front of me- there is another door, marked “51”; a strange vibrating underneath my feet is all the warning I get. Power lends me strength- with a shove, I open the fifty-first door, and slip inside; not a moment later, the floor I was on rises, and I see that it’s an elevator- it’s moving fast. **They’re on the bottom floor. Go.**

Slip back into the shaft, quick-hurry, and there is only darkness and echoes- leave the fifty-first door open, and by its light I can see that the door in front of me is marked fifty-two. Shove it open with Power, quick-hurry, and slip through, and shut it behind me- and then find something to hide behind- pillar, sort of pink looking, and slightly soft to the touch. Look back at the elevator- wow that was fast, holy shit- and the doors soon open. A pair of white coated people, a woman and a man, walk out; I follow them on cat’s feet.

My clothing doesn’t make sound when I move in it- I think that, more than anything, saved me. Well, that and my judicious use of Shadow.
I follow the two people through the red-lit hallways; the air smells faintly of ammonia, and the too clean sterile smell of a hospital, mixed with the fetid smell of sickness and decay. The walls pulsate gently; I am surrounded by something that is slightly alive.

Ew. Cool.

We walk through a series of hallways- and it is then that I notice that there are strangely small creatures with grey skin and red glowing horns, sitting on the man and woman’s shoulders; I see them, and I think they see me… but the man and woman do not.

Sweetness.

There’s a faster way to get where you need to go; there’s a turning up ahead. Go left, then right, then stick to the lower wall, and follow it. You’ll know when you get there.

There is soon a fork in the hallway- the man and woman go right; I go left, and am soon alone- I start to lope, not quite run, and soon enough come to another fork. I take the right-wards path, and move quicker- and then there is a pair of walls, one low and one high. I creep along the lower wall- the space around me changes, and soon enough I am looking out over a strangely circular room. I take the time to cloak myself in Shadow, crouch, then look- and this is what I see.

There is a low pillar, covered in buttons and dials and lights, and in front of the pillar is a trio of clear tubes, big enough to hold a fully grown man- inside the first tube is a lanky young man with short red hair, his suit bright yellow with red highlights- I think… I think he ran into me, like, a year ago… Hm. In the second tube is Robin- and in the third is… Aqualad. And in front of them stands a boy, dressed all in white. Oh dear.

And then my limbs are like iron weights, and I cannot move them, why can’t I move? There is a voice, a powerful voice in my head that isn’t mine-
–Why have you come?- I look at Aqualad. ‘He asked for my help.
- Hmm… Wait.- ‘Why?’ -The boy, in white- he is my brother. I wish for him to make a choice…-
‘To choose freedom, and a life, or not freedom, and death. Is that right?’ -Yes.- ‘Then I will wait- but do not expect me to… to keep my mouth shut.’ My jaw unlocks- and just in time too.

“I live because of CADMUS! It is my home!” Growly-unused. Interesting.

“Dude, your home is a test tube. You’ve never even- we can show you the sun. The real sun.” Robin’s voice is kind of nice, actually. Young though. Very young.

“Ah, pretty sure it’s after midnight, Rob- but we can show you the moon…?” Yellow boy speaks
next. His voice is older, but also kind of… scratchy?

“We can show you, introduce you, to Superman.” I’d know that velvety voice anywhere. Nnhnng.

“Why should I even believe you?” Growly-voice. And that’s a que if I’ve ever heard one. (And I have. And the fact that I only understood most of the words spoken, not all, means nothing!)

“Why shouldn’t you believe them is a better question.”

The boy-man in white blinks, and whirls- my limbs are still lead heavy, but judging from the reverb in my comment… I’d bet that the place I’m sitting in is a natural echo point for this entire room. Meaning… I don’t think he can hear where I’m coming from.

“Who- where are you!?!?”

“I am Red X, and I am here, same as you.”

“That’s.”

“Now, for the facts of this matter as I see them- you are a person, yes? Yes, I think so- you seem personable enough- and anyway, you’ve grown up as a person should grow, yes? You were born in some manner, and you grew, and you learned as you grew, and it appears that you have wanted for nothing. Except, well- you don’t seem…”

“What…?”

“You don’t seem very… happy. Do you like it, down here? In the dark, with the red lights and the voices of the Them, in your head, pick-picking away at you?”

“I.”

“Do you like being told what to do, what to think, what to feel?”

“…no.”

“Then perhaps you should listen to what those three have to say- after all, it might be nice to make your own choices…”

And then the man I saw before- when did he even get in here?- speaks.

“It might be, but he’ll never find out.” I hadn’t noticed the little grey-skinned gnome-y on the Growly-boy’s shoulder; it’s horns glowed red, and the Growly-boy’s eyes went wide. He stopped… he stopped being a person. It’s quite possibly one of the most frightening things I’ve ever seen.

The leaden sensation leaves my limbs, and I can suddenly move- except my legs have fallen asleep fuck, I’ve fallen over, ow fuck why, I need to be quiet- I miss whatever the man I followed in says next, exactly, but he has a sleazy voice, I don’t like it- but I don’t miss the way the ovoid room lights with lightning and screams.

Oh shit, I’d better get down there- holy fuck that’s a long way down. But they’re screaming! But that’s really far- but they’re going to die!- but it’s faaaar- Death beats fear, get your cowardly butt down there! I sigh, quietly, and then crawl onto the top of the low wall- yeah, they’re still screaming- I roll off of the top of the low wall, and it feels like I just rolled off the couch, are you fucking kidding me.
I’m still cloaked in Shadow, thankfully- and then the door is shoved off it’s hinges, holy fuck. It’s the growly-boy! Only there isn’t a gnomey anymore? Oh, hey, they’re talking- the scratchy-voiced boy in yellow, I should know his name, fuck- “You came to save us?”

The growly-boy glares at them, and then smirks. “Well, since I don’t seem to have heat-vision, I guess saving you will have to do.”

“I came to save you too, but this guy got here first…”

I’ve stood up, and I’ve stepped forwards, into view- I drop my Shadow, and let them see me. Varying degrees of confusion and surprise race across their faces. Robin soon is free from restraints I couldn’t see from where I was- and now he’s freeing the boy in yellow, and Growly-boy is freeing Aqualad- hee, growly-boy has a nice butt!- and then we’re all standing around each other, and kind of staring at each other? Oh dear, an alarm is going off- oh hey, and now we’re running. Interesting. (I tend to use interesting as a pejorative.)

We run from the ovoid room, and then down a hallway that is rapidly filling with giant grey-skinned… ogres, I would say, trolls are actually quite small. Growly leaps forwards with a roar, and punches one of the grey ogres out; wow, he’s got some rage in him. We run harder- I don’t really hear what they say, and I can’t hear anything, why can’t I hear- There is a Card, stuck to the bottom of my boot. I sign it as we run- it’s called Silence. Hmm.

Oh, hey, dead end- wow, that’s a narrow vent. We wriggle through, and then there’s some stuff that happens that I’m not really aware of- okay, this is weird, why can’t I keep my attention on anything? What the hell is going on- shit fuck, I’m underground. Shit shit fuck fuck fuck. “I hacked the motion sensors.” I only understood two words of that sentence, oh dear gods whyyyyy- and now we’re running up stairs, okay, no big deal- Darkness rises like a storm-tossed sea. I awaken, and hey, we’re in a lobby, that’s not weird at all. Oh shit, it’s Sleazy-voice, and he’s saying something and he’s drinking stuff from a phial- no no, never drink things from phials, and it’s unmarked too, oh fuck- AH AH HE’S CHANGED INTO A GIANT GREY TROLL AHHHHHHHHH-

Okay, freakout over, fight a troll, how does one fight a troll- and a fist is going to be in my face in about four three two one- “THUNDER!”

Thunder leaps from my chest and barrels into the grey ogre like a hellcat from the storm-lords. Hee-okay, now- wow, Aqualad is pretty when he fights- Thunder dodges out of the strikes from the grey ogre, and Growly punches him very hard and Robin is doing something, what is he doing- ooo, schematics! I quickly run over to him, but keep my eyes on the battle- wow, okay, I’m about to overcast, I need to drop Thunder; I drop the spell and Dash forwards- I’ve actually gotten more efficient with it, yes!

And with a one two three, I’m within the ogre’s reach- my fans are out, and then he’s punching towards me but I’ve already darted up into The Dragon Soars in the Sky and I’ve landed on his shoulder and now I’m Treading on Ice- he doesn’t like that I’m jumping on him. Good.

Hop from shoulder to shoulder and slide along his arm when he jerks it out, fans opening lines of cutting on his arms- he slaps at me, like a fly, but I’ve already moved so he’s only slapping himself; wooo, I’m hungry, whoops, nearly got me- “Too slow too slow neener neener YIKES-” he catches me in the ribs with the back of his hand, and throws me clear across the room, ow ow fucking ow, shit. Okay, can’t tell if anything is broken- oh, I think they have a plan now, thank the gods, okay, X marks the spot? I can work with that, shit yeah-

The Ram Charges into the Fence, and a pillar shatters under the force of my head-butt- okay, wow, I did not know the technique was that powerful, ow, fuck, my forehead hurts, ow shit. Okay, now-
AH AH THE BUILDING IS FALLING SHIT SHIT SHIT OH SHIT THEY’LL BE CRUSHED UNDER DEBRIS- SHIT FUCK, AQUALAD AND GROWLY SHOULD BE OKAY, BUT I CAN’T GET CLOSE ENOUGH TO ROBIN AND YELLOW-SCRATCHY VOICE FUCK ARRRRGH-

And then the building falls.

Take short, shallow breaths. Do not panic, do not scream; keep your arms as they are. Either help will come, or you’ll dig up and out. You will be okay. Breathe in, breathe out, and breathe slowly. Shhh.

My arms are locked above my head, and Shield is keeping the full weight of the crumbled stone from crushing me. I go to my Shop, and I breathe slowly and quietly and softly, and I only come back when I hear the steady chunk-crunch of stone being lifted off of me. Sweet, fresh air is the first thing that comes through, and then the pale light of the moon, and then I am being lifted out, okay- argh, I’ve overcast, but I’m not passing out, why- defined world. Defined limit. Huh. That’s actually kind of nice. But owww, ribs.

I finally settle on a piece of stone, next to Aqualad- I’m leaning back, so as not to aggravate my ribs even more. Ow ow ow. Oh, hey, I’m panting. Wow the moon is bright tonight.

“We did it.” Aqualad’s shirt has a tear, right at the top of his pectoral. Mmm, pectoral.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Robin and the very fast yellow boy slap hands, and then wince- hmm. I give Aqualad one of my less mild stares.

“Why you down there, Aqualad?”

He blinks at me, then looks a bit sheepish. “I saw something weird, so… I followed it.”

I stare at him, and then I laugh so hard tears prickle at the corners of my eyes- and then I’m curled up pressing hard on my ribs because FUCK OW IT HURTS TO LAUGH OW OW OW OW THIS IS NOT FUN, I HATE ADVENTURES OW OW OW, RIBS FUCK OW. Aw, dude, I ripped my boot, ow dammit fucking RIBS! Hey, Aqualad is side-hugging me, eee! Oh my god, I hope I smell at least not awful, holy shit Terry, what are you doing, what is wrong with you?!??! Other than sleep deprivation, you have a major crush on Kaldur.

“See Superboy? The moon.” I still don’t know his name, this is embarrassing- ow, wow, okay, the moon is hugely full, wow- and that’s someone flying towards us. It’s not a bird, and it’s not a plane- I think it’s… Superman?

And now there are people all around us okay, this is just weird- oh, hey, they’re talking. I should probably listen.

Hmm. I should probably be more frightened of the guy with the Bat on his chest, but… bats are sooo cute, it’s just not frightening at all. Whoops, wait, no, he’s got a killer death-glare on him, aaarrgh, okay, and Aqualad is still hugging me hheeeeee-eee!

Superboy just stood up and is explaining that- okay, I don’t know half the words, what does “clone” mean, argh argh argh- oh, and now he’s kind of yelling, and “Why let them tell us what to do? It’s simple- get on board, or get out of the way.” I did not understand that sentence completely, but he
I’m rocking. Wow, I really am tired. It’s not a noticeable trait, usually; something I picked up on the streets, when I was younger, one of two… It. Calmed me, and I didn’t see the harm in it; I was, and still am, a scrappy, dangerous, vicious fighter, but I couldn’t be that all the time, and I’ve always, always, always seen things a little differently. It was safer for me to seem… dangerously unstable, rather than just dangerous. The other trait was the one that warned; I pop my jaw when I’m mad, and the faster the pops, the shorter my fuse. Like a pot of boiling water.

There is a price that gets paid for being… Different. Extra. Meta. More. And that price is the ability to be normal. It’s why I don’t like the defined world; nothing here is real, nothing here is right. But I’ve made the choice to fight, and now to fight with them, and the thing about choices is that you can never unmake them, not even if you beg… You can never go back, only forwards, and while the past can be relived, do you really want to? I’m sorry, I’m maundering… but I felt it apropos, as Terry’s passed out, and I usually don’t get a chance to really ruminate; I’m her back-up, you see: Her inner eyes. I watch, and listen, and remember, and while she’s the one who remembers before memory happens, I’m the one who doesn’t forget. And I wouldn’t change that for the world.

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I awaken on the sixth of July, because that’s what the clock-radio face Reads the date is, and the light streaming in says it’s mid-afternoon- I’ve never really understood the use of numbered clocks… I am instantly aware that someone tried to take off my mask, because the edges of my face are sore. My body suit and my overdress are gone- my underwear remains, as does my kit because, well, my kit tends to return. My greaves are now a pair of bangles- big thick rounds of heavy gold just big enough to be loose on my wrists, but not quite large enough to take off. They are engraved and covered with trailing designs, like the soft curving of hair in wind or the gentle twining of vines; my names are engraved on them too, in the round-line language I Write in, and filled with a red lacquer to differentiate. My knives and my fans are inside them- I can feel them there.

Someone has bound my ribcage- I can feel the wrappings shifting as I move. I am flat on my back- I usually sleep on my stomach, but… I suppose I was sick, in a way.

But I am not sick, anymore, and I think I should get up now. I stretch, and feel the tension in my legs and hips relax; my lower back pops, and my toes curl. I slowly sit up, and the covers slide off of me in a slick slither and pool around my hips. I stretch again, arms over head this time, and groan- I heal fast, ish, but my ribs are still very sore; my shoulders, however, appreciate the stretch.

I swing my legs down, out of the bed; oh, I’m wearing socks, I legit couldn’t tell. They’re red, with black stripes, and go all the way up to my knees; my underwear are black, with a frilly lacy band over my hips, X flowers picked out in fine red thread. My ribs are wrapped in soft white bandages, made out of what feels like plain cotton- they cover from the bottom-most rib to the very bottom of my breasts. My sports bra is red, with a black swipe where it goes in against my breastbone, and crosses in the back like an X. My fingernails are a bright, lurid red- what the fucking hell, why are
they red. I did not paint them red- magic is weird, I know this is a fact, but sweet baby Jesus. (Yes, I can swear on Jesus, he’s a cool deity, he won’t mind. I will not swear on, say, Hekate (Oh whisper in the night!) or Ishtar (Hubba-hubba!), because they actively listen for their Names, and get tetchy when they’re called for nothing.)

I stand, and sway, and do what I do every morning- have since I was approximately three, but I just thought it was a part of waking up for the day- I bend all the way over, and stre-e-etch my back, and then bend side to side, and then go forwards and crouch, and breathe and stretch stretch stretch- and about fifteen minutes later, I’ve stretched all my soreness out, and I feel ready for anything. I roll down from my scorpion pose, lie flat on the ground for a long moment, to rest, and shove up with my arms- and promptly crack my head on something.

Gods dammit!

I swear, quietly, and look to see- Oh!- I knocked my head on a chair. There is an over large t-shirt and a pair of gym shorts on it; the shirt is white, and the shorts are red- I think they were left for me. I stand, and dress in the clothes- and there is a door. I am in a room- it’s walls are a yellow-green, with a rippling white edge three fingers wide. There is a loosely tatted carpet where the floor should be, and a thin white rounded bump where the wall meets the floor. There are shelves that look strange to my eyes, and there are a few small statues, and a strange clock under a jar-bell, and a few books of quotations and ooo! a book about Alphonse Mucha!

Alphonse Mucha is one of my absolute favorite artists in the world- his work is intricate without being overdone, and there is a strange sparsity to his style that has always fascinated me. He manages to convey, through thickness of line and sparsity of form the exact thing he wants to- whether that be the delicate flush of a maiden’s skin, or the exquisite drape of a scarf. The steadiness of his lines- ugh, I can’t even describe it.

Now, I could take this very large and well printed book and sit on the bed and read it, but beds are for sleeping, and I’m actually really hungry.

Pulling the book from the shelf, I walk over to the door- I know it’s a door because of how it’s placed in the room, and how it’s sized- there is a yellow-brown circle on the lower right, about a handspan below my hip, with a sort of orb, and a pair of hinges on the left side, spaced some distance apart. I think it opens like the big house doors, but I’ve never seen the weird round thing before, so I’m not sure.

I reach out, and touch it, the big book under my arm- it’s cool, and sort of… rattles? It turns! Okay, so turn it… and the hinges are on this side, so… pull? YES! Okay, yeah, it might be silly to get so excited about opening a door, but, well… I get excited over little things.

I walk out of the room, and into a narrow hallway; it is airy, and bright, and there is a sound coming from somewhere, like… a spark-viewer, I think they’re called; I’m not really willing to pay the rates required to have full service for one of the little glowing fishbowls with gemstones around the rim, filled with a liquid too thick to be water, sealed and perfused with a set of dials and switches and antenna, but I hear they’re kind of cool to have. You can watch pre-recorded things on it, or watch semi-live plays, or watch concerts broad-waved… I don’t really understand the mechanics of them, but I do understand that they’re way above my price range- my little red X flower-powered radio from Gemworld (magic is weeeird) might occasionally need to be fed some of those pearls I got from the peddler’s cart, but it’s free, and it works for my needs. (I should pick up a police scanner, I wonder where I can get one…)
I walk down the hallway, and pass other doors- one is open to a watercloset, with a tub and a strange thing sticking out of the wall- Shower. It’s a shower. Huh. Okay. Weird. The curtain, when I touch it, is sort of- like, it’s not cloth, and it’s not paper, but it’s clear like a sort of membrane, but it wasn’t grown either- it’s smooth on one side, and sort of rough on the other, and it’s speckly and sort of smells like bleach- there are suction cups on the vertical edge, and it hangs from a series of rings, made out of a clattery something isn’t glass, even though it’s clear, and there are weird round things that are stiff and stone-like but stick to the sides of the tub through the what-ever it is. It looks like a curtain, actually- a really weird curtain. The mirror is very large, but I turn my head, and I don’t have to look in it.

I come to the landing at the top of the stair- I’m not on a ground floor, O-kay- and feel a wave of intense vertigo wash over me. The room sways and wobbles, and I brace myself against the wall. I crouch, and put my socked feet on the second step down, and then with a steady forward bump-bump-bump I go down the stairs; the book is in my lap the whole time, balanced between my knees and my belly. I finally slide off of the bottom step- at some point, I just closed my eyes, as that sometimes makes it easier, and I didn’t have to look so…- and put my head between my knees; I’m shaking. I don’t like heights.

A scratchy voice- the same one as before- says something to me. It takes me a second to translate- “Are you okay?”

I have to give him an answer- “F-f-fine. Don’t like heights, but fine.”

My breathing steadies, and I am finally able to look up, book at my side; I am also able to open my eyes. I see Growly, still in his bright white suit- oh, it’s got the same word for Hope on it as Superman’s, I hadn’t noticed- and Scratchy is crouched near me, wow, oh my god it’s the guy I flirted with in Missouri, I’m in Missouri! YES! I know where I am, I know where I am!

Scratchy voice is staring at me oddly- “You- you don’t like heights?”

I shake my head no. “They make me dizzy-vomity. Vizzy? Dizvomzy.”

His eyebrows are quirked high and tight, like he’s missed something important. “If- how did you get down to us? At CADMUS?”

“I jump down. Was very high, so took me three tries.”

“you- You have vertigo and you jumped off the equivalent of a fifty two story building!?!”

I slightly hunch at his tone, and can feel a flush working up my skin. “What is vertigo, equivalent?”

Growly is the one who gives me the answers, not Scratchy- no, no, he’s called Superboy, pay attention- “Vertigo is a subtype of dizziness in which a patient inappropriately experiences the perception of motion (usually a spinning motion) due to dysfunction of the vestibular system. It is often associated with nausea and vomiting as well as a balance disorder, causing difficulties standing or walking.

Equivalent is synonymous with Equal, Corresponding, Alike, and Same.”

I blink, and mentally try to figure out what was just said- “Equivalent means Same, yes?” I’ve stood up, and walked into the room where they were sitting- that’s a couch, cool, but I think Scratchy was sitting next to Superboy, so, um- aha, okay, there is a chair, which I settle into, and there’s a low table with magazines on it, so I set the Mucha book onto it. Scratchy sits back down next to Superboy, who says “Yes.”
“What is subtype?”

“When you have a smaller group inside a larger one, but both groups are the same group.”

“Like cliques?”

“That’s a really good example, yes.”

“Okay. What is inappropriately?”

“It’s when, um, it’s when something is done that isn’t right socially.”

“What is socially?”

“Socially is a derivative of social, which is a word implying society or people.”

“Derivative?”

“Like a child of, but not alive.”

“Oh! Descendant of stone! Um, but what is perception?” Scratchy has turned the spark-viewer off; the room is much quieter, but there are other sounds now, quiet sounds- I can hear a steady tun-pa tun-pa tun-pa coming from another room, I’d expect; the sounds of kitchen noise filter in. I can faintly hear the chirping of birds.

“Perception is the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses.”

“Dysfunction?”

“When something doesn’t work the right way.”

“Ohhh- but what is…” and just like that, we talk and talk; each time they answer a question, I invariably hear more words I don’t understand, and ask about them, and they explain, which cycles in more words I don’t understand- and the entire thing only gets stopped because my stomach chooses to growl very loudly, right when I was about to ask the meaning of blonde.

I flush so hard I can actually feel my blood-pressure rise. “…Um. Food?”

Scratchy- who I’ve heard Superboy refer to as Wally, so I think that’s his name, and until he says otherwise- Wally, smiles at me. “Sure!”

In the kitchen there is a woman who looks too much like Wally to not be a relation- “Mom! She’s finally awake!” I blush hard- and his mother says “Wally!” in an admonishing tone. I am soon seated at a table, fastidiously eating food- I’m so hungry I don’t really care what it is, just that it’s there and mine and mmm. Beef. That’s beef. So tasty. I am eating at a slightly accelerated pace, but I have always taken the time to enjoy my food- except when it doesn’t taste good, at which point I try to ingest it as fast as possible- but this food is very good, so I take my time. But I’m hungry too, so not too much time.

My vision un-tunnels right about half-way through the plate of food; the guys have been watching me eat, why are they watching me eat, “What?”

“Nothing!”
“Where is it going?”

I look at Superboy a little oddly. “It going into my mouth, then tummy, where else?”

I finish my breakfast (breaking of sleeping fast), and take the plate back into the kitchen, to wash it; Wally’s Mother tells me that she’ll handle it, really, and “I put your clothing in the wash, and it’ll be dried soon- why don’t you go hang out with the boys?” I end up on the couch- Superboy on the left, his elbow and upper body slumped against the arm of the couch; I’m in the middle, my legs crossed at the ankle, back straight, and hands folded in my lap; Wally is on the right, boredly flicking through brightly lit windows into other worlds.

About three hours later, Wally’s Mom comes in and has a short argument with Wally, hands me my clean, dry clothing, and throws us all out of the house- I have enough time to put my clothing on, and flicker into my Terry clothing.

The guys seem a bit stunned when I do, though. It’s like they’ve never seen a girl’s body before… Anyway.

We leave Wally’s house, and walk around what I now know must be Central. We buy some apples, Superboy gets more clothing, and then we go back to Wally’s house. Dinner that night is very good, and I sleep in the clothing I wore down the stairs- Wally’s father is a nice enough man, but… I don’t know, I don’t like mustaches. Lip carpets. Eeeew.

The next day, we go shopping again- and we go to a bright place, made of wide spaces and juicy displays of clothing; and it is while I’m in a store called Dexter’s Hangar that I see it. It is a skirt, high in the front and long in the back and it’s got frills, and it’s got a bow with a skull on the knotted part, and it’s the most perfect shade of maroon, and I really hope they have it in my size. Holy shit they have it in my size, sweet baby Jesus life is good. Oh oh oh there’s a matching vest and under-blouse- I must have it.

I put the entire ensemble on- and that’s too much maroon, I need something to break up the swathe- oh oh oh, that’s a really cute white belt, perfect. Okay, suck it up, you need to see the whole effect- Urrrggh, mirror, but the clothing- I need shoes and stockings. Okay. I get those- oh gods they have so many pretty shoes I want ALL OF THEM FUCK- oh, hey, those have just the right heel for me to be able to walk, and OHOHOHOH those stockings have flowers on them, I must have them on my body.

Okay, I’m dressed- and my skirt is charcoal grey-maroon and goes right to above my knees in the front and down to my ankles in the back; the inner fabric is an inky soot color. There are two rows of a total of five buttons, jet-black, that go from my waist to my upper hip, following the contour of my pelvis, stitched onto a snug wrapping of pinstriped fabric; to preserve my modesty, there is a looser skirt that flows down to my knees, but can be buttoned higher for probable seductive purposes; it’s got three, yes, three tiers in the back, each one with its own frilly ribbon edge. I’m going to have to button it above my knees though, otherwise I won’t be able to kick the guy in the gut when I need to. Oh fucking shitdammit, really? Okay, well- my stockings are a darker shade of red, sort of a dried bloody brownish red, lacy over-large roses picked out in thinly looped threads- lace, I think it’s called; they’re actually more like a pair of very high, very fancy socks, not a pair of very thin pants.
It’s a little odd, but very comfortable—although there is a thin layer of sticky something, that hugs my upper thigh, and that feels very strange. But my underwear matches them, mostly, so everything in life is... basically perfection right now.

Oh, shoes!

My shoes are boots, and red, very very red— not my normal cherry red, but bright fake-cherry candy red, and shiny shiny like an overly waxy apple. They go to just above my ankles, high at the top— they suck to my feet like overly-friendly gloves, their toes slightly rounded up and pointed; the laces for the boots are thin and black, and there is a black beady clip that click-snaps over the knot; I double tied them anyway, just to be safe. My belt is made out of a bright white, same-same but different shiny-shiny stuff my boots are made out of; it actually loops twice around my waist, but that’s because I picked a really long one. The belt is actually belted over the vest, so you can see it— I’ve never really seen the point of wearing a decoration if you place it so that it can’t be seen. (Why get a tattoo you aren’t proud to wear?)

My vest is not like a normal vest— it hugs me, and sort of wraps, again, like a too friendly glove, around my ribs— which is actually kind of nice because ow ow ribs ow, I had successfully forgotten about them, owww— anyway, it’s pinstriped on a slight bias, meaning my shoulders are at the widest part of the angle, and my waist the narrowest, with only one button right between my breasts. My blouse is an ivory color, as dead white is often too harsh on my skin— unless I’m going to a funeral, of course; it buttons up the front, and has weirdly small sleeves— the chest was too small to button up all the way, so I unbuttoned it to about where the top of my sternum is— my Terry bra is molded and lacy at the top of the cups, and has a perfect little rose right at the top of my sternum, but I added a zircon bead for extra bling because I like sparkly things. The rose with the shine in its center peeks out when I sigh, but I shouldn’t be sighing too much, although it will distract the guy— oh for fucks sake.

Speaking of things that are sparkly, my glasses are shaped like what many imagine a cat’s eye to be shaped as, with curlique slips of lurid red, and encrusted at the edges with bright red rhinestones. I have a love-loathe relationship with them, because on the one hand, I can’t really see clearly without them, and the defined world is fucking amazing looking— but on the other hand, I look like an idiot with them on, like a fucking vapid nosepicking cow who only thinks about appearances, and that’s not who I am. However, they accent my outfit nicely for the moment, so I suppose they’ll have to do— also, when I bat my eyes at the guy, he’ll trip.

Okay, you know what, this is getting old— I take a deep breath, gently tuck the longer part of my bangs back and clip it there with my X hairclip, and drop into my Shop. Once there, I focus and I see that there are a pair of yellow-haired twins— one boy, one girl— who will try to rob a store; Wally and Superboy will stop the girl while wearing— handkerchiefs?..., but the boy will run through this store to escape.

Sigh. I’m going to have to stop him.

I’m also going to have to cover my face, but not with my mask— I have two, well, three, options. I could wear that lacy scarf over there, or that red bandanna, but no, those are choking hazards— Aha, that red “surgical” mask is perfect. I pick it up, and loop it over both of my ears— a quick jerk up and down, and a little press, and then it’s just right on my face. A little weird to breathe through something that smells faintly of vanilla, but its okay, I’ve done weirder. I bend over, and make sure that my boots are on absolutely right— snug but not choking, and that the laces are tucked away so that they won’t catch.

The skirt buttons up neatly— a quick pick-pinch of the fingers through the neatly hidden holes, and
then a sort of slidy-loop string-loop over the buttons, and then it’s done; not a moment too soon, as the yellow haired boy I Saw just ran inside. He shoves several people out of his way- I calmly walk forwards, into his path, and cant my hips to the left; this is not an unbalancing, but a readying for the kick I’m going to use- not something deadly, like… like The Swan Descends Gracefully, but something that will stop him if I throw a little Power into it- and then he’s in front of me and moving fast, and my body has swivoted (swiveled + pivoted) into Horse Deters Wolf.

The ball of my foot, and the full force of my weight, and a slight smidgen of Power catches the yellow-haired boy wide in the gut; he grunts, his eyes wide and very blue, and then he stumbles back- my leg feels like it does when I shin concrete, which is to say a little jarred, but not all that hurt- on a not-whim, I gently curl my leg into the mantis pose (crooked knee and knife toes, can kill a man in the throat or blind him in the eyes), and then move my ankle back and down, my toe pointed towards the ground; I stand in the ready stance for Swallow Dives and Strikes. My legs form a perfect forty-five degree angle, my left foot pointing towards my target, my right foot pointing towards my right.

The boy’s eyes are very wide, for some reason; I narrow my eyes. Actually, it would be better if I canted my hips to the right- I do, and not a moment too soon- the boy throws a pretty solid punch at me, which I duck, and then I shove forwards and slam the bases of my open palms against his collarbones (this is a bone breaking move, but I think he has super-strength he does so it’ll only hurt like hell and maaaybe bruise); he yells, and stumbles back farther. I take my chance while he’s off balance- I use a variant of Divine Dragon swishes Tail, which is properly done with a sword or large knives- and kick his feet out from under him, then dart back about half a step.

He shoves himself up, and lunges for my legs- but I’ve already lifted into Butterfly Teases Fish, and proceed to stomp out a staccato pattern on his back. With a final flourish, I’m in the lobby of the store- I whirl, and duck a wild arm, like a clothes-line at neck height; now, at this point, I can do two things. I can prolong the fight, and possibly wait for assistance which should be coming, or I could break his nose and then knock him out. Hmmm. Dodge, twist, duck- yeah, ow, ribs say knock-out. So, knock-out it is- I dart forwards, right inside his guard- there is just enough time to flutter my eyes at him, which seems to throw him off, but I’ve already slammed my forehead into his nose, and then push up and crack; Goat Knocks at Gate Twice. With a soft sort of groan, and then a “guh” he falls directly on me and holy shit he’s heavy fuck fuck fuck he’s unconscious fuck I can’t lift him arrrgh- “Ack!” and drop to the ground, the boy’s heavy unconscious body and face squished directly into my boobs.

Nnnnng-owowowowrrgh.

And then Superboy in a blue bandanna is lifting him off of me, holy shit thank you- “Thank you!” and I can breathe ow ow ribs ow, fuuuck ribs ow. “Hi guys! (ow fuck ow)”

“Hi. Um. Wow.” Wally comes in at a run and stares at me, and then there’s that guy in red I met that one time- he is smiling, why is he smiling-, and Superman too. Hmm. Both of them are smiling, this is weird.

I stand up, my fingers flicking over the buttons holding up the skirt- with a sort of, not a shimmy, more like a stretch, but that isn’t right either- it’s when you shake out a skirt with your hips, not your hands, anyway, I do that. The front-skirt falls down back to about my knees, and I adjust my shirt-nervous? Fuck, I’m totally nervous, damn. Welp- my shirt is adjusted, the threat is handled, so the only thing left is- “Want to buy this clothing. Give me money?” and I hold out my hands (both of them because that’s polite).
Wally gulps, weird, and hands me the little black card that his mother gave to him for our excursion, nodding all the while- I smile, “Thank you!”- and with a mild sweep of my skirt because it’s cool, I go to the register, and I buy everything I’m currently wearing. The saleslady is nice enough to cut and peel the price-stickers off, and there’s a weird thing that’s pinned through my skirt and another at the nape of my neck that probably sounds an alarm when it goes through the door.

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I go back to the little room I changed in, fold up the clothing I was wearing before, and put it in my purse- that ninth pocket really is handy, but kind of hard to find things in, I should make an organizer- and then I walk out of the store, and go with both of the guys back to Wally’s House; out of the corner of my eye, I see a door that shouldn’t be there- Aha. This must be the nexus for this area of the Nightmarket.

I really like my new skirt, and don’t really need a reason to wear it, but, hmm. It’s not really practical for everyday wear- maybe for first impressions? Yes! But, ugh, nothing I have is exactly clean though- I will ask Wally’s Mom where I can wash my clothing.

HOLY FUCKING SHIT, WASHING MACHINES ARE THE SINGLE GREATEST INVENTION I’VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE, I MUST HAVE ONE. It’s a machine that has this barrel in it, right, and there’s a stream of water- probably comes in through a hose, but you can choose how hot or cold it is you don’t have to boil the water, or go to the cistern/rain barrel/river to get more, it just pours in when you pull the button- and there’s this spirally paddle thing that spins and moves the clothing through the water and you can add soaps which come in scents like perfumes, and holy shit this is really cool, it’s spinning and whirling and the soap made all these bubbles and there’s this window I can watch things happening in- oh oh, I know- I leave the laundry room, and pound up the stairs.

In the room I slept in, I change back into the clothing I wore this morning, and neatly fold up my new clothing, and then I go back downstairs- on my butt, of course.

And then I watch my clothing get washed by a machine. It’s without a doubt the very best thing I’ve ever done in the defined world- certainly the most relaxing.

I’m not actually sure how long I’ve sat there, staring, before it happens- and what happens is I have a Waking Dream. Those are very very rare for me- I am almost always asleep when I have my Dreams, but sometimes if I get into a sort of… a sort of dreamy relaxed state, I can have one when I’m awake.

There is a boy- no, was a boy, but is a boy- not a boy anymore, a young man my age- and his hands are covered in blood- (His Name is Tamer (The one who Tames), and the two of you have been friends for as long as you’ve been alive), and I know him, but… but he was a figment of my imagination, so how- he’s crying, why is he crying- why are his hands covered in blood? A white cloth wraps around his face, and then tightens- he cries out, and then his eyes roll back; his unconscious body is lifted from the bloody ground, and roughly handled into a sack of some dark cloth- the sack is taken first by plane across the sea, then up a river that flows down cliffs, then carried through a forest filled with birds, then by horse across great plains, then by camel across a desert, to the palace of a demon, lodged in the side of a mountain; Tamer is taken from the sack, and bathed and cleaned- the blood is cleaned from his hands, picked out from underneath his fingernails- he is dressed in plain clothing, and ritually prepared, and on the ninth day he is taken from a dark
chamber down down down and bound and carried to a bed of stone, and an old old man with a shock of white hair in the black is carried to another bed of stone; a strange set of jewelry is placed onto them both.

A thump from far away, and the beds are soon covered by- it isn’t water or oil, but it’s bad, it’s very bad- as soon as it touches Tamer, he awakens, and tries to scream but he can’t he can’t they’ve put a board in his mouth so he cannot scream and the water rises higher and higher and his eyes his eyes are so scared and then the water rises over his face and he’s crying oh gods why is he crying- and then there is only the black not water not oil what is that stuff, and then it sinks down and- AND IT’S TAMER’S FACE BUT THAT IS NOT TAMER THAT IS A DEMON AND HE’S NEVER COMING BACK-

A loud breeep breaks my trance- no, shit shit it wasn’t over, fuck fuck- wait, wait, the drying machine (THERE’S ANOTHER MACHINE JUST FOR DRYING THINGS IN, YOU DON’T HAVE TO WAIT FOR A STRETCH OF DAYS WHEN IT’S MOSTLY SUN, YOU COULD EVEN WEAR DRY CLOTHING IN SUMMER, HOLY FUCK I NEED ONE), Wally’s Mom told me to put my clothing in the- she called it the dryer; I read the instructions inside the drying machine, move my clothing from the washing machine’s barrel to the drying machines barrel, and I put in a sort of a cloth-paper that smells faintly of lavender and starch, and I set it and start it and I watch and then-

There will be an opportunity for Tamer to escape the demon’s mountain- but only one, and only if he is awoken at the right moment; a pinch on the ear will suffice. Then, to escape the demon’s palace, he will need a guide- something with wings, bright enough to follow, but dull enough to hide. To get down the demon’s mountain, he will need a ride; someone with legs that can run almost vertically could scale the mountain in enough time to greet the moon. To cross the desert at the bottom of the mountain during the night, he will need one with scales like armor, and something to hold onto. To cross the plains, a ride is required; to cross through the forest of the birds, he will need a disguise, and a good friend to guide him- if he speaks, even once, the birds will kill him. The river will carry him far and fast, but to ford the falls is a dangerous task; a boat, if it were the right one, could do it- a creature with wings, if it were strong enough, could carry him across the sea.

The demon will send three monsters after Tamer- and the first will fall prey to the birds of the forest, and the second will fall prey to the sea, and the third will be killed by words.

And Tamer will, for a time, be free of the demon. And when the time comes, he will offer refuge to the one who saves him.

But be warned- there are only nine days in which his soul may be saved.

The dryer brleeeps. My vision was over anyway.

I don’t have much time. Damn- I need to go home... I fold my laundry, and run back upstairs, and grab the clothing I was wearing- I butt-thump back down the stairs, and grab my bag from the hook
by the door- I need to organize, do I have enough time, yes yes; a quick pouching of fabric, a flurry of needle and thread work and they’re staring at me arrrrgh- “y-Yes?”

“What are you doing?” Superboy. Okay, um-

“My friend is in danger- I must go to help him.”

He looks at me oddly- I feel compelled to explain.

He has superhearing, keep working. “Is like this- have had friend for longer than have… anything else, really. Is. Um. Not-real Real? Like- pretend? But nothing is pretend- everything is real, somewhere. So, not-real Real pretend-real friend is in danger- terrible terrible danger- and I am only one who knows enough to save him. So, I pack things, and go save him.” I’ve finished my pockets- okay, leave it on the table, run into laundry room, grab clothing, run back- clothes pocket open, drop, close pocket- that’s that done.

Food, I’m going to need a bribe- um um um, fuck I don’t know this kitchen- “Wally, need fruit. Need sweet sweet fruit, lots of it- You have?”

“Uh, yeah- but you’re going to save your imaginary friend… on a whim?”

(Imaginary?) “Not whim- premonition. I get them.” Oh good, cherries, that should be enough- but I’ll take some apples too- they get thrown into my bag, food pocket yes!

Wally is staring at me, arrgh- “What?”

“When was the last time you saw him, your friend? In person?”

“Um. Never. Is not-pretend friend; never met for true.”

“But you’re going to go help him anyway.”

“Yes.”

I can see his incredulous why- so I beat him to the punch. “I go to save him for same reason painters paint, or scientists science. Not something I particularly want do- would rather no one ever needed to be saved, or at least could save selves- but, but- he is my friend, just like you and Superboy and Robin and Aqualad- what is your hero name?- and if you needed my help and I knew it, I would go.”

“you- I’m Kid Flash- You would really just drop everything to go help someone you’ve never even met?” Wally says this with such disbelief- except…

I give him my second best stare- it’s the are you secretly taking stupid pills stare. “And what you think you do every day?” I’ve yanked on my boots, and laced them quick; matching socks were one of the many casualties of extreme packing. My left sock is a tube sock that I accidentally washed with one of Raven’s kirtles once- it’s a rich blue, like a glazed piece of porcelain- the other is an black and pink argyle sock. I shove them both down around my ankles, over the laces (so they don’t catch), stand up, and take a count- yes, I have all my stuff, yes, I have all my bribes, ye- no, I did not Write out my Dream, you can’t forget to do that; I open the tenth pocket, pull out the current Journal, and with quick, careful hands, Write the Dream down.

I’ve done this so many times, I sometimes forget how interesting it can be- because in the very act of Writing, the Dream… for lack of terminology, it solidifies. With one hand, I Write- with the other, I dig through the fourth pocket and pull out several sets of paints; from the second and third come pens and brushes- a goose feather with a very fine nib, and a glass one with a nice wide line, and a sable brush that is very… very absorbent, but also not- I’m not sure how to describe it, just that I can get
the paint where I want it, when I want it almost every time.

The colors whirl out, and into the shapes and forms of the Words- and almost before I know what has happened, illumination occurs- why is... The Gates of Horn.

Holy shit.

_Holy fucking Shit._

“I go. I- have not been home in four months, and… and there is not much time to save him.” I’m not quite crying- this is going to be an _adventure_; hot, sweaty, gory, danger at every turn, and most likely a new scar that will twinge in the rain. Urrgh. “I come back soon.”

And then I go to save Tamer, Prince of Assassins, from becoming…

I go to save my friend from becoming a monster.

Let me tell you about my scars, and the Gates of Horn. They aren’t connected, but I’d rather not talk about walking through the same city I walked through about a year ago, only then I was very differently dressed- oddly, my Red X garb draws more attention. Whatever.

I have only five truly noticeable scars- one on my right hand, one on my left foot, one on my right shoulder, one on my upper lip, and one underneath my hair; I consider these scars noticeable because they’re the ones that tingle under certain circumstances.

The one on my right hand I got during the Mystic portion of my Animal Husbandry elective, at Necro’s; it was hatching season for the Pimpernell Dragons, and our project was to incubate and raise one of the little spiky fire-breathing lizards to maturity, and then release it into the wild- it would be tagged, and bonus points were awarded to anyone who’s dragon came back the following winter to nest. (Mine did.) Anyway, when my dragon hatched out, I was so excited I forgot that it had been incubating in basically a forge, kept at an even fifty-five hundred degrees. The dragon licked across the back of my hand, and burned me so badly I blistered- I was wearing protective gloves, but there’s only so much thick leather can handle. It tingles near very hot surfaces, or when I’m in the presence of fire-breathing dragons.

The one on my left foot came from a nail- it’s a small circle, with a sort of pit in the middle; I got it sometime when I was eleven or twelve, not entirely sure. Actually, that one almost killed me- the wound got septic, and one thing led to another, and well- anyway, that one aches when I’ve been poisoned.

The one on my shoulder came from an arrow, shot by a centaur; and I escaped them by throwing myself into a river where giant lizards swam. They didn’t eat me, for some reason- and when I dragged myself out of the river, a witch-doctor was kind enough to remove the arrow, and make me a medicine from the arrow shaft to protect against infection, which worked. Tasted like death, but worked. That one hurts when it rains- got it after I got Rain, now that I think about it...

The one on my lip I got in a fight, which I don’t really remember the cause of; considering when I got it, it was probably because I shot my mouth off at the wrong time. Which I do, but much less often, because that one aches when I’m about to say something that will get me punched in the face.
I don’t like getting punched in the face.

Finally, the one under my hair came from me falling off my bed and onto a book- it’s a sort of jagged cut, and very cool looking. That one goes all tingly in a bookstore, which actually feels really sort of wonderful, but also very overwhelming. I think that’s why I act the way I do in bookstores- thinking back on it, I’ve had that scar the longest.

The Gates of Horn are a pile of pillar-y bone things, somewhere near the Dream King’s Castle, in the Dreaming. They are also known as the Gates of Truth, and they open to let true dreams through- I know this because I once asked a soothsayer of great skill where my Dreams come from, and she told me that the ones that are true (which has always been all of them) come through the Gates of Truth. Also known as the Gates of Horn.

Basically, to get to Tamer and save him from becoming a skin that a demon wears, I will have to go to the source of my Dreams, and walk through that portal, and see what is on the other side- and not die in the process.

Shit.

I eventually find the mall again, and the door that shouldn’t be there- the cherry-fruit is just enough to get me into the Central Nightmarket, and then it’s a quick jaunt through the bustling marketplace- leaping over a cat-bar fight that’s spilled out of an alleyway (the sound of fighting cats and breaking glass is always a little jarring) and then a dead run down the Jasmine Road, heading east. Through some mystical woo-woo stuff that makes no damn sense, I end up in the Vale of Unicorns, steadily loping along the same road that brought me to Pudong, two years ago.

And it is there that I meet Dui, and Kai, and discover that I have more skills than just the ones involving spellcasting.

There lives, in a vale where unicorns graze- where they have grazed for so long, in fact, it is known as the Vale of Unicorns- a family of winged unicorns called alicorns lives, and they are all beautiful. Except for one; that one is Dui, and Dui is kind and gentle and very alone, because when she was born- with long legs like her mother, and a strong back like her father, and the wide shoulders of her grandfather, and the big eyes of her great-grandmother, and the special little tail-flick of her aunt, and the gigantic wings of her uncle; her coloring is normal to her family, a deep chestunt- but horns and manes are unique to each unicorn- Dui’s horn is especially unique because when she was a very young filly, she knocked her horn against the horns of a faun, and broke it. And as she grew, her horn did not, until finally she had no horn at all. Her skills at flying, however, are unparalleled, because- and this, I think, is the Law of Balance (All things being equal; what one gets another will get something else in equal measure) at work- her great wings allow her to fly far higher, and her loneliness has driven her to greater heights of aerial maneuvering. Dui, though very kind- for, as sometimes happens, the only thing hurting a person does to them is it makes them kind- is considered by the other unicorns of the vale, which includes her family, to be very ugly indeed. Her mane is also unique- it curls into proper waves of flaxen thread, just like the manes of the rest of her family does, but where their’s tends towards fatty sausage curls, her’s tends towards windblown rat’s nest. She is strong, and gentle, not prone to nerves- and she stands at about 160 cm. Her family is not kind- they are actually rather cruel, for all their beauty and wealth.
There is one other- just one- that is uglier to the unicorns of the vale, one who is uglier than Dui, and that one is Kai.

Kai is a unicorn chiefly because his father is a unicorn and his mother is a unicorn- and they are unicorns because they have the right horsey shape, and the required singular horn, but they aren’t really… accepted. In politeness, they are given the scrublands on the sleek sheer hills to roam, which they quite like, actually- and Kai, who is quite independent of his parents, and aunts, and uncles, and cousins- look, his family is stupidly huge, alright?- Kai likes to stand on summit of the mountains surrounding the Vale of Unicorns (called the Dragons Teeth), and breathe in the sweet, warm air that rises from the lower land, and watch the edge of the world glow in the light.

Kai is called ugly by the unicorns who know of him- mostly his family- because his horn developed a split in the middle and curled into the spiraling horns of a big mountain ram; he looks like a proper unicorn in the body, mostly- there’s a wild streak in him from his great-great-great-grandmother that showed rightly true in him. His legs are short and strong, like his fathers, and his body wide, like his mother’s, and he has the big head and powerful neck of his uncle, and the height of his grandfather- which is to say, he is about 13 hands tall, or 132 cm, give or take.

Kai differs from his family in one way, and that way is that he is not interested in the girls he has known all his life- yes, they are all fine fillies, and yes, they would make good wives, but… he’s just. Not interested.

Dui differs from her family in many ways, but the largest of them is that she is not bound to the land- oh, yes, her heart kind of sings when she flies over the rolling hills of ever-verdant grazing, and yes, there is no grazing quite like the grazing at ten-thousand feet below sea level- but. She’s not… attached.

Nothing would have come of this, excepting for the fact that one day, for no other reason than “why not?” Dui flew higher than she had ever flown before, and nearly lost her breath- and then, suddenly she was in high high scrubland, and the grass was of a variety she had never seen. Thinking herself in a strange new land, she slowly glided all about- catching the eye of Kai, who quietly trotted down from his mountain summit, all the while staying out of sight of Dui.

Dui soon landed in what Kai considered his private glade, because there were no others who could get to that high high place, and rested flump and rolled all around in the grass, her body exuding a faint perfume of heady rose and lavender. Kai hid himself behind a curve in the road, and with some trepidation, spoke to the one who had flown into his special place- but he soon regretted his harsh tone, because she was crying shit shit fuck-

Dui, thinking herself alone, laid down in the soft grasses and began to cry- because even the kindest of people have a breaking point. And then a voice came out of nowhere, and startled her into flight.

Kai called out- “Please wait! I am sorry- please please, won’t you come back?” and, in a burst of fright, he ran out into the glade, his dun coat and stiff mane jagged in the light.

And Dui saw him, and wheeled in the air, and glided down soft touch the ground- and stared at him, and beheld him as… lovely; his stocky body, and his short legs, his dun color with pangaré features, dark brown around the mane which stands erect and is short and black and shines in the light, his pale brown flanks and yellowish-white belly and muzzle, the faintly striped legs, and the tail with the long dock and short hair. All of these things Dui saw, and all of these things Dui considered- beautiful.

And Kai saw Dui, with her flaxen mane, and the star on her forehead of pale white where her horn should have grown, her rich dark chestnut coat with a flaxen mane and long flowing tail, a short
head, her strong neck, well laid back shoulders, wide croup (hindquarters) and expansive gait- tall and strong, with very strong hooves and joints.

Love at first sight, while rare, really does happen sometimes- it’s what comes after that tends to be problematic.

This is also where I get involved in the story.

It came to pass that Dui was heavy with Kai’s child- but Dui’s family would not stand for one of their daughters to get married to some so and so- and so, they bound Dui’s wings, and would not let her fly- so, she ran, and ran, and ran.

And, when Dui did not meet with Kai, as they had planned- for he had built a home for them, on their high cliff- he knew that something had happened to her, and sought her out.

He found her, in the lowest of her ancestral grazes- and he unbound her wings. And that was when I came upon them both, because I had strayed from the path without realizing it and had become quite lost.

I cheerily greet the two of them, and inquire about them- and they tell me their story, and in that moment I know that my Fabrications elective will finally come in handy. I explain to them that I am skilled in the art of Skin-changing, and, for a small fee- directions to the nearest witch of skill- I will happily change them from a mare and stallion to a woman and a man. They balk, but eventually, after much discussion amongst themselves, agree.

With careful fingers, I take my scissors from the eighth pocket, and with careful snips remove their horsey skins- with a wet sliding, they slough off and into the ninth pocket of my bag. In their place stands a woman of dark chestnut with flaxen hair, heavy with child, and a man of dun skin and inky hair. They thank me profusely, and accept my gifts of clothing and blankets- I make sure to include one that is very soft, easily cleaned, and beautiful, for the baby on the way (eee!), and in return, they give me directions to the witch-woman’s hut; the witch-woman called Baba Yaga.

I thank them for their directions, and see them on their way- Dui gathers Kai in her arms, and with a great wooshing of wings, lifts into the sky, and out of my sight.

I walk through the Unicorn Vale to the south, as Dui and Kai instructed me, and close my eyes when the beauty of the place becomes too bright- soon enough, I am in scrublands, and then a forest, and then a Dark Forest of Indeterminate Age.

I am also, once again, on a path- it looks very much like the Rocky Road. I come to a turning, and ahead I see a glade, filled with gently fluttering colors on the leftwards path- and to the right, I see a bleached white fence made of bones, and a giant pair of chicken’s feet. I go to the chicken’s feet- there was a ring of pale white stones that bothered me, for some reason- they looked very much like teeth. Then again, they very well might have been.

I come to the gate of Baba Yaga- it is a tall gate, with the jawbones of a donkey for a knocker. I lift them, and let them clatter one two three, and the gates creak open by themselves.

I walk into- well, okay. Here’s the thing- during my Mystical Animal Husbandry elective course, I was taught all about all kinds of weird creatures that can also be domesticated- and what I’m seeing right now is a flock of Gemhens- looks like the Coup’de Gras variety- in a tizzy because they- aha,
their coop hasn’t been cleaned, and their feed’s in a disarray, and oho, that’s some nasty water right there. There’s only one thing to do- I clean out the coop; there’s a shovel, and a scoop, and a fresh bale of straw, and a wheelbarrow, and I use them all; clear out the bedding, and sweep out the chicken shit, lay down fresh straw for the hens, check done next- throw out the old feed, icky icky, into the midden that’s steadily growing in the barrow, and uugh, stinky stinky- and then the barrow is full and the coop is clean, and the Gemhens are streaming back inside and settling into their places, or are milling and pecking around the outside, just because they want to.

I take the wheelbarrow with it’s foul load behind a barn, where- yep, there’s the midden, dump this out and- shit shit, that is a horse, and a moth in a permeable jarbell, and a corkscrew-cow- they give the sweetest milk, but only when treated kindly, fuck- so I clean out the barn, and clean off the animals; fresh nightblooming flowers in a pot for the moth, and an adjustment to the bell so it has more space to fly- I just move it to it’s own stall, why not.

The horse is a vicious old nag, but enjoys the rubdown I give- steady strokes with the grain, push in hard so it can feel it, use the small brush for the face, and get the hooves cleaned and polished; yeah, use that oil, it’s got a really distinct smell I’d know anywhere, and take the time to unmatt that tail, she needs it for flies, and gently takes a whole apple from my hand- and then she says “The witch has a boat, that can fit in a disk of metal no bigger than a coin- and she has a penchant for games of dice and chance. Be careful, though- she cheats. When you win it off of her, don’t go to sleep on the stove, like she’ll want you to- that’s how she usually gets her coin, and her dinner, back. You’ll have to devise your own way of getting out of the house- once you manage it, sleep in my stall. You will be safe here, and I will wake you before dawn- let the hens out, and follow the directions the eggs give you.”

“Can I leave my bag with you?”

“No, I can only protect things that are alive- leave it with the moth; he’ll hide it, and probably work out some manner of deal for his services.”

I thank the horse, and give her another of my apples, and then I go to the moth, and barter a deal- for the service of guarding my, heh, bag of tricks, the moth will need to be freed- for the service of stealing something of Baba Yaga’s, the moth will need to let me use his shape for an unknown reason, in an unknown place, for an unknown span of time- for the service of a body double, the moth will need to become immortal. I agree to his terms, and our deal is struck.

And then, Baba Yaga herself appears. Baba Yaga is a wrinkled old hag of a woman, with big cracked, but really cutely snaggled teeth- well, they would be cute if they didn’t want to eat me, holy shit Baba Yaga is scary as *fuck*.

Now, there are four things that are true about Baba Yaga- she is a witch of strange and fantastic power, she flies in a motar and uses a pestle to steer, her house is fenced by bones and walks about on the feet of a chicken, and- and this is the most important thing- she is neither evil, nor is she good. Baba Yaga is Baba Yaga- she is what she is, herself and wholly herself.

And she is looking at me and trying to figure out whether or not she should kill me- I’ve seen that look many times before, so I give her something more to work with. “Hi-ah! I’ve near finished cleaning this here barn, and is there anything else needs doing round here on account of I hain’t eaten in near ages and could surely use a good meal…”
Baba Yaga smirks- big, like she thinks I can’t tell a smirk from a smile, and then says “Milk the cow, and come wash up for supper- then we’ll play a few after-dinner games, child.”

“Yay!” Oh dear. It’s going to be one of those nights.

There are rules, commonly called Accords, that keep the many lands... balanced, sort of. There are rules about how you talk to people, and rules about travel, and rules about hospitality- I’ve already told you about the First Dinner, which is more of a... rite? but still included in the Accords- Another thing about inviting people to your home is that either two or three things absolutely must be given freely: Food and Shelter, or Bread, Wine, and Salt. These items allow a sort of- a sort of truce, and can be used to determine the nature of your host- a kind host will give you the best of what they have, and a cruel host will give you the worst... and a person who actively means you harm will give you nothing at all. I, personally, usually don’t mean anyone harm, and so will serve a very fine fruit wine- it’s pretty dry, with a sharp floral snap right at the edge- Buns of some sort, usually filled with my favorite red beans, and powdered soy sauce, because salt is hella expensive and I don’t trust the stuff that comes out of West Kowloon.

Salt should never be turquoise, nor should it burn.

And the reason these things are done is to keep the peace- if hospitality is given, cordiality must be returned. That is the rule. And if that rule gets broken, anything goes.

Baba Yaga’s house is, indeed, built on the legs of a chicken- a normal chicken, with bright yellow feet, and fluffy feathers overlaid like scales- but where the rest of the hen should be sits a massive, tumble down... thing. It’s not a house- it’s got the shape of a house, and the seeming of a house, but part of living in Kowloon (the city that makes no sense) is being able to see what is actually there, so... Baba Yaga’s house is not a house. It’s... it’s something that’s only pretending to be a house. It’s a trap.

Inside is everything Baba Yaga owns- and everything she’s ever stolen- we walk through rows and piles of things beyond price, like memories and emotions, and things that are priceless, like rare gems, and things that have worth, like turnips, and things that are worthless, like plastic spoons- and then we are at a gigantic table adjacent to a stove that glows with a hellish flame; it’s a big, old-world thing, with a massive tiled shelf that spreads heat evenly, and tends to stay about a degree above normal body temperature- which reminds me, my normal body temperature is not 37 degrees Celsius, it’s 38- which in Farhenheight is about 100.5, I think? Anyway, I am not particularly sensitive to cold- I am extremely sensitive to heat. But that shelf should be about the same temperature I am- which means that if I have to sleep on that, I won’t be able to- I have to be warmer than I am to sleep. But not too warm, or I wake myself up- I usually sleep under a sheet during the summer, and I am really nervous right now, wow.

Anyway.

For supper, Baba Yaga serves herself a large platter of foods that I honestly don’t want- they bear too much resemblance to human- oh fuck. I get a bowl of steam- vapor, really, that smells faintly of mold. For herself, Baba Yaga pours a dark red wine, like clotted blood- for me, a cup of milk. For herself, a chunk of salt bigger than both of my fists, a bright pale lump of wealth- for me, nothing at all.
(No Food, No Shelter, no Bread, no Wine, no Salt. She has given me nothing, really, and milk will make me sick- so I owe her nothing. Anything goes.)

After supper, Baba Yaga pulls out a well-worn and worked over die, and a board with long triangles painted on it and a pile of tacks- oh dear. Backgammon. I’m not going to enjoy this- ugh, and it’s one of the few games I’m really stupidly good at, too. As the night grows older, I steadily loose game after game, eventually losing my clothing as well- I am soon left with nothing except my body suit, and my mask- and that’s when I make my move.

During the course of my miserable showing in backgammon, I noticed that Baba Yaga would play with a coin, which had a boat on one side, and nothing on the other, and a circular hole running directly through the center of it, every time she was going to push the die into her favor. Her tell. It’s about time to really up the ante- “Baba, it’s been real fun playing, but I’m getting kinda tired- maybe I could go to bed soon?”

“Hmm… one more bet, and then bed for us both, I think.”

“Yay! Um, but- can we use that coin? I’ve been havin’ the most awful luck at dice tonight, and maybe a coin would be better. Oh! I know the best game for playing with a coin- do you want to play?”

Baba Yaga looks at the coin in her hands, and then at me, and then smirks and says “Surely.”

I smile my most vapid smile, and say “Yay! I’ll explain the rules- could you hand me the coin, please?” She does, and I glance at the coin- yes, it’s the coin I need. “Okay, so- the game goes like this; I’ll flip the coin, catch it, and smack it down” with a flick of my fingers, the coin rises high into the air, and is snatched by my other hand faster than even Baba Yaga’s eyes can see, (I’ve pulled this trick on dragons, this is nothing) and smack both of my hands on the table, one above and one below- but Baba Yaga sees, and I can tell, thinks that the hand on the table is the one with the coin. “And now we bet! I’ll bet my head, that it is heads, against everything I’ve lost tonight- my shoes, and my dress-, and I’ll bet against the coin I just flipped, and what will you bet? But! I almost forgot- it’s very important you bet something of equal or greater value, otherwise it isn’t a good bet.”

Baba Yaga stares at me- I grin at her like a fool, and really make her sweat- “We only have ten seconds to decide what to bet, otherwise the first better wins by default!” My voice is cheery and giggle-bubbly- and Baba Yaga can’t decide. She’s a collector, you see, and in this case, greedy- she can’t decide what she likes least of her things that is worth more than my head (and the true answer is, the only thing worth one head is another, no matter who it belongs to.)

Baba Yaga doesn’t manage to decide what of hers she’s willing to part with within the time allotted, so I win. She, grudgingly, fuck fuck, gives me back my boots, which I put on, and my dress, which I also put on, and then she says to me gruffly “Time for bed.”

“Okay! Where shall I sleep?”

“On the stove, where else?”

“Okay!”

I climb up onto the shelf, flop onto my back, and feign sleep- and I hear Baba Yaga mutter to herself “Well, at least I’ll get a few good meals off of her.” I let her think I’m asleep for as long as I can stand, and then I wince and sit up, and call out like a small child “Baba Yaga?”

“Yes child?”
“I have to pee…”

She lets me out of the house, and as soon as my feet touch the ground, the chicken legs rise into the air again, taking the house far out of reach.

I quickly, but calmly, walk to the barn, and find the old nag- she shifts around, and lets me into her stall, and gives me an apple- the same one I gave to her, the second one. I eat, and feel better, and then I sleep through the night, safely- and I dream of nothing at all. The nag wakes me at false dawn, and I let the gemhens out- gemhens are different from normal hens in that they are every color excepting brown, and have every number of legs excepting two- and I gather their eggs. Some eggs are plain, and some are encrusted with jewels- the plain ones are the ones I want. I gather them in my sleeves, all of them, and run back to the barn; the moth gives me back my kit-bag, which holds the multitude of eggs just fine- and then the nag speaks again.

“There is a hole, in Baba Yaga’s fence- take some of the cow’s milk and wash the biggest skull away, right near the gate- it’s only made of sugar. For your kindness to me, take a lock from my mane- if ever you need my help, burn it, and I will come.”

I cut a lock of hair from the nag, give her my last apple; the moth crawls into my sleeve, the two headed screw horned cow gives me her milk, and I wash the skull away- with a minimum of wiggling, I’m out of Baba Yaga’s yard, and running down the path. I get quite a ways away before I hear, just barely, a scream of rage.

Dash is actually really good for putting distance between myself and the things trying to kill me- and before I know it, I’ve made it to the outskirts of Kowloon. I settle into a steady lope, and go to Dumpling Cheng’s- I haven’t seen her in four months; I miss her.

Dumpling Cheng hugs me when I return- it’s the fourth month of the year, shit shit, I forgot; this is the month when the fighting was worst during Cheng’s war, damn. “I’m sorry I haven’t called, D.”

“It’s alright, I know you’re busy… just. I worry. Is all… -How are you, siddown ferGods-sake, I haven’t seen you in a dogs age!”

I settle on my bucket, and listen to Dumpling chatter on about all the things I’ve missed by being away- who is dating whom, who has gotten married, divorced, killed, committed suicide, risen from the dead, has a new mistress, went back to the old mistress, what the prices of foods have changed to, what the prices of metals have changed to, how many times the alchemist’s guild building has exploded into a pillar of flames, what color scales the mermaids are preferring now, how nice the magnolias bloomed this year- and all of this, if I were normal, would be inane. But I am not normal, and this is not inane- this is… intel. This is everything of socio-political import that has happened for the past four months- every potential job, every potential hazard, laid bare. I settle in, eat what she serves me, and commit every alliance, shift in gang territory, and new trading route for who knows what, to my memory.

And then I tell her everything that has happened to me in the past- Jesus, it’s really been four months, hasn’t it- and finally round out with “So… Do you know how I can get to my friend? I know I have to go through the Dreaming, but… how do I get to it from here?”

“There are two ways to get to the Dreaming that I know of- you go there every time you sleep, of course, but for what I think you need- you’ll need to go to the Sandy Shores, in West Kowloon.”
“Where is it?”

“It’s a little complicated to get to- you know the Crossing of Stairs?”

I know that place well- gave me the worst case of vertigo I’d ever had- “I know it.”

“There is a balcony, with a filigreed floor and rail, called the Vine Step; stand in the place where you can see the crossing of all the stairs- and that is the place where the Bridge of Rainbows starts.”

“Is the Bridge of Rainbows an actual rainbow?”

“Yes- it only appears when it rains.”

“Okay, then-”

“Walk along the Bridge until you come to its apex, and take three steps to the left; this will land you in the Endless Pool, an extremely exclusive bar and restaurant- but on it’s far side is the Sandy Shores, one of the nicest hotels in Kowloon. Rent out the room, and at sunset, go underneath the bed- there will be a sort of trapdoor. That door will lead directly into the Dreaming.”

“How do I get back?”

She smiles, and hands me a sandollar. It’s made out of gold, and sits heavily in my hand. “Break that and swallow a piece- you, and any who choose to go with you, or return with you, will awaken at sunrise on the bed you climbed under, on the morning of the night you left.”

I thank Dumpling profusely, because she always knows the best things, and then I go to visit Raven and Jinx because I’ve been gone for four fucking months, holy shit.

I get to Raven’s house and notice something- music. Music coming from her house. Odd. I leap up to her porch, and take my boots off- the steady strum of strings counterbalances to an animalistic throbbing beat; the strings whine and groan, lick and wriggle all over the drums; the drums grunt and growl and nuzzle the strings… but they aren’t going anywhere, which is okay sometimes- except the music abruptly cuts out, and I hear Raven say “fuck, it’s still not right. what are we missing?”

“I dunno, but we’ve got’n real close to wha’ever it is- maybe… I dunno.”

“Maybe you need a singer?”

“maybe- Terry!” Raven sets her lute down, and leaps into my arms, hugging me with all the strength she has in her arms- I yelp, because ow fuck my ribs are still a bit sore; she lets go instantly, and then feels me up with her cool healing energy- her clouded, mildly frightened expression clears, and she says “Just bruised, you’ll be fine.”

Jinx has set her drumsticks down on a snare drum, and has stood up- when Raven pronounces me pretty much okay, she comes in for her hug; she’s gotten more muscles in her shoulders, which are broader- she’s growing up. Wow, she’s gotten much more controlled- her hug is only a little too tight, not painful.

Jinx lets go of me, and we go into Raven’s kitchen- we eat some food, wax melon, which is one of my favorites- and we catch up. Apparently, while I was gone, they’ve started having sex- I can smell it on them. Good for them, really- love is wonderful. They’ve also started a band together, but they’re missing something in the sound- so, I offer to join their band, if they want.
They look at each other, then at me, and then say- finishing each other’s sentences all the while “Well…”

“We’ve kinda gotten a style goin’-”

“and we would need to practice with you”

“P’much constantly-”

“to get the best sound”

“An’ blend’our styles further.”

“do you have time for that?”

“I don’t, not really- but I do possess the skill of being in two places at once.” I use Twin, and suddenly there are two of me. The girls blink at me, and at me, and at each other- and then they grin.

“welcome to Bitch/Witch Trio the Band, Terry.”

“Yeah-yeah!”

I grin, and I grin, and I stay there to practice with the girls, and I leave for my house.

I get to my house, after climbing all nine hundred ninety nine stairs, and the one ladder- my keys open my apartment just fine, and all my stuff is just as I remember it; I take a shower, and get ready for an adventure.

This is what I pack for my adventure:

I pack clothing, at least one of everything I’ll need, and a size up just in case- you really never know. I pack three dresses, and two different pairs of shoes, underwear and socks, shirts and pants, and my makeup bag- which is every piece of makeup I own, eyeshadow, foundations, lipstick, blush, eyeliner- DA WERKS!; I pack weapons and toys, books and musical scores, and I grab a trumpet I bought on a whim, but as I recall, Tamer always was a fan of the sound (EEE! I’M GOING OVER TO MY FRIEND’S HOUSE, WHAT DO I EVEN TAKE, EEE!).

Soon enough, I’ve packed everything; a quick dumping of the sand collected in my boots on General Failure, and a double check that I have absolutely everything I know I’m going to need- money, keys, clothing, toys, books, and a cellphone for emergencies- and then I’m out the door and running to the Crossing of Stairs.

Along the way, I buy more apples, and two big bottles of water, and some cheese even though I can’t eat it, and some rough wheat bread, which I rarely eat, and some dried fruit, which I usually think is too sweet- but I’ll need some food, OH! Sweet, smoked salmon jerky, and I trust this seller, and ooo! cured cooked bacon with the fat still on, so tasty.

The Crossing of Stairs is one of the most interesting places in the Nightmarket- it’s a place where the laws of physics are a bit… optional. I walk down Ho’oh lane, pass the scribe’s shop there- then at the turning of Heralds, I make a right instead of a left, like if I was going to the clubs and cabarets- then, I just follow the tiled path to the Crossing of Stairs. Once there, I look for the Potted plant- there
it is! Orienting myself to it, I walk in a careful arc through the streams of people, and then I’m at the base of the Vine Step- it sort of looks like a cross between a corkscrew, a trellis, and a bean-plant. I clamber up it, and come to the Vine Step- and then, thinking hard about exactly how much rain I want (only enough to make a rainbow and no more) I cast Rain.

Soft drops of water fall, and the day is bright- instantly, a glossy bridge of rainbow light appears, thick bands of color steady and solid underneath my feet. I hurry across the bridge, and at the apex exactly, I take one two three steps, just like Dumpling told me to- and I am at the edge of an infinite pool of water, mirror smooth. I look into it’s depths, and see only sand- with mild trepidation, I ease into the cold water, and swim through it, my long tail making short work of the distance.

Soon enough, I come to a place where I cannot see, for the sand and silt in the water- I swim onwards, my nose leading instead of my eyes- and I swim on, through murky waters. Finally, I come to a wall, and swim upwards- when my head clears the surface, I see I am at a sandy shore.

I climb out of the pool, and swipe the water from my sleeves- something shifts, under my feet, and suddenly there is a card that I am standing on. I pick it up and sign it; Sand. A woman and a snake, the woman wearing the snake like a scarf, the woman herself like a shifting swirl of sand- and then, before me is a shack, made out of poles of bamboo and chinked with shards of glass and cracked seashells.

I walk into it, up a rickety set of stairs and onto the small deck of a house on stilts with a flat flat roof- the second I step over the threshold, I am instantly awash with a sense of safety and peace. There is a bed, and a low shelf with a bowl in it, full of cowry shells and coins- mostly drachmas. I plunk a handful of copper coins into the bowl, and settle into the little shack- this is the hotel of which Dumpling spoke.

It’s noon- I have about eight hours until sunset. I open my bag, and pull out one of the gemhen eggs- and taking three steps across the room, I throw it over my shoulder. It shatters with the sound of breaking plates, and out of it comes a book entitled “Patterns of Dress for Fey Creatures.”

I open it, and see the most wonderful dress patterns- and descriptions like “Most alluring during the full moon” and “Do not drink alcohol wearing this dress”; the index shows me to the animal transformation section- I pull out the two unicorn skins, and thread of silver, like the book says, and a needle made of bone- and then I sew the skins into clothing.

The alicorn’s skin becomes a vest that leaves my shoulder blades open to the air; it curves over my breasts, hugging me closely, with a trio of ivory buttons carved with clouds and inlaid with mother of pearl. The mountain unicorn’s skin becomes a pair of boots, thick soled but more sacklike than anything else, tight to my foot and held on with strips of the skin made into string and hung with brightly colored beads of red and red-gold and brown and black. The lock of hair from the nag becomes a tassle, which I hook into a woven length of- it’s actually a special kind of blanket, thin as skin and strong as steel, wound into a rope; I hook the tassle onto this rope, which I wrap like an X around my neck and under my breasts.

I can’t wear my carp dress in the Dreaming, it won’t… It doesn’t seem like a good idea. I take it off, but leave my body suit on- and the thing about my body suit is, is it moves and breathes and feels, to me, like my very own skin. I sometimes forget that I’m wearing it- unless I have to pee, of course. Now, to me, it looks like a soul-sucking blackness made cloth that does not shine in the light. When I ask Raven and Jinx what it looks like, they’ll tell me that in the light, I look like a piece of fabric that moves, and in the dark I look like a hole shaped like a person.

Anyway.
Over my hips goes a skirt I got from Sinta, bright red and jingling with-they aren’t coins. She was very clear about that—she was also very clear about the fact that anyone who wears it instantly looks feminine, no matter how masculine… Considering that, I pull on a pair of black undershorts, because. Um. Tamer’s going to have to wear this, and I am not wandering through hostile territory without pants again. (That was awful. I still smell like fucking vanilla perfume, goddamn—ugh, it should wear off in another month though.)

I wrap my hands in thick white bandaging, so that I don’t break my knuckles if I have to punch a bitch. Which I might.

The moth had fluttered to the ceiling during my preparations—once I put all my new clothing on, it fluttered down, and pinned itself to the breast of my vest, like a brooch. The sandollar goes into my kit, which goes into my bra—and then I’m ready.

I settle onto the bed, and wait—and soon enough the light changes from over-bright white to softly gold—sunset at last. I fold my dress into a red bundle, and leave it under my pillow, on the bed—and then I crawl under it. There is a door that slides to one side, and down it, a ladder. I climb down down down—and then I am simply on a ladder, climbing down, and there is nothing above me but crystalline stars.

My feet touch the ground after a time of climbing—and then I take one step back from the ladder and see that it’s a tree, covered in sparkling blue leaves. The wind blows gently, and the leaves flutter their wings, and fly away. I follow the blue winged leafy butterflies, and wander through a plain of glass, pitted with ink. The sky is purple, and smells faintly of cream.

I walk some more, and come to a lane cobbled with molars—there is yellowing grass growing up where the brown dirt gums wedge up into the marble teeth. I follow the path, and come to a castle that is drawn with ink and graphite—there is a Lion and a Griffyn, guarding the gate. I stop just out of their reach, and call to them “Which way to the Gates?”

They glance at each other, then at me—and then they say “Each of us will ask questions, five; answer them, and truly, and we’ll tell you the way to the Gates of Ivory and Horn—but you’ll have to decide which is which on your own.”

“Alright.”

The Lion goes first.

“Poor people have it. Rich people need it. If you eat it you die. What is it?”
“Nothing.”

“…If I have it, I don’t share it. If I share it, I don’t have it. What is it?”
“That is a Secret.”

The lion smirks. “What is so delicate that saying its name breaks it?”
I don’t say anything for a long moment, because—oh! “Silence.”

The lion’s teeth are very brightly white when he smiles. “They come out at night without being called, and are lost in the day without being stolen. What are they?”
This one I remember—“Stars.”

“What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats?”

Um. Fuck. Wait wait, I know this one— it’s… fuck, shit fuck… Oh! “A river!”
The Lion grins, and then glances at the Griffyn, who does not look impressed or amused. It’s his turn.

“I drift forever with the current
down these long canals they’ve made
Tame, yet wild, I run elusive
Multitasking to your aid.
Before I came, the world was darker
Colder, sometimes, rougher, true
But though I might make living easy,
I’m good at killing people too.”

I blink, and raise an eyebrow. “Lightning.”

The Lion stifles a snicker. The Griffyn glares, and then says-

“Each morning I appear
To lie at your feet,
All day I will follow
No matter how fast you run,
Yet I nearly perish
In the midday sun.

What am I?”

I smile at him. That was an easy one when I was a child. “You are my shadow.”

The Griffyn glares, then huffs and snorts.

“Five hundred begins it, five hundred ends it,
Five in the middle is seen;
First of all figures, the first of all letters,
Take up their stations between.
Join all together, and then you will bring
Before you the name of an eminent king.”

I stare at him for a long moment, then crouch and work it out in the dust- it’s been a while since I’ve used roman numerals. “D A V I D.” The Lion laughs aloud- the Griffyn glares him into submission.

“As I went over London Bridge
I met my sister Jenny
I broke her neck and drank her blood
And left her standing empty.

What am I?”


“This thing all things devours,
Birds, beasts, trees, and flowers.
Gnaws iron, bites steel,
Grinds hard stones to meal,
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountain down.”

“…Time.”

The Lion Laughs, and the Griffyn Sighs, and then they say in perfect unison- “The Gates are back the way you came, past the tree you climbed down.”

I bow to them- “Thank you for telling me.” turn, and walk back to the tree I climbed down, and then past it and then I am at a pair of Gates, one made of Ivory, the other, Horn.

And they’re identical. No, they’re not. It’s the Right one, not the left. I step through the Right archway, identical to the Left- and then

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And when I come through it, I am in a dark room made of stone, and Tamer is lying before me, flat on his back.

I crouch, and pinch his ear, hard- his eyes, those blue blue eyes, snap open, and stare at me. I breathe, and let myself exude a presence I haven’t for a long time- and something in his face changes.

He looks… confused, but also… I don’t know how to describe his face.

‘Do you want to be here?’ I say this with my eyes, and my pose, and my entire being- and he responds to me as he once did.

‘No. I don’t.’

‘I will lead you from this place. Follow me.’ And, with a sort of flicker I am a Moth. He rises from the piled carpets, and follows my fluttering wings. I float on glistering fans, and flick-flap through wide open spaces- and, when I See someone coming, I hide. So does Tamer. Together, we sneak out of the demon’s palace- out hallways, through rooms, down stairs, and over a wall. And then we are on the nearly sheer edge of a mountain.

‘I will carry you upon my back. Get on.’ And suddenly, I am a mountain unicorn, my legs long and strong, and my split horn curling in the pale light of the moon. Tamer swings his leg over my
shoulders, and holds on tightly- with a bunching of my hips and a lift of my hooves, I leap down the mountainside, scree and stones crackling down on the slippery slopes. I run and bound and leap, and Tamer holds me tightly with his arms. Finally, I am at the bottom of the mountain, and running still- and then I come to sands, and can run no more.

Tamer slides off of my back, and I stand before him- I take my tassle-rope off, and hook the tassle to my hip, and untie the rope and suddenly I am holding a sheet of the finest cloth, soft and slippery in my hands. I flick it out, and lay it flat on the rolling sands, and then I sit on it- and pat the space next to me. Tamer settles next to me, his short legs crossing into an X; my long legs fold under me. I cast Sand, and we start to slide-fly over the vast, empty space- but we are still, like we’re sitting on the finest of gladed plains, and the wind that passes our faces is swift but cool.

I pull out the food I bought on the way to the Crossing of Stairs; oh, the apple seller threw in some wax-melon, I’m definitely going back- I set out bright white handkerchiefs and palm sized thimbles made of fine thin porcelain, like glasses, and set out a bright clear green glass bottle of plain water; on one handkerchief goes the meat and cheese, and on another goes the fresh fruit, and on a third, in their own little thimble cups, the dried fruit- and then the meal is prepared.

Tamer stares at the spread, and at me- and then he sort of… huffs, and makes a derisive little Tt sound, like how can we eat at a time like this- and I say “There won’t be time later- eat now, please.” And then, I say the Words for meal-taking, and open the water, and pour us both a glass- Tamer first, as he is my guest. And then I dine on fruit and meat and drink cool fresh water, and slice open the cheese, taking a thin thin slice- barely even a sliver, because… I remember eating tiny tiny pieces of cheese before, and it was okay; and, soon enough, Tamer dines with me, his mouth slowly and then quickly devouring what I leave behind- I’m not actually all that hungry, so there is lots for him to eat. And he eats… basically everything.

I notice that he seems a bit- strange, like he’s willfully forgotten something, or perhaps has been drugged; I have seen this kind of thing before. It will wear off in time- but I am not sure I will like what comes out…

We steadily sip the water from our thimble-cups, and I finally get up the nerve to ask “Why were you there, Tamer?”

He stares at me, and then he says “It is… a duty.”

“It’s a duty. It looked more like an onus to me…”

“Yes…”

We are silent underneath the bright and glinting (glisten+splintering) stars- the wind hisses and rustles, and I put away the thimbles we don’t need anymore, and flick the crumbs from the handkerchiefs, and fold them up and away- and then I settle back and lie flat, lifting my cup to my lips and sipping. Tamer stares at me, and then he says- “Can’t we go faster?”

“Do you want me to be conscious when we get where we’re going?”

“Yes…?”

“Then no. We can’t.”

Tamer eventually lies beside me, as the blanket is small but not too small- it’s… it’s just the right size for us both really, which says something about the cloth- if I could just remember where I got it…
Tamer’s arm is cool against mine, and I remember this sensation- we have lain side by side before, but we were much smaller, and the world was a brighter place.

The desert passes in the night, and at the dawning of the day we come to a wide flat plain bounded only with sky. I let Sand go, and stand from the blanket- Tamer stands as well, and stretches his long torso. I snap the blanket in the air, and watch the dust glister in the sunrise- and then I tie it over Tamer’s shoulder’s, like a cape. Then, I take the tassle, and with Firey set it ablaze- it burns quickly into fine white ash, and smells faintly of hayflowers and apple juice. I toss the ash into the wind, and there is the nag who helped me before- she is huge, here, big enough for both Tamer and I to ride.

I jerk my head ‘come on’ at Tamer, and mount up on the swaybacked mare- Tamer mounts behind me, and then with a sort of woosh, we’re moving over the massive plains, the mare’s long legs leaping and arching through the tall green grass.

The day passes behind us, as do the plains- neither Tamer or I feel the need to speak… well, actually, I’m more concerned with keeping my seat and not throwing up, I don’t know about Tamer.

Anyway.

Around noon, we come to scrub lands, and then to a forest- and here, I ask the mare to stop. She does, and I slide off the horse, and vomit into the nearest bush- my dizziness slowly subsides, and I feel much better.

Oh- this is almost to the forest where the birds live- I need to disguise Tamer.

“Tamer- this forest is a special place. If you go in as you are now, you will not leave it alive. Permit me to disguise you?”

“…Alright.” I stand on a rock, and the mare sidles to it- I am at just the right height to turn the cape-blanket into a blanket-robe of fine silvery white; my hip scarf goes over his head like a veil, and suddenly, he could be a bride, being led from one place to another. As a final touch, I mark around his eyes with inky blackness- yeah, that should do it.

“Tamer, if you speak in this disguise at all, the illusion will break.”

He nods.

I cut a staff from a just right hard wood, and step forwards- I walk on, and hear the mare take up a trot behind me, and then I take my steady lope, and she canters.

We come to the forest proper, and here I slow my pace a bit- not much, and the mare, bless her sweaty soul, keeps her pace and her footing just fine. We move through denser and denser foliage, and the light fades to almost twilight- the trees here are massive, and old. Soon enough, we come to the trail of an elephant, and we follow it for a time- and then we come to the place where the birds live.

I notice the first bird because I’m not looking for it- I see it out of the corner of my eye, while quietly watering the mare; it’s body is that of a normal enough birds, brightly colored as this is a tropical forest- but it’s eyes… those are not the eyes of a bird, but of a man. We steadily move along the elephant trail, and deeper into the territory of the bird-people- and then I realize that we are being followed, and not by the bird-people, but by one of the three monsters.
So. This is what I sing- I pitch my voice high, and just a little loud. “Sister, sister, I am taking my pretty sister to be wed. Sister, sister, I am taking her to the sea.”

A voice like the trilling of a bird calls out of the dense forest- “Why why why?”

“Sister, sister, my father told me to go. Sister, sister, because he told me so.”

A different voice, dark and old. “Who-who?”

“Sister, sister, she’s marrying a man. Sister, sister, she’s marrying a shark man.”

A third, piping sweet. “Happy-sad, sad-happy?”

“Sister, sister, I’m happy for her to marry such a man. Sister, sister, because he is a rich good man.”

Another voice, loud like a blaring horn. “Joy-joy-joy!”

“Sister, sister, I’m afraid for her too because there is a monster following us. Sister, sister, the monster means to steal her away.”

And then the forest is silent for a long, long moment. And then a final voice, high and piping, like a flute. “Where-is-it? Where-where-is-it?”

So, there is only one thing to say. “Sister, sister, it’s behind us and I am afraid. Sister, sister, it means to kill me and take my sister away.”

There is a rustling like the fluttering of feathers, and the tap-tap-tap of distant drums; there is a scream behind us, and the sounds of battle. I do not look back, nor does Tamer- and we walk a long ways, until finally we come to a break in the forest, and there is the river, just like I Dreamed it. We’re out of the forest, and Tamer doesn’t need his disguise anymore- I help him slide off the massive horse, and take my hip scarf back- and then I tie his blanket robe back into a cape.

The moment neither I nor Tamer are on the horse, she tosses her head, wriggles her swayed back, and dives into the air like a bird- and then she is gone.

The river awaits us.

I pull out the coin I won off of Baba Yaga, and flick it high in the air- it spins, and spins, and then with a golden flicker it’s a small boat gently bobbing in the placid waters. My back hits a tree so fast, I don’t quite realize I’ve run away backwards. I’m, I’m shaking- why... why am I s-shaking. I AM NOT GOING IN THAT. NOT AGAIN. NEVER AGAIN NO NO NO. I’m actually kind of... I’m- crying? And then Tamer is picking me up, and lifting me up, and he’s- he’s carrying me to the boat, and and I don’t want to get in that but if I don’t we won’t- and then we’re in the boat and the boat is moving, and I, I, I, I, - I black out. When I awaken, Tamer is holding me in his arms, gently stroking my hair. I force myself to sit up, and I feel that we’re almost sitting still- but the shore is racing past us, and the river is roiling and pitch-yawing like the most violent of seas.

But I am still, and the boat is still- and ahead of us is a chasm, like a cliff- and with barely a bump, we’re down it.

We drift along the river, and in the fullness of time- late evening, when the sun is just starting to set- we come to the sea. Tamer has to carry me out of the boat, but when my feet touch the ground, I am able to turn and face my tormentor- with a motion like catching something thrown, the boat ripples
and wriggles, and with a glinting spin it is in my hand, a coin once more.

We walk for a ways, and finally come to the seashore - the waves from the ocean crash on the shore, and the sky is clear. Stars burn brightly in the blackness of the night, and the moon is a pale orange eye, peering through a halo of finest white. Storm coming. I adjust Tamer’s cape into a cowl, hood and all- and then I change from girl to hornless alicorn. “Get on my back, and I shall carry you across the sea.” Tamer mounts me, his legs just in the junction of my wings, his hands tight at the base of my mane. I cast Fly, and instantly know how to fly- and then I am flying (walk trot canter gallop flap-flap-digflap LEAP), and then I am flying us across the sea.

There is a storm, after splattering rain, over the thrashing wine dark waves- lightning scatters stars across my vision, arcs of screaming light chase me through the sky; thunder booms and thooms and cracks! sharp in the air, like bullets and bombs and other things that have killed lots of people at once- Tamer holds onto me with his arms and legs, and I eel through the air, ducking and diving. The waves roll and crest, now towering mountains I strain to clear, now fathomless pits I race to escape- the spray of salty wind coats my face, and my tail is a banner of silken threads lit golden white in the true-bright light of the lightning, and Tamer’s fists are tight in my mane.

I fly into the eye of the storm- this must be a typhoon, then- and for a time, I know peace. The waves still crash and jeer, but the stars are bright and cold, and the moon shines high in the sky, a near perfect orb. The wall of the storm looms closer- I shove forwards, and the screaming of the wind is deafening; Tamer holds me even tighter, and I fly into the lightning laced screaming of the typhoon…

And then I’m not in the typhoon anymore, just an avalanche of water- the thunder and lightning fades into memory, and only the misery of flying through an entire ocean’s worth of water remains behind. I fly, and I fly, until finally I see the spluttering lights of the Dark City- I remember more now, Tamer, Prince of Shadows lives in the Dark City with the Lucky Man, in a house- Yes, there it is, a house on a hill in a small forest, overgrown, and with a sort of a thud, I land on the slick green water-sheeting lawn.

And then, with a thump- I change into… into, I suppose, what Tamer always saw me as, when we still played together, in the brighter days.

And then I know nothing at all.

I awaken in a dark room- no, wait, it’s just raining, that’s why it’s so dark- I slither out of bed, do my wake-up stretches and walk out of the room; I’m hungry, and although I should worry about where I am… I’m at Tamer’s house. There are definitely traps, but in the same way I know where my toenails are when I wear boots, I know where the traps in this house are. So, I avoid them.

I come to a staircase, and gripping the railing with my sinuous tail, I carefully waddle down the stairs- I could fly, it’s just… I don’t. Like it? Hmm… I’m at the bottom of the stairs and I’m clicking across the marble floor, when I see the most beautiful Long underneath me; she, because her horns are very small and sweetly curved, she has lustrous, bright red scales, and a shiny black mane that flicks forwards over her eyes and goes out into a flippant tassel at the end of her tail; her ears are like those of a deer, and her hands and feet have five toes, and are clawed, but not cruelly so- oh, they retract, that’s neat! Her limbs are long and supple, and her torso short and curved- the only thing about her that is slightly odd is that she has a pair of tentacles, feelers really, tipped with pale cream puffball things- and her… her left eye is a very pale blue, but her right eye is brown-black, like a pool of ink…
Oh. Oh! That’s me! I’m- I’m beautiful as a Long! Wow! Arrgh, but I’m hungry, wow- okay, kitchen is over- aha, through that door, and yes! Kitchen!

I know where everything is, so I make myself some ricey soup with chicken- and then Tamer is in the kitchen too, and he’s staring… at… me…

“Hi Tamer!”

He looks so… confused. “…Late Summer? Is that really- is that really you?”

I smile at him- he looks a bit… befuddled. “In the flesh!”

Tamer stares at me- and then, a sort of dawning wonder overtakes his features, and he smiles a smile of breathtaking joy. And then, he hugs me- and this I remember most of all, this warm crush of arms around me, and I hug him back and yes this is good, this is very good indeed.

I finish making the soup- Tamer doesn’t really… doesn’t really stop hugging me, which is a little odd, because he used to be very adamant about the virtues of affectionate touch- in that there were none. I ladle us both bowls of my chunky ricey chickeny soup, and we settle down at the kitchen table, Tamer almost curled into my side.

“You’re soup’s getting cold, Tamer.”

“I’m not really… not really hungry, Late Summer.”

“Mmm… You should eat anyway. Also, I go by Summer, now.” I can feel Tamer’s stomach growling against my sides- he says he isn’t hungry, but his body says he is… which means his heart is too full.

He takes a bite of soup with a trembling hand- and then gulp after gulp, like he hasn’t eaten in days. Well… he hasn’t, not really.

Tamer is… tall, but not like I’m tall- I carry my height in my legs; Tamer’s height, for now, is in his torso. He has short black hair that shines faintly blue in the light- his eyes are a very sharply clear shade of blue. His face is an egg shape, with the round part as his forehead and the pointy tip his chin; he has a pair of dimples that pop out to say hello when he smiles- but Tamer doesn’t smile very often. His nose is sort of squished looking, and kind of bulgy- his lips are thin, and a sort of orangey-tan. He still has rather large ears- but they’re better fitting than I remember them being…

He’s crying into his soup. Oh dear.

I wrap an arm around him, and that seems to undo him- suddenly he’s a sobbing snotty mess in my arms, and he’s saying stuff but I can’t understand him through the tears… but honestly, I don’t… I don’t really need to. I think I might have cried like this, a few years ago- but. I don’t know why he- he’ll tell me. I’ll make him tell me, and then maybe- maybe he won’t hurt so much?

Either way, kitchens are not the place for heart to hearts like the one we’ll need to have.

Through some complicated maneuvering with my tentacles and tail, I get Tamer onto my back- he
holds onto me tightly and continues to bawl. I grab my soup, and a spoon, and maneuver us both out of the kitchen— with careful steps, I wander through Tamer’s house, quietly eating my soup and letting Tamer cry himself out on my back. I finally come to a room with what looks like a very fancy spark-viewer, and that is a very large couch, wow— and Tamer just nearly fell off my back, shit, he’s asleep, okay, ummm— oh! I know, I’ll make a blanket fort! I haven’t done that in ages, I hope I still remember how- I gently slip Tamer off my back, and onto the ground- one of the throw pillows from the couch goes into his arms, which he hugs tightly.

Okay, now- I arch up onto my legs, and carefully shift the couch around, back to front, then I take the cushions and sort-of… make walls with them? It’s hard to explain the technique and this is not enough cushion, hmm- oh, there’s a linen closet right over there, and yessss it’s got so many things in it, peeeeeefect.

Soon enough, a fort made of cushions and sheets and pillowy goodness is made, and I’m tired— my soup is gone, and Tamer looks kind of cold. I flip the last blanket over him, a warm kind of flannelly thing, and then I set my bowl on the low table, and then I curl up around Tamer and sleep.

_Hmm-nnnnh. Nnnnhmmnhhh. I-hu-uh-nnnnnngh. Aa-ah-ahh_- I wake to Tamer stroking my ears and mane and horns, sending rushes of electric wonder-feeling through my body “_Tamer- Stop!”_ and he stops. Okay, okay breathe- just. Breathe. I don’t like Tamer like that, I don’t think- I like the wonder-feeling, but… not like that.

“You have to ask me- you always, _always_ have to ask me first, before trying to do that with me.”

“Summer…?”

“It’s- okay, yes, it’s very nice to- to get the wonder-feeling, but, but you must always make sure that the person you’re trying to _give_ the wonder-feeling to is, is okay with _receiving_—”

“Summer- was I doing something… uncouth? To your person, I mean? And… what, exactly, is the wonder-feeling?”

“Um. Okay. So- you weren’t doing anything uncouth, physically, the thing you did that was uncouth was that you didn’t ask me for permission. It’s a consent thing. Um- you have to always be sure that the person you’re giving the wonder-feeling to _wants_ to get it, and from you. The wonder-feeling is- it’s… It’s sometimes like tiny dancing lights under your skin, or um, wetness? And it feels very very good, but also kind of overwhelming, or, um, or sometimes it feels like warmness all through you, and the very best kind is where all your muscles contract at once and fireworks go off inside you and you sort of twitch for a while. Um.”

Tamer is blushing. Okay. That’s new. “So, to clarify- you aren’t offended that I was… that I was giving you the wonder-feeling, but you are taking offense to the fact that I didn’t obtain your permission to do so first?”

“Well- yes. The wonder-feeling is very very good, but… not without permission. With permission, it’s one of my favorite things to do.”

“What if it was… um. Accidental? Like- I didn’t know that, um, petting you like that would give you the wonder-feeling, but it did, so…”

“Accidental is… Hmm. I suppose if you don’t know what you’re doing, it’s permissible once- but only once.”
“So… if I were to obtain your permission… I could give you the wonder-feeling?”

“If you wanted to, sure. But, um- don’t, ah, don’t you want the wonder-feeling too? If they’re being given out, that is…”


“I- if you wanted, um. I could, um. I could give you- I could give you one, if you wanted.”

Tamer is very red, but also… kind of intrigued. I can tell, I’ve seen that look before- “I- Um. Oh-okay. Sure.”

“Okay.”

(Tamer and I always had lots of fun together- the difference now being, I think the fun we’re going to have is a little more… Adult. Oriented.)

And then I can’t really seem to move- but no, I can, just… I feel a sort of shimmer, inside my heart, and I twist and ripple and then I’m Red X, not a Long or something else- but I don’t want to be Red X right now, I want to be Terry; I press my fingers to my eye, and draw back. Instantly, I am wearing- except, no, I’m wearing what I went to rescue Tamer in, sans bodysuit and mask- the air is cool on my skin; I clip my hair back with my hairclip, and I look at Tamer for a long moment. I feel myself flushing, mirroring him- And then, I move. I think I know what happened; this will relax him, and me, enough to work through it. Also, everyone should have their first good sexual experience with someone they trust.

I reach out, and very gently touch his face- his skin is soft underneath my fingertips, his flush pale pink; his eyes are wide, but slowly soften and haze, sloe and slide and slip. I trace steady lines over him, gentle gentle smooth and soft over his eyebrows and eyelids, the sweetness of his lips under my fingers. His breath is warm, where it puffs out, and his shoulders slowly relax. He begins to lean into my touch, and I carefully get closer to him, the coolness of his skin intoxicating. Supple.

I press my lips to his, soft-slow, glowing secret sweet- he stills for a moment, and then he kisses me back, and his lips are cool against mine. I gently open my mouth, just barely, and slip-lick against his lips- a soft sound, like the cooing of a dove, and his lips open too; his mouth is a cool wetness that my tongue explores slowly, carefully- his tongue is cool, but warming up inside my mouth, and gently licks across my teeth.

We kiss, and only kiss, for a long moment- and then Tamer puts careful hands on my hips, thumbs rubbing against my bare skin. I reach up, one hand laid against his collarbone, the other at the nape of his neck; my fingers slowly creep around, gently slipping under his loose pajama-like top and into his stiff smooth hair. His nipples are taught, and I gently tease them with my fingers, and my mouth- I lick him through his shirt. He whimpers, and pants a little, and then rolls us on our sides and kisses me some more.

Skin on skin and slowness- the soft ripple of tongues and teeth nearly clicking together. His fingers find the bottom of my vest, gently dig into my ribs- I can’t help the tiny giggle that escapes me. It tickles, right like that and oh shit- “Hee-ah-hahahaha- hey! I- uhnmm-” Tamer’s strong fingers tickle me, and then he’s found my bra and is… huh. He likes my boobs. (Honestly, I do too, my boobs are
fucking choice.)

I wriggle his shirt off, and scratch lightly at his abdominal muscles- he nnnnghs, and unties the rope-tie from behind, where I tied the knot keeping it on, and then my vest is unbuttoned. I only let go of Tamer long enough to shriggle out of my vest, and then my hands return to their explorative mapping of Tamer’s pectorals and abdominals and his trapezius with my hands, and sometimes my mouth- my mouth kisses his mouth, and his jaw, and his throat, which I gently nip at, and his trapezius, which makes the perfect jutting arch to nibble at; his upper body ripples and tenses underneath my teasing caress. I lick his nipples directly, and he gasps- and then he is palming my breasts.

We continue in this fashion of just… touching each other, fondling each other, for quite some time.

Tamer smells of sesame oil and strange flowers- his hair is slightly oily, and gleams dully in the diffused half-light of our blanket fort. His skin smells of soap, slightly, and faintly of some sort of incense- it gives me a numbing feeling in my mouth, but it also tastes slightly of cherry-vanilla-banana. Underneath that is Tamer’s own specific smell- a sort of musky-fruit smell, with faint tones of orange, copper, and cotton- and he truly tastes of the tang of salt sweat exertion, and the copper-sting of blood. One of his hands has migrated down, along my spine- he gently cups my buttock, and slowly palpitates it. The other is feeling along my vagina- gently teasing apart the lips, and slowly touching my slick wetness.

I flex under his hands for a moment, and give myself over to pleasure- then I allow myself to reach lower, along the steady, fuzzy trail of hair between his hipbones, down under the waist-band of his pants, and stop there. I caress the wiry hair, and feel- well, I suppose that’s his penis, but weird- it’s twitching against the palm of my hand.

Tamer kind of whimpers, but I was just biting on his collarbone, so maybe- “Too much? Sh-hah- should I stop?”

His head shakes left and right- no, no, but I have to hear it- “nnnnNNNNNooooo-” I smile, and “Okay.” And then I carefully twist my hand and gently grip his penis. He holds very still- I slowly rub along the length, feeling where it slopes into his body, feel at the tip where wrinkled skin rolls over something that makes Tamer hin-miin-hnnn when I stroke at it with my fingers. There is something warm, underneath the wrinkled skin- I gently roll it back, and stroke at the warm thing- Tamer whines, and bucks into my hand. There is a sort of slimy-ness, on the tip of my finger- “s-Summer, I feel- I feel weird- gnaaaaa-”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” His penis is very hot in my hand, and stiff- and then there is a sort of jerk, from inside of him, and there is something warm and sticky splurting out of him, all over my fingers. I stroke down to the shivering base, and gently squeeze up and out the top- Tamer whimpers and moans loudly, and then shudders. The muscles of his back jump and twitch- his eyes cross a little bit. H-ghaaaaaaaaahaaaaa.

I wipe my hand off inside his pants, and then pull them down enough to stroke at his thighs.

Tamer is still for a while- I continue to stroke his thighs and his side and along his back; warm supple soft and slow. And then, I feel his fingers slowly begin to stroke against me- and I lose it. Completely. I am gone, friends, I am gone- when I can see again, and my voice has gone down to something approaching normal, and I’m a warm puddle of happy on the carpeted floor. Tamer’s breath is gently stroking the side of my neck.
Alright. Time to do this.

“Tamer?”

“Yes Late Summer?”

“Who died?”

And then, he weeps for true- not the great wracking sobs of before, but the quieter grief I know to be of him, and only him, and not a product of drug or over-whelmation. And then he speaks, and this is what Tamer, my good best friend, tells me:

“Please hold all interjections until the end.

I am Tamer, Prince of Shadows, and my story is thus; I am of no woman born, but a mother have I. I grew up in a castle hidden in a forest across a distant sea- I was raised in many castles hidden in many places across distant seas, but this castle was special because… because it was where I ceased to be a boy. As I have yet to become a man, I do not know what I am- and sometimes… sometimes I wonder if I will ever stop being a monster.

This is why I know I am not a boy- boys do not kill other boys. Not, and remain boys. It is not possible…

There was a boy, a strange wild boy of skin like coal and eyes of purest gold, flecked with green like the waxy leaves of a plant I prefer not to name, as it is deadly poison, and with brown like scabs. And his name was Ig- (he stifles a sob)- His name was Igla, and we were raised in that place together.

I am gifted, or perhaps cursed, to remember everything that I see, and hear, and touch, and smell, and taste- every sensation and perception I recall with the same clarity and focus as if I were feeling it directly for the first time… again.

Igla and I did everything two young boys in a castle can do together- we wandered the grounds, we threw each other out windows, we threw rocks at each other and other people, and we chased chickens and birds and small animals, and we collected things that caught our eyes and cached them, hidden in the stones of that ancient, secret place. He was my brother-friend, bound to me- and he was my servant as well.

I am a Prince, no common man, and I had been taught that the role of the nobility is to care for the lower classes- to protect them from harm, and to defend their homesteads, to take them in during the lean times, and to garner stores for them during fat times- to ensure that they will continue on, long after my death. And Igla was my servant, my brother-friend; we slept in the same room, nearly the same bed, and shared all meals and lessons.

Including our last one together.

One day, in the early part of the summer, which was always hot and rainy, Igla became different- he lost the joy in his life, and he apologized profusely to me, and he could neither pay attention to lessons or eat at meals- and then, in the night, after the door had been shut and barred, Igla
apologized even more, and begged my forgiveness, and tried to kill me. I stopped him, and begged him to tell me why, and he told me that the ones who raised and cared for us- the ones I had thought my strange, changeable family- had his family captive, and the only way to save them, he told me, was to kill me. Or, and he was very clear, for me to kill him.

That night, I could not kill Igla- he was my brother-friend, my servant, and it was my solemn duty, to which I had sworn, to protect him faithfully. So, we sat, all through the night, staring at each other with fearful gazes- and when the morning came, one of our tutors looked in and sucked his teeth, and grabbed Igla by the upper arm, and dragged him away, muttering about “Teaching brats to do as their told.” I did not see him until that night.

That day, I lost all joy in life, and could neither pay attention to lessons nor eat at meals- I cried, and was slapped to stop my tears. And then the night came, and Igla with it, and I knew that I would have to let him kill me, or kill him- because I knew, somehow, that- that he would want to kill me.

And he did, and he tried- and I had never killed before, so his death was not clean, or quick, or painless. I had to stab him many times before I could open his guts and let them spill upon the floor- and I do not remember what happened next, other than meeting you, Late Summer, and awakening in another castle, all evidence of my lesson gone- excepting, of course, the pain in my heart and the burning rage that has never quite gone out.

This was when I was five years old- and I remember it as if I was still doing it today. As if I had just done it, as if… as if his blood was still accidentally swiped across my face. And after that night, I was a boy no more- but I have not become a man… so what am I?”

Tamer, my good best friend, is silent for a long moment; he shivers, so I sit up and find the rope, and unravel it back into the blanket. I gently slip it over the both of us, and more aggressively cuddle with him. After a few moments of my nuzzling care, he begins to speak again.

“I met Late Summer during her namesake, at a castle in the middle of a city, which I never saw; and I only met her in my dreams. I became her friend, and she mine, when I was five years old- and I was her friend for five bright-perfect years.

She was weak, my Summer- and in the world of our dreaming, there were countless dangers, but she was unafraid; I knew that she would be killed if I didn’t help her, and so, for a time, we were inseperable.

I miss those dream-days.

When I turned ten, I decided to put away childish things, and I fought with the only equal-friend I had ever had, my good best friend, and then- and then I changed my entire world, and for a time, forgot her.

For the longest time, I thought she was only a figment of dreams- until, of course, my grandfather, who is the Demon’s Head, tried to suck out my soul and wear my skin like a bespoke suit, and she came through the Dream-world to mine, and saved me.

And the reason I forgot her is because I met my Father- the Lucky-man, Knight-protector of the Dark City of Fools.

My f-father died in a riot, in the Dark City, doing his duty as a Knight- a one-in-a-million chance, a
freak ricochet of a piece of rubble went squish in through his mouth, where it was left exposed by his helm; by some horrific oddity of probability, it shot into his brain and rattle-bounced it into mush. He was dead before he knew there was a danger- and there was more blood than I knew how to fix.

I cried, there- and then I knew darkness.

It was my job to watch his back- my job to protect him from harm, and… and I failed. Again.

When I awoke, it was to a strange, not-strange shape, in the darkness- and a not-voice Voice that I knew, but could not remember from where. I remembered that I trusted the voice, and that it would never willingly lie to me, not about anything- so, I trusted it.

First it became a moth, which showed me a clear path through the fortress of my grandfather, and then it became a goat of the highest mountains, and carried me to the desert below. Then, the voice was a girl of my age and height, lacking a face but not a skull- and she set out a blanket I remembered, and bade me to sit by her side, and then we flew across the desert on wings of sand. We dined on fresh fruit, and dried fruit, and cheese, and cured meats- and when we came to the plains of tall, waving grasses, the voice called a mare of great speed and skill, and wrapped the blanket over her like a saddle. We rode the mare through the grasslands, and when high noon came, we came to the edge of a forest.

The voice disguised me as her sister, and led me on the mare through the dark forest, until we came to a place where the birds were the people, and the people were birds. The voice sang a song, and convinced the birds to fight and kill the Shadow following us- and then we were out of the bird’s forest, and to a river. And it was at the river that I began to remember, slowly, just who the voice was- because the voice threw a coin into the river, and summoned a boat, and could not make it- herself get into it. And I remembered that the Voice was always terrified of dying in a small boat, but could never explain to herself or to another why- so, I lifted her, and carried her into the boat, which floated with the river like it was smoother than glass- even though it boiled and burped and growled like a thing alive.

The voice passed out, from fear, so I held her and tried to comfort her- and she awoke when we came to the river’s delta, and the boat returned to her hand. The voice then turned into a horse with wings, and flew us across a storm tossed sea- I think we actually flew through a hurricane, which just goes to show how amazing my friend is.

Finally, we returned to my home, and the voice passed out- I put her in a bed, to let her rest; the rain followed us.

The next morning, the voice rose from her bed, and went to the kitchen to make herself something to eat- and then I finally recognized her, because she was finally a shape I remembered; even though that wasn’t her normal shape, I was finally able to remember who the Voice was- Late Summer, my good best friend.

In the five years we had not seen each other, Late Summer- Summer, now- had changed from a girl into a woman, and never has she been a monster. Yet I am still not a man. So I must be a monster.”

“You are no monster, Tamer. I am not friends with monsters- beasts, certainly, but never monsters. Why- why do you speak such lies about yourself?”

“Because they aren’t lies- I kill people and enjoy it, Summer. I’m not… I’m not right. I’ve never been- I’ll never be able to- I’m not right.”
“Neither am I, Tamer. I’ve killed people and enjoyed it- that is not a prerequisite for being, becoming a monster.”

“I do not understand people, and often make them- angry, and uncomfortable. I’m cruel, and mean, and I hurt everyone around me.”

“Me too, sometimes.”

“I don’t have any friends- I had few before, but after this, I’ll be surprised if the people I know can even remain civil.”

“I am your friend, Tamer- and I have very few friends as well. And I don’t really think being civil is necessary to be someone’s friend.”

“…Sometimes, I wish Iglia had been able to kill me. Sometimes, I wish it was I who had died in the darkness.”

“…Sometimes, I wish I had been in the car with my parents when it crashed. Sometimes, I wish I had stayed with my Nainai and starved to death. But only sometimes... How often is your sometimes?”

“Lately?”

“Yeah.”

“All the time.”

I’ve graduated from cuddling to holding, and at this, I draw him closer to me, as if I can protect him from his own heart.

“Tamer… I’m good at triage. Did you know that? I’m good at figuring out what the problem with something, someone, is- and I think your problem, if there is one, and I mean no offense, is that you don’t have anyone to talk to. Just talk to- not get advice from, not fight with- just… talk.”

“Summer I- I failed him.”

At some point, one of the sheet’s making the roof of our pillow fort must have fallen. That’s the only reason I can think of for there being so much more direct light- but no, I glance up and see that it’s been cut, odd- and in the light I can see the slicing trails of sorrow, bitten into Tamers shoulders and thighs and sides. Probably did it with a razorblade, that’s why the lines are so thin and clear- you can barely see most of them, and it’s likely most wouldn’t see them- my Tamer always has been good with a sharp blade…

So.

“Do you feel like a failure, then?”

He moans into his tears- “…Yes!”

I remember now, where the blanket came from. “Tamer, do you remember where this blanket came from?”

“N-no…”
I snuggle closer with him, and then I speak what little I remember. “When we were small, very small, during the lost-bright days, we had to hide from something very dangerous. I think… I think it was some kind of monster that ate children, but I don’t—”

“…boneclaws.”

“Yeeeees- anyway, I knew that the only way she could get us is if there were some darkness for her to hide in, so… so I pulled starlight and flickering candleflames together into thread, and you wove it into the blanket, and we were safe from her. I think… I think maybe you should keep it.”

“But- But Terry, I made it to protect you!”

“Damian, I’ve learned to protect myself- and I think… I think you need, have always needed it, more than I do, now, or did, then.” Tamer-Damian-Tamer has a series of weals, along his forearm; “Do you remember how you got these?”

He stares at them; I grip them in the pattern, because I sort of do remember where he got the scars, but he has to- “Terry, stop.” I let go of him, instantly.

He stares at me, his blue blue eyes wide with terror- and then he remembers too. I press my forehead against his, and whisper, softly-

“I remember that she liked you very much, and paid the most attention to you, and that she looked like what you thought your mother looked like- but nothing like a mother at all. I remember that she made wonders for you, and you liked them- but they were hollow, just shells. A shell game. I remember that she didn’t have the eyes of a mother- she had the eyes of a monster.

I remember that I lied to you, about why I wanted to make the blanket- and I remember why we forgot each other.

I… I made you leave, Damian. When the Boneclaw Mother showed, a sort of- predatory, I think is the word- interest in you, I knew that I had to protect you, because… because I loved you, and love you still, and that’s what people do for the ones they love, I think. Sometimes. If they can.”

“But- but I was the Protector, and you were my Guide-”

“Yes. And that’s why we broke- I could see a danger you couldn’t, and decided to protect someone I loved from harm- and when I had done what I had done, our agreement was broken, and we forgot. We grew up- well, I grew up first- and we forgot who we were.”

“We forgot who we’d decided to be.”

“Yeah.”

We are silent, together- I’m holding Damian, and Damian is holding me- his skin is cool against mine, and our bodies are entwined. The blanket of starlight and candleflame is warm over us both- warmth of candles for Tamer, coolness of stars for me.

You need to ask. Now. Before it’s too late.

“So- and this might be a strange question but- was it good? What we had together?”

“The brighter days, or, um, just now?”
“Both…?”

“I think we did alright…? I mean, what we had back then was… special? And I miss it, but… there’s no going back, is there…”

“No, I don’t think there is. Not really.”

“So… I think… I think I’m glad I had you for then, and I remember it with fondness- and… I’ll keep the blanket of Lights, to keep me safe and to remember you by.” He sighs. “I think that will be enough, right? I mean-”

I smile at him, gently knock my head against his. I can just barely see the reflection of my eyes in his- and the rain has stopped; sunlight slowly diffuses in like a fine red tea, bathing us both in gooey pink light.

“I think we did better than alright, Damian. We don’t need to be imaginary friends anymore- I don’t need to pretend that you’re my friend. You are my friend. And… I like you- but, um.”

“You don’t want to have my kids either?”

I stare at him, then smile, relieved. “You felt it too?”

“The earth moved, the world spun, fireworks and dancing lights- and when I kissed you, and gazed into your eyes, I felt… meh.”

“Oh thank the Gods, I thought it was just me.”

I giggle, softly, and wonder of wonders, Tamer joins me- soon we’re laughing so hard, tears are running out of our eyes, and Damian is sobbing again, and so am I.

And it’s okay.

(That was the other thing about being with Tamer, Damian- him- it was always okay to be myself. Always.

I’m… I’m really glad that hasn’t changed.)

We lie together, in silence, for a long moment- and then Tamer asks me the question that always ended our time together. “How long can you stay- shit! I mean… how long until you must god-dammit, fuck.”

I sigh, and sit up, put my clothing back on, and stretch.

“Help me take the fort down?”

Tamer sighs, and then Damian says “Alright.”

He pulls his clothing back on, and together, we put the room back to rights; we end up lounging on the couch, my bag open at my side. I reach into it, and pull out the golden sandollar- with a single clench of my hand, it breaks into two equal pieces. I pull out a piece of paper, and wrap it around the little half circle of gold, and I hand it to him, along with one of my calling cards. “If you ever want to come visit me, eat that; if you ever want to talk, even about nothing at all, my phone number and email is on the card.”
He blinks at me, then at the card- and then he rips a piece of paper out of a magazine on the low table- I didn’t notice it, I usually do Oh! It’s a tabloid, no wonder- and writes out his phone and email, and gives it to me. “Same to you, Summer.”

I smile, and put the ragged-edged paper into my bag- just before I put the gold into my mouth, Tamer moves forwards and hugs me, as hard as he can. I hug him back, and he whispers in my ear- “I’m really glad you decided to be my friend, Summer.”

“Me too, but for you. Love you, Tamer.”

“Love you, Summer.”

And then our time together is over, and I eat the gold, and the darkness of the Rift swallows me again- and when I can see once more, I am lying in the bed at the Sandy Shores Hotel, and it is just beginning to dawn.

I stretch, pack my things, toss my hair, and drop TWIN- and suddenly I’m in a fucking riot.

What the ever loving hell.

(Procrastination is not typically a function of laziness, apathy or work ethic as it is often regarded to be. It’s a neurotic self-defense behavior that develops to protect a person’s sense of self-worth.

You see, procrastinators tend to be people who have, for whatever reason, developed to perceive an unusually strong association between their performance in life and their value as a person. This makes failure or criticism disproportionately painful, which leads, quite naturally, to hesitancy when it comes to the prospect of doing anything that reflects on their ability- which is pretty much everything.

In real life, you can’t avoid doing things. You have to earn a living, do your taxes, have… hard conversations sometimes. Life requires confronting uncertainty and risk, and so pressure mounts. Procrastination gives a person a temporary hit of relief from this pressure of “having to do” things, which is a self-rewarding behavior, so it continues and becomes the normal way to respond to pressure.

Particularly prone to serious procrastination problems are children who grew up with unusually high expectations placed on them. Their older siblings may have been high achievers, leaving big shoes to fill, or their parents may have had neurotic and inhuman expectations of their own, or else they exhibited exceptional talents early on, and thereafter “average” performances were met with concern and suspicion from parents and teachers.

There’s a reason I don’t like to show off my skills, no matter how good they might or might not be. And there is a reason I don’t have a steady job, not really.

But all things must end.

Or begin, as the case may be.)
A power trio is a rock and roll band format typically having a lineup of guitar, bass and drums, leaving out the rhythm guitar or keyboard that are used in other rock music to fill out the sound with chords. While one or more band members may sing, power trios usually emphasize instrumental performance and overall impact over vocals and lyrics. Our trio is different, in that the only instrument I can play with any kind of skill is my voice - I could learn to play another, I think, but I wouldn’t be as good. Raven’s 192-stringer, however, can handle both high and low strings, and Jinx can’t be beat on drums. After I’ve gone to Tamer’s, I stay, and we make music together for hours, jamming, laughing, and merging our sounds into something beautiful and new.

About a week later, we realize we’re a punk band. We aren’t punk rockers - but we are a punk band. And then, somehow or other, we decide that we could make money if we get good - so we play together, and make songs. Lots of songs. Songs, even.

(Punk rock is a rock music genre that developed between 1974 and 1976 in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Rooted in garage rock and other forms of what is now known as protopunk music, punk rock bands eschewed perceived excesses of mainstream 1970s rock. Punk bands created fast, hard-edged music, typically with short songs, stripped-down instrumentation, and often political, anti-establishment lyrics. Punk embraces a DIY ethic; many bands self-produced recordings and distributed them through informal channels.

The term "punk" was first used in relation to rock music by some American critics in the early 1970s, to describe garage bands and their devotees. By late 1976, bands such as the Ramones in New York City and the Sex Pistols and The Clash in London were recognized as the vanguard of a new musical movement. The following year saw punk rock spreading around the world, and it became a major cultural phenomenon in the United Kingdom. For the most part, punk took root in local scenes that tended to reject association with the mainstream. An associated punk subculture emerged, expressing youthful rebellion and characterized by distinctive styles of clothing and adornment and a variety of anti-authoritarian ideologies. The first wave of punk rock aimed to be aggressively modern, distancing itself from the bombast and sentimentality of early 1970s rock. According to Ramones drummer Tommy Ramone, "In its initial form, a lot of stuff was innovative and exciting. Unfortunately, what happens is that people who could not hold a candle to the likes of Hendrix started noodling away. Soon you had endless solos that went nowhere. By 1973, I knew that what was needed was some pure, stripped down, no bullshit rock ‘n’ roll." John Holmstrom, founding editor of Punk magazine, recalls feeling "punk rock had to come along because the rock scene had become so tame that Billy Joel and Simon and Garfunkel were being called rock and roll, when to me and other fans, rock and roll meant this wild and rebellious music." In critic Robert Christgau's description, "It was also a subculture that scornfully rejected the political idealism and Californian flower-power silliness of hippie myth." Patti Smith, in contrast, suggests in the documentary 25 Years of Punk that the hippies and the punk rockers were linked by a common anti-establishment mentality.

Throughout punk rock history, technical accessibility and a DIY spirit have been prized. In the early days of punk rock, this ethic stood in marked contrast to what those in the scene regarded as the ostentatious musical effects and technological demands of many mainstream rock bands. Musical virtuosity was often looked on with suspicion. According to Holmstrom, punk rock was "rock and roll by people who didn't have very much skill as musicians but still felt the need to express themselves through music". In December 1976, the English fanzine Sideburns published a now-famous illustration of three chords, captioned "This is a chord, this is another, this is a third. Now form a band." The title of a 1980 single by the New York punk band Stimulators, "Loud Fast
Rules!” inscribed a catchphrase for punk's basic musical approach.

Some of British punk rock's leading figures made a show of rejecting not only contemporary mainstream rock and the broader culture it was associated with, but their own most celebrated predecessors: "No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones in 1977," declared The Clash song "1977". The previous year, when the punk rock revolution began in Great Britain, was to be both a musical and a cultural "Year Zero". Even as nostalgia was discarded, many in the scene adopted a nihilistic attitude summed up by the Sex Pistols slogan "No Future"; in the later words of one observer, amid the unemployment and social unrest in 1977, "punk's nihilistic swagger was the most thrilling thing in England." While "self-imposed alienation" was common among "drunk punks" and "gutter punks," there was always a tension between their nihilistic outlook and the "radical leftist utopianism" of bands such as Crass, who found positive, liberating meaning in the movement. As a Clash associate describes singer Joe Strummer's outlook, "Punk rock is meant to be our freedom. We're meant to be able to do what we want to do."

The issue of authenticity is important in the punk subculture—the pejorative term "poseur" is applied to those who associate with punk and adopt its stylistic attributes but are deemed not to share or understand the underlying values and philosophy. Scholar Daniel S. Traber argues that "attaining authenticity in the punk identity can be difficult"; as the punk scene matured, he observes, eventually "everyone got called a poseur".

Punk rock bands often emulate the bare musical structures and arrangements of 1960s garage rock. Typical punk rock instrumentation includes one or two electric guitars, an electric bass, and a drum kit, along with vocals. Punk rock songs tend to be shorter than those of other popular genres—on the Ramones' debut album, for instance, half of the fourteen tracks are under two minutes long. Most early punk rock songs retained a traditional rock 'n' roll verse-chorus form and 4/4 time signature. However, punk rock bands in the movement's second wave and afterward have often broken from this format. In critic Steven Blush's description, "The Sex Pistols were still rock'n'roll...like the craziest version of Chuck Berry. Hardcore was a radical departure from that. It wasn't verse-chorus rock. It dispelled any notion of what songwriting is supposed to be. It's its own form."

Punk rock vocals sometimes sound nasal, and lyrics are often shouted instead of sung in a conventional sense, particularly in hardcore styles. The vocal approach is characterized by a lack of variety; shifts in pitch, volume, or intonational style are relatively infrequent. Complicated guitar solos are considered self-indulgent and unnecessary, although basic guitar breaks are common. Guitar parts tend to include highly distorted power chords or barre chords, creating a characteristic sound described by Christgau as a "buzzsaw drone". Some punk rock bands take a surf rock approach with a lighter, twangier guitar tone. Others, such as Robert Quine, lead guitarist of The Voidoids, have employed a wild, "gonzo" attack, a style that stretches back through The Velvet Underground to the 1950s recordings of Ike Turner. Bass guitar lines are often uncomplicated; the quintessential approach is a relentless, repetitive "forced rhythm," although some punk rock bass players—such as Mike Watt of The Minutemen and Firehose- emphasize more technical bass lines. Bassists often use a pick due to the rapid succession of notes, which makes fingerpicking impractical. Drums typically sound heavy and dry, and often have a minimal set-up. Compared to other forms of rock, syncopation is much less the rule. Hardcore drumming tends to be especially fast. Production tends to be minimalistic, with tracks sometimes laid down on home tape recorders or simple four-track portastudios. The typical objective is to have the recording sound unmanipulated and "real," reflecting the commitment and "authenticity" of a live performance. Punk recordings thus often have a lo-fi quality, with the sound left relatively unpolished in the mastering process; recordings may contain dialogue between band members, false starts, and background noise.
Punk rock lyrics are typically frank and confrontational; compared to the lyrics of other popular music genres, they frequently comment on social and political issues. Especially in early British punk, a central goal was to outrage and shock the mainstream. There is also a characteristic strain of anti-sentimental depictions of relationships and sex, exemplified by "Love Comes in Spurts," written by Richard Hell and recorded by him with The Voidoids. Anomie, variously expressed in the poetic terms of Hell's "Blank Generation" and the bluntness of the Ramones' "Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue," is a common theme. Identifying punk with such topics aligns with the view expressed by V. Vale, founder of San Francisco fanzine Search and Destroy: "Punk was a total cultural revolt. It was a hardcore confrontation with the black side of history and culture, right-wing imagery, sexual taboos, a delving into it that had never been done before by any generation in such a thorough way." However, many punk rock lyrics deal in more traditional rock 'n' roll themes of courtship, heartbreak, and hanging out; the approach ranges from the deadpan, aggressive simplicity of Ramones standards such as "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend" to the more unambiguously sincere style of many later pop punk groups.)

The thing is, we aren’t a punk rock band- we’re all punks to some degree, Jinx being the most punk, Raven being the least (she’s really more of a grunge kind of person), and I somewhere in the middle, but that’s not what our music is, really… if anything, it’s a sort of… Cabaret. Cabaret is a form of entertainment featuring music, comedy, song, dance, recitation or drama. It is mainly distinguished by the performance venue (also called a cabaret), such as in a restaurant, pub or nightclub with a stage for performances. The audience usually sits at tables, often dining or drinking. Performances are usually introduced by a master of ceremonies or MC (sometimes spelled emcee in the U.S.). The entertainment is often (but not always) oriented towards adult audiences.

Cabaret also sometimes refers to a Mediterranean-style brothel – a bar with tables and women who mingle with and entertain the clientele. Traditionally these establishments can also feature some form of stage entertainment, often singers and dancers or burlesque entertainers.)

And, after a few weeks, we realize we’re actually really fucking good.

Now, I’m not naming names (because I did it) but, well, I know a guy who would let us play at his club, and one thing lead to another, and then I was wearing what I wore to fight the blonde guy in the clothing store, and um. Yeah.

So.

Apparently, our music is too much for some people- I mean, all I did was sing a ballad, and then people started fighting each other- and then I’m back together, and there’s really only one thing to do.

I signal Raven to play something… vicious, and Jinx, bless her, picks up my mood- one second the crowd is trying to eat itself, the next it’s cowering from the force of my rage. And then- and then I sing the most violently loving love song I’ve ever managed to sing.

The night goes on, and we play one of the best sets ever- and when it’s done, we sneak out the window of the dressing room, and hide out in my apartment.

In the faint hours between Midnight and Dawn, Xanghai takes on a sort of near-carnival glow that steadily fades away- neon dragons scream their raging challenge to the uncaring stars, which slowly fade away into bright darkness. The moon gently glows on the river, and the glass of windows
shimmers in the glare of passing trucks. And we three move down back alleys and up side streets, and then we’re back in Kowloon proper, and then we’re at my apartment, and the door is locked behind us.

Jinx’s drumkit is a set of gemstones inlaid in the bones of a deer-wolf, studded with teeth, dials, a large and small turntable, things that flick, things that click, and set of normal drum tops. She’s drooling on it while she sleeps, and snuggling with it like a very small child would a favored toy—Raven’s 192-stringer is shaped sort of like a battle ax that made love with a harp and never left, then got turned into some longnecked aquatic bird— it’s big, and weird looking, and she’s also sleeping on it. They’re actually sleeping on my bed, the little darlings, all nestled together and humming— and there’s something I needed to do…

Ah, yes. I’m joining the Team later today, so I’ll need to put something together so I’m not always go-stay-going… Hmm…

There was something at Necro’s that we used all the time- mainly for turning in assignments, and you connected them to sv’s (spark-viewer) for long distance assignments, like during the more hands on Sciences- what the fuck were those things… they were- not the stone gate that we used for the Survival Final… Tangle-Rings!

Alright, actually, I need to re-explain my schooling, it’s gotten fuzzy on me, and whenever that happens, I- For the first six years of my life, I had a series of private tutors that schooled me in the ways of Singing, Kung Fu, Tai-chi, and Calligraphy. For the years I was six to ten, I went to public school, and learned the basics of mathematics, art, literature, science, history, and also learned basic Atlantean and M’arzzic.

Then, for the next two years, I was enrolled in the illustrious school of hard knocks, where I learned to fight dirty, cheat at games of chance, lie with a straight face, steal, fight, and how to use many slang terms that would get me kicked out of polite company.

When I was thirteen, I went through Sinta’s extremely foulmouthed school of manners and deportment, and learned how to not be “a giant puss filled pimple on the ass of fucking shit-licking sons of jackal’s whores tax collecting bitches.” It’s really amazing I don’t curse more, actually.

When I was fourteen (which here I mean, between the ages of thirteen and fourteen), I worked like a little demon at Necro’s and gained my Certificate of Knowledge- which is equivalent to most high-school diplomas, actually. I also applied, and was accepted into the St. Jude’s branch of Seldvirck’s Academy of Applied and Unapplied Mystical Energies, which Necro’s feeds into. However, I decided to defer for a year’s time, which will end sometime in… September, I think.

However, I now remember why I always have to visibly wear red- first year students at Seldvirck’s have to wear red, no matter how old they are, or what their specialty is, no matter which branch it is.

Mine is Information, by the way, which means I will eventually have to wear purple. Ugh. Purple is such an ugly word.

Anyway.

During my year at Necro’s, I had to use these things called tangle-rings; the basic idea is that it’s a ring engraved with special runes and such, and then sliced in half down the long way, so you get two
ring-shaped pieces; it’s still a ring, and what goes in one side comes out the other- except, and this is
the most important part- they don’t even need to be in the same demesne as the other to still do what
they have always done. Basically… they’re portable soft-spots that can be made. Sort of. Not really.
The point being, I need to make one.

Okay. Um.

Hmm.

I can’t use a stiff object, it won’t work- Cloth. I usually get, like, samples and samples of fabrics- so,
okay, what do I ma- A quilt. To hang on the wall. So… A tapestry? No, a quilt- hand stitched with
care, but… I need a design.

I know!

I pull out a Card, and carefully copy the back-design; it’s… it’s changed. Somehow. There’s the sun,
and the moon, and a scattering of stars, and swirls of blue and red, like water and flame- and I
suddenly know what to do.

Exchange. That’s the Word I stitch into the sun-circle, where I would put a handle on a regular door-
the one to stay here, in Kowloon, gets hung on the dividing wall of my apartment- it takes almost the
entire space, wow, and falls gentle-quiet, like paint.

And I’ve been gone long enough, I think- time to go back.

But before I go- time to really get ready.

So. What works, and what doesn’t- bodysuit is good. Skirts- I like the line of them, but not the
hazards- so, undershorts, okay; long trailing sleeves… nice in theory, not in practice. There has to be
an adaptation- okay, wait, go back to the beginning.

I pull out the Carp pattern, and see what I missed before- the original pattern was a robe, not a dress
or anything crazy like what I made. It’s a short robe, actually, with a rounded bottom and sleeves that
expose my hands. I have two bolts of fabric that I’ve never used, mainly because I couldn’t
remember how to hem the fabric after it’s cut- it’s cloth of Light, meaning if you don’t know how to
spin light into thread, you won’t be able to sew the fabric. But- Tamer helped me remember how- I
have the right tool in my baaaaaaaaaaa-I actually have several hundred gemstones, sweet Jesus, what
the hell- no wonder my bag has been so heavy!

I dump it out and find three pentagon yellow diamonds, fifty emerald lozenges, an onyx shard, more
diamonds than I can shake a fist at, turquoise lozenges of a shade of blue most vibrant, uncut ruby
chunks like pomegranate sections of the exact color of pigeon’s blood, beryls like pale drops of red
wine, emeralds cool in their forested greens, aquamarines like perfect chips of lake and river and sea,
morganites that gleam like the eyes of night creatures in the darkness, heliodors plump and glinting,
goshenites of all sizes. I also have opal optical drivers- thin discs of opal held in individual oily
casings in every color, peridots that sparkle quietly, glass that is brittle to the touch but also holds a…
pastel-ity that the other gemstones cannot match, zircons glowing with a doubled light, jade stinking
with wealth, corals of such vibrancy you could almost faint- and the ink bottle now holds black
silicate held in suspension with a solution of some sort- I would guess saline. I put all this monstrous
wealth onto GF (Aw, Fuck!), and try not to worry about the way the rubinite X flowers weave
themselves into the bounty, or the way the flat mirror ripples when I put my shell-phone into it to charge.

I take the first shower I’ve had in quite a while- and I feel instantly refreshed.

Soap and Water.

It’s the best.

I pull down my two bolts of Lightcloth; one I set out in full beam of the windowsill, to catch the red morning’s light- it’s typhoon season, the sunrise is always red right now- and the other, blank Lightcloth I cut into the original pattern of the Carp dress- and, once I have pinned it onto a dressmaker’s dummy I keep in my apartment, something amazing happens- my first and second costumes, since I didn’t throw them away, float out of the back of my closet, and settle, like… like souls, directly onto the muslin, and are absorbed. The sun rises, and the other bolt of fabric is dyed a lurid red; I cut it according to instructions, and sew it with a beam of dawning light, focused by a ruby. And then it is finished, and I have a red jacket- honestly, it looks most like a cheongsam, but too short, and loose, like the old style, with cleverly hidden pockets on my upper arm-sleeves; and there’s an over-jacket thing, because… oh, the collar is too tight for the hood of my body suit to go through, so- I pull out my body suit to check, and yes, the hood is now a sort of over jacket vest thing, with a strangely see-through veil thing that I can pull up, over my face.

Weird but wonderful- my body suit now covers me from neck to everywhere else, no gaps or holes- it moves easily enough for me, but I get the feeling it would be impossible for anyone else to remove it, short of slicing it off.

Which reminds me- I need to carry more on me than just my Cards, my Bag, and my Blades. I’ve got enough time- and I’ve been meaning to do something with that pig iron cauldron in the corner…

I grab it, and go up to my Workshop; and it’s changed while I was gone, okay- it’s more… organized? No- Cohesive. It fits better. The river of not-water is a spring now, with ruby X flowers growing in profusion- the laboratory and the sewing space have merged in strange ways, and there is now a terminal, which I will call Lance-Corporal Awful (shit!), and oh!

I get it!

I put the cauldron into the hopper, that’s what it’s called, and go to the terminal- and aha, I knew it- there’s a whole suite of options, fuck yes- okay, only things I can actually use, um um- Actually, I really only want six things; I enter the command, and watch as my new fantastic machine does it’s work- five minutes later, and there is a pleasant chimmy chime, and I have a cloth of Xen rope, a breast-plate imbued with Xenthonium and perfectly fitted for me, a pair of knee pads that will absorb a great deal of shock, and a new hand mirror. The other two things are a hair-comb that can make it through Raven’s hair without giving up in defeat, and a pair of knuckle dusters for Jinx- little darling defends her friend’s honor so hard, so why not give her a little boost? Besides, her hands are important.

I go back downstairs, and quick like a rabbit stitch ten different bags- a dark red with black lining and golden fish on the outside; a black with sky blue on the inside and red lines like swirls on the outside; a bright yellow with red on the inside, and white spots outlined in black on the outside; a sky blue with black on the outside, white feathering on the outside; a white with red on the outside, green
and black within, like leaves on both- actually flip that one inside out, it’s her secret to tell; an orange with black stripes and dark green within- no, flip that one too, it’s her secret; a black studded with stars, and peachy creamy on the inside, like the fur of a white rabbit; bright vermilion with yellow inside; red and white checks, with golden cloth on the inside; black with bright yellow feathering outside, soft pastels within, like the petals of a rose.

Into each bag goes two eggs from the gemhens; on the table I leave the gifts for the girls, and their two eggs, and then I break my other one- it shatters softly and inside is… a flash drive.

Okay.

That’s one of the weirder things I’ve ever gotten. I should put it in the phone-bath. What? Put the flash drive in the phone bath- I stand, and put the flash drive into the phone bath, along with an egg-shaped opal that glimmers coolly blue, a few garnets, a shard of bloodstone, and a ruby X blossom; the phone-bath shimmers, and my phone floats to the top- I think I just upgraded it. Like, seriously upgraded it- holy shit!

I have a screen now! Cooool!

(Premonitions are always a little jarring when they’re like that- but it’s always really easy to tell when it’s a premonition, and not, say, a particularly strong urge- it feels a bit… not jump-leapy, more like pin-needle and pulling.

Hard to explain, but unmistakable. Like an orgasm, actually.)

I completely empty my bag- it’s almost worn out, time for it to retire.

What to use, what to use… Actually, I have two choices- one is a backpack that is shaped more like a pangolin and oh fuck I’ve just accidentally thrown it into my desktop computer, fuck- it’s, kind of shimmering, and slithering, and wow, okay, I guess for my Red X backpack I’ll go with my other choice- an outer purse for coins, empty inside- I take out the Carp clutch from the now retired bag, and in it goes, and oh dear god- ow, ow, “Get off of me!” the backpack that landed on my desk has mutated into a very affectionate abiotic creature- “Ack! Get off of me right now!” What finally slinks off of me is something that looks like a cross between a computer, a pangolin, and a saluki dog, green like an artichoke with bright golden pearls for eyes, massive like a housefly’s; it’s tail is long and wide like an alligator’s, but scaled like the rest of the body, almost in an artichoke pattern, and it’s feet are the feet of a chicken. Where muscles should roll and roil beneath horn-scaled skin instead flicker wires and bits of processing computer and microchip, steadily opaqueing with a sort of film, like vellum. There are a trio of- wires, yes, wires- jutting out from it’s muzzle, three to each side in a line; it’s head flaps, which look like ears, are folded and flop down against it’s neck.

It’s tail flick-flick-flicks, and then a long black tongue with an insert like for my… phone… reaches out and takes my coin purse, and swallows it whole. There is a strange, rippling shudder, and then the creature is the backpack once again.

I have no idea what just happened… unless- I swipe my mask on, and put on my new costume- and yes, the backpack turned into the coinpurse, which goes where it always goes, in my bra; the kneepads go on my knees, the rope crosses over my waist, and the hood-thing is surprisingly comfortable. My blades are heavy at my wrists; I flick through a basic one-stance kata, and yes, my movement is perfect. Two stance, three stance, four, five- yes, all perfect. I separate my Cards into two nearly even piles- Wind and Water based cards in the Right sleeve pocket, Fire and Earth in the Left.
I switch back, and light on my back is the backpack- like the inside of a natalus’ shell, reversed and jutting out, soft like felt but hard as stones, thick straps over my shoulders- and artichoke green. I fold and pack the rest of the Cloth Tangle-Ring- and I notice that the one I’m folding is blank, but the one on the wall has… pictures? No- stories, unfinished- begun.

Ah. So that’s the way of things, then. Okay.

It’s going to be a while before you’ll be able to come back here for any length of time; pack well. I re-fold and pack all of my new clothing- four pairs of skinny jeans, black as always, five red and black shirts that button up the front- bowling shirts, I think they’re called- and five v-neck red shirts of varying shades and thicknesses; some of my favorite house dresses- ten total, each with four buttons down the front and belts attached and same colored; bras and underwear, mostly plain, some favorites; pajamas, mostly nightgowns; and my new school uniform, a bright red long sleeve shirt with a loose collar that doubles as a cowled hood, and a red ruffled skirt that has a pair of black shorts that go underneath, purple-black over-vest with the school crest in red, dark brown fingerless gloves, and a pair of black boots; I pack my text books for my first year of college, which I bought quite cheaply- the ones that are basically just the texts inside ring binders are so much cheaper, holy shit. However, some of them aren’t sold that way- I have to take Alchemy 101 (potions, cures, chemistry)- aha, Heggie’s Compounding Companion- and Spellcraft Theory 101 (cantrips, spells, hexes)- oh gods, not Precious Mirror of the Four Elements, ugh, algebra, but no Spellwriting at all, I tested out of that; Calligraphy does have it’s uses…

Okay, where is that copy of Devliv’s Devilry, that’s my 102 book (siege breaking) for Evocation- there it is, on top of the icebox! Okay, I doubled on Illusions- 101 (lying) and 102 (stealing), because the classes have very different focuses- so I need Loki’s Guide to Messing with Folks, and- aha, there they are, I knew I put them together- Loki’s Guide to Messing with Folks and The Unabridged, Unedited Tales of Bre’r Peter Rabbit, and Friends. I’m not taking Summoning- but I am taking that continuing elective, Animal-Leeching (vet apprentice); hmm- there it is Bloie’s Anatomy of Creaturese, under the couch, and that other one that’s at Necro’s- Grey’s Anatomy, in the couch...

Okay, whatever. Enchantment- my Bag of Four (Athame; Full Rainbow of Beeswax candles; Ball of Twine; Handmirror) has everything I’ll need for that class, but- aha! Peoms of Flowyr Fey- why did I put this with the Kama Sutra? Ugh, whatever- Divination 104 (prophecy); I know I bought a crystal ball, now where did I put it… Oh, hey, there it is, I was using it as a paperweight, ha- and there’s a book that goes with it… Aha, Scenes Unseen but Dreamed. Not taking Change courses, I don’t have the aptitude for it exactly- no wait, yes I am, I’m taking the 100 class, Basic Theory- so… aha! Accounts of the Werelings, their kin, and their ways- Raven gave that to me, I think- yeah, she did, she annotated it in blue. Ah jeeze, I signed up for Warding- fuck, okay, where is that lap table, ugh, sketchbook made out of actual paper, pencil case, drafting pencils, eraser, pencil sharpener- Supplementary Notes on the Art of Figures- where did I put that- There it is, abacus, in the flower… pot… and those tools, why are they with my hairpieces, ugh, okay, protractor, compass, slide rule, sextant, and… there it is, straight edge and ruler.

So, that’s eleven books, which means I can take one more… I- hmm. I’ll figure it out…

I settle at my family altar, and pray for my parents- it’s been a while, but… it’s easy enough to do. And… it makes me feel better. About them being gone, I mean. I know what I’m going to take- I printed out my mother’s transpersonal psychology papers, and bound them myself- I’ve been meaning to read them, but… well. I can hear her voice, when I read them- strange, but true.

Okay. That’s… that’s basically everything I’ll be needing- and, okay, repack my kit, done, and… yeah. That’s… that’s really it.
Oh shit, almost forgot, I’m tutoring that Anatomy class- okay, where is all that crap, and there’s that lesson plan… okay. Now- I pack my makeup, my bike helmet, and pull my bike off the wall- I traded my old one for a new one; it doesn’t fold up, but it’s much harder.

I take my keys, a big bag of money, some wax melons, lock up behind me, and leave again- the Jasmine Road goes both ways, and with steady up and down motions, I’m pushing along it faster than I really can on foot- and then I go through a soft spot, somewhere in the rolling fields of the Ghosts- and then I’m… in Missouri, again, and I check my phone- woah, nearly fell there, okay, it’s… July Eighth, not bad!

I pedal steadily, my backpack full of books and clothing- a wax melon gets eaten on the fly, and I adjust my bike helmet- actually an old army helmet with the rolled up edge that I painted red with black flowers and cute skulls on the sides; my glasses are, surprisingly, staying on. Woo! The stars are really bright this side, and the moon is a pale sliver in the darkness- I pedal on, through the small hours of the morning.

I’m wearing one of my regular red shirts- it’s snug to my hips, V necked, with teeny sleeves, and my fingerless school gloves, and a pair of my skinny jeans, and my brown boots; I ride through a small city called Blue Valley, and stop at a place called Grant’s Gym- I need to pee, and it seems like a nice place. I lock up my bike, leave my helmet with it, and run inside- aw yeah, bathroom.

I finish my business, and grab a card from the information desk- into the bag it goes, I’ve been meaning to find a place to learn new stuff from- and then I’m pedaling again.

It’s after dawn when I reach Central, and then I’m riding through town- and lo and behold, I’m at Kid Flash’s house. I park my bike on the front porch, leave my helmet out there with it- knock at the door-

“Hi Wally!”

“t-Terry, Hi! Ah- Come in, come in; it’s almost breakfast, have you eaten?”

“Nope, breakfast sounds good!”

Breakfast is a massive spread of all kinds of things, all of which I sample- I’ve always eaten lots of food, which I think worried Dumpling Cheng, and then of course, I grew almost a meter over a single summer, and then she wasn’t so worried- and Wally hasn’t stopped staring at my face.

“What?”

“Wha- Nothing! Sorry!”

I stare at Wally for a moment, then shrug- “Oh, Hey Superboy!”

He blinks at me. “Hi Terry.”

I finish my portion of breakfast, and we three retire to the couch, and begin watching the not-SV, Wally once again flipping through windows to other, stranger worlds, before finally settling on a drama of some kind- I think it’s animated, actually- in which a pair of women are traversing the land, fighting monsters. I like it, but I also don’t- the costumes are quite nice, but the dark haired woman is
It’s during a lull in the viewing, when advertisements for things I have never known of nor needed roll past that Wally says “So, um, how did that thing with your friend go?”

“Hmm? Oh, Damian- Well, his father died, and made him very sad, so I had to talk him out of suicide.” I hadn’t realized the truth of my statement until I had actually said it aloud.

Wally stares at me. “You… you talked someone out of suicide?”

“Yes. Took all night long, but worth it. Getting to him was tricky, but still. Worth it.”

“You couldn’t just… dream yourself to him?” Superboy’s voice is still kind of scratchy, but it’s getting more… together, more stretched out. He’s developing his own specific voice, which is always nice to see.

“No- we grew up, and apart, so the road that would have taken me to him before… it wouldn’t support me. Not now, anyway. I’m too big.”

“So… how did you get to him?”

“I went through a sort of… a sort of in-between place, that goes everywhere, because. Hm. Dreams are everywhere, even when they aren’t, and everything has to exist somewhere when you aren’t looking- like Madagascar, or parents.”

Wally is looking at me in a very strange way- okay, I’ll explain further.

“It’s like- when you see-smell-touch-taste-feel something, you know it’s real, but when you don’t, you have to believe it’s real, because you can’t-… and that’s the way Dreams are, dreams too, and they have to go somewhere when they aren’t being used, because everything that exists goes somewhere, so… so I went to the place where- where dreams go when you aren’t sleeping.”

“And then…?”

“And then, I followed a path, and won directions to the Gates that would let me through to another world.”

Wally blinks. “Another world?”

“Yes- um. Damian doesn’t live in a world that’s near ours- he lives, like… a few hundred worlds over, and sort of sideways?”

“Like… a parallel dimension?”

“What is parallel dimension?”

Wally looks a little puzzled but then an idea sparks behind his eyes- he zips away in a rush of multicolored wind, and returns with a pad of paper and some markers. And then he draws two straight lines on each side of the paper, and labels them “Our world” and “Damian’s world”, and then he says “Like… two worlds almost next to each other, and the same things in both but…”
different.”

I suddenly understand- it’s like a bursting of understanding behind my eyes. “Yes! Same same, but
different!”

And just like that, we’re chattering on about how the entirety of everything is layered like onions
made out of colanders, and Superboy occasionally interjects with facts that I didn’t know before, and
then it’s an hour later, but we’re still talking and-

“But wouldn’t that cause the universe- sorry, world, you go to, to sort of… collapse?”

I sigh, and put my hands in my lap; my eyes settle on the top edge of the low table, brightly colored
magazines growing wavery. “Well, yes. That’s why… that’s why I could only stay for one night.”
And then I’m pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes and my face is burning and I can’t really
breathe, okay, this is not good, ow- my throat really hurts, and Superboy is hugging me and now I’m sobbing.

Okay.

I’m less okay than I thought.

And Superboy is actually really good at hugs, wow.

When I can see again, I’m back on the couch, and my face is sort of gungy feeling, like… smeared?
Anyway, I feel lots better now, still quite sad, but- I have to believe that my friend will call me if he
needs help. That’s why I gave him my phone number and email, after all. Wow, that is a very
worried looking Wally- “I’m okay now, I think. Just… sad, a little.”

Wally cocks his head, then says, quietly- like he’s afraid he’ll break something if he says something
too loud. “Why?”

“Well… my friend grew up without me, and I without him, and now we’re different people, a-and…
I guess not the same? Anymore.”

“So… you’re same same… but different?”

I can’t quite help it- I giggle, and the look of relief on Wally’s face is like golden light on clouds at
dawn. “Yes, exactly.”

We return to watching the not-SV, and I zone out for a while- which happens sometimes, when I’m
feeling too emotional about something.

Oh, hey, Wally is saying something- “and we’ll leave now, okay? Oh, but first we’ve gotta put you
and Supey into the system, Terry.”

“Okay…?” Superboy just kind of grunts.

I grab my backpack from where I’ve left it- like this weird tiled space right before the house turns
into the house, behind the front door? And we go, me, Superboy, and Wally. I follow them through
Central, it’s straight-wide streets very strange looking to my eyes, but easier to navigate with a guide-
and then were at a ramshackle place, forgotten by the majority. We go inside an empty, forgotten
space, and there waiting for us is the red man from a few days ago, I guess he’s the Flash, maybe?
Anyway.

I get sat in front of a strange, empty screen, which scans me, and then I-think-Flash says some things I don’t understand, and then there is a voice which says “Please state designation.”

I blink, then “Red X.”

“Recognized B0fzzzt. Red X.”

Possibly-Flash says, with a worried frown “Computer, restate designation.”

“Recognized, B010. Red X.”

I blink. Possibly-Flash and Wally and Superboy are staring at me, and the computer-thing. That’s… a bit weird. “Sorry, but- are there ten B Zeroes?”

Possibly-Flash stares at me for a moment, and then says, quietly, “No. There aren’t.”

“Odd.”

Superboy gets added next, but I miss his designation number- not because I wasn’t paying attention, I was! But… apparently Waking Dreams are going to be a thing now.

Yay.

Twins I have seen before, and then a fist to my face and pain exploding across my vision and the twins again inside a storm and then a bolt of light too bright to witness and then the twins a third time, one red one black and then darkness. A scream. And pain, in my side.

Wait. That’s it? Huh. That’s… different.

Oh, and now the weird shack-thing has a glowing doorway, and Wally just walked through it, okay, great, walking through glowing doorways is always interesting. I walk through the glowing doorway. And on the other side is… a Cave. Weird. Oh!

“Hello Kaldur, hey Robin!”

“Hello Terry.”

“Hi!” Robin’s voice is really cute, actually- he’s really short too!

I walk into the dark cave, which I soon adjust to- it’s not actually that dark, just different. It’s… big. There’s this sort of funnel looking thing hanging down from the ceiling, and a bright light is coming from underneath it, and oh sweet Jesus I’m underground.

Arrrgh.

Oh, Batman is saying something- and I don’t understand basically anything he’s saying, okay, great.

Ahh, Kaldur is saying “Today is the day.” That voice- so perfect.
And who is that girl…? *Something* is *weird* about her, but she’s cute too...

The Cave is, under questionably sound logic, hidden in plain sight—actually, that’s a very good idea, the best place to hide something is right where it should be, or in a place where the other things look more real than the real thing… It is both on a beach and under what is known even to the locals of Happy Harbor as "Mt. Justice"; a Cave with more carefully guarded entrances and emergency exists than a network of anthills.

Come to think of it, that’s really all the Cave is. Ranging both from the upper crusts of the mountain to (and, but this is supposed to be a secret for security reasons I haven’t quite figured out yet, even a few floors below) the sea level, it has surprisingly numerous looping corridors and as many floors as it’s structurally sound to include. Pockets of hidden rooms and secret passages connect nearly every part of it, because it was Batman’s idea mostly— but he didn’t choose every room to build in the place, which is why my room is what it is.

The rooms themselves are wide and tall, preventing the feeling of claustrophobia that might otherwise be inherent in a place known as a Cave. Almost everything in it is oversized and chock full of circuits, too. From the monitors as huge as frankly oversized walls, to the training equipment, to the **kitchen**.

There are four Main ways to enter and exit the Cave, like the valves of a human heart— well, five, once I add my thing. The first is the front entrance located at the base of Mount Justice, leading into the forest. The second is the back entrance that faces the Rhode Island coast, and the third is through the bay door in the hangar which opens onto the Atlantic Ocean. The fourth method is via one of the Zeta-Beam teleporter tubes, through which members of the Justice League and the Team can travel to and from various locations. And the fifth one is in my room, on the largest wall perpendicular to the door, and hangs like a tapestry— unless you know how it works, of course, in which case it’s a door that lets out in my apartment’s living room in Kowloon.

Other features include:

- **Grotto**: A place of contemplation that has been here since the league days.

- **Hangar**: The largest room is the multi-level hangar which contains two more Zeta-Tubes and the Cave’s main generator.

- **Kitchen**: A fully stocked open kitchen and eating area.

- **Library**: A two-level library with reading tables and dozens of bookshelves. A secret passage is hidden behind one case.

- **Living quarters**: A number of rooms, fairly similar in design, along a corridor.

- **Locker rooms**: Rooms to change in, located between the workout room and the showers; includes benches and lockers.

- **Lounge**: Located in the same room as the kitchen, a lounge area with a couch and a large television.

- **Medical bay**: To treat injured members. Contains advanced medical equipment, including a MRI
scan and X-ray.

Mission Room: The central chamber, with a holographic computer. It can also serve as a training area. The Mission Room also has two Zeta-Tubes.

Showers: Used by members when they return from a mission and require sanitation, located next to the locker rooms.

Souvenir Room: An empty room, save for a set of shelves on one wall- it’s about the size of a large storage closet.

Waterfall Room: A room that can be completely cut off from the outside, for private meetings and conversations. One wall features a decorative waterfall.

Workout room: A room with stair steppers, stationary bikes, elliptical trainers, treadmills, dumbbells and barbells.

The Cave also boasts a network of corridors, air vents and secret passages which connect many rooms together- and it has it’s secret spaces as well; I know about one of them.

That space is the Old Archive Room.

An Archive Room is… a space, usually quite large, and filled with shelves and drawers and bright lights- there usually aren’t any windows of any kind, but the rooms I’ve been in have always felt… restive. Tranquil. There is a strange sort of peace to be found in the depths of such a place- the peace of a thousand years and the dust of echoing days weighing down page after page of near forgotten lore, bound into books and settled into cases. (Trouble rather the tiger in his lair than the sage amongst her books. For to you the Kingdoms and their armies are things mighty and enduring, but to her they are but toys of the moment, to be overturned by the flicking of a finger.)

This archive room is empty- correction, it’s been emptied; there were records here, once, but now all that remains are unmarked drawers with inserts for handwritten labels, five massive tables meant for research upon, or possibly bookbinding, and built in shelving, filing cabinets, and wide-flat drawers for maps. Free standing shelving, and ladders on rails, that climb and climb into the far reaches of my sight; the air in this room is cool and dry, and the light is at that just right point where it’s bright but not glaring.

I step into the empty echoing space, empty of what it once held- I had just gone to find a bathroom, and to get away from Miss Martian, no she wants to be called Megan, nnnngh why does she freak me out… Anyway.

I had gone to find a toilet, but I must have taken a wrong turning- there’s no soft spots here, it doesn’t feel like, and the hallways all look the same, even though they aren’t. I’m not worried- I’ve got food in my bag, and they’ll probably find me if I’m gone too long, and then there was this door that looked… well, I wanted to see on the other side, and then there was the empty archives, and it’s perfect.

This room is perfect.

There’s this one large empty wall, right, and it’s just exactly the right size, and I’ve pulled out the other half of the tangle-ring, and it’s perfect, it really is- it hangs beautifully, long and wide and soft
pale against the dark stone, and then it ripples- Exchange, and a Red Long wheeling through dark starflung skies, and a brocaded koi swimming through water.

Aha.

They’ve connected- I leave my bag on one of the tables, and run through- yep, all good, and then I’m in my outhouse. Holy shit, bathrooms are wonderful. And wow, I have a lot of books- in fact, judging by the number I have in my outhouse, I have too many for one place...

I get out of the outhouse, wash my hands, and go back inside my apartment- I have a duffle bag somewhere, where is it… Aha! And there’s a basket too, and a whole buttload of rubberbands, and paperclips- and then I’m grabbing everything that cramps my tiny apartment, and shoveling it into my duffle bag, and rolling up papers and putting them in rubber bands, and so many books, I have so many books- nine feet of bag barely makes a dent, I shall have to make several trips- and then I’m back through the door, and unpacking, and shelving my books because so many beautiful shelves aaaaaah, and then I’ve made twenty trips and moved over seventy percent of my books over and the shelves are only about half filled… But wait! I have all that other crap!

And then come my oddities- because I’m always paid for my services, and it’s usually too much trouble to sell what I get, so… I have rugs and pennants and pendants and statues, and jars full of dragonfly wings and teeth and little skulls made of bronze and marbles, and glass buoys that glow during different phases of the moon and seashells that sing, and a stuffed alligator gar that hangs from the ceiling and I always knock my head against that thing which never hurts but still, and random squares of fabric with certain magical properties- and holy shit, I forgot I had another bed in here!

Damn!

And then my apartment looks… merely lived in, not squashed, and the Archive room looks… useful, again. A bit messy though. I’ve shoved one of the tables against a wall, like a desk, and that other bed went over near it, and my books are in piles and arrrrrgh.

What follows can only be described as a whirlwind of chaotic cleaning and organizing- at some point, I found a label maker I got as a reward at some point, and then it all sort of blurs together- I distinctly remember using Twin so I could write out labels and reshelve books at the same time- and then I’m organizing jam jars of weird things, and then there are all these banners I have to hang, and why do I have so many maps that I never even use, ugh-

And I’m being watched who-

“Um. Hi.” I’m currently hugging, trying to wrestle it into a corner or something, but it’s like, four meters long, the giant stuffed alligator gar I mean- and my face is burning. Okay. Um. “Um.”

“What is this place?” It’s not her voice alone that’s freaking me- what is it?

“Um. W-well, I was. Um. Kind of. Um. Hoping that would- that would be, um. That would be… my room…? Um. But not okay, I can take my stuff back…”

“Your stuff?”

“Where did you bring it from?” Superboy’s voice never ceases to startle me slightly.

“Y-yeah, all of this stuff, um, mine, and I brought from my apartment… I can take back though, if this. um. Not okay…?”

“Ah, no, I believe that it’s alright- I have no problems with you using this room. But… how did you
find it?” Rrrrgh that voice- no wait she asked a question, arrgh-

“Um. Got lost. And then found… perfect room, and so- um… Yeah. You come in maybe?”

They walk into my room- and I am instantly aware that I do not like Megan. Something about her rubs me in all the wrong ways… it’s like, like she’s a face-stealer or something, but that can’t be true. She’s not. She’s not a face-stealer, she’s Megan. And she’s your teammate; you don’t have to like her, particularly, you just have to be civil.

I walk over to my bed and toss the squishy fish onto it- I need to bring over some bedding, and probably another tick… and Megan is going to pick up something that will make me reflexively cast sleep- “Superboy, don’t worry, it wear off-”

And then I turn and see Megan holding the skull of a dragon, and I freak out just a little, and I cast Sleep on Megan because that particular skull has a minor curse on it that only works if the person asks about it, so now she’s asleep and wow the ground is getting close fast and then I don’t know anything at all for quite some time.

Sleep, man.

Sleep is one of the few spells I have that always rebounds on the caster. I wonder if it still would if I did it on a larger crowd…

I Dreamed, while I was Asleep, and this is what I Dreamed:

Once upon a time, there were two little girls, and the little girls were different from the other people in their village; they could see and do things that no one could understand, and that made the villagers scared.

They turned away from everyone and became sad and lonely, and had no one to turn to- except each other. And for a time, that was enough… but there’s only so much you can turn to another who is also your sister before you start turning to yourself- twins are different, and slowly slowly they began to melt into each other, until there was no difference between one and the other and the more they turned away from people and into themselves, the more scared they were of them- and the people of the village did something terrible… they took her away and they killed her. Them. Her.

Even though she-they was dead, something in her came back- and this part of that little girls wouldn’t go away, even after three hundred years.

And the longer it stayed, the less there was of the little girls.

Until, finally, there was nothing left of the little girls at all.

Just the part that came back- and that part waited. For a thousand years, it waited.

And while it waited, it grew.

And it grew.

And it grew- until it wasn’t a part of a little girl little girls little girl at all, but a young woman and it
grew up. It got bigger.

One day, a Face-stealer came, and beheld It as lovely, and courted It most ardently, and It allowed itself to be courted, and then they were wed.

And from their union came children- just two, sister-daughters born on the same day at the same time- and they hated each other.

Time passed. Things grow as they always do- and somehow or other, they found that while they were furious together, they were miserable apart. And so it went for twenty years, both of them steadily becoming more and more and reaching-

And then my Dream Breaks- and I see, in the edges, bright green light, and I hear a scream that awakens me, and I am screaming, and so is Megan.

And then we aren’t screaming anymore- we’re staring at each other.

Watch-waiting.

“M-m-m-m-megan- s-s-sorry, um. Megan?”

“Y-yes Terry?”

“Don’t ever go into my Mind without permission again.”

Her brown eyes are wide in her green face- and then she gulps, and nods, and we are silent, on my bed- the soft leather of the tick-mattress is pliant and cool under my rigid fingers, goose feathers within resisting my grip but faintly. Am I angry- no, I am not angry, I am… that feeling when someone invades your privacy, not anger, something else… Whatever it is, I am it, currently, and it’s not her fault, she didn’t know- and she won’t do that again, I don’t think, not unless it’s a serious emergency.

I have to believe that. I have to believe that. I have to believe that, otherwise, I will rip out her throat with my teeth; I have to believe that she didn’t mean to. I have to believe that she’ll ask if she wants into my Mind again. I have to believe that. Because if I’m wrong, I’ll have to kill her; because if I’m ever wrong, I’ll die.

There are few known ways to become a Noble- but one of those ways is to kill another and claim what is theirs as your own. I, unwittingly- because we only went over it briefly, in Etiquette- have claimed Madame White’s their-tiy as my own.

This will be interesting later.

Oddly enough, my first day at the Cave is not my most dangerous- no, that day will come on the Twenty-Fifth of July- and, because of Megan’s accidental interference, I will not be as prepared as I normally would be.
I’m not mad at her.

Swear to the gods, I’m not.

I forgot how much I enjoyed playing Pokemon, and then I remembered that I have a chapter to write and then I realized that this is a multipart chapter and felt relieved. Only, it also ends on a cliffhanger? So I'm not sure if that relief will extend to you as well...

Human bonding is the process of development of a close, interpersonal relationship. It most commonly takes place between family members or friends, but can also develop among groups such as sporting teams, or whenever people spend time together. Bonding is a mutual, interactive process, and is different from simple liking.

Bonding typically refers to the process of attachment that develops between romantic partners, close friends, or parents and children. This bond is characterized by emotions such as affection and trust. Any two people, or beings who spend time together may form a bond. Male bonding refers to the establishment of relationships between men through shared activities that often exclude females. The term female bonding is less frequently used, but refers to the formation of close personal relationships between women.

In the 4th century BC, the Greek philosopher Plato argued that love directs the bonds of human society. In his Symposium, Eryximachus, one of the narrators in the dialog, states that love goes far beyond simple attraction to human beauty. He states that it occurs throughout the animal and plant kingdoms, as well as throughout the universe. Love directs everything that occurs, in the realm of the godss as well as that of humans (186a–b).

Eryximachus reasons that when various opposing elements such as wet and dry are "animated by the proper species of Love, they are in harmony with one another ... But when the sort of Love that is crude and impulsive controls the seasons, he brings death and destruction" (188a). Because it is love that guides the relations between these sets of opposites throughout existence, in every case it is the higher form of love that brings harmony and cleaves toward the good, whereas the impulsive vulgar love creates disharmony.

Plato concludes that the highest form of love is the greatest. When love "is directed, in temperance and justice, towards the good, whether in heaven or on earth: happiness and good fortune, the bonds of human society, concord with the godss above—all these are among his gifts" (188d).

In the 1660s, the Dutch philosopher Spinoza wrote, in his Ethics of Human Bondage or the Strength of the Emotions, that the term bondage relates to the human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions. That is, according to Spinoza, "when a man is prey to his emotions, he is not his own master, but lies at the mercy of fortune."

In 1809 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in his classic novella Elective Affinities, wrote of the "marriage tie," and by analogy shows how strong marriage unions are similar in character to that by which the particles of quicksilver find a unity together through the process of chemical affinity. Humans in passionate relationships, according to Goethe, are analogous to reactive substances in a chemical equation.
Active listening is a communication technique that requires the listener to feed back what they hear to the speaker, by way of re-stating or paraphrasing what they have heard in their own words, to confirm what they have heard and moreover, to confirm the understanding of both parties.

When interacting, people often "wait to speak" rather than listening attentively. They might also be distracted. Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others, focusing attention on the "function" of communicating objectively as opposed to focusing on "forms", passive expression or subjectivity.

There are many opinions on what is "active listening". A search of the term reveals interpretations of the "activity" as including "interpreting body language" or focusing on something other than or in addition to words. Successful communication is the establishment of common ground between two people—understanding. Agreeing to disagree is common ground. Common ground can be false, i.e., a person says they feel a certain way but they do not. Nevertheless it is common ground, once accepted as understood. Dialogue, understanding and progress can only arise from that common ground. And that common ground cannot be established without respect for the words as spoken by the speaker, for whatever reason.

Thus the essence of active listening is as simple as it is effective: paraphrasing the speakers words back to them as a question. There is little room for assumption or interpretation. It is functional, mechanical and leaves little doubt as to what is meant by what is said. The process is successful if the person receiving the information gives feedback which shows understanding for meaning. Suspending one's own frame of reference, suspending judgment and avoiding other internal mental activities are important to fully attend to the speaker.

To use the active listening technique to improve interpersonal communication, one puts personal emotions aside during the conversation, asks questions and paraphrases back to the speaker to clarify understanding, and one also tries to overcome all types of environment distractions. Judging or arguing prematurely is a result of holding onto a strict personal opinion. This hinders the ability to be able to listen closely to what is being said. Furthermore, the listener considers the speaker's background, both cultural and personal, to benefit as much as possible from the communication process. Eye contact and appropriate body languages are seen as important components to active listening. Effective listening involves focusing on what the speaker is saying; at times the listener might come across certain key words which may help them understand the speaker. The stress and intonation may also keep them active and away from distractions. Taking notes on the message can aid in retention.

During the first week I started to live in the Cave, I moved approximately ten percent, formerly all, of my books into my new room—because it turns out I now own several libraries worth of books, courtesy of Madame White’s Dues. Fucking hell that’s wonderful.

I learned of my acquisition of the entirety of Madame White’s estate on the Ninth of July, which was the very next day, but after I had moved in; it was breakfast, I remember, because I was eating eggs I
had scrambled- I usually don’t eat scrambled eggs, but I felt the need to that day, which was unusual enough for me to take note- what was not unusual was to get a Homing Pigeon Notice thwacking into my head.

At the time, I thought it a simple summons by one of my repeat clients- I am in the business of finding things, people, information, and for a price, I will do it for others- usually, I just do those things for myself. It was not a summons from one of my clients- it was a Deed, specifically a Due Deed, sent out by the nearly defunct Kowloon branch of the Celestial/Infernal Lands Office, stating that I was now the sole owner, proprietor, and executor of the estate of the Former Madame White, her servant Blue, and all things owned by her, forthwith until the “Date in which, Red X, owner, is deceased, deposed, overthrown, or otherwise removed from her post of office.” Holy shit. “Holy shit.”

Superboy looks up from his cereal. “?”

“I think I- I t-t-think I own a house now. Um. Possible.”

“Okay…?”

“Um. Never owned House before. Um. Fuck.”

“…?”

“I’m also, um… small royalty now. Sort of.”

Let me tell you about my first few days at the Cave.

I wake up about two hours before the dawn, slithlop (slither + plop) out of bed, and do my morning stretches which works up a mild sweat- I picked my clothing for the next day the night before, so I grab it off of the table near my bed, and go to the locker room; my locker is #10. I put my new day clothes in my locker, undress, and take a shower- I’ll have to bring over toiletries at some point this week, or possibly next- ugh, I can’t believe the first week of July is almost over…

Anyway, after my shower, I get dressed in clothing for the day- today I’m wearing a v-neck red t-shirt, black skinny jeans, normal bra and underwear, and my favorite cherry red workboots. Finger comb my hair, ugh, and go back to my room- my sleepwear goes into a small but growing pile, along with the clothing I wore the day before- fuck, I need a hamper for this side- and then I write out a schedule for myself. It’s been… years, actually, since I last used a formal schedule- but I’ve not forgotten the security one provides.

This is what my schedule- really more of a list with categorized timeshared activities on it- is:

Main Schedule-

MORNING:

Morning Ablutions- Morning Stretches, Shower #1, dress for day

Breakfast- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM
Morning Training- Basic and Advanced conditioning, reconditioning if necessary, Kata for Unarmed/Armed, find and correct mistakes, endurance training, cool down, Shower #2

Free Time

Lunch- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM

Afternoon Studies- Prepare for classes in Sept. Prepare for Tutoring Anatomical Studies- begin work on Simraculi for dissections; study take home work, work on assignments, work on external projects. Work on Casting speed, strength. Meditation. Shower #3

Free Time

Dinner- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM

Evening- Attempt to bond with Teammates. It’s important.

Free Time

Late Evening- Night Stretches, ready clothing for tomorrow, quick clean of room, go to bed.

Alternate Schedule-

Morning Ablutions- Morning Stretches, Shower #1, dress for day

Breakfast- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM

Morning Business- Follow leads, visit with Dumpling, work on house chores

Free Time

Lunch- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM

Afternoon Business- Work on Cases, visit with the Girls, Make Rounds

Free Time

Dinner- DO NOT EAT IN ROOM

Evening- Attempt to bond with Teammates. It’s important.

Free Time

Late Evening- Night Stretches, ready clothing for tomorrow, quick clean of room, go to bed.

That is my schedule; each day, I alternate which one I follow. I will actually keep to it, for the most part, for the rest of my time with the Team. I honestly couldn’t tell you which schedule I’m following on what date, as until quite recently, I had not been beholden to a strict regiment of dates and times- but honestly, what schedule I’m following when isn’t really that important. Consider the fact that it will be interrupted by Missions, class time, the inherent problems that come with owning five palaces, and who knows what else- though that is my schedule, my routine, it is by no means rigid or… determinant of what I do in a single day.
We three finally settle the letters in various drifts and piles— a total of Five piles, each one of varying size. The largest pile is actually of Gratitudes— specialized Deeds filled with thanks to the recipient from the sender for various reasons, and often some form of gift, token, or trophy. The majority of them are from the Rocky Road Harpies, who sent their Gratitudes as well as several beautifully fletched arrows, various bowls and spices, medicines, drawings, jewelry made of shells and stones and feathers and flowers, and small lumps of gold. Oh, a crystal egg-light with it’s own little bag! That’s going directly into my pocket…

The Gratitudes are soon opened and sorted, and the various gifts carefully settled into piles— I’ve got ribbon and gems, flowers and feathers, necklaces and circlets and bangles, oh my. I’ve got stuff I don’t even know what it is- bones with drawings on them, dice without numbers, rings too big for fingers but too small for wrists- just. Stuff. And the thing about gifts from Gratitudes is that they aren’t Deed Awards— they’re Gifts, free to be re-gifted, if necessary or desired.

“Um… you guys want any of these things, you can have. Want, maybe?”

Superboy picks up a small piece of jade carved into a panting dog- Megan (urgh-argh) picks a brightly colored feather, from the tail of a Harpy, wow, and dyed bright green with golden tendrils swirled from the hollow tip to the pointed end.

I move my face like I’m going to say that they can have more if they want to- but they’ve already said “Thank you” and put their dishes in the kitchen and gone to do whatever it is they do, taking their gifts with them.

Okay… I guess. Um. Hmm. That was a little weird, to be honest.

Anyway.

I need to take a break from my copious mail opening, so I take my plate into the kitchen, and wow, Megan and Superboy left them here, ugh, I hate a dirty sink in the kitchen so- first, set up a space to wash the dishes in, lay out the drying towel- cool, we have towels in a drawer, but why are they all white, I shall have to bring some interesting ones from home- fill one sink, the far sink…

Okay, like, there are two sinks in this sink, so the near sink would be the one next to the drying off towel, and the far sink is the one filled with hot soapy water and now dishes- and when I say hot I mean “vapors rising from the depths” hot. I sing the dishwashing song, which involves quite a bit of vibrato, and then the dishes are washed, and I’ve dried them off, and put them back where they came from.

Aw yeah. Dishwashing champion.

And I am now ready to face my least favorite part of mail reading- the Moments, and the Legalities.

Okay, so. When Kowloon became the Chaos nexus for Asia, several things happened at once— there was, of course, a cultural revolution, in that there was now no reason to obey the Mandates of Heaven or Hell. For a period of about sixty years, there was total anarchy in the streets- random shootings, madwomen, giant pigs eating filth and garbage and dead bodies, packs of dogs that ran wild in the streets- and then, the oddest things happened.

Things… got better. Order reasserted itself. Who was to blame?

The Beggar’s Sect. That’s who.
The Beggar’s Sect has a membership of mostly beggars as its name suggests, but some of them are from other walks of life. They are noticeable in public for their dress code and behavior- in that, they tend to dress neatly if ambiguously and they are polite until insulted. The members adhere to a strict code of conduct and maintain the utmost respect for ranks- new members are respectful of the old and so on. They uphold justice and help those in need through acts of chivalry, courage, and charity. The Beggars' Sect is also one of the supporting pillars in the defense of ancient Han Kiaom society from foreign invaders. The sect has a wide network of communications and the members are reputed for their excellent information-gathering skills. This is due to the sect's large size and the nature of its members, which allows them to blend into different parts of society easily.

The sect was founded in the Han Dynasty and has lasted the centuries. It is mentioned in wuxia novels such as Demi-Godssss and Semi-Devils (Song Dynasty) and The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber (Yuan Dynasty).

The Beggars' Sect was one of the largest and most highly recognized martial arts sects in the wulin (martial artists' community) until the Yuan Dynasty. Its fame and popularity began to decline in the Yuan Dynasty due to ill-discipline among its members and incompetent leadership. During the Ming Dynasty, the sect experienced it’s lowest public approval rating ever, but resurged to near it’s former popularity in the Qing Dynasty.

The sect is divided into various sections, including the "dirty clothing" section and the "clean clothing" section. The former is dominated by beggars while the latter is made up of non-beggars- I am in the clean clothing section. It has many fenduo (branches) spread throughout the land and each of them is headed by a duozhu (branch master).

Each member carries at least one pouch-like "bag" and the number of bags they carry indicates their rank in the sect. The highest rank a member can attain is that of an elder, which is second only to the chief. Elders carry nine "bags" each. I am a mere child in my fenduo, so I only carry two bags- given to my by my ranking officer in the sect, Sinta. I use them like pockets.

Chiefs carry ten bags each, and during the meeting of Chiefs, two extra bags are produced. I have no idea what they are for- but it is said that there is a prophecy about a tiger and a dragon... Or it might have been a phoenix and a dragon, I’m not sure, I’ve never read or heard the actual prophecy.

The sect is headed by the Chief, who holds the highest authority in the sect. Each chief is selected from a pool of nominees based on their prowess in martial arts, contributions to the sect, personal conduct, and popularity. The Chief carries the revered Dog Beating Staff as a symbol of leadership. The sect has some weird practices and customs, such as the one that allows all members to spit once on a newly elected Chief as a mark of respect, and the one that encourages it’s younger members to attend excessive revels.

The Four Great Elders serve as the Chief's deputies and reserve the right to strip the Chief off his post if he fails in his duties. Besides the Four Greats, there are also elders with designated duties, such as the Elder of Discipline, who enforces law and order in the sect- I actually know him, he’s Mr. Walnut of the Fabric Merchants. Now that I think about it, he always does have nine pouches with him... The Elder of Training oversees the martial arts training of members- that, I think was Tramm, who I defeated in the underwater kingdom in the Philippines... Except no, it couldn’t have been- Tramm only had three bags... Pretty Cheng always has Nine pouches on her person. I wonder why... and, of final note, The Elder of Gossip oversees the information gathering- usually female, and I think the English word for it is... Spymaster? Anyway. In Kowloon, there’s really only one person that could be.
It’s Dumpling Cheng.

The sect holds monthly meetings to discuss their plans in the jianghu in a different location each time. I’ve only been invited to one of those things- I promptly got kicked out for starting a fight. Well, I had to! They were insulting Sinta!

Anyway.

The Moments are… like society pages, except it’s in my best interest to keep up with what the “aristocrazies” are up to, just in case I can swing a job from that quarter. But the doings of the ‘Risto’s are, one, crazy, and two, really boring.

The Legalities are a different matter- they are, basically, the rules that govern the city, and new ones are posted at the end of the First week of every month. They are not only really boring, they almost always tend to make me mad. Why, then, do I keep up with them? Well- Legalities are basically lists of things that are and are not permitted- everything from what kinds of drugs can be done on the street (opium and hashish are always illegal- wine flipflops) to the lengths of school uniform skirts (must be knee length or lower, is usually a warning of the dire consequences of disobeying) to which things can no longer be sold (almost always weapons, almost always ignored). Sometimes they’re just warnings, or blacklists- once, someone snuck in a love letter to Kwan Yin.

This week, we’ve only got one less than five new… tax exemption for sellers of durian fruit, ban on recurve blades, ban on miniature crossbows and “oneshots”, the Whore knowne as Sinta is charged with High Crimes…

Wait.

What?

“The Hulijing knowne as Sinta of Nirvana is hereby charged with the High Crime of Murder in the First, against Thor Odinson, the Mage of Walls, Odin Nagson, The Dwarves of Klipmtz, and the Queen of Beasts. Her Trial is set for High Noon on the Last day of August, for reasons of Expedition. No legal consul has been set at this time, for the party of Sinta of Nirvana. The Desceased are Represented by Dewey, Cheetum, and Hau.”

Mother of Mayhem and Mercy! “Fuck!”

Okay. I am not a lawer. I didn’t go to law school… but Jinx was… Hang on, I need my phone.

I slap the Legality down onto the table, shove back, and run to my room- down this hallway, turn here, down these stairs, one door, two doors, three doors, another hallway- and there it is, in it’s pocket of my bag, which is on my Second Desk- first desk by the bed, second by the first, and down the line until the one after the third, fifth being in the center of the room.

Okay, I have my bag, and I’m obviously keeping to the AltSchedule today, so- I take my bag back with me, along with some of my pinkest diamonds. Ugh. Diamonds.

Back at the table, all the Gratitude Gifts go into pocket nine, along with their notes, and the Moments. Nothing really happened that I can make use of there, so they get gator clipped together
and plopped into the ninth pocket as well.

I pull out my new computer- it’s like a smaller, more streamlined version of the thing in my Overshop… Ugh, I knew eggs wouldn’t be enough, but I really don’t have time to cook… Fruit and Veggies it is, then.

Hmm… Oh! Apples! Yay! Hmm… Oh, cool, we have a mandolin, and cucumbers! Yummy! And… hmm, radishes, and carrots, and celery, mmm, grapes and cherries and strawberries blueberries blackberries raspberries, oh! Jasmine Tea! I haven’t had this in ages…

So, I made myself a snack of fresh fruit and vegetables, a big pot of tea, and then I settled down at the table and started working at my computer. Doing work.

Uuuuuuuugh.

My new computer is different from my old one- firstly, it’s several smaller objects, not one great big one.

The central processing core is a spinning top, with a long tip and delicately traced filigree like blossoming X flowers, with a hollow space in the center- I place it, carefully, in the forward center of my workspace. It balances, and then begins to spin, quite gently. I pull out a quintet of statuettes, each one a small mythical being of some special significance to me, specifically- a Mermaid made of twelve color jade, perfectly picked and carved to reveal her features exactly, but also give her a mouth and hands smeared with blood; a Harpy of wood inlaid with ivory, feathers picked out in sharp detail, narrow face proudful, joyous, and rageful, talons big and sharp; an Alicorn of marble, painted with silver and gold, inset with gemstones tiny but sparkling in the light, like chips of fire; a Long of bronze, long legged, short chested, horns curved but sweetly so, mane ragged but gleaming; and an X blossom and plant, coiled into a disk- the blossoms pudgy petals bleed their bright ruby toned X, the greenness of the leaves almost deafening- Lacquer.

I place more than three of the statuettes at perpendiculars to the top- Alicorn and Mermaid to the left, Long and Harpy to the right. The X disk goes in front of me. The top begins to spin faster.

Wait. Did I ward my space first? Oh godsss dammit, fuck!

I take everything down, and put it back in it’s cedar wood case lined with velvety plush.

Okay.

Let’s see now- I have that really nice pelt, it was treated for artistic use… it’s.

Oh.

It’s a Maltese Tiger pelt.

The term Maltese comes from domestic cat terminology for blue fur, and refers to the slate grey coloration. Many cats with such colouration are present in Malta, which may have given rise to the use of the adjective in this context; however the tigers have nothing to do with the island.
The Maltese tiger was described as having a bluish-grey base colour which changed to deep blue on the undersides and stripes similar to those of a normal orange tiger.

It has long been believed that it is honorable to be killed by a Maltese Tiger. Local tribes would sacrifice themselves to these tigers because they believe they would be reincarnated as one. Richard Perry, in his book "The World Of The Tiger" reiterated that Kiao's blue tigers were called blue devils because they were so often man eaters.

Most of the Maltese tigers reported have been of the South Kiaom subspecies. The South Kiaom tiger today is critically endangered, and the "blue" alleles may be wholly extinct. However, "blue" tigers have also been reported from Korea, home of Amur tigers.

There had been sporadic sightings of blue tigers in the Fujian Province of Kiao since the early 1900s.

In 1910, while in south-eastern Kiao American Methodist missionary and renowned tiger hunter Harry R. Caldwell described a tiger coloured deep shades of blue and grey-blue. Caldwell, an experienced hunter and reliable eye-witness, wrote: "I glanced at the object, which appeared to be a man dressed in the conventional light blue garment and crouching, I simply whispered to the cook 'Man,' and again turned my attention to watching the goat. Again the cook tugged my elbow, saying 'Tiger, surely a tiger,' and I once more looked. Now focussing on what I had altogether overlooked in my previous hurried glances, I saw the huge head of the tiger above the blue which had appeared to me to be the clothes of a man. What I had been looking at was the chest and belly of the beast." Caldwell attempted to shoot the tiger, but noticed two boys collecting plants nearby so he moved to a safer location from the shot. Unfortunately, the tiger disappeared. He wrote about the blue tiger in his book "Blue Tiger" in 1925 and noted that other sightings had been reported in the region.

On several occasions John noted seeing maltese colored hairs along the mountain trails they were searching, but he did not catch sight of a live blue tiger. Another account of the same hunt is contained in "A Narrative Of Exploration, Adventure, And Sport In Little-Known Kiao" written by his hunting companion, Roy Chapman Andrews (Associate Curator Of Mammals In The American Museum Of Natural History And Leader Of The Museum's Asiatic Zoological Expedition Of 1916-1917) and Yvette Borup Andrews (Photographer Of The Asiatic Zoological Expedition) published in 1918.

Another report, given to Mystery Cats of the World author Dr Karl Shuker, comes from the son of a US Army soldier who served in Korea during the Korean War. His father sighted a blue tiger in the mountains near what is now the Demilitarized Zone. Blue tigers have also been reported from Burma.

More recently, there have been occasional reports of blue tigers in a mountainous region on the border between North and South Korea. Because North Korea does not welcome outsiders, it is not currently possible to investigate sightings. There are no blue tigers in captivity today - if there were, the recessive gene would make it easy to fix the trait. If a smokey blue tiger was born in the Woodland Park Zoo, this would be the only captive blue tiger.

Slate-coloured tigers may represent a montane population of tigers where the colour has become fixed in a small, isolated and inbred population. Caldwell's hunting expedition indicates that blue tigers, if they are a separate race, prefer inaccessible regions where they are less likely to be encountered by humans.

Is it possible that blue tigers are due to a manifestation of the chinchilla gene known as "shaded silver". The Amur tiger is found in north eastern Kiao and northern North Korea and Siberia and has
produced white tigers. The South Kiao tiger whose range covers Fujian province (near Taiwan) has not produced white tigers though the historic ranges of the Amur and South Kiao tigers may have overlapped resulting in inter-breeding. The South Kiao tiger is supposedly the "stem species", from which all other tigers evolved so it is just about possible that the chinchilla mutation occurred in the South Kiao tiger where it causes the bluish shaded colour morph and has been inherited by its descendent species where it has combined with other genes to produce white tigers.

A smokey blue hypermelanic tiger cub was born in the Oklahoma Zoo in 1964 to ordinary Bengal tiger parents. It died in infancy and is preserved as a wet specimen. There are no blue tigers in zoos or private collections, and no known blue tiger pelts.

The black tiger was also long considered mythical, but several pelts have proven that pseudo-melanistic or hypermelanic tigers do exist. They are not wholly black, but have dense, wide stripes that partially obscure the orange background colour. The hypermelanic tiger cub born in captivity at Oklahoma City Zoo had a smokey hue between some of the stripes.)

For a pelt this small though… and then I smell, feel- it. Starvation. Disease. Genetic… weakness. It was mercy, not fear or cruelty that killed this little one- I, personally, can think of no higher honor than to ask it’s help in guarding what is mine. Still… there must be something I can- wait!

Okay, in my bag I have a mortar, pestle, paper money I was going to use for… anyway, paper money, and my inkstone, and inkstick, and brushes. I eat some cucumbers, and some of the cherries, and then I burn the paper money into fine black ash with Firey, which gently sifts into the inkstone; I get up, wash my hands, and come back with a cup of water- I carefully combine the water and the fine black ash money, and then I grind a thick black ink.

I flip the pelt so it’s skin side up, and I Write upon it the Star of Fives- a symbol that shows the relationship between the five elements- and then I let it dry. While it dries, I pull out two large… conch shells? Computer parts, okay- and what appears to be a keyboard crossed with an abacus beaded with animal teeth and an ouja board with a floater that has a pair of clicky buttons and a till from the roaring twenties, it’s writing a filigreed prayer for lucre, with altar bells for chimes and a lever that makes them ring. That’s… kind of weird, but it’s red, black and white, so… and there’s a little drawer on the side too, but it’s kind of rounded at the end, and another that’s thin, like for paper.

And now the Writing is dry- I reset the top and statuettes, and the flower disk fits perfectly into the drawer. The conch shells are settled into place, and WOAH! I have a dribbly candle. Sweeeeeet.

And what should my hand come upon but an opal butte crystal with Contra luz color plays- all of it’s faces are faceted, and the matrix inclusions are improbably amazing- to look into it is to see a pond both at midnight and midday, whirling stars and gently blue green water swirling with fish and river creatures unknown and unnamed, and finally the smooth dry skull of an alligator gar.

The gem goes into the gar’s mouth, and the candle on it’s head- and with a pinch at the tip, Firey lights the candle, and then- The top whirls, and then with a susurrus hum, the entire setup flutters into… a Gleam-accessor. Not an accessory object- an accessor. Holy shit.

And it's portable.

Holy fucking shit.

It’s taken me about an hour to set up my computer completely for the first time- I’ll get faster as I go along. Now that it is set up, time to do some digging.
I insert the Legality concerning Sinta, and in front of me, a whirling mass of bright pinpricked dots and diffused colors like dust in unseen wind coalesces- my viewing point.

I let it work out what exactly it considers to be pertinent to the search; I pull out my phone, and lo and behold, there is a cord meant to attach to both objects, like an umbilical cord. And then I call Jinx.

“Hey Jinx.”

“Red X, hey! What’s up?”

“Have you gotten this month’s Legalities?”

“Um… lem’me check… yes!”

“Read them for me please, now, if it’s not an imposition.”

“All right- le’see, only four this week… tax exemption for sellers of durian fruit, weird. Ban on recurve blades, no one cares. Ban on miniature crossbows and “oneshots”, that’s a crackdown from the Tongs if I ever read one… the Whore knowne as Sinta of Nirvana is charged with High Crimes… Wait wait wait- Sinta? *Our* Sinta?”

“…You know her?”

“Yeah she- um. She… helped me out with a delicate problem, y’know.”

“Oh, you mean she helped you figure out how to have sex with Raven without freaking her out?”

I hear a small squeak, and muffled cursing. “…How in de’fuck do you keep finding these things out?”

“Some things, I just know, or Know, as the case may be.”

“Fine- but yeah, Sinta help’d me out, so… what can I do? To help her?”

“Read it all the way through, then tell me- and truthfully…”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you really leave Gemworld, Jinx?”

She is silent for quite some time.

My computer rings one of it’s smaller bells- ah, the first search is finished.

{"The Hulijing knowne as Sinta of Nirvana is hereby charged with the High Crime of Murder in the First, against Thor Odinson, the Mage of Walls, Odin Nagson, The Dwarves of Klipmtz, and the Queen of Beasts. Her Trial is set for High Noon on the Last day of August, for reasons of Expidition. No legal consul has been set at this time, for the party of Sinta of Nirvana. The Desceased are Represented by Dewey, Cheetum, and Hau.”}

= Commonality found in Desceased- all are members of the Nine Realms gang, mainly of Asgard
branch. Query Further in Yggdrasil register? < y/n > =

= < y [enter] > =

= Searching… =

Jinx, on the other end of the phone line, gasps. Muffled words, prayers possibly, muffled sobs.

“Jinx. It’s okay- just tell me. I can listen just fine.”

She sighs. Her voice is rough, like carpet that’s had wet paint spilled into it and then dried- and then she speaks, and this is what she says.

“When we first met, ‘bout a year ago, I… I lied to you. I didn’ leave Gemworld because I couldn’ control m’powers, I left because… ’cause I didn’t want to be a figurehead.”

I wait, quietly- sip of warm tea, fragrant floral and bitter to the taste- I’ve steeped it too long, damn.
The soft crunch of a strawberry in my mouth.

And then.

And then Jinx tells me the Truth.

“In Gemworld, there are… factions, I suppose, that operate like, like mafia families, and the one… The one I belong to is. Is called the Boar Tribe. The-”

“The Boars of the Western Mountains.”

“…yes…”

I sigh.

“Tell me everything, Jinx.”

“Alright. In ancient times, th’Land of Gemworld was covered in Forest- a forest of glintering and Gleam, light crashin’ through the leaves of winnow fine iron- and the ruling house wasn’t Amythest, but Diamond.” She sighs again then continues. “My full name is Jinx Diamante, daughter of Hex Diamante and Infraction Kies, descendant of Silvertongue the Boar and the Horned Queen.

Silvertongue the Boar was the first ruler of Gemworld, and he became so after he bore four children to different sires.

There is a wall, at the edge of the Land, that was built to keep Giants out of Gemworld in an age long past- and this wall was built by a wizard, with the aid of a mystical stallion. However, the price the wizard required for his services was, was unpayable- so, Silvertongue, who was gifted in the arts of shapeshifting, he. He… he lured the stallion away, because it was the stallion that was doing the work- but, no, that can’t be, because… because he would have been. He would have been six years old at the time- but he lured the stallion away in the form of a mare, and bore the stallion a foal- and in that time of luring, the stallion was unable to work on the wall, and so the wizard wasn’t paid.”

“The Mage of Walls, I presume?”
“Yeah- that’s. That’s what we call the foal- it. Um. It grew, and became a great warrior, and for it’s dam fought valiantly and well, and so Silvertongue began to consolidate his power against the Thunderer and the Allfather.”

“Why?”

“Well, in those days, the mountains were held by the Dwarves, led by Klipmtz, the Iron King. The Dwarves made, and still make, the finest weapons in Gemworld, and it was decided that Silvertongue, Thunderer, and their father, Allfather, were in need of Weapons, so, so they decided to… to get the dwarves to make them weapons. But- they didn’t have money for the weapons, and dwarves have to be paid for their services, but- and Silvertongue was so called because he could say anything and make it sound true, and he- he convinced the Dwarves that his… his head was a fair bargain for the Weapons, and then- and then he convinced them that his head couldn’t be removed, so they would have to take something else so, so, Thunderer- but, no, no, he couldn’t have been more than ten, so how- no, no, the, the horse was First, but, but that would mean- no, but, Thunderer held Silvertongue down, and Klipmtz, King Himself, took a needle made of the wingbone of a humming bird and thread of starlight, and he…”

Silence. I sip my tea, eat some celery; crunch munch swallow. Wait. And then, she continues, like the first words opened a hole in a puss-filled wound, and now it’s all splurting out of her, faster than she knows.

“Thunderer held Silvertongue down, and the Iron King sewed his lips shut, and he could not speak again for four years. In that time, he bore his three other children, because to legitimize his… his powerbase, he married the strongest of the warlords, the Queen of Beasts, and bore her three children- The Serpent, The Wolf, and The Queen of the Dead.

Time passed, and Silvertongue the Boar ruled his kingdom with a fist of velvety iron- his son, the Mage of Walls, brought peace and order to the lands, and his son Wolf watched over the forests, and his son Serpent watched over the waters, and The Queen of the Dead- how, how can this be- the Queen of the Dead took her mother’s place on the Throne, and her mother’s place in the Marriage bed, and bore her father’s children.”

I don’t say anything- but, I have an idea. A suspicion. There is something I Know.

“Jinx,” and my voice is quiet, and soothing, and ever so gentle “Where did Storm-wolves come from?”

“H-how- how do you know that name?”

“Answer the question, please.”

“Storm-wolves- Jabberwocks, are… are the product of the union of Wolf and a druidess, from the forest of Bones. She wore a helm made from the pate of a dragon, and was said to be both beautiful and foul, and… and it is said, that they came upon each other in the spring, and in the forest became man and wife- and in that forest, the druidess was the Horned Queen, for her helm bore the horned crest of the dragon long slain.

And, the Horned Queen bore Wolf ten children, five with all the best qualities of dam and sire, and five with all the worst. And the five with the worst qualities attacked and mortally wounded their parents- the Horned Queen fought them off as best she could, and Wolf took the remaining five children and set them on a boat, and pushed it into a river and out to sea- and then, succumbed to his
wounds, and died.

His wife felt it, the instant he died, and so let the five Jabberwocks slay her.

The Jabberwocks then claimed the forest of Bones, now the Dark Forest of Bones, as their own, and grew, and mated with each other, and with any unsuspecting creature they could find- and… and some of those creatures were other Druids, and that is why I count myself descendant of the Horned Queen- all those descended from the Jabberwocks… rapacity are, hah, “gifted” with the color of the Jabberwock’s flame- green, on their skin, so they are ever marked with where they have come from.”

“So… you are a product of two ancient lines, which have fallen on hard days, the idea being that you could somehow gain power in the court, and then, at an apropos moment of someone’s choosing, retake the throne so long lost to both your houses-”

“Thus plunging the Land into fifty years of darkness and despair. Yes.”

“Well. I’m glad you explained that to Sinta.”

“…Oh fuck. I-”

“Your role in Amethyst I’s court was Orator, right? Mostly Prosecution?”

“Yeah, Yeah!- I can Defend jus’ fine too, given proper backup.”

“So- I’ve gotten most of the Commons, what else would you need?”

“Ah, Sightings, and some lucre for bribes, and a suit.”

“I’ll send the Commons and the Sightings and the lucre in a few moments- you’ll have to come over so I can measure you for the suit.”

“…Thanks, X.”

“No problem.”

“Okay- I’m going to get ready, and um… talk to Raven. Um.”

“Alright. I’ll send the stuff over when I’m ready, and we’ll set a date for your fitting later. Talk to you soon!”

“Okay, Bye!”

= Secondary Commonality found- each Prosecutore is listed as being involved in some way with Loki Silvertongue. =

I take the diamonds, and pile them just in front of my keyboard. They glitter in the light, softly pink, like watered strawberry juice.

+ Compile: Primary, Secondary Commonalities +===> [ Insert to P!AdamantineDrive; Consolidate ] [ y [enter] ]

The viewpoint whirls, and then light like a river of speckled gold whirls into the diamonds; the diamonds vaporize, and golden light mingles with soft pink mist, and then it squeezes into an orb and then with a thumping rattle, a rounded ball of facets clatters down. It’s pink, with hints of gold within- and I know for a fact that Jinx will be able to access it with her Drums.
Now, for the matter of lucre… Oh shit, I have Bills! Wait, I have an actual Gleam accessor, I can just pay on-facet… Okay, let’s see… Oh, I need to settle some tabs, not so bad, I can use the gold I got from the Rocky Road Harpies…

I pay my bills, which takes about a quarter of my gold, and then I divide the remainder in half and set one half next to the round pink diamond. I put the rest back into my money pouch, which goes back into my bag- and then, with a careful click, I open the Send/Recive function on my phone, and Send Jinx the information and the lucre.

The Jobs are simple information gathering, nothing special- I work for Gui, generally and I’ve started labeling certain kinds of customers with different names… this month, I’ve got job requests, Queries, from two different Yuan Gui, one asking that I find a lost picture, the other asking that I make sure their car is taken care of, hmmm, a Query from a Gui Po about some weird new music by a musician that calls themselves “Shriek”, hhmnnnnnn, and a Query from Hell, asking that I find the ones called the Inkborn, and bring them in for questioning. Okay, these shouldn’t be so bad.

And my butt hurts, ugh, and I’ve eaten all the food- it’s noon, and time for lunch, anyway.

I eat, and then I go into my room, and then I’m in my apartment, and then I’m downstairs and out the door- making my Rounds. The Ba Jiao Gui on Ho’oh lane hasn’t seen the Inkborn, but does inform me that they’re a duo of sisters, wanted for questioning in the theft and murder of a senior official of Hell’s Cat. Hmm. As payment, I pick, peel, and mash for her toddler, some of the banana’s on her tree and prune it for her- poor woman got her hands cut off before she died, and this is helpful to her.

Then I go to the scribe’s shop, and get the early-student special- I need notebooks, and binders, and regulation writing utensils… oh, hey! A miniature notebook, free gift with purchase “Thank you so much!” and that’s another half of my gold gone, and that’s the picture that the Yuan Gui wanted- why it was folded and wedged between two bricks, I’ll never know- it goes into my bag, along with my school supplies.

Oh, hey- time to go practice with the Girls, and… I should probably do something I’ve been putting off.

Urgh.

I get to Raven’s house about mid-afternoon, and- fuck, I’m late, or possibly they decided to start without me, and… I knew it. I Knew it.

I walk up the stairs to Raven’s porch, and just… listen. The slow steady throb of a heart sings in perfect tune to the plinkety twang of strings plucked in perfect synchronization, weaving between them a slow moaning cry of joy. I walk in on cat’s feet, set my bag on a hook by the door, that’s new, and settle myself in the half shadow behind the couch- and I listen to my two favorite girls make beautiful music together.

The song ends, and there, floating in the half light, is a woman made of music- I hold out my hand, and she alights on it, delicate as soap bubble on a bright summer’s day. She flickers, and then I am holding a Card. I sign it, and read her name- Song. Ah.

“You guys have outgrown me.”

They look up, and I see- yeah. “I go to school on September First- so, I knew this was coming, but…
I’m glad. You guys… you don’t need me to be successful.”

“Terry, I’m sorry we didn’t tell you earlier, about how We’re…”

“About how you’re really more of a duo, not a trio? It’s okay. It happens.”

“So, uhm, wha’ happens now? I mean- are we still-”

“Well. I still think of you two as my favorite people in the world- that probably won’t change. So… yeah. We’re good. And honestly- I think the two of you will be better without me.”

The girls smile at me, relief like starlight on their faces- and I smile back because, well, even though I’m good at singing, and even though we made great music together- I am not comfortable on a stage, performing.

And that’s okay, I think.

(I wonder why it’s so hard for me to-)

I have cousins. They’re distant relations, the descendants of my Waipo’s sister- but where I am the only child born to the line of the “one who left”, my Waipo’s sister stayed. She got married, and had twelve children, six boys and six girls, all of whom lived to become men and women, and all of whom had children of their own- and it is these children, and their children, that make up the superheroic community of Canada, parts of Russia, and in my generation, Eastern Asia. And they… don’t talk to me.

And I don’t talk to them.

And that’s- I don’t know if it’s okay or not. But that’s what is.

I find the Yuan Gui who wanted their picture returned- it’s a simple thing really, I’ve seen it quite a few times; the story is a sad, but obvious one, and I don’t like it.

The story goes that there was a married couple, and for whatever reason, the husband hated the wife- or perhaps the wife hated the husband, and not the kind of hate that kills people quickly, like a knife through the side in a bar fight, but the slow kind, the kind that kills from the inside out.

Well, eventually the hate rotted them both so much that they could no longer tell who was who, or what they looked like- because husband and wife are buried together, and neither can go On without the other- and if left unchecked, their names will be lost as well, leading the Gui to dissipate into the ether like an ice cube on the burning hot concrete.

I give the wretched melt-wax and rotting creature the picture, and suddenly there stands before me a woman and a man- still in their marriage day clothing, his suit stained with white fluid, splattered from a rip in his side, drip dripping down; she with her throat a fluttering rent in her neck.

They bow to me in gratitude, and I bow back- and then they vanish, with a soft gasping sound, like an insult heard and offended with. And then, they are gone, sparkling dust in the wind that then fades, blown away.
In my hands are five parcels of spirit-money, two lumps of gold, and a comb lacquered with peonies and red swirls.

On the way home, I stop by the Lands office, and retrieve the Keys to my new Palaces- the day is almost done, so… I go back to my apartment, gather up the necessary toiletries that I forgot last time- my makeup, my shampoo and conditioner, my combs and brushes, and a pair of sandals for the shower, and some deodorant for under my arms, and some of my jewelry- while I’m home, I paint copies of my mother and father’s picture, and carefully take the playbill from it’s spot- it’s the only thing I have left of Nainai, and… I don’t want to leave her here. I put two of the five stacks of money in it’s place, for my parents, and then I go back to my room in the cave.

I choose a shelf, near my eye level, and gently set my father and my mother down there, along with Nainai, and the rest of the spirit money. I’ll have to get plates and bowls for them here, and a cloth for underneath of some kind…

Oh! That smell is wonderful!

Dinner is very good, but I don’t actually know what I’m eating, and I’m too embarrassed to ask- well, anyway, dinner is very… quiet. The food is good, but none of us know each other well enough to talk to each other yet. As the meal goes on, I can actually feel myself becoming more tense and uncomfortable- meals are times for sharing and conversations and I’m going to have to start this off, oh godss- “Uhm. What you do today?”

Megan’s voice is like… like bathwater that someone else has bathed in recently, recently enough for it to still be comfortable to bathe in, but someone else used it and it’s like soapy scum on the bottom of the soap dish, still good to wash something with but kind of gross looking, and like the static shock right when you touch a wool blanket for the first time and then your fingers sink into the wool and it’s soft and warm and wonderful- but it takes a moment to forget the painful shock.

“Oh, well, today I unpacked some of my things, and I watched a little tv… I read some cookbooks too, I want to try some of the recepies!”

“Oh… what is recepies?”

“Recepies are instructions to make food by.” Superboy’s voice is gruff.

“Oh! What kind of recepies you want to try make, Megan?”

“I’m thinking of making cookies, they looked really tasty, and possibly a cake too…”

“…Um. Since I no help with dinner, I can maybe help with cookies?”

“Oh! Um. Well- I would love the help for the first few batches, but I’d like to do some on my own too-”

“Yes, sure! I help first few times, then you make on own- Yes, good.”

Oh godss that was awful. And I’m blushing, dammit, ugh, why am I blushing, arrrrgh.
“Superboy, what you do today?”

“… I watched No Signal, and I went outside for a while, and I ate a pear.”

“Was pear good?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tomorrow, maybe eat another pear, so can compare.” I giggle. Homophones, man. They’re the 

best.

And Megan and Superboy are staring at me, oh gods why. I flush harder, red staining my cheeks and parts of my shoulders and arms.

Ugh. Being shy is just fantastic, really.

Shyness (also called diffidence) is the feeling of apprehension, lack of comfort, or awkwardness experienced when a person is in proximity to, approaching, or being approached by other people, especially in new situations or with unfamiliar people. Shyness may come from genetic traits, the environment in which a person is raised and personal experiences. There are many degrees of shyness. Stronger forms are usually referred to as social anxiety or social phobia. Shyness may merely be a personality trait or can occur at certain stages of development in children. The primary defining characteristic of shyness is a largely ego-driven fear of what other people will think of a person's behavior, which results in the person becoming scared of doing or saying what he or she wants to, out of fear of negative reactions, criticism, or rejection, and simply opting to avoid social situations instead.

Shyness is most likely to occur during unfamiliar situations, though in severe cases it may hinder an individual in his or her most familiar situations and relationships as well. Shy people avoid the objects of their apprehension in order to keep from feeling uncomfortable and inept; thus, the situations remain unfamiliar and the shyness perpetuates itself. Shyness may fade with time; e.g., a child who is shy towards strangers may eventually lose this trait when older and become more socially adept. This often occurs by adolescence or young adulthood (generally around the age of 13). In some cases, though, it may become an integrated, lifelong character trait. Longitudinal data suggests that the three different personality types evident in infancy, easy, slow-to-warm-up, and difficult, tend to change as children mature. Extreme traits become less pronounced, and personalities evolve in predictable patterns over time. What has been proven to remain constant is the tendency to internalize or externalize problems. This relates to individuals with shy personalities because they tend to internalize their problems, or dwell on their problems internally instead of expressing their concerns, which leads to disorders like depression and anxiety. Humans experience shyness to different degrees and in different areas. In addition, shyness may manifest when one is in the company of certain people and completely disappear when with others— one may be outgoing with friends and family, but experience love-shyness toward potential partners, even if strangers are generally not an obstacle.

Shyness can also be seen as an academic determinant. It has been determined that there is a negative relationship between shyness and classroom performance. As the shyness of an individual increased, classroom performance was known to decrease, and vice versa.

The condition of true shyness may simply involve the discomfort of difficulty in knowing what to say in social situations, or may include crippling physical manifestations of uneasiness. Shyness usually involves a combination of both symptoms, and may be quite devastating for the sufferer, in many cases leading them to feel that they are boring, or exhibit bizarre behavior in an attempt to
create interest, alienating them further. Behavioral traits in social situations such as smiling, easily producing suitable conversational topics, assuming a relaxed posture and making good eye contact, may not be second nature for a shy person. Such people might only affect such traits by great difficulty, or they may even be impossible to display.

Those who are shy are actually perceived more negatively, in cultures that value sociability, because of the way they act towards others. Shy individuals are often distant during conversations, which may cause others to create poor impressions of them. People who are not shy may be too up-front, aggressive, or critical towards shy people in an attempt "to get them out of their shell." This may actually make a shy person feel worse, as it can draw attention to them (making them more self-conscious and uncomfortable) or cause them to think there is something very wrong with themselves.

Being shy can have its advantages as well, according to Thomas Benton in his article "Shyness and Academe", published in May 2004. The author says that because shy people "have a tendency toward self-criticism, they are often high achievers, and not just in solitary activities like research and writing. Perhaps even more than the drive toward independent achievement, shy people long to make connections to others often through altruistic behavior. Susan Cain, in her article "Shyness: Evolutionary Tactic?", describes the benefits that shy people bring to society that western views devalue. Without characteristics that shy people bring to social interactions, such as sensitivity to the emotions of others, contemplation of ideas, and valuable listening skills, there would be no balance to society. In earlier generations, such as the 1950s, society perceived shyness as a more socially attractive trait, especially in women. This indicates that views on shyness vary with the culture. Sociologist Susie Scott, in her book Shyness and Society (2007), is one expert who has sought to challenge the pathological interpretation and treatment of shyness. "By treating shyness as an individual pathology, ... we forget that this is also a socially oriented state of mind that is socially produced and managed." She explores the idea that "shyness is a form of deviance: a problem for society as much as for the individual", and concludes that, to some extent, "we are all impostors, faking our way through social life". One of her interview subjects (self-defined as shy) puts this point of view even more strongly:

"Sometimes I want to take my cue from the militant disabled lobbyists and say, 'hey, it's not MY problem, it's society's'. I want to be proud to be shy: on the whole, shys are probably more sensitive, and nicer people, than 'normals'. I shouldn't have to change: society should adapt to meet my needs."

Author and broadcaster Garrison Keillor has similarly, tongue-in-cheek but sympathetically, published a manifesto of "shy rights":

"Shyness is not a disability or disease to be 'overcome'. It is simply the way we are. And in our own quiet way, we are secretly proud of it."

Those considered shy are also said to be socially inhibited. Social inhibition is the conscious or unconscious constraint of a process or behavior that a person considers objectionable in a social setting. In other words, social inhibition is that which holds one back. There are different levels of social inhibition, from mild to severe. Being socially inhibited is good when preventing one from harming another and bad when causing one to refrain from participating in class discussions. Behavioral inhibition is a temperament or personality style that predisposes a person to become fearful, distressed and withdrawn in novel situations.

In cultures that value outspokenness and overt confidence, shyness can be perceived as weakness. To an unsympathetic observer, a shy individual may be mistaken as cold, distant, arrogant or aloof, which can be frustrating for the shy individual. However, in other cultures, shy people may be perceived as being thoughtful, intelligent, as being good listeners, and as being more likely to think before they speak. Furthermore, boldness, the opposite of shyness, may cause its own
problems, such as impertinence or inappropriate behavior.

In cultures that value autonomy, shyness is often analyzed in the context of being a social dysfunction, and is frequently contemplated as a personality disorder or mental health issue. It should be noted that such analyses are conducted from a Western cultural perspective, and often do not consider shyness as having any potential utility in a social framework, either outside or within Western culture. Some researchers are beginning to study comparisons between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, to examine the role that shyness might play in matters of social etiquette and achieving group-oriented goals. "Shyness is one of the emotions that may serve as behavioral regulators of social relationships in collectivistic cultures. For example, social shyness is evaluated more positively in a collectivistic society, but negatively evaluated in an individualistic society."

In a cross-cultural study of Kiaom and Canadian school children, researchers sought to measure several variables related to social reputation and peer relationships, including "shyness-sensitivity." Using peer nomination questionnaire, students evaluated their fellow students using positive and negative playmate nominations. "Shyness-sensitivity was significantly and negatively correlated with measures of peer acceptance in the Canadian sample. Inconsistent with Western results, it was found that items describing shyness-sensitivity were separated from items assessing isolation in the factor structure for the Kiaom sample. Shyness-sensitivity was positively associated with sociability-leadership and with peer acceptance in the Kiaom sample."

(A highly sensitive person (HSP) is a person having the innate trait of high sensory processing sensitivity (or innate sensitiveness as Carl Jung originally coined it). According to Elaine N. Aron and colleagues as well as other researchers, highly sensitive people, who comprise about a fifth of the population (equal numbers in men and women), may process sensory data much more deeply and thoroughly due to a biological difference in their nervous systems. This is a specific trait, with key consequences for how we view people, that in the past has often been confused with innate shyness, social anxiety problems, inhibitedness, social phobia and innate fearfulness, and introversion. The trait is measured using the HSP Scale, which has been demonstrated to have both internal and external validity. Although the term is primarily used to describe humans, something similar to the trait is present in over 100 other species.

The attributes of HSPs can be remembered as DOES: Depth of processing, Overly aroused (easily compared to others), Emotional reactivity and high empathy, and Sensitivity to subtle stimuli.

HSP students work differently from others. They pick up on subtleties and may think about them for a long time before demonstrating their grasp of a subject. If an HSP student is not contributing much to a discussion, it does not necessarily mean he or she does not understand or is too shy. HSPs often have insights they are afraid to reveal because they differ from the common view, or because speaking up is too over arousing for them. HSPs are often very conscientious, and gifted with great intelligence, intuition and imagination, but underperform when being evaluated. This also applies to work situations; HSPs can be great employees — good with details, thoughtful and loyal, but they do tend to work best when conditions are quiet and calm. Because HSPs perform less well when being watched, they may be overlooked for a promotion. HSPs tend to socialize less with others, often preferring to process experiences quietly by themselves. The ability to unconsciously or semi-consciously process environmental subtleties often contributes to an HSP seeming "gifted" or possessing a "sixth sense."

Social inhibition is a conscious or subconscious constraint by a person of behavior of a social nature. The constraint may be in relation to behavior, appearance, or a subject matter for discussion, besides other matters. There are a number of reasons for social inhibitions, including that the person fears that the activity, appearance or discussion will meet with social disapproval. For example, a person with a
low level of social inhibition might focus their conversation on subjects that others feel uncomfortable about or which are not commonly discussed in that particular social group; while a person with a high level of social inhibition would avoid touching on such subjects.

Inhibitions can serve necessary social functions, reducing or preventing certain antisocial impulses from being acted on.)

After dinner, we three retire to the couch, and Superboy turns on the notsv to reveal an empty abyss of darkness, filled with nothing more than the murmuring of ghosts and the words “No Signal”. I don’t like it- but it seems to give Superboy some measure of relaxation, so… I don’t think I’ll do anything to change that, yet.

We sit there for what feels like hours- and, in fact, it is. We do not talk. I’m horribly uncomfortable, but… that passes. I don’t like the ghostly murmurs coming from the notsv, but slowly slowly they resolve into… into words. Phrases- I don’t exactly understand why this “Skin-Taker” is so frightening to the people in the notsv, but I suppose I don’t have to. Pirate Percy seems to be the only sane person- AUGH that was freaky, why would they close up on the weird ship’s face like that, uuurgh, I don’t like this show.

And why is it playing calliope music in the background? It makes no sense!

Huh. The show is called “Candle Cove”, and appears to be on rerun on this channel- I’m not sure why, exactly, Superboy likes it, so- “Um. Superboy- why you like this show so much?” An advertisement for tooth wash is playing, black and white with bright red gums and gnashing teeth. There’s something weird about this whole viewing window, like it doesn’t just go one way, and the music that’s playing is strangely sticky, cloying, like perfume that smells too strongly of flowers to hide the smell of death.

“----------”

I don’t know what happened next- there was the strangest sensation of being looked at, and then I remember casting Silent- fingers to lips and then hush, and there is no sound, not even a heartbeat- and then… nothing.

Nothing at all.

Wait no- something. A piece of a song-

You have eyes to see, nevertheless you see nothing.

You have a soul to feel, nevertheless you feel nothing.

You have a mind to know, nevertheless you know nothing.

That is the way we want you to be! HOHOHOH!

Now sleep, dearest children, sleep the night away- and sometime soon, again we’ll play

“SILENT!”

When I came to, it was the morning of the tenth day of July. All three of us were on the couch- the
notsv had turned itself off. I was slumped onto the arm of the couch, and a small string of drool slipped from my lip as I lifted my head- Megan had curled up on Superboy, skin pale pale white and pink-red at the edges, patchy and pebbled like a lizard’s skin.

Ah. That’s one of the reasons why.

Her eyes open, and her skin ripples from pale white glue color to the color of American money- her freckles stay exactly the same.

She stares at me- and I stare at her. And then I say “Good morning, Megan.”

She blinks. “g-Good Morning, Terry.”

“I make breakfast today, if okay with you…”

“Oh, ah, s-sure, no problem. Um.”

I smile small-ly at her, and stand up, stretch- I can do my morning stretches on the move, so I do, steadily working out the kinks and wrenches that come from sleeping on a couch- which reminds me, I need to get more bedding from my apartment, and bring it over…

I’m washing rice for the morning’s porridge- I have to set some aside for the family, and FUCK I need to get some nicer plates for them- when Megan asks an odd question “Terry- you. You aren’t going to- to say anything, are you?”

“About what?”

“Um. About- what you saw?”

“Oh. Um, well- yes, because is very dangerous to have an open doorway like that in living place. Hmm… Will have to Lock view-window for time so cannot be attacks again, I think, and maybe get new view-window…”

Megan blinks at me, then smiles. “I think that’s a very good idea, Terry.”

Breakfast is very good that morning- I like it a lot more than eggs and fruit, and Superboy and Megan seem to enjoy it. Before I leave the room, I make sure to throw Lock on the view-window on the wall, making it stay in the off position until I lift the spell, and to gather the food for my ancestors.

And then, I go back to my room- food in it’s pretty bowl onto the altar for my family, and ack, I’ve left all of my training clothing at my apartment. No big deal- I walk through the Door to my apartment, and grab what I train in- a sports bra, a rib wrapper- as this is not my first market day, okay, I’ve hurt my ribs before- a red headscarf, a loose pair of gympants, bandages, and a pair of nearly worn out kungfu shoes- jeeze, I need to get new ones, these have about had it.

Hmm… my ribs are still a bit touchy, so… yeah, broom handle, and the flags- I’ll do fanwork and monkey skills today, the knife drills will be too much for me.
I go back to the cave, shower- hair washed with *actual shampoo and conditioner*, brushed with an *actual comb*, oh my gods yes, and I need a washcloth, holy fucking shit. Anyway, dry off, training clothing goes on- wrap my ribs so they don’t bother me too much, wrap my ankles for support, and around my feet because my shoes are going to die today, wrap my hands for fighting; I won’t be punching anyone today, I think, but it’s still a good habit to keep in; sports bra isn’t necessary with the rib wrapping, but… I like wearing them, now. Underwear, Gympants- just plain old full pants that go to my ankle, nothing fancy, faded red because I got them second hand- I should re-dye them at some point- my nearly worn out kungfu shoes on my bandaged feet, my sweatband around my forehead, my x clip pinned through the left strap of my sports bra, and I’m ready for a full day’s work.

My bladefans are always on my wrists- I’ve gotten so used to their weight, I forget I’m wearing them sometimes. Unless, you know, something with entirely too many teeth goes for my face or something, which will happen later today aw *fuck*.

The area of the cave meant for training in, specifically, is the big space I met the rest of the team in on my first day here- it’s the right size to use the flags in, and… I really want to do some flips, okay? I actually really like doing backflips. They’re fun!

Before I do that, I have to do some serious stretching first- inhale and exhale, pull the energy of the air into my body and warm everything up; bend and stretch, legs and arms and back and front, everything streeetch and bend and blood flowing through- and when my body feels loose and kind of wiggly, I know I’ve done it right.

So- my first basic kata is a simple punch and kick combo, and then I steadily add more punches, and blocks, and kicks, jumps- and then I’ve done my entire unarmed routine twice, which means it’s time to add a weapon, so one second I’m doing a simple spin-kick, the next I’m holding a pair of fans and then sweep the foot and twist- my ribs don’t hurt, but they sort of… they’re sort of stiff, which means, even though it will break the rhythm of my training, I need to stretch them some more.

Hmm. How does one stretch their ribcage without- oh! My breathing exercises!

I stop at a good stopping place, horse stance and wide defense, good for stopping spears, and stand up to my full height, snap the fans shut and they are cool bands of metal warming on my wrists once more. Now, for breathing- Inhale deeeeeeeeeeep and hoooonnnnnnold it, and breathe out slowly, gently lifting the “feather” off my lips no more than two centimeters, and again, and again, and one more time- and yes, my ribs are not stiff anymore.

There we go, nice and stretched. Oh hey, and I’m much more refreshed now- so, fan kata again, and it’s been too long to start where I left off, so, start over- and then flow, flick flutter spin, dart in then back, low spin goes to high reach, flip once, feels good, flip twice, even better, and… and then I’m not just doing my katas- I’m dancing.

It’s great fun… and then I’ve done all I can with a pair of fans and no sparring partner three times, so- onwards, to balancing with the broom handle.

Oh, my shoes broke- I pull off the tattered remains of my old kung fu shoes and put them down near my flags; the broom handle- staff, really- is about to my eyes and is made of a limber-firm wood, but not bamboo, because it isn’t hollow. I walk to the center of the room and with a twisting vault, I’m on top of the pole, balancing on the bases of my palms- perfect stillness, and then twist down and around and I’m on the ball of my left foot and kick high fall back and twist pole in hands and *smack!* on the ground, and twist low sweeping up and leap kick twist and stomp- head crushed then low snapping up and ribs breaking- whirl up again and up balancing high to look and see the field of
battle and then whirling death of stick in limbs. Pause. Breathe. Cross guard up to present arms- then bow, and this is the fifth repetition so stop.

And yeah, that’s as much as I can do with my ribs wrapped like this- maybe a few defense flips? No, too much torque, I might really hurt myself.

Which means- flags. Ugh.

My flags are really more for flexibility and stamina- kata’s train my actual skills, staff for endurance- this is for flexibility. And this is one of the few things from my childhood that actually got smaller, instead of grew. I used to be able to do a lot more- but, well… I got taller. And stronger. And… it’s kind of hard to be- to be graceful and pretty when your 200 centimeters tall and trip over yourself at least once a day. What usually ends up happening is I get tangled in the flags at least once, and have to redo the movement.

So, of course, it’s during flag training when the Huli Jing attacks me.

Fucking shit godsss damn.

It’s during the middle-beginning of my abbreviated routine when I hear music, like from a calliope inside a computer- oh fuck, really? And then I do a full back-bend, which I was trying to avoid doing and then I leap backwards because- in front of me, vibrating in time to the whirling music is a naked woman- no, a fox- with nine long black tails writhing like an injured octopus, lashing the air with barely restrained fury; her hands and mouth and eyes dripping with bright red dripping dripping blood. Her claws are big and sharp, and her toes dig small furrows into the stone of the floor- her body is that of a fox’s, stretched to fit over the frame of a woman, and the only thing, the only thing about her that is even close to human is her face- it is ovular, with bright blank white skin, like that of an unbroken chicken egg, her eyebrows small dots of black over eyes that are twin bleeding pits, blood and mucus steadily slipping out and down her face, like tears. Her hair is long and disheveled, black like her tails, and the smell of animal musk and blood and dirt is thick in the air. It looks like it would hurt to be her- her body doesn’t fit together correctly, as if she was made, not born…

And then- she lunges forward, and I dart back, my flags making a simple rounded loop around us both; her teeth are bloodstained and bright yellow-white, and her breath stinks of rotting flesh. Her clawed hand reaches for my heart and I Jump high over her, my flags twin banners behind me- long trails of rippling pink, thin in the light and gently reflected in the shines of her rank-lank black slithering hair. Her tails lash the air and then reach for me, extending tentacles of razor sharp threads with murder on their minds- my flags are twin eddies in the air, just enough slack in them for me to reach up and swipe at the X brooch- and then my flags are long white sleeves, and my outfit is a red ruqun with gold stripe over the bottom hem and collar, a golden toggle over my left breast, my body suit underneath, my favored cherry red boots on my feet, and no time to admire my new clothing-drop and roll, leap backwards.

My face feels different- moveable, if that makes sense. No time to worry though- whirling through the open space, leap the blades on the floor; Crossing Great Rivers and her hair falls in lank rank puddles on the floor, blood dripping from where I’ve cut her tails and she screams and it is the sound of a fox fighting in the darkness, shrill and high and terrifying. That’s interesting- I shouldn’t have been able to cut her like that, not if she was a real huli jing- which means she isn’t. But I Know that she is.

We fight- teeth snapping, hair crackling, and I realize that I can’t defeat her on my own. I can fight her for a long time- but if I don’t change something, I will not be able to win.

And then I see that in fifteen minutes my friends will walk in the door and be killed- I dart and then I
Dash, sliding stop five steps forwards and her face- blood and fury and the screaming of a woman trapped- and then my friends are in the Cave and I’ve cast Shadow and she freezes.

And then I can see what I only thought I saw before- her eyes are… hopeless. Not empty, exactly, and not quite dead. But close. So. There are two ways this can end, and it all hinges on how much of the old Dragonslayer’s Oath she’ll accept. (It goes “I will free you, and save you from this monster.”)

I take three and one steps forwards, and then I sit on the ground, cool against my overheated body- not a full crouch, but a sort of crouching squat, because- she copies my movements exactly.

“Why have you come?”

“I was sent.” Her voice is raspy, thick with mucus and blood- broken from too much screaming with no one to hear or care.

“To kill me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You are strong, in your red and black and gold and white; the Master seeks your death because you are strong.”

“Because I could defeat them?”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you want to kill me?”

“No.”

“If I let you go, will you try?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to kill you?”

“YES.”

“Do you want to die, for true?”

“…Yes- no. I don’t know…”

I sigh.

“Why will you try to kill me?”

“They made me what I am- if I kill you, I will be rewarded with what I was.”

“They will give you back whatever they stole, just like that- bring my head-”

“Heart, lungs, and liver, actually-”

“Viscera, then, and you’re back to what you were, easy-quick and done? No, they won’t.”
“No. They won’t.”

“Couldn’t they be fought?”

“YOU THINK I HAVEN’T TRIED? No, little mortal girl- for an age I have been trapped in a skin that is too small in a body that does not fit and for an age I have been forced to- and I am done. I. I want this to end- please, please. Just. End.”

“A creature of the forest stolen from her home and forced to be what she is not- and then, finally, killed on the riverbank when brushed with poison from a flower of her native home. Yes?”

She looks at me, black eyes so cold and near dead- and then, blooming in them brighter than stars-Hope. “Yes?”

I hum softly to myself- “And what did the forest creature do before she was caught?”

“She- she was an administrative assistant in the court of the Summer Queen.”

“…Do you know the story of Lady White Snake, and her descendant, Madame White?”

“Ye-es…”

“Do you know how they ended?”

“…Yes. That surely that wasn’t-“

“Yes. It was. I am now the executor of the Five Palaces, and I’ve never run anything larger than an apartment before. If you were willing to live on, and change once more- would you run my Summer Palace?”

“…You will not force me to be what I am not?”

“How in the name of Heaven and Hell would I manage that?”

“Then- yes. I would love to be your-”

“Administrative assistant.”

“Yes.” Her eyes are bright, now, and full of joy- and the tears that drip from her face wash the blood-snot away, sloughing off an age’s worth of fury in the space of ten breaths.

“So. This is how it will go- I will let you go, you will attack me, I will break your curse, and then we’ll work the rest out, right?”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Excellent.”

And then I drop Shadow and throw a mountain of X Flowers on her. The music stops, like the record got bumped so hard the needle jumped all the way to a broken state. And then bright green foxfire- phosphorus, but not, we aren’t in a swamp- and then she sits up from her bed of floral delights; nude, long sleek black hair, skin like fine white soap, the palms of her hands the same bright red and she yawns and her mouth is a bright red slurp across the lower half of her face that is tiny then huge and full of entirely too many pointy teeth. Her eyes open, nine black tails with white tips
gently undulating in the light- and then she flops back down onto the flowers and rolls in them, yipping with happiness.

I am happy to give her this moment of pure joy- I’m about to overcast, are you fucking kidding me. I hate being underground.

Still. It’s nice to see someone else happy after so long being angry and sad. I don’t know what prompts her to speak again, but when she does, flower petals are sticking to her skin and strewn through her hair.

"A promise always comes with flowers and chains- these are my flowers, so where are the chains?"

“Well, if you truly wish to work for me, there are two conditions that you must fulfill.”

She nearly flinches, but then says- “Ye-es?”

“Firstly, I require that you wear clothing that covers your genitals, and shoes.”

She blinks at me. “Really? You don’t- ah, you don’t require your workers to be, um, all natural?”

“Fuck no.”

“Sweetness!”

I grin. “Secondly, I require that my friends and relations be treated with the utmost courtesy and respect- meaning, no seduction, no pranks, and absolutely no stealing.”

“That’s fair.”

I stand, and so does she- and the petals on her skin transform into fine clean robes of linen, soft bright colors, the petals in her hair turn into beautiful hair pieces bundled into buns most lovely, and then she is a refined woman of servant status, standing on a bed of flowers. And then I’m tapped, so I drop Flower, and the woman is a fox with a pretty choke-chain collar on, sitting in a berm of flowers and petals smelling faintly of roses.

And then my friends Superboy and Megan walk in the door.

“Hi!”

And then two very important, but very small things happen- I overcast, and have to drop Lock, and I realize I haven’t eaten anything in five hours.

The rest of the day is very boring- I’ve never really tried to do anything after overcasting, and for good reason; once I’ve overcast I don’t have much energy for basically anything other than the basic necessities. This means that I’m barely conscious for the rest of the day, and barely have the presence of mind to unplug and disconnect the viewer which I did, actually and eat something before flopping into bed fully clothed. The Fox jumps and flops onto my chest at some point, and I fall asleep soon after.

I do not dream, or Dream.

I’m going to skip through the next few days, as the only thing of major import that happens is I give the junior key to my Summer Palace to the Fox, and send her off to Kowloon to handle my business there- I won’t have to worry about the other palaces for a while, as they’re seasonal, and... yeah.
Anyway.

On the Tenth, I get up, do the morning routine of bathing and breakfast and paying my respects to my parents, and then I’m off to Kowloon until lunchtime- I need to help the Gui with Car Problems, and find out more about the one called “Shriek”.

In fact, I will not find out much about Shriek until after we decide that Kaldur should lead the team. Ugh.

The Query I got from the Gui with the car leads me to a side-garage, filled with boxes, and a shifty looking greaser type with slicked back hair and no lower jaw. He can speak just fine, and the story he tells me is this-

“When I was about your age, I had one dream, and that was to build a vehicle from near-scratch, and paint it, and drive it around town like a total badass. I had gotten all the parts and extra bits together, and was about ready to begin, but then, well.” He gestures to his face, obviously referring to the jagged rent where his lower jaw and throat used to be- and then it flickers, and he’s not that bad looking, but kind of chinless. “So- will you help me?”

“What exactly were you trying to build?”

“A motorcar, only I think I got the wrong parts, because motorcars usually have four wheels, right? Only the frame I have only has space for two, and honestly I don’t care about riding in it, on it, anymore, I just want the damn thing built and being used so I can move the fuck on.”

“…I’ll still help, if you want, only- what were you planning on doing with it after you go on?”

“Ah, well- if it’s alright with you, you could just… keep it? Because I can’t take it with me and, um, I’m sorry, you probably don’t have a place to put it…”

“No, I do, we just have to carry the parts up to my place first.”

We spend the rest of the day shuttling box after box of neatly labeled and fucking heavy boxes up the nine hundred and ninety nine stairs and one ladder and through the Door to the Cave and drop it off in the Hangar, where all the vehicles are. In the end, there are approximately fifty boxes, some of which are rotting.

I accidentally skipped lunch, but no problem- for dinner than night I eat half a roasted chicken and five apples. And then I sort of flop onto the couch like a sack of potatoes, and I guess someone re-connected the viewer thing, because I accidentally sat on the remote thing for it and it turned on but this time to a news view of some kind? So I watch that for about an hour, and then Kaldur and Wally and Robin walk in right when someone named Selena Gonzalez is reported missing.

They seem… troubled, by what they hear. Hmm. I wonder why?

On the Fifteenth, I start the preliminary work on the motorcycle- before I even consider putting it together, I check every part. I inspect the frame for cracked welds, and find one- I have a book about welding, hang on, back to room and grab it and the book about motorcycle care and repair- yeah, this
is easy to fix, and with a little application of Firey the crack melts back into the frame. Okay, pull the spark plugs from the engine one at a time and test the cylinder compression by rotating the engine crankshaft bolt using a pocket size compression gauge and a set of sockets with a ratchet. I’ve never done this before, so I consult my motorcycle book’s section on engine evaluation. A compression check is near the top of the list, so that’s what I do first- the top of the list being “Do you have an engine?”, second being “Is it on fire?”.

I make sure the crankcase- which looks like the Words for Move and Forward and Speed and Go squished together- has no cracks or holes, and I don’t find oil deposits or burned spots around the cylinders.

About halfway through my check of everything, I realize I’ve been working on this one thing for half the day- ugh, tunnel vision, I thought I broke myself of this habit! Hmm… I need to work on my casting strength anyway, so- I cast Twin, and then I go back to work on the motorcycle, and I stand up, stretch, and go to make myself something to eat.

In the kitchen I find Megan, carefully reading a card with words on it- a recipe, I think.

“Hello Megan!”

She looks up from her recipe, and her face flickers- like, not fear, not anger, not hate- but not something happy or nice, not exactly, either. And then it’s gone, and her face is what it always seems to be, a sweet face full of nothing bad at all.

“Terry, hi!”

“What you’re making?”

“I’m making cookies, I think- do you want to help?”

“Ah, yes, please!”

And then for the next hour or so, I spend time with Megan. Something about her makes me irritated, and part of it is that she doesn’t let herself be herself- and, okay, that’s her choice, and her secret, so okay, I can deal with that. But there’s something else that bothers me about her, and I don’t know what it is, and that’s not good. The last time something bothered me about a person and I couldn’t figure out why, and then ignored it, I nearly died for real.

Um. I don’t want to have that happen again, so… so I know, I know, that I need to trust Megan, but… but I don’t want to have to- no. So, I’m going to keep a watchful eye on her, and if I see what I should have paid attention to again, I’ll… I don’t know what I’ll do, but. I’ll do something.

(I don’t really want to do Something to Megan though- I like her a lot.)

The smell of baking cookies fills the air- warm and buttery, soft and sweet and kind of lovely, in a saccharine way. I suppose it could be nice on a cold day, or for something involving pain- wow, Megan’s front is covered in cookie making stuff. Jeeze.

And in the hangar, I’ve finished checking every part, so begin to put them together- and that’s when I realize I have more parts than I actually need for a regular old crotch rocket.
I have an entire horse skeleton, what the hell. It’s not a race horse though— it’s a warhorse, possibly a carter’s horse used for knights in full armor…

Oh! This is a- this is a Ghostrider! Well, the parts of a Ghoster- okay, that makes more sense. Now that all the parts are laid out, assembly shouldn’t be too hard— except, no, I don’t have all the parts. Ugh. I’ll have to get them in a few days…

Anyway, since I can’t do this anymore right now, I’ll cover it with this sheet and do something else— I think I’ll make Megan an apron. Yeah! Pink, with ruffles, and maybe a heart?

Hmm… there is that bolt of fabric I’ve been meaning to use, it’s that weird pink checked pattern— I thought it was red, but it wasn’t and ugh. Yeah. Hmm. Welp- I’ve got enough space, so, I’ll get the fabric, and some other bits of fabric, pink with a sort of blue sway-vy pattern on it, melty pastel green and yeeeee, I shall make her a lovely apron and give it to her, and perhaps she will like it? Perhaps perhaps perhaps!

So, the apron I make for Megan is three simple panels, the middle one longer than the outer two, the bottom edge curved up so that the entire lower line is that of scalloping but huge, and then seamed and lined with soft pale green fabric, like melted sherbert.

One strap for around the neck, a loop; two straps at the waist for tying around, and two Words over the thigh, Good Effort; and I forgot I had this lovely light grey fabric, so I make a traditional apron with the frilly shoulders and everything, but- hey, I have a skull and crossed bones appliqué, sweet- and then I have to sew them together, so… I have a portable treadle sewing machine at my apartment… I get it, along with it’s little sets- tools for fixing it if it breaks and oil for the cogs and gears, extra belts for the driveshaft, and a box full of threads in every color- I empty out the sewing pockets of my purse, and yessss- I now have a perfectly wonderful sewing station, shelves full of threads and boxes of needles, all my smallest, most delicate thimbles neatly arranged and sorted and I forgot I had been meaning to learn how to knit, wow- and I can’t concentrate, better sew these up and go eat some of those cookies.

I sew Megan’s apron together, then mine, and then I fold Megan’s up and walk into the kitchen- and there I am, leaning against the counter, and there Megan is, staring at me, and then at me, and then back at me.

“Hey Megan!” “Sorry if I” “worry you but” “I was working on project for work and” “needed break so” “I make this for you!” And then I put her apron on the counter.

She stares at it for a moment, and then picks it up, and smiles- and it’s a real smile, this time.

“Thank you Terry, for the apron. Next time I cook something, I’ll wear it with pride!”

I drop Twin. “Good!” and I’m still leaning against the counter, but my hands are an unholy mess of cookie stuff and there is engine grease under my nails and I totally washed them, what the hell.

You know what? Whatever. I’ll just wash them again.

Now, understand, I do not like sweets, but I helped to make these cookies, and it would definitely hurt Megan’s feelings if I didn’t eat them so- I take a bite. Yeah, really sweet, chewy- I guess it’s okay, as far as sweets go, but not something I’d want every day.

I finish the cookie, and even though I didn’t like it very much, I still smile and compliment it, and thank Megan for letting me help her cook, and that’s that, I suppose. Something about her still
doesn’t sit right, but I can put it in the back of my mind for now, I think.

And anyway- she’s really cool. I actually do like her a lot…

Over the next few days, I steadily assemble the Ghoster, but soon realize that I’ll need to make it flight capable because I’ll be on my schools Bountyball team- oh my fucking gods, why would I agree to play a game in midair over a gorge, what the hell future me- so I am indeed missing some important items- hmm. I do want to show my teammates part of my world, so… on the sixteenth, at breakfast “Um- Megan, Superboy, you want to come shops with me for working and school? I show you part of homes, and it may be fun being?”

“Oh. Sure, Terry, I’d love to go.”

Superboy just nods.

We finish breakfast, I wash the dishes, and then I make sure I have enough money for what I want- holy shit that’s a preposterous amount of lucre, why- five palaces. Fucking shit, I keep forgetting.

Anyway, I have a checkbook now, wow, so yes, there is no reason I can’t buy whatever the Hell I want. I honestly don’t want much of anything- except those damn parts, so…

“Okay, some rules. Very important you do not touch anything on other side unless I say is okay. Please no eat anything unless I say okay. Please no drink anything unless I say okay. Never ever tell real name- say you superhero name instead. And try not to show you scared- is scary over there sometimes, but if you show it, it makes it worser. You understand rules?”

“I understand.” Megan nods.

“Yes.” Superboy nods.

I nod. “Okay- comes with me, and you will see a world of pure imagination.”

And then I take them to my room, and then through the Door, and then we’re in my apartment, jeeze, my home computer grew again- and then we’re out on my front porch, through the little gate, and I’ve opened the roof door and climbed down- Megan floats down, and Superboy just jumps. I sigh, smile, and tap the ladder so it’ll go back up, and then bid them to follow. They do, and nine hundred and ninety nine flights of stairs later, we’re in the lobby- which has new couches, cool. And then we’re out the door, and into the abyss… no, that’s too dramatic, we just go outside and into a minor sprinkle. A frog bounces off an awning and onto my shoulder, chirrups at us, and then hops away on glistening wings of orange-blue; fish swim, glintgleaming in the rushing gutters hopping and biting at the fairies that flicker above the waters; cattails and wide elephant ears wave in a soft breeze, little snail villages suctioned up in the dark shadows cast by the verdant parasol-leaves.

It’s good to be back- cobbles chinked with off white pebbles, warm wet air in my lungs, purple wide leaved grass-trees gently undulating, dragonfly winged lizards fluttering past; the sky is a soft vermillion, delicately splattered with bright gold. Superboy and Megan are looking all around us in something very near to awe- I just grin at them, click the stacked heels of my fake-cherry red boots together, and say “This is my home city of Kowloon. Welcome, my friends.”
The market I need is Bones, over in West Kowloon- I’m going to be buying a set of wings, I’m not sure from what yet- so I’ll need to go to the higher reaches of the Floating market, and then cross the Ponds, which shouldn’t be a problem.

So.

To get to West from East, you have two choices- go across the Highbridge, or take the Ferry. I’ve heard that the Highbridge has some of the best views of the city, but I always take the Ferry. However, I have my friends with me, and I don’t think they’ll let anything bad happen to me so-Highbridge it is.

We start the climb imperceptibly- just a gentle uphill walk, and then we’re climbing another staircase, this one built with switchbacks and awkweird alcoves that lead I don’t know where- I’ll have to come back sometime, and really explore- and then we’re at the Highbridge and wow. I’ve never-I’ve never seen Kowloon from this high up before, it’s beautiful.

It’s odd- I didn’t realize before how impossibly huge my city is. I don’t… fuck there are entire places I’ve never even heard of, much less seen. And Megan and Superboy are staring, awed- I wonder what it is they see?

“Come on guys- we’ll come back this way, so you can see this again, okay?”

“Oh-okay.”

“Sure.”

The Floating market, so called because it’s entirely on boats that float, is not very far from the Highbridge- I follow the signs, neatly numbered and lettered, and my friends follow me, and then we’re there- a multitude of boats at eye level and below and above, gently floating and flowing along, rope bridges that edge over the sides of boats on the same relative elevation and connect and constrain them to a certain configuration, buckets rising and falling on ropes filled now with spices now with soup now with a small child sent to their other parent for discipline, and people of every shape and color. So many people- people with feathers instead of hair, people with scaly arms, people with bones for flesh, people with no eyes- so many different people.

I step onto the dock, and then carefully hop onto the walking edge of the boat- Megan and Superboy follow me. We’re halfway to where we need to be when I realize we’re about to walk on one of my cousin’s boats, and into the greater food street of the Float- they will almost surely insult me terribly- and of course it’s the cousin that makes the best noodles ever, and of course it’s almost lunchtime so- “Guys, the next boat we’ll hop onto is an okay place to eat- the food is delicious. We can eat there, but I’d rather not- I don’t really like noodles. But we can if you want to.”

“Hm. I actually like noodles a lot- I think we should eat there.” Megan smiles slightly apologetically.

“I don’t have a preference.” Superboy is gruff but not grumpily so- more like that’s just how his voice is.

I don’t sigh- I smile the kind of smile that has to be called a smile because there’s no other way to describe what I do with my face- wait, no, there is. I grimace- if you don’t know me well, you’ll be convinced that I’m smiling.

I’m not smiling.
The noodles Kuai Dongshou makes are very very good; chewy but soft, sweet and savory, the
delicate flavor of sesame oil underlying the brash spiciness of siracha sauce, the twang of lime juice
and the cooling earthiness of bean sprouts, the sweetness of beef flank and the chewy fullness of
pork meatballs- it’s so very good, the seating area of the restaurant is always packed nearly solid.
Little bird women wait the tables, their vibrant jeweled wings fluttering almost faster than the eye can
see, their diaphanous tails carrying massive bowls of noodle soup that the diners share amongst
themselves in their own individual bowls. The richer diners eat from bowls provided by the
restaurant- the poorer eat from bowls of their own.

The air is full of waitresses, the thick heady smell of delicious food, and conversation- the words
from many people ebb and flow like gentle waves of lake water on skin warmed by the noon day
sun. We’re seated quickly, because while Dongshou- the whole family, really- and I might not get
along, I know that she’s a consummate professional, as am I; I know that the food served to me will
be perfect. I also know that she doesn’t want to serve me, but… I’m paying for her work, so she has
to- that’s in the Accords as well. (When you say you will do something under a certain condition-
being paid for work, helping someone, marrying at a certain time- you must keep your word. To do
otherwise is a dishonor that cannot be recovered from.)

We eat lunch, and we’re quiet because- and this is something I hadn’t thought about before- the
noodles served on Dongshou’s boat are so good that… it discourages talking. Like, have you ever
eaten something so good you just want to savor the moment, really feel and taste and smell every
sensation and talking would distract from the perfection in your mouth- so you don’t? That’s what
the noodles at this place are like.

The other thing I hadn’t really thought about is, well, the last time I ate noodles here. I was…

When I was somewhere between ten and thirteen- from the ages of nearly eleven to barely thirteen- I
lived on the streets of Xanghai. Somewhere near the middle of that time, I became someone I did not
respect, and hurt many people. I don’t blame Dongshou for not liking me, and I don’t blame my
ageate cousins for being afraid of me- during that time, I was a person to be feared.

But, well, things changed- I trusted the wrong person, and did something completely unforgivable,
and I almost died, and I stopped being that person- it was a big jolt all at once, and then slowly
shifting around into someone else again. I changed myself, and where I lived- but my cousin’s,
families, perception of me didn’t. So… we don’t talk to each other- I hear about parties and get
together’s they throw, about birthdays and weddings and deaths, but… indirectly. I have a book,
somewhere on the shelves of my bookcases, that details everything I know about the people related
to me by blood ties, but it’s all. Rumor. Hearsay.

I wish, sometimes, that I had done things differently- that I could be a part of something greater than
myself, in my home land. (I wish I could have a family again.) But. I can’t. (But- the one I do have
doesn’t want me.) I fucked it up, so now… I don’t know.

Anyway.

After about a month of living in Kowloon that first year, I came here on the direction of Dumpling
Cheng, and had a small bowl of delicious noodles- and I never came back. Not because the noodles
weren’t delicious, which they were. Not because the service wasn’t perfect- it was. The reason I
never came back was because- because of this sensation, over my skin, the sensation of being glared at, and no matter how I glanced it never went away. I met the head noodle chef that day, complimented her work most graciously, and in her eyes was-

Well. There’s a very good reason I’ve never come back.

We finish lunch- I ignore the sensation of a knife at my throat for the entire meal- and then start going into the higher reaches of the Float, until we’ve gotten to the wide flat rounds of the lilypads that make up the Pond- I climb the rope ladder that connects the high boat to the lowest lilypad, and then with a sort of hung, I’m onto the top of it, past the thorns that grow from underneath the pad, and onto the slightly undulating surface of green, beads of water slinking around my red-booted feet. The next bit is a simple moment of walking through a low class neighborhood, and then we’re there.

The Bones market is like the biggest junkyard that ever existed, piled high with the collected skeletal remains of creatures from beyond imagining- there are the bones of things dead here that haven’t been seen for a thousand ages, things left here that don’t exist anywhere else- I’m here to buy the… I know! The carapace of a *Giganta Anisopterahelicoptris* should be perfect for my Ghoster- and then, somehow in the moments of walking towards the Insectiod section of the Bones and showing my friends some of the weirder things in the Bones I pick up two Cards- Big, and Little. I sign them without really thinking about it, and am glad that I do- Heliflys are always about the size of a small house. I buy the carapace of what is actually known as a Damerfly, which is slightly smaller and more maneuverable, at the cost of speed; it’s center body is about the size of a treehouse, with flicker fast wings and shimmery blue-black armoring along the belly; it’s eyes are multifaceted red-splosions, glintering in the light; I cast Little, and shrink the Damerfly carapace down to the size of a box of matches and put it, whole, in my glasses case.

Payment is a simple matter- a signing of a check (signatory promissory note exchanged) and my business for the day is done.

Going back home is faster than getting to the Bones- a switchback trail takes us, somehow, to the Highambridge, and then it’s a quick jaunt through the neighborhoods and we’re there, at my apartment building- mid-afternoon, no big deal, and then we’re through the Door and back at the Cave; I put the Damerfly shell with the skeletal beginnings of my Ghoster, using Big to grow it back to size.

On the eighteenth, I have the feeling that I’ll be doing some fighting today, so I put on my favorite red and black shirt with the white ten on the back, and my fingerless gloves for school, and a pair of training pants that are black, and my knee high boots that are the funky cherry red color and lace up the front; today, my X-object (Xject) has decided to be a pair of earrings. Okay. I can work with that- I did get my ears pierced during Sinta’s Etiquette course... Glasses on face, and we’re good.

At breakfast, I have a premonition- a battle with a man-whirlwind, bright red- and I have this conversation with Megan:

“‘You remember what I told you when meet first, Megan?’

She swallows, then nods- “Yes, I do.”

“In a battle, you ignore it, is okay.”

She blinks at me, brown eyes staring. “Are you sure?”
The truth is, no, I’m not sure- but I’ll need to be in the loop, so… “Yes.”

“Alright.”

After breakfast, about an hour before Noon, the rest of our teammates come to the Cave- Kaldur is actually more _hmnnnnnnng_ than I remember, how is that even possible, and Robin is really short, wow.

Oh- “Hey Wally.”

“Terry, hey!”

“What here for?”

“Well, we’re hoping Batman has a _mission_ for us.”

“Mission?”

“Um… a mission is like an adventure with goals.”

“Oh! Sounds good- haven’t seen him lately, but maybe yes today…”

Red Tornado is... odd. It’s like- he has an aura, I guess, but that’s just it- I’ve never met a person with a wavery aura before who wasn’t dying. It’s freaking weird.

Still, I like him well enough… But well- I get the feeling that my teammates are less than pleased with our- ‘den mother, I think is the phrase.

Oh- Missions, when they come, are from Batman; Red Tornado doesn’t have any for us.

“This team is _not_ a social club.”

“Socializing is an important aspect of building a team, Aqualad. Suggestion: familiarize with your new teammates and with your new base of operations.”

Kaldur doesn’t look happy.

“Um, well- since we live here, we could give you a tour?” Megan to the rescue!

“Alright…”

“Not look so down- is really so bad to spends time getting to know each others?” He goes a little pink and then smiles at me, and holy shit there I go, redder than my boots.

“Well- now that you mention it, I don’t think so.”

I really really want to kiss him- _OH MY GODS WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME????_

We three show the others around the Cave- my favorite place in the Cave is actually the Hangar, simply because if I don’t look up, I can pretend I’m on the side of a mountain, not inside it… and somehow or other, we come to Megan’s- well. It’s a ship, and it flies and she doesn’t like me. Um. Oh dear.
Okay. I can do this. I can get into the flying thing and not freak out. It’s going to be just fine. Really.

Oh shit, Megan was baking cookies earlier- did she remember them or-

“Something’s burning.”

“Oh no- my cookies!”

We all go back to the kitchen, and oh yeah, those cookies are carbonized- blackened, burnt, and very nearly charcoaled. I kind of want to eat one. Augh, Wally, why would you eat one and then flirt with Megan- she doesn’t like you like that, what the hell man?

“I wanted to do something kind for all of you…”

“It was kind of you to think of us at all.”

Introductions go pretty simply- Kaldur tells us to dispense with formalities and call him by name, Wally does as well- Robin is forbidden on pain of Batman to reveal his name, Superboy only has Superboy to call himself by, Megan is actually M’gann M’orrz- but she prefers Megan so Megan it is, and I- my secrets are very dangerous. So I only tell them half my name.

“I’m Theresa, but please call me Terry.”

Wally (West) smirks at me, and says “What, no last name?”

“Not today, Wally~”

Megan is looking at Superboy consolingly and then- “GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

And everybody is wincing except me-

“Megan, stop! On Earth, this is an extreme invasion of privacy.”

“Yeah, and Supes probably has a bad taste in his brain from CADMUS-”

“I’m so sorry Superboy-”

“Just. Stay out of my head.”

And then with a huff he’s stomped over to the couch and sitting down. I’m wide eyed- I have some idea of what happened, but well… Superboy- did he really mean to get that angry? I’ll go ask- I don’t think he did.

“Superboy, why did you get so upset? She couldn’t have meant anything bad-”

“She said that we’ll find an earth name for me too- I have a name, it’s Superboy!”
“Do you like that name?”

He blinks at me- “What do you mean?”

“Well- I don’t actually like the name “Theresa” very much, so I don’t answer to it- I changed my name to something I do like, “Terry.” So, what I’m asking isn’t, “do you have a name”, it’s “do you like the name you have?”

“Is there something wrong with the name I have?”

“It’s a bit utilitarian, for one thing- there’s nothing personal, personable, about it. I like it if you like it- but, well- I think what Megan meant, and I could be wrong but- I think she meant that if you wanted, she’d, we’d, help you find a name that you like, and that, well- fits.”

“Names can… not fit?”

“Oh my gods, yes! For example, my younger sister was named Rachel, but that name didn’t fit her at all- like, I didn’t even think of her as Rachel for a while, that’s how bad it was, but she eventually found a name that fit her- Raven. I’m not sure if Superboy fits you anymore, really- like, does Superboy describe you completely?”

“Yes- no. What- what are names supposed to do?”

“I’m not actually sure- but I think they’re meant to… to prove that you’re real. Or something like that. Oh, and when Megan asks us to go, we’re going.”

“What?”

“Superboy, Terry, would you like to come with us to see the rest of Happy Harbor?”

“Okay Megan, I go.”

“No.”

“Please, Superboy?”

I kick him in the shin. He glares at me, and I smile with entirely too many teeth.

“Okay, fine- I’ll go.”

Megan’s Ship doesn’t like me. Well, no- it doesn’t really have an opinion about me. I don’t like her- she’s nice, and pretty, and really strong, and I’m really high in the air oh shit fuck dammit-

“Terry, are you alright?”

“F-fine, Megan.”

“Well, if you’re sure…”

“Superboy, I know that you feel awkward about what happened with Megan earlier- simply apologize to her.” Kaldur says this quietly, soft to soothe Superboy and perhaps give him direction that I was unable to…
Megan looks really sad, oh no- “Don’t worry Megan, he’ll come around.” Wow, okay- Robin can probably sing really beautifully…

“If you say so…”

“Hey, so- you’ve got telepathy, obviously, but what are your other powers?”

“Oh, um, well-”

And then Megan lets go of the controls of the Bioship- no, no, she probably controls it with part of her mind, I refuse to worry un-needfully- and then her body warps and suddenly standing in front of us all is a girl with skin like golden sand poured over pale white bone, her hair a ragged mop of inky straight blue-black that flops softly over her bright blue eye that glows on the left, soft pink lips like the petals of a pale blushing rose, a small smushed nose with a sort of wedge shape at the end, rounded cheeks with soft pink flush on them, and thick eyebrows black and neatly brushed; a long neck, and big wide shoulders, and small-looking breasts, and a narrow waist, big round hips, and legs that are twin columns of muscle. Cherry red boots, black pants tucked into them, red and black bowling shirt, black fingerless gloves- holy shit that’s me.

“Wow!” I’m actually really impressed.

“Thank you, Terry.”

“Woah. Hey- can you do me?” Wally, there had to have been a better way to say that-

“Um, well-” and then there is a Kid Flash standing there, only… Kid Flash’s hips are narrower, and no, he doesn’t have breasts. Oh dear-

“Megan, you has problem withs mimicking male?”

“Yeah- I can mimic females really easily, because I am female, but… I guess I need more practice with male forms…”

“So- ah, what other powers do you have, like, flight, invisibility, wall walking-”

“Oh! Um, flight and invisibility, yes- density shifting is too advanced for me right now, though…”

“Hey, no worries- Every time KF tries to vibrate through a wall he gets a bloody nose-”

“Dude!”

“So, Terry- what are your powers?”

“Oh, um- I can See future, sometimes big pictures Dreams, sometimes little warning moment. Mm- I have magical spells, and… I can Read things?”

“Read things?”

“Um- like… Megan, can you show M’arzzic somewhere?”

“Sure- ah, here, this is the onboard flight guides, onscreen in front of us…”
“Okay so, it says: Current altitude is: 15000 [unit name] Bearing: 12 [units] away from axial magnetic pole, Speed of 55’000 [units].” I’ve never actually read something aloud before. “Um. It works with any language, but is faster with language stills spoken- and I can’t really translate units.”

“Do you- do you understand what you read?” Wally seems to have skipped over me using magic.

“More often, now- because I’m older I’ve gottens better at the understandings…”

“Huh?”

“Wells, some thing don’t translate very well- like, um, units of measures, names, things like that…”

“Well- let me show you some of the ship’s functions!”

“Alright.”

And then there’s a sort of judder in my stomach, and I look down and HOLY FUCK WHY CAN I SEE THE GROUND THIS IS NOT GOOD AUGH NO NO NO AAAAAAAAAAAAHH-

“Terry, it’s alright, I’m not going to drop you-”

“AAAAHHHHhhhhiiiiii- I know that, Megan, it’s just. Um. I can see the ground. Er. I’m going to just… look at something else. Urgh. Hello, Kaldur.”

“Hello, Terry. Are you going to put your feet down, or-”

“No.”

And then Red Tornado is calling to tell us about a disturbance at a local power plant, what the hell is a power plant and then EVERYTHING IS SPINNING I AM NOT OKAY WITH THIS OKAY, I WAS NOT OKAY WITH GETTING INTO THE FLYING SEMI-ALIVE CREATURE AND I AM REALLY NOT OKAY WITH SPINNING OH GODSSS WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY-

And then we’re on the ground and I’m feeling vomity, wow.

Outside there is an industrial building of some sort, the local power plant I would suppose- what even is that?- and Robin is gone. I can already tell that that is going to be a thing. (When I take him to Kowloon, I’ll have to impress on him the extreme danger of that habit…)

And then I have a nasty premonition- just enough of a hint of what’s to come to put my hero clothing on- today, it’s short black shorts, my long red ruqun with the long white sleeves that I fought the Summer Fox in, the same boots I was wearing before, and my strangely movable face.

And then the wind picks me up, and I kid you not, throws me. Hard.

“OW!”

When I’ve managed to leap to my feet- being underground does not agree with me, and I’m still kind of dizzy from being up in the air and oh shit there it goes- handy that there’s a ditch right there, and I make it to it and yup, there goes my stomach. Ugh. I hate vomiting.

I stop blowing chunks in time to hear the asshole who threw me- and the rest of my teammates, Jesus- mock our skills, something about “disappointing young heroes who-” but then I stopped listening and threw a Glow in his face.
He promptly uses lightning to lift and throw me. Ow. Thankfully I didn’t land in my own vomit, but still. Ow.

And I’m far enough away that I see my teammates attack the windy-dude, and promptly get blown off their feet, wow Robin is getting a lot of air oh shit it’s all rocks over here-

I Dash, and then-“Oof!”

“Ugh.”

“Hi Robin!”

“Hey Red X.”

And then I gently roll him off of me and stand up and turn again because- “Ack!”

“Awp!”

“Hi Kid Flash!”

“H-hi Red X…”

And then the rest of our teammates are there, and now the windy-guy is flying, fucking hell, and he’s saying something but I’m a bit preoccupied trying to breathe- and now he’s flying… away…

Huh. Weird. Almost as if he couldn’t… see us… hmm… And I am still having trouble hearing everything, the wind is really loud…

“That was stupid- you convinced us that was Red Tornado!”

“I’m- I’m sorry-“

“Save it.”

And with that impressive display of maturity, Superboy, Robin and Kid Flash have run off to deal with the windy-dude.

“I- I just w-wanted to be part of the team…”

“At this point, I am not sure that there is a team…”

And then Aqualad runs off to keep the other three out of the clutches of death’s arms, holy shit why am I so dramatic lately? Anyway-

“I think you did the bests you coulds- so, um… I has two spells I can use. One wills gets me right behind hims, the others destroy. You think I should try?”

“Um- I have an idea about what to do too, but… I’m not sure how to best use your skills so-”

“Well… if your plans doesn’t works, I could use mine?”

“That- yeah. I think- I think that would be for the best… M-may I… May I stay in contact with you? Mind to mind?”

I slowly, softly, sigh. “Yes. But- gentles, please.”
“Okay.”

Softly, at the edge of my self- a knock, and then a soft green-white light, gentle and seemingly serene- and in my mind, I hold out my hand and just as gently grasp it, then with barely a thought, I have a specific area meant just for it- a thing that looks a great deal like a lamp, only it’s a jar, only it’s a bell, only it’s a speaker with many sounds available- only it’s the only safe part of my mind, for Megan, and if she strays from here I cannot guarantee her safety, does she understand?

‘Yes, I understand.’

‘Okay.’

And then palms up and open and flicker flutter little light into the womb of glass to protect you because there are things in my mind that bite and I do not wish your death, no, never- and then we’re Connected, and-

‘My idea is this- I will attempt to get close to the windy guy-’

‘He calls himself Mister Twister-’

‘That’s a much better name- right, I will attempt to get close to Mister Twister, and he’s an automatontic lifeform, right?’

‘Ye-es, but we generally use the term robot here…’

‘ Weird, but- I will get as close as I can without him noticing, and then cut off his head- hopefully his “brain” is in his head, but if it isn’t, I’ll just dismember him.’

‘Okay- I’m going to try and get Red Tornado to help us…’

‘Sounds good- let me know if you want to do something different.’

‘Okay.’

I cast Shadow and drop down into all the shadows of this place- ripple along the fine boned shadows of the grasses, Jump and hop through the big shadows of the rocks beneath the soil and settle soft as nothing at all in the shadow of the pier. Lightning flashes by, and I Dash through it’s flicker fast shadow and settle in the shade of the scarf around his neck, and then I wait for the absolute best moment, preferably mid-sentence to-

‘Red X, wait! The new plan is to disguise myself as Red Tornado and have the rest of the team fill in for his powers, then take him out semi-head on.’

‘I- alright. But… that makes my plan really not good- if I move at the wrong moment, I’ll break the illusion. Hmm…’

‘Do you have long range capabilities?’

‘Yes, but they tire me out a lot- and if I use those spells, I won’t be able to do much else.’

‘Oh… Oh! What if- if my plan looks like it’s going south, or I need you to- could you, like… provide assistance that way?’

‘Like- everything’s going wrong, I step in and end things?’

‘Yeah- I mean. Are you okay with that?’
'Yeah.'

'Okay- you get into position, I’ll find the guys.'

'Okay.'

I drop into my Shop and wait- the chatter of my teammates is entertaining white noise, but not important, I have my position and orders - soon enough my teammates are there, surrounding Mister Twister- I ripple out and settle in his shadow on the ground and wait, silent and cold. His shadow breaks apart- breaks open, and there standing is a man; into his shadow I Dash except-

'Miss Martian, this man is an automatic lifeform a robot as well.'

'Really?'

'Yeah- check for yourself if you aren’t sure though.'

'One sec- aha. I’ll take him out.'

'Cool.'

Smash! comes a rock down hard, and the man feels like he’s going to run so I hold him there with his shadow and he crunches apart in my hands but there is no telltale scent of blood, and so it ends. I ripple up on top of the heavy stone, an upward humping of dark Shadow, and then I drop and they can see me and I grin. Catlike. Cock head just so and yeah, that’s right.

Red X, in the house.

My teammates step back excepting Miss Martian, who with a wave of her hand lifts the rock up- I Jump but not high, just straight up, and come back down soft-quiet and in what would be viscera if it were a man, but it’s not a man, so it’s fine. Light steps over the metal remains, and then- ‘Good plan, Miss Martian. I’m glad I wasn’t necessary at the end of it.’

‘Me too, Red X.’

“What- wait, Megan, in case you didn’t notice- WE DON’T SMASH PEOPLE WHO’VE SURRENDERED TO US!” Robin sounds very upset. I can’t imagine why- ohhhh, he didn’t know…

“It wasn’t a person-” I don’t quite make an unhappy noise at that, but only just barely… “-it was a robot. I couldn’t read it’s mind, so…” Hmm. There’s something off about that statement, but I’m not sure what it is… oh hey, a Card- Windy. Neat! I sign it, and tuck it away- and then I help gather up pertinent parts of the two automatons, and who even nests those things, why would anyone even do that? Oh yeah, before I forget-

“Nice plan, Miss Martian.”

“Thank you, Red X.”

We go back to the Cave in the Bioship- on the way, I go back to plain clothes, and that seems to startle Wally more than my work clothes did. Weird, but true. It takes a while to get back and I’m a bit wiped but not totally gone, yanno? I think I’ll have a chicken sandwich for dinner tonight…
Dammit, I need to get started on that sim for Anatomy, those things are hard to make…

We’re back in the Cave- I make myself a sandwich, see Wally’s longing gaze, and make him one too- and then it’s later that evening, I think we watched the nsv or something, I don’t know. I do know that we’re explaining our roles in the mission to Red Tornado, and when it’s my turn I say “I was backups, in case thing wents wrong.” I then stretch my ribs and shoulders because ow, I got thrown around a lot today, and I’ve got both of my arms stretched over my head when Robin says “Having a heartless machine as a supervisor may not be that bad.”

Je-sus; I let my arms down and with one hand do the finger snap head tap (motion like snapping fingers on top of someone’s head, only hand and wrist movements, do not follow through with smack unless absolutely necessary) and say “Rude!”

“And incorrect- I do possess a heart, as well as excellent hearing.”

“And apology would not be out of place.” Ah, Kaldur. Backing me up and I think if you were to whisper sweet nothings to me my panties would dissolve HOLY SHIT WHAT EVEN IS THIS IN MY HEAD?

“Sorry for the comment and the sentiment, Red Tornado.”

That night, I Dream, and this is what I dream:

Once upon a time, there were two little girls, and the little girls were different from the other people in their village; they could see and do things that no one could understand, and that made the villagers scared.

They turned away from everyone and became sad and lonely, and had no one to turn to- except each other. And for a time, that was enough… but there’s only so much you can turn to another who is also your sister before you start turning to yourself- twins are different, and slowly slowly they began to melt into each other, until there was no difference between one and the other and the more they turned away from people and into themselves, the more scared the people were of them- and the people of the village did something terrible… they took her away and they killed her. Them. Her.

Even though she-they was dead, something in her came back- and this part of that little girls wouldn’t go away, even after three hundred years.

And the longer it stayed, the less there was of the little girl.

Until, finally, there was nothing left of the little girls at all.

Just the part that came back- and that part waited. For a thousand years, it waited.

And while it waited, it grew.

And it grew.

And it grew- until it wasn’t a part of a little girl little girls little girl at all, but a young woman and it grew up. It got bigger.

One day, a Face-stealer came, and beheld It as lovely, and courted It most ardently, and It allowed
itself to be courted, and then they were wed.

And from their union came children- just two, sister-daughters born on the same day at the same
time- and they hated each other.

Time passed. Things grow as they always do- and somehow or other, they found that while they
were furious together, they were miserable apart. And so it went for twenty years, both of them
steadily becoming more and more and reaching for something that could not be found until one day,
in a fit of rage, the sister who was red with rage killed her sister- choked her and threw her in the
river and her face turned black black black.

The red sister became an enforcer for a wizard of songs, whose tunes overtook the minds of many
and forced them to dance to beats not their own. She will give Red X a scar over her right eye, but
not Theresa. She will burn most vibrantly, and then not at all- when she is just as black black black
as her sister, she will die.

The black sister became a gui bent on vengeance at any cost- and she will try to steal my body and
kill her red sister dead dead dead. She will sneak into the simraculum I will make for my lawful
work, and kill me- water will save me, wash away the black black gui but not forever- only with the
death of her sister will her rage abate. And when her red sister is black and charred, the wet black
sister will find her, and finally finally they will be what they always should have been- together. One.

A scream overlaid on music that whirls. And there, rising- Inque.

I gasp, and throw myself from my bed- holy shit, that was not good. And I still don’t know anything
about the whirling music- I heard it when I Silenced the nsv, and again when I fought the Summer
Fox; I don’t forget music easily, and this music was extremely distinct, that special kind of distinct
that only comes when someone doesn’t want you to notice the distinctiveness. Like a named item.

Ow, okay, I’ve got to stop messing with my ribcage, mother of godss- a hot shower should help me a
lot, so- and I’ve sweat through my clothing, ew. Okay, strip the bed- did I get that extra bedding, no-
Okay, walk on over and wow I forgot how muggy it is in summer here, aha there’s my sheets all
folded up nice, and I’m not going to get back to sleep any time soon so- I take a shower at my
apartment, put on a house dress, and start moving other things over to my room at the Cave.

I move bedding and dishes and several vases that were too big for my Apartment but fit perfectly in
the Cave, and then I realize I haven’t been out on my deck at night before, so I go out to look and I
have a garden now. There is a fish pond, what the hell.

“Hey Boss!”

“Fox, hello- what’s going on?”

“Well… your stuff is consolidating around your home base- and all the castles are sort of…
merging.”

“So… instead of five normal castles, I have one great big palace with five different styles squished
together?”

“Yeah, basically. On the plus side, all the libraries are merging as well. With your permission, I can
merge your own personal shelves with the library’s shelves…”

“Permission granted- is there anything else you, personally need?”
“No, not really.”

“Not really…?”

“I just- I was… I can’t sleep.”

“Tell me about it.” I’ve settled onto the railing, hip pressed into entwining vines, and Summer Fox tells me about the things she saw, and the things she did, and other, more horrible things when under the thrall of Shriek and Music Mistress- the “Master”- and she sobs a warm puddle of sorrow and rage onto my shoulder near the end.

I hold her, and stare at the stars, and feel a thick lump in my throat but I do not cry because because because they’re going to steal Raven and Jinx and they will call me and I will save them and free them from their enslavement, and I shall sing a Song- a special song, the Prelude of the Dawn of Life.

I will not be able to do it alone- thankfully, I have a few weeks to prepare…
Four and Twenty Blackbirds, Baked into a Pie (Part 2)

On the First day of the second week of July, the twentieth, I premonit that we’ll be going camping today, so I start to gather- Wait, what the fuck is camping?

I don’t have any books about it- wait the Cave has a library that I haven’t looked at yet! Oh shit, I can’t go out there like this, I can see my stomach through some of these holes- okay, um, today… black mid-calf shorts with little flowers on the hem- and it’s odd, I’ve never really grown hair on my legs, although I did regularly scrape them to hell and back when I was younger, so maybe the hairs just gave the fuck up- red v-neck shirt, basketball sneakers, and striped black and white socks up to my knees. (Red shoes, of course.) I don’t actually remember where I got all of my clothing from- mostly dumpster diving, or charity, or possibly hand-me downs from the rest of the Apartments… I’ve realized just now that the clothing I brought over first was the clothing I bought myself.

Huh.

Weird.

Anyway- the Cave has a Library with… books… in it. I don’t walk there- I run down the hall, hard right and left and three doors along a narrow hallway and “Good Morning Megan!”

And then I’ve turned and three more doors and another hallway, up this ramp and- holy shit, yes! BOOKS!

Ah there are so many reference books here, it’s fantastic- oh, cool, a book about Camping! Let’s see- Camping is an outdoor recreational activity. The participants (known as campers) leave urban areas, their home region, or civilization and enjoy nature while spending one or several nights outdoors, usually at a campsite. Camping may involve the use of a tent, caravan, motorhome, cabin, a primitive structure, or no shelter at all.

Camping as a recreational activity became popular in the early 20th century. Campers frequent national or state parks, other publicly owned natural areas, and privately owned campgrounds. Camping is a key part of many youth organizations around the world, such as scouting. It is used to teach self-reliance and teamwork.

Camping is also used as an inexpensive form of accommodation for people attending large open air events such as sporting meetings and music festivals. Organizers often provide a field and other basic amenities.

The equipment used in camping varies with the particular type of camping. For instance, in survival camping the equipment consists of small items which have the purpose of helping the camper in providing food, heat and safety. The equipment used in this type of camping must be lightweight and it is restricted to the mandatory items. Other types of camping such as winter camping involve having specially designed equipment in terms of tents or clothing which is strong enough to protect the camper's body from the wind and cold.

So- things I will definitely need if I want to do this camping thing, which is not roughing it although it sounds a great deal like it:

I will need a first aid kit- what the fuck even is that, I’ll ask Megan or Superboy- and something to
protect me from the elements… it’s not going to rain tonight, so, just a mosquito netting should be fine. But I also want to work on my fear of heights- wait, I got that Deed Award (DA) from those rock climbers, a sort of shelf that you stab into cliffs when they’re really really high and you need to rest for the night and there were instructions for adapting it to hang in a tree, so- a bedroll, because while I can sleep at night in the summer without anything, I prefer not to, um um um…

I shouldn’t need too much light outside, my nightvision is very good- however, if I do, I can use Glow and my Blades are versatile tools, um, something to sit on- I’ll bring my Milking Stool DA- it’s basically a round seat with a single leg in the middle that you can balance on if you’re desperate or bored or poor like me (except I’m not poor) (I am if I want to keep my original school Deposition). I have an oilcloth poncho, and I’ll change into the boots I got in Kansas for the rest of the day…

I think I’ll make some dumplings like D. Cheng taught me to- ones that are good cold or hot, and um, maybe bring a small steamer? Hmm… I have a shit-ton of citrionic candles, and straight up citrionic ooze, and I’ll take a wash in the sea in the morning… I have bottles that used to have wine in them, and I have those AP stoppers lying around- I’ve got enough time to wash those suckers out and work the DIY magic on them… Things I am definitely taking to cook in- A wok, my big cooking chopsticks to elevate the steamer, my boiling water pot with the blue glazed insides, my two layer bamboo steamer, and plates I guess- I’ll take some from the Cave- we should be able to find firewood there, and if not… It’ll be good practice with Firey (and I think I used that Card to cook and heat with almost exclusively for a while- but I was also really tired then too, so my memory could definitely be faulty…)

So- Because it’s good practice for Alchemy I decide to make dumplings instead of any of the many other things I could make, and I decide to make meat dumplings- I think we have some ground beef in the coldbox, so, yes, and- wait, first, change into my boots.

I put the book back, and go back to my room and change my shoes- and I knew I had better plates in all this crap! Ugh, they’re DA’s I got from a Ba Jiao Gui- her tree was knocked down in a storm, and I helped her move her house in exchange for teaching me the ways of the Woman (okay, look- there are some things it’s best to learn from people who don’t live in the same building as you- masturbation is one of those things) and fucking shit, next month is Ghost Moon- I always forget!

I need to start preparing today, but- uuuuugh.

Why do I always forget that August is Ghost Moon? Arrrrrrgh-

Anyway.

I need to wash the dish set I got from the Ba Jiao Gui- they’re caked with dirt, and kind of gross, so- to the kitchen! BUT WAIT- I grab my small box of specialty teas, because I don’t even know, I don’t have a glass teapot handy… and my apron because I’m going to be cooking today, and I’d rather not get food all over myself. Like I always do.

I carefully carry the medium sized box of dishes to the kitchen, my teas set carefully on top, and “Good Morning, Superboy.” He just blinks at me, a bit like a startled grad student in the stacks after a long night of feverish study. I smile and- okay, Megan beat me to the kitchen today. S’cool- I Twin and I put the box of teas on the table at the chair I always sit at and walk towards the fridge and larger pantry area to see what we have, and I walk into the kitchen- Megan is cooking some sort of round cake (oh my gods the apron I made for her is ADORABLE ON HER! EEEEEEEEEEEE!), sort of golden brown looking, and OH COOL SHE MADE BACON! (BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)(it’s so damn
tasty, fuuuuuuuck)

I shall partake of thee, deliperfectable (delicious+perfect+delectable) bacon, after I wash these dishes! Yes!

And Megan left some dishes in the sink already, so- set it up and dish washing, la-la-la, sparkly clean! Wash wash wash! Yeah! (I am pumped today.) And then I start washing the DA dishes, and holy fuck these are mismatched-

Okay, we have ground beef, like I thought, but also ground turkey, which is different- hmm, cabbage is good, bok choy is good, we have some other things in here that are good for marinades… do I want to marinade my veggies? Nah- I’ll just dice them up and sweetness, green onion- but first I need the dough.

What does the pantry have for me- flour, good, salt, good, vegetable oil, sesame oil, good, soy sauce, cooking wine

And these dishes are beautiful; I just wish that they matched at all. Oh well- they at least harmonize within the red spectrum nicely… and the dishes are done and I’m going to want to be able to use this sink so- wash the sink out, wash my hands and switch with myself, who puts the dishes away; I put my apron on, and start measuring out ingredients for my dumplings.

Okay- things going in dumplings in these little bowls over here and things going around dumplings going in those little bowls over there and-

I put all of Megan’s cooking dishes away, well dried of course, and then I dry mine off and oh hey, this teapot is made of clear glass- didn’t I just see a hot water pot- and that’s 425.8 L of water on the dumplings side-

Okay, now carefully mix the water into the flour and the salt and mix it together until it’s a smooth ball, you can do this Terry OH GODSSS IT’S SO STICKY-

I did indeed see a hot water pot- okay, fill it but not too much, no one wants boiling water spewing like an underwater volcano, and- yeah, there’s a burner at the back I think I can use so…

“Thank you, Megan.”

“You’re welcome, Terry.”

And water’s on the boil, yeeees- now, prepare the pot for the tea! It’s got a spell on it, so make absolutely sure that it’s clean, okay, now, wipe it down really good- okay, it needs to dry as much as possible, and I think I’ll drink the tea in this pretty cup shaped like a tulip blossom…

Okay, dough is now in twenty flattened wrappers and I need to wash my hands- switch out with myself, hands washed and apron off, and I think I’ll put together a plate for myself and aha, I knew there was a platter somewhere, and you’ll be needing this little cup of water and this plate-

And mix the meat with the finely diced and chopped vegetables and spices, and the cabbage can go in now too- mix mix mix and scoop some out onto the wrapper and dip slip press press press, and onto the platter repeat twenty times- and I’ve got enough left over for mini sausages, but put the finished product onto the platter and wrapped with a towel and into the fridge-

And Megan made enough for everyone here, so I do too, and I set the plate down on the table and put my apron on the hook next to Megan’s behind the fridge, and drop Twin- and very nearly drop my plate, wow, okay, Twin should only be dropped when I’m not holding something.
Anyway.

That morning, I eat small golden-brown round flat cakes that are faintly sweet with honey and a little butter spread over them, and little flat sausages, and strips of deliperfectable bacon, and it’s so wonderful! Ah!

Oh, I almost forgot- the teapot is dry and still quite hot, the water is boiling, and my cup is by my plate- so, pick which one I’m going to have, um um- this one, into the pot and pour the water in, turn the little blue flames off, and carefully carry the teapot back to the table. Settle. (I’m not sure what that cup with the ruffles was meant for, but it’s clear mostly and sort of floral- I should take it with me to camp.)

And slowly unfurling like a dried out dream immersed in love once more, a blossoming flower, soft pinks and oranges, tea slowly infusing into the water- I pour myself a cup when it’s just the right color, a sort of goldeny clear, and yesssss, I forgot how much I like blooming tea- not just because it’s beautiful to watch, and it is, but because I really like the flavors involved; soft happy flowers, dark rich tea- not as dark and rich as Iron Buddha (Blacker than a moonless night, hotter and more bitter than hell itself; that is Iron Buddha Tea. For full enjoyment, please imbibe only the smallest amount listed~!) and the warm sensation flowing through my body, wellness and good health.

And I have dumpling wrapper dough on my nose. Fucking shit.

And then I get buried in another wave of letters.

Honestly, I’m not sure why I even bother…

Four Gratiitudes, a pile of rubber ducks given as deed awards for something I hadn’t realized I’d done, and a large bar of gold in belated reward for the assistance in the recapture and containment of Malchior of Voi, and that’s my mail for the last week. I sometimes despise the Kowloon Mail system. I am not alone in this disgust- we’ve been rated as the worst place to try and mail a letter to or from.

These aren’t any of the things I normally get- this is a scroll, and that’s… something else. Um. It’s a book, actually- long slats of… bone? Okay- carved and bound with bright red tape, satin, it looks like, and… Oh my fucking gods.

There’s literally only one thing this could possibly be.

IT’S MY CLASS SCHEDULES! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

Okay, open this up and-

Unless otherwise stated, all classes start on the First of September, and are self-paced.

1. Alchemy 101 (potions, cures, advanced quantum biochemical research)- Heggie’s Compounding Companion = Final: Potion/Cure of student’s choice (year project), written exam (timed questionnaire, untimed essay), verbal exam (theoretical application of knowledge), practical exam; upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Certificate of Apothecary will be conferred, certifying that the recipient is a registered and trained apothecary for Asia and Pacific Rim, edging into California.
1. Spellcraft Theory 810 (cantrips, spells, hexes)- *Precious Mirror of the Four Elements* = Final: Handcopied spellbook of student’s choice (year project), written exam (timed essay), verbal exam (focus is on enunciation), practical exam; upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Certificate of Spellcrafting will be conferred, certifying that the recipient is a registered and trained spellcrafter for the eastern hemisphere.

Tutor: Iusa Ohens; Gcode [abra-kazaam]##465465

1. Evocation 102- *Devilv’s Devilry* = Final: Destruction of “unkown” object, verbal exam (theoretical application of knowledge), strength test (measurement of overall casting strength); upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Breaker’s Mark of a level in reference to the recipient’s overall skill level, which can be used for free inclusion at the Honeydrip Inn.

Tutor: Skullbreaker McLain; Gcode [llamedos]@78979

The Honeydrip Inn is a very famous tavern where spellcasters hang out, talk shop, and get hired. It’s also a Guild bar- you can only get in if you’re a friend of the guild, or if you’re in the guild, or if you have precedence- and sigebreaker’s get precedence.


Final: Feast of Fools at Winter Solstice, verbal “exam”; upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Brag Right is conferred, and the recipient is Known.

Tutor: Mixxy Trixxy; Gcode [ehehe]/987

Okay, that ball’s the second day of the third week of December.

1. Animal-Leeching (vet apprentice); *Bloie’s Anatomy of Creaturese, Grey’s Anatomy*

Final: Deveroux Derby, Deveroux Ball on Vernal Equinox. Upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Degree of Animal-Leeching will be conferred, certifying that the recipient is a registered and trained Animal-Leech for the Eastern Nightmarket.

Tutor: Annabelle of Unicorn Vale; Gcode [neight]_88

Okay, that’s on the Last day of the Second week of March next year- I’ll make that no problem. I think.
1. Enchantment- Bag of Four (Athame; Full Rainbow of Beeswax candles; Ball of Twine; Handmirror(Glass preferred, metal acceptable)) *Peoms of Flowyr Fey*

Final: Creation of Accursed or Blessed Object (student’s choice, no swords or rings please), Enchanter’s Ball on the 31 of October.

Tutor: Charlotte; Gcode [fiendsfriendsfiends]-m4k1n6f13nds

1. Divination 8105 (prophecy); a crystal ball, *Scenes Unseen but Dreamed.*

Final: One well-crafted prophecy of the student’s own, written exam (timed questionnaire, untimed essay), verbal exam (theoretical application of knowledge), Ball of Lights on the Summer Solstice (current year) with an exam for proof of attendance; upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Certificate of Diviner will be conferred, certifying that the recipient is a registered and trained Seer for the planet.

Tutor: Cassandra; Gcode [truefax]-10-16

Wait- this year’s summer solstice was on the First day of the third week of June… how- Return! I’ll have to make an aiming array for accuracy… but it’s do-able. Okay.

1. Change 100, (Basic Theory)- *Accounts of the Werelings, their kin, and their ways*

Final: One well made draft of changeable animal, written exam (timed questionnaire, untimed essay), verbal exam (theoretical application of knowledge), Changer’s Ball (Masquerade Ball) on the Autumnal Equinox; upon passing of examination to examiner’s satisfaction, a Certificate of Change will be conferred, certifying that the recipient is a registered and trained changesmith.

This year’s equinox is on the third day of the second week of September- wait, what the fuck? That’s- how am I- *who* am I, because I’d normally get Sinta to go with me, but she’ll be in gaol probably until the new year… I’ll figure something out.

1. Warding 12- lap table, sketchbook made out of actual paper*, pencil case*, drafting pencils*, eraser*, pencil sharpener*, abacus, protractor, compass, slide rule, sextant, straight edge and ruler (a Gleam-compatible tablet may also be used for items marked with *); *Supplementary Notes on the Art of Figures*

= Final: Ward of student’s choice (year project), written exam (timed questionnaire, untimed essay), verbal exam (theoretical application of knowledge), practical exam

Tutor: Marcosta Del Rosta; Gcode makeithappen[10/10]

Please note that unless otherwise listed, all exams for all students are held in the twelve days immediately subsequent to the New Year, with test results posted on the last day of the month.
And there’s something else in this scrollbook- oh, it’s my requirements for the anatomy class I have to teach. There’s also a flyer for Bountyball, and the school rulebook- I need to sign up for that (ugh no why), it’s important for graduation.

But- the class requirements…

This is a self-paced course, with a Deposition posted only at the time of testing. The following subjects must be covered in a reasonably thorough manner:

The Integumentary System

The Muscular System

The Nervous System

The Skeletal System

The Sensory System

The Endocrine System

The Cardiovascular System

The Lymphatic System

The Respiratory System

The Digestive System

The Urinary System
The Reproductive System

Fourteen video dissections are required for the course, but more are allowed. Two must be humanoid dissections. The First lesson must be uploaded to the school server in the appropriate location before the Last day of August, and the Last lesson must be uploaded before the First day of January.

As this is a self-paced course, the final exam is standardized, and the examiner provided by the school, not the tutor.

NOTICE FOR NEW TUTORS: a seminar will be held on the Last day of August, wherein the new tutor will be taught the needed spells for their posting, as well as the traditional spells of Tutorship. Attendance is mandatory.

Bountyball teams don’t start tryouts until October, but I should read this flyer soon, today it would just worry me unnecessarily. And I’ll have time to read through the school rules a little later… Materials list, read that later too-

So, after breakfast, I gather materials for camping- Superboy was the one who answered my question about a first aid kit; we have an Infirmary, and it actually has several first aid kits there, but we need the one for- aha, Forest/Mountain. I grab it, and thump it onto the breakfast table, and I need to wash out my bottle for water- it’s a gallon jug that used to have wine in it, and has a sort of thread felted string woven around it; I pull it down from the self, and sniff and no, actually, it doesn’t smell like wine, but I should still wash it out- um, steamer, and boiling pot, and light some incense for my parents, and cooking chopsticks, and carry all these things to the kitchen table.

Um, what else did I need- my hanging platform, and yes I put all the ropes together, woo! And this mosquito netting is nearly new, but it does have a few small holes which I’ll have time to repair… Oh! I know what the cup with the ruffle edge is for, it’s a thing you put a little tea candle into to make a pretty ambiance on a romantic date- so that’s why I’m taking it, I had noticed that normal Glows as bright as I tend to make them are really harsh on the eyes… Bedroll, ah, special double thick sheet so I’ll be warm but not too warm, and a soft pillow- I almost want to take the stuffed gar, but no, that’s silly, I’ll take a regular pillow.

My Milking Stool DA is not in one place, why did I put the base with my umbrellas? Keeping my oilcloth poncho over here makes slightly more sense… and I’m already wearing my boots…

I don’t think I’ll take the citrionic candles, but I do have citrionic incense, I forgot I had that stuff- and why did I put the AP stoppers with the incense, they have no association- nor does a wok- anyway, I take all of my things out and set them on the table; I need to check everything.

Okay- everything’s good, so now the only thing to do is repair the mosquito netting, which… got chewed by moths. Fucking hell- okay, since it’s not a quick repair, I need a story to remember- there has to be something…

Hmm… Well, there’s always one story I know very well- I remember painting an illustration for it a long time ago, and it’s what I used to get my apartment… The story is called The Journey to the West, and this is how it goes:
Far across the Eastern Sea, on the island called the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, a magic boulder had sat on the mountain’s peak since the creation of the world. Bathed in the energies of Earth and Heaven, quickened by the light of Sun and Moon, the stone became fertile, and at last cracked open to release its young.

From this stone egg emerged a full-grown monkey. As it gazed about and above, golden light shot from its eyes to the farthest reaches of Heaven and Earth.

High above in Heaven, the Jade Emperor, Ruler of Heaven and Earth, was startled by the rays of light reaching his Celestial Throne.

“See what’s causing that,” he ordered his chief minister, the Spirit of the Great White Planet Venus.

The Great White Planet went to look out the East Gate of Heaven and soon returned with his report. “Your Majesty, a stone has given birth to a monkey. The rays of light came from its eyes. But now that the monkey has taken food, the light is fading.”

The Jade Emperor sighed. “Only a monkey, is it? Well, we have important business here. A monkey is no concern of ours.”

Elsewhere in Heaven, Lord Lao Tzu, Supreme Patriarch of the Way, was refining Elixir of Life, when just for a moment the golden rays penetrated his alchemy laboratory.

“Such a powerful beam!” murmured Lao Tzu in wonder. “The one who produced it will surely become an Immortal!”

Far off in the Western Paradise, the Buddha paused in his blessed discourse to his disciples as the rays of light shone into the temple hall. He closed his eyes a moment in silent meditation, then turned to Kwan Yin, Most Compassionate Bodhisattva and Goddess of Mercy.

“A remarkable creature has been born: a monkey, yet not an ordinary one. I see he is destined to become an enlightened being, a true Buddha. Yet before he does, he will offer us no end of mischief.”

And so saying, he resumed his blessed discourse.

On the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, in the Heavenly Cave of the Water Curtain, the island monkeys were feasting to celebrate the birthday of their king. But the Monkey King himself sat there gloomily.

“What’s wrong, Your Majesty?” asked an old gibbon.

“Here I am, only four hundred years old,” said the Monkey King, “and I’ve already reached the heights of greatness. What is left to hope and strive for? What can be higher than a king?”

“Your Majesty,” said the gibbon carefully, “we have ever been grateful for that time four centuries ago when you hatched from the stone, wandered into our midst, and found for us this hidden cave behind the waterfall. We made you our king as the greatest honor we could bestow. Still, I must tell you that kings are not the highest of beings.”

“They’re not?” said the Monkey King.
“No, Your Majesty. Above them are godssss, who dwell in Heaven and govern Earth. Then there are Immortals, who have gained great powers and live forever. And finally there are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who have conquered illusion and escaped rebirth.”

“Wonderful!” cried the Monkey King. “Maybe I can become all three!” He considered a moment, then said, “I think I’ll start with the Immortals. I’ll search the earth till I’ve found one, then learn to become one myself!”

The very next morning, the Monkey King ordered a pine raft to be built and loaded with fruit for the journey. Then he took leave of his cheering subjects, floated downstream to the island’s edge, and started across the great sea.

On the Mountain of Heart and Mind, the Monkey King stood before a double door in the mountainside. Beside it was a huge stone tablet carved in ancient characters.

DIVINE CAVE OF THE THREE STARS

“This is the place!” said the Monkey King. “Right where the woodcutter told me. I just hope I look all right in these human clothes.” He glanced down at what he’d gathered on his journey—black boots, red robe, and yellow sash.

Just then, one of the doors opened and a young man peered out at him. “You can’t be the one!” he exclaimed in horror.

“What one?” asked the Monkey King.

“My master, the Patriarch Subodhi, just mounted the dais to deliver the day’s discourse. But instead of starting, he told me to open the door, because someone had come who wished to study the Way.”

“That’s me!” said the Monkey King.

“You don’t say!” said the young man, laughing. “Then come along.”

They walked down a stone corridor and into a large chamber, where thirty or forty disciples faced a dais made of jade. Sitting cross-legged on the platform was a man who looked as old as Heaven, yet strong and healthy. His flowing beard trailed away behind him.

“Master!” cried the Monkey King, dropping to his knees and knocking his head on the floor. “Please accept this humble seeker as your disciple!”

“Humble, is it?” said the Patriarch. “We’ll see about that! But tell me, what is your name?”

“I have no name, Master, for I had no parents to give me one. I was born from a magic stone.”

“Most unusual,” said the Patriarch thoughtfully. “Well, what if I name you ‘Monkey’?”

“Master, what an ingenious idea! It fits me perfectly!”

“Then ‘Monkey’ it is,” said the Patriarch. “And for now, you may stay and learn with the others—just as long as you keep out of trouble!”

So Monkey became a student of the Way. Each day, he studied scriptures, discussed doctrine, and listened to the discourse of the Patriarch. The rest of the time, he swept the cave, helped in the vegetable garden and orchard, gathered firewood, and carried water from the stream. Days went by, then weeks, then months, then years.
One day during the Patriarch’s discourse, Monkey grew so excited that he could not contain himself. With his eyes closed, he got up on all fours and began leaping and turning.

“Stop that!” roared the Patriarch. “Monkey, why are you prancing about?”

“Forgive me, Master!” said Monkey. “I was so happy to hear your words, I danced without knowing it!”

“Is that so!” said the Patriarch, looking at Monkey thoughtfully. “You’ve been here seven years now, I believe. Tell me, what branch of the Way do you wish to learn from me?”

“Master,” said Monkey, “you know how ignorant I am. Anything you want to teach me is fine.”

“What if I teach you the Way of the Seventy-Two Changes? You’ll then be able to turn yourself into anything you want.”

“Wonderful!” said Monkey.

So the Patriarch whispered into Monkey’s ear.

For three months, Monkey practiced the techniques in private. Then one day, as he walked back from his chores in the orchard, the Patriarch came up to him.

“Monkey, how are you doing with those tidbits I taught you?”

“Just fine, Master,” said Monkey. “I can now accomplish all of the Seventy-Two Changes. But tell me, Master, will this make me immortal?”

“Not likely!” said the Patriarch.

“Then I beg you to teach me more.”

“All right,” said the Patriarch. “What about Cloud Soaring? You’ll then be able to travel quickly wherever you want.”

“Marvelous!” said Monkey.

The Patriarch explained, “When Immortals or Buddhas or godssss want to travel great distances, they ride on magic clouds. They rise to the cloud by stamping one foot, and stamp it again to move the cloud forward. But you’re built differently. So instead, let’s try the Cloud Somersault.”

Then the Patriarch taught Monkey how to somersault high into the air, land on a magic cloud, and propel it across the sky with more somersaults.

Another three months passed while Monkey practiced. Soon he could travel for hundreds of miles with each somersault. Then one day the Patriarch paused in his discourse and addressed Monkey again from the dais.

“Monkey, how are you doing with that little trick I taught you?”

“Very well, Master. But tell me, will this make me immortal?”

“I should say not!”

“Then please, Master, teach me more!”
The Patriarch jumped from the dais and stalked angrily up to Monkey. “You greedy creature! Will you never be satisfied? Will you never stop demanding?”

He thumped Monkey on the head three times. Then, with his hands held behind his back, he stomped into his private chamber and slammed the door.

“Stupid ape!” yelled one of the disciples. “You’ve upset the Master!”

“Yes,” said another, “and who knows when he’ll come out again!”

But Monkey just sat there grinning.

Late that night, Monkey crept from the disciples’ sleeping place, out the front door of the cave, and around to the back. There he found the Patriarch’s door left open a crack.

“Come in, Monkey,” came the Patriarch’s voice.

Monkey slipped inside. In the candlelight, he saw the Patriarch sitting cross-legged on his cot.

The Patriarch smiled. “I see you understood my secret signs.”

“Yes, Master. I knew that hitting me three times meant to come here in the third watch of the night. And holding your hands behind you meant to use the back door. I came just as you instructed.”

“In that case,” said the Patriarch, “it’s your destiny to learn the Way of Immortality. Come close, my disciple, and hear the secrets of Eternal Life.”

And so the Patriarch revealed his precious wisdom— but only to Monkey, and that knowledge… that knowledge is different for everyone.

For three years Monkey practiced the secret techniques. His body grew hard and enduring and full of powerful energies. Then one day, he was sitting with the other disciples outside the cave.

“Monkey,” said one of them, “what is that nonsense about the ‘Seventy-Two Changes’? Can you really turn yourself into something else?”

“I certainly can,” said Monkey proudly.

“We won’t believe it till we see it,” said another.

“Then just watch this,” said Monkey. He called out, “Change!” And there in place of Monkey stood a unicorn!

“Bravo! Bravo!” yelled the students. They cheered and applauded as Monkey changed back and took a bow.

Just then, the Patriarch Subodhi burst from the cave. “What’s all this noise?” he shouted. “Don’t you know that followers of the Way never shout?”

“We’re sorry, Master,” said Monkey. “I was just showing them one of my changes.”

The Patriarch turned white. “Away, all of you—except Monkey!”

When they were alone, the Patriarch turned on his disciple. “Is that how you use your powers—
show off? Don’t you realize the others will be jealous? They’re sure to come and demand your secrets. And if you refuse, they may seek revenge!"

“Master, I’m sorry!” said Monkey. “I didn’t think!”

“Well, I won’t punish you,” said the Patriarch. “But you’re not safe here any longer, so you’ll have to leave.”

“Master, where would I go?” said Monkey in alarm.

“That’s your business,” said the Patriarch. “But on your way, you’d better pick up a magic weapon for protection. The Dragon King of the Eastern Sea might have something useful.”

“But, Master,” said Monkey with tears in his eyes, “how can I leave without repaying all your kindness?”

“Don’t do me any favors,” said the Patriarch. “Once you’re gone, you’re bound to land in serious trouble. Just keep my name out of it, and don’t you dare tell anyone you’re my disciple!”

“Master, I promise,” said Monkey. “Good-bye, Master.” Then he somersaulted into the air, landed on a magic cloud, and flew off, head over heels.

At the bottom of the Eastern Sea, before the green jade palace of the Dragon King, Monkey marched up to a cowrie shell gate where a Dragon Captain stood guard. The captain stared in amazement.

“I’m here to see the Dragon King,” declared Monkey. “Tell him it’s the Monkey King from the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit. And be quick about it!”

“Yes, sir!” said the captain, saluting smartly.

In a few minutes, the captain was ushering Monkey into the throne room.

“Welcome, brother,” said the Dragon King stiffly. “How kind of you to pay this most unexpected visit.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Monkey.

“Tell me, brother,” said the Dragon King, “how did you gain the art of living under water?”

“I’ve studied the magic arts of the Way for many years,” said Monkey. “In fact, that’s why I’m here! Now that I’m an Immortal, I need a magic weapon to match my abilities. Can you spare one?”

“An Immortal!” remarked the Dragon King. “Well now, perhaps I can find one for you. Captain, bring out the Scimitar of the Waning Moon.”

The captain fetched a large scimitar. Monkey took it and made a few passes at the air. “Too light! Too light!”

The Dragon King laughed. “Brother, you must be joking. That scimitar weighs nearly a hundred pounds!”

“It just doesn’t feel right,” said Monkey.

The Dragon King looked somewhat alarmed. “Captain, bring out the Battle-Ax of the Noonday Sun.”
The captain brought it out, and Monkey swung it a few times. “Still too light. Way too light!”

Now the Dragon King looked really frightened. “Brother, that weapon is over a thousand pounds!”

“I need more weight!” declared Monkey. “Don’t you have anything heavier?”

“I assure you,” said the Dragon King, “that’s the heaviest weapon in the palace!”

Just then, the Dragon Queen entered from a door behind the throne, bowed graciously to Monkey, then spoke low to the king. “This monkey is no ordinary fellow. Perhaps you should give him the giant stamping rod in your treasury.”

“That old piece of scrap?” whispered the Dragon King. “What could he do with it?”

“That’s his concern, not ours,” hissed the queen. “Just give it to him and get him out of the palace!”

The queen bowed graciously to Monkey and took her leave.

The Dragon King cleared his throat nervously. “I remember now that in my treasury is an iron rod once belonging to Yu the Great. He used it to pound down the beds of the rivers and seas in the time of the Great Flood. Perhaps it will meet your needs.”

“Bring it out and we’ll have a look,” said Monkey.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” said the Dragon King. “It weighs ten tons, and not one of us can lift it! We’ll have to go ourselves to see it.”

The Dragon King led Monkey across a courtyard and into the treasury, then pointed out a pillar of black iron. It was twenty feet high and as thick as a barrel, and both ends were tipped with gold. As Monkey approached, the pillar began to glow.

“It likes me!” said Monkey.

He examined the pillar closely and found characters inscribed near the bottom band.

CELESTIAL STAFF OF THE OBEDIENT IRON

Monkey put both hands on the pillar and lifted it. The Dragon King gasped.

“The weight seems right,” said Monkey. “If only it were smaller.”

At once, the staff shrank to 15 feet and became thinner too.

“Wonderful!” said Monkey. “It really is obedient! But even smaller would be nice.”

It shrank to 10 feet.

“Almost there,” said Monkey.

Five feet.

“Perfect!” said Monkey. He hefted the staff and declared, “It weighs the same as before!”

As they returned through the courtyard, Monkey tried some practice thrusts and parries. The Dragon King turned pale and jumped out of range. “Brother, please be careful!”

Monkey said, “I believe this little beauty will do anything I want.” He called out, “Grow!” Both
Monkey and the staff shot up to over two hundred feet tall.

“Take this! And that!” he shouted, swinging at an imaginary foe. The water swirled so furiously, it nearly swept away the Dragon King.

Then Monkey called “Shrink!” Monkey and staff returned swiftly to normal height. “Smaller!”—and the staff alone became the size of a needle. Monkey lodged it safely in his ear.

He turned to the Dragon King, who was now trembling violently. “Thank you, brother! You’ve been a most gracious host!”

“Don’t mention it,” said the Dragon King.

And with a leap and a somersault, Monkey was gone.

On the surface of the Eastern Sea, not far from the Dragon King’s palace, Monkey landed lightly on a barren rock that jutted above the waves. Stretching himself out on it, he yawned and then studied the sky.

“No that I’m an Immortal, I think I’ll fly up to Heaven and become a god as well. But that’s all after a good nap.”

He closed his eyes and quickly drifted into sleep.

All at once Monkey felt himself jerked to his feet. Two men were clutching his elbows. One man had the face of a horse, the other had the head of an ox.

Horse Face held an official document, which he studied closely. “Is your name Monkey?”

“That’s right,” said Monkey, in a daze.

“All right,” said Ox Head, “get moving!”

They started to drag him off. Stumbling once, Monkey happened to glance back. There he saw himself, still lying on the ground!

They rounded the rock and started across a desolate plain. The sea was nowhere in sight. “Where is this?” he asked. “And how did I get here?”

“He wants to know how he got here!” snorted Horse Face.

“You got here the same way as everyone!” said Ox Head.

After a while they came to the wall of a city. Above the gate was an iron placard with characters inlaid in gold.

DEMON GATE OF THE LAND OF DARKNESS

“Land of Darkness?” exclaimed Monkey, at last coming fully awake. “But that’s the realm of Yama, Lord of the Dead! I don’t belong here!”

“That’s what they all say!” said Horse Face.

“But I’m an Immortal!” protested Monkey. “I’ve gone beyond death!”
“Tell it to the judge!” said Ox Head.

“All right, I will!” said Monkey, snatching his staff from its hiding place in his ear. “Grow!” he cried, and in half a moment he was swinging five feet of it.

“We didn’t mean it!” cried Horse Face, fleeing through the gate.

“Can’t you take a joke?” said Ox Head, racing after.

Monkey followed them in, still swinging his staff. The demons of the city were terrified, and not one of them dared get in his way. By the time Monkey reached the Palace of Darkness, Lord Yama and the other nine Judges of the Dead were waiting on the steps.

“Sir, what seems to be the trouble?” asked Yama nervously.

“The trouble?” said Monkey. “The trouble is you’ve brought me here!”

“But sir, I assure you,” said Yama, “you will be judged fairly and punished—I mean, re-educated—strictly according to your past deeds. Then when the evil you’ve done has been avenged—I mean, corrected—you’ll be returned to the Land of Light for a brand new life.”

“I don’t want to be reborn!” said Monkey. “I don’t want to die in the first place! Don’t you realize I’m an Immortal?”

“An Immortal!” said Yama in consternation. “There must be some mistake!”

“Exactly!” said Monkey. “I demand to see the Register of Life and Death.”

Yama led him into the Hall of Darkness, where a clerk dragged out several musty volumes. Monkey searched till he found his name.

“Writing brush!” commanded Monkey, and the clerk gave him one dipped in ink. Monkey blotted his name from the register. “That should do it,” he said.

“This is most irregular!” protested Yama.

“Tell it to the judge!” said Monkey. He slammed the book shut and rushed out. Then he made his way back to the city wall, swinging his staff as he went.

Just outside the gate, Monkey tripped and fell rolling. When he opened his eyes, he was back on the rock in the Eastern Sea.

“Wonderful!” cried Monkey as he jumped to his feet. “Next stop: Heaven.”

High above in Heaven, at the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors, in the Hall of Divine Mist, the Jade Emperor, Ruler of Heaven and Earth, was having a bad day.

He had spent his whole morning stamping his official seal on documents promoting or demoting heavenly officials. In the afternoon his wife, the Lady Queen Mother, had demanded his help with the invitation list for the Grand Banquet of Immortal Peaches. And now both the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea and Yama, Lord of the Dead, stood before him complaining of some kind of monkey who had become immortal, with power enough to threaten them both.

“I’ll see to it at once,” said the Jade Emperor. “Now, both of you, please return to your kingdoms.”

No sooner had the Dragon King and Yama left the hall than a lieutenant rushed in and bowed to the
“Your Majesty, there’s trouble at the East Gate. A talking monkey arrived there an hour ago and demanded entrance. Four of our guards engaged him in combat, but he is holding them all off with a simple staff.”

“Indeed,” said the Jade Emperor, raising an imperial eyebrow. “This must be the monkey Immortal that was reported to us.” He turned to his commander-in-chief, the Heavenly General of Mighty Miracle. “Round up the twelve Thunder Generals and arrest the fiend.”

But the Spirit of the Great White Planet Venus stepped forward and said, “Your Majesty, as your chief minister, I must point out that this monkey’s deeds may not yet merit such a response. Would it not be better simply to invite him into Heaven and offer him a position? Then we could keep an eye on him and avoid further trouble.”

“An excellent idea,” said the Jade Emperor. “You may go at once to extend the invitation.”

The Great White Planet soon returned with Monkey and bowed low before the Celestial Throne. “Your Majesty, I have brought the Immortal.”

“Remarkable,” said the Jade Emperor, looking Monkey up and down.

“Glad to meet you too!” said Monkey. “So, what’s it like, running the universe?”

A gasp went up from the Great White Planet and from the other court officials. The Jade Emperor stared icily at Monkey. “In light of your primitive background and the recentness of your arrival, I will overlook your ignorance of court etiquette.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” said Monkey. “I knew we’d get along.”

“Now, in regard to a post,” said the Jade Emperor, “my officials tell me the only current vacancy is as a supervisor in the Imperial Stables.”

“Sounds important!” said Monkey. “I’ll take it!”

“Very good,” said the Jade Emperor. “Henceforth, your title shall be ‘Protector of Horses.’”

“Protector of Horses,” said Monkey dreamily. “Thank you, Your Majesty!” And as the Great White Planet pulled him quickly from the hall, he called back, “You won’t be sorry!”

“I’m not so sure about that,” muttered the Jade Emperor.

At the Imperial Stables of the Jade Emperor, a banquet of welcome and congratulation was being held for the new Protector of Horses. In just a few weeks of Monkey’s care, the thousand heavenly coursers and chargers had begun to grow sleek and muscular. The officials under him liked him as well, and so had gathered in his honor.

“What a wonderful feast!” said Monkey as he sampled all the dishes. “I certainly like the food here in Heaven!”

“This isn’t bad,” said his chief assistant wistfully. “Still, it’s nothing compared to the food at the Grand Banquet of Immortal Peaches.”

“What’s that?” asked Monkey.

“Each year the Lady Queen Mother holds a banquet at the Pavilion of the Jade Pool. Her guests all
dine on Immortal Peaches grown in her orchard. Each peach has ripened for nine thousand years and adds that many years to the life of the one who eats it. And for dessert, they have Pills of Immortality, made from Elixir of Life refined by Lord Lao Tzu in the Crucible of the Eight Trigrams. A single pill will guarantee eternal life.”

“I can hardly wait!” said Monkey. “When is the banquet?”

“Today,” said the assistant.

“But I haven’t had an invitation,” said Monkey.

“Of course not,” said the assistant. “Your post is too low.”

“What do you mean?” said Monkey in alarm. “I thought Protector of Horses was a high-ranking position.”

“On the contrary,” said the assistant. “It’s so low, it has no rank at all!”

Monkey was stunned. “So that’s what they think of me, is it? Me! The Monkey King! Well, I won’t stand for it! I’ll go to the banquet whether they want me or not!”

He rushed outside, somersaulted onto a cloud, and sped off.

At the Pavilion of the Jade Pool, servants ran about, busily setting the tables. From where he had landed nearby, Monkey could see trays loaded with Immortal Peaches, and bowls brimming with Pills of Immortality. There were also large pitchers filled with juice of jade, and heaping plates of delicacies like unicorn liver and phoenix marrow.

Monkey’s mouth watered. “I won’t bother waiting for the other guests,” he said. “Change!”—and he became an exact image of the Spirit of the Great White Planet Venus.

Monkey stepped into the pavilion and announced in the chief minister’s voice, “A command from the Jade Emperor! You are all to go to the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors for further instructions.”

“What in Heaven could that be about?” said the head steward. “All right, we’d better not dally.” And all the servants rushed off.

As soon as Monkey was alone, he changed back to himself and started grabbing peaches right and left. They tasted so heavenly, he wanted to eat them all—but since there were so many, he took just a bite or two from each one. He guzzled the jade juice and bolted down whole plates of delicacies. And he popped Pills of Immortality into his mouth like peanuts.

“At last!” he said. “A feast fit for a Monkey King!”

At the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors, in the Hall of Divine Mist, the guests of the Lady Queen Mother had gathered to await the Grand Banquet of Immortal Peaches. Nearly all of the most important divinities were there, including ministers from all departments of the heavenly administration, heavenly generals, many star and constellation spirits, and a number of Bodhisattvas and Immortals. Seated beside the Jade Emperor and the Lady Queen Mother were Lord Lao Tzu, Supreme Patriarch of the Way, and Kwan Yin, Most Compassionate Bodhisattva and Goddess of Mercy.

As the Jade Emperor conversed with the guests, the head steward entered and bowed low before the Celestial Throne. “Your Majesty, your servants are assembled outside the hall, awaiting your
instructions for the banquet.”

“Instructions?” said the Jade Emperor. “I have none to give!”

“But, Your Majesty,” said the steward, “the venerable Spirit of the Great White Planet Venus commanded us in your name to come and receive them!”

“The Great White Planet has been here the whole time, and I gave no such order!” The Jade Emperor turned to his commander-in-chief, the Heavenly General of Mighty Miracle. “Go at once to the Pavilion of the Jade Pool and find out what’s behind this. And take along the twelve Thunder Generals, in case there’s trouble.”

At the Pavilion of the Jade Pool, Monkey had eaten as much as he possibly could and was patting his stomach in satisfaction. But a moment later he looked nervously at the scene around him.

“I don’t think I’ll win any friends this way!” he said. “I’d better clear out before I’m spotted.”

But just then the Heavenly General of Mighty Miracle ran up with the twelve Thunder Generals. “Monstrous monkey!” he bellowed. “You’ve ruined the Grand Banquet of Immortal Peaches!”

“There’s not much doubt about that!” said Monkey, with a sheepish grin. “But what are you going to do about it?”

“You sickening simian!” roared Mighty Miracle. “Have a taste of my battle-ax!”

Mighty Miracle rushed at Monkey, who grabbed his staff from his ear and called, “Grow!” Just in time, he blocked the swing of Mighty Miracle’s ax.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” said Monkey.

Mighty Miracle swung again and again, but Monkey parried every blow. Soon they were moving so fast, their arms were just a blur.

Mighty Miracle bellowed, “Let’s see if you can face my magic powers! Grow!”—and he shot up to over a hundred feet tall.

“I know that trick too!” called Monkey. “Grow!”—and he was once more face to face with his opponent.

The noise of their battle was deafening, and their movements raised a wind that nearly blew away the twelve Thunder Generals. But neither could gain an advantage.

All at once Monkey cried, “Shrink!” and somersaulted into the air. At normal size, he sailed right by Mighty Miracle’s battle-ax. He brought his staff down squarely on the Heavenly General’s shoulder as he passed over it.

Mighty Miracle roared with pain, then quickly shrank to normal size and retreated.

Now the twelve Thunder Generals surrounded Monkey and attacked him with their battle-axes, swords, lances, halberds, maces, and scimitars. Monkey whirled like a top, countering every blow. But after a while he grew tired.

“This is hardly a fair fight!” he said. “But here’s a trick you haven’t seen yet!”

He yanked a dozen hairs from his tail, threw them in the air, and cried, “Change!” Each hair became a monkey that swung an iron staff against one of the Thunder Generals.
“Now I can take a break!” said Monkey. He put his staff away in his ear and stood grinning in the midst of the battle.

At that moment, the Imperial Chariot arrived at the pavilion with the Jade Emperor, the Lady Queen Mother, Lord Lao Tzu, and Kwan Yin.

The Jade Emperor was aghast. “What did I tell you! It’s that fiendish monkey again!”

“Just look at my banquet!” cried the Lady Queen Mother. “It’s a complete disaster!”

“Your Majesty,” said Kwan Yin to the Jade Emperor, “it appears that your generals could use a bit of help in dealing with the Immortal. Will you permit me?”

“Most Compassionate Bodhisattva,” said the Jade Emperor, “I am grateful for your offer. But I must point out that you have no weapon.”

“I have this porcelain vase of willow twigs, which I always carry with me,” replied Kwan Yin. “Allow me to show you how useful it can be.”

Kwan Yin stamped her foot, rose a hundred feet in the air, and landed on a magic cloud. Then taking careful aim, she dropped her vase right onto Monkey’s head.

Monkey dropped unconscious to the ground. The fighting monkeys at once changed back to hairs, returning to his tail.

Kwan Yin retrieved her vase and landed back in the chariot.

“Well done!” declared the Jade Emperor.

“It is not worth mentioning,” replied the Bodhisattva.

The Heavenly General of Mighty Miracle came up. “Your Majesty, what are your wishes regarding the Protector of Horses?”

“Take him at once to the execution block,” said the Jade Emperor. “Cut him into a thousand pieces!”

“Your Majesty,” said Lord Lao Tzu, “I’m afraid such a punishment is no longer possible. After eating so many of my Pills of Immortality, his body must be as hard as a diamond. No weapon could pierce or even scratch it.”

“Then what are we to do with him?” asked the Jade Emperor in dismay.

“Perhaps I can be of service,” said Lao Tzu. “Hand him over to me, and I’ll heat him in my Crucible of the Eight Trigrams. In just an hour his body will be consumed to ash—and at the same time, I can recover my elixir.”

“I accept your kind and considerate offer,” said the Jade Emperor. “We will return to the palace to await word of your success.”

In the alchemy laboratory of the Cinnabar Palace, Lord Lao Tzu, Supreme Patriarch of the Way, dumped Monkey into the Crucible of the Eight Trigrams, clamped down the lid, and lifted the crucible onto the hearth.

“Stoke up the fire as high as you can,” he told his assistant. “We’ll need the greatest heat possible to
Meanwhile, Monkey was starting to come to. “What hit me?” he wondered, rubbing his sore head. “And where in Heaven have they taken me?”

He groped around in the dark. “It’s some kind of porcelain pot, and it’s getting warm! Are they trying to bake me? Or burn me to ashes? Well, I won’t let them do it!”

Monkey pushed and kicked at the lid, but it wouldn’t give. Then he took the miniature staff from his ear, held it pointing up, and said, “Grow!”

In a flash the staff enlarged to five feet, pushing against the bottom of the crucible and shattering the top. As Monkey jumped out, he knocked over the astonished Supreme Patriarch, sending him head over heels.

Monkey ran in a blind rage all the way from the Cinnabar Palace to the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors, brandishing his staff at every heavenly official along the way. At the palace steps he found the Heavenly General of Mighty Miracle and the twelve Thunder Generals, who all grew pale at the sight of him.

“So you thought you could do away with the Monkey King!” shouted Monkey. “Well, here’s a message for the Jade Emperor: I’m no longer the Protector of Horses. I’m now the Great Sage Equal to Heaven. And he’s no longer the Jade Emperor, because I’m taking over! If he doesn’t step down from the Celestial Throne, I’ll come and pull him off it!”

In the Hall of Divine Mist, the Jade Emperor could hardly believe the message he had heard from the Heavenly General.

“The audacity of this wretched monkey knows no bounds!” he declared. “Gather as many soldiers as you need and wipe him out!”

“Your Majesty,” said the Heavenly General uneasily, “I fear we are unable to do so. The creature is too powerful a fighter for any single warrior to defeat. And if we send great numbers against him, he can easily outdo us with an army made from the hairs of his body. Even if we capture him again, we have no way to destroy or imprison him.”

“Just what are you telling me?” asked the Jade Emperor in amazement. “That I must give up my throne to this stinking monkey?”

“Your Majesty,” said Kwan Yin, “I don’t think it need come to that. There is still one who could defeat the rebellious Immortal and preserve your rule. Why not send to the Western Paradise and ask the assistance of the Buddha?”

The Jade Emperor said, “If the resources of Heaven are not enough to defeat this monster, I suppose I have no choice!”

Moments later, the Spirit of the Great White Planet Venus was speeding on a magic cloud out the West Gate of Heaven. It was not long before he reached the Western Paradise, where he landed on the Mountain of Miracles and entered the Temple of the Thunderclap.

The Buddha listened closely to the message of the Great White Planet. Then he turned to his disciples. “Remain steadfast in your practice of meditation until my return.”

Outside the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors, Monkey marched up and down, swinging his staff, till his patience ran out.
“Time’s up!” he yelled at the quaking Thunder Generals. “I’m coming in!”

But just as he stepped forward, a magic cloud landed in front of him. Off it stepped a huge man in the robe of a monk.

“What’s this?” said Monkey. “Who are you, old monk, and why are you standing in my way?”

The man laughed. “I am Siddhartha, often called the Buddha. I am told you call yourself the Great Sage Equal to Heaven and even demand the Jade Emperor’s place on the Celestial Throne.”

“That’s right,” said Monkey. “He’s been there long enough. Someone else should get a turn.”

“The Jade Emperor,” said the Buddha, “has been perfecting himself through four million lifetimes, for over two hundred million years. And you’re not yet even fully human! What makes you think you’re suited to rule Heaven and Earth?”

“I have great powers,” said Monkey. “I’ve mastered the Seventy-Two Changes. And I can travel for hundreds of miles with a single somersault!”

“Indeed!” said the Buddha. “Then could you stand on the palm of my hand and somersault clear out of it?”

Monkey stared at the Buddha. “Enlightenment must have addled your brain! I just said I can somersault hundreds of miles. How could I not jump out of your palm?”

“Then wager with me,” said the Buddha. “If you get off my palm with a single somersault, the Celestial Throne will be yours. I’ll just tell the Jade Emperor to come live with me in the Western Paradise. But if you don’t make it off my palm, you’ll return to Earth and leave Heaven alone.”

“You can make good on your promise?” asked Monkey.

“Certainly,” said the Buddha.

“Then you’re on!”

Monkey put away his staff and jumped onto the Buddha’s palm, which was the size of a lotus leaf. Then he gave the mightiest leap of his life.

Head over heels Monkey tumbled through the air, spinning like a windmill for hundreds, thousands of miles. At last he came to five olive-colored pillars reaching high into the sky.

“This must be the end of Heaven,” he told himself, and he landed at the base of the middle pillar. “That bet wasn’t hard to win. But I’d better leave behind some proof.”

He plucked a hair from his tail and said, “Change!” The hair turned to a writing brush filled with ink, and Monkey wrote on the pillar his Name.

He returned the hair to his tail, gave another mighty leap, and moments later landed back in the Buddha’s palm.

“All right, old monk,” said Monkey. “Now keep your part of the bargain and tell the Jade Emperor to clear out.”

“You impudent ape!” said the Buddha. “You’ve been on my palm the whole time!”

“What are you talking about?” said Monkey. “I somersaulted clear to the end of Heaven! If you
don’t believe me, come see the proof for yourself.”

“Well, there’s no need to go anywhere,” said the Buddha. “Just look down.”

Monkey looked down, and there at the base of the Buddha’s middle finger were the characters of his Name.

“It can’t be!” declared Monkey. “It’s some kind of trick! I’m going back to look for myself.”

But before Monkey could leap again, the Buddha turned his hand over, thrust Monkey out the West Gate of Heaven, and pushed him down to Earth. The hand turned into a five-peaked mountain which pinned Monkey between stone walls. His head and arms were out, but the rest of him was hopelessly trapped.

“You can’t do this to me!” cried Monkey. “I’m the Monkey King! I’m an Immortal! I’m the Great Sage Equal to Heaven! Let me out!”

He stopped to consider. Then he added, “Please?”

High above in Heaven, outside the Cloud Palace of the Golden Doors, the Buddha was receiving profuse thanks and congratulations from the Jade Emperor, the Lady Queen Mother, and Lord Lao Tzu. But at last he said, “I must now return to my disciples in the Western Paradise.”

He turned to Kwan Yin, Most Compassionate Bodhisattva and Goddess of Mercy. “Would you care to accompany me?”

As the two flew west on magic clouds, Kwan Yin said gently, “No doubt the rebellious Immortal deserved a strict punishment. But wasn’t eternal imprisonment a bit harsh?”

“His punishment is not eternal,” replied the Buddha. “You may remember I once told you about this very monkey. He is destined to become an enlightened one, a Buddha.”

“And how will that come about?” asked Kwan Yin.

“Five hundred years from now,” said the Buddha, “I will need a messenger from the Middle Kingdom to come to the Western Paradise and carry back holy scriptures. It will be your own role to find a man or woman worthy of the task. At that time, too, you will recruit our penitent monkey friend to protect the messenger on the long and perilous journey. By doing so, the monkey will atone for his crimes and earn Enlightenment.”

“The compassion of the Buddha is beyond measure,” said Kwan Yin.

Buddha and Bodhisattva smiled at one another and touched hands lightly. Far ahead, the Temple of the Thunderclap gleamed in the setting sun.

And I’ve mended my netting, damn. That’s the power of stories, yo. Oh, hey, my teammates are here- I’ll remember the rest of this story later.

“Hi Wally, Hey Robin, Hello Kaldur.”
“Hi Terry!”

“Hey Terry!”

“Hello, Terry.”

“What are we doing today?”

Wally sits down across from me—“Well, we’ve been talking about that— we all have basically nothing to do, and well… I think we should go camping.”

“Mm. I’ve never been camping before- I think it’s a good idea. Okay!”

He blinks at me, then smiles.

Later that night, after I’ve set up my sleeping platform and gotten talked out of the tree by Wally, after we’ve set up camp and eaten dinner— I think they liked my dumplings, and I know for sure that I liked Megan’s… I’m not sure what it was, because there was no sand in it and I’m not sure how ‘which’ is involved in this object… anyway. There were also things involving sugary squishy pillow-things and melting them onto graham crackers with a square of chocolate on them and then eating them and I don’t really like sweets, have I mentioned that? Not out loud.

Wow- in the light of a moon that’s waning towards Thief’s Moon (that’s when it’s on the wane and there’s only half a slice of moon in the sky), Kaldur is aglow, soft sandy russets glowing pale pale gold, eyes burning green in the light from the fire. When I look at him out of the corner of my eye, his eel tattoos are splattered with pale white dots, like scales. I wonder… I wonder how he’d react to— oh shit he’s looking at me, um. Fuck, what do I—

“Hey so— since we’re camping, maybe we should tell stories.” Robin, you wonderful boy.

“Yeah yeah yeah- Kaldur, um um, Kaldur, um, Tell us about how you became a hero!” I think Megan has had too much sugar- she’s normally not so… bouncy.

And Kaldur smiles and eeeeeeee, he’s so pretty I want to LISTEN TO WHAT HE’S SAYING, LIKE A NORMAL NON-OBJECTIFYING PERSON holy fucking hell.

“I grew up in Shayeris, and entered the military for mandatory service at age 12; I was transferred to the Conservatory of Sorcery shortly after, which is located in Poseidonis. Even though Poseidonis is very different from Shayeris, I made great friends there…

One day, Ocean-Master, a terrible villain, attacked the city, and, after fighting for hours, defeated Aquaman. Garth, a friend of mine, and I attacked Ocean-Master to protect our King, but were no match— however, our actions allowed King Orin to recover, and defeat Ocean-Master. He was impressed with our courage, and offered us both a place as his protégé, like Batman and Green Arrow. I accepted and became Aqualad- my friend, Garth, decided not to, and returned to the Conservatory.”

“(magic isn’t real)” Wally, magic is totally real.

“Um, Wally- how did you get into the heroing thing?”
“Well, Terry, I’m actually a legacy. See, the way it started is Jay Garrick received his powers in a freak lab accident at Lampert laboratories, which used to make chemical things for cosmetics. During the 40s and 50s, he was known everywhere as the Flash, the fastest man alive, but he didn’t think to use a secret identity, which allowed a young fan to track him down. After talking for hours and hours, that fan decided to recreate the events of the explosion under laboratory conditions. He got superspeed too, and became the second Flash. Later, I discovered a cache of journals kept by the Flash, my favorite superhero… so, I recreated the explosion that gave the Flash his powers with my chemistry set.

I blew up my room and ended up in the hospital- After I got out of the hospital, the experiment started to show its effects, and I got super speed, but not nearly as fast as the previous Flashes. The Flash agreed to take me as his partner, but only if I follow his orders completely- and that’s the legacy, and how I became Kid Flash.”

“Superboy, um um- what about you? I’ve heard about how you got out of CADMUS but um um- do you, like, um-”

“I remember some things, but I’m not sure what is and isn’t real- lots of things were just… implanted, by the G-nomes. What’s mostly on my mind is… Destroying Superman.”

Wally just shook Robin’s leg- I guess he was daydreaming. Or since it isn’t day anymore, I guess he was night dreaming? Except that would be actual dreaming and whoops, got distracted.

Oh hey, we’re praising Superboys accomplishments. Okay, I can get behind that- “You explained things to me and you didn’t get upset about it, and you explained it so I would understand- were you upset about explaining all that to me? I’m very sorry if I upset you…”

“You didn’t upset me, Terry.”

I look at him and smile- “Yay!”

A little later, and we’ve sat in silence for a while, all of us a bit more comfortable with each other- and now I want to know “Megan?”

“Yes Terry?”

“How did you become Miss Martian?”

“Well, on Ma’rrz, everyone lives underground because the surface is inhospitable. Family life is important, and families are large- but communication occurs mostly telepathically. There are three main groups of Martians- Green, Red and White. The White Martians are discriminated against by a large part of the green and red community- treated like, like animals almost… I’m a Green, of course, but- but I still think it’s wrong.

I’m really close to my uncle, J’onn J’onzz, who’s a high ranking… police officer is the best translation I’ve come up with, but he’s really a [ambassadorial aid involved in matters of protection], and I watched all of his adventures with the Justice League on tee-vee. My uncle eventually realized he too needed a young partner, like his friends in the League, and returned to Mars to hold a competition, with the prize of becoming his protégé. Half of the Martian population entered, and at first, my uncle was reluctant for his favorite niece to participate. But I did, and I won, and I came to Earth, and it was the happiest moment of my life.”

“Wow!”
“Yeah! But um- Terry, how did you become a hero?”

“Oh! Well… I’ve done lots of things that could be considered heroic, like I’ve killed child-eating demons and I’ve fought a dragon and I once made the lady at the local Revenue Service cry because she was stealing- but I think the thing that really solidified my resolve to be a hero, or something like it, was when I gave the Crimson Avenger something she desperately needed.”

“What did she need?” Kaldur’s voice isn’t exactly velvety- it’s too… mmmm, for that. But. It’s something that I like very much and he just asked me a question-

“She needed- well, I’m not actually sure. I thinks, at the time we met, above all thing she needed someone to talk to who wouldn’t judge.”

“What exactly does the Crimson Avenger do?” Robin- he sounds… puzzled? Worried, maybe…

“The Crimson Avenger avenges people. Violencely.”

They’re all staring at me- so, I explain, in careful language, about how I was going to America by sea for personal reasons, and how I met the Crimson Avenger in a graveyard, probably just after getting a new assignment, and how I talked to her, and learned of her curse. I tell them of altering her curse- because it was then, and still is now, beyond my power to remove it- so that she isn’t compelled to shoot everything dead. I tell them of letting her borrow one of my spells so that she can tell whether or not her clients are being truthful, and whether or not the person she’s about to derive rightful retribution from deserves to be headshot.

And I finally tell them of Kansas, and the horrors of the corn crib. And then my story is over, and it is very silent indeed.

“Really?”

“Yes Wally- Really. Use science to explain whatevers you want to explain- but, for the deaths… I checked the registry at the church, because that’s the only thing that existed that far backs, and their names were listed in birth and deaths, and… and that’s what happened. That’s what I remember.”

I think I might have ruined the mood… well. Too late. And Megan did ask- it’s not like any of my other escapades are much more… palatable. Oh yeah, and before I forget (because I have before and that was awful)- take out the little ruffled cup, stuff it with citrionic incense, and quick application of Firey and there we go, go away mosquito fumes rising into the night. And it always smells faintly of orange peels…

I actually like Megan a lot. Have I mentioned that? Because I do. Like her. I just wish she didn’t occasionally creep me out. Because she does. Occasionally.

And I don’t know why.

On the second day of the- you know what, this is too weird to try and make work, I fucking know I’m off by at least a day, and ugh- on the twenty second day of the month of July, we, as a team, had our first mission. This was also the day I realized that I have serious authority issues, but… yeah. Mission.

Let’s start it… here. When I Jump out of the bio-ship and Fly. Yeah. Why, exactly, would I Jump out
of a flying not exactly alive creature when heights scare me like nothing else? (Strike is scared of small boats, not me.) Because I’m the only other person on the team who can fly, and Miss Martian had to fly the ship.

I’ll explain.

Our first actual Batman-approved mission was a simple reconnaissance mission- honestly, something I’ve never actually done before, simply because my “missions” always go horribly wrong. (Most recently? All I had to do was find one guy, but nope, ended up killing an evil demon woman instead. Bluh.)

Santa Prisca, the world-wide producer of the illegal super steroid Venom (hiss hiss), had ceased all shipping of the drug, despite the fact that the facility seemed to be producing the steroid at full capacity. Our mission was to infiltrate the island, figure out what was going on, and report back to the League. Based on the information we retrieved, the League would intervene.

I’m still not entirely sure what “The League” actually is, but if I ever need to know, I’m sure someone will tell me. Or I’ll find out. Honestly, it sounds like a gang of some sort…

So, anyway- the plan was to sneak in, look around, and then leave. We didn’t do that.

But anyway- skip past the long boring flight out to Santa Prisca, in which I nearly give myself a panic attack- and the first dropzone’s coming, and oh gods I hate heights- nope, business time, I can freak out about my location in relation to the center of the earth later- I’m going before Aqualad, three two one and the floor has dropped out from underneath me and Fly and Shadow and yesss we’re good.

‘I’m en route as we speak, guys. I’ll check in again when I’ve made landfall.’

‘Talk to you then Red X.’

And then I’m flying in the warm night- a dark shadow across the half moon.

I fly in towards the island, and I’m Shadowed, so the sensors don’t register me- and then it’s up loop and fall, drop Fly and Jump to land soft, like a bird on a branch. ‘Okay, I’ve landed. What do I do now?’

‘Red X- get as close to the factory as you can, and scout out the area. We will meet you there.’

‘On it, Aqualad.’

And then I’m Dashing through the forest, a dark shadow in the undergrowth, a slithery serpent of night- and who are those people, what are they doing- pause over them, silent shadow hush and stretch and shiver like a cat and listen closely- “The Master will not be pleased. We shall return at once.”

I follow them, silent and cold in the Shadow.

Whisper soft over leaves long fallen and dead and there, a door- slip under Shadow quiet, hide in a shadow like a silent curse- and then and then we’re at the so called Master (really handing that title out these days) and he’s a snake man. Huh. What is it with snakes?

Wait- shadow just makes me invisible to the eye- can he still- “Hold.”
And then he’s going to go for my throat so move and his hand is very strong and it’s wrapped around
my upper arm so drop Shadow and spin kick and twist the arm and yes, broke that hold real good.
Sliding stop, and blades out and ready to go WHAT WAS THAT SOUND? It was a sort of, a sort of
clicking sound?

‘Um, I hate to be a bother, but should I be worried about these?’ and then I take a picture of what’s
being pointed at me and then everyone is yelling loudly-

‘YES YOU SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT THOSE!’

‘Oh, okay.’

So, stand up straight and hands at my sides, blades away- that girl has a very interesting haircut, but
I’m not sure it suits her face, and wow, that is going to be a lovely bruise on the shirtless guy’s face
and whoops, haircut girl nearly got me there. Hmm. I wonder what I’m going to have for my next
meal- wow, she’s really trying hard isn’t she?- and ow, something just scratched my face and it sort
of tinges oh shit that’s poison and hey~ my ribs don’t hurt anymore and BANG down I go.

That’s just depressing, really.

When I come to, I’m… okay, all of my clothing is still on, but there seems to be a great deal more
space, and wow that is one well-built guy- kind of… mammoth-y huge… and I am tied up, on the
ground, sort of like a sausage. Hmm.

‘I think I’ve been captured.’

‘WHAT!’

‘Calm down, I’m about to effect a daring escape.’

‘WHAT!’

And the Mammoth Guy is about to try and kill me with a stomp, I think they think I’m still
unconscious- rollololololol and yep, that could totally just have been a random happening, totally.
Here he comes again, rollololololol and he’s looking a bit pissed off, and so now- Mongoose climbs
Tree, and he smells terrible, like burnt toast and wet dog and hup! Onto his shoulder, sitting pretty,
and here’s the hand to smack and drop down roll forwards and hop hop hop- they were not messing
around when they tied me up, ties around my ankles, knees, arms, and chest, damn- and crouching
bow three two one and I can feel the displaced air rushing over me, holy shit, I need to get these
things off- I’ll have just enough time to free my legs, Power and snap snap goes the weird not exactly
chains, man, the defined world is weird and yowza, spin and KICK and he goes flying because I
haven’t dropped Power but I need to do something else- Shadow pins him down and Power and
snap goes the rest, drop Shadow and he leaps for me but Egret Snaps Dragonfly and my hand on his
meaty throat and full backbend to suplex WHAM. He groans, and goes limp- I wriggle out from
underneath him, and drop Power.

“So. Was that it, or—” and there’s Haircut Girl, coming in fast fist high and DUCK leg sweep but she
jumps it and I dodge back back back crack on my forearms, Opening Scissors and twist and she
screams because that’s a broken ankle, but she’s up again and whirling into a kick except I’m on the
other side of her leg and Fork Tines and pull-push and scream because that’s a broken knee.

She falls, and moans on the ground and I walk away, because I have other things to be doing.
‘So- I’m free to- whoops, tell a lie, talk in a moment-’

‘OH MY GOD!’

And then I’m fighting the guy I kicked before, and yeah- that was a very good kick, he’s totes got a nasty bruise. And he doesn’t look happy, wow- pull and turn and woah, he’s fast- leg sweep, nope, no go, hey now, no need to break my leg with a stomp. Jesus, and Robin’s about to throw a flash grenade so I Shadow my eyes and I can’t see but I can hear and flop drop and PANG and yeah, Dash away all.

“Hey Robin.”

“Hey Red X.”

‘Retreat so we can regroup!’

‘Roger dodger-~’

‘On it, Aqualad.’

And now we’re running and what is that whirling thing, it looks kind of like a Raptor but not and who is that guy, he’s weird looking- and SHIT FUCK whirl and catch that blade on a bladeside holy fuck. He’s fast- duck back back and Robin throws a punch and is promptly slammed down and low sweep nope and melee fighting is not my favorite thing and woah duck and turn shoulder into Ox Carries Load and low tap heart tap whirling Crashing Waves to throat and both legs up jump and OW FUCKING HELL he got my shoulder but no big deal roll and on my feet.

Am I bleeding- no, doesn’t feel like it but that bruise is going to be wicked and I think that’s enough playing with swords so Dash forwards and Mongoose Bites Fangs (you need two blades for this one) and his sword shatters cleanly across the guard.

Aw yeah.

Red X, represent!

‘Robin, Red X- we need to go!’

‘Right!’

‘Okay!’

And then a whirlwind of yellow- thank you, Kid Flash- and we’re running through a factory (ugh, wasn’t I supposed to scout this place out?) and now we’re in a tunnel and GAH SUPERBOY WHY WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT AND- HOW DID HE GET CONCIOUS SO FAST AAAAAAAAHH- okay, who’s this guy?

“I don’t get it- how could my first mission as leader go so wrong?”

“You have trained to work very well with one person- as we are not that person, your bounty of experience hinders your efficacy.”

Oh wow, Kaldur has some wonderful insight happening and he’s so wonderFUCKING HELL NO THIS IS NOT THE TIME OR PLACE GOOD GODS. (This is hilarious, oh my gods.)
“Well- as I’m obviously not good as a leader… Maybe someone else? Miss Em, Superboy?”

“After what happened last time, no way.”

“Pass.”

“Kei Ef?”

“No way dude.”

“…Red X?”

“I can’t evens scouts a building withouts problem.”

We’re all looking at Aqualad.

He looks back at us (eeeeeeee those green eyes are so perfect omg I want to kiss his eyelids and lick his tattoos and eeeeeeeeee)(that’s more better, fo’ sho’) and sighs.

“I accept the burden then- until you, Robin, are ready to lift it from my shoulders. Our priority is now to prevent that shipment of Venom from leaving this island.”


“Sorry, niños but-” honestly, enough is enough. One second he’s going into some spiel about killing us all and bringing the wrath of the League down on his tiny island and blah blah blah and the next I’ve thrown my blade hilt first- it richocets off the wall of the tunnel and beans him right in the throat. He goes down like a sack of rice.

And everyone is staring at me, okay- “What? We’re on a time limit, right?”

Anyway.

We totally stopped the whirling thing. It exploded mid-air, and then exploded again when it hit the factory building. It was so cool. Aqualad is really the right leader (and I would love to lead him to my bed sometime) and that was the end of our mission…

…except no, no it wasn’t because we needed to get debriefed and dressed down by Batman. Something about not doing what the mission required, or something- there were some praises in there about choosing a leader and adapting to changing circumstances, I think- for some reason, I always have a hard time understanding what Batman says… maybe it’s his accent?

So.

On the twenty third, my rountine goes- ice on shoulder has melted, get up, pee/poop, eat something balanced (coconut rice and black beans), more ice, sleep. Wash, rinse, repeat. By the end of the day, my shoulder’s only hellaciously sore and kind of greenish, not a giant purple heaving mass of ow. Which means- time to plan the twenty-fifth’s engagement.

Ugh.

I hate raves, too- bastardized versions of revels with weird whirling lights and music that pounds in the skull- just. Dreadful.
But still- I need to wear some very specific clothing, so I don’t stand out… I really wish Sinta wasn’t in gaol, so I could call her and ask… ugh… Wait, I have teammates! They might know what to do!

Wait no- it’s after Midnight, I can’t wake them up for weird questions…

So- the activities at a rave always have extremely vigorous dancing somewhere in there, so… I can’t wear skinny jeans like I normally would- it has to be thinner than that- um um… Opaque tights- I have a black pair, and let’s see, um, and my red sneakers (hightops for ankle support!) and ah- I can’t wear my normal heroing outfit, like I want to… except maybe I can, hang on- I KNOW WHAT TO WEAR! It has to be me, but also showing off, and a little risqué- so… a strapless dress, yeah, and red of course, and um…

My hair is what I need to change first- okay right now it’s just too short for anything WAIT WHERE IS THAT DA- it was used by a princess with accursedly long hair and yes, that’s the one and run it through and holy shit that’s a lot of hair. Um. Wow. Okay, I can work with this, I think- I haven’t had hair down to my ankles since I was five, good gods- so, Twin and ack, nearly overcasting here, make it quick- scissors and cutting and whoosh, short cute haircut.

Okay now, there was something else I needed to do- oh yeah, that damn Sim! So, run over to the apartment, grab the tub, I’ve got all the ingredients, pour it together, Twin and mix and chant and pour the water in just right and set it on low to bubble for a few hours and then I’ve overcast, so I go to sleep.

Sleep, man. Sleep is the best.

The next day, I have two distinct premonits- one is that I need to get help from the team because if I don’t, I’ll become a slave to the rhythm and the other is that all of the ravers are female- a guy would stand out, and standing out is a one way ticket to braindrain-ville. Crap. So- that would mean… Aw fuck. I’m going to have to- wait, they might say- no they won’t they’re too nice. Fucking shit.

So- get Superboy and Megan first, because shit this is going to be so awkward. Uuuuuuuuugh.

Thankfully, the awkwardness is somewhat eliminated by the fact that the Team will just go with it after I explain why but still- so awkward.

So. At breakfast, Megan, Superboy, and Kaldur… okay, weird- are there, so I explain to them that at sunset “I get a call to go help my friends, and whether any of yous come help me or not, I’m going.”

“Ah, that’s- why will you have to go help them?”

I sigh. “There are evil musicians stealings mind- I go, fight the evil music people, free their thralls, and get friends back.”

“I don’t see why we can’t help you-”

“They have preference for girls. If you go as you are, they see you, they kill you- so… either don’t go, or… pretend.” And I kind of wince, because wow that was a bad sentence and this is horribly awkward- and I think the rest of the team is here, what even- okay, just go forwards- “Um. I can disguises, or… um.”

“I think it might be easier if we- Megan, could you…” Megan nods. And then we’re all together- hang on, hang on, if I’m going to explain this I need some ambiance- here we go, a theater- plush seats, big screen and-
‘This is the story, as far as I can tell- please hold all interjections until the end:

‘Once, there was a boy who sang like an angel- and where I’m from, that isn’t a hyperbole, that’s an actual descriptor. Shush, Wally.

(I didn’t say anything!)

You were thinking it.

Anyway.

He was a musical genius, and those don’t come around very often- but he was… well. Gifted is the term that tends to be used- but this boy, this one boy… he was a gift. There was a school for those with special gifts, a school where he could learn the most wonderful songs, meet the most amazing people- the best of the best, and wasn’t he the best? So. He went- family packed their strange, gifted child up, and sent him on.

And he went.

(What happened to him?)

‘Well, Robin- what do you think happened to a country boy in a school full of nobles? Nothing good, I know that for sure- but I’m not sure what. I do know, however, that while he was at school, he met another like him, but bad- and she, they… together, they took revenge on their tormentors, because while they were at that school, in that place, they were tormented. If their partnership, their… distortion, had ended there, this wouldn’t be happening. But it didn’t, and it is.’

On the screen come images of women and girls, some desiccated and long dead, some ghostly and shimmering in time to a strange, unheard beat, and some merely still images- and all of them missing. Lost.

‘These are some of the thousands of women and girls who have been stolen away by these two… villains. They have had several thousand years to perfect their craft, and amass a- a collection of women and girls. They have very clear preferences for women and girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty six; they prefer thin to fat, strong to weak, and long hair over short. Their hunting grounds are every nightclub and dancehall- and their traps are much like soft-spots (hole in the world that you can fall through), except not quite so… natural. Unnatural in the extreme, even.’

(So- how do you plan on stopping them?)

‘Since their power comes from the music, I was going to Silence the music and… play a different song- they’re actually going to steal my old bandmates, and it hasn’t been so long that I still don’t know how to sing with those two. And, well- I owe them.’

(What do you owe them?)

‘My emotional sanity- they- they saved me. So… now, when the time comes, I’ll save them. It’s only fair.’

I can feel their curiosity- well, they might as well get acquainted with one of my issues now, instead of later- ‘I’ve been alone for a long time. It’s not by choice- but shit happens in life sometimes, and
you have to keep going, as the alternative is death. So- I kept going, and somehow... I found them. Or perhaps they found me, I don’t know- but. Yeah. I owe them. So- whether you decide to face the horrendous danger of going into a strange dimension to fight powerful, evil ghosts who steal people’s minds and turn them into musical zombies or not- I’m going to save my friends.’

(We’re going with you... but, um...)

‘Yes, disguises and protection from the music of evil. I actually have some ideas for that, but we need to work quickly- I can pick clothing, if Megan can style your hair...?’

(No problem, Terry.)

‘Okay- then we should get started.’

I look at them all- they look back at me, resolved and determined. If there was more time, I’d probably give them all hugs. But there isn’t.

So- run back to my room and grab the OopsieBrush, and everything I flung around to try and find which outfit would look the cutest on me- fucking Christ I have a lot of clothing- and scissors, and sheets for hair, and a comb and lots of clips, so many clips- and I knew I had unopened makeup somewhere! Where is that stage jewelry- And my outfit, and yes, this is going to be interesting-

Sliding stop in tube socks don’t trip don’t trip I make it to the table and set everything down and then trip and ow, that’s my hip, mother of mercy preserve me- okay. So. Kaldur first, because he has the least hair because it’ll be the most dramatic and “Um, stand up please Kaldur.”

“Okay.”

And I take the brush and starting from the back, I brush his hair out. Steady strokes down and away, thick glossy hair golden shiny bright shimmering- when I’m done, honey golden waves of hair fall from the crown of his head and the nape of his neck to his ankles, shimmering in the light. (That’s just lovely, that is.) I smile at him- his green eyes are hazy and whoops I guess he liked getting his hair brushed.

“(but magic isn’t real!)”

“(seems real to me.)”

Megan waves her hand and calls a barstool chair over- it’s very tall, and Kaldur sits in it with quiet aplomb. “Robin, Wally, or Superboy- which next?”

Superboy steps forwards- I do the same thing, coal black with tints of red lengthening, delicate curls near his face, long loops and spirals of hair falling down to his booted feet.

Robin’s hair is much the same, except less curl and more wave, and tints of blue, not red. Wally’s hair is very very soft- and it’s very very fine, and sort of orangey brownish red, shot through with occasional bands of copper and gold.

Kaldur’s is still my favorite though. So much gold! (And it smelled very faintly of saltwater, and the sea, and had the texture of fine raw silk in my hands. Ugh, Kaldur, why are you so perfect...) Wait, I was doing something- clothing!
Right, okay- Robin’s pants are fine, and Superboy’s aren’t- Wally’s are a maybe, depends on if I have the right kind of shirt… and adams apples, um um- chokers, I know I went through that choker phase- yep, I brought them… Hmm… Aha! Bright yellow shirt with red stripes that I only ever sleep in and makes me look like a cadaver- perfection! “Wally, take off your shirts.”

“Um… okay.” And while he’s doing that- pins, pins, lighting brooch set, yes!

And his shirts get stuck on his hair, that’s just sad- I carefully pull them off of his mass of thin fine orangey red hair, and pull his hair through the neck hole of the shirt. “Arms up!”

And then slide the massive shirt over his arms and “Stand up straight!” and yes, it fits perfectly across the chest! Now, Right sleeve pull and twist under over pectoral, left sleeve, pull and twist under over pectoral and strategic placement of brooches and yes. He’s as feminine as he’s going to get without a haircut and some makeup.

I glance over, and Kaldur has very… I think they’re called sausage curls, because you can put sausages inside of the curl, and anyway, he has them and they’re so cute, oh my gods- but no, focus! Um, um um- here we go! “Robin, take off your shirt.”

“Okay.”

And wow, dudes got muscles- and yep, there’s his shirt stuck on his hair, I really didn’t do this right-thankfully, his shirtdress is one of mine from before I got boobs, so- dark blue and it buttons up the front and black belt with a big buckle and “Tie to the left, Robin.”

Superboy- actually, if I could just find a skirt… Pink wrap skirt with sparklies and “Superboy, take off your pants. Um. Please.”

He shrugs, and takes off his pants- and he’s wearing tight underwear, oh my- and I hand him the skirt and he ties it to the left, like he should. (LEGS!)

Okay. So- Robin is now in a long blue top that buttons down the front, black belt set a little high to make it seem like he has hips, and there are giant mockets (mock+pocket) on his chest so he could possibly have boobs. Even though he doesn’t. Tight dark jeans underneath the dress, big sneakers- yeah, he’s good.

Wally is wearing a red… well, it sort of crosses over where boobs should be, and his bust is slightly bigger because of the sleeves shoved under there- and his pants are wrong. Like, all wrong.

“Dude, your pants are wrong.”

“Dude, what’s wrong with my pants?”

“Um- too bigs, and wrong line for top. Mis-matchy, um… most girl with friends would never wear that to party. So- change pants to tighter?”

“But- I’m wearing…”

“Wally just go- oh wait, no-”

“Tell me where are, and I go get…?”

“Um. My room is on the second floor, third door to the right, after the bathroom- you remember how to get to my house?”
“Yes.”

“Okay, well… I need, um-”

“Small clothes- um. Underthings? I know boys only have to wear one…”

“Like Superboy’s. Er. Yeah. Top dresser drawer, on the right.”

Robin is laughing silently- I’m not sure why, but oh well… Oh! “Um- these all go with shirt you wearing, Wally- pick which ones you want to wear.”

Oh gods this is so awkward. And he’s going to stretch my new tights out- no, focus!

So. I’ve never actually used the spinning door thing that glows myself before- I just followed Wally into the Cave.

(Wait- I don’t actually want to touch his smallclothes- yes, they’ll be clean but still- and I don’t want everyone to know about what I’m getting, this is embarrassing enough as it is; um, yeah, reusable grocery bag, and a pair of tongs that I am going to thoroughly disinfect later)- and um- “How do I use the spinny-glowy door?”

Superboy, who hasn’t really spoken all morning, is the one who tells me what to do.

It’s actually very simple- I follow his directions, and go through the door with the bag and the tongs and I am still in my pajamas (Short shorts, ratty shirt, frilly underwear, sports bra I forgot to take off- wait, where are my glasses?). It’s closing in on Noon though- and I really only want to change my clothing once today. I’m glad I fell asleep in my bra though-

Anyway.

After only one wrong turn, I’m at Wally’s house- I go inside, up the stairs, and open the top dresser drawer, and there- neatly folded white bundles of smallclothes. Pinch them up with the tongs into the bag, and butt thump down the stairs- breathe, you’re fine, breathe.

Okay, back to the Cave- oh!

“Hi Wally’s Mother!”

“Hi dear.”

And then I’m out the door, and down the street, and back to the whirling door and through and in the Cave- and Megan has gotten through Kaldur, Wally, and Robin, and is now working on Superboy, wow, go girl go- which means it’s time for makeup.

“Here Wally- go change.”

“Um- did you use salad tongs to grab my underwear?”

“Yes.”

Robin is silently laughing harder now, okay, whatever.

Makeup to make a guy look like a girl is hard. It’s very hard- but only if you don’t have the right colors. I start with Wally- and I should put my glasses on, holy mother of maheym, they’ve been on
top of my head this whole time- WOAH!

“WALLY!”

“What?!!”

“YOU HAS FRECKLE!!”

And Robin is now laughing for real, um, okay- weirdo.

Anyway.

For Wally, I use a pale brown eyeshadow with a little faint hint of red in it, and just like I thought, it makes his green eyes explodingly vibrant, like holy shit. Dark green pencil around the edges and holy fuck, he’s got so many shades of green in his eyes- but his eyelashes are so pale ugh, okay. “Try not blink.” And swoosh with the eyelash wand and “Do not blink.” And there we go, big green eyes that sort of sparkle- a little touch of gold eyeshadow in the corners near his nose, and yes, perfect.

“Smile please.”

He smiles, and I brush on a very slight amount of pink blush, right along his cheekbones and slightly wider over the cheeky part of his cheek. Waah- his jaw is really square, um um- lighter foundation along the curve, and make it so that his face looks rounder along that edge, ugh, so much work making a boy look like a girl- and then lips are last so- “Smile really big please.” And his gums are a sort of, a sort of pinkish red- so, I have a lipstick in that color, little brush and smooth it on- “Lips still please.” And smooth it on smooth it on, and done. Powder to make sure everything sets- powder on the lips so it doesn’t come off- and done.

“Go change shorts, look at self- if you want to change something, let me know, okay?”

“Okay.”

And then Wally stands up, grabs a pair of- wow, really, yellow knee spandex tights, okay- and runs off in a burst of speed. A faint yell of some unnamed emotion echoes throughout the cave. I wonder why- the makeup looked good on him, and the haircut with the bangs and the flippy outs at the shoulder looked really cute too…

“Robin?”

“I’ll do my own eye stuff, because-”

“Right, forbidden on pain of Batman- um, can I do rest?”

He stifles a giggle. “Sure.”

Robin’s makeup goes much faster, as he’s in about the same color palette as Wally, and I know exactly what I’m doing now- also, his jaw is less square. (Well, he is younger…) and then he’s done, and he grabs one of the larger palettes of eyeshadow and a black pencil, and then he’s gone somewhere- and Kaldur is next because Megan is playing with Superboy’s hair, and I don’t think Superboy minds all that much.

I think he might even be smiling, a little bit.
Kaldur’s skin is so smooth, and so soft- I had forgotten the sensation, but oh my goodness. And for his pale green eyes, I think a quiet gold would be right- and oh my gods, he smells so good, like seaweed and starlight and FOCUS DAMMIT and his cheeks look good in a creamy peach and smooth the jaw and ummm if it wouldn’t be weird I would kiss him right now FOCUS! and lips. (If he smiles at me this close, I am going to kiss him. Um. That would be horrifically awkward, so I’m not going to ask him to smile. Oh gods.) (I really want to kiss this boy. I’ve never actually wanted to kiss someone before, it was just something to pass the time with- so what the Hell is wrong with me?) So- not tangerine, but the… Vermillion? Oh my, that’s wonderful- yes, dark vermillion on him looks simply divine, and I want to kiss his vermillion lips so badly right now GODS DAMMIT FOCUS. Oh, he’s already wearing a shirt I would have chosen for him- blue, with darker highlights like waves near the bottom.

“I’ll do Superboy’s makeup, Terry.”

“Oh- well, okay Megan. I get ready for… yeah.”

So- I’m wearing a party dress, short red skirt with slight ruffling, and red laces up the white bodice in front and back- the back ones look like they tie at the bottom but they don’t come undone, but the front ones do, and tie at the top. There’s an internal bra that’s meant to be seen- it’s red and black and lacy as hell, and if it were an actual bra, I wouldn’t wear it outside the bedroom. Ahem. So- to put this on… pull the sleeping shirt up and step into the dress from the neck, lace it over the hips and up the waist high enough to be snug, you can adjust it later- and I’ll take over from here. Pull the shirt down but don’t put the arms back through, wriggle out of the bra and set it aside, lace the bodice up the rest of the way and shirt comes off now because the bodice of the dress is on, and reach under and take the shorts off, and hallelujah, your underwear match and are boy shorts, not bikini briefs; make sure that the bow is even and square, and you’re good to go. I stick a pair of appropriate socks in every pair of shoes I own, so- yep, little black socks that go over my ankles, and boots go on and laced and tied, and I’m dressed.

Hair is done, and make-up needs to be a little heavier than normal- sharpen those cheeks, lips glossy fake cherry candy red, eyes like a broken nose only dusky brownish gold- and brush the hair out one last time, clip it up X style. Now, for this I actually need to use the “special feature” of Light cloth- so, touch the X and focus and when I look again, my legs are dusky and my dress is black and red, not white. And I can feel that my face is… sharper. More… skeletal.

And Megan is wearing hot pink and dark purple. That is a good look for her, I think- and Wally seems to agree.

So, to recap- together, Megan and I have transformed our male teammates into seriously more feminine versions of themselves, versions that will stand up to relatively close scrutiny. That kind of scrutiny will not be on the dance floor, but will be backstage.

Oh dear.

“Aqualad, what’s the plan?”

“I thought you had one…?”
“Um. No- I have goals. I know that I need to do things in a certain order, and that certain dangers will be there, but… normally, I just make it up as I go.”

And now everyone is staring at me and my face is burning, good gods.

Robin to the rescue!

“In that case, X, let me plan this one out- we need to stop the brainwashing music, right? And you’ve dressed us all as girls because-” ‘is my hair going to stay this length?’

“The villains have self-conditioned to accept females as not threat-” ‘only if you wash it.’

“So. We look innocuous enough to avoid suspicion, which means we can get into the place- okay, so… what are the goals of this mission?”

“Goals are, um, get into rave, find villains, break slave bonds, and save friends- um, musical bonds, so… break with better music, or stop rhythm totally. The villains are living off of their slaves, like parasite? Have lived for so so long off of others- there’s nothing left of selfs. Just… echoes. So, if break chains of binding, break villains, kill villains; stop music, stop evil. No more. They aren’t… alive. And if save friends, they help us fight.” ‘My world is not your world. These are not people- they’re ghosts. What does innocuous mean?’

“So, the ultimate goal of this mission is to stop the music, right?” ‘Innocuous?’

“Right.” ‘Oh, that’s what it means.’

“Okay- so, three pronged attack. First, we try to stop the music with sabotage- kill the speakers, break instruments, things like that- KF and I will handle that. While we’re doing that, there should also be a rescue mission going on- Superboy and Miss Em can manage that, I think- so, Red X and Aqualad will try to stop the evil music with better music.” ‘How does that even work?’

‘Depends. If you can’t save friends in time so I can sing, Aqualad and I will fight our way onstage- either way, I’ll use a spell to stop the music.’

“You have a plan in case you can’t sing?”

“Yes- spell for song, spell for silence- can combine the spells but have to be careful. Some spells get stronger when combined- wrong way, could die.”

“Okay- is that the only way to do it?”

“That I know of, Yes.”

Robin sighs, and looks to Aqualad. He nods.

“Very well- we know our roles. Miss Martian, please link us up now.”

‘Alright. Let’s do this.’

To get this many people to where the rave is without arousing suspicion, we have to take public transportation- thankfully, in Kowloon, certain kinds of public transportation is free for use during a certain time of day or night. This happens to be one of those times.

‘Follow me- don’t eat anything, don’t drink anything, don’t take anything. And please, for the love
of all things sacred- do not wander off alone. Oh, and take these, you’ll need them.’ I hand out accessories- chokers that match clothing choices and disguise voices, and random items that just look cute; in the end, we all look like rave girls headed out to party. (I also hand out earplugs, because this is going to be fucking loud, and the less you hear of the evil beat, the better. Which reminds me!)

We board the superfast fishbus- it’s gotten refurbished recently, the tiles are new, and the seats are much more plush- that stops by the roof of my house; we settle into a row, paired off in our mission configurations, and soon enough, we’re there.

I follow the thumping bass, and then the other people- streams of women and girls of all ages, big and small and beautiful and ugly, and all of us moving forwards, towards the sound-

And then, we’re there.

Thumping bass and a screaming synthesizer, the stank of a thousand sweating perfumes roiling in the darkness under a bridge to nowhere- lights flashing against the darkness, and the wet screaming of a thousand women- this, friend, is a rave.

There are probably drugs here too, fuck, I don’t know- ‘You’re looking for two girls: One of them, Jinx, has long light pink hair and pale green skin that sparkles faintly; her eyes are slit like a cat’s. The other, Raven, is a sort of dull white, almost blue color, short curly blue black hair and violet eyes. Put these in their ears to break the spell on them, then tell them to come find me- they’ll be able to handle the rest.’ I hand Superboy and Miss Martian two pairs of earplugs each; they nod, and then they’ve vanished into the crowd, Superboy’s massive strides parting the bodies before him like an angry sea god, pink skirt black shirt FLARE; Miss Martian’s curvy form (neon pink and purple aglow and tight to the skin, work it girl!) wriggling into the morass easier than I ever could.

Aqualad was instructing Robin and Kid Flash about meeting places, and then they’ve vanished too- Blue dress over blue black legs and flippy hair flashing over black sparkle eyes; yellow leggings under red shirtdress, wavy orange-red bouncing over clear red lens- and then they are gone from my sight.

Aqualad and I move through the crowd; I move closer to him and brush my hand across his, and ‘All right?’

‘Yes. It’s just-’

‘Hot and stinky. I know. I’m sorry.’

And he smiles at me. (Nnng. Cheekbones. Holyshit. But I’m too far awaaaaaay~)

We make it, through the gyrating mass, to the backstage- and then with a little wriggle and glance, the stone golem guards quietly ignore us (just two girls who want to have a little fun, nothing to see) and then I see who I’ve come to destroy- and then, they start to… sing.

Thing.

Together?
(Low throbbing base scrapes across my nerves-)

*Why do you try so hard?*

*Maybe you should come on over to my side of town~*

(slow scream of synth and level, thunder in the blood)

*It doesn’t have to be this way—*

*Just let me drag you down—*

(tension in my limbs and I want to dance except this isn’t my jam, this isn’t my jam)

*Dance with me across the concrete floor*

*Let knives of hate stab through your heart~*

(Sneak over to the speakers and there’s KF and Rob, hands pressed over ears- Aqualad is a warmth behind me. Touch their shoulders and Silence, and they open their eyes and stand.) ‘Key it up so that a bass and a drumkit would play.’

‘On it.’

And there, on the edge of the stage, are Superboy and Miss Martian and they- yes, they found the girls!

Which means- here comes the bridge—

(Screaming against my breast bone, and the low dull roar of a forge)

*When was the last time you danced?*

*Maybe today is the day to start~*

And I grab a microphone, make sure it’s turned on, and quietly walk out on stage; Take the singing stance, breathe in eyes up and shoulders back and SCREAM-

*I fucking would if YOU HAD A HEART!*

And it’s so jarring I can actually hear when Shriek misses his beat. Which is all the opening Jinx needs- one second she’s on the broken glass and rave detritus covered ground, the next she’s behind me, drummer extra-ordinary. Oh, she’s wearing- it’s like a flapper’s dress, only sparkly and short. And then the thunder of her drums makes my heart start to pound in time to the effect of “fuck you, fuck this, fuck no” and all that’s on my mind is busting these bitches down- and Raven is at my side, dark jeans, ruffled shirt and black pinstripe vest and her Stringer is in her hands. The low roll of angry guitar, because Raven holds her mind like a peerless gem in the hand of a miser and we have Malchior to thank for that- and then wonder of wonders, I can hear in the reverb of my Sisters rage the echo of an amplifier- Robin and Kid Flash hooked us up.

Which means- time to break the illusion.

(Three of the Bitch/Witch trio’s unplayed melodies, back to back- Pityless Woman/Stolen Away; Bones; Queen’s Death (It’s short and mad and to the point, fuck yeah) and together they create the Chord of Death.)
“Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.
Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.
I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.
I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful - a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.
I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.
I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.
She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said -
'I love thee true'.
She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.
And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dreamed - Ah! woe betide! -
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.
I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried - 'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!'
I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.
And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.
The warder looks down at the mid hour of night,
On the tombs that lie scatter'd below:
The moon fills the place with her silvery light,
And the churchyard like day seems to glow.
When see! first one grave, then another opes wide,
And women and men stepping forth are descried,
In cerements snow-white and trailing.
In haste for the sport soon their ankles they twitch,
And whirl round in dances so gay;
The young and the old, and the poor, and the rich,
But the cerements stand in their way;
And as modesty cannot avail them aught here,
They shake themselves all, and the shrouds soon appear
Scatter'd over the tombs in confusion.
Now waggles the leg, and now wriggles the thigh,
As the troop with strange gestures advance,
And a rattle and clatter anon rises high,
As of one beating time to the dance.
The sight to the warder seems wondrously queer,
When the villainous Tempter speaks thus in his ear:
"Seize one of the shrouds that lie yonder!"-
Quick as thought it was done! and for safety he fled
Behind the church-door with all speed;
The moon still continues her clear light to shed
On the dance that they fearfully lead.
But the dancers at length disappear one by one,
And their shrouds, ere they vanish, they carefully don,
And under the turf all is quiet.
But one of them stumbles and shuffles there still,
And gropes at the graves in despair;
Yet 'tis by no comrade he's treated so ill
The shroud he soon scents in the air.
So he rattles the door--for the warder 'tis well
That 'tis bless'd, and so able the foe to repel,
All cover'd with crosses in metal.
The shroud he must have, and no rest will allow,
There remains for reflection no time;
On the ornaments Gothic the wight seizes now,
And from point on to point hastes to climb.
Alas for the warder! his doom is decreed!
Like a long-legged spider, with ne'er-changing speed,
Advances the dreaded pursuer.
The warder he quakes, and the warder turns pale,
The shroud to restore fain had sought;
When the end,--now can nothing to save him avail,--
In a tooth formed of iron is caught.
With vanishing lustre the moon's race is run,
When the bell thunders loudly a powerful One,
And the skeleton fails, crush'd to atoms.-

(low rumble through the heart, tears drip down your ugly face, lightning flying by in the
thunderstorm and I laugh as you cry)

Her strong enchantments failing,
Her towers of fear in wreck,
Her limbecks dried of poisons
And the knife at her neck,
The Queen of air and darkness
Begins to shrill and cry,
"O young man, O my slayer,
To-morrow you shall die."
O Queen of air and darkness,
I think 'tis lies you say,
And I shall not die tomorrow;
But you will die today.”

The low righteous fury of a girl who sorrows for the dead and screaming who never got to become
what they wanted to be and harsh deadly wrath from a girl who gave her mind blindly before and
will not be fooled again and the terrible boom of rage from a girl who knows what it is to be a slave-
and around us is the shattering Illusion, breaking apart at the seams. Our beats are just too fresh for it
to handle- and with single whispering gasp, it falls apart; the “Masters” are revealed to be
compilations of junk and wires, echo boxes and broken mussel shells that fall apart on the last
booming pound of Jinx's baseline beat.

And in that beat a sound- like the firing of a gun, and at the edge of the stage, the Crimson Avenger
shot a woman dead- and from her shadow rises a monster, that melds with drops of blood spilled
from her chest and oh SHIT- I’ve already run forwards and “Back me up, yo!”

And yes, there are two Cards here for the taking- Wave, sign it, Illusion, sign it- and then leap and
slide under her and let the stealth go, you know who you are- and there, rising before me is a woman
made of dripping bloody ink- Inque.

And she wants me dead.

How do I know this?

Well- it’s kind of obvious someone doesn’t like you when they throw a giant spike at your head.

Strangely, I’m not the one who dodges- Kid Flash lifts me bodily and slides to a stop on the other
side of the stage; and he’s in his uniform, how in the hell- ask later.

‘Her defeat lies in water- I think it dissolves her? But don’t let her catch you, or you’ll end your
jam…’
‘Right!’

And then, to the slowly building strains of Jinx and Raven’s dual ambiance back-up explosion fire, we fight Inque.

We win. (I melt a giant ass block of ice, why is that even here? Whatever.)

(Fuck, I’m tired.)

And then- we go back to the Cave- first we drop the girls off at Raven’s house, but then... yeah. At some point the hair-magic wore off, and everyone’s hair is the original length, except mine because I washed it with soapy water to set the length and my feet hurt, holy shit.

And the couch in the living room is much more comfortable than I remember, and Kaldur is sitting next to me in his normal heroing stuff, why- whatever. Magic is weird, who the fuck even cares.

I guess I fell asleep- because I only wake up when I smell bacon (BAAAAAAACOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNN), and realize that I am aggressively cuddling with Kaldur. Like, legs entwined and nuzzling on the couch, aggressive- I can actually feel him breathing into my hair, okay- but I’m hungry! But he’s so comfortable, holy shit, skin so smooth and he’s like a giant heat sink that smells like sea air and sunlight and the cleft of his neck, right in the hollow space where clavicle turns into throat- right there he smells like musk and fish and lavender and I’m breathing him in now, sweet Jesus- and yeah, he’s awake now, I remember that stretch in the stomach area and his eyes are open and his hands are on my sides and they sort of stroke upwards across my ribs oh shit-

The laughter that comes out of me is small, and accompanied by squirming. And now he’s squirming a little, and sort of laughing slightly and-

Sitting up now. Oh wow.

I am red. My face is red, my neck is red, my shoulders and arms and legs and everything underneath my dress is red red red- and um. Er. He’s red too. Okay. Just. Remember to breathe.

Oh gods.

Breakfast! Eggs and BAAAAAAACOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNNNN, and golden brown bread that has been exposed to heat! Butter! Jam! And the guys look about the same, really- none of them got too wet last night, and there wasn’t any soap around, so they look normal enough to me, other than the fact that we’re sitting at a table eating breakfast and I’M THE ONLY ONE NOT IT COSTUME DAMMIT but anway.

After breakfast, I take a shower, and change into clothing I don’t mind getting various fluids on, and then I check my Sim- yep, still bubbling, add a little sulfur powder and some turmeric, put the lid on that sucker, lower heat to barely warming, and I need to work on my Ghoster some more, um um- oh, hey, there are motorcycles in here now, neat. And this one has a giant red x on it.

I think it’s for me.

Dismantling it goes much faster than I think it will, mainly because I don’t really care if I can put it back together in it’s current form- I am careful to leave the tracer-bugs intact when I pull them off the chassis. And into the Ghoster the pieces go- and then, finally, I start adding cosmetic pieces… at some point, when I wasn’t looking, my pangolin backpack snuck in and started watching
me- and then, when I was about to start upholstering the thing it leapt forwards and combined itself with the Ghoster and now I don’t even- no, no panicking. Breathe.

And there, before me, is a skeletal motorcycle, except it’s also a horse with the wings of a damerfly. And it likes me. A lot. And then it ripples, and looks just like the motorcycle I killed, with a giant red x, just as before, and the addition of a skull face on the… gas tank, I think it’s called.

And Red Tornado is going to have a mission for us today, good heavens, better clean up and take that shower- sweeping the floor, uh huh uh, throwing trash awa~ay- and shower. Soap and water all over my grody flesh, and holy shit that is a beautiful bruise on my shoulder, good gods it’s like a sunrise with all these cool greens and pinkish oranges and wow! Ow- poking is bad ow fuck why ow- why do I always forget to not poke at the stinking bruises, gods dammit- anyway, brush out the hair, wash everything, it’s all good- and STOP THINKING ABOUT KALDUR’S HANDS ON YOUR BODY, THIS IS NOT THE TIME, THEY WILL HEAR YOU IF YOU TRY TO DO THAT, NOT RIGHT NOW.

Argh.

Oh, it’s a hormone rush- My period is coming. (The red flood is coming! It’s the end of us all!) Bluh, why does being a girl have to involve massive influxes of hormones that make me think about having lots of sex? So annoying!

Anyway. We’re going on a Red Tornado mission today, but I’m not sure where… I can’t really- I can tell we’ll be fighting, but I can’t really See it. Which is odd- except it’s not.

My Seeing something (person, place, thing, idea) clearly and truly depends on two factors- the aura of what is being Seen, which is merely the energy that it exudes by existing, and the surroundings of the something- like, like… like, the more things around the something, the easier it is for me to See it. Like picking out a red dot in a field of green-

Unless of course you’re trying to find one red dot in a sea of red dots and this analogy isn’t quite right. Um… but well- it’s more like… like when the only thing you can see is the red dot, all of the empty space, by default, becomes extremely important. Except it’s empty. So what, exactly, are you looking at? It’s a bit like trying to discern the size of a cloud without a mountain to compare it to…

I think- I think part of the reason I hate mirrors the way I do isn’t just because of my body dysphoria- it’s because they’re empty. I know, intellectually, that that’s me, there, in the pale clear waters- but I don’t… I don’t feel it. (How much does anyone really remember about being a child?))

Red Tornado comes around lunchtime- I’m eating a sandwhich, and listening to our mission brief, but then I think I got distracted because… because there was a sudden sensation of being dizzingly high, and overwhelming terror- and of being lost in a place I can’t… See through? What? A Waking Dream, obviously, but- “Your mission, therefore, is to apprehend Psycho-Pirate in Colorado and retrieve the canister of plutonium.”

What’s plutonium? You know what, right now that doesn’t really matter- we’ll be going to go get it, and I can sort of See the thing we’re after; it looks sort of like a, a big silver tea thermos, only more bulky and industrial. With weird yellow and black symbols on it, I don’t understand- perhaps this plutonium stuff is dangerous?
Argh we’re flying aren’t we, and it’s a costumed event so- switch to Red X costume and it’s a red robe dress that stops above my knees, long sleeves, white bodysuit (????) and my mask is… hard? Okay, magic officially makes no damn sense. And I’m going to need a parasol- do I even have a parasol? Wait, yes I do- I have one of Lady Snowblood’s spares, and holy shit, a cooler umbrella/parasol there has never been- and we’ll be leaving shortly, so run off and grab it, and some sunscreen.

I always forget why exactly this is one of her spares- until, of course, I open it, and remember that the Lady is, technically speaking, an assassin…

I should explain.

When I was fourteen, during my year off from school, there was a sort of gala event that went terribly wrong; I read about it in the Moments, and I think it was something like “The Hon. Businessman Tsukamoto Gishirō was brutally killed at the blah blah blah money grabber’s party who the fuck cares…” but the reason I remember it so clearly was that it was the coldest winter on record, snow everywhere- horrible. (And everyone knows that “Businessman” is fancy for gangster…)

Anyway- I was taking the long way around to get back home after running an errand for one of the Cheng sisters, can’t remember which at the moment, and I came upon a woman with long black hair and bright white robes, lying on the ground in a pool of her own blood. Well. You know me- I couldn’t just leave her there, so, I bandaged her wounds as best I could, and carried her back to my apartment. Once there, I rebandaged her wounds, properly this time, put some more wood on the fire, and put her in my bed- and at dawn, she told me her story, and the story of Lady Snowblood- Yuki-sama- is this:

Once, a teacher, his wife Sayo, and their son were attacked by four criminals- who needs a reason why? The woman, and leader, named Kitahama Okono- she held Sayo while the three men, Takemura Banzō, Shokei Tokuichi, and Tsukamoto Gishirō murdered the teacher and his son and raped Sayo.

Tokuichi secretly took Sayo far away to work for him- but Sayo killed him with a knife and went to prison. And in her boiled a rage so potent- well. She was desperate for revenge- so desperate that she seduced any prison guard she could, and finally gave birth to a daughter- the Lady Snowblood, Yuki-sama.

The birth was a difficult one, and Sayo, weary and embittered, succumbed to death- but not before telling the other women of the prison her story, and imploring them to raise her daughter, Yuki, and send her on the path of vengeance that she could no longer tread. It being her Dying Request, the women of the prison were bound to obey her.

And they did- first by raising the baby to a child, then by secreting the child out of the prison, and into the care of a monk by the name of Dōkai.

Dōkai taught Yuki the way of the sword, and when she was twenty, she set off in search of her mother’s vengeance.

And she found it.
First, in killing a man named Shirayama for a man called Matsuemon, the leader of an underground organization; he finds the four villains for her. Then, in finding Banzō's daughter Kobue- Kobue is a prostitute, and her father was an alcoholic wreck with gambling debts. At a gambling house, Yuki played cards with Banzō, who got caught cheating. He was about to be killed, but Yuki persuades the owners to pardon him, and then lead him to a beach and killed him.

A setback came when Yuki learned that Tsukamoto Gishirō had died; she visited his grave, cut the flowers growing there and then cut the gravestone. Matsuemon and his friends notice that Gishiro died just when Yuki started trying to find him, three years before.

A man who saw her attack the grave, a reporter named Ryūrei Ashio, followed Yuki. He questioned her past; Dōkai told him her story. Ashio wrote and sold the story- Dōkai did this to get Kitahama Okono to reveal herself, and Okono sent men to kidnap Ashio. They tortured him for Yuki's location, but he refused to tell them; brave man.

Yuki, learning of his plight and Okono’s location, entered the estate and killed several of Okono's men. She entered the building and is fired upon by Okono- but Yuki-sama is an amazing swordsman, and mere arrows cannot defeat her. However, Okono was crafty enough to call in reinforcements, instead of facing her death head on- and while Yuki fought and killed Okono's men, Okono hung herself. Yuki, enraged, sliced the corpse in half.

Finally- Yuki learned that Gishirō was still alive. She found him at a masquerade ball and killed him, but the dead man wasn’t really Gishirō. (That’s the problem with revenge…)

Ashio and Yuki found and followed the real Gishiro. Gishirō shot Ashio. Even though he was wounded, Ashio stopped him from shooting Yuki as she swung on a lamp between balconies. Yuki stabed through Ashio into Gishirō's chest; she then cut Gishirō's throat, but as he died he shot her with a miniature crossbow. He fell over a railing and onto the ground floor full of guests, thus making the utterly boring and plebian Moments announcement possible.

Yuki, terribly wounded, stumbled outside- and Kobue, whose father she had killed, suddenly appeared. She stabbed Yuki, and then ran away. Yuki fell on her face- and slept, for what she thought would be the last time... but she awoke again, in my apartment, in my bed, wounds bound and warm for one of the few times in her life-

“And it is only now that I find I am at a loss- I do not know what to do with myself, now.”

I hummed, I remember that- and I handed her a bowl of breakfast porridge, rice and fish that day- and I said to her “Well, right now, I think you should eat something- getting shot and stabbed is very bad for the internal humors.”

And for whatever reason, Yuki-sama laughed then. I don’t think I said anything funny, but maybe she just needed to laugh…

Anyway.

Yuki-sama stayed with me for about a month, and left just before New Years; just after New Years, in March, I got a present from her, the parasol umbrella- except it has a sword inside it.

God this thing is cool.
An umbrella or parasol is a canopy designed to protect against rain or sunlight. The word parasol usually refers to an item designed to protect from the sun; umbrella refers to a device more suited to protect from rain. Often the difference is the material; some parasols are not waterproof. Parasols are often meant to be fixed to one point and often used with patio tables or other outdoor furniture. Umbrellas are almost exclusively handheld portable devices; however, parasols can also be hand-held. The collapsible (or folding) umbrella may have first been used in Kiaom, although its appearance elsewhere seems to have been independent, and had sliding levers similar to those in use today.

The word umbrella comes from the Latin word umbra, meaning shade or shadow (the Latin word, in turn, derives from the Ancient Greek ὄμβρος.) Brolly is a slang word for umbrella, used often in Britain, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and Kenya. Bumbershoot is a fanciful Americanism from the late 19th century.

In written records, the old reference to a collapsible umbrella dates to the year 21 A.D., when Wang Mang had one designed for a ceremonial four-wheeled carriage. The 2nd century commentator Fu Qian added that this collapsible umbrella of Wang Mang’s carriage had bendable joints which enabled them to be extended or retracted. A 1st century collapsible umbrella has since been recovered from the tomb of Wang Guang at Lelang Commandery in the Korean Peninsula, illustrated in a work by Harada and Komai. However, the Kiaom collapsible umbrella is perhaps a concept that is yet centuries older than Wang’s tomb. Zhou Dynasty bronze castings of complex bronze socketed hinges with locking slides and bolts—which could have been used for parasols and umbrellas—were found in an archeological site of Luoyang, dated to the 6th century BC.

An even older source on the umbrella is perhaps the ancient book of Kiaom ceremonies, called Zhou Li (The Rites of Zhou), dating 2400 years ago, which directs that upon the imperial cars the dais should be placed. The figure of this dais contained in Zhou-Li, and the description of it given in the explanatory commentary of Lin-hi-ye, both identify it with an umbrella. The latter describes the dais to be composed of 28 arcs, which are equivalent to the ribs of the modern instrument, and the staff supporting the covering to consist of two parts, the upper being a rod 3/18 of a Kiaom foot in circumference, and the lower a tube 6/10 in circumference, into which the upper half is capable of sliding and closing.

The Kiaom character for umbrella is 傘 (sǎn) and is a pictograph resembling the modern umbrella in design. Some investigators have supposed that its invention was first created by tying large leaves to bough-like ribs (the branching out parts of an umbrella). Others assert that the idea was probably derived from the tent, which remains in form unaltered to the present day. However, the tradition existing in Kiaom is that it originated in standards and banners waving in the air, hence the use of the umbrella was often linked to high-ranking (though not necessarily royalty in Kiaom). On one occasion at least, twenty-four umbrellas were carried before the Emperor when he went out hunting. In this case the umbrella served as a defense against rain rather than sun. The Kiaom design was later brought to Japan via Korea and also introduced to Persia and the Western world via the Silk Road. The Kiaom and Japanese traditional parasol, often used near temples, to this day remains similar to the original ancient Kiaom design.

A late Song Dynasty Kiaom divination book that was printed in about 1270 AD features a picture of a collapsible umbrella that is exactly like the modern umbrella of today’s Kiaom.

And we’re here, sweet.

Oh shit- I run out of the Bio-ship, skid on the salt ground, and vomit some ways away from
everyone- okay, I was able to keep my cool, but not the contents of my stomach. Hmm… seasickness wristbands?

I’ll think of something.

Wait- where am I?

A massive plain of bright white, slowly edging into nothing at all- except, no, that’s a mountain. Okay. I kind of know where I am now- so turn around and there’s my teammates, it’s all good except how far away am I from them? They look kind of small, surely I didn’t run that far- so walk towards them and why am I swaying what the hell I should not be able to notice the rotation of the planet- and now I’m with them and the ground is very close, hello- Thump.

“Ow.” I fell on my face, damn.

“X!” Aqualad is helping me sit up, holy-

“I’m alrights, really- just… dizzy.”

Glad I didn’t break my parasol- that would have sucked. So- stand up, “Thank you, Aqualad.” And open up that parasol, the sun is bright.

The factory from which the plutonium (Like, is it from pluto? Does it have special powers?) was stolen is a potash factory- Oh! That’s why we’re being sent!

‘X? You know something about this?’

‘I know why it’s so important, yeah- besides the plutonium stuff getting stolen, I mean.’

(‘…You do know what plutonium is, right?’ ‘No, not really- I’m sure if it’s important, one of you will inform me…’ ‘Terry! Plutonium is a transuranic radioactive chemical element with the symbol Pu and atomic number 94. It is an actinide metal of silvery-gray appearance that tarnishes when exposed to air, and forming a dull coating when oxidized. The element normally exhibits six allotropes and four oxidation states. It reacts with carbon, halogens, nitrogen, silicon and hydrogen. When exposed to moist air, it forms oxides and hydrides that expand the sample up to 70% in volume, which in turn flake off as a powder that can spontaneously ignite. It is radioactive and can accumulate in the bones. These properties make the handling of plutonium extremely dangerous.

Plutonium is the heaviest primordial element by virtue of its most stable isotope, plutonium-244, whose half-life of about 80 million years is just long enough for the element to be found in trace quantities in nature. Plutonium is mostly a byproduct of nuclear reactions in reactors where some of the neutrons released by the fission process converts uranium-238 nuclei into plutonium.

Both plutonium-239 and plutonium-241 are fissile, meaning that they can sustain a nuclear chain reaction, leading to applications in nuclear weapons and nuclear reactors. Plutonium-240 exhibits a high rate of spontaneous fission, raising the neutron flux of any sample containing it. The presence of plutonium-240 limits a sample's usability for weapons or reactor fuel, and determines its grade.)
Plutonium-238 has a half-life of 88 years and emits alpha particles. It is a heat source in radioisotope thermoelectric generators, which are used to power some spacecraft. Plutonium isotopes are expensive and inconvenient to separate, so particular isotopes are usually manufactured in specialized reactors. ‘So- what kind are we retrieving? The exploding kind, or the not exploding kind? Or is there a both going on here…?’ ‘I- I don’t actually know… Huh.’

‘Why else would we be sent?’

‘Well- this is a really big factory, right? Like, largest in the area?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Well, the only reason to have a factory anywhere near a place like this is if it’s for the factory work itself, like to make stuff, and I would guess that this is… probably a potash factory.’

‘What’s potash?’

‘Potash is the common name for various mined and manufactured salts that contain potassium in water-soluble form. The name derives from "pot ash", which refers to plant ashes soaked in water in a pot, the primary means of manufacturing the product before the industrial era.

Today, potash is produced worldwide at amounts exceeding 30 million tonnes per year, mostly for use in fertilizers. Various types of fertilizer-potash thus constitute the single largest global industrial use of the element potassium. Potassium derives its name from potash, and was first derived by electrolysis of caustic potash, in 1808.

Potash is also used in bleaching textiles, glass making, and the production of soap.’

‘…Why do you know this?’

‘Read it in a book- also, I’ve made potash before for selling. It’s good stuff, very sell-able. Saleable? Sold-y.’

And when we finally get to the factory, we’re almost immediately attacked- except, well, I’m sort of… I don’t exactly look like a superhero on first glance, so they mostly ignore me, which means I’m able to question some people before I’m noticed by the Psycho-Pirate.

This is what I learn- there is actually an underlying, deeper problem, here. The few questions I manage to ask paint a disturbing picture- I think, in their pursuit of lucre, the factory workers here have disturbed a Land Warden.

Land Wardens are ancient spells, generally used in battle that lay fallow for several thousand generations, and in that time change from war spell to guardian of place. They tend to congregate around areas of great natural beauty or import- major, ancient rivers tend to have the nastiest ones, while mountain ones are the hardest to disturb. In this place, I’d say, at most, the spell is mid-level, probably journeyman’s work. Meaning, I can modify it- if it were a masterwork, like the ones in the Himalaya Mountains (which lead into the Kunlun Mountains), or the Sahara Desert, I couldn’t touch it. But this one can’t be more than a few thousand years old- and I should, in theory, be able to alter it, slightly.

I think.
Anyway- while I was working out the land issue, the Psycho-Pirate noticed me and looked at me with a very ugly faaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAA

‘AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAA

‘Red X-’

‘AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAA

‘RED X-’

‘GYAAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAA

‘TERRY!’

AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

AAA

‘THERESA!’

AAAAAAHAHAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

‘It is an illusion. Please calm down.’

‘O-okay. I’ll try. Um. I’m sorry.’

‘It is alright- the mission is over, anyway. Kid Flash has retrieved the plutonium, and even though Atomic Skull attacked, we’re all okay.’

‘That’s wonderful- I need to do a thing for reasons. A- a magic-y thing, and um. It might take a few minutes- do we have time?’

‘Certainly.’

I feel a strange grimace slither across my face, and then I’m outside the factory and then I Fly- higher and higher into the air (and oddly enough- this isn’t so bad. Still not something I particularly want to do, but manageable and I’m going to vomit again when I get to the ground, lovely), so high as to see the entirety of the place we came- it’s a salt flat. Hmm. Interesting- which means- okay, since this isn’t actually a mirror, this should be okay- Cloud and plop down onto a fluffy cold seat of water vapor. Cloud the sky gently, letting little bits of purest blue peek through- and then Rain down soft
and gentle, patter patter drip and plip and then stop because there, radiant- a mirror-like stretch of ground, a border between Heaven and Earth.

And there, spinning out of rainbow- prismatic Wards, like I thought there would be- and the maker didn’t add a replenishment clause, gods save me from people without the gift of forward thinking; and there’s… there’s a Locked Being in here? How old is this thing?

Ugh- the release clauses are here, at least- but they didn’t complete the finalization warft? Who the fuck- this is bad craftsmanship!!

Arrrgh!

I am fixing this- no, wait, first Big the umbrella- but- Big the umbrella before you fix the Land Warden (okay, weird)- I Big the umbrella, and then I sort of… fixing a Ward in one way or another is a bit like playing Cat’s Cradle with the Universe, if the Universe were strings… that’s not a good explanation, but…

Anyway- loop over thumbs and hold, complete tie on ring finger at the end of the change, drop wrist and tug-pull-push and thumbs free knot complete and then there is a girl diving at me- she has a pair of wings, okay (yellow and black at the tip), and bright pink hair, not Jinx’s washed out pink but pink like a neon tube dripped over her head, short cut and hello, eyes like mine only black; brown skin, like terracotta clay covered in dirt, and a sort of shining ring, circlet thing, over her forehead; loose gold shirt-dress-thing, sort of wrapped around the chest area? And black pants ending in some really cute flats, holy shit- and now she has a sword and shield, well butter my butt and call me a biscuit- Fly Cloud and draw the sword and BLOCK BLOCK drop down and spin-turn tight, she is right on you.

Low swooping dive and oh shit there goes the Cloud but you’re still Flying and use the canopy as a Shield- that was bright now dive low and BLOCK BLOCK RIPOSTE and SLASH!

Low swooping spin, easy on the turns use the canopy to break speed and gather Cloud again and poof! fog, everywhere, and it’s kinda hard to see- and she’s calming down now I think so, drop Fly and Jump down down down down and land with barely a ripple on the Border between Heaven and Earth. Stand. Sheathe your sword.

And there alighting on the mirror bright blue before me is- an angel, wings sparking with gold- Who knows?

“Hi!”

“Ah- He-hello.”

“I’m Red X.”

“Oh, um… Or-oracle.”

“So- why did you…?”

“I- I thought I was still…”

“Still fighting?”

“Yeah…”

“I think that battle ended a long time ago, Oracle.”
“I think you’re right, Red X. So- where should I go now, do you think?”

“Well… I don’t know. If I were you, I’d take a look around, see what there is to be seen- it’s a big world, and while that battle may have ended, that doesn’t mean there aren’t battles to be fought- um, maybe catch up with old friends…?”

“Y-yeah… Hey, Yeah! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome! Oh, and please” I hand her my calling card. (Fine ivory paper, medium-weight, and printed in Red- Red X) “Call on me for help or assistance, or even just idle chitchat, or anything really, anytime!”

And she smiles at me, and hands me… her calling card. (Ultrafine white paper, heavy in my hands, and printed in Gold- Oracle) “You too, yeah?”

And then she flies away- one beat, two beats, three beats, and she’s gone into the wild blue yonder.

And then I vomit, and realize that I’ve managed to overcast- except on top of some serious emotional trauma, I don’t just go fluffy in the brainpan- I pass out.

Like, full dark, no seeing, nothing, gone.

Thankfully, I manage to topple over backwards, instead of forwards into my own sick.

When I come to, we’re flying again, except Aqua- no, except Kaldur is holding me, and holy shit he smells so good-

‘Thank you.’

‘Eeep!’

Welp. There I go- redder than a maraschino cherry. Yay.

And we now have nine days of downtime; we go back to the Cave, I eat something and hide in my room for the rest of the day, and the next day I- let me see, I need to practice on my Ghoster, make a lesson plan and start those dissections, and start Jinx’s suit- okay, that’s all doable… so, first…

Hmm. Ghoster first, I’ll be using that skill the soonest- which means I should take my stuff out of the saddlebags…

Hmm- what did I bring again? Wait- where’s that materials list- here we go, let’s see-

Alchemy 101: Heggie’s Compounding Companion, three Cauldrons (glass, stone, metal), alembic, aludel, athanor, retort (with stand), crucible, cupellation, sand bath, show globe (with interior tangle ring), slate (with white chalk), Dragonhide Gloves, safety goggles, safety mask.

(Okay, I have everything except the gloves, goggles, and mask; I’ll need to work a shopping trip in somewhere- I knew doing that job for the Alchemist’s guild would pay off! (DA’s man. DA’s are the best.) (Where am I going to put the cupellation? It’s huge!))

Spellcraft Theory 101: Precious Mirror of the Four Elements, full Calligraphy set (student choice, brushes and quills preferred, black ink only please), magnification element (student’s choice, glass is not acceptable), full range of Pigments.

(I’ve got all of this- I just need to find that piece of quartz…)
Evocation 102: *Devliv's Devilry*, safety helmet, pauldron, breastplate, greaves, shinguards. (No metals or plastics.)

(I have everything except for- What are shinguards?)


(I have all of these.)

Animal Leeching: *Bloie’s Anatomy of Creaturese, Grey’s Anatomy*, notebooks (bound and lined please, spiral acceptable), map pencils, black pen, red pen, work boots, work gloves.

(Need work gloves…)

Enchantment: *Peoms of Flowyr Fey*, Bag of Four: Athame, beeswax candle, ball of twine (cotton preferred) hand mirror

(I need to re-sanctify my athame…)

Divination 104: a crystal ball, *Scenes Unseen but Dreamed*.

(I have these too- and wow, how did I fit this many books into my bag…?)

Change 100: *Accounts of the Werelings, their kin, and their ways*, sketchbook

(Yep.)

Warding: *Supplementary Notes on the Art of Figures*, lap table, sketchbook made out of actual paper*, pencil case*, drafting pencils*, eraser*, pencil sharpener*, abacus, protractor, compass, slide rule, sextant, straight edge and ruler (a Gleam-compatible tablet may also be used for items marked with *)

(I need to make a lap table- I have an extra pillow that would be perfect, but what should I use for the table part… hmmm… and I think I actually have a voucher for a tablet… somewhere- I need to clean my room. Rooms.)

So- carry all these books back to my room, and the crystal ball and the pencils and why did I do this all at once I can’t see and whoops- three steps left drop down leap roll stand and “Careful going around corners please!” and walk on.

I’m not entirely sure who I just dodged around- there was a jagged black cape? And red legs, very toned? Oh well, no worries- I’m at my room now and put all these books on yet another desk- that’s a sewing desk, a girly desk, and a student desk, Jesus- and I need to read the Bountyball flyer.

Okay- it’s right over here, and I need a tack board or something- it’s going on the list, I guess…

Cast Twin and I clean my room and I read the flyer-

The flyer says something about prestige and honor and no one really cares, what’s the point- oh, it’s called Bountyball because of a weird gamebreaking gimmick, okay- aha, rules of engagement:
This is a team game played with two teams of at minimum, ten; twelve substitutions are allowed per game. Team A that wins a coin toss has thirty seconds to take their positions on the field of play- their job is to guard their pennants and each other from capture. Team B then must attempt to capture A’s members and pennants- capture of all members is called an All Out, and awards fifteen points. Capture of all Pennants is called an Honor Out, and awards twenty points.

When an All Out is called, a substitute member of the captured team may call All Free and free their teammates, on the condition that they forfeit their chance of play in the game. This is worth twenty points to the captured team.

When an Honor Out is called, a substitute member of the honorless team may steal or otherwise retrieve the captured Pennants of their team, on the condition that their own pennant is sacrificed. This is worth fifty points to the captured team.

There are three tasks a player must do during gameplay- Capture, Restore, and Honor.

To capture another player, Player A on team A would knock Player B on team B from their mount, or steal their pennant. This is worth five points to team A.

To Restore another player, Player C on team B would catch Player B on team B before they fell, or restore their pennant after capture. This is worth five points to team B.

To Honor another player, Player B on team A would distract Player C on Team B from assisting Player B on team B. This is worth five points to team A.

The Bountyball is released in the event that the game has been played for two days straight with a tie; capture of the Bountyball is worth five hundred points. (Why is the Bountyball shaped like a fox? Oh fucking shit)

The game is over when one team forfeits due to exhaustion, when one team earns a thousand points through capture of player or pennant, or when it has been played for twelve days- in which case, the team with the highest score wins. If, at that time, there is a tie in scores, a sudden death round will be called, with the last player mounted and possessing of their pennant winning for the team and declared Honor Uncatchable.

Captured teammates cannot Restore pennants until freed. Restored teammates cannot Honor or Capture for five minutes after restoration. Honorless teammates cannot Capture until Restored.

There are four positions: Catcher, Jailer, Thief and Switch. Catchers prioritize capture of opposition players. Jailers prioritize the guarding of captured players. Thieves prioritize the theft of opposition pennants. Switches may switch between all three.

It is at the discretion of the Captain of the team as to which player is in which position.

There is no eye-gouging allowed in play.

Safety gear is recommended, but not necessary.

All weapons are allowed.
An individual’s pennant must be visible at all times on the field, bigger than a bracelet, and smaller than a banner.

At the end of the season, the team with the highest overall scores (most pennants retained, most players captured, most players restored) will compete with each other for the honor of playing against our greater school’s Bountyball teams- winning of this championship level event is grounds for automatic consideration of Graduate Appeal.

The Saint Jude’s branch of Seldvirck’s Academy of Applied and Unapplied Mystical Energies has not won the championship games of Bountyball in millennia.

To sign up for your school’s Bountyball teams, sign on the line below, and the tryout sheet will be sent to you in two days time.

Okay. Welp. I sign the overly perky sheet of paper with my appellation of choice- bright red X like a slash from a sword- and I can feel the Geas being laid on me. Oh dear. I’ve signed a contract.

Oh, hey- found all the stuff, and the Alchemy stuff was made Pictoral for travelling purposes- how big is the cupellation forge, dimensions are… oh, that’s not so bad- and it autovents through the Alchemists Vents in Kowloon, sweet. So- there’s that weird corner that’s too big for a wardrobe but too small for a motorcycle- yes, perfect fit, so desk that is one less than five going over here, and set up that Alchemy stuff, bluh, and there’s an autovent for tables in this Pictoral too- there we go, all set up, and hah, ready for meaningful study at some point. And I have a fridge too…? Okay- there’s room next to the cupellation, so- and it’s a really cute turquoise too!

Do dee do dee do, cleaning up the room do dee do dee do- and I need to do laundry, wait- the Cave has washing machines! HOLY SHIT YES! And I have laundry carts! Woo!

Oh wait, some of this is handwash only- and these rugs are ready to be put on the floor now (Arabian rugs are beautiful, but also finicky, and I’m so glad I have pads for these suckers) so clear the floor and roll the pads out first and lay down soft silk done in mesmerizingly intricate patterns and holy shit that’s soft and lovely. And now my room is too… old. I do still have all those proofs and bad copies- I could hang some?

(For those who don’t know- In modern printing, a proof is a test print to show exactly what the final print will look like. Typically it is run on an inkjet copier. It is good for catching typos and some rendering distortions like font issues. However, it isn't a good way to predict true color in the printing process as it is not an exact proof. In art, proofs or trial proofs have the same function: to make sure the art is reproducing as planned. Proofs are done before a final run of a print is done to allow the artist to change and improve the image.

In art production when the trial proof is approved the edition is run. The approved print is the printer's proof and is kept by the printer. It is marker "P.P." Traditionally, the publisher or artist gave the printer extra copies as an acknowledgment of a job well done. Today the number of printers’ proofs is about the number reserved for the artist. The artist's proof refers to the percentage of the prints of a series that is run off and kept by the artist. It is usually about 10 percent of the prints and
they are marked "A.P." Both of these runs are typically identical in appearance to the limited edition, but may vary by the color of ink and type of paper used. The artist's and the printer's proof can be used by the artist and printer for their own personal use or can be sold or given away. They are considered an investment, allowing the printer to share in the benefits of his skill.

For collectors the question "Are printer's proofs more valuable?" comes up a lot. Most art prints are numbered, but not all printer's proofs and artist's proofs are. Since the printer's and artist's proofs are almost identical to the limited edition and run at the same time, they usually are no more or less valuable. All prints are signed by the artist.

An edition is the number of prints run in a series. These are signed by the artist and numbered--1/100, for example. The printer's proof and artist's proof are not counted in the limited editions. This practice can give buyers a skewed idea about the rarity of a particular print. There may be 120 total prints instead of 100. Giclee, silk screen and lithography are common types of art prints that are considered original art that is typically run in editions, numbered and signed by the artist. A printer's proof in art photography is the master proof against which all other prints are compared to check for quality and color. Photography prints are not always run at the same time. The photographer themself may create the master proof.

I have several thousand different proofs, everything from promotional pictures of burlesque dance shows to ads for housewares- the reason I have so many is because, when I’m really and truly strapped for cash, I’ll do a few jobs; when I started it was lettering only, but then I moved up in ranking- at this point, I’m usually asked to make the person in the advertisement… like, happen? Anyway, there are a few in here that I like more than the others, some for wine, others for places- and I guess I could hang some of them.

(My job, in the past, has been to evaluate certain parts of each proof and send it on to the next worker- and if I spot a glaring mistake that can’t be fixed in time, I pull it from the line. Since the faulty proofs are usually destroyed or otherwise made worthless, no one cares if the workers take ones they like.))

And I do have stick tape- fuck it, why not? It’s my room…

And I need to eat something, gods, what is with this forgetting meals thing? Hmm- I wonder what we even have to eat. (Oh dear.)

I’ve signed the flyer, so time to train that Ghoster- it has a battle mode- what even… how does that work…? Welp, only one way to find out- it’s settled in and gelled, so- test it out!

Oh shit I said it- too late, here we go- The Ghoster rears, screams, and takes off in a flurry of neon-red sparks. Low sweep around the edge of the room and bounding leaps through the air and if I wasn’t holding on so tightly I’d be screaming with laughter-

Hmm. I think I’m going to have an avocado and bacon (BAAAAAAAAAAAAAACOOOOOOOOOOOOON!) and maybe some lettuce? Hmm… Oo! Sourdough– Bread! And mayonnaise- that isn’t mayo, that’s something else. Hmm. It might be useful to put my glasses on-
Ahahahahaha! This is so fucking fun! Woo!

And time for laundry! Sandwich was good with the not mayo stuff, but a little sweet- and now for clothing washing! Yeah!

Whoops, there go my glasses- I don’t need to see, whatever-

Hmm, I should probably separate these out into colors, except all I wear is black, white, and red. … Perhaps I should invest in some other colors.

And the Ghoster is slowing down, I think I made it- nope, tell a lie, battle mode! Bring it on!

And I’m glad this laundry cart has a washboard in the bottom of it- this sink is really deep too, here we go- and I always forget to bring- oh, sweet, they already have hanging up thingies. Lalala laundry, lalala-

Split in two, leap from one to the other and dodge some nasty red lasers, wow-

Soap and detergent, uhuhuh, smelly sheets that make things soft, yeah yeah yeah-

Back flip, flip-flop, low spin and flutter through the air like a banner, and fall like a star from the heavens-

Fill the sink with holy-shit that’s hot water, add some soap and the wash board, and shuhshuhshuh scrub those clothes. Cleaning smallclothes, cleaning them clean~

Leap fall, spin dance wriggle low rolling bounce and Jump arc over and land soft as feathers where you started. Rest. Dodge again-

Hanging up clothing, no worries or cares~
And this time I can feel it, the ending coming-

And time to stare at the laundry! Whirling spiral of red-

So. Jump high and let yourself fall, and then-

And then-

Land.

See.

A woman in black that I’ll spar with; an archer in green with long hair of gold; a helmet that shines gold and yellow and will steal you away if unwary; a lecture I will enjoy, but behaviors I will not; the tyranny of angry men; an interesting old man, but also a crazy old man; and I’m going to break my nose.

That was remarkably uninformative. No indications of time or place- just events. Not even what the people involved look like!

Oh, time to put the laundry into the drying machines- do de do de do- and there are counters here for folding things, amazing. The stuff I hung up can go into the dryers now- excepting for my actual measured and fitted with underwires and everything bras; those are air-dry only.

Let’s see- laundry is done and folded, so back to my room and put it away, re-organize the rest of my stuff (why do I keep all this stuff?)(because someone gave it to me) and… Oh, hey- my phone’s ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Red X, right? It’s Oracle- I, um, I’m sorry to call you so early-”

“No, it’s alright, what’s the matter?”

“Um, well- did you sign up for Bountyball? Like, you just signed up?”

“Yeah…”

“Um- Well, okay, so I went back to my CO, and she got me into the St. Jude’s branch at Seldvirck’s,
and um… I’m. Ah. I’m captain of one of the school Bountyball teams so- so I was wondering… if you’d… play for me?”

“What position?”

“Um- since I don’t, ah, actually have that many players- you’d be a Switch…”

“That’s cool. I’m In- I can also recruit some other players, if you want…?”

“Oh yes, please- you’re the only person I- thank you.”

“Alright- so, send me the practice schedule, and I’ll call you back when I know if the people I have in mind are willing to play.”

“Thank you, X.”

“No problem. Talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay. Farren-well.”

“Right, Goodbye.”

Hm. Put the Ghoster away, and Bubbles to clean up this mess- now back to my room. Aha, and I’ve finished putting away all my clothing, so- switch, and I’m going to start organizing my smaller bits and pieces of DA detritus- need more incense for family altar; and time to call Jinx.

“Jinx, you there?”

“Terry, hey- what’s up?”

“Well- have you signed up for Bountyball?”

“Wasn’t planning on it- why?”

“Well-” and I tell her about Oracle, trapped in a Ward for millennia unknown, and now in school and-

“Terry, I’ll be happy to help her out- but, you maybe want me to, ah, talk to Raven about it? She’s not too ‘appy with you at the mo’.”

“What? Why?”

“…You are about to start your period right?”

“Yeah- oh. Oh shit- I totally forgot about the checkup!”

“Yeah, I know, and so does she. You really gotta start takin’ better care of yourself, Ter, this is just-”

“I. I think I might be overdoing it, a little… I skipped a meal today.”

“Terry!”

“I know, I know- I just… got distracted. Oh, hey- when do you want me to fit you for the suit?”
“Yeah, no- what’s going to happen is you’re going to wait in your apartment for Raven, who’s going to check you up, and then you’re going to take the rest of today and all of tomorrow off.”

“But- but Jinx! I have so much to do, and- and your suit, and I have to go school shopping and-”

“No, Terry. Today, and tomorrow- rest. Please. Fuck, I’ll even send my old video games- It’s not like you resting two days will hurt your plans o’er much, yeah? And when was the last time you did something just for fun…?”

“I. I don’t… I don’t remember. Holy shit. Yeah, send over those games.”

“Will do, and I never play them anymore, so I think… I guess, like, keep them or whatever- and, yeah, so, Raven will be over there within the hour; be ready, ‘cause she is not happy.”

“Well- alright, but… but your suit, though-”

“I can wait. Rest, Terry.”

“O-okay. Um. Okay. Thanks, Jinx.”

“Anytime. Later.”

“’Bye.”

So. Over to the Apartment and HOLY SHIT this place is… bigger, now. There are several doors that have numbers- like, five doors for my- oh! Five palaces! And I guess I can go through if I wanted- but wait, there are actually si- seven, seven doors- the Apartment door to the roof, the Door to the Cave, and the Five palace doors- cool!

And that’ll be Raven, knocking on the door- taptaptap.

Yep.

Okay, time for a check-up, in which I am to be poked, prodded, and harangued-

“holy shit you’re horny- that’s a serious sexual imbalance, Terry, you know better.”

“W-what?”

“when’s the last time you orgasmed?”

“Um- Hello, Raven, How are you?- the sixth or seventh, maybe?”

“hello, Terry, i’m fine- and you’re supposed to be letting out your sexual energy at least once a week, Terry, that’s three times a month at minimum. How many have you had this month?”

“Ah- o-one. Oh dear.”

“do I have to explain this again- well, obviously yes, since it seems you’ve ignored my prescription yet again-”

“Aw, Raven, come on now-”

“the Reason you, Theresa, need to orgasm at least three times a month has to do with your internal
balance of humors, specifically the balance of your five elements. You are, of course, Water dominant, but your Fire can overpower your Water very easily—basically, you think more often than you feel, when your natural state of being is more about feeling. Orgasming semi-regularly will—"

“Will rebalance my Fire-to-Water ratio without changing my natural Earth, Wood, or Metal ratios, which are almost perfectly balanced, and would suffer from meddling. I know, Raven, I just… I just haven’t… wanted to.”

“Terry- please don’t… don’t Freeze again; your Wood can’t take it. (We both know for the most part, Earth is a lost cause…) your Freezing… it always happens around this time of year, midsummer, and then again near midwinter, and- and it’s frightening. please don’t freeze your heart.”

“I’m sorry Raven- it’s just so… it hurts. It really fucking hurts.”

“I can tell- but, well- right now, you’re just… you’re just putting it off. you have to face the past, even when it hurts. Especially when it hurts.”

I sigh. “If I do this, I won’t be able to… to.”

“i know- so, make up a list and give me some funds, and I’ll buy the things you wanted to get. we lived together for a while, so I think I know your taste pretty well- but, i think, honestly, that this is a necessary thing to do. so- i don’t mind buying things on your behalf. also, i think i’ll have lots of fun playing Bountyball on Oracle’s team.”

“Cool. So… diagnosis?”

“Lack of orgasms compounded with emotional freezing- my prescription is to get the toys from the box under your bed you think I don’t know about, use them, and then cry your eyes out about whatever’s been eating you for so long. this isn’t something that can continue, Terry. the Past must be Reckoned with.”

“I know, and I understand. Thank you, Raven.”

“you’re welcome, Terry.”

So. I pull out the box of, ahem, toys, and go back to my room at the Cave- and there it is, I knew I was being watched- now, how do I get up there? Oh, hey, while I was gone I put a lot of posters up- I guess I could use one of those…? I have that stupidly huge one that’s big enough to go in that corner and will cover that little watching eye just fine, thank you- so, both of me grab some tape and the massive poster and Jump and tape and tape and tape and Jump and tape and smooth and tape and Jump and press and smooth and tape and now the entire corner is an explosion of semi realistic flowers- the reason this one wasn’t used is because the writing was wrong- and now… I guess I need to soundproof my room? No, archive rooms are always pretty well insulated- so, the only thing left is… to get to it. I suppose.

I’m going to skip past the horrible feeling of trying to orgasm when you know you’re supposed to, and can’t quite do it. It’s amazingly horrendous- like when there’s a word on the very tip of your tongue but you can’t spit it out, except it’s like there’s all this pressure inside of you, hot and gooey and tense and crackling in your belly and you want it to go away so badly but you can’t quite do it.

Ugh.
So awful.

So- why do I always try to freeze my heart around this time of year? Well- during those two years on the streets, I did many strange and terrible things to survive- some of them more terrible than others. I- I suppose I should tell you about the most terrible thing, the reason my… kin, won’t talk to me. Won’t look at me.

And I will- but that means that I’m going to tell you about the Mahjong Gang, and the one scar I try to never think about. Yeah, this was during that time I wasn’t there- take your time, Terry, I know this is hard for you.

Thanks, Strike.

First, let’s get an idea of what I used to be- first, shrink me down about fifty centimeters, drop several kilograms off of my body; basically, I was just skin and muscle and bone. As for my eyes- I like to think, now, that my eyes are kind. Gentle. (Raven says that they are like that sometimes, but only when I’m actually feeling calm and gentle- sometimes they snap and burn like broken ice, and sometimes they swirl like a windstorm at sea- anyway.)

My eyes then were- I had the kind of stare (and if I truly have to, I can call it up again) that could peel paint off a wall, could make a rabid dog walk the other way, could make a man with a gun back down, and this I know because I have done these things with the force of my furious stare. I call this Glare Number One, and I haven’t used it in a long time.

Yeah, well- this time in my life was marked by two very distinctive things- my loneliness, and my fury.

I’ll explain- no there’s too much. I’ll sum it up- I was alone because I had chosen to be, and I was angry with my choice because- and this is a bit embarrassing to admit, but, in the defined world, which is where I stayed for those years, I have one of the very worst senses of direction ever. It’s gotten better, now- navigating Kowloon will do that- but then… even if I had wanted to go back, and there were days when I did, I couldn’t find a way. Like, literally, I didn’t know which street I needed to go down.

However, that doesn’t explain why I don’t want to remember this time- so, I’ll say it plain, if I can; during this time, I was at my lowest. I fought people for money, I ate things from the garbage, there were times I didn’t really see the point in bathing- fuck, I almost joined a gang, I very nearly went through the initiation- and that, I think, is what I don’t want to remember.

Why not?

The initiation was… okay, so, after a ritual beating in which I was marked with a burn, right under my… my left breast, feel that? Yeah, the weird… it’s a rectangle with curved edges. Why? Yeah. Um. The- the Mahjong Gang divides itself into suits, like the game of Sparrow? So, um- so, I was nearly inducted into the Honor suit, which has two divisions- Wind and Dragon. Wind is more concerned with money and status, while Dragon just wants a good fight- and back then, I was one of the best fighters there was.

So… what was the initiation?

I… I had to kill someone in one of my fights- the um. The person who was trying to get me into the gang, Big Time, he- he set the fight up, and all I had to do was, was kill m-my opponent. I. I couldn’t
do it. I don’t remember, exactly, how I got to the fight—just that… that when I got there, there was this girl, with, with long yellow hair and big blue eyes, and I was so afraid of, for, her, for some reason— but. But it was my— it was my task to fight her, so… I did.

Dive down from the roof and growl like a wild thing— and Big Time gave me something to drink and I’m so angry— my hands and feet are red, like blood, and I feel like I could rip someone’s throat out with my teeth and I want to kill a man, I want to kill a man dead. Leap forwards and scream a challenge and she dives back— and she says something, but I don’t understand her, I don’t understand her at all. I don’t question it.

Dart forwards and claws swipe and scream again— except I feel weird, I feel wrong, but I’m just so angry— I want to kill her. I don’t know her, she’s never done anything that I know of, and I want to kill her and I don’t understand and I want to kill her I want to kill her—

Hissing snarl and a tail that lashes and my jaw cracks open like a zipper and I leap forwards and she catches me in the chest with a booted foot of brighter red— my red is the red of semi-dried blood, fresh on old and gleaming sticky sour red— and she dodges and ducks and palm strike to my chest and it hurts and roll forwards claws flying to the throat and—

Roar from the gut and fire screams out, gushing wound bleeding screaming; claws in mouth and “Blades of Blood!” and they fly out like arrows from my tongue and slash and cut and lick bloody gouges into the street and across her body and she turns from me and whimpers— “Moon Tiara Action!” And a crescent of glowing gold whirls out towards me and catches on my leg and I can’t feel it why can’t I feel it— oh no, oh no that’s a— that’s a pin and she’s turning to face me and her hair is so yellow and her eyes are the purest blue and I’m scared, I’m so scared, so— “Hellfire Gaze!” and lasers like spars of iron reach out of my skull and slick across the air, blood stench thick in the air and flowers of X— and still she stands.

Oh fuck.

“STARLIGHT HONEYMOON THERAPY KISS!”

And then I feel like I’m reliving the moment when I first Dreamed of the horror that was to visit my family and I’m living the moment when I almost died of fever in the arms of a woman I do not truly know and I’m living the moment when Strike stopped talking to me and I was for the first time in my life alone and I’m so alone and Big Time means to kill you, if we cannot defeat her.

What?

He’s going to kill you if you don’t win.

Oh hell no.

Thought you’d say that.

And then the attack is finished, and I feel— different. Better, somehow. More… more me than I’ve felt for a long time. So— I stand again, and she looks scared now, but— I smile, and bow, and say “Thank you.” And then I turn and stare at Big Time, who I thought was my friend but— (friends don’t treat friends like objects)— I was wrong.

I run towards him, gearing up for a fight, and then he grabs my fist as it flies towards his face and he pulls me forwards over his hip and then I’m through a window that glows and then I’m falling
And when I hit the water, darkness is all I know.

I awaken on the bank of a river, beneath an overpass- the same one that my parents drove off of, not too long ago- and it is then that my sight returns. And I See that Big Time is standing before his superiors, explaining my failure- and a flashing flicker of green light in a ray (death ray), and then he’s rotting from within, a puddle of person-gunge on the floor. Water sluices through a pipe in the wall and washes him away- and a man aglow from within, skeleton black and white and green yellow glowing glowing glowing (A Blight upon the Land) and then I See no more.

I think that was when I began to actively seek out the Nightmarket- before then, it was just a place I sometimes hid in when I wanted to vanish for a little bit, but after that- it started to look more and more like a place I wanted to live, far away from such dangers. I think that was when the idea of… of shunning fame and glory started to grow, and my training with Tiki only solidified it, made it stronger- and now… I’m- And I think that’s where my fear of heights came from… and my crotch is really sticky and wet and ARRRGH THE RED FLOOD IS UPON US UGH UGH UGH I REALLY HATE THIS PART OF BEING A WOMAN FUCK FUCK FUCK UUUUUGH.

I have to change my sheets, wash out my shorts and underwear, and use tampons again. Glad it’s only going to be for five days, this is horrible enough as is.
Something about that moment in our life; something in you was changed. Something was altered by that magic, and I’m not sure what… but I am sure that it’s starting to wear off.

Oh dear.

Showering away the blood from my nethers, showering the blood of the moon away~ and tampon in and scrub scrub scrub, and no more blood gunk here, no siree. I’m really glad the blood-gunk didn’t have time to dry, it’s coming out of my smalls and shorts really easily- the same cannot be said for my sheet though. I guess I can retire it to painting dropcloth level or something…

Dum dee dee, changing clothing to loose pants and a big t-shirt, dum dee dee- brush hair and braid it back so it doesn’t get in your eyes, la la la~ and back to my room with a pit stop at the laundry room for my slightly bloody fabrics. Doo dee doo dee doo.

And Jinx sent over the games, alright- oh, cool, it’s a Playpal Dreamweaver! And good gods that’s a lot of games- I see, okay, it’s mostly game suites and graphic/aural patches, that’s more like it, and… and those are controllers, sweet Jesus. Ugh, it’s covered in Dust! though, I’ll have to clean them off…

To the Living Room! (Sitting room? Room with NSV in it- Common Room, there we go!)

And this box is actually pretty nice, for something that used to hold shoes- oh, hey, game cleaning stuff is in here too~ yes, video games! Let’s see, ultrasoft wipe, crystal game cartridge- and this is a NienTien-dao suite, cool, multi colored mushrooms, weird turtles, and a pair of plubmers- let’s see… Oh my gods, this is- this is the wonky Incipisphere suite, they only sold a thousand of these before they were pulled from the shelves, I think- yes, the multicolored ptolemy’s gate proves it! This cartridge has the at-home version of Sburb on it! (I’ve played the arcade version before, and the card game version, and it’s really really fun, but also really really hard, oh my gods) and of course all the Squiddles games, which are fun in their own way; hmm, this is… LoZ? I’ve never heard of it… but I like this trio of golden triangles, and the sword with wings is nice too…; Squeenix, another one I’ve never heard of- Wait, no, this is the game series that always has a character that looks really similar to Gackt. Hm… not sure if that’s good or bad, I’ve forgotten what he looks like…; Acorn Studios, I think this is the one with, like, the weird go slow, farming type games…? I don’t know, I was never into those…; and these are blank, why- oh that’s right, Dreamweaver’s open platform…

Let’s check the console itself- it’s a dull, off white thing with very clean lines and gentle curves; a big red spiral on top, for the games, and- oh, this is a hook-clip model, meaning there should be PlayBands with matching Inserts- yeah, I have… wow, fifteen, in every color of the rainbow- red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, pink, black, white, brown, clear (actually sort of blue-ish), sparkling, red and green striped, and pink and purple swirls. But they all need to be washed- and yeah, they’re made out of something that can be washed, so- scrub in the tub rub rub rub and dry them off, and yes. Anything else in there? Oh yeah, graphic/aural patches- really more like inserts, sort of like… like little cards? And there’s a little tray for them- yeah, like a little slip them in thing, I guess… and aha, cords! (Gemworld has more electrical stuff than Kowloon does, and no one is entirely sure why- but I’m pretty sure that-) yes! compatible with the view-screen! Excellence!
So- since I’ve never actually played any of these games before- oh sweet, data wiped already, so, let’s make a New Player- Name: Theresa, Favorite colors (up to five~!): Red, White, Black, Gender (Anything is possible!) Female, Best Hand: Ambidexterous, How Old: 15 years of age- okay, that’s all it wants to know and I have to make 1500 on BubbleBash in Squiddles before any of the other games will play. That’s… a bit annoying.

But, no, it’s a safety feature- Squiddles is the most basic game for a reason, it goes through basic controls, introduces some of the weirder concepts that tend to carry over into other video games… and allows the modifier-cards (graphic/aural) to warm up, and inscribe into the system.

So.

Okay, load all of the game suites- they look like oversized coins, like game tokens, even- poker chips. What’s poker? A card game, like Sparrow only with more betting. Huh.

Welp.

Let’s play some Squiddles.

~Squiddly and cuddly, suctiony and snuggly

Together with my tangle buddy I belong…

Happiness and laughter

Joy forever after-

Squiddle-y-dee, squiddle-y-dum,

Let’s all sing a Squiddle-y song~

Oh dear. This should be… interesting.

About an hour later, I have no idea what’s going on. There are brightly colored objects whirling past, and I sort of wriggle my fingers and they *sparkle* and it’s all very odd- and then the words BUBBLE BASH! Flash across the screen and suddenly I am looking at a very muscular octopus with a handlebar mustache and some rather impressive battle scars.

Oh, and he’s sort of… blue? With grey tentacles, and it looks like both of his googly, anatomically incorrect eyes have been blacked by punching- oh dear, a cutscene, this should be weird- “I am the third strongest fighter, the son of the son of the STRONGEST FIGHTER IN THE WOOORRRRRRRRRRRRRLLLDDDD~!”

“… Okay…?”

“HUH. YOU DO NOT beliEVE MEEEE?????????? THEN FIGHT ME, BABE!”

“HEY NOW!”
And then, strangely- something… clicks. It’s weird- one second my hands are kind of numb from
trying to fight the game, the next I have a controller, and then I’ve flipped upside down and holy shit,
this is fun- punch punch X+D+O COMBO die die die you weird-ass octopus die!
KABLAMMO!
“Uuuaarrrgh- y-you are indeed a worthy opponent~ SO FIGHT MY FATHER!
DAAAAAAAAAD! I FOUND ONE FOR YOU!”
“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAT~!”
“I SAID I FOUND ONE FOR YOU~!”
And then a much bigger octopus is fighting my little squidleeni avatar, and holy shit this is so much
fun- X+X+SPIN+D+O SPINDASH SEVENTEEN SPARKLER PARADE crashity bashity
wooo~! And I think I’m kicking my feet- fuck I am, sweet Jesus, I’m really having fun- punch punch
MEGA PUNCH+O+D+STAR EXPLOSIVE LOVE BATTALION CRASHER and hahahaha!
BASHOOOOOOOOOOM!

“UUUUuuuuuuuuaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrgh. It’s been so long since I was defeated- you are, indeed,
a most worthy opponent. SO FIGHT MY FATHER!
DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
“I
FOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUNNNNNNNNNNNNNNDDDDDD
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNEEEEEEEE
FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOORRRRRRRRRRRR
YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”
“RIGHT-OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO-”
And that is a preposterously huge octopus- and someone is laughing really hard, oh OH THAT’S
ME HOLY FUCK YEAH- ahahaha punch punch combo and this music is really upbeat and
starshine combo+X+X+X+X+X+O CANNONADE KISSY HUGGLE FEST-SPLOSION!
“UUUUUUUUUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRGH~
are INDEED a truly Mighty Opponent! Thus, I bequeath to thee- THE LAURELS OF
FRIENDSHIP! NOW, young lady, GO FORTH AND SEEK YOUR FOURTUNE!”
And now there are suites of games, and GConnect is active, cool- oh, hey, time for a food.
I squish my hands together to save-pause, and then I sit up and stand, and I’ve stood on the other side
of the couch, I didn’t know that was possible- short couch, then.
Food. Food is good- coconut rice and beans left over from the other day, slice some avocado in
there- and I guess I missed breakfast, leftover bacon (so damn tasty) goin’ in the boooooowl~ um um
um, cilantro, chives, sesame seeds, a little bit of fish sauce- om nom nom. So tasty.

Tomorrow, I think I’m going to relax on the beach… yeah, I should make sure my swimsuit still fits,


and then I’m going to relax on the beach. But first- VIDEO GAAAAAAAAMES! YEAH! And I’ve overcast a lot in the past week or so, so… today and tomorrow, no casting for me. Argh. Magic, why you gotta have restrictions like that…?

I play various video games for the rest of the day- battle strange monsters, break pots and take the rupees within, gain and loose hearts, mushrooms and green turtle shells, red turtle shells that breathe fire, blue turtle shells that fly, green turtle shells that have spikey backs and spin, and when you punch some of them they kill the others- pipes of green and blue and purple, dive down one and HIDDEN AREA; banana peels and inky squids, ghosts that freeze when you look at them, slippery ice levels, celestial fireworks and mini-bosses, wonky controls on powerful vehicles, annoying helper fairies and healing springs; air battles, sea battles, giant squid and evil wizards- so many strange and fantastic things, and oddly… I’m kind of… bored?

Because, well- most of this stuff is inaccurate, or misspelled, or… wrong. The only thing that seems pretty consistent is the battle simulators, and even then, they’re kind of predictable after a while. But still- I’ve managed to play for a few hours, so… do something else.

Hm… I’ve got some books I could read- no, I’ve read all of those. Um. I could paint?

Yeah.

I’ll paint for a while- so, close out all applications, save and quit; I’ve got a much nicer, cleaner box in my room- grab it, come back, sort out the controllers with their inserts and the games go into this partition, and the console goes here, disconnect everything and put it- aha, there are other consoles under here, cool, room for one more, all right! And that’s enough video games for one day- time to paint.

Hmm… what should I paint though?

Oh, hey- maybe Megan will have an idea.

“Hello, Megan!”

“Hello, Terry! What’s up?”

“Um- I play too much video games today, need to paint some… um, but have problem.”

“What’s that?”

“I do not know what to paint!”

“Ah- well, you could paint… a landscape? I mean, sunset is in a few hours, so…”

“Oh! Hey, yeah- thank you, Megan, that’s a great idea… Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome, Terry.”

That was awkward. I need to not miss meals with Superboy and Megan- I need to socialize with them better.

Oh wait- “Megan?”

“Yeah?”
“When is supper?”

“Um- at six…”

I look at her, tilt my head- “When is six?”

“Ah- that’s about three hours before sunset.”

“Oh! Okay, thank you!”

“You’re welcome.”

Kiaom painting is one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions in the world.

Painting in the traditional style is known today in Kiaom as guó huà, meaning 'national' or 'native painting', as opposed to Western styles of art which became popular in Kiao in the 20th century. Some modern examples of these traditional artworks can stem from Kiaom artists such as Amanda Teh, Jennifer Wu, and Johnny Chen. Traditional painting involves essentially the same techniques as calligraphy and is done with a brush dipped in black or colored ink; oils are not used. As with calligraphy, the most popular materials on which paintings are made of are paper and silk. The finished work can be mounted on scrolls, such as hanging scrolls or handscrolls. Traditional painting can also be done on album sheets, walls, lacquerware, folding screens, and other media.

The two main techniques in Kiaom painting are:

Gong-bi, meaning "meticulous", uses highly detailed brushstrokes that delimit details very precisely. It is often highly colored and usually depicts figural or narrative subjects. It is mostly practiced by artists working for the court, Celestial or otherwise, and in independent workshops.

Ink and wash painting, in Kiaom Shui-mo or also loosely termed watercolour or brush painting, and also known as "literati painting", as it was one of the "Four Arts" of the Kiaom Scholar-official class. In theory this was an amateur art practiced by gentlemen, a distinction that begins to be made in writings on art from the Song dynasty, though in fact the careers of leading exponents could benefit considerably. This style is also referred to as "xie yi" or freehand style. I’m… I’m getting better at it- Gong-bi is what I learned first, but today… I’m going to try Xie Yi style.

Landscape painting was regarded as the highest form of Kiaom painting, and generally still is. The time from the Five Dynasties period to the Northern Song period (907–1127) is known as the "Great age of Kiaom landscape". In the north, artists such as Jing Hao, Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, and Guo Xi painted pictures of towering mountains, using strong black lines, ink wash, and sharp, dotted brushstrokes to suggest rough stone. In the south, Dong Yuan, Juran, and other artists painted the rolling hills and rivers of their native countryside in peaceful scenes done with softer, rubbed brushwork. These two kinds of scenes and techniques became the classical styles of Kiaom landscape painting.

Kiaom painting and calligraphy distinguishes themselves from other cultures' arts by their emphasis on motion, and change with dynamic life. The practice is traditionally first learned by rote. The master showing the 'right way' to draw items, which the apprentice has to copy strictly, continuously, until the movements become instinctive. In contemporary times, debate emerged on the limits of this copyist tradition within the modern art scenes, where innovation is the rule, while changing lifestyles, tools, and colors are also influencing new waves of masters. I learned to write, and read, by rote
memorization- I didn’t actually develop my own style until last year, and it’s still changing; I still come across Words I’ve never seen before, every day. All the time. It’s wonderful and annoying.

The earliest paintings were not representational but ornamental; they consisted of patterns or designs rather than pictures. Early pottery was painted with spirals, zigzags, dots, or animals. It was only during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) that artists began to represent the world around them. In imperial times (beginning with the Eastern Jin Dynasty), painting and calligraphy in Kiao were among the most highly appreciated arts in the court and they were often practiced by amateurs—aristocrats and scholar-officials—who had the leisure time necessary to perfect the technique and sensibility necessary for great brushwork. Calligraphy and painting were thought to be the purest forms of art. The implements were the brush pen, made of animal hair, and black inks made from pine soot and animal glue. In ancient times, writing, as well as painting, was done on silk. However, after the invention of paper in the 1st century AD, silk was gradually replaced by the new and cheaper material. Original writings by famous calligraphers have been greatly valued throughout Kiao's history and are mounted on scrolls and hung on walls in the same way that paintings are. Artists from the Han (206 BC - 220 AD) to the Tang (618–906) dynasties mainly painted the human figure.

During the Six Dynasties period (220–589), people began to appreciate painting for its own beauty and to write about art. From this time we begin to know about individual artists, such as Gu Kaizhi. Even when these artists illustrated Confucian moral themes – such as the proper behavior of a wife to her husband or of children to their parents – they tried to make the figures graceful.

During the Tang Dynasty, figure painting flourished at the royal court. Artists such as Zhou Fang showed the splendor of court life in paintings of emperors, palace ladies, and imperial horses. Figure painting reached the height of elegant realism in the art of the court of Southern Tang (937-975).

Most of the Tang artists outlined figures with fine black lines and used brilliant color and elaborate detail. However, one Tang artist, the master Wu Daozi, used only black ink and freely painted brushstrokes to create ink paintings that were so exciting that crowds gathered to watch him work. From his time on, ink paintings were no longer thought to be preliminary sketches or outlines to be filled in with color. Instead they were valued as finished works of art.

Beginning in the Tang Dynasty, many paintings were landscapes, often shanshui ("mountain water") paintings. In these landscapes, monochromatic and sparse (a style that is collectively called shuimohua), the purpose was not to reproduce exactly the appearance of nature (realism) but rather to grasp an emotion or atmosphere so as to catch the "rhythm" of nature.

(Painting during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) reached a new level of sophistication with further development of landscape painting; immeasurable distances were conveyed through the use of blurred outlines, mountain contours disappearing into the mist, and impressionistic treatment of natural phenomena. The shan shui style painting—"shan" meaning mountain, and "shui" meaning river—became prominent features in Kiao landscape art. The emphasis laid on landscape painting in the Song period was grounded in Kiao philosophy; Taoism stressed that humans were but tiny specks amongst vast and greater cosmos, while Neo-Confucianist writers often pursued the discovery of patterns and principles that they believed caused all social and natural phenomena. The painting of portraits and closely viewed objects like birds on branches were held in high esteem by the Song Kiao, landscape painting was paramount. By the beginning of the Song Dynasty a distinctive landscape style had emerged. Artists mastered the formula of creating intricate and realistic scenes placed in the foreground, while the background retained qualities of vast and infinite space. Distant mountain peaks rise out of high clouds and mist, while streaming rivers run from afar into the foreground.
There was a significant difference in painting trends between the Northern Song period (960–1127) and Southern Song period (1127–1279). The paintings of Northern Song officials were influenced by their political ideals of bringing order to the world and tackling the largest issues affecting the whole of their society, hence their paintings often depicted huge, sweeping landscapes. On the other hand, Southern Song officials were more interested in reforming society from the bottom up and on a much smaller scale, a method they believed had a better chance for eventual success. Hence, their paintings often focused on smaller, visually closer, and more intimate scenes, while the background was often depicted as bereft of detail as a realm without substance or concern for the artist or viewer. This change in attitude from one era to the next stemmed largely from the rising influence of Neo-Confucian philosophy. Adherents to Neo-Confucianism focused on reforming society from the bottom up, not the top down, which can be seen in their efforts to promote small private academies during the Southern Song instead of the large state-controlled academies seen in the Northern Song era.

Ever since the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), painting had become an art of high sophistication that was associated with the gentry class as one of their main artistic pastimes, the others being calligraphy and poetry. During the Song Dynasty there were avid art collectors that would often meet in groups to discuss their own paintings, as well as rate those of their colleagues and friends. The poet and statesman Su Shi (1037–1101) and his accomplice Mi Fu (1051–1107) often partook in these affairs, borrowing art pieces to study and copy, or if they really admired a piece then an exchange was often proposed. They created a new kind of art based upon the three perfections in which they used their skills in calligraphy (the art of beautiful writing) to make ink paintings. From their time onward, many painters strove to freely express their feelings and to capture the inner spirit of their subject instead of describing its outward appearance. The small round paintings popular in the Southern Song were often collected into albums as poets would write poems along the side to match the theme and mood of the painting.

Although they were avid art collectors, some Song scholars did not readily appreciate artworks commissioned by those painters found at shops or common marketplaces, and some of the scholars even criticized artists from renowned schools and academies. Anthony J. Barbieri-Low, a Professor of Early Kiaom History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, points out that Song scholars’ appreciation of art created by their peers was not extended to those who made a living simply as professional artists:

During the Northern Song (960–1126 CE), a new class of scholar-artists emerged who did not possess the tromp l'oiel skills of the academy painters nor even the proficiency of common marketplace painters. The literati’s painting was simpler and at times quite unschooled, yet they would criticize these other two groups as mere professionals, since they relied on paid commissions for their livelihood and did not paint merely for enjoyment or self-expression. The scholar-artists considered that painters who concentrated on realistic depictions, who employed a colorful palette, or, worst of all, who accepted monetary payment for their work were no better than butchers or tinkers in the marketplace. They were not to be considered real artists.

However, during the Song period, there were many acclaimed court painters and they were highly esteemed by emperors and the royal family. One of the greatest landscape painters given patronage by the Song court was Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145), who painted the original Along the River During Qingming Festival scroll, one of the most well-known masterpieces of Kiaom visual art. Emperor Gaozong of Song (1127–1162) once commissioned an art project of numerous paintings for the Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute, based on the woman poet Cai Wenji (177–250 AD) of the earlier Han Dynasty. Yi Yuanji achieved a high degree of realism painting animals, in particular monkeys and gibbons. During the Southern Song period (1127–1279), court painters such as Ma Yuan and Xia Gui used strong black brushstrokes to sketch trees and rocks and pale washes to suggest misty space.
During the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), painters joined the arts of painting, poetry, and calligraphy by inscribing poems on their paintings. These three arts worked together to express the artist’s feelings more completely than one art could do alone. Yuan emperor Tugh Temur (r.1328,1329–1332) was very fond of Kiaom painting and became a creditable painter himself.

Beginning in the 13th century, the tradition of painting simple subjects—a branch with fruit, a few flowers, or one or two horses—developed. Narrative painting, with a wider color range and a much busier composition than Song paintings, was immensely popular during the Ming period (1368–1644).

The first books illustrated with colored woodcuts appeared around this time; as color-printing techniques were perfected, illustrated manuals on the art of painting began to be published. Jieziyuan Huazhuan (Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden), a five-volume work first published in 1679, has been in use as a technical textbook for artists and students ever since. (I have a copy of that somewhere- oh, no, third shelf, second case from the door- I know exactly where that one is…)

Some painters of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) continued the traditions of the Yuan scholar-painters. This group of painters, known as the Wu School, was led by the artist Shen Zhou. Another group of painters, known as the Zhe School, revived and transformed the styles of the Song court.

During the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), painters known as Individualists rebelled against many of the traditional rules of painting and found ways to express themselves more directly through free brushwork. In the 18th and 19th centuries, great commercial cities such as Yangzhou and Xanghai became art centers where wealthy merchant-patrons encouraged artists to produce bold new works.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, Kiaom painters were increasingly exposed to Western art. Some artists who studied in Europe rejected Kiaom painting; others tried to combine the best of both traditions. Among the most beloved modern painters was Qi Baishi, who began life as a poor peasant and became a great master. His best known works depict flowers and small animals.

Beginning with the New Culture Movement, Kiaom artists started to adopt using Western techniques.

In the early years of the People’s Republic of Kiao, artists were encouraged to employ socialist realism. Some Soviet Union socialist realism was imported without modification, and painters were assigned subjects and expected to mass-produce paintings. This regimen was considerably relaxed in 1953, and after the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-57, traditional Kiaom painting experienced a significant revival. Along with these developments in professional art circles, there was a proliferation of peasant art depicting everyday life in the rural areas on wall murals and in open-air painting exhibitions.

During the Cultural Revolution, art schools were closed, and publication of art journals and major art exhibitions ceased. Major destruction was also carried out as part of the elimination of Four Olds campaign.

Following the Cultural Revolution, art schools and professional organizations were reinstated. Exchanges were set up with groups of foreign artists, and Kiaom artists began to experiment with new subjects and techniques. One particular case of freehand style (xieyi hua) may be noted in the work of the child prodigy Wang Yani -born 1975- who started painting at age 3 and has since considerably contributed to the exercise of the style in contemporary artwork.)
The ocean is... big. And Beautiful. Blue, sparking across the edge of the sky and white gold at the border of heaven and earth, rippling scales like a massive fish of blue waves and green seaweeds washing up onto the shore. Big brush, block in faint blues and yellows, slow slippery strokes with very wet silk, let the colors diffuse and there's that faint green I knew was there- dabs of white over drops of yellow, the faint scratching of a very dry brush dipped in very faintly inky water, the low slow dance of wind and sand, faint browns and silvery sparkles in handfuls of light; woosh and shush, hush a bye grasses whispering over dancing lights- and sunset's in a little more than three hours, time to go back in- and yeah, I need to stop on this painting, it's a giant mass of color- I'll add defining lines later.

Supper and socialization time, hell yeah!

Oh gods so awkward- we don’t actually talk to each other all through supper. I don’t really know what to say to them, and argh argh argh this is awful.

Welp. Maybe further exposure will make it less horribad.

I really hope so.

So. After dinner, I check to see if my swimsuit still fits- and lo and behold, it's become... defined. It’s a one piece suit now, a sort of leotard thing that has sleeves to my mid-forearm; it sort of, sort of crosses over my breasts and is not tight exactly- snug, is the term. And wow that is a lot of leg- it’s got three layers of ruffle over my hips and crotch, like an abbreviated skirt, and the outermost layer which flows into the rest of the suit is bright red, like, astonishingly red- and then the next ruffle layer is white and frilly, and the lowest layer, the one closest to my skin, is black.

The top is splotched with red and black and white, like the scaly pattern of a koi fish, and there’s a necklace that sits right above my collarbones that’s piled in with the cloth- oh, it’s my seamail, but- whatever.

I like it. I like it a lot. But it’s bedtime, and tomorrow I am going to set up my waterproof desk and test this sucker out, see if all the magic still works.

I sleep, soft and quiet- and if I dream, I do not remember it.

On the twenty fifth of July, I find yet another old bag of mine (I have an entire shelf of these things, Jesus)- specifically, the satchel I took with me when I escorted Kaldur back to the defined world- and after a delicious breakfast cooked by Megan, I pack myself a lunch.

OH MOTHERFUCKER! Ghost Month is... is in six days, motherfuck- no no, I can prepare tomorrow, shit- but for today’s lunch- Cold thick noodles in savory sauce with beef lightly dressed with sesame seeds, radish and carrot matchstick salad with diced scallion and orange, and UGH WHY they don’t have single serve bag soy milk here? Ugh, America is weird- man, they don’t even have single serve tetra pak soy milk, what the fuck- anyway, plastic bag sealed with red and blue stripe on the open end filled with soy milk from a carton, ugh weird whatever- and pack it all in the special sea-safe lunchbox DA, originally made for the use of merrows on sewer detail- the container keeps the contents as inserted and untouched by the surrounding area when open for a distance of approximately one third of a meter. Basically a safety bubble for foodstuff.

Anyway- I ordered a Gleam-compatible tablet the other day, and it was delivered yesterday at
I’m going to test it out- I had art and warding programs preloaded on it, so…

Well. I need to let my Cavemates know where I’m going, in case I get attacked by a shark or something… oh, hey, they’re… making calf eyes at each other, but not actually looking at each other, okay- “Um. I’m going out to ocean area- if I not back for dinner, please come looking for me, I might be dangered…”

Megan looks at me, blinks, and smiles gently. “No problem, Terry.”

I smile back- she’s not so bad, really, I just don’t know how to behave around her to not cause offence. I’ll get it right eventually, I hope…

So- what is the ocean like in the area of the Cave? Well- for one thing, there are lots of tidepools, little dips in stony sand filled with fluttering creatures; crabs and tiny flickering fish silver and blue shapes swimming in the dark green waters; grey brown lobsters that shine faintly blue and snails gently sliming across algae covered stones settled in the bottom of small, shallow pools.

Waves crash, and gulls cry, and I and I- for a few brief hours sit in the shadow of a large sea tossed and settled stone. I draw the tide pools, and the creatures within, and try and fail to capture the delicacy of movement inherent in the gently undulating fronds of seaweed, lacy and small though it is. And then midmorning comes, and the shadow I was in has wandered off to engage in some other endeavor- which means it’s time to get in the water.

I stand, put my tablet and stylus (dual model, pen/brush with multiple nibs and brush styles, twist the twisty button to cycle through them) into my satchel with my lunchbox, and then I walk into the waves, and promptly flop forwards onto my face.

So. Apparently the magic of the Carp suit is triggered in the presence of water- I’m just glad I’m wearing the… it’s too small to be proper seamail, so it’s the breathing necklace for now- and in the wash of the waves over my scaly butt, I see the flaring of my tailfin, and suddenly, without question, Know what kind of fishwoman I am, exactly, on the spectrum of possible carp. I am a red, black, and white, butterfly koi Carpwoman.

Who can’t see for shit without her glasses, good gods- oh, hey, right on top of my head as usual… and they changed when I wasn’t looking, like most of the things that I own for any length of time and use often, or will use often- they’re a pair of black rectangular frames, lenses thick as ever, but hooked at the end so they won’t fall off easily. I slip them on and slither into the sea, necklace making the initial jolt of entrance into the cold Atlantic sea more of a temperature change, and less of a suddenly can’t breathe thing.

The Atlantic is fucking cold. Really fucking cold. Augh.

I swim out into the teeming waters near the Cave- seaweeds undulating, fish darting here and there, the soft sensation of water over scaly flesh; my breasts are covered by a band of fabric that starts just under my clavicles and ends just below the fold that attaches my breasts to my ribs. It is neither loose nor tight- when I experimentally jolt down, I can feel my breasts pushing up, but not particularly hard, and it’s the same in the other direction- the bandeau appears to restrict overall movement of my breasts, and not much more. It’s patterned in the same way my upper swimsuit was- splottes of red and black and white- and my tail is basically unchanged, maybe a little sleeker, more muscular.

I swim on, slowly becoming accustomed to the coolness of the waters; I finally come to another
stone, surrounded by gently waving algae growths and seaweeds— a turtle gently flips past me. I acknowledge it, but do not overly react in any way, as that would scare the sea-creature— I merely settle on a bare patch of stone, take out my tablet, and draw— I only stop when hunger makes concentration impossible. I eat my lunch, and find that the flow of my art is gone— so, and this I will swear up and down for the rest of my life, I put my things away and only mean to rest my eyes, head pillowed on my satchel.

I don’t sleep on my back, and that is because of a healthy, respectful, and understandable fear of getting possessed by a Gui.

A person that has passed on but chooses to stay in the physical world even though they are in spirit form is known as a Gui. They are apparitions of dead people— and whether the person was a humanoid or an animal is entirely moot. Gui are very real, and they do share spaces with us in life, although they are slightly removed from our plane of existence.

They’re usually the spirits of people who have become trapped on our plane, hovering somewhere in the blue space at the edge of the horizon between the sky, land, and sea— the Undefined world, in which all things are possible and exist at once. (My home— some people call it Skaia, I call them too invested in Squiddles. Undefined is much more… explanatory. And sensible. However, the crucible of unlimited potential part is dead on…) Often, a Gui is bound in some way, held from the judgments of Hell (it’s really more like an assessment, and Hell really isn’t that bad— some parts are actually quite lovely) by their own unreleased desires, or the simple ignorance of their death. Some remain for many years, centuries, even, before finally accepting that their time has passed and, in doing so, cross over into Hell, and their judgment. Sometimes, other beings that are neither Gui or God come through— and these beings are often called angels or devils. But that is neither here nor there so— the short explanation of what a Gui is? A Gui is an Echo— nothing more or less. And the fastest way to get rid of an old Echo is to change the sound.

Gui have been seen, and have a Name, in every culture in the world, and have been… noticed since the beginning of recorded human history, at least the parts we understand. Manifestations of a Gui often occur recently after death, as the being’s… well, echo, is still very much present. Gui have also been known to manifest much later, years later, in times of great crisis, tragedy, or death. They may even appear when a still-living loved one is in great need. Gui, when manifested, can be seen in a variety of ways— in their most recent form, that being the form they took in the moment of death, in the form they remember best, which could be from anytime of their past life, as a silvery wisp or a shadowy figure, or even a fog. When they do not physically manifest, they can make their presences known with other phenomena, like moving an object or messing with electronics to be noticed. Bound Gui show themselves more often, and appear in a semitransparent state— half here, half not— although they can also appear solid. Gui that have successfully gone on, to the judgments of Hell usually go about the world undetected unless they choose to make themselves known.

In the West, closer to Hell, Gui are often, and quite rightly, perceived as restless spirits. There are, of course, two flavors of restless dead— the revenant, and the Gui that powers the worthless shell— let’s talk about the Gui. Restless Gui are beings that have unfinished business of some kind in the physical world, be it defined or not— they may be seeking revenge or justice after being the victim of a violent death (like the people Jill tries to help) or they may not have been able to complete their Deathbed
Concerns or have issue with the way their former property was divided. They may remain to attempt to convey important information, or secrets that never saw the light of the moon, much less day- or, and this is rare enough that I’ve only ever heard of it, not actually had to deal with it myself, they may linger because they wish to avoid judgment and punishment on the other side.

Where I’m from, there’s this thing called reincarnation; the process is… is supposed to be a person dies, they are weighed and measured on the scales of Judgement in the courts of Hell, and then they are scrubbed away in three rivers- the first river takes all their broken promises and lost things away, the second takes away their memory of self, and the third… the third forces them to remember their original goal, at which point they are given a dossier of their past accomplishments- and that’s about where my knowledge runs out. I know that there is some kind of choice involved- I would assume it involves whether or not to try again- and I know that once a choice is made, a second bath in the river of forgetting things happens. (And the wheel in the sky keeps on turning…) I think, I think my process was messed up somehow- I shouldn’t remember some of the things I do, and yet- and yet I do.

Anyway.

Gui can be found in several kinds of places- mostly places that they knew well while they were alive, or the place where they died. They have many powers, possibly relating to skills they possessed in life, or relating to the manner in which they died- and every Gui, benign or malignant, can possess a living being by entry of the mouth, where they will settle in the lungs- sleeping on the stomach or side is the easiest way to avoid possession.

The light around me changed- I need to paint, right now.

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck yes.

The- the color - it’s so vibrant and I am almost vibrating with excitement and push it onto the page Terry, do not break the moment- and then I paint. And I paint- colors that fade into each other, the soft flicker of fins and teeth- And then I realize I’m basically in a swarm of sharks and it’s pouring rain, a sunshower.

Huh.

Beautiful, but potentially deadly- hmm, I need to add details to this painting; switch to thin tip brush, stiffer than before- flick flick, ripple of muscle, point of fin, edge of stone-

‘Hello, Kaldur’ahm.’

‘Hello, Theresa. If you don’t mind me asking… what are you doing?’

‘Oh! I’m painting- the light and the fish together, against the murk of the depths- it’s just… it’s just so beautiful, don’t you think?’

‘(Yes, she is.)’

‘S-sorry?’

‘Ah- yes, it is.’
The rain stops, and the light changes again— not harsher, exactly, just… brighter. And then I see that, no, I am not alone— because there’s Kaldur, and… his mentor? Oh, that golden haired king I saw before!

“Hello!”

“Hello- the sharks did not frighten you?”

“No…?”

Kaldur has really pretty eyes- no he’s saying something, fuck- “- supper at the Cave?”

“Um- I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

“Would you like to have supper in the town, or at the Cave?”

Woah damn, I thought it was later than that- “Either is fine with me, um- where would you like to go?”

“Ah- well, I think town would be, um, nice if you wanted to…?”

“Um, sure, alright!”

And why is the King laughing at us silently? Whatever.

We swim to a dock- “And we can meet at the restaurant, alright?” “Alright!”, and I make a short hauling leap onto the dock, and stand in a long, flowing skirt of black and white patterned like scales ruffled and short, a lacy golden shirt over a deep red bandeau- and adjust my glasses and satchel. I start walking into town, my shoes- when did I put those on, nevermind- quickly eating the space between the docks and the restaurant, and then I’m there- and I’m early. Dang. Hmm… I could get a table…? Oh! It’s going to sunshower after we get our food, I’ll get one outside!

I’ve been seated, and am reviewing what I drew when Kaldur sits across from me-

“Hello!” “Hello.”

“oh!” and I can’t help the nervous giggle that escapes me why am I nervous (you’re on a date with Kaldur dear oh) and there goes my face, like a maraschino cherry. Fuck.

“Um- um, wh- ah, do you, do you like the table? Because we can move if, ah-”

“N-no, no, ah, the- that is, the table is quite lovely, I like it.”

“Ah, that’s good, that’s- um, yes?”

And it’s the waiter, and ye- yes, we are ready to order, um, I am allergic to milk, will that be a problem? No, good, that’s wonderful! And- oh, I didn’t know Kaldur was allergic to milk as well, wow- and “I’d like summer salad with all the fruit please, and grilled mackerel and the lemonade-yess, the pink lemonade please”; and Kaldur orders the mackerel as well, and the steamed string beans with sliced almonds, and the watermelon tea spritzer.

“So-” “So-”
“Oh, I’m sorry, you go ahead-”

“A-are you sure, because-”

“N-no, really, it’s, ah, it’s fine.”

“Well, alright, if you’re, if you’re sure- may I, that is if it’s not terribly rude- may I see what you painted today?”

“O-oh! Well, a-alright- these are just quickpaints, so the quality might not be very good-” and I pull out my tablet and go to the front page of my “sketchbook” and I doodled Kaldur in here oh my good gods- well, maybe he won’t notice yes he will um, but do I mind exactly if he notices why am I overthinking this just show him- “A-ah, um, j-just pull across the screen from right to left to, to advance, okay?” and then I hand it to him, and he blinks because- well, I know it’s a doodle of Kaldur, but it’s also an electric eel, but I know I was thinking about Kaldur when I drew it because of the xīn hé huā all around the little snakey-fish, little pink symbols of the heart and doodle flowers and oh dear, he hasn’t said anything- no wait, he turned the page, those are all my tide pool drawings… And I think he likes those because he’s smiling a little now, and my fingers itch because I want to capture this moment on the Gleaming page but I can’t because he has my sketchbook and wow, he’s really into the page so maybe…

His eyes are green. I’ve mentioned that, right- a serious celadon green that sparkles almost blue in the right light; short cut hair that is a soft pale gold, like white gold- and I wonder how it would feel under my fingers, because I think I touched it once but I don’t remember the sensation exactly, and I know his skin is softer than it seemed possible to be, so impossibly smooth- like the flesh of a chicken underneath the fatty skin, so smooth, slippery in the water. His hands, on the palm side, are calloused from where he holds and wields his weapons- mine are too, but slightly different along the fingers because of my art (you can’t paint and draw and Write as much as I do and not get a mark from it) and his webs are more sensitive near the palm than at the edge… I don’t remember no no, I do, I had just awoken and was tracing the webs of his hand and I was working up to touching the head of the eel tattoo when he stopped me (hand in hand and squeeze a little too firm) and held onto my hip and that was the first time I really realized how strong he is-

And his eyebrows are much darker than his hair, but that makes sense to me- and his nose, oh his nose is sharp like a knife and his lips are bigger than mine and I wonder what they would feel like against mine and his voice does things to me, sends shivers of electric glory down my spine and kindles heat in the pit of me that feels so good and he’s looking at me fuck look at his jacket his jacket is blue with a sort of, a sort of black piping (her lips are plain and pink today, but usually they’re red like spilt blood or the soft flesh of tuna and I wonder if they are as soft as they look) and the soft shine of light across the flowers on the table, lilies and carnations (her right eye is blue like the sky at noon, but her left is the sky at midnight, and this dichotomy is reflected in her personality as well- sometimes, she is vivacious and outgoing and sometimes she is silent and serene) in a square glass container, little rounds of glass stone at the bottom, silvery white (she hides her blue eye behind her hair, and I wonder if she would shy away from me if I were to move her hair and what is wrong with me) and my nailpolish is chipped on my pinky, I’ll have to repaint it, oh the food is here.

Kaldur sets my tablet aside, and we eat lunch together- we can’t talk to each other, for some reason- every time I catch myself staring at Kaldur, I force myself away because staring is really rude, and every time I catch Kaldur staring at me he blinks and looks at something else and the entire meal is a series of are you staring at me, no no, but weren’t you staring at me, no no that’s weird and rude I would never, and I want to kiss him so badly it’s awful because what if he doesn’t want to kiss me-
And then I realize I’ve locked eyes with Kaldur, and even though I can feel the low level blush on my face burn a bright and bold crimson, I cannot look away- I am drowning in celadon green, and his lips are so close and I want to kiss him, oh gods I want to kiss him- (we’re sitting at a corner table, thighs nearly touching shoulder to shoulder and angled to each other so we can talk and see each other easily)- and his hand comes up and sweeps my hair out of my face and loops it behind an ear and I lean forwards a little because even that light contact draws me like moth to flame, like a wolf to howl at the moon-

His breath is warmer than I remember, soft puffs of air on my face, and his eyes are so so beautiful (her eyes are so so beautiful) and then I tilt my head a little because noses are still a thing, and then and then his lips are softer still, softer than his skin soft as petals and my eyes flutter shut and the world goes golden and orange behind my eyes I closed them and I feel like I’m floating in a cloud of orange and red and starlight shining through my skin so thin so thin-

And then I realize that it’s raining, bright sky still- no clouds, but rain. Pouring, in fact. The rain is nearly torrential, that cinematic style of precipitation that seeks to soak the actors to the skin so you can get away with some nudity even though they’re fully clothed- except this is not a movie, and the fact that it’s pouring rain is too small a trifle for me to stop kissing Kaldur- in fact, the only real reason I stop kissing him is the fact that I kind of can’t breathe and kiss him at the same time and argh I want to keep kissing him but air so I pull away, and I pant for a little bit- and his eyes, his green celadon eyes, I would gladly drown in them, are heavy and darker and so so green and I want to keep kissing him but but we’re still in a public place and I want to tear his clothing off with my teeth and (grab her pale golden flesh and squeeze) pin him to a flat surface (pin her to the ground) and we’re still in public so we should pay for the food and go somewhere that isn’t public and (I can’t because I don’t have a condom dammit fuck fuck fuck) there is more than one way to have a good time-

“K-kaldur?”

“Y-yes, Terry?”

“I think it’s, I think that it’s time to leave.”

“Y-yes, I- I agree. I shall pay the bill, and then we’ll go, alright?”

“Ah- you’re sure you want to pay?”

“Yes, very sure.”

“Well, um- ah, okay. Alright. I’ll wait for you, h-here, okay?”

“Okay.”

The rest of the afternoon is spent wandering around the lovely city of Happy Harbor, sightseeing, people watching, pressing into corners and alleyways and ducking behind trees for increasingly passionate kisses, and then it’s a few hours to sunset and we’re in a copse of trees a way’s back from the main park and “Kaldur, I- ah!- I told Megan and Superboy that I would be ba- ah ah ah aaaaaaahck by sunset today. Ngh.” And that is a hand on my butt, and his leg is between mine and pressing and his lips are so fucking soft and aaaaaah fuck-

“It will be sunset soon, Terry, we should ge- eh ah ah aht ba-ah ah ah ah-”
And turnabout is fair play, right? So I trace the muscles of his waist, shove my hands under his coat and shirt, press and scrape and kiss him harder, fuck fuck fuck-

“I know- oh oh oh, OH!” and then I can’t stand up anymore, nope, I’m gone friends, I am gone, warmth between my legs and weakness at the knees and “Kaldur’aahn!” And I’m holding onto him and there are tears running down my face that felt so good so why am I crying but wait- press with the edge of my hip and feel- he’s still-

“Mmmnngh- Theresa, please, we should be-”

“Kaldur’aahn, shut up.” And then my lips are on his and twist my hand down to feel smooth and rough and firm and supple, and he groans out my name against my lips and we’re about the same height, that should not be as appealing as it is- and he has no body hair, okay, it isn’t shaved either, it’s just… skin. No, tell a lie, he has hair on his balls and he moans aloud, that rich velvety voice making obscene sounds because of something I did and then he stiffens and gasps and “Theresa!” and wetness in my palm, and I feel… fluttery. Warm butter on rice, the sensation of relaxation- it isn’t here. Usually it is- but I’m still… ready to go.

Well.

Shit.

Foreheads resting together, and my eyes meet his- “We have to go.” “We have to go.”

So, after a quick stop at a restroom for reasons of hygiene, we go back across the city, and there’s a zeta tube in town, sweet- and then we’re at the Cave, and I suddenly realize all the way over we held hands but now that we’re here we aren’t and- (I want to hold her hand but that would be indecorous, I’m the team leader and she is my subordinate, it’s… wrong) he’s team leader, fuck dammit, we can’t do anything in public, not really. Arrrrrrgh.

The next day, I go into town on my motorbike with my old pack that I used to carry groceries in, and I get supplies for Ghost Month.

The fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar is called Ghost Day and the seventh month in general is regarded as the Ghost Month, in which ghosts and spirits, including those of the deceased ancestors, come out from the lower realm (commonly called Hell). Distinct from both the Qingming Festival (in spring) and Chung Yeung Festival (in autumn) in which living descendants pay homage to their deceased ancestors, on Ghost Day, the deceased are believed to visit the living.

On the fifteenth day the realms of Heaven and Hell and the realm of the Living are open and both Taoists and Buddhists perform rituals to transmute and absolve the sufferings of the deceased. Intrinsic to the Ghost Month is ancestor worship, where traditionally the filial piety of descendants extends to their ancestors even after their deaths. Activities during the month include preparing ritualistic food offerings, burning incense and joss paper, and burning papier-mâché forms of material items such as clothes, gold and other fine goods for the visiting spirits of the ancestors. Elaborate meals (often vegetarian meals) may be served with empty seats for each of the deceased in the family treating the deceased as if they are still living. Ancestor worship is what distinguishes Qingming Festival from Ghost Festival because the latter includes paying respects to all deceased, including the same and younger generations, while the former only includes older generations. Other festivities
may include buying and releasing miniature paper boats and lanterns on water, which signifies giving directions to the lost ghosts and spirits of the ancestors and other deities.

It’s while I’m out, haggling over joss sticks with an old man, that Summer Fox calls me- I leave the stall, and answer my phone, and this is the conversation I have.

“Sorry to call you so abruptly, boss lady-”

“It’s alright, what can I do for you?”

“Well- your castles have finished consolidating, and I’m- well, I’m just the one person, and I’m not enough to keep everything here alright, so, with your permission- may I find my descendants and get their help, if they are willing?”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you, madam- are there any specific things you want done for the upcoming Ghost Day?”

“Ah- well, firstly, what are our tenants and assets like?”

“Ah- well, I took the liberty of repairing and restructuring the living spaces of your fiefdoms-”

“Good-”

“And we’re still basically rolling in money, even after I paid the backpay owed to our laborers and workers and serfs.”

“We have serfs?”

“Yes, Madame, we do.”

“Were they treated kindly before?”

“No Madame, they were not.”

“Well- first, get in touch with your descendants, and then… party like there’s no tomorrow. I want food for days, a river of floating boats and glowing flowers, fireworks, raucous laughter, games and gold and shrines and, and joss paper and joss sticks and gods, just-”

“The works, Madame?”

“Da Werks, even.”

“I’ll see to it- shall I give your name, or-”

“Oh my gods, no! Simply say that the new lady of the castle wishes to… apologize for the actions of the former, and gives this small token of, um-”

“Appreciation for works done, and will be done?”

“Yes, perfect.”

“Very well. I’ve connected your apartment to the bookbinder’s workshop in the basement of the Library, and I’ve started fumigation of the rest of the House- and may I have a stipend to buy
necessary supplies?”

“Naturally, and I was also thinking- I need to give you a salary of your own.”

“Madame! I simply could not-”

“I insist upon it, for the simple reason of- I will own no slaves, Summer Fox. You are not bound to me by anything other than what we agreed- as such, with proper notice beforehand, that is, two weeks’ notice, you may leave my employ at any time. Therefore, it behooves me to give you worthwhile compensation for services rendered- ergo, a salary of” and I name a reasonable price, to my mind.

“Ma-Madame, that is simply too much money- a quarter of that is much more reasonable, and even then it is simply too much-”

“Then you will have to accept half of the named figure. If it truly bothers you that much, set up a payment scale, and I’ll see to it that it’s enacted. Fair?”

“Y-yes, Madame, of course.”

“Very well. Was there anything else you needed, Summer Fox?”

“I was- ah, I was wondering if the Madame had arranged transportation to and from the First day of Collegiate level course work?”

“No, I had not, for myself or my younger Sisters.”

“If it please you, Madame- there will surely be young children among my descendants, who will need to be taken to school; if I may set up a ride to and from the school for yourself and your Sisters, would you be amenable?”

“I- why, yes, certainly. Thank you, for your kind generosity.”

“It is a pleasure, Madame. Thank you for taking my call, and fare thee well.”

“It was a pleasure, Summer Fox, and gods be with you in your pursuits.”

I get back home to the Cave and start preparing for the fifteenth of August- okay, I have cash joss, gold joss, silver joss (money and wares), miniature paper boats, paper for flower lamps, candles, jasmine rice and fifteen kinds of beans and three really beautiful bowls, and um um- tea and joss incense and some little bells that ring most poignantly, and thick weight thread, and some clothes lines, and I think that I know just the place to put these- there’s a cliff-side on the mountain that will be perfect to set up an altar to my family, I just need to scout it out and set things up.

Maybe this year-

Jinx calls me on the Last day of July, and this is our conversation:

“Hey, X.”

“Hey Jinx- do you have an idea for what you want in your suit?”
“Actually, I was thinkin’ goin’ more… traditional- if I could borrow your OopsieBrush, I mean… I was hoping you would have time t’make a full Sattika ensemble- y’know, sadi with the really extravagant pallava, an exquisite parkar, a duppatta, and I can handle the adornments.”

“Y-you- you want me to make an eight and a bit meter long length of fabric, covered in ceremonial designs and mystic doodads, and gold, fit your underthings, and- When is your court date?”

“I’d actually prefer you use iron pyrite, and linen is my preferred fabric of choice-”

“Oh gods-”

“It’s not so bad, you can use adhesives in the application process, and the designs can be computer generated, just-”

“It all has to be hand-made. I can use computer-stuff to make things a little easier- like, project the design on the fabric, but-”

“But y’have to actually paint’t on, yeah. I would do this meself, but your Writing is so much more beautiful, and, well, you’re the only one I trust to do this right. When can I come in t’be fitted?”

“In the upcoming month, the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth are all good days.”

“Um… Seventeenth is best f’me, so- I’ll see you then, alright?”

“Alright- any specific symbols, and when, exactly, does this need to be done?”

“Y’know the crystal structure of pyrite? Well, that’s the overall pattern I want- multiples of thirteen, an a profusion of butterflies, and the color purple is a must, and I need it by the winter’s solstice.”

“Purple. You want… purple.”

“Um- Red X, you sound a little strange…”

“I’ll do it. You’ll be paying me quite a lot, but I’ll do it.”

On the first day of August, Batman comes by the Cave, not to give us a mission but to take my vital figures, apparently; he has everyone’s except mine. Okay. I guess I can do that?

Oh, Black Canary is going to be doing the actual testing, not him- that makes me feel slightly better. (Oh my gods I’m about to meet Black Canary, she’s the coolest lady ever, oh my gods oh my gods.) Wait, what?

“What do mean I have spar Black Canary?”

“It’s the easiest way to record your vital statistics and get a baseline for your martial skills.”

“…What do I have do?”

“Put these on, and report to the Mission room.” It’s a pair of wrist bands and head gear. Okay. And the mission room is empty, so- Crouching Armadillo.

Roll forwards and stand, jump hop spin left and low sweep step back step back high jump and grab the arm and Monkey swings on Fence over her shoulder and turn she turns so Walk the Circle and I’m glad I decided to wear loose red shorts, a black v neck shirt and kung fu shoes whoops duck
duck duck leap back and turn to one side, I hate that my glasses mess up my peripheral view, press her through the movement with hand on elbow (holy shit she’s strong) and hop and back and punch punch kick nope, dang- fist to face snap head back with motion and it still hurts but I’m not unconscious so and owwww didn’t break my glasses either and open palm to sternum and she huffs out a breath because that was a punch too and oh no I’m in a headlock, ack, twist so my back is to her and knee to chest and Donkey Kick and that hit something do it again but harder Donkey KICK and “ow” jam elbow into sides and if she doesn’t let me go soon I’m going to fucking bite her (aaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!) and “Hold.”

I freeze, still a bit wild eyed with panic- and she’s let go of me now, okay, breathe Theresa.

“How old are you?”

“I- hah- I am fifteen years old.”

“How many serious fights have you been in?”

“Lots.”

She blinks.

The rest of the day is spent doing sit ups, push ups, chin ups (I didn’t know those were even a thing, but I like them) weight lifting, strength testing, and, oddly, vital lung capacity finding- apparently mine is really high. (I was trained to sing operatically- but I didn’t realize that meant eight minutes of breath underwater unaided.)

The things I already knew- I am two hundred centimeters tall, which is apparently six feet and five inches (feet are not that big! And what the fuck is an inch?). I weigh sixty three point eight kilograms (which is approximately one hundred and forty five pounds, and what in the Nine Hells is a pound?). I am eighty six percent muscle, on the very strong side of normal; my eyes are astigmatic, with my blue eye seeing better close up but blurring things in the vertical plane and my black eye seeing better far away but blurring things in the horizontal. I am in the ninety ninth percentile for flexibility, and I average a temperature of 38 degrees Celsius (which is approximately one hundred degrees Fa something; I can’t even say it, bluh…) I have black hair, and am of Asiatic descent.

The thing I did not know- I am highly clairvoyant, with a reaction time that coincides with the action as it’s being taken or approximately ten seconds before. I’d never actually had a chance to time it out before…

On the second day of August, I do two things at the same time- I start gathering materials for the fabric and dyes for Jinx’s Suit, and I find the place I’m going to spend the Fifteenth night on the mountainside. Maybe this year-

Natural dyes are dyes or colorants derived from plants, invertebrates, or minerals. The majority of natural dyes are vegetable dyes from plant sources such as roots, berries, bark, leaves, wood and other organic sources such as fungi and lichens.

Archaeologists have found evidence of textile dyeing dating back to the Neolithic period. In Kiao, dyeing with plants, barks and insects has been traced back more than 5,000 years. The essential
process of dyeing changed little over time. Typically, the dye material is put in a pot of water and then the textiles to be dyed are added to the pot, which is heated and stirred until the color is transferred. Textile fiber may be dyed before spinning ("dyed in the wool"), but most textiles are "yarn-dyed" or "piece-dyed" after weaving. Many natural dyes require the use of chemicals called mordants to bind the dye to the textile fibers; tannin from oak galls, salt, natural alum, vinegar, and ammonia from stale urine were used by early dyers. Many mordants, and some dyes themselves, produce strong odors, and large-scale dyeworks were often isolated in their own districts.

Throughout history, people have dyed their textiles using common, locally available materials, but scarce dyestuffs that produced brilliant and permanent colors such as the natural invertebrate dyes, Tyrian purple and crimson kermes, became highly prized luxury items in the ancient and medieval world. Plant-based dyes such as woad (Isatis tinctoria), indigo, saffron, and madder were raised commercially and were important trade goods in the economies of Asia and Europe. Across Asia and Africa, patterned fabrics were produced using resist dyeing techniques to control the absorption of color in piece-dyed cloth. such as cochineal and logwood (Haematoxylum campechianum) were brought to Europe by the Spanish treasure fleets, and the dyestuffs of Europe were carried by colonists to America.

The discovery of man-made synthetic dyes in the mid-19th century triggered a long decline in the large-scale market for natural dyes. Synthetic dyes, which could be produced in large quantities, quickly superseded natural dyes for the commercial textile production enabled by the industrial revolution, and unlike natural dyes, were suitable for the synthetic fibers that followed. Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement preferred the pure shades and subtle variability of natural dyes, which mellow with age but preserve their true colors, unlike early synthetic dyes, and helped ensure that the old European techniques for dyeing and printing with natural dyestuffs were preserved for use by home and craft dyers. Natural dyeing techniques are also preserved by artisans in traditional cultures around the world.

In the early 21st century, the market for natural dyes in the fashion industry is experiencing resurgence. Western consumers have become more concerned about the health and environmental impact of synthetic dyes in manufacturing and there is a growing demand for products that use natural dyes. The European Union, for example, has encouraged Indonesian batik cloth producers to switch to natural dyes to improve their export market in Europe.

Cellulose fibres require fibre-reactive, direct/substantive, and vat dyes; which are colorless, soluble dyes fixed by light and/or oxygen. Protein fibres require vat, acid, or indirect/mordant dyes that require a bonding agent. Each synthetic fibre requires its own dyeing method, for example, nylon requires acid, disperse and pigment dyes, rayon acetate requires disperse dyes, and so on.

The essential process of dyeing requires soaking the material containing the dye (the dyestuff) in water, adding the textile to be dyed to the resulting solution (the dyebath), and bringing the solution to a simmer for an extended period, often measured in days or even weeks, stirring occasionally until the color has evenly transferred to the textiles.

Some dyestuffs, such as indigo and lichens, will give good color when used alone; these dyes are called direct dyes or substantive dyes. The majority of plant dyes, however, also require the use of a mordant, a chemical used to "fix" the color in the textile fibers. These dyes are called adjective dyes. By using different mordants, dyers can often obtain a variety of colors and shades from the same dye. Fibers or cloth may be pretreated with mordants, or the mordant may be incorporated in the dyebath.

In traditional dyeing, the common mordants are vinegar, tannin from oak bark, sumac or oak
galls, ammonia from stale urine, and wood-ash liquor or potash (potassium carbonate) made by leaching wood ashes and evaporating the solution.

We shall never know by what chances primitive man discovered that salt, vinegar from fermenting fruit, natural alum, and stale urine helped to fix and enhance the colours of his yarns, but for many centuries these four substances were used as mordants.

Salt helps to "fix" or increase "fastness" of colors, vinegar improves reds and purples, and the ammonia in stale urine assists in the fermentation of indigo dyes. Natural alum (aluminum sulfate) is the most common metallic salt mordant, but tin (stannous chloride), copper (cupric sulfate), iron (ferrous sulfate, called copperas) and chrome (potassium dichromate) are also used. Iron mordants "sadden" colors, while tin and chrome mordants brighten colors. The iron mordants contribute to fabric deterioration, referred to as "dye rot". Additional chemicals or alterants may be applied after dying to further alter or reinforce the colors.

Textiles may be dyed as raw fiber (dyed in the fleece or dyed in the wool), as spun yarn (dyed in the hank or yarn-dyed), or after weaving (piece-dyed). Mordants often leave residue in wool fiber that makes it difficult to spin, so wool was generally dyed after spinning, as yarn or woven cloth. Indigo, however, requires no mordant, and cloth manufacturers in medieval England often dyed wool in the fleece with the indigo-bearing plant woad and then dyed the cloth again after weaving to produce deep blues, browns, reds, purples, blacks, and tawnies.

In Kiao, Japan, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Gambia, and other parts of West Africa and southeast Asia, patterned silk and cotton fabrics were produced using resist dyeing techniques in which the cloth is printed or stenciled with starch or wax, or tied in various ways to prevent even penetration of the dye when the cloth is piece-dyed. Kiaom ladaois dated to the 10th century; other traditional techniques include tie-dye, batik, Rōketsuzome, katazome, bandhani and leheria.

The mordants used in dyeing and many dyestuffs themselves give off strong and unpleasant odors, and the actual process of dyeing requires a good supply of fresh water, storage areas for bulky plant materials, vats which can be kept heated (often for days or weeks), and airy spaces to dry the dyed textiles. Ancient large-scale dye-works tended to be located on the outskirts of populated areas, on windy promontories.

In medieval Europe, purple, violet, murrey and similar colors were produced by dyeing wool with woad or indigo in the fleece and then piece-dyeing the woven cloth with red dyes, either the common madder or the luxury dyes kermes and cochineal. Madder could also produce purples when used with alum. Brazilwood also gave purple shades with vitriol (sulfuric acid) or potash.

Choctaw artists traditionally used maple (Acer sp.) to create lavender and purple dyes. Purples can also be derived from lichens, and from the berries of White Bryony from the northern Rocky Mountain states and mulberry (morus nigra) (with an acid mordant).

From the second millennium BCE to the 19th century, a succession of rare and expensive natural dyestuffs came in and out of fashion in the ancient world and then in Europe. In many cases the cost of these dyes far exceeded the cost of the wools and silks they colored, and often only the finest grades of fabrics were considered worthy of the best dyes.

The premier luxury dye of the ancient world was Tyrian purple or royal purple, a purple-red dye which is extracted from several genera of sea snails, primarily the spiny dye-murex Murex brandaris (currently known as Bolinus brandaris). Murex dye was greatly prized in antiquity because it did not fade, but instead became brighter and more intense with weathering and sunlight. Murex dyeing may have been developed first by the Minoans of East Crete or the West Semites along the Levantine coast, and heaps of crushed murex shells have been discovered at a number of
locations along the eastern Mediterranean dated to the mid-2nd millennium BCE. The classical dye known as Phoenician Red was also derived from murex snails.

Murex dyes were fabulously expensive - one snail yields but a single drop of dye - and the Roman Empire imposed a strict monopoly on their use from the reign of Alexander Severus (225–235 CE) that was maintained by the succeeding Byzantine Empire until the Early Middle Ages. The dye was used for imperial manuscripts on purple parchment, often with text in silver or gold, and porphyrogenitos or "born in the purple" was a term for Byzantine offspring of a reigning Emperor. The color matched the increasingly rare purple rock porphyry, also associated with the imperial family.

(A mordant is a substance used to set dyes on fabrics or tissue sections by forming a coordination complex with the dye which then attaches to the fabric or tissue. It may be used for dyeing fabrics, or for intensifying stains in cell or tissue preparations. The term mordant comes from the present participle of French mordre, "to bite". In the past, it was thought that a mordant helped the dye bite onto the fiber so that it would hold fast during washing. A mordant is often a polyvalent metal ion. The resulting coordination complex of dye and ion is colloidal and can be either acidic or alkaline.

Mordants include tannic acid, alum, urine, chrome alum, sodium chloride, and certain salts of aluminium, chromium, copper, iron, iodine, potassium, sodium, and tin.

Iodine is often referred to as a mordant in Gram stains but is in fact a trapping agent.

The type of mordant used changes the shade obtained after dyeing and also affects the fastness property of the dye. Dye results can also rely on the mordant chosen as the introduction of the mordant into the dye will have a marked effect on the final color. Each dye can have different reactions to each mordant. For example, cochineal scarlet, or Dutch scarlet as it came to be known, used cochineal along with a tin mordant to create a brilliant orange-hued red. Residual iron mordant can damage or fade fabric, producing "dye rot".

The dye lake is an insoluble molecule formed when the complex of dye and mordant are combined, which then attaches to the substrate. Mordants increase the fastness of the dye since the larger molecule is now bonded to the fibre.

The term "lake" is derived from the term lac, the secretions of the Indian wood insect Laccifer lacca (formerly known as the Coccus lacca). This is the same insect from which shellac is obtained. The type of mordant used can change the colour of both the dye-plus-mordant solution and influence the shade of the final product.

In Histology, mordants are indispensable in fixing dyes to tissues for microscopic examination.

Methods for mordant application depend on the desired stain and tissues under study; pre-, meta- and post-mordanting techniques are used as required.

The most commonly used stain used in diagnostic histology of animal tissues is Harris' haematoxylin as part of a haematoxylin and eosin (H&E) stain.)

I have a set of dyes left over from… never you mind where, and they will work perfectly for the Sim. Sims? What the Hell's the plural for that, anyway...?
A Sim, or simraculum, is a famiscle creature; a fleshy shell meant specifically for scientific study. The process to make one is begun with the construction of the flesh itself- different elements and inorganic compounds are combined to create a fluid that will mimic flesh exactly, or near exactly. I wouldn’t use it to replace actual living flesh unless it was a dire emergency- but anyway. Simraculum is both the name for the flesh shell created for the purposes of dissection and the fluid produced before the formation of the shell.

Formation of the shell is a simple enough process- a complete skeleton of whatever creature required is placed in a container, generally made of cedar or pine, and completed Sim fluid is decanted over the bones; within twenty four hours, a famiscle of a once-living creature is created, floating in excess saline. Unused elements of flesh settle on the bottom and can be reused- the saline must be discarded, as it cannot be reused in the Sim process. Preparation of the bones is generally done using gelatin threads which dissolve into the flesh. Curing starts once the Sim floats in saline and the excess material settles onto the bottom of the container- the Sim must rest in solution for a total of twenty four hours, or one whole day. Curing is completed with an electrical pulse generated from a claypot battery- this simulates electrical impulses generated in life, and ensures that the completed Sim is a viable famiscle for scientific study.

Insertion of dye materials is recommended, as freshly created Sim fluid has the color of new milk; dye materials must be added before insertion of the bones, to allow the various structures to be colored correctly. Bones can be reused, however, care must be taken that the bones themselves are not damaged- any kind of damage or destruction to the bone structure will result in damage or distortion to the Sim.

It is not recommended that the shells created from Sim fluid be consumed, as the vital essences of a once live creature are not present in a Sim. Sim fluid, if properly stored can be stored for a period of up to seven hundred years- Sim shells can only be stored for as long as the actual flesh retains it’s viability as a scientific material.

I have created pure Sim fluid, and am now separating it into base fluid and usable fluid- I have a full cat skeleton, and a full tuna skeleton.

Linen is a textile made from the fibers of the flax plant, Linum usitatissimum. Linen is labor-intensive to manufacture, but when it is made into garments, it is valued for its exceptional coolness and freshness in hot weather.

The word "linen" is of West Germanic origin and cognates with the Latin name for the flax plant linen, and the earlier Greek λινόν (linon). This word history has given rise to a number of other terms in English, the most notable of which is the English word line, derived from the use of a linen (flax) thread to determine a straight line.

Textiles in a linen weave texture, even when made of cotton, hemp and other non-flax fibers are also loosely referred to as "linen". Such fabrics generally have their own specific names other than linen; for example, fine cotton yarn in a linen-style weave is called Madapolam.

The collective term "linens" is still often used generically to describe a class of woven and
even knitted bed, bath, table and kitchen textiles. The name linens is retained because traditionally, linen was used for many of these items. In the past, the word "linens" was also used to mean lightweight undergarments such as shirts, chemises, waistshirts, lingerie (a word also cognate with linen), and detachable shirt collars and cuffs, which were historically made almost exclusively out of linen. The inside cloth layer of fine composite clothing garments (as for example jackets) was traditionally made of linen, and this is the origin of the word lining.

Linen textiles appear to be some of the oldest in the world: their history goes back many thousands of years. Fragments of straw, seeds, fibers, yarns, and various types of fabrics which date back to about 8000 BC have been found in Swiss lake dwellings. Dyed flax fibers found in a prehistoric cave in Georgia suggest the use of woven linen fabrics from wild flax may date back even earlier to 36,000 BP.

Linen was sometimes used as currency in ancient Egypt. Egyptian mummies were wrapped in linen because it was seen as a symbol of light and purity, and as a display of wealth. Some of these fabrics, woven from hand spun yarns, were very fine for their day, but are coarse compared to modern linen. Today, linen is usually an expensive textile, and is produced in relatively small quantities. It has a long "staple" (individual fiber length) relative to cotton and other natural fibers.

Many products are made of linen: aprons, bags, towels (swimmers, bath, beach, body and wash towels), napkins, bed linens, linen tablecloths, runners, chair covers, and men's & women's wear.

Linen fabric feels cool to the touch. It is smooth, making the finished fabric lint-free, and gets softer the more it is washed. However, constant creasing in the same place in sharp folds will tend to break the linen threads. This wear can show up in collars, hems, and any area that is iron creased during laundering. Linen has poor elasticity and does not spring back readily, explaining why it wrinkles so easily.

Linen fabrics have a high natural luster; their natural color ranges between shades of ivory, ecru, tan, or grey. Pure white linen is created by heavy bleaching. Linen typically has a thick and thin character with a crisp and textured feel to it, but it can range from stiff and rough, to soft and smooth. When properly prepared, linen fabric has the ability to absorb and lose water rapidly. It can gain up to 20% moisture without feeling damp.

It is a very durable, strong fabric, and one of the few that are stronger wet than dry. The fibers do not stretch and are resistant to damage from abrasion. However, because linen fibers have a very low elasticity, the fabric will eventually break if it is folded and ironed at the same place repeatedly.

Mildew, perspiration, and bleach can also damage the fabric, but it is resistant to moths and carpet beetles. Linen is relatively easy to take care of, since it resists dirt and stains, has no lint or pilling tendency, and can be dry-cleaned, machine-washed or steamed. It can withstand high temperatures, and has only moderate initial shrinkage.

Linen should not be dried too much by tumble drying: it is much easier to iron when damp because of its growth pattern. Linen wrinkles very easily, and so some more formal linen garments require ironing often, in order to maintain perfect smoothness. Nevertheless, the tendency to wrinkle is often considered part of the fabric's particular "charm", and a lot of modern linen garments are designed to be air-dried on a good hanger and worn without the necessity of ironing.

A characteristic often associated with contemporary linen yarn is the presence of "slubs", or small knots which occur randomly along its length. However, these slubs are actually defects associated with low quality. The finest linen has very consistent diameter threads, with no slubs.

The standard measure of bulk linen yarn is the lea, which is the number of yards in a pound of linen
divided by 300. For example a yarn having a size of 1 lea will give 300 yards per pound. The fine yarns used in handkerchiefs, etc. might be 40 lea, and give 40x300 = 12,000 yards per pound. This is a specific length therefore an indirect measurement of the fineness of the linen, i.e. the number of length units per unit mass. The symbol is NeL. (3) The metric unit, Nm, is more commonly used in continental Europe. This is the number of 1,000 m lengths per kilogram. In Kiao, the English Cotton system unit, NeC, is common. This is the number of 840 yard lengths in a pound.

The quality of the finished linen product is often dependent upon growing conditions and harvesting techniques. To generate the longest possible fibers, flax is either hand-harvested by pulling up the entire plant or stalks are cut very close to the root. After harvesting, the seeds are removed through a mechanized process called “rippling” or by winnowing.

The fibers must then be loosened from the stalk. This is achieved through retting. This is a process which uses bacteria to decompose the pectin that binds the fibers together. Natural retting methods take place in tanks and pools, or directly in the fields. There are also chemical retting methods; these are faster, but are typically more harmful to the environment and to the fibers themselves.

After retting, the stalks are ready for scutching, which takes place between August and December. Scutching removes the woody portion of the stalks by crushing them between two metal rollers, so that the parts of the stalk can be separated. The fibers are removed and the other parts such as linseed, shive, and tow are set aside for other uses. Next the fibers are heckled: the short fibers are separated with heckling combs by 'combing' them away, to leave behind only the long, soft flax fibers.

After the fibers have been separated and processed, they are typically spun into yarns and woven or knit into linen textiles. These textiles can then be bleached, dyed, printed on, or finished with a number of treatments or coatings.

An alternate production method is known as “cottonizing” which is quicker and requires less equipment. The flax stalks are processed using traditional cotton machinery; however, the finished fibers often lose the characteristic linen look.

The best linen in the world is worn by the women and men of the Imperial Court of Celestial Kia. Yes, really.

There’s only one person to call-

“Oracle?”

“Yeah- Oh, Red X, hello! Did you recruit successfully?”

“Yes, Captain, I did- their names are Jinx of Gemworld and Raven of Azarath, and I believe they’ll be very helpful.”

“…Raven of Azarath and Jinx of Gemworld? Those are the people you- I. Okay- you’re… you’re absolutely sure they can do it?”

“I trust them with my life, Captain.”

“Alright… I. Well. Alright. Now, I think there was something else you were calling me for-”

“Yes sir, I- I am sorry to ask this of you, but… I need Imperial Flax Seed, the kind that grows.”
“...”

“I would not ask this of you under normal circumstances, but a friend of mine is on trial for murder, and Jinx is going to Orate for her, and I- I swore to make her Suit.”

“You- you can do that sort of work?”

“Yes sir.”

“How-... Why can you do that sort of work?”

“I am two hundred centimeters tall-”

“!”

“And the purveyors of clothing generally do not sell clothing in my size, or will overcharge most grievously. So, I learned to make my own clothing- and then I became a warrior, so...”

“So you make your own armor as well. I see. Hmm... If I do this for you, I expect recompense of some kind- and to see what you do with what I give you. Fair?”

“...What kind of recompense?”

“Well- there is a, a sort of dish- that was common when I was put... In- but now no one knows what it is, and I don’t... I don’t remember what it was called.”

“Describe it to me.”

“It came in round, clear containers that shattered, scattered, when dropped, and inside was an orange-yellow liquid that smelled faintly of honey and sunlight, and the fruit was pale white; and to taste it was to taste the heat and sloth of summer, even in the dead cold darkness of winter. The fruit was sweet, but not cloying, and dripped when bitten, and the liquid burned on the way down, and left the mouth slightly numb- and any wound you had felt half better for a taste- and I remember some that drank too much and acted quite foolishly- I’m sorry, I’m. I’m maundering-”

“No, it’s alright- I know what you’re talking about. Does the name Imperial Peach Nectar sound familiar?”

“-Oh my gods. That’s it, that’s the stuff! Why- how- why can’t I find it anymore?”

“Ah- well, it fell out of favor with the Queen a few hundred years ago, and as it’s a repurposed folk recipe, it must have just been... well. Unremembered.”

“Not forgotten?”

“Not it Kowloon, Captain.”

“Hah- oh. Oh! So- in return for... how much flax seed do you need?”

“I’m making a traditional Sadhi ensemble, so-”

“One pound.”

“Sir?”

“I assume you’ll be dyeing it yourself?”
“Y-yes sir…?”

“The lea of Imperial Linen is one hundred and forty four.”

“Oh my. Yes, one pound is more than enough.”

“I’ll have it to you by the end of the week.”

“Thank you sir. It will take a bit longer for the Imperial Peach Nectar…”

“I understand. Just… before the end of the year?”

“Absolutely!”

“Alright- Thank you, Red X.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Okay. The very first thing I need to do is secure honey for the Golden Honeywine, which is the liquid that Imperial Peach Nectar… There are several special dishes that fall in and out of favor perennially, and Imperial Peach Nectar (which is dead useful to have around the house, I usually make a cordial instead as the effects are faster but also slightly less potent) is one of the things that tends to fall out of favor in the upper class a lot faster than in the lower class. Particularly in Kowloon- and the reason this specific foodstuff has never quite fallen out of fashion is the fact that consumption of any part of it will heal anything short of a death wound to about fifty percent, and raise death wounds to a mere grievous maiming.

Kowloon being Kowloon, this is the sort of food that doesn’t go out of fashion, isn’t really fought over, and can be made easily with the right ingredients. Actually, Kowloonites usually make plain Peach Nectar- Imperial Peach Nectar has some things (which tend to be expensive) in it to make it, well, Imperial.

Anyway. The first thing I need to do is secure honey- the best kind for this would be honey that has been cultivated by the Double Cloud variety of bee, so called because of their bright white patches on the head and thorax. I have no idea what beekeeper’s smoke, but I want some for selling purposes…

I know!

“Summer Fox?”

“Yes, Madame X?”

“Do we, by chance, own honey producing bee hives, or chrysanthemums?”

“Yes Madame- we have Heavy Gold, Green Willow, Double Cloud, and Blue Rose currently producing, and one of my nibbling’s is currently entreating a nomadic swarm of Binaric Bubblers to create a home among our fields. We also have fifteen chrysanthemum fields in the Five colors.”

“Forgive me- but what is a nibbling?”

“The gender neutral term for the child of your brother or sister is nibbling, Madame.”
“Ah, thank you- I called to ask because I am in the process of making Imperial Peach Nectar for a friend of mine at the Celestial Court-”

“My Gods, how kind of you!”

“Yes, well, I can’t very well make Golden Honeywine without Yellow chrysanthemums and Double Cloud honey, now can I?”

“Indeed not- although, I am sorry to tell you- our peach trees were severely mistreated, and I do believe that they will not be bearing fruit this year, or next.”

“Oh, dear, were the peach dryads overworked?”

“Indeed, Madame.”

“Do what you can for them.”

“Of course, Madame.”

“Well- I will be needing enough honey and florals to make Golden Honeywine to o’erfill the largest picklejar I have.”

“It shall be placed on your desk, in your Apartment, by the end of the day.”

“Thank you. Pray tell- do we have fields that have lain fallow for too long a time?”

“Why- yes, Madame, we do indeed. Neither I nor my family members can clear the fields, as that isn’t…”

“I understand- I will be coming by on the twenty eighth of August to clear a field and set up Imperial Flax for Linen production-”

“Oh my- isn’t it a bit late for that?”

“Yes, and no- but for my purposes, I need a field that has too much growing energy, but no actual use.”

“We’ll have it ready for you, Madame.”

“Thank you, Summer Fox- and forgive me, but… is there something you would prefer to be called?”

“… I would actually prefer to be called Blade, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, Blade. Thank you for your time.”

“Quite welcome, Madame X.”

Hmm- now where am I going to get yeast?

On the mountain in which our Cave resides, there is a small but lively brook that comes down the side of the earth in a series of falls- and part of this water is heavily scrubbed waste water from our adventures in cleanliness, but- the source of this brook is a small pool of water that cheerfully burbles
out of the ground, only a head below the jagged teeth of a cave, naturally made and filled with strange echoes that rise from the waves of the bubbling pool.

I have spent the quiet hours of the morning scaling the slippery slopes of this riverside mountainside, steadily reaching higher and higher, and it is only now that I see I must climb higher still- I have a peach and some apples left from my breakfast, but… I will need them soon. (I am wearing loose training pants, Carp shoes (only one article from the entire Carp ensemble is needed to Change), a v neck red t-shirt, safety goggles over my glasses, a small hip pouch with the fruit I just mentioned within, and hands wrapped to fight or, in this case, climb. And yes, I Twinned like this.)

I step into the water, and then I swim forwards, fluttery tail disturbing only the barest amount of silt at the bottom of the pool- I swim through darkness, but I do not fear- and then I come to a wall, smooth below the water, but craggy above. I gently swim along the wall until I come to what I knew was there- a chimney flue in the stone, and the light of dawn shining through; the hole appears to be tiny. This is false.

I will spare you the details of my near endless climb to the hole through which the sky shined through- instead I will tell you more of the story of the Monkey King, and his Journey to the West.

(There are many ways to tell the same story, you know.)

The Buddha was lecturing his congregation about the morality of the inhabitants of the four continents. “I have 3 bundles of scriptures that could help the people of the Southern Continent,” he said. “Someone needs to go to the Eastern lands and find a virtuous person to go on a quest over the mountains to obtain the truth-revealing scriptures.” Kuan-yin volunteered to find a pilgrim to make the hard journey.

Kuan-yin received several talismans or good luck charms to give to the pilgrim: an embroidered cassock (priestly robe), a nine-ringed staff, and a special magical headband.

Kuan-yin and her disciple bodyguard Hui-an set off on the journey and soon came to a large body of water called the River of Flowing Sands. A hideous monster attacked the bodyguard Hui-an. They fought without anyone winning. The monster was surprised to discover he was fighting Kuan-yin’s bodyguard. (The monster happened to really be the former Curtain-Raising Marshal who used to wait on the Jade Emperor at the Treasure Hall of Divine Mists. He accidentally broke a crystal cup and was banished to the Region Below and turned into a monstrous shape.) Kuan-yin promised to help the monster return to his old position if he will help the pilgrim in his quest to get the scriptures. The monster agreed, and he became the Sandy Priest. He waited faithfully for the arrival of the scripture pilgrim.

Kuan-yin continued on the journey and soon came to a mountain where a ferocious monster with huge ears and drooping lips came at her with a muck-rake. The bodyguard defended Kuan-yin, and she threw lotus flowers at the monster. When the monster found out that he had attacked the Lady who saves from Three Calamities and Eight Disasters, he asked for her forgiveness. The monster confessed that he used to be a Marshal of the Heavenly Reeds in the Heavenly River, but he was banished to the Lower Regions because he became too cozy with the Goddess of the Moon. The monster thought that there was no hope for him, but Kuan-yin told him: “Heaven helps those who help themselves.” The pig-looking monster who had a big appetite promised to do penance for past
sins and to become a disciple of the scripture pilgrim when he arrived. Kuan-yin gave the monster the religious name of Pigsy. Soon Kuan-yin came upon a dragon suspended in mid-air. He was being punished for setting fire to his father’s palace and destroying his precious magic pearls. The Lady of Mercy went to the Jade Emperor to plead for the dragon’s life so that he would help her in her mission to find the scripture pilgrim. The Jade Emperor gave permission, and Kuan-yin told the dragon to wait in his cave and turn into a white horse to serve the pilgrim when he came by.

On the following day Kuan-yin finally arrived at the Mountain of Five Elements where the Great Sage was imprisoned. The Monkey asked the merciful Kuan-yin to rescue him. He had already served his 500-year sentence. Monkey reassured her that he was now going to behave himself and do good works. Kuan-yin told Monkey to wait for the pilgrim and then become his disciple. Monkey agreed to wait. Kuan-yin reached Ch‘ang-an, the capital city, and went to the temple to find a true monk to become the pilgrim.

When Kuan-yin arrived in the capital city of the Great T‘ang Nation, the Emperor was choosing a supreme religious leader for the land. The chosen priest Hsuan-tsang was at his temple preparing for the ceremony. Kuan-yin offered the cassock or priestly robe to Hsuan-tsang. At the day of the Great Ceremony, the priest Hsuan-tsang delivered his sermon about Salvation and Divine Protection for the Nation. After he finished talking about Right Conduct, Kuan-yin approached him and asked: “Why are you only teaching about the Little Vehicle? Don’t you know the teachings of the Great Vehicle?” Hsuan-tsang told Kuan-yin that none of the monks had any knowledge of the Great Vehicle. She told him that the teachings of the Little Vehicle only lead to confusion.

“However,” she told him, “I have three sections of the Great Vehicle, called Tripitaka or Three Bundles, which can help people reach Heaven.” When the Emperor heard about Kuan-yin’s statement, he called for her and asked where she kept those Three Bundles. “It is located in India,” she said, “in the Great Temple of Thunderclap of the Great Western Heaven.” She recited parts of the scriptures to convince him. The Emperor was so overcome with joy that he made plans to send a traveler to India to get the scriptures. Hsuan-tsang declared his willingness to make the journey for the good of the empire. The Emperor and Hsuan-tsang made vows to achieve their goal, and they became bond brothers.

On the day when the long journey began, the Emperor gave Hsuan-tsang a new name: Tripitaka, in honor of the scriptures he would bring to Kiao from India. Tripitaka was given traveling papers, a golden bowl to collect alms, two attendants, and an imperial horse to ride on. It was now late autumn and Tripitaka and his attendants had arrived at the mountains which stood as a barrier between Kiao and India. Somehow they got off the path and fell into a deep pit. About half a hundred ogres attacked them and started eating up the attendants. Tripitaka was saved from the cannibalistic ogres by an ancient old man, who told him the ogres were various animal spirits of mountains and trees. The old man led Tripitaka to safety because he was a pure person. Before the old man disappeared, he left a message on a piece of paper:

“The Planet Venus
from the Western Heaven,
Came to rescue you.”
On the following day Tripitaka came to a rugged mountain where he saw a hunter. The hunter told him about the monkey who was locked up in an iron box at the base of the mountain. This Mountain of Five Elements, as it was called, was thrown down from heaven during the Han dynasty. When Tripitaka got to the base of the mountain to see the Monkey, he heard Monkey say, “Master, get me out of here and I’ll help you get safely to India.” Monkey told him the whole story of how he was imprisoned because he made a ruckus in the Halls of Heaven. Tripitaka wasn’t sure how to free Monkey, so Monkey told him that all he had to do was remove the seal of golden letters from the top of the mountain and he would be freed. At the top of the mountain Tripitaka found the golden letters “OM.” He made a simple prayer, “If Monkey is meant to be my disciple, let the letters be removed.” Instantly the letters rose skyward and Monkey was released.

So Monkey became the keeper of the horse and Tripitaka’s disciple, and they traveled together toward India. Tripitaka wanted to give his new disciple a religious name, but Monkey told him he already had a name: “Empty-of-Mind.” They had not gone far when they were approached by a savage tiger. Monkey told Tripitaka not to worry. “I’ll just tear this beast apart and use his skin for a new outfit,” he said. Monkey used his magic weapon on the tiger and within minutes he took care of the tiger and had himself new clothes. Tripitaka was amazed at Monkey’s powers. Monkey reassured him that he had many transforming powers which would be helpful in a pinch. So they continued chatting as they rode on the horse toward the setting sun in the southwest.

The following morning they were met by six heavily armed bandits. They wanted the horse and the packs. They said they were called Eye that Delights, Ear that Grows Furious, Nose that Wants, Tongue that Desires, Mind that Imagines, and Body that Suffers. Monkey told them, “We are your masters, so don’t block our way.” The bandits wouldn’t listen to Monkey, and they started beating on Monkey’s head with their weapons. When Monkey was not dazed, they said, “He has a hard head.” Then Monkey took out his weapon and beat them to a pulp and took their belongings.

Tripitaka was shocked at Monkey’s behavior. “How could you take another man’s life?” he asked. Monkey answered, “If I had not taken their lives, they would have taken ours.” Tripitaka scolded Monkey and told him he was unworthy to be a priest. Monkey felt insulted and he decided not to go to India to help Tripitaka in his quest for the scriptures.

As Tripitaka walked on alone he met an old woman who was carrying a silk robe and an embroidered cap. The old woman asked him why he was traveling alone. He told her about his unruly disciple who left him alone. She told him about a spell called True Words for Controlling the Mind, or the Headband Spell. She told him she would persuade his disciple to come back. When she disappeared, Tripitaka realized the old woman was really Kuan-yin in disguise.

Meanwhile, Monkey was headed for the palace of the Dragon King of the Eastern Ocean. Monkey told the Dragon King about his adventures as a priest and disciple. Dragon King congratulated him on leaving the bad and trying to attain the good. However, when Monkey told him why he left his Master, the Dragon King said, “Shouldn’t you learn a little patience?” Monkey decided the Dragon King was right and that he needed to learn to control his temper. So he headed back to fulfill his task. On his way back Monkey met Kuan-yin, who scolded him for breaking his vow to her. Monkey promised to improve and behave this time.
When Monkey returned to Tripitaka he saw the robe and cap that Kuan-yin had given the scripture pilgrim for his journey. Tripitaka told him that wearing a cap allows a person to recite scriptures without learning them, and wearing the silk robe allows a person to perform ceremonies without any practice. Monkey wanted to try the cap and robe on, and Tripitaka let him. Monkey felt intense pain when he put on the cap. Tripitaka was reciting the Headband Spell, and Monkey’s pain only stopped when the reciting stopped. “You put a spell on me,” cried Monkey. Tripitaka told Monkey he wouldn’t recite the spell if Monkey listened to his instructions. Monkey agreed. However, when Tripitaka turned away for a moment, Monkey took out his magic staff and was ready to strike the Master, but the Master turned in time to say the magic spell. Once again Monkey fell to the ground in pain. This time Monkey promised to follow obediently without causing any more trouble.

Now that it was winter, traveling was much more dangerous through the slippery mountain passes. When they came to Coiled Serpent Mountain, Monkey remembered that there was a river called Eagle Grief Stream nearby. When they arrived at the water’s edge, a dragon swirled out of the waves and swallowed their horse. Tripitaka started thinking he was having a bad dream. Monkey told him not to despair. He would go after the dragon and retrieve the horse. Monkey used his magic powers to make a turbulent storm in the stream. This caused the dragon to think a monster was threatening him. “Blessings never repeat themselves, but troubles always come in pairs,” he said to himself.

When dragon came out of the water to face the strange monster Monkey, he was challenged to a fight for the horse. When it seemed like Monkey was going to win the battle, dragon turned into a snake and wriggled away in the tall grass. Monkey called on the god of the mountain to help him. The god of the mountain came and told Monkey that Kuan-yin had rescued that dragon from elsewhere and put him in the mountain stream for safe-keeping. Then Kuan-yin was summoned, and when she arrived on a beam of light she told Monkey who the dragon really was. “That dragon is the son of Ao-jun, the Dragon King of the Western Ocean,” said Kuan-yin. “I saved him from a death sentence for setting fire to the royal palace and destroying some magic pearls, and I put him in the stream so that he could carry the scripture pilgrim to India.” When the dragon heard that Kuan-yin was at the stream, he came out of the water and told her he was still waiting to hear news of the scripture-seeking pilgrim. Kuan-yin told him Monkey was the pilgrim’s eldest disciple. Both dragon and Monkey had to agree not to fight anymore and follow Kuan-yin’s instructions to complete the task assigned to them.

Kuan-yin then sprinkled the dragon with the sweet dew in her vase and blew on him. When she cried, “Change!” the dragon instantly changed into an exact image of the Master’s white horse. Then Kuan-yin instructed Monkey to lead the horse to Tripitaka. Monkey was reluctant to go through anymore hardships. Kuan-yin told him, “Without faith and perseverance nothing is possible.” Kuan-yin also promised to help Monkey in times of his greatest trials. Monkey thanked her and took the horse to Tripitaka.

It was now early spring. The mountain forest was turning green and willow leaves started to appear. The traveling pilgrims were approaching Cloud Ladder Cave, and Monkey saw a pig-faced demon with a nine-pronged muckrake in his hand at the entrance to the cave. When Monkey somersaulted in the air to attack the demon, the demon ran into the cave and slammed the door shut. Monkey smashed the door to bits with his magic wand and confronted the coward. The monster-demon was angry and said, “Breaking and entering without a permit is a capital offense.” Monkey bellowed back, “Don’t waste your time reciting man-made laws to an immortal.”
After they argued for some time and insulted each other, the monster was surprised to learn that Monkey was traveling with the scripture pilgrim. The demon, whose religious name was Pigsy, explained that Kuan-yin instructed him to wait for the pilgrim. He also explained that the merciful lady put him on a vegetarian diet so he could atone for his acts of eating travelers. Monkey took Pigsy to Tripitaka and convinced the pilgrim that Kuan-yin had converted him. Pigsy kowtowed (bowed low) to Tripitaka and made a solemn vow to follow both pilgrims to the West in search of the scriptures. Now there were three scripture-seeking pilgrims traveling together.

Summer was now slowly changing into fall and the three travelers came to a very broad river which looked difficult to cross. Monkey told them that with his keen vision he calculated the river was 800 miles across. Tripitaka spotted a stone slab beside the river with an inscription, “River of Flowing Sands.” The inscription also said that the river was 800 wide and 3,000 deep. As they were reading this, a red-haired monster with a yellow cape rose from the water. The monster had a string of nine skulls hanging from his neck. Pigsy fought the monster with his muckrake while Monkey protected Tripitaka and the horse. When Monkey saw that Pigsy couldn’t defeat the monster, he rushed in with his iron wand and clubbed the monster’s head. The monster retreated back into the water.

Tripitaka was thinking that maybe they should have talked to the monster instead of fighting him. This way they might have convinced the water-demon to carry them across the river. Pigsy and Monkey devised a plan to lure the water-demon to the surface. Pigsy would dive down and talk to the demon; Monkey would wait beside the river. When Pigsy dove down to where the monster was and talked to him, he was surprised to hear that the monster was formerly an alchemist at the Jade Emperor’s palace. However, he was banished because he broke a precious crystal cup of jade. So now he lives in the River of Flowing Sands and feeds on fishermen and other creatures. When the monster suggests making a meal of the ugly Pigsy, another battle begins. Once again Monkey tries to charge into the battle and help, and once again the monster escapes.

Monkey now suggested going to the Southern Ocean to ask for Kuan-yin’s help. When Pigsy suggests that Monkey should just somersault all of them across the river using his magical powers, Monkey replied, “An old proverb says, ‘Lift Mount T’ai, it’s as light as a mustard seed, but don’t try to raise a mortal above the earthly dust.’” Since Monkey and Pigsy are only guardians of Tripitaka’s mortal life, they can’t protect him from his troubles, nor can they obtain the scriptures by themselves. So Monkey somersaulted to the Southern Ocean where he found Kuan-yin at the Purple Bamboo Grove beside Mount Potalaka. Monkey told her about their problem with the river-monster. She told him the monster was placed there to help the scripture pilgrim. And from now on Monkey should always mention the purpose of their mission, which is to seek scriptures.

Kuan-yin helped Monkey by sending her disciple Hui-an with him. Hui-an was able to convince Sandy, which was the monster’s religious name, to come out of the water and join the pilgrims in the quest for the scriptures.

The seasons and the years passed. New adventures provided new learning experiences. They were being tested in the hard realities of life to see if they were worthy servants of the Way. The pilgrims each had to master a task and overcome a weakness. Tripitaka had to gain the respect of his disciples; Monkey was responsible for the Master’s safety; Pigsy was in charge of the luggage; and Sandy had to take care of the white horse. Sometimes the traveling companions fought with one another, and that’s when they revealed their weaknesses. Monkey was always impatient; Pigsy was jealous of Monkey’s easy job; Sandy preferred to take it easy and not work hard; and the Master had many mortal limitations.
One day they came to the summit of a peak and saw an unexpected red glow on the distant horizon. Tripitaka wondered why it felt so hot; it was already autumn. Pigsy told him that there is a kingdom in the west where the sun sets into the ocean and makes a sizzling sound of fire cooking water. Monkey laughed at Pigsy’s explanation. Tripitaka noticed some buildings nearby and asked Monkey to inquire about the frightful heat. Monkey asked an old man about the heat and the land, and the old man said it was always hot in the region known as the Flaming Mountain, which blocks the way to the West.

When Monkey asked how the people got flour for their bread, the old man told him they were dependent on Immortal Iron Fan, who has a palm leaf fan. One swish of the fan puts out fire, a second swish makes wind, and a third swish brings rain. Monkey wanted to know where this immortal lived so he could get the fan and put out the fire. The old man told Monkey that the immortal lived on Mount Emerald Cloud in a cave called Palm Leaf Cave. It was southwest with a round trip distance of 1,460 miles. The old man said they always bring him presents of animals and fruits so he would help them plant their crops in season. Monkey had heard enough, and he took off on his cloud trapeze without any further delay.

And then I’ve reached the hole in which the sky shines through, which means it’s time for a snack.

I eat most of the peach, and most of the apples, but leave some of the sweet fruit behind- and then I scratch a hole in the ground and put the cores inside. And then- Wood and press down with the taproot and up towards the sun, toes into water and grow- and there, high above me, a nexus where the air holds things aloft for days, and that is where I need to be- opening stance and lift and grow, slowly rise on the strong back of hardwood tree growing towards the sky and flow with the wind and bend to it’s whim, and grow, ever reaching towards the sky and I’m going higher so close your eyes and just

keep

moving

towards

And then I am at the place where the air is still, and there, floating, a stone the size of me from shoulder to hip- this massive stone held aloft by the providence of- I step forwards, onto the stone, and my tree winds around the stone and holds it winding and branching and a table of stone held in the mighty arms of a peach apple tree. I open my eyes, and there between my feet on the wind smoothed stone is a Card called Float. I sign it, and feel when the weight of the stone is fully held by the tree- drop Wood and stand on what I’ve created- a tree bearing fruit and leaves, and a table made of stone.

This will be the place I attend to the souls of my ancestors.

Maybe this year-
I jump down, and fall through the hole in which the sky still shines through— even though there’s a giant tree root going through, it’s only about a quarter of the space gone, and I fall just fine— the root spirals around me like stairs, and I drop into the water and I’ve jumped down into the water and I let the current carry my changed body downstream, and leave the water where I started my climb.

I’ll have to bring supplies at some point… Anyway— back to the Cave. Let’s do this the fast way— drop Twin and I’m dripping on my carpet, shit—

I decided to use yeast from the Imperial Brewery in East Kowloon— I just have to talk the brewmaster into giving me some. Hmm— well, there was that rumor about rat king in the basement, and a reward for slaying it— I’ll just tell the roomies where I’m going—

“Hey Superboy— I’m going to be gone for the rest of the day, but I’ll be back sometime tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

And then I pack a bag— I’ve gotten out of the habit of carrying one, wow— ink and brushpen, cloak for sleeping under, computer, and I need some peanut butter— to the kitchen!

Peanut butter in a foilcup, perfect!

And I’m going to have to figure out how to patch the game code in my copy of SBURB— oh gods, what? Immersive Mode really isn’t as fun as it should be— oh my gods, why now?

Arrgh— no, figure out the coding when you have to wait for the thing— okay.

So— the Brewers Guild of Kowloon’s main brewery, also the Imperial Brewery, is in East Kowloon, on Kunlun Alley— not Kunlun Road, that’s somewhere else. I change into Red X— and this time I have a hood, what the ever loving hell.

You know what?

Fuck it.

I grab a flash drive from off of my desk— and they’ve multiplied, oh! This one is meant for game data, it has pixel art on it— and then I’m out the door and downstairs and “Hello landlady.”

“Hello tenant.”

And then I’m out the door, and off to the brewery by way of the Arcade— brewery doesn’t even open to the public for a few hours, and the Arcade never closes— I’m going to need my game data from the SBURB machine I favored there… I think I spent, like, my entire summer of being thirteen in there because it was too hot to stay at my apartment and the Arcade (which, let’s be clear, is the size of the mall in Central City, only it’s all videogames and amusements) is always kept at a chilly fuck—that’s— cold degrees.

As a result of being really really poor, I hold the dubious distinction of All Time High Score—
My game data is transferable to my homecopy of SBURB—just have to put it on my flashdrive. So—go into the arcade, ignore the pachinko (I’ve been banned from playing anyway) and down the right steps towards the left, and there’s the SBURB machine I favored—it looks like a cross between a powerscooter, a hairdresser’s sit-down-in-the-chair hair dryer, and a computer.

Plug in the flashdrive, input my old game code, and—Save Gamedata to external drive [y/n] [y enter]—and now it’s a medallion on a chain, SBURB logo on one side, red and black spirolgraph on the other, and that’s it. Damn. That was actually easy.

Medallion around neck, and on to the brewery!

Okay—now for something completely different—the actual problem with the Imperial Brewery is that no one can stay alive through the night there; everyone always ends up a pile of gnawed on bones.

According to the head foreman, this is not a security measure—they’ve tried priests, exorcists, everything, and nada.

So—“I’ll fix your problem for one mason jar of Imperial Brewers yeast.”

“That’s it? Just like that?”

“Yeah— I’ll spend the night here, fix things, and in the morning, you give me the yeast.”

“Heh. Done.”

So. To fix this, I need to paint—and I paint cats. Cats—white cats, pink cats, grey cats, orange cats, blue cats, green cats, yellow cats, big cats, small cats, cats with one ear, cats with no tail, cats with big eyes, cats that are more whisker than cat, cats with big paws, cats with big bellies—so many cats that every square centimeter of empty space is not, in fact, empty space, but more fucking cats.

And one really really big cat, the King of All Cats.

And by then it’s almost moonrise, so, I find an empty Kiao cupboard without shelves, open and leave the peanutbutter cup as bait, and hide in the little closet. Wrap up in my cloak and fire up my computer, and go to the SBURB focused chatrooms—

}{New Topic: IM Game Patch

My friends are playing SBURB in IM on our home copy—what do I need to patch the game so they can get back out?

Replies:
Lulz, say goodbye to your friends!

[Um- if you can manage to get your hands on build data from a completed game, or even a winnable game, you might have a chance.]

good luck with that=

//Yeah- but there aren’t that many people who’ve managed to complete SBURB… and even then, you’d need to IM yourself to upload the patch.

++dude, no one is that crazy++

I’m that crazy- so does anyone have build data from a winnable game they’ll share?

ADMIN CALIBORN HAS BANNED THIS TOPIC.
ADMIN CALLIOPE HAS UNBANNED THIS TOPIC.
ADMIN CALIBORN HAS BANNED ADMIN CALLIOPE.
ADMIN CALIBORN HAS BANNED ADMIN CALLIOPE.
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ADMIN CALIBORN HAS BANNED ADMIN CALLIOPE.
ADMIN CALIBORN HAS BANNED ADMIN CALLIOPE.
ADMIN CALLIOPE HAS UNBANNED HERSELF AND HAS TRAPPED ADMIN CALIBORN INSIDE THE CLOSET.

~Here love- this should do the trick. My idiot brother might not want to share, but he’s not on the computer, is he?~

ADMIN CALLIOPE HAS SENT RED X  LOLSuCKITLOSERS.txt

Thank you, Admin Calliope.

~you’re welcome, love.~

NO FuCK YOu!

ADMIN CALIBORN HAS SENT RED X  FuCKYOu.exe

RED X’S BOUNCEWALL ICKY DEFENSE HAS SENT THE FILE BACK TO ADMIN CALIBORN

ADMIN CALIBORN’S CELLPHONE RAGESPLODED!

Boys.

~ugh, I know. Best of luck with that, dear.~
Thank you, Callie. I’ll name-scrub the patch and publish it if it works. Thanks for your help!

And that’s the thing I needed, so- with a little jiggery pokery, my ip address vanishes entirely, and-

ADMIN CALIBORN IS THROWING A TEMPER TANTRUM BECAUSE HE CAN’T FIND RED X ANYMORE

-ehehe. Wow, those are some nasty sounds- have you ever heard a cat fight for real? It’s not something you really want to hear, and that sounds like a whole fuckton of angry hissing cats.

Anyway- time to write a game patch.

A game patch is an update to the game code that is made to improve the game that is specified by the patch. To make one, you need build data.

Build data is… a memory, I would call it, of everything the game is supposed to be. Holes in the memory create glitches in the game, which is why patches are created. In games that update a lot, like Squiddles, there is a simple system which allows a patch to append new archives to the file system. The new archives contain all the assets that differ from previous patches/builds. (An asset is an economic resource, or something of value- in game terms, it’s everything you would get by playing the game. And for these games, I do mean everything.)

Another way to describe this system is that new archives are overlaid on top of existing archives, like onionskins. When an asset is to be read in from disk, the file system traverses the archives and selects the newest version of the asset. In this simple system, over time a user who installed the original game would have multiple archive files from each progressive patch, each archive containing an updated set of assets. In contrast, a user who acquired the game much later in its life span would not have a plethora of archive files on their disk, but rather a collapsed archive representing the proper state of the world as of the time of their installation. Meaning- if I were to patch my copy of the game, and make a copy of it, and give it to someone else, they would get the game already patched and ready to go.

Why does SBURB need a patch? Well- there’s a weird quirk in it’s code that only comes up when someone tries to play it in IM (Immersion Mode), and that is that the game doesn’t have to be winnable. This is bad, because SBURB is the kind of game that gets old fast if it can’t be won- and the only thing that has to be done to win the game is to create a game thing called a “Genesis Frog”, but that’s only possible if there are two player Aspects present- Time and Space. Well- technically you can get away with not having a Time player, it just means you have to wait for the frog to mature in Real Time- which, depending on your echeladder level (dear gods why do I remember so much of this crap), could at a low level take months, or at a high level (higher than mine, sadly- Admin Calliope, Godtier: Lyricist, would probably be at the right level though) take seconds.

(A players Aspect is what their special game powers are- for me, I can do things involving space, everything from moving things around, teleporting, taking the space out of wounds- and Classes are what they can do with their powers, or like… how they do it? It isn’t really clear how it works in the game- but my aspect, Queen, is said to Command [Aspect]. In game, that usually amounts to me having to call the name of an attack, or add a movement of some kind. This can get awkward, especially in stealth based missions.)
Anyway- SBURB’s coding screwup is such that the actually necessary to winning the damn game Aspect of Space is not always present in every, well, session, of the game. This is bad game design- every game session should be viable. Whether or not it actually is viable is up to the players, not the game. Anyway- it’s almost dawn, the patch is coded and loaded along with my game data- and the other quirk about SBURB is all patches have to be installed during gameplay. I don’t know who came up with that, but if I ever meet that person (Someone on the Hussieteam came up with this shit, I can sense it) I will have very angry words at them.

And it’s dawn, and time to see what the hell- holy shit.

There’s the torn up carcass of a giant ass rat, and every cat I drew on the walls has either red on it’s mouth, on it’s paws, or isn’t facing the way I drew it. Dang.

The brewery foreman is suitably impressed, and gives me the yeast.

I drop it off at my apartment, and there’s the honey and the chrysanthemums- let’s see, who owes me in the building- I know!

Fifty floors down lives a spinster’s son by the name of Snark- yes that’s really his name, and he’s actually quite nice- who owes me for reasons. Involving booze.

Anyway.

“Oi, Snark!”

“Red X, Wassup?”

“I have yeast, honey, and chrysanthemums- need you t’make me Golden Honeywine.”

“I dunno-”

“Did I or did I not dig you up when the wine wore off?”

“Yes, you did. Okay, I’ll do it- when do you need a finished product by?”

“Before the end of the year.”

“Oh, no problem. Wow, this is top quality- yeah, I’ll have it done when you come back.”

“Cool.”

That’s that sorted, now back to the Cave.

I get back sometime after dinner- and Robin and Wally are on the couch, playing video games- specifically, they’re playing SBURB and they’re about to accept the IM option oh fuck no don’t do that!

I try to run to the Common Room, but promptly trip over a book I haven’t managed to shelve successfully, and then I drop my glasses and have to find them, and by the time I’ve managed to overcome my myopic vision and find the corrective lenses that I’ve come to rely on to see (“I’ve lost my glasses and I can’t find them without my glasses!” The irony of this statement has never been so palpable), it’s too late- I run in right when they’re vanishing into game data.
“Fuckdammit!”

And then I promptly trip over my own two feet- I was wondering when it would be today- and narrowly avoid breaking my front teeth. Sigh.

Now, let’s see- how does one upload- aha! It’s the player key- and Wally’s is orange, and Robin’s is the sky blue one (I thought I only had a plain blue one? Weird.) and there’s my red one in the basket, stick the spirograph token in and place it in the console, put on the jellybands and [Game Data will take approx. one hour to load. Proceed y/n?] [y enter]

So, since that’s going to be an hour to load, time for a sandwich or something, I haven’t eaten in a while- hmm, turkey on white bread with mayo and tomato and some mustard and lettuce and some pickles and they’re going to be in an Atomik Ebonpyre (a killzone in which enemies spawn at miniboss level and up, and there are millions of them) when I finally manage to get in the game, so… which scepter will I use? Fuck, which fraymotif (semi-background music that provides power-ups when you fight in synch to it) will I- Black. That’s literally the only one that would be worth using in a situation like that… Because uploading my game data won’t just upload my stats and weapons, but my enemies too- ugh. I can’t wear my Godtier pajamas- they do provide a nice stats boost, but for the kind of fighting I’ll be doing- hm… I always was partial to the Three in the AM dress, but… hang on, I need my phone-

{text: Jinx}

Hey, what would happen if I combined a Three in the AM Dress with Godtier Pajamas?

Something cool, I’d imagine.

Thanks.

NP.

{/text: Jinx}

Player Data has finished loading, Game Data seventy five percent complete- are there any alchemizations you would like to create prior to entrance into current session (only have enough boondollars for three)? [y/n] [y enter]

Select: Three in the AM Dress

Select: Godtier Pajamas

Combination will create: Sneaking out at Three in the AM Gown. Proceed? [y/n] [y enter]

Alchemization complete. Equip? [y/n] [y enter]

Select: Flare Searching Beloved Magnetism Scepter

Select: Rulership Charming Knockback Scepter

Combination will create: Holy Hellraiser Scepter. Proceed? [y/n] [y enter]

Equip? [y/n] [n]
Select: Holy Hellraiser Scepter

Select: Empirical Royal Recovery Scepter

Combination will create: Restoring Feedback Fusillade Scepter. Proceed? [y/n] [y enter]

Equip? [y/n] [y]

Are there any fraymotifs you would like to equip? [y/n] [y enter]

Select: Black, Midnight Crew, Get Up, Sarabande, Cascade, Clockwork Melody, White, Ruins (with Strings), Sunsetter, Liquid Negrocity, Three in the Morning, Heirfare, Ace of Trump. You have two fraymotif slots available. Proceed? [y/n] [y enter]

(I don’t think I’ll need all of those, but still-)

Game data loaded. Enter password.

[xmarksthespot] [enter]

Welcome back, Queen of Space! Play in IM? [y/n]

I’ve eaten my sandwhich, they’re about to be swarmed by monsters, and “No worries, I got this-” [y enter]

And then I go IM into SBURB.

The world is a spirograph, and then it isn’t- I’m on a surprisingly comfortable slab of stone, and my glasses are on- oh fuck, I’m in the Derse crypts (there’s Prospit and Derse and if you really want to know more about this, you can read the http://archiveofourown.org/works/340777?view_full_work=true old SBURB Glitch FAQ, okay?)

Wait- before I do anything, I need to- okay, I’m in what I equipped, fraymotifs are all there (only some of them aren’t for strifeing exactly…), but no scepterkind because there are no strifekinds in the crypts… So, my weapons would be in the Royal Armory.

Hmm… Royal Armory is on the south side of the Derse Castle, down the steps and third door to the left- and I have my full captchalogue- so, where is it… Aha, ProDer Masque; equip this sucker, and stand up because-

Right.

I’m wearing bright red shoes like for ballet, and a circle skirt dress that is black with sparkling green dots like stars that falls softly to just below my knees; tight at the waist, with big bell sleeves that have a slight lag effect near the edge that end just past my wrists; a loose hood rests where the ruff would normally be, and hoops low like the hood of a Seer- low enough to hide the circlet, which is one of the marks of my Class. My dress doesn’t actually have my Aspect symbol on it anywhere, which is why the ProDer Masque can be equipped: it makes the Carapacian NPC’s think I’m one of them.

Game Mechanics. Gotta love ‘em.
Now- I’m actually all the way in the center of Derse, and the fastest way to get to the Castle is to do a sicknasty stunt off the chain and use my spacey powers to land on the roof of the Castle, then do some serious wall-crawling (Ninja Ninja) until I’m at the right window, jimmy it open, and get my strifekind. (I can’t just teleport there either, even though I really want to, because I have this feeling- I don’t think Robin and Wally are even on the same planets at the moment. To get to them, I would need to… well, I need to do something called Synchronize And Unite, which usually happens during the entering section of the session, but, well… Anyway, to do that, I need to save as much of my- there are in-game stats that need to be at a certain level to use the player Aspect, and use of the Aspect lowers the stats, and some of them refill on their own and some of them don’t, you need to do stuff for that to happen, and one of mine which is also crucial to use of my Aspect feels very nearly empty (I would save when my Pluck was so low)- I’ll have enough to do the adjusting for the stunt off the chain, and then I’ll have enough for the Synch And Unite- and then I’ll be fighting the Atomik Ebonpyre, which should refill Pluck, but I can only do that if I have my strife kind and what if it doesn’t work oh gods- and they can see my internal monologue, thank you SBURB.)

((Game Mechanics. Gotta love ‘em.) You, hush. (XP))

The Crypt is a single slab of stone with my Aspect symbol on it, and a chain, which connects to this moon’s moon (so it doesn’t float away) and I need to climb it.

So, I do.

(don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown don’tlookdown)

Nnngh. Nnnnoooooope. Thankfully, I’m at the right height- I just need to start, um, swinging. Here we go. (ohdoublefuck)

The chain steadily eases back and forth, and then sways, and then I’m right at the perfect apex so I let go and start to make a really nice curve towards the roof of the palace, but I need to aim slightly towards the laundry shed, it doesn’t have a roof and I can see that it’s full of folded linens

(ohshitohshi
hella suspicious- time to do the other thing.

(I might have. Cultivated a slight… reputation. While wearing the ProDer Masque. For reasons. Um.)

Running leap forwards and unEquip the Masque right there and grab the scepter and yep, totally trapped- but I’m not in it, so- and now for the other bit.

(That alarm is Loud-)

I will be using the ability [Space Jump] three times. (and then I’ll be out of pluck so- Heirfare. I need to switch to Heirfare.) Okay- Jump one: TO=Incipisphere [Do the Spacey Thing]

And for a moment everything is very bright green

And then I’m floating in blackness.

*Switch Fraymotif: Heirfare* -) [play] and then I sing Heirfare and call into being a giant black butterfly, it’s wings patterned with alternating red and green halfmoons in a spiral pattern. The fact that they are flashing in a slightly dizzying way is a minor detail.

(I think I’ve gone a bit blind.)

Robin is a Heart player, and Wally is Time- and Wally can handle himself for a little longer than Robin can (his gamestart area is totes glitched, damn), Rob’s about to Sequence Break-

(aw dude no)

Jump two: TO=HeartPlayer [Do the Spacey Thing]

And I come through right when he gets kicked out with one health (don’t sequence break, it’s bad) and I catch him so he doesn’t go to zero health and die because that would be just sad, really. (And I don’t particularly want to kiss him when there are other options- he’s too short for it to be interesting…)

Robin is actually small enough to set in my lap (ick), so- and now for Wally- he’s on the roof of what the game is going to call his House, and thank heavens it’s really tall-

Jump three: TO=TimePlayer [Do the Spacey Thing]

And a twist and grab his arm and shift the weight- wow, Atomik Ebonpyre surrounded by Meridian Ebonpyres, the game wants Wally dead- and the Heirfare crashes into a boiling mass of Imps and other things with giant teeth (which smacks my Fraymotif back to Black, which is what I wanted anyway-)

And I am out of Pluck, and Robin only has one health, and Wally is being weird- oh, oh fuck no, he has the DERP (Players show symptoms of a Deficiency in Elementary Reasoning Procedures (DERP) when their Brainitude dips in the negative. This is bad and will get them killed- treatment? Slap to back of head, increases Brainitude into positive digits. Yes, SBURB is the kind of game with fakey-fake but oh so real diseases that do things to you.)

“Wally, Turn Around.”

“This and a um that what-”
I turn and see that the army that was bearing down on us before, and there’s really only one thing for it- “[Off With His Head]!” and their heads fall from their shoulders and they splash down into piles of grist and “WALLY, TURN AROUND!”

“Okay.”

And I smack the back of his head quite firmly. He yelps, and then turns back and whimpers. “I’ll handle it- but you need to protect Robin, he only has one health left. If he loses that one health, you need to smooch him directly on the lips.”

“Why-”

“I’ll explain why later- for now, just trust me. And hi, by the way.”

And then I hand Robin to Wally and turn back and yes- enemies spawn when you aren’t watching, and now STRIFE!

I run forwards and “[Quake Beam]” takes out a bevy of imps- and then it’s a sort of ultra-violent blur of beating enemies into grist until my pluck meter is high enough to [Space Jump] again. I manage to work my way over to Wally and Robin- and then my Pluck is high enough and I’ve grabbed them both and “[Space Jump]”

And the world is very green again

And we’re on my planet. Specifically, we’re in the living room of my game-constructed house, and in the kitchen should be- yes! Healing Gels!

“Stick this in his mouth.”

“’Kay.”

The effect is almost instant- and then Robin is thrashing and maybe shouting a bit, and then he’s not.

“Hi Robin.”

“Hi Terry. Where am I?”

“You’re in the kitchen of my game constructed house- we’re currently in a video game, by the way- and you just recovered from having only one health. How do you feel?”

“Kind of awful.”

“Yeah, my monsters drop shitty healing items, sorry- go lie down on the couch for a bit, your health meter refills faster when you’re stationary. Also, I need to have a private chat with Wally for a bit, okay?”

“Uh- yeah, sure.”

Robin eases off of Wally, then staggers a bit like a drunken old man into the living room, and flops on the couch there with a pained grunt.

“Wally. What time is it here?”
“Four in the Afternoon.”
“What time is it where we were?”
“Three in the Morning.”
“What time is it in the Common Room of the Cave?”
“Six thirty in the evening.”
“When did you accept the choice to play in IM?”
“Six twenty-five.”
“How long have you been in the game?”
“Two weeks…” And in his face I can see the DERP trying to rise again- I snap my fingers sharply, click, and I say-
“What you are experiencing is a mental malady called Temporal Shennanigans. This is what occurs when a player with the Aspect of Time tries to keep track of Real Time alongside Game Time.”
“So-”
“So. This game is generally over, allowing for competence of the players, in two hours. In game, this might look or feel like months- understand that in the game, it is months and out of the game, it is hours. Hey Robin; feeling better?”
“Yeah.”
“Wally, what time is it?”
“Eight. Holy-”
“Yeah. Game mechanics at work.”

I pull my hood back, and flick my goggle-circlet up so they can see that, yes, it really is me.

“So- do you want the overly detailed but comprehensive explanation, or the SparkleNotes version with fine detail removed but important concepts retained?”

“Which one is faster?”

“SparkleNotes version.”

“SparkleNotes version.”

“Okay, so- Players (that’s us) take the role of nobles who have been driven from their rightful place (their Land) by an evil (the Denizen) at the start of the game. These Players are scattered on two kingdoms (Derse and Prospit) that are at war on a promised land (Skaia). This is the setting of the game as it starts- which is where the two of you are, as you’ve entered the game proper. The goal of the game is for the Players to reach Skaia in order to claim for their own the very thing that Derse and Prospit are fighting for (the Ultimate Reward). However, at game start, Players aren’t allowed to set foot on Skaia. That’s because they have no right to participate in the contest for the
Ultimate Reward. The Players have no political leverage; their titles are only honorary. A title of nobility without a Land means nothing. Therefore the "role" of Players in the game is to "conquer their Land" in order to prove their worth and obtain recognition as leaders of independent powers. Players start their true quest with the title of Heir Transparent (Echeladder stuff), must go through Heir Conditioning (Land Quests) and finally achieve the title of Heir Aspirant (Godtier stuff). They will then be recognized as autonomous, fully-fledged nobles that are allowed to go to the Battlefield (yay) and stake their claim for the ultimate reward (bugged, but I'm working on that). As an extra plot twist, they get to defy the Black King who inevitably wins the war right as they arrive, and which stands before them and victory.”

“…so… what was the music for?”

“And what do you mean, bugged?”

“Fraymotifs are musical powerups that effect how much damage attacks do- not attacks, just attack modifiers. You can buy them at your fraymotif shop. As for bugged- this game is really really dangerous to play IM because of one thing- it’s buggy.

For a mild example- look out, through the glass door.”

They walk to the side, and look through the window-door; I can actually see the terror seize them. Robin finds his voice first.

“…what are those?”

“SBURBGamers call them Ohgodwhat’s- they’re caused by a glitch in the gamecode that makes enemies spawn; instead of spawning in a wide area, they spawn in one place and become a hissing multiheaded and armed moving monster made of ewwwww and horrorterror. They also have all of the stats of every monster that went into their mis-spawn, so they’re much much stronger than the surrounding area’s monsters. Because of what I prototyped, my monsters look like skeletons covered in flowers.”

“Okay- you say that like the monsters have… zones.”

“They do- Robin, your land looked pretty okay in the monster zoning; Wally, your land is glitched as fuck.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well- there are several kinds of monster zones, the most dangerous being the Atomik Ebonpyre zone- which is what you were in, and that’s not normal. Also, you were surrounded by Meridian Ebonpyres, which are usually closer to the equator of your planet- didn’t you notice the gigantic monsters wandering around?”

“…oh.”

“Prototyping…?”

“Do you remember throwing two objects into a glowing sphere thing that floated and hissed static at you?”

“Yes.” “Yeah.”

“That’s prototyping- the game uses it to template types of monsters specific to each player’s Land and Aspect. Which reminds me- monsters will spawn everywhere you aren’t looking.” I open the
pantry door, smack the Imp that jumps out into grist, and walk over it to collect it- and I need to install gristTorrent… “Land refers to the planet you started on, and Aspect is- it’s what in game powers are based off of, and I can really only give you a few hints in how to use them- it’s different for everyone.

Anyway- to get out of here, we have to win the game. To do that, we have to defeat the Black King at the time of the Reckoning. However, none of us are currently powerful enough to do that- you two literally just started playing the game, and I only just finished Terraforming my planet when-”

A Knell rings out. I can actually feel my teeth rattle.

(oh fuck)

The guys are looking at me- and I’m scared because…

“Stay here. I have to finish fighting a Challenge.”

They look at each other, then at me- “Okay, fine, come on.”

We step out onto the patio, and I sing Heirfare. The butterfly returns, and all three of us get on- I direct us to the Earthsea Borealis, except- “No, really, stay here- this is a Player specific battle. The monsters in this area should be at your level- but please don’t hesitate to team up, okay?”

“Okay.” “If you’re sure…”

“Try and stay near this spar- Imp Gardens can get really confusing.”

I settle them on a spar of bone, inside an area I call the Imp Gardens- they should be able to collect grist and gain some experience without getting into too much trouble.

And then I land the butterfly on the level surface of the Earthsea Borealis, and in the swirling whirl of butterflies comes the shape of the Nightmare Heir- who looks just as scared as I am.

(I think that’s Stormspirit that’s playing…)

“Do you want to just… like… talk this out instead of beating the snot out of each other? Again?”

“No. That’s not how it goes.”

“Ohkay. I understand.”

(I think she’s supposed to be me only reversed, like a Nega version? Only… that’s not what I look like…? So I’m not sure how effective this actually is.)

Dash forwards and CLANG of scepter on scepter and-

“You’re a terrible hero-”

“I’m not a hero-”

And duck the swing of fist and lash with foot and
“You have no friends-”

“Then who are my coplayers?”

Stab and dodge the [Quake Beam] and whirling sweep and CLANG and

“You let them die-”

“Everyone dies-”

[Overwhelming Decree] cancels against itself and

“What if you’re wrong?”

“Has to happen sometime-”

CLANG of scepters and side dash and [Rush Divine Martinet Knock] and dodge every energy bullet and-

“No one loves you-”

“I love me-”

High jump and [Descendive], dash away from the spikes and leap and CLANG and-

“Red is ugly-”

“Fuck you it’s awesome-”

[Cresendevasilliatory Imperial Order] and the world goes spikey again and that is a lot of energy bullets spiraling like a lotus and

“Your mother didn’t love you-”

“Then why did she stay?”

[Baroque Breakdown] and we clash harder and faster and stronger, powerup and go- and-

“Your family abandoned you-”

“That’s their choice-”

Flip forwards and whirling legs crash onto each other and [Heavenly Rush] blasts us both back and-

“You hate your powers-”

“My powers suck-”

CLANG of scepter on scepter once again, and this time-

“Everyone thinks you’re weird and crazy.”

“I am weird and crazy.”

And then a little sort of drop to the left and UPPERCUT and [Royal Rumble] and she poofs into nothing at all.
The sun sets, exploding the sky into a fury of reds and oranges and greens- and then I jump off the floating island of the Earthsea Borealis, and flap back over to the guys on my Heirfare, which never stopped being a thing exactly. They’re sitting on top of the spar, a little roughed up but still quite fine.

“I think I’d like the uncondensed version, if you don’t mind.” Robin nods, silently agreeing with Wally.

“Hop on, and I will explain you a thing…”

We go back to my house- I set the guys up with their own computers, and I finally have enough grist to move my alchetemizer and totem lathe- I captchalogue them, and then I take the guys to my favorite place on my Land- my favorite because it’s the most protected, the safest place there is. It’s also the place where my Prospit and Derse appearafiers are, and where I always wanted to set up my actual base of operations.

Once we’re there, I settle the guys down on stone benches- and the reason this place is the safest is because it’s where the World whispers to me the loudest, and because there are ten Crystalanths that glow with a soft red light, and the flowers blossom, always; and this is where the Pleasants live when they aren’t traveling around. (My consorts are semi-nomadic bone white foxes with flowing garments made of flowers woven together.)

I explain the basics of the game to them, and about Prospit and Derse and why, exactly, it’s so important to smooch corpses when the get to zero health. I explain about Lands and Aspects and Player Commands. I explain about mental maladies and dangers inherent in the game; about Others and Angels and Saccharine Doppelgangers, which I’ve never seen but I have heard of on the forums. I explain about strife, and strifekinds, and echeladders and boondollars. I explain about consorts and quests and trials.

And then- “So. To get out of this, we have to play… play our roles as best we can.”

We play the game- I do indeed have to use all of my fraymotifs- we each level up many times, unlock much of the hidden data, get crazy weapons and titles- fun and games and shenanigans galore.

And then, finally, we can’t play our roles anymore so we have to fight and defeat the Black King.

And we do.

(Wally finally managed to use [Tomorrow Never Dies]- I’ve never been so proud of a Mage. And Robin used [Center of Brilliance] to great effect on the Black Queen- I didn’t know you could make the bosses deal damage to each other like that. Shinies are still fucking creepy though, even if he’s a very nice Seer.)

The Ultimate Reward is a door, about the size of one of the- (Zeta Tube?) (Yeah.) (Really?) (Yeah.) (Okay.)- about that big, and when I press my hands against it I can feel sort of a slippery layer, like if the skin of a bubble were impermeable- and a sort of, a sort of slit, and my hands are glowing green, and now I need to peel it back a bit- and it slowly oozes open and ugh, I need more hands, I need to pull the [SBURB OPTIONS] terminal out-
“Thanks guys.”

“No problem.” “Yep.”

Let’s see now- my player pendant (in-game ID) is also my controller jellybands, so- hold pendant in palms and press between hands until wrists touch, and then pull them out to reveal a spirograph of red and black and white and green and then I press it into the spirograph inset in the [SBURB OPTIONS] terminal and-

New Software Detected. Scanning= No Malware Detected.

[Load Patch -) crossticth.exe][enter]


Piloting Ash Diffusers, Gathering Cranks, Supplying Eave Pockets, Undertaking Scroll Stops, Accelerating Straps, Designing Fittings, Protecting Diamond Boilers, Logging Downspouts, Correlating Shingles, Uniting Mallets, Qualifying Electrostatic Lifts


Uploading Calliope/Caliborn Admin System

Patch Complete. Save? [y enter]

Publish Data? [y/n]

(BITCH DON'T YOu DARE!)

(shUt Up Caliborn, we need her help-)

(OuR GAME IS FINE AS IS, FuCK YOu!)

(eek- X, look oUt!)

Red Miles rears into the air and lashes at my face- and there, rising, a serpent made of red flames and wriggling veins and hissing, searing rage. Caliborn, Lord of Time, Admin of Evil, and all around asshat.

Of course, he’s so arrogant that he doesn’t realize that I uploaded Calliope as well- or that when I entered, I activated the Connect feature. Now all I have to do is publish the data, and-

Caliborn roars- “He’s made out of Red Miles, guys. Don’t get hit.” –then scatters into a thousand screaming writhing tendrils of deadly rage. We scatter, and I spam portals ([Spatial Distortion]) to help the guys; we dodge and duck, and I work my way over to the terminal, and Wally and Robin figure out I’m doing something and so they attack the nexus of the Miles with [Clockbreaker] and [Reincarnate Rememblast] respectively, and Caliborn screams and I kick into a sprint and jump the Miles and slide and stagger to my feet and [y enter].

The terminal slurps back into the wall- and at first, nothing seems to be happening.
And then I see- it’s inside my head, but I can see-

{You Players who valiantly took the roles of nobles who have been driven from their rightful place by an evil at the start of play- you nobles of many Lands- you who have fought and hard and well to reach Skaia and claim your rightful reward, who have conquered their Lands and proven their skills must now prove them a final time.

Past the Door is a battle- a battle of the Gods. Your enemy is the one known as Caliborn ( Evil Admin); your allies are myself, the one known as Calliope (Good Admin), and every other Player of this wretched game of SBURB.

(Please forgive my earlier cowardice- my brother was stronger than me for a long time, so… it took a while for me to find enough courage to stand up to him. I apologize for taking so long to fix the plight of the Lost Beta Players- please, forgive me.)

Enter, if you dare.}- and then doors open, thousands upon thousands of doors, and suddenly there is an army of creatures- squid people, grey skinned people with orangey-yellow horns, humans, angels, demons- and we’re all players in this game, and so, we fight.

It’s when every Time player uses [Clockbreaker] on Caliborn at once that I start to believe that this might be a fight we can win- which means it’s time to do the thing. I have never actually tried to sing a [Player Command] cold- no fraymotifs, nothing- but, well. It’s either this or nothing so- [Showtime].

Specifically- [Showtime/Sweetpipeskind (Last Strife Mix/Defeating the Ultimate Evil)].

Yes, really, that’s what it’s called.

(Wow, okay, note to self- singing in a final battle is kind of amazingly fun, and also this is the best song I’ve ever written- I mean, sure, the Dersite themes are pretty great but this one is the best. I wish I could have snuck it into the game when I worked on it… Ah well.)

And then, through the mystical jiggery-pokery of music, Calliope rises, a serpent of crackling green- and then she starts to (Muse of Space = Fondly Regard Creation = defensive capabilities maxed, can do anything with Space but it works best defensively so-) deflect Caliborn’s attacks back at himself, and then things get very strange-

And then Caliborn uses [Scratch]-

Except Calliope rebounded it onto him-

And then the power of Scratch hits, and since he’s (Lord of Time = Destroyer Of Everything = offensive capabilities maxed, can do anything with Time but it works best offensively so-) a god it’s super effective and then-

The world crashes and screams, and where once was a red serpent made out of thousands of other red serpents now sits an egg of bright, gleaming red. Calliope, in a really cute hat and dress (she has leukemia, that’s why she wears hats that cover the entire head; it’s also why she looks like a cadaver, even though she isn’t. Sad.) raises her hand and snaps a finger and the egg is tiny tiny and then it is inside a bottle filled with stardust and dreams around her neck- and the bottle, and this I know for a fact (thank you Space powers) is about the size of my thumb nail. Which is pretty damn small,
actually. (And I can also feel my patch working- because I didn’t just patch the [Exit Game] function in IM, I patched everything and um… well, if you’re going to write a patch, why not make it comprehensive?)

Anyway.

“Red X?”

“Yes Calliope?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“No really- Thank you.”

I smile.

“Anytime, Callie.”

And she smiles- and through the sickly pallor of her skin and the wretched shell the disease has forced her body to be, I can see the person she was- and the person she would have been. (And I am sad, because she will be neither. And I am happy, because she’s going to be someone even better.)

A doorway, cut into the air and golden- and then an echo in the air ‘Game’s over. Go home.’

“Ready guys?”

Robin and Wally look at each other, then at me, and then nod- and all three of us walk through the doorway so bright I have to close my eyes-

And then I open them, and see the grey ceiling of the Cave. I’ve been sitting still for too long, this is not okay- ow, fuck, it hurts to even stand up and ow, ow, no, not okay- stretch, stretch some more, and the guys are being hugged (awww) and now I’m being hugged (eep!) by the definitely-Flash guy and hi, okay, hug him back- yay! Hugging!

Wait, IM SBURB has side effects- I need to- I need my computer, it’s on the kitchen counter exactly one meter behind me to the- ow, fuck, I hate Space poweroffs!

A poweroff is… like, you know when you go outside on a really hot day and you have to do something and then you come back in and you basically can’t move because the heat fried your brain? It’s like that, only with weird powers that my body hasn’t adapted to handle quite right- I mean, parts of the power work okay, and parts don’t and I should not be aware of the rotation of the earth owowowow-

Computer. Get the computer- and while I wasn’t looking, it… consolidated is a good word. It honestly looks a bit like a laptop- it isn’t, it’s got more processing power than a human brain, but… It is also covered in flower decals and is faintly pink at the edges.

I actually quite like it- and the undercarriage is the blue tiger pelt-pattern, so it’s warded and everything.
Now, I just have to- and walking feels a bit like putting shoes on a cat looks, and Gbook, come on hands, you can do it- and now turn oh gods ow fucking counter and walk back and hello, couch, yes, let’s just roll forarrrgh, fucking table. Lousy goddamn spatial reasoning.

“Terry- is something wrong?”

“I’m not sure, Rob- there’s… I have a bad feel about Wally. So I’m just going to double check something...”

“What do you mean? We won the game so-”

"Don't think of it as a game- think of it as a semi-alternate universe in which we gained a set of superpowers tangentially related to our inner selves. Now that we're back in our universe of origin, those tangential powers are trying to...sort of assimilate? Only in this universe, our bodies can only handle so much of the energy before it says "to hell with it" and gives up. Which is bad. Normally the energy would slough off on it's own. According to the readings I’m getting- Wally, due to your rapid metabolic rate (you special speedy snowflake you), the residual energy is being absorbed faster than your body can handle. You've already absorbed more than you can really handle- how do you feel, by the way?"

“Kindatwitchythisreallyweirdwhat’sgoingon-”

“Yeah…” what I can do, with your permission, is slow down the rate of absorbtion.”

"Youcan'tstopitcompletely?"

"No- it's... it's bound to you. Um... like when milk protiens stick to plastic because of a similarity in structure? Basically, the energy is- is sticking to your own internal speedy-ness, and to separate it out would mean killing you. Which I'm not doing again- once was way too many... So- I'm going to slow it down to... to a manegable rate. Um."

"W-willtherebeside-effects?"

"Ye- maybe. It might be that your overall speed increases. It might be that you get all the powers you had in the game. And..."

"A-and...?"

"Well. You might die."

“Doit.”

“Okay.”

I actually have something I can repurpose for this- a little edging here, a little code there- okay, it’s loading.

“You should feel it in a few seconds- let me know if anything feels weird in any way, and I’ll tweak the parameters…”

“Okay.”
Oh hey- I have an email! Oh it’s from Tamer- oh! Oh dear, I didn’t leave it with him- ah, but I really shouldn’t… Twin works on objects, not just people. Fuck, really? Yeah. Okay, so- Twin self and computer, and I need to switch tasks on this one- and this one is continuing to mess with Wally’s metaphysical aura so he doesn’t poof into a cloud of atoms.

Hm…

‘Sob feels sob, don’t know what to do with myself, sob angry all the time sob only know how to fight sob- okay, I need to get that trumpet from my purse, probably some other things, you know what, fuck it- Augh, standing, stagger stagger PITCH YAW STAGGER wobble through the Cave, and dig through my purse bag in my room- I could have sworn I put this thing in here- Yes! Trumpet! Now where’s the case?

I will spare you the details of crashing over myself in my room trying to find things that I know I have, stuffing them in my purse, knocking my head on my bed, and staggering back into the Common Room, and nearly faceplanting onto Robin in front of Batman- no, sorry, still get an adorable baby bat (SO CUTE OH MY GODS) everytime I hear his name. Whoops, there go my legs-

“Oooof!”

Goddamn lousy post-game powers fucking up my spatial reasoning. Honestly, it’s like I got turned into a cat and some evil bastard decided it would be cute if I wore shoes. Fuckass.

Meanwhile, Wally’s… Temporal Reservoir, okay, has finished loading- and wow, that’s a compilation of Words right there- “I don’t know why I keep shouting at them.” “Because every time you see them happy you remember how sad they’re going to be. And it breaks your heart. Because what's the point in them being happy now if they're going to be sad later. The answer is, of course, because they are going to be sad later.”- and Wally is staring at them.

“What does that mean?”

“You can’t tell?”

“I- sort of? Only it’s… blurry.”

“Try to make it focus- it’s yours, after all, so you should be able to see it…”

He mumbles the Words to himself, and then stares at them, and then at me- “What does that even mean?”

“Why should it mean something?”

“So- what are you doing now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well- one of you is making Wally slightly crazy with magic-logic, and you’re-”

“Sending my semi-suicidal friend a whole bunch of weapons to fight off inner demons with.”

“Ah. Can I help?”
“Sure!”

“But- but what did the game even mean? What was the point?”

“If it happened, it happened- why should it mean anything? Why should there have been a point?”

“Stop answering my questions with more questions!”

I smile at him. He glares, huffs, and turns away from me. I stifle, barely, a grin. Now, one last thing-

“So, are we going to play some different videogames sometime? Or this one again only not in IM?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Sweetness.”

“Why a trumpet?”

“My friend has trouble saying what he feels aloud- so I think maybe… it’s sometimes easier for me to, to deal with something indirectly? Only, art is some of the most direct stuff there is- so, if I have a problem or something, I make a painting or a drawing or a dress, and I feel… better.”

“Huh. Do you think that will really help him?”

“I’m also sending him a basic housekeeping guide, and a book about stuffed animals.”

“…Why?”

“Why not?”

Okay so- so I can understand that the metaphysical ramifications of a pocket dimension that fits into a game cartridge is not a new thing, but still… Why would a game that is meant to be played not allow an exit whenever- like the normal Pause function? Or the save and quit function?”

“That’s actually one of the functions of IM- Immersive Mode- and one of the reasons most games come with a warning about playing in it- oh yeah, are you feeling better?”

“Yeah… what kind of warning?”

“I’ll pull up a screenshot- here we go- {Warning to Players: Once IM is entered, the only way to Exit the Game is to play it all the way through. Please be advised, some games take longer to play than others. Enter IM [y/n]?”

“So- it wasn’t a flaw in the game?”

“No, it’s an actual function of the game-system itself- as I recall, it’s an anti-cheating measure.”

“Oh. Oh! That makes sense- like, there are game FAQ’s?”

“And forums, and image boards, and cheatcodes-”

“So it’s to prevent the Player from using a source outside the game to get through the game.”
“Yep.”

“So- why did the game need a patch?”

“Well… Okay, you remember Caliborn? Well, he’s technically the lead programmer of the game; one of the first people to ever win it, and play it all the way through. However, the actual lead programmer is Calliope-”

“The sick girl in the frilly hat?”

“Yeah- she’s a friend of mine from secondary school, actually. Anyway- the game is actually a Warding project gone horribly right, and then turned into a videogame that… not confers powers exactly, more like amplifies.”

“Amplifies- like, I always had the potential to… to do the Timey thing, and Rob always had the potential to do the Hearty thing, and you always had the potential to do the Spacey thing, but in this universe…?”

“In this universe, our powers manifested in different ways- for me, it’s the ability to navigate the dimension I make my home in with relative ease, lead others through it, and go to and from the Defined and Undefined worlds without much more than a time displacement somewhere. In you, the Timey thing manifested as superspeed, because speed and time are connected- I forget the equation, but I think Einstien Wrote it out?- and in Robin, I think… Well, his will start manifesting as, um… Charmer’s ability? Not really sure how to say better…”

“No, I think I get it- the dude can talk a girl into a date really easily- but… how does the Spacey thing translate? And what is warding?”

“Ahh, spatial reasoning- basically… my dimension, which is called Undefined now a days, is not laid out like yours… Um. You know how a cell is… it has all the mitochondria and the proteins and the vesicles and the membrane and all the little organelles and everything?”

“Yeah…?”

“You know how nothing in the body is actually static? It all moves around, all the time?”

“Yeah…?”

“Well… apply that to a place you can go, and then try to draw a map of it that’s accurate for more than an hour.”

He stares at me.

“It’s not that things do or don’t exist sometimes- it’s that they move around. They always exist- it’s very hard for something to not exist in the Undefined- but. It’s not always in the same place.”

“Okay. So- your spacey thing is being able to navigate a place that changes shape but not content- so what’s warding?”

“How did you meet your friend?”

“Well- Undefined used to be called Fairyland for a reason. It’s… it’s connected to everywhere stories go, and, well… My friend decided to make up a person to be his friend, and through some major
cosmic coincidence- or possibly meddling, who knows- I did the same thing, only in reverse. We dreamed each other into realness- except we were already real to begin with? So…"

“So- your imaginary friend from when you were a child turned out to be a real person in another dimension?”

“Universe, actually.”

“So- why is he suicidal?”

“It’s a combination of things- I think his break point was when he realized that his father really was dead. Um- then I had to save him from his evil grandfather, and… he. We didn’t really talk to each other for five years or so- and in that time I think he forgot a lot of what I taught him, and I forgot some of the things he taught me, but well… He is my friend, but in his world- in his world, I don’t think he has very many friends. He’s one of the very first friends I ever made, so… so, even though I can’t actually be there for him, I still want to- to be there for him. You know?”

“Yeah. I get it- so, what are you actually sending him?”

“I’m going to send him this trumpet, a sheaf of music, an instruction booklet for the trumpet, some cookbooks, some books about sewing, and… I’m wondering whether or not I should send him this book about knitting things out of yarn…”

“Maybe some GIFs of cute things being cute?”

“Yes! Um, but I don’t have very many saved…”

“I do- can I upload them onto your computer?”

“Sure! But don’t try to hack, your system will go pop.”

“So- what even is time, if it can be… affected by a string of quantum-code?”

“As it was explained to me in one of the lectures of metaphysics held by a truly bat-poop crazy professor- although I will admit, Professor Song was very cool, and quite knowledgeable in her field- time is, from a non-linear, non-subjective perspective, a large wad of multicolored felt. As you all should be aware by now, the multiverse is a series of sieves and colanders and permeable membranes which encompass the many states of being, all crammed and stacked and clumped together; and there are certain beings and substances that can pass through the many many holes in the many many layers; but one of the only things that can pass through every layer is Time.

Time, when it is considered as an Aspect of the multiverse, can most easily be associated with Entropy, and therefore, Chaos- because Time, as the riddle goes “devours birds, beasts, trees, and flowers, gnaws iron, bites steel, grinds hard stones to meal, slays kings, ruins towns, and beats high mountains down.” Therefore, it is an associate of Chaos, in that given enough Time, any ordered system, be it a living being, or an entire civilization, or a galaxy, will devolve into the Chaos inherent in Death.

As an aside- Entropy, in itself, is much like economics- it is neither good, nor evil- it just exists. Chaos is one of two forces in the multiverse that is truly neutral- the other being Order. Chaos is a passive force- it just happens; no one has to force it one way or another for it to come into being.
What many people often don’t remember is that the world started in Chaos—because, in the days before life existed, everything mixed in the soup, and there was no such thing as separation. Order is an active force—it is made to happen; if no one forced or enforced an order of some kind in the world, it wouldn’t exist. Even though the world started in Chaos, it moved forwards the first time due to the influence of Order—the first Ordering of cells, the first creation of tissues and organs and life, deep within the sea.

To condemn one and praise the other is to lose sight of their congruence—one cannot exist without the other. They are one of the First Balances that ever existed—the very First Yin Yang to ever exist anywhere. (Yin, of course, refers to the “shady side”, while Yang is the “sunny side”.)

However, while this is an interesting digression into the nature of existence, it has very little to do with our lecture.

Taken from a linear perspective, Time is a thread that is attached to you somewhere—only you can really perceive it, and it is a color specific and special to you, and you alone—specifically, the part of you that is not defined externally (that is, by other people) but is defined internally (that is, by you)—and this thread is inextricably bound to your life, and to the lives of everyone you ever meet, speak to, or are spoken of to. This is where the giant wad of multicolored felt comes in—and this is also why, even if you go to the farthest universe from your own, you will still find a memory of yourself somewhere—possibly as a character in a story or as someone’s imaginary friend—because that wad of felt, with all of it’s colors (each one, of course, corresponding to a singular being that is affected by time) is felted between each sieve, colander, and membrane—meaning, of course, that there are threads finer than gossamer, finer than sunbeams or moonlight—so fine, in fact, that they can slip through the permeable membrane that guards the most fragile of worlds (these being the ones inside your head) and threads impossibly huge, stronger than swords of steel or beams of laser—so strong, in fact, that they make (or made, Time is hell on the temporal prepositions) their own holes in the thickest of the barriers between worlds, thus holding the entire compilation of separate materials together.”

“So… t-Time is a thing that, when viewed linearly, exists mostly in my head?”

“Yes.”

“And when it isn’t viewed linearly, it’s still in my head, but there’s a whole lot of it that isn’t?”

“Yes.”

He stares at me, green eyes confused—and tired. I stifle a yawn.

“We have been playing videogames for—two hours? So… bed Time?”

“I—yeah. Huh. Hey!”

I giggle, and then I drop Twin—I have the strangest sensation of being two different people, but of course, I’m not—and then I’m sitting with my computer next to Robin on the couch…? But I was on the floor—okay, I’m between Wally and Robin. Why—magic is weird move on.

(I think I might have injured myself when I rolled my eyes that time…)

And I think the Flash is laughing at me. Whatever.
So. I write out an email to my dearest friend, Tamer, and attach the demon-slaying weapons, and I also entreat him to get professional help because I’m not, and I send it off to him (pocket to put things in, books and instrument, and a GAttaché of several kittens and ducklings and baby bats and other adorable baby creatures, and [enter] and it’s off through the magic of the internet to my emotionally roiling friend. Sigh.) and then I go to bed- not before putting away the Playpal, of course, and taking a long relaxing shower. With soap. Lots of soap.

That night, I do dream- I dream of Robin, the Seer of Heart, and Wally, the Mage of Time, and I, Queen of Space, fighting Imps and collecting grist, slaughtering bigger and more dangerous beasts that the game throws at us- killing the Ringwraiths, when they come for us, and then defeating the Black King; terraforming, and the aftermath of their battles with the Nightmare Heir; the Underworld, and how Robin’s was full of Angels; the Void, and how Wally ended up with a sleepitude of --- and his dreamself went cuckoo bannanas-pants-on-head-no-smalls-crazy due to interference from the Others; battling on, endless climbing of echeladders, my final title of Beatdown Queen (young and free, gonna knock you out~); the Final Battle, and our escape- and then I dream of nothing at all.

Training today- should be fun. What to wear- my superhero outfit? I guess so… let’s see, my X clip… is now a pair of X’s on the flippy-pieces of my glasses. Okay- press and go- and I’m wearing… my bodysuit- except it covers my head? And my mask is… actually a mask. Stiff and still. Sleeves, loose- but I believe these are called bell sleeves, and the skirt goes to just above my knees, circle cut; my boots end just above the ankle- and this outfit has a feeling of… finality. Like this is what it’s going to be for a while.

On my wrists sit my Blades, in their Resting form- heavy, but not really… not needed, not right now. My Cards now occupy a sort of- not space in my head, not exactly. It feels like, like when you pick a specific bowl for keys and leave it by the door? Like that, only for a deck of magical Cards. Spell Cards? Whatever, I don’t even know anymore…

My power level has gone up. Hmm- I can still only cast two spells at a time, but it feels like- My… Deck? Is ordered to levels now… so… Oh! Bubbles is a very low cost spell, and Windy is a very high cost spell, and the rest array themselves between the two- I need to see how strong Bubbles actually is though…

To the Mission Room!

Woo!

Oh shit, I forgot that I cast Flower- ugh, that’s stinky and gross, wow- okay, clean it up, so- Bubbles! Orbs of rainbow whirl out and swoosh across the stone floor, over the mess I made and washing it away, a billion cleaning bubbles scrubbing the floor- and then I feel that the floor is clean, so I drop Bubbles, and the mess fades with the spell. But now the floor is wet, so I need to dry it- Windy is gentle and soft, and slowly sweeps across the floor, whirling the residual water away- and then the Mission Room is pristine.

And I don’t feel… I feel at three fifth’s strength, which is honestly amazing- something like that would have knocked me flat a while ago.
I should also get a feel for my new clothing- and my ribs are better, so knife drills! Yay! But first I need to warm up- simple stretches first, then more and more complex ones until finally I’m doing one that makes me look vaguely like a pretzel made out of a person and then I’m ready to Walk the Circle- Stand and face the dawn, then walk to the left and float the palms at chest high and slowly begin the turn. Increase the speed and then float the hips above the floor; slow whirling out and kick the feet out together low stoop to cartwheel and then I’m not thinking about anything at all- the gentle flow of Circle Walking throws me into a trance as surely as any of my other training drills. The drill ends when I am parallel to the ground and facing it, two hundred centimeters up in the air and slowly moving right- which means it’s time to transition into knife drills; blades in palms and slash and landing roll up crouching leap like a cat and whirl of silver in the light and catch of blade on blade that’s not my blade- it’s blue, and glowing.

“Hello, Aqualad.”

“Hello, Red X. Spar?”

“Okay.”

I step backwards, hands in front and bow.

‘Why?’

‘So you can see I don’t have a longsword on me.’

‘Ah.’

He bows back, much the same as I did- except his hands are at his side, as they should be.

Step to the left and he mimics me- it’s going to be like that, is it?

Slow walking to the side, circle up and then dart forwards- his eyes are very green, have I mentioned that?- and then blades cross and dart back and he follows (so chase me) (my pleasure) and then water follows me like serpents on the stones, blue and glowing and Freeze them solid and he smiles at me and then shards of ice shatter themselves and fly towards me like sparrows and I Cloud the field and dart towards- he freezes up and doesn’t move, lift mask from under chin to reveal face and press secret quick a kiss to his cheek and dart back laughing when he whirls, Cloud fades to mist and my lips left a mark of blazing red on him (mine mine mine) (oh my yes) and he’s blushing over his neck and ears and forehead.

I am as well- red cheeks and forehead and chin, slowly dripping down my neck and oozing over my whole body, which he cannot see but I can feel and- Dash to the side and low sweeping roll and water comes for me again; shards of ice that catch Glow and sparkles that flare brightly and then the ice falls and tinkles on the stone floor and I use Wave and the tinkles become chimes become reverberations that waver in the air and the water scatters into the air and the air is thick and muggy and we’re grinning at each other. Dart forwards and blade meets blade- dance back and sweeping kick, lean to side and admire the movement of his shoulders and back and hook ankle to ankle and he rolls with it and is on his feet and the wet air whirls and slashes towards me and ease under it and laugh and Bubbles full of Thunder fill the air, and he pops one and the air is full of lightning and the roar of a wolf-cat in heat (it sounds like particularly nasty thunder, like when a thunderstorm hisses
and crackles and pops without ever raining). I dive into a Shadow and slide underneath him but he whirls and dives and pins me fast to the floor and his eyes are so very green- and that is Red Tornado in the doorway.

*Gods Fucking Damn It.*

Sandwiches are delicious. I mean, um, yes. Delicious. Bacon warm thick crunchy chewy salty meaty mmmmnmmnn, on pretzel bread so chewy and warm brown and big chunks of salt so tasty and crunchy sweet and um avocado, tasty avocado green and slip soft of cool smooth fat, crunchy green and soft cress and sweet wet lettuce and sweet Jesus and all the holy gods I want to have sex right now. Like, right the fuck now.

Kaldur chokes on his peach lemonade.

‘My apologies.’

‘It is quite alright.’

I retire to my room for about two hours, and I make use of a specific kind of toy- and I highly recommend getting some toys at some point in your life. Yes, you can do a lot with your hands alone but good gods; a nicely molded piece of silicone that vibrates on command will change your life. Fuck, some absorbent towels and a door that locks- anyway.

After breakfast today, Superboy went to a city called Metropolis- he’s going to be back in about an hour, and in one *hell* of a mood…

I should get some padding.

Let’s see- holy- this is… this is- Okay. There are things that go underneath contemporary armor that are perverted versions of older styles of armor; I didn’t realize that I got this kind of DA- it’s a leotard that is soft and made of fabric that smells of salt and is cool to the touch, and a pair of greaves that are thick bracers of cloth that loop over the thick of my palm and thick over my knuckles, and calf guards that hook over the arch of my foot, and they’re thin like slim pieces of silk and- there’s a catch, right at the back of my neck, and it’s the work of moments to slip out of my suit and into the padding, and then the suit pulls back on without problems- and I bend and twist and arch and my suit moves perfectly well. My boots aren’t too loose or too tight, my blades rest easy on my wrists, and my boobs are pressed up and together in a way they have not before- they jiggle and bounce a bit less too, which is quite nice.

(Yes, I think about my breasts and how they move all the damn time. If you have breasts, and you say that you don’t think about the way your jigglers wiggle, you are lying.)
Black Canary was injured today- I’m not sure from what, but it’s going to undoubtedly be a problem later. I haven’t actually seen her yet, but she totally was. Now to decide- I should hold back when I fight her, except they’ve already seen me fight so I’m not sure if that’s worth anything… Arrrrrrrrgh. Just… go with it I guess.

And now it’s time for training in the Mission Room- I really hope Superboy isn’t too upset from whatever happened today…

Black Canary is… she has hair of softly beaten gold, and pale skin like… like sandstone mixed with talcum spread smooth with little dots of terracotta scattered over the edges of her cheekbones. Freckles. Her eyes are blue, like the sky near the sea- hard but not harsh. Pretty- a face like a bird’s, like… sharply beaked, something that eats seeds.

She also hits a bit like a cargo truck against the body of a full grown deer.

No, really.

She hits fucking hard.

“I consider it an honor to train all of you- I’ll throw a lot at you, everything I’ve learned from my mentors-” she winces as she removes her blue jacket, tuxedo style collar cut high just below the ribs, rip over left bicep that must be her main injury, question is should I target or ignore- “and from my bruises.” And she tosses her jacket aside like it’s nothing.

“What happened?” Miss Martian, with her uncle- and that, I think, made Superboy mad more than anything else, more than any other thing that might have happened today- it just made me sad. (He’s got good instincts though- he doesn’t really know his own strength, so it makes sense to distance himself from us… still, it isn’t right that he’s standing all the way on the other side of the room…)

I think it’s very hard to see someone else have something you want desperately- even if you know that… that it is wrong to be jealous of the relationship of someone else. It is not Megan’s fault that her uncle loves her and wants to be around her- and it is not my fault that my family doesn’t want me. I am me, and she is she- there are innumerable differences between our lives, our worlds. That doesn’t mean that- that I don’t long for someone who wants to know how I’ve been, and how I am now, and if I’m really okay. Because I do- I just. Not at the expense of, of my integrity, or my sanity, or my pride, or my independence- I just.

I don’t know. I don’t know.

(Black Canary’s voice is very pretty, I like it a lot.)

“The Job. Combat is about controlling the battle- putting it on your terms. You should always act, never react. I’ll need a sparring partner.”

“Yo! Right here-” Kid Flash, never volunteer! And it’s very rude to eat during training, extreme
metabolism or not! “swoosh-“ and the banana goes into a trashcan “and after these moves, how about I show you mine?”

Black Canary smirks and narrows her eyes (oh dear), and then they take ready stances- and then Kid Flash has blocked a punch, but whoops, leg sweep- and bang! onto the brightly lit ground; Shifu Canary set it up for training reasons. A voice with no life speaks- it pretends to be female, but I know better- “Kid Flash: Fail.”

“(ow) Hurts so good…”

“Nice block. Now, what did Kid Flash do wrong?”

Robin’s lively voice chirps out- “Oh oh! He hit on teacher and got schooled!”

“Dude!”

I giggle.

“Dude!”

“He allowed me to dictate the terms of-”

“Ch, Whatever.” Oh dear. Superboy, this is not the way to deal with anger…“This is a waste of time. I’m a living weapon; any battle I’m in is going to be on my terms.” His voice has smoothed out, but… I think he’s about to get his bell rung.

Two full body slams later, and yeah- Superboy, this is not the thing to be doing. (Crazy is doing the same thing twice and expecting something different to happen…)

“This is stupid- I’m leaving.”

“Superboy-”

He’s almost stormed off- welp. “Shifu, may I try?”

“Red X- of course.”

I step forwards, bow, and then- Center weight and stand, examine opponent. How fast is Black Canary?

Shift to left- she shifts to left; Shift to right- she shifts right.

Ready? (Yes)

Set? (Yes)

Go!

Dart forwards, stop short then back again. Arms up, circle around, don’t take your eyes off of her-step forwards and high sweep and she jumps back roll with it and uppercut, back back side to back block (ow) dart back and she follows, punch forwards and duck her punch again-

Phone’s about to ring, leap back and block at the ready-
“Team. Earlier today—” and then he says a whole bunch of stuff I’m not too clear on. I’m pretty sure we’re escorting a bunch of beaten up parts of a something called *Amazo* (what does that even mean?) to a place called *Star*. It is possibly a laboratory? I really wish I understood Batman’s voice better, this is really annoying…

And what I’ll need to wear for the start of the mission is in locker ten in the locker room. Sweetness.

Okay, there is no way in hell I’m wearing all of that- my bodysuit is better than those f-ugly pants, thank you. I will wear the jacket though- red and black with a strip of white on the sleeve ends and gold stripes across the left side; I take it out of the locker, and off of the hangar- and how does this work?

Let’s see- there’s a row of blackened… teeth? They seem remarkably like teeth, and at the bottom hem of the jacket there’s a… a sort of squared off thing that a little… not a nail, but it’s the right shape, maybe a key? But how do the teeth- oh! There is a slider thing, so maybe that’s it? The key fits into the slider thing, but not all the way- so slide it down to the bottom, and try again- yes, okay! It makes a sort of a… *szzzzrrrtt* sound, when you draw it up and down the blackened teeth, and when I insert the key part into the slider it slides further than before, and the bottom hems match up! Hmm- I think if I hold it at the hem and then pull the slider- *szzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*.

Ooooo!

Coooooooooooool!

Now, put it on- and make sure everything fits underneath and is neatly tucked away, and then- *szzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* And there is a sort of flap, that folds over it, and then buttons that make a *snap* sound when pressed together, and this is a nice jacket, very snug and it moves quite nicely through the air…

“Theresa- do you know, um, what a zipper is?”

“Um- no, Kaldur’ahm, I- I do not. Why?”

“N-no reason, just asking.”

“O-okay.”

So- for the mission, we are each given something that looks quite a bit like an inner eartooth, but isn’t because it’s not made out of bone and gems, and connected via something that is floating in space (Really? That seems a bit impractical…) to each other.

And then we’re on our motorcycles, which match our… jackets? No, other way- our jackets match our bikes (except they’re wearing, like, full on suits?) and now we’re through the Zeta tube and out of a small ramshackle barn and into a small forest.

We wait- and adults in brightly colored costumes with strange powers- oh, there’s Batman, okay, mission’s going to start soon.

Do de do de do de do.

I think we’re in Connecticut- it’s got that feeling… that feeling of having too many Gui in one place
and not enough shamans and priests to lay the unquiet dead to rest- it honestly feels a bit like a lightning bolt that’s about to snap overhead, or having to poop when you’re seriously constipated.

Awful. Connecticut has some of the largest numbers of graveyards and haunted places in the United States- but I’d have to ask someone to be sure…

Dum de do de do dum de do do do.

Soon enough, trucks drive past, and we ride out into the early evening, heading towards where the sun will set- we ride. Robin and Superboy have a conversation I don’t really understand about things that have no meaning; Miss Martian and Aqualad talk about Superboy’s anger- oh, so it’s because…

Superman is ignoring him? Okay…

Ooo!

The sunset is very beautiful today- and what was that? It looked oddly- glowy? And green? Ahh!

Monkey!

(When Monkeys Attack! Wait, no, time and place, Terry, time and place…)

I block the green and black monkey with one hand, and flip my bike to battle mode with the other, and then I Jump as high forward as I can- I land on the van with parts in it and crush the Monkey’s neck with a little Power to my fist; it’s a robot monkey, figures.

More monkeys rush forwards- I unzip my jacket and catch one of them and tie it tight around it, then spin with the arms like a mace and catch and break another monkey and they have lasers and rockets, how is that fair?

Dodge duck and hop, watch the edge and ggnnnnnggh- oh thank heavens, that’s Miss Martian and Kid Flash, wooo! Monkey, monkey with lasers, monkey with electric teeth things, monkey- grab tail swing batter batter swing and SLAM into another monkey.

I think I’m laughing- there’s this weirdly deranged giggle coming from somewhere, so I think it might be me… Oh woah, that is a lot of monkeys on Miss Martian, I better get over there- best not to forget my jacket with the monkey in it, which is still twitching…

And that is a preposterous amount of red laser flying through the air- oh, no no- it’s danmaku, okay, it won’t hurt a person but it will fuck up electronics… yep, there go the monkeys, bleup bleaap Oheeeaaaaarrrrrrgh and then they Pop! like balloons on that show with the cat and mouse that try to kill each other.

(The thing about videogames from magical lands? The really good ones are just stories you interact with- in the case of Touhou, it’s an actual chronicle of actual events that actually happened, with actual people and spells and everything- from several millennia ago, of course, otherwise it couldn’t have been used.

I really fucking like Touhou.)

And I’m beating monkeys off of Miss Martian, who has materialized arms to help with the task of
beating monkeys and AAAAAAAAH SHIIIIIIIIIT they got away with the cargo! Fuck dammit! And now the truck is wobbling, and there it goes- sliiide! I Jump high, and I see Superboy following the monkeys with the things and, well, I can’t just let him take on an unknown danger alone- so, I go after him.

I leave my jacket behind, and throw my helmet at my bike- it catches it with a tongue like tie, and then returns to normal bike mode- and then I’m in the corn following Superboy, and I know no more of what happened with the rest of the team.

I know a story about corn- let me tell it to pass the time.

A long time ago, long ago, so long ago that no one can remember, and no tree can remember, and no rock can remember; so long ago that there were no people, and there were no trees, and the rocks had not been made... In those days past, when the world was less than it is now- or perhaps more, depending on how you choose to look at it- the land and the sky and the sea were very different from what they are now. For one thing, the land floated on the back of a turtle that swam in the sea, and the sky could be cut with a blade and eaten- for another, all the lands of the world had not yet split apart, and everything that could be found was all in one general place (thornless raspberries and bamboo groves on one mountain!)- but those are not the stories I’m going to tell today.

Today, I shall tell the story of the sisters three- Corn, Beans, and Squash. Well, they were nicknamed Corn, Beans, and Squash- their actual names were Meenhi, Wimlah and Gunnedoo. Meenhi was called Corn because she had long silky hair and was very tall, like the corn plant, and wore green clothing; Wimlah was called Beans because she loved to climb, and had long thin braids, and also wore green clothing, like her sister Corn; and Gunnedoo was called Squash because of her big hips and pretty striped skin.

Now, on the subject of their parentage and birth- their father was a witchdoctor of great skill and power, but, through the calamity of a bunyip’s jagged teeth, had lost the love of his life- the only thing left of her was her memory, three bracelets he had made for her that terrible day of her death, and sadness. He had meant to give the bracelets to her, of course, but there just wasn’t time; Hunter’s boy had been down with lesions to his barrangal and there was medicine needed, and then the Sky People had wanted spells to protect against galgala, and then a young woman had been brought in with a dent in her gabara, and then the damn dingoes had run off with his best piece of garuma and then and then and then his beautiful wife was dead and there wasn’t much point to the bracelets now was there? Except maybe- maybe there was- Walan had always said, “Tayawan, I want children-three daughters, pretty as can be.” And, well, what better way to remember his lost love than with three new loves?

So, Tayawan took an ear of corn and a string of pea-beans and a big fat squash and the bracelets he had made for his wife, pale wood carved some beads smooth and some with animals leaping from the grain; and with his mystical powers fashioned three beautiful daughters- our Corn, Beans, and Squash. Now, when Tayawan first made the girls, they were just that, girls- but Tayawan’s powers were legendary, and his daughters were as human and alive as could be, and in the way of all living things, grew up into three beautiful young women.

(I’m running sidelong to a traintrack at the moment, but I don’t know any stories about trains…)

In the time it took for them to grow up, the bunyip of the terrible teeth had had three sons of her own,
Iroquois, Mohawk, and a third brother, whose name has been forgotten. It was a very long time ago…

Anyway, these three brothers were out hunting for their mother when they came upon Corn, Beans, and Squash, gathering water for the day- and the sisters saw the brothers. Ah, young love! So violently stupid! The brothers, being independent little cusses, decided to steal the sisters away, as the laws governing the sister’s tribe would not allow the young lovers to marry by honorable means. However, by stealing away the sisters, the brothers started a war- a terrible battle, in which everything with a pulse decided to get in on the action.

Bunyip versus man!

Dropbear versus Bunyip!

Flies biting everything that moved!

Tayawan, desperate to protect his daughters, used his mystical powers to turn the three sisters into pillars of stone. He was then, quite promptly, snapped in half by the same bunyip that ate his wife. Unfortunately, the half that was snapped was holding the magic bone that Tayawan had used to turn his daughters to stone- and it’s magic was so potent that it turned the Bunyip into bones as well; from the flesh of the unsnapped half of the witchdoctor father there arose a bird, now called the Lyre Bird, which ever searches for the bone that will turn the sisters back from stone to woman. Unfortunately, the battle was so fierce and so long fought, the field was entirely bones, bones of every shape, color, and size- and with Tayawan’s simultaneous death and transformation, his magic exploded across the land, shattering it into the continents we know today; killing the turtle, cracking it’s shell and settling it’s bones and flesh upon the ocean floor- and the sheer force of the explosion pushed the sky far far out of reach.

The three brothers were forever separated from the three sisters- but never were Corn, Beans, and Squash forgotten by them, and, in their honor, the brothers- Iroquois, Mohawk, and the one who was forgotten- raised mounds, and in them planted Corn, Beans, and Squash, to remember their lost loves by.

So it has been to this day.

And I’m in Gotham again- holy shit, this is a nice school- And three guesses that that explosion wasn’t caused by Superboy, and the first two don’t count.

I go in through a hole in the wall of the building, and follow the trail of destruction and am just in time to see a being made of… metals? punch Superboy in the face, and slam him into a bank of lockers. Superboy stands, punches a locker- and I’ve Shadowed myself. Hmm. I think I have a habit, now…

Whoop! Nearly crashed into Superboy there, but that’s a science lab, hmm… I wonder if- yeah, they have exactly what I’ll need, and- oh, sweet, they must have been doing a lab, because that is a hermetically sealed syringe and it’s already got a needle- sweeeeeet. Wait, why- I’m sure I’ll find out. Twin, and follow Superboy again- and now we’re in some sort of arena area, only why would you put such shiny wooden floors in an arena? Anyway, Superboy is now fighting- oh, no, tell a lie, Superboy is getting his shit kicked by… I guess that’s the Amazo thing? Better help him out- Twin, then I sneak into the shadows under the seats of the arena, and I drop Shadow and Dash forwards to try and flank MOTHER FUCKER- “Access: Black Canary.” and punch to the face. Ow, fuck
dammiiiEEEEEK! Footstomp! EEEeeooohkay, Superboy’s fighting Amazo again, and roll to feet and-

One of these things is not like the other, one of these things does not belong; that man is not a combatant, and those monkeys are guarding him… Let me think, I need to take out his guards and get him fast so… Illusion? Okay- gently settle it over the man himself, and then it’s set, so I don’t have to continue to cast it- now, Freeze the monkey guards, and slowly rise behind him, a blood-drenched shadow of death, okay, what is with the dramatics lately?

On my feet! and Dash to the left and “Access: The Flash” and are you fucking kidding me so he’s about to grab me so I Jump and backflip over him and I really don’t want to be this close to him so oh fuck he grabbed my sleeve so Thunder! And of fucking course he’s insulated to electrical shocks, of fucking course, so Power and punch his wrist and his fist breaks releasing my sleeve so low sweeping up kick to chest and that dents too in the shape of my booted foot and he’s grabbed my foot and “Access: Superman” and I’m being slammed into the ground except I know the thing to do is to relax on impact and my underarmor is doing it’s job very well, wow-

“If I may, it is my humble suggestion that you call your automaton off.” Hold the syringe to his throat- and he doesn’t know that it’s only de-ionized water inside- and he swallows, movement traveling up my arm through the needle gently digging against his flesh but not quite piercing through-

And this is getting old, and painful, so Shadow and Twin Drops- I see the syringe drop down, and then the man is yelling but the blood pounding in my head is drowning out what he’s saying. Amazo must have scared me more than I thought…

And there’s Superboy again, angry as ever, but now he’s yelling something about channeling his anger- oh, oh I think he figured it out! And there’s Kid Flash and Robin, when did they get here? Oh cool! Keep away! I haven’t played that game in a while- oh shit, Kid Flash is being crushed by Amazo, fuck what do I- arrow from nowhere?

Dude, what?

Superboy’s going to finish the fight, so I go over and crouch by the arrow- It’s green, and I don’t recognize the fletching, but the head is smooth, with a broad tip like for making a big exit wound. It’s a small arrow compared to my arm, meaning it’s a relatively large arrow, so a powerful archer shot it. It’s of middle weight, by the size of the hole in the floor- and someone who wears floral scents made or fired it. Hm… I’d say… Sweet pea. Lush, delicate, definitely floral, not exotic exactly- sweet pea.

( 

The 'sweet' in the name refers to the peas' odour rather than taste; note the Latin name, Lathyrus odoratus. Sweet peas look lovely in the garden but, for me, they are as important as a cut flower - a lovely bunch of sweet peas can fill a room with a delicate but intoxicating presence. The scent of sweet peas has unfathomable depths of gentle sensuousness. It is one of those delicate yet persuasive fragrances the garden produces that is more enticing and seductive than any man-made perfume. However, most sweet peas grown today do not have any fragrance at all. This is a terrible shame. It obviously does not stop them being beautiful flowers, but, to me, they are incomplete, like beautifully served food with no flavour.

But before I get too carried away on this hobbyhorse, it has to be admitted that the choice of fragrant sweet peas is much more limited than the scores of sumptuous scent-free varieties.

This is a result of the obsessive breeding and showing of sweet peas in the last 100 years or so.
The original sweet pea, introduced to this country at the end of the 1600s, is likely to have been a magenta and purple bicolour, now called 'Cupani' or 'Cupani's Original'. 'Painted Lady' was one of the first bred varieties, being recognised as such as long ago as 1726, and it is still one of the best. Very few new varieties were raised until Henry Eckford, the head gardener at Sandywell in Gloucestershire, virtually invented grandiflora sweet peas at the end of the 19th century. These have larger flowers and a much wider range of colours but, crucially, retain their fragrance. For the record, the elusive 'Monty Don' is a grandiflora. By 1900, Eckford had raised no fewer than 115 varieties. In 1901, one of them, 'Prima Donna', sported a flower with greater size and a distinct wave to the upright bit of the flower (the 'standard'). This happened simultaneously in the three gardens of Eckford, at Unwin's - then a cut-flower nursery outside Cambridge - and at Althorp, where Earl Spencer's head gardener identified it and showed it as 'Countess Spencer'. The upshot of this coincidence was that the cross between Unwin's wavy sweet pea 'Gladys Unwin' and 'Countess Spencer' produced the Spencer sweet peas. These have long stems and large flowers, which make them ideal for showing. To this day, sweet peas inspire an almost maniacal competitiveness in certain male gardeners - and it is always male, I am afraid.

Prize sweet pea growing is about a search for perfection and the desire to be acknowledged as supreme by your peers, but this is not really gardening.

I grow flowers for delight, not acclaim. The best for that perfect sweet pea fragrance is the original 'Cupani's' or 'Matucana'. Both are bi-coloured, as is 'Painted Lady', a pink and white variety. Other than these, it is best to hunt out the grandifloras that Eckford developed, which will make up most of any so-called old-fashioned mix of sweet pea seeds. In general, I like the richer colours such as 'Purple Prince', 'Black Knight' and 'Midnight', as well as the red 'Gypsy Queen', 'Violet Queen', the bright orange 'Henry Eckford', or the magenta 'Annie B. Gilroy'. Good scented whites are 'Dorothy Eckford', 'Royal Wedding' and the ivory 'Cream Southbourne'. But however they look or smell, all sweet peas are grown in the same way. Horticultural convention has it that you should sow sweet peas in autumn, but although this will give you earlier flowers, it means storing and protecting the plants over winter. So unless you have a cold frame or greenhouse, spring - around mid-February - is a safer bet. It was also decreed that the seeds needed nicking with a knife, but this is not so.

I have consistently found they have a high rate of germination if you sow them in a pot or root trainer (all legumes have long roots and need some depth of soil to grow into), soak the container in a basin of water for ten minutes so that it absorbs plenty of water, and then keep the seeds moist (but not sodden) with the soil at 6 degrees C. I sow three or four to a three-inch pot, and will eventually plant them out, supported by a wigwam. If one does not germinate, I do not replace them.

One strong plant will produce as many flowers as half a dozen weak ones all competing for nutrients. However, when you buy sweet peas from a garden centre there might be as many as a dozen in a pot and all of them weedy, pathetic plants, so it is a good idea to thin them out dramatically to give them a chance. Late frosts are the enemy when it comes to planting out - mid-April is a good general rule of thumb, as long as the plants have been well and truly hardened off: give them at least a fortnight outside in their pots, and be prepared to cover them with fleece if there is a cold snap. They are inclined to sit rather sullenly when first planted out and are susceptible to slugs, so keep an eye on them, and make sure that they are well watered. To get the best from them it is advisable to treat them like climbing beans - that is, to dig a pit and fill it with good manure or compost. The peas will need tying in every week or so for the first few months, but will support themselves once they get growing strongly. To keep the plants flowering as long as possible, you must keep picking them, because they quickly go to seed as the weather warms up. They are also quick to go to seed if they become dry, so a regular soak is essential. If you want the sweet peas to be at their best you need to pick all the blooms every eight to ten days. As you do so, remove any seed pods that appear, because the plant will channel more energy into seeds than making new flowers.)
It occasionally bothers me that I remember everything I read so well. Occasionally. Except it comes in handy quite often, so… Angle of descent was from- That window. Huh. I pull the arrow free of the floor, and surprisingly, the arrowhead comes with it; maybe it’s not meant for hunting, okay- and the arrow tip itself is smooth edged, sharp to my fingertip and yeah, this is a nice arrow. Let’s see now- the window is over there and-

‘Red X, where are you going?’

‘During the battle with Amazo, someone not on the team shot an arrow in assistance.’

‘Ugh, they still don’t trust us!’

‘Um- I was going to go see if there were any traces of the archer-’

‘Don’t bother- they’ll be long gone by now.’

‘O-okay…’

So, we pack up the automaton parts, get back on our bikes, and ride off into a Zeta Tube.

Later, Batman debriefs us, explaining that “You all performed well under rapidly changing circumstances, and everyone in the League is impressed.”

“Even Superman?”

“Superman will come around eventually. You’re all dismissed.”

Superboy looks disheartened- and I think… I think I could help him, I think. I just… I have this thing about not telling other people about my problems, but still- he. He needs someone to tell him that he can- and he’s walked almost all the way out the door, so I run to catch up with him and-

“Superboy, please wait!”

“What, Terry- I’m not in the mood for-”

We’re in the hallway, just past the doorway that leads into the hall for the living quarters.

“Please just listen to me! I- I understand how awful it feels to know that, um, that there is another person out there who could help you, like, understand the world, but they will not look at you, um, and they will not s-speak to you, or even… Um. I get it, okay? I just- I think if the people who are supposed to help you won’t, you should… um, you should maybe find people who will, okay?”

“What are you- are you saying I should give up and just… accept being ignored for-”

“No! I’m saying that… that, um, you should look around and see if there aren’t already people who notice you, and, like, pay attention to you, a-and want to spend time with you. That’s what I’m saying.”

He stares at me for a moment, angry still, and then he sighs, and then he says- “But what if you already… messed it up?”

“Unmess it up! If you were rude or mean, apologize and try to make amends!”

“Thanks Terry.”
"You’re very welcome, Superboy!"

And then I have to undo my mask because holy shit, blushing, and ah, fresh cool cave air- I’m getting better, with the whole being underground thing. I’m also starting to remember-

Well.

There are always parts of life that are so traumatic and horrible, you make yourself forget them—except you can never really forget something like that, so… you make yourself stop remembering.

There’s something else I’m making myself not remember, about why my blood relations won’t look at me, won’t talk to me, won’t associate with me, none of them- and it’s something I can’t change. I remember that very well. Something to do with land animals…

Ugh. I don’t want to remember now, I’ll just be upset.

And there’s Black Canary- oh yeah, I guess she came back for something, and there goes Superboy to talk and make amends like I said, and Robin- Oh dear, I’d better get over there.

I quickly trot over to where Robin is—kind of haranguing Batman and a guy in green, an archer it looks like—and I’m just in time to hear Robin say “You’re still babysitting us!”

“No, he is not.” “No, I’m not.”

The archer in green is holding the arrow that was shot in our aid and—“The arrow that was shot for defense too short be… Um, sorry, who are you?”

“Green Arrow, and she’s right—also, this isn’t how I make my arrows—See?”

“…Oh. So—maybe Speedy?”

“No— it would be too short for him too.”

“You know Speedy, X?”

“No, I meets, and sees him shoot— and that arrow too short for him too.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, X.”

“Is a bad thing, Robin— arrow too short, draw bow, arrow catch on bow then shatter, splinter splinter splinter—” And I pat my arm, chest and face to demonstrate where the splinters would go. “Same—same but different problem, arrow too long it not fly straight, or fast.”

“So— for a professional archer, the length of the arrow is very important?”

“Yes.”

He nods, then says—“Can you shoot a bow?”

“Not accurately at range.”

“And if you were to fletch an arrow it would be—”

“Black shaft, red feathers; tip of stone, glass, or ceramics. And longer.”
“Oh.”

“Also, the arrow was shot from on top of building or something like that- could tell from angle in floor. Nice try though.”

“…Thanks.”

Robin looks a bit put out. I giggle, and then walk off- and Green Arrow is smiling, I guess because I correctly identified neither he nor I shot that arrow, and I need a shower, I smell like vanilla and sweat.

So. Quick pitstop at my room for fresh clothing and a pair of bodyscrubs I need to use to reduce chafing, and time to reapply the scar stretch stuff; I need to make a new super suit, this one’s going to be too small soon- and I’m in the shower, right, and soap on my skin and water running down my body, caressing my thighs and hips and butt and back and Kaldur just walked in the door. Holy fucking gods, what the hell- I don’t think they have that kind of taboo here, dear. And you are in the communal showers- okay. Okay, I can deal with this, just- stare intently at the wall and don’t look at him, don’t think about th-the water r-running down his body and he’s probably cut like a professional swimmer don’t even go there dammit, just stare at the white tiles with their white-grey grout and focus on the way it feels to wash your hair, the exact texture of wet hair under your hands and the w-washcloth rub it with soap and smooth gentle circles into your skin. Steady hand across the neck, smooth smooth pay attention to the edges of the scar on the shoulder, and down and down and check the breasts for strange lumps and bumps, very important so I know I don’t have the cancer- scrub the shoulders and the shoulder blades and in the middle of the back and down, and then underneath the breast tissue in the front because that’s where mold will grow if I don’t scrub and across the ribs and pay attention to that scar, it’s right over a rib; soft curve of waist and make sure you get the small of the back, skip butt and between for now, left leg, right leg, feet- rinse out the towel. Clean the middle bits- and that’s that. Turn of the water, grab the salt scrub, and- it’s big chunky salt too, and not cheap to get, but so so worth it- now, rub it in, small smooth circles like before, steady over my entire body and my skin feels slick and slippery and I wash off with a little soap and I’m smoother again, now for the sugar, two parts sugar to one part oil and scrub, pay special attention to arms and legs and feet and neck and face, and wash wash smoother still, and I’m smooth and not overly oily, so- scar stretch stuff.

Scar tissue forms after injury to the normal collagen cells in the body. If you cut yourself, have surgery, or tear tissue in the body, scar tissue will develop. The development of scar tissue is part of the normal healing process in the body. Collagen is a substance that is present in all of our body parts. There is collagen in muscles, tendons, and ligaments. There is also collagen in skin and bones. The cellular makeup of collagen makes it very strong due to the alignment of collagen cells. It can resist tensile forces, such as stretching and pulling, without tearing or breaking. After injury to a muscle, tendon, skin, or ligaments in the body, the inflammatory process starts to heal the injury site. This process helps to ensure that the injured site is cleaned up and new cells are brought to the site that will soon become healthy tissue. Some of these new cells are collagen cells. Unfortunately, the body does not know exactly how to arrange the collagen cells so that they become healthy tissue that can resist tensile and stretching forces. The collagen cells become a balled-up clump of tissue called scar tissue.

After scar tissue forms in the body, it is not permanent. The scar tissue can become stronger and better able to tolerate stretching forces through a process called remodeling. Remodeling scar tissue is
a must to ensure that the muscle, tendon, skin, bone, or ligament becomes normal, healthy tissue again. Scar tissue remodeling occurs as you start to stretch and pull on it. The stretching of the scar tissue helps to align the collagen fibers to allow them to return to normal. This realignment of the collagen fibers makes the tissue better able to tolerate the forces that are placed on it during the day.

If you strain your hamstring muscle or tendon, for example, you'd follow the R.I.C.E protocol for a few days. After some healing has taken place, gentle stretching of the hamstring muscle is indicated to help ensure that the scar tissue is remodeled properly. After fracture or injury to bone, weight bearing with the bone helps to remodel the bone tissue to make it strong again. Wolff's Law states that bone grows and remodels in response to the specific load applied to it. Therefore, bone becomes stronger as you place more and more stress on it. After fracture, a physical therapist can help you learn strategies to place the correct amount of stress in the correct direction to help with the remodeling process of bone.

For my scars, I need to massage them in a circular motion- this aids in lymphatic and blood flow, because scar tissue doesn’t really… do that very well. Then, Myofacial Release, to help relieve constriction in the affected tissue- it also makes the scar itself a little more stretchable. Finally, I need to lubricate scars with vitamin E oil- specifically, the ones across my knuckles, as those will re-open if I don’t. I did street fight a lot in my youth, and I didn’t know how to wrap my hands back then- and my anger was much less well controlled…

But yes- hardest first, meaning the ones across my back. Oh yes- I suppose I’ve made myself forget about those… some of them are from falls and general scrabbling around, and some… aren’t. The worst one is still from the damn centaur arrow though… ugh, the exit is so much bigger than the entrance, I always have trouble with it- ‘I could help, um, if you’d like.’

‘What, with my, um, with my scar care?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘Well… y-you know what to do?’

‘Oh, er, yes.’

‘Er, well- Alright.’

He crosses the tiled floor and don’t look back dammit, don’t you do it and then he’s behind me, and-

“I-it would be easier i-if you were, um, a-against the wall.”

Gnnnngh. “O-okay. I’ll, I’ll just, um.”

Cool tiles against my breasts, the front of my thighs, my cheek and I’ve turned so I can see him and his skin is still wet from the shower and his eyes are so very green I’ve mentioned this I know I have but I can’t help it, I notice skin then eyes then, like, mouth, and he’s- is he biting his lips? Possibly, and his tattooooooooO0000oooh, oh my goodness that feels good. Like, toe curlingly good, I can’t feeeeeeHHHHHEHEHEEEEEeeel my legs- it feels so good and um. I’m still a bit wet which might be why I’m so sensitiIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII AAAAAHHHHH t-to Kaldur’s energy, or it might be I just have a sensitivity to Kaaaaaaalduur in general and he’s touching lower on my back now and wow that feeeeeeEEEEEEEEEeeeee, uunnnnnaaah.

Hands on my hips, smooth smooth hands and then down my thighs and over my knees and rubbing my ankles and my feet and then he’s sliding back up and touching the shivering softness of my inner
thigh and he goes no further, f-fuck. Strokes back along the curve of my butt, curves over the small of my back and around to the front, just above my hips and rubbing up my stomach and just shy of the cleft of my breasts and then and then he’s deftly cupping my breasts and smoothing over the soft bumps of my mmmmmmm and then he’s smoothing high along my chest and clavicles and neck and I’m lifting my arms higher and his hands are very gentle along the pit of my arm and the bones of my shoulders and then he’s pressed a kiss to the back of my neck fingertips soft on my throat and whispering in my ear “Done.”

And then he walks away.

Fuck.

Wally, Robin, and Megan choose that moment to walk in.

Fuck dammit.

Well, I’m not fit company at the moment, so, turn off the shower wrap up in the towel and arrgh, dammit Kaldur, I’m wound tighter than a watchspring about to break, you jerk. Ugh, I don’t even remember what I decided to wear- oh, pajamas, loose ruqun I patched some time ago- it’s too short to wear without a pair of shorts, so… Okay, on with the clothing! Oh, hey- sandals! Sweet!

Aw yeah, cute clothes! They never fail to make me happy! (Wanna know what else would make me happy? HAVING A DAMN ORGASM!)

You know who could advise me in this moment? Dumpling Cheng. Besides, I haven’t called her in like- ages.

To my room!

Away!

“…So, yeah- Alexis, what the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Um. Hmm. Well, when that happened to me, I only had to go after him once and then the infatuation was gone because he had an ugly sex face-”

“I’ve tried that, it didn’t work and Oh! Oh my gods, Lexi, I didn’t even tell you about what happened today in the showers!”

“The showers?”

“Yeah- see, we have these big communal showers- and I was about to massage scarstretch oil in, right, and he offered to do it for me-”

“Oh my gods-”

“I know! And then he was all like, caressing me, and Grandma, that’s not even the thing- every time we touch bare skin to skin, I feel like I’m full of, of… like I’m full of butterflies. Does that- what even is that?”

“Well, Baby Girl- it sounds like you’ve got yourself a good old-fashioned case of Hot for Leader, compounded with a bit of Teenaged Love.”
“But that’s the other thing- I don’t. I don’t want to… to compromise him, his position as team leader, and I think- I think if I tried to… I don’t know, romance him while at work, I would, and that’s not at all what I want, so-”

“So romance him outside of work!”

“Grandma Lexi, he’s always at work and- I just called you grandma, I am so-”

“I’m glad you finally figured it out, to be honest. Now, if that young man is always at work, you need to find the moments when he isn’t at work, and… present opportunities. And a little workplace flirting is good for the soul.”

“Tch. I keep forgetting you were a saucy minx in your younger days…”

“Were? I’ll have you know, I still have lovers at my beck and call, any time of the day or night!”

“Grandma! TMI!”

My Grandma Lexi’s rich, chicken soup flavored laughter fills me with contentment- and while I might be sexually frustrated beyond comprehension, I’m… I’m going to make a plan, and deal with it.

Tomorrow.

But tonight I’m going to sleep…

The next day, I realize I haven’t set up the area for my Sim’s to cure- the fluid is ready to go, so… hmm, take out these shelves, and these cedar wood boxes fit perfectly well- hm, I think I left the skeletons I want to use at my Apartment- let’s see, yep, there they are, cat skeleton, fish skeleton, and I have a lizard skeleton? Damn, I forgot all about it- I have a box small enough for it, so… back to my room, set the skeletons in the boxes, and I have a pitcher marked specifically for Sim fluid- it’s really ugly, wow, I forgot- and scoop up some fluid, walk on over, and pour over the fish; tuna I think, and I need two to cover to the line- right, the boxes used for Sims develop a sort of line of demarcation where the optimum fill level is.

And fill the cat box, and the little bit left over is more than enough for the lizard, and that’s it- nine more skeletons to prepare, ugh. I need to make a powerpoint anyway…

It’s not like I can’t multitask.

I take my computer, and settle down at the kitchen table- and today I’m going to have to help mob someone, so I’m wearing shorts and a loose tanktop today, sports bra and plaincloth panties- wait, why would I need to be in a mob? I haven’t worked as a Messenger for years- gods, that was where I met Calliope, wasn’t it…

I’ll explain.

When I was thirteen, there were only two things I really knew how to do- I knew how to fight like a cornered rat, and I knew how to navigate the city of Kowloon and the greater Nightmarket. Oddly enough, these two skills were all I needed to become a Messenger. The mail system, which I haven’t really explained because I don’t exactly understand it, doesn’t always work as advertised- or I should
say, there are some things you simply can’t send through the mail, of which the Gleam and GMail is incorporated. Certain legal documents, packages over a certain size, and… illegal items, cannot be sent through the Gleam, as there are catch-nets and firewalls that make getting the package from here to there impossible.

Calliope, before she got sick, was senior dispatch at Pretty Flowers Modeling agency: Mail Division. She was the person who sent me out, because I had realized that I actually needed money now, fuck, so- I asked… Gods, she’s my aunty, isn’t she? I asked Aunty Landlady for reccomendations, and she sent me over to the agency- Calliope goosed me from the models lineup and put me in Runner’s reds and- okay, there are divisions in the PFMa:MD, and the people who actually deliver packages are always in Red and Black and sweet Jesus, I’ve never moved past that, have I? Holy fuck, and senior Runners wear golden stripe- damn. I’ve… I’ve grown up.

Damn. I am a senior Runner- I wouldn’t flinch from some of the crazier jobs, although I probably would force a much higher price for pharmaceuticals… Anyway.

During my time as a working Runner, Calliope was my… mentor, I suppose. It was her that taught me about Duty…

I should call Calliope, I haven’t actually talked to her, specifically, in a long time.

“Allo!”

“Allo- Calliope, it’s me, Red X? I’ve been thinking about you lately, and I just wanted to… to call you. And…”

“Oh, X! Darling, it’s been ages- how are you?”

“I’m alright- how are you?”

“Well, so- it isn’t cancer, like I was told; my brother was poisoning me with cinnabar.”

“Oh my gods, Calliope-”

“No, no- it’s alright, it’s alright, he’s in jail and he’s never getting out, but… well, I’ve got permanent nerve damage, so. Well- not permanent, Imperial Peach Nectar will fix anything- but I don’t have the money for even a sip of that… My pension will keep a roof over my head at least… Anyway, it’s been ages since one of the old gang has called me, how the hell are you?”

“I’m absolutely amazing, but- sorry to pry, it’s just… do you have enough money for food, at least?”

“Well, no- not really; I mean, I can buy the occasional brisket or such and gum on that for months, I’m not totally destitute, and I’ve got my garden at least- I’m just. Poor. Again.”

“I- okay. I’m making Imperial Peach Nectar- the real stuff, not watered down, not apricots, Peaches and Honeywine.”

“Oh my gods-”

“And if you want, I think I can… I can keep a jar by for you-”

“Oh my gods-”

“Because, well, nerve damage sucks balls, and well- I’m on a Bountyball team-”
“Theresa, if you can get me real Imperial Peach Nectar, I will play any position, and I mean that, I will play fucking Jailer-”

“I. Well, alright- it might be a while until I can get you the Nectar. Are you absolutely sure you’re willing to play the game Cal?”

“Terry- I’m in near constant pain, pain that I didn’t… I didn’t choose to have this. Do you understand that? I didn’t choose to have the fascia covering my nerves melt, didn’t choose to have my nerves matriculate- and if I can choose to have it undone, no matter the danger that may follow- it will be my choice. Understand?”

“I understand perfectly Callie. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll send you yours when it’s ready, okay?”

“Okay- no, really, thank you.”

“Your’re welcome, Calliope. Talk later?”

“Absolutely!”

Today, I’m going to have to get jars. Hmm. There should be enough time…

And introductory powerpoint is half finished, nice.

Mason jars are made of soda-lime glass and in the U.S. come in regular mouth 60 mm inner (70 mm outer) diameter or wide mouth 76 mm inner (86 mm outer) diameter and a variety of volumes including half-pint, pint, quart, and half-gallon.

The most common U.S. brands of Mason jars are Ball and Kerr. Both are now part of the Jarden Corporation based in New York. In Canada, Bernardin, another division of Jarden, is the most common brand.

In home canning, food is packed into the jar, leaving some empty "head space" between the level of food and the top of the jar, then the lid is placed on top of the jar with the integral rubber seal resting on the rim. The band is screwed loosely over the lid, allowing air and steam to escape. The jar is heat sterilized in boiling water or steam. The jar is then allowed to cool to room temperature. The cooling of the contents creates a vacuum in the head space, pulling the lid into tight contact with the jar rim and creating a hermetic seal. Once cooled, the band is removed to prevent residual water between the jar threads and the lid from rusting the band. If the jar seal is properly formed, internal vacuum will keep the lid tightly on the jar. Most metal lids are slightly domed to serve as a seal status indicator: the vacuum in a properly sealed mason jar pulls the lid down such that the dome is concave, but an improper or failed seal or microbial growth will cause the dome to pop upward. Some old Mason jars used glass lids with separate rubber rings, instead of steel, and are now considered unsafe for canning.

I know lots of people, all over- the person I need to speak to is Mad Old Hettie, simply because she’s the only person I know of who could point me in the direction of jars that can withstand the temperatures I’ll be canning with…
Finding her is going to be a bit interesting—maybe Captain will know.

“Allo, Captain?”

“X, Allo- what’s up?”

“Do you know the current location of Mad Old Hettie?”

“She’s still alive?”

“…I’ll take that as a no, then.”

“Wait, w-wait- I’m at the Office, let me check- ah, right, she’s somewhere in London.”

“Somewhere?”

“There’s a pretty good view of the Thames…”

“…”

“I’m sorry, X.”

“My name’s Terry, Captain. Theresa, actually- but please call me Terry.”

“I’m Max- Maxine, really, but. Max.”

“Alright- so, any luck on the recruitment, or-”

“I wish. It wouldn’t be so bad if my contemporaries hadn’t either kicked the bucket or moved on to other pursuits- I had hopes for my old buddy Azzie, but, well- He runs a bookstore now. He seems very happy.”

“Hang on, I’m getting another call- Hello?”

“H-hi, um, I’m. I’m not sure if you remember me?”

“Jill, right?”

“Yeah- um, I. I was just- since you changed the Terms, I’ve been… well, I’m really grateful and all but, well-”

“Kind of hard to keep going when you don’t have to?”

“No, it’s just- I don’t. I don’t have anywhere to go- I went back home, right? because I wasn’t on Assignment, and, well- more time had passed than I’d realized. I’m… I’m alone. I’m the only one who even- I just. What am I supposed to do now?”

“…I think I know someone who can help you. One moment?”

“O-okay.”

“Max, you still there?”

“Yeah…”
“Pull up the file on Jill Carlyle please. Read it.”

“Oka-y, but- oh. Oh my goodness. Terry- she. You- you wonderful- but she’s-”

“Yeah. Go talk to her, see if she’s-”

“I’m already gone, T. Thanks, yeah?”

“For sure. Jill, are you still there?”

“Yeah. Um, so-”

“So, a friend of mine is on their way to you right now- they’ll be able to help, and understand, alright?”

“Alright- but… how will they know where I am?”

“Trust me, they’ll know.”

“I- but how?”

“They’ll know, Jill. It’s kind of a thing, with them.”

“Okay- if y-your sure.”

“I am- so, talk to you later?”

“O-okay- oh hey, hi, I was just- yeah, I’m Jill- X sent you?”

I hang up the phone.

My powerpoint’s done, time to go to London.

Let’s see, I need to go to defLondon first. Underground is a closed area- oh, right, Open and closed areas are… well, okay. You know how you have to be part of a certain area to get into it, like, part of a school to know about all the facilities, or part of a club to know where the old hang out is- certain areas of the Nightmarket are like that. There are places I can’t get to because I live in Kowloon- and that has more to do with the history of the enmity between France and England and Kiao, and some to do with me as well, I suppose…

Although the designation “Anglo-” strictly specifically refers to England, not the UK as a whole, modern intergovernmental relations between these two nations are habitually called Anglo-French relations and understood to refer to the UK and not only England. The term Franco-British relations is also used.

Early Franco-British interactions occurred before Caesar's invasion of Gaul, when the two regions
were inhabited by loosely trading Celts fighting the Romans as a common enemy. They continued under the Roman Empire – as both modern day states were ruled from Rome. Both were provinces in the larger Roman Empire.

Today, both France and the United Kingdom are member states of the European Union (EU), and it is estimated that about 400,000 French people live in the UK, with approximately the same number of British people living in France.

When Julius Caesar invaded Gaul, he encountered allies of the Gals and Belgae from southeastern Britain offering assistance, some of whom even acknowledged the king of the Belgae as their sovereign. Although all peoples concerned were Celts (and the Germanic Angles and Franks had not yet invaded either country that would later bear their names), this could arguably be seen as the first major example of Anglo-French cooperation in recorded history. As a consequence, Caesar felt compelled to invade in an attempt to subdue Britain. For the next five hundred years, there was much interaction between the two regions, as both Britain and France were under Roman rule. This was followed by another five hundred years with very little interaction between the two, as both were invaded by different Germanic tribes. At the turn of the second millennium, the British Isles were primarily involved with the Scandinavian world, while France's main foreign relationship was with the Holy Roman Empire.

However, in the mid-eleventh century there was a dispute over the English throne, and the French-speaking Normans, who were of Viking stock, invaded England under their duke William the Conqueror and took over following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and crowned themselves Kings of England.

The Norman feudal culture took root in England, and for the next 150 years England was generally considered of secondary importance to the dynasty's Continental territories, notably in Normandy and other western French provinces. The language of the aristocracy was French for several hundred years after the Norman Conquest. Many French words were adopted into the English language as a result. Possibly up to one third of the English language is derived from or through French. The first Norman kings were also the Dukes of Normandy, so relations were somewhat complicated between the countries. Though they were dukes ostensibly under the king of France, their higher level of organization in Normandy gave them more de facto power. In addition, they were kings of England in their own right; England was not officially a province of France, nor a province of Normandy.

During the reign of the closely related Plantagenet dynasty, which was based in its Angevin Empire, half of France was under Angevin control as well as all of England. However, almost all of the Angevin empire was lost to Philip II of France under Richard the Lionheart, John and Henry III of England. This finally gave the English a separate identity as an Anglo-Saxon people under a Francophone, but not French, crown.

While the English and French had been frequently acrimonious, they had always had a common culture and little fundamental difference in identity. Nationalism had been minimal in days when most wars took place between rival feudal lords on a sub-national scale. The last attempt to unite the two cultures under such lines was probably a failed French-supported rebellion to depose Edward II. It was also during the Middle Ages that a Franco-Scottish alliance, known as the Auld Alliance was signed by King John of Scotland and Philip IV of France. The English monarchy increasingly integrated with its subjects and turned to the English language wholeheartedly during the Hundred Years' War between 1337 and 1453. Though the war was in principle a mere dispute over territory, it drastically changed societies on both sides of the Channel. The English, although already politically united, for the first time found pride in their language and identity, while the French united politically.
Several of the most famous Anglo-French battles took place during the Hundred Years' War: Crécy, Poitiers, Agincourt, Orléans, and Paris. Major sources of French pride stemmed from their leadership during the war. Bertrand du Guesclin was a brilliant tactician who forced the English out of the lands they had procured at the Treaty of Brétigny, a compromising treaty that most Frenchmen saw as a humiliation. Joan of Arc was another unifying figure who to this day represents a combination of religious fervour and French patriotism to all France. After her inspirational victory at Orléans and what many saw as Joan’s martyrdom at the hands of Burgundians and Englishmen, Jean de Dunois eventually forced the English out of all of France except Calais, which was only lost in 1558. Apart from setting national identities, the Hundred Years' War is often cited as the root of the traditional rivalry and at times hatred between the two countries. During this era, the English lost their last territories in France, except Calais, which would remain in English hands for another 105 years, though the English monarchs continued to style themselves as Kings of France until 1800. France and Scotland agreed to defend each other in the event of an attack on either from England in several treaties, the most notable of which were in 1327 and 1490. There had always been intermarriage between the Scottish and French royal households, but this solidified the bond between the royals even further.

The English and French were engaged in numerous wars in the following centuries. They took opposite sides in all of the Italian Wars between 1494 and 1559. An even deeper division set in during the English Reformation, when most of England converted to Protestantism and France remained Roman Catholic. This enabled each side to see the other as not only a foreign evil but also a heretical one. In both countries there was intense civil religious conflict. Because of the oppression by Roman Catholic King Louis XIII of France, many Protestant Huguenots fled to England. Similarly, many Catholics fled from England to France. Henry VIII of England had initially sought an alliance with France, and the Field of the Cloth of Gold saw a face to face meeting between him and King Francis I of France.

While Spain had been the dominant world power in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English had often sided with France as a counterweight against them. This design was intended to keep a European balance of power, and prevent one country gaining overwhelming supremacy. Key to English strategy was the fear that a universal monarchy of Europe would be able to overwhelm the British Isles. Following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, as Spain's power weakened, France began to take on a more assertive role under King Louis XIV of France with an expansionist policy both in Europe and across the globe. English foreign policy was now directed towards preventing France gaining supremacy on the continent and creating a universal monarchy. To the French, England was an isolated and piratical nation heavily reliant on naval power, and particularly privateers, which they referred to as Perfidious Albion.

There was a sharp diversion in political philosophies in the two states. In England King Charles I had been executed during the English Civil War for exceeding his powers, and later King James II had been overthrown in the Glorious Revolution. In France the power of the monarchs and their advisors went largely unchecked.

England and France fought each other in the War of the League of Augsburg from 1688 to 1697 which set the pattern for relations between France and Great Britain during the eighteenth century. Wars were fought intermittently, with each nation part of a constantly shifting pattern of alliances known as the stately quadrille. Partly out of fear of a continental intervention an Act of Union was passed in 1707 creating the Kingdom of Great Britain, formally merging the kingdoms of Scotland, England and Wales. While the new Britain grew increasingly parliamentary, France continued its system of absolute monarchy. The newly united Britain fought France in the War of the Spanish Succession from 1702 to 1713, and the War of the Austrian Succession from 1740 to 1748, attempting to maintain the balance of power in Europe. The British had a massive navy but maintained a small land army, so Britain always acted on the continent in alliance with other states.
such as Prussia and Austria as they were unable to fight France alone. Equally France, lacking a
superior navy, was unable to ever launch a successful invasion of Britain. France lent support to
the Jacobite pretenders who claimed the British throne, hoping that a restored Jacobite monarchy
would be inclined to be more pro-French. Despite this support the Jacobites failed to overthrow the
Hanoverian monarchs. As the century wore on, there was a distinct passage of power to Britain and
France, at the expense of traditional major powers such as Portugal, Spain and the Dutch Republic.
Some observers saw the frequent conflicts between the two states during the eighteenth century as a
battle for control of Europe, though most of these wars ended without a conclusive victory for either
side. France largely had greater influence on the continent while Britain posed dominant at sea and
trade threatening French colonies abroad.
From the 1650s, the New World increasingly became a battleground between the two powers. The
Western Design of Oliver Cromwell intended to build up an increasing British presence in North
America, beginning with the acquisition of Jamaica from the Spanish Empire in 1652. The first
British settlement on continental North America was founded in 1603, by the 1760s these had grown
into thirteen separate colonies.
The French had settled the province of Canada to the North, and controlled Saint-Domingue in the
Caribbean, the wealthiest colony in the world. Both countries, recognising the potential of India,
established trading posts there. Wars between the two states increasingly took place in these other
continents, as well as Europe. The French and British fought each other and made treaties
with Native American tribes to gain control of North America. Both nations coveted the Ohio
Territory and in 1753 a British expedition there led by George Washington clashed with a French
force. Shortly afterwards the French and Indian War broke out, initially taking place only in North
America but in 1756 becoming part of the wider Seven Years' War in which Britain and France were
part of opposing coalitions. The war has been called the first "world war", because fighting took
place on several different continents. In 1759 the British enjoyed victories over the French in Europe,
Canada and India, severely weakening the French position around the world. In 1762 the British
captured the cities of Manila and Havana from Spain, France's strongest ally, which led ultimately
to a peace settlement the following year that saw a large number of territories come under British
control. The Seven Years' War is regarded as a critical moment in the history of Anglo-French
relations, which laid the foundations for the dominance of the Anglosphere during the next two and a
half centuries, and arguably the spread of democracy and English common law.
The Anglo-American settlers had originally fought on the side of the British, but as some Americans
grew dissatisfied with British policies the French saw an opportunity to undermine British overseas
power. When the American War of Independence broke out in 1775, the French began sending
covert supplies and intelligence to the American rebels. In 1778 France, hoping to capitalise on the
British defeat at Saratoga, recognized the United States of America and signed a military
alliance. France in 1779 persuaded its Spanish allies to declare war on Britain. France despatched
troops to fight alongside the Americans, and besieged Gibraltar with Spain. Plans were drawn up,
but never put into action, to launch an invasion of England. The British were forced to withdraw
forces from the American mainland to protect their more valuable possessions in the West Indies.
While the French were initially unable to break the string of British victories, the combined actions of
American and French forces, and a key victory by a French fleet over a British rescue fleet, forced
the British into a decisive surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. In 1783 the Treaty of Paris gave
the new nation control over most of the region east of the Mississippi River; Spain gained Florida
from Britain; France received little except a huge debt. For a brief period after the war, Britain's naval
power was subdued by an alliance between France and Spain. The crippling debts incurred by
France during the war, and the cost of rebuilding the French navy during the 1780s caused a
financial crisis, leading directly to the French Revolution of 1789.

During the French Revolution, the anti-monarchical ideals of France were regarded with alarm
throughout Europe. While France was plunged into chaos, Britain took advantage of its temporary weakness to stir up the civil war occurring in France and build up its naval forces. The Revolution was initially popular with many Britons, both because it appeared to weaken France and was perceived to be based on British liberal ideals. This began to change as the Jacobin faction took over, and began the Reign of Terror. The French were intent on spreading their revolutionary republicanism to other European states, including Britain. The British initially stayed out of the alliances of European states which unsuccessfully attacked France trying to restore the monarchy. In France a new, strong nationalism took hold enabling them to mobilise large and motivated forces. Following the execution of King Louis XVI of France in 1793, Britain declared war on France. Except for a brief pause in the fighting from 1802–03, the war lasted continuously for twenty one years. During this time Britain raised several coalitions against the French, continually subsidizing other European states with the Golden Cavalry of St George, enabling them to put large armies in the field. In spite of this, the French armies were very successful on land, creating several client states such as the Batavian Republic, and the British devoted much of their own forces to campaigns against the French in the Caribbean, with mixed results. In 1798 French forces invaded Ireland to assist the United Irishmen who had launched a rebellion, where they were joined by thousands of rebels but defeated by British and Irish loyalist forces. The fear of further attempts to create a French satellite in Ireland, led to the Act of Union merging of the crowns of Great Britain and Ireland to create the United Kingdom in 1801.

In 1799, Napoleon came to power in France, ending the revolutionary era and creating a dictatorship (crowning himself Emperor in 1804). After he had triumphed on the European continent against the other major European powers, Napoleon contemplated an invasion of the British mainland, but was dissuaded by the annihilation of the Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar, coinciding with an Austrian attack over its Bavarian allies.

In response Napoleon established a continental system by which no nation was permitted to trade with the British. Napoleon hoped the embargo would isolate the British Isles severely weakening them, but a number of countries continued to trade with them in defiance of the policy. In spite of this, the Napoleonic influence stretched across much of Europe. In 1808 French forces invaded Portugal trying to attempt to halt trade with the United Kingdom, turning Spain into a satellite state in the process. The British responded by dispatching a force under Sir Arthur Wellesley which captured Lisbon. Napoleon dispatched increasing forces into the Iberian Peninsula, which became the key battleground between the two nations. Allied with Spanish and Portuguese forces, the British inflicted a number of defeats on the French, confronted with a new kind of warfare called "guerrilla" which led Napoleon to brand it the "Spanish Ulcer". Allied to an increasingly resurgent European coalition, the British invaded southern France forcing Napoleon to abdicate and go into exile on Elba in 1814.

After escaping and briefly threatening to restore the French Empire, Napoleon was defeated by combined British, Prussian and Dutch forces at Battle of Waterloo. With strong British support, the Bourbon monarchy was restored and Louis XVIII was crowned King of France. The Napoleonic era was the last occasion on which Britain and France went to war with each other, but by no means marked the end of the rivalry between the two nations. Despite his final defeat, Napoleon continues to be regarded as a national hero figure in France for his numerous victories over coalesced monarchies.

Despite having entered the Napoleonic era regarded by many as a spent force, the UK had emerged from the 1815 Congress of Vienna as one of the leading financial, military and cultural powers of the world. France also recovered from the defeat at Waterloo to quickly retake its position on the world stage.

Despite their historic enmity, the British and French eventually became strained political allies, as
both began to turn their attentions to acquiring new territories beyond Europe. The British developed India and Canada and settled Australia, spreading their powers to several different continents as the Second British Empire. They frequently made stereotypical jokes about each other, and even side by side in war were critical of each other's tactics. As a Royal Navy officer said to the French corsair Robert Surcouf "You French fight for money, while we British fight for honour." Surcouf replied "Sir, a man fights for what he lacks the most." According to one story, a French diplomat once said to Lord Palmerston "If I were not a Frenchman, I should wish to be an Englishman"; to which Palmerston replied: "If I were not an Englishman, I should wish to be an Englishman." According to another, upon seeing the disastrous British Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War against Russia, French marshal Pierre Bosquet said 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.' ('It's magnificent, but it's not war.') Eventually, relations settled down as the two empires tried to consolidate themselves rather than extend themselves.

In 1830, France underwent the July Revolution, and the Orléanist Louis-Phillipe subsequently ascended to the throne; by contrast, the reign of Queen Victoria began in 1837 in a much more peaceful fashion. The major European powers—Russia, Austria, the UK, and to some extent Prussia—were determined to keep France in check, and so France generally pursued a cautious foreign policy. Louis-Phillipe allied with Britain, the country with which France shared the most similar form of government, and its combative Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston. In Louis-Phillipe's first year in power, he refused to annex Belgium during its revolution, instead following the British line of supporting independence. Despite posturings from leading French minister Adolphe Thiers in 1839–1840 that France would protect the increasingly powerful Muhammad Ali of Egypt (a viceroy of the Ottoman Empire), any reinforcements were not forthcoming, and in 1840, much to France's embarrassment, Ali was forced to sign the Convention of London by the powers. Relations cooled again under the governments of François Guizot and Robert Peel. They soured once more in 1846 though when, with Palmerston back as Foreign Secretary, the French government hastily agreed to have Isabella II of Spain and her sister marry members of the Bourbon and Orléanist dynasties, respectively. Palmerston had hoped to arrange a marriage, and "The Affair of the Spanish Marriages" has generally been viewed unfavourably by British historians ("By the dispassionate judgment of history it has been universally condemned"), although a more sympathetic view has been taken in recent years. Lord Aberdeen (foreign secretary 1841–46) brokered an entente cordiale with François Guizot and France in the early 1840s. However Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was elected president of France in 1848 and made himself Emperor Napoleon III in 1851. Napoleon III had an expansionist foreign policy, which saw the French deepen the colonisation of Africa and establish new colonies, in particular IndoKiao. The British were initially alarmed, and commissioned a series of forts in southern England designed to resist a French invasion. Lord Palmerston as foreign minister and prime minister had close personal ties with leading French statesmen, notably Napoleon III himself. Palmerston's goal was to arrange peaceful relations with France in order to free Britain's diplomatic hand elsewhere in the world. Napoleon had a very pro-British foreign policy, and was eager not to displease the British government whose friendship he saw as important to France. The two nations were military allies during the Crimean War (1853–56) to curb Russia's expansion westwards and its threats to the Ottoman Empire. However when London discovered that Napoleon III was secretly negotiating with Russia to form a postwar alliance to dominate Europe, it hastily abandoned its plan to end the war by attacking St. Petersburg. Instead Britain concluded an armistice with Russia that achieved none of its war aims.

The two nations also co-operated during the Second Opium War with Kiao, dispatching a joint force to the Kiaom capital Peking to force a treaty on the Kiaom Qing Dynasty. In 1859 Napoleon, bypassing the Corps législatif which he feared would not approve of free trade, met with influential reformer Richard Cobden, and in 1860 the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty was signed between the two countries, reducing tariffs on goods sold between the UK and France. During the American Civil War both nations remained neutral. France came close to entering on the side of the Confederate
States of America. The cutoff of cotton shipments caused economic depression in the textile industry, resulting in widespread unemployment and suffering among workers, and support for an intervention that would reopen the trade. In the end Britain refused to go to war and France followed suit.

Napoleon attempted to gain British support for a scheme to put an Austrian Prince, Maximilian I, on the throne of Mexico, but the British were not willing to support any action other than the collection of debts owed by the Mexicans. This forced the French to act alone in the French Intervention in Mexico. The U.S. helped the Juarez regime and France pulled out its troops. Its puppet Emperor Maximilian was executed by the Mexicans. When Napoleon was overthrown in 1870, he fled to England where he and his family lived in exile. The new French Third Republic continued a policy of the warm relations with Britain, especially following the creation of the German Empire.

The Opium Wars, also known as the Anglo-Kiao Wars, divided into the First Opium War from 1839 to 1842 and the Second Opium War from 1856 to 1860. These were the climax of disputes over trade and diplomatic relations between Kiao under the Qing Dynasty and the British Empire. The end result of the Opium Wars was the forcible opening of Kiao to trade, and the lasting humiliation of the Kiao government and Kiao people. Many students of Kiao history have suggested that the events of the Opium Wars smoldered in the Kiao consciousness for decades, laying the groundwork for the numerous violent rebellions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These wars were rooted in a desire to trade in Kiao. Kiao had been engaged in trade with the West since the 1600s, with Westerners primarily using silver to pay for silk, spices, tea, porcelain, and a variety of other Kiao goods. Many Western nations were accustomed to bargaining with goods, rather than money, and they began to chafe at Kiao demands for silver in lieu of trade goods.

When Great Britain seized control of India, it also acquired a monopoly on India's opium production, and British merchants came up with a brilliant solution to the Kiao trade problem. By smuggling opium into Kiao, merchants could acquire a steady source of Kiao silver which could be used in trade, by creating a market for the highly addictive narcotic. The Kiao government, understandably, didn't think as much of this idea as the British did, and many government officials began protesting the growing opium trade, and attempting to enforce Kiao's strict anti-drug laws.

In 1839, the Kiao government appointed Commissioner Lin Zexu to supervise the Kiao port of Guangzhou. Zexu took a strict anti-opium stance, even writing a letter to Queen Victoria to declare his intentions to put a stop to the opium trade. He confiscated and destroyed huge volumes of opium, giving the British an excuse to start the First Opium War. The British claimed that he had engaged in property destruction, and they hammered coastal Kiao towns with gunships and soldiers. Finally, the Kiao government was forced to cede defeat, and the British forced them into the Treaty of Nanjing, gaining the territory of Hong Kong along with very favorable trade terms in 1843.

13 years later, the Second Opium War was triggered by a Kiao-led search and seizure of a British ship which had been suspected of smuggling. The British used military force again, accompanied by nations which wanted a slice of the lucrative trade in Kiao like France and the United States. In 1860, the Kiao were obliged to sign a second treaty, the Treaty of Tianjin, opening more ports to European trade, providing free passage for European merchants in Kiao, and obliging Kiao to pay reparations to the nations involved in the Second Opium War.

The Opium Wars are often used as a clear example of European imperialism in Kiao. Like many nations in Asia, Kiao was forced to open its borders to trade against its will, and to offer very favorable terms of trade to its European “partners.” The “Unequal Treaties,” as the treaties which ended the Opium Wars are known, provided numerous very lucrative contracts, ports, and terms to
European signatories, and forced Kiaom to considerably compromise its legal system. Ultimately, the Kiaom population rebelled, and the Opium Wars could be considered a major contributing factor in the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the last royal dynasty in Kiaom.

I don’t like England. Let me say that now. I don’t like England, or the fact that it reintroduced opium to my people.

My people. Fuck- I remember now. I remember why I’m not… wanted.

I’m a Fox. It’s a specific mystical genotype that marks me, in current society, as an outsider- as different. It’s why my eyes don’t match, and why my hair glows red in strong light, and why I can see the dead along with the future- normally, you only get one of those, not both. I have both.

The earliest clear description of the use of opium as a recreational drug in Kiaom came from Xu Boling, who wrote in 1483 that opium was "mainly used to aid masculinity, strengthen sperm and regain vigor", and that it "enhances the art of alchemists, sex and court ladies". He described an expedition sent by the Chenghua Emperor in 1483 to procure opium for a price "equal to that of gold" in Hainan, Fujian, Zhejiang, Sichuan and Shaanxi, where it is close to Xiyu. A century later, Li Shizhen listed standard medical uses of opium in his renowned Compendium of Materia Medica(1578), but also wrote that "lay people use it for the art of sex", in particular the ability to "arrest seminal emission". This association of opium with sex continued in Kiaom until the end of the 19th century. Opium smoking began as a privilege of the elite and remained a great luxury into the early 19th century, but by 1861, Wang Tao wrote that opium was used even by rich peasants, and even a small village without a rice store would have a shop where opium was sold.

Smoking of opium came on the heels of tobacco smoking and may have been encouraged by a brief ban on the smoking of tobacco by the Ming emperor, ending in 1644 with the Qing dynasty, which had encouraged smokers to mix in increasing amounts of opium. In 1705, Wang Shizhen wrote, "nowadays, from nobility and gentlemen down to slaves and women, all are addicted to tobacco." Tobacco in that time was frequently mixed with other herbs (this continues with clove cigarettes to the modern day), and opium was one component in the mixture. Tobacco mixed with opium was called madak (or madat) and became popular throughout Kiaom and its seafaring trade partners (such as Taiwan, Java, and the Philippines) in the 17th century. In 1712, Engelbert Kaempfer described addiction to madak: "No commodity throughout the Indies is retailed with greater profit by the Batavians than opium, which [its] users cannot do without, nor can they come by it except it be brought by the ships of the Batavians from Bengal and Coromandel."

Fueled in part by the 1729 ban on madak, which at first effectively exempted pure opium as a potentially medicinal product, the smoking of pure opium became more popular in the 18th century. In 1736, the smoking of pure opium was described by Huang Shujing, involving a pipe made from bamboo rimmed with silver, stuffed with palm slices and hair, fed by a clay bowl in which a globule of molten opium was held over the flame of an oil lamp. This elaborate procedure, requiring the maintenance of pots of opium at just the right temperature for a globule to be scooped up with a needle-like skewer for smoking, formed the basis of a craft of "paste-scooping" by which servant girls could become prostitutes as the opportunity arose.

Beginning in 19th-century Kiaom, famine and political upheaval as well as rumors of wealth to be had in nearby Southeast Asia, led to the Kiaom Diaspora- Kiaom emigrants to cities such as San Francisco, London, and New York brought with them the Kiaom manner of opium smoking and the social traditions of the opium den. The Indian Diaspora distributed opium-eaters in the same way,
and both social groups survived as "lascars" (seamen) and "coolies" (manual laborers). French sailors provided another major group of opium smokers, having contracted the habit in French IndoKiao, where the drug was promoted by the colonial government as a monopoly and source of revenue. Among white Europeans, opium was more frequently consumed as laudanum or in patent medicines. Britain's All-India Opium Act of 1878 formalized social distinctions, limiting recreational opium sales to registered Indian opium-eaters and Kiaom opium-smokers and prohibiting its sale to workers from Burma. Likewise, American law sought to contain addiction to immigrants by prohibiting Kiaom from smoking opium in the presence of a white man.

Because of the low social status of immigrant workers, contemporary writers and media had little trouble portraying opium dens as seats of vice, white slavery, gambling, knife- and revolver-fights, a source for drugs causing deadly overdoses, with the potential to addict and corrupt the white population. By 1919, anti-Kiaom riots attacked Limehouse, the Kiaotown of London. Kiaom men were deported for playing keno and sentenced to hard labor for opium possession. Both the immigrant population and the social use of opium fell into decline. Yet despite lurid literary accounts to the contrary, 19th-century London was not a hotbed of opium smoking. The total lack of photographic evidence of opium smoking in Britain, as opposed to the relative abundance of historical photos depicting opium smoking in North America and France, indicates the infamous Limehouse opium-smoking scene was little more than fantasy on the part of British writers of the day, who were intent on scandalizing their readers while drumming up the threat of the "yellow peril".

Opium prohibition began in 1729, when Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing Dynasty, disturbed by madak smoking at court and carrying out the government's role of upholding Confucian virtue, officially prohibited the sale of opium, except for a small amount for medicinal purposes. The ban punished sellers and opium den keepers, but not users of the drug. Opium was banned completely in 1799, and this prohibition continued until 1860.

Under the Qing Dynasty, Kiao opened itself to foreign trade under the Canton system through the port of Guangzhou (Canton), and traders from the British East India Company began visiting the port by the 1690s. Due to the growing British demand for Indian tea and the Kiaom Emperor's lack of interest in British commodities other than silver, British traders resorted to trade in opium as a high-value commodity for which Kiao was not self-sufficient. The British traders had been purchasing small amounts of opium from India for trade since Ralph Fitch first visited in the mid-16th century. Trade in opium was standardized, with production of balls of raw opium, 1.1 to 1.6 kilograms, 30% water content, wrapped in poppy leaves and petals, and shipped in chests of 60–65 kilograms (one picul). Chests of opium were sold in auctions in Calcutta with the understanding that the independent purchasers would then smuggle it into Kiao.

After the 1757 Battle of Plassey and 1764 Battle of Buxar, the British East India Company gained the power to act as diwan of Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. This allowed the company to exercise a monopoly over opium production and export in India, to encourage riots to cultivate the cash crops of indigo and opium with cash advances, and to prohibit the "hoarding" of rice. This strategy led to the increase of the land tax to 50% of the value of crops and to the doubling of East India Company profits by 1777. It is also claimed to have contributed to the starvation of 10 million people in the Bengal famine of 1770. Beginning in 1773, the British government began enacting oversight of the company's operations, and in response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, this policy culminated in the establishment of direct rule over the presidencies and provinces of British India. Bengal opium was highly prized, commanding twice the price of the domestic Kiaom product, which was regarded as inferior in quality.

Some competition came from the newly independent United States, which began to compete in Guangzhou, selling Turkish opium in the 1820s. Portuguese traders also brought opium from the
independent Malwa states of western India, although by 1820, the British were able to restrict this trade by charging "pass duty" on the opium when it was forced to pass through Bombay to reach an entrepot. Despite drastic penalties and continued prohibition of opium until 1860, opium importation rose steadily from 200 chests per year under Yongzheng to 1,000 under Qianlong, 4,000 under Jiaqing, and 30,000 under Daoguang. The illegal sale of opium became one of the world's most valuable single commodity trades and has been called "the most long continued and systematic international crime of modern times".

In response to the ever-growing number of Kiaom people becoming addicted to opium, Daoguang of the Qing Dynasty took strong action to halt the import of opium, including the seizure of cargo. In 1838, the Kiaom Commissioner Lin Zexu destroyed 20,000 chests of opium in Guangzhou. Given that a chest of opium was worth nearly $1,000 in 1800, this was a substantial economic loss. The British, not willing to replace the cheap opium with costly silver, began the First Opium War in 1840, the British winning Hong Kong and trade concessions in the first of a series of Unequal Treaties.

Following Kiao's defeat in the Second Opium War in 1858, Kiao was forced to legalize opium and began massive domestic production. Importation of opium peaked in 1879 at 6,700 tons, and by 1906, Kiao was producing 85% of the world's opium, some 35,000 tons, and 27% of its adult male population regularly used opium—13.5 million people consuming 39,000 tons of opium yearly. From 1880 to the beginning of the Communist era, the British attempted to discourage the use of opium in Kiao, but this effectively promoted the use of morphine, heroin, and cocaine, further exacerbating the problem of addiction.

Scientific evidence of the pernicious nature of opium use was largely undocumented in the 1890s, when Protestant missionaries in Kiao decided to strengthen their opposition to the trade by compiling data which would demonstrate the harm the drug did. Faced with the problem that many Kiaom associated Christianity with opium, partly due to the arrival of early Protestant missionaries on opium clippers, at the 1890 Shanghai Missionary Conference, they agreed to establish the Permanent Committee for the Promotion of Anti-Opium Societies in an attempt to overcome this problem and to arouse public opinion against the opium trade. The members of the committee were John Glasgow Kerr, MD, American Presbyterian Mission in Canton; James Corrigan, MD, American Presbyterian Mission in Peking; Archdeacon Arthur E. Moule, Church Missionary Society in Shanghai; Henry Whitney, MD, American Board of Commissioners for foreign Missions in Foochow; the Rev. Samuel Clarke, Kiao Inland Mission in Kweiyang; the Rev. Arthur Gostick Shorrock, English Baptist Mission in Taiyuan; and the Rev. Griffith John, London Mission Society in Hankow. These missionaries were generally outraged over the British government's Royal Commission on Opium visiting India but not Kiao. Accordingly, the missionaries first organized the Anti-Opium League in Kiao among their colleagues in every mission station in Kiao. American missionary Hampden Coit DuBose acted as first president. This organization, which had elected national officers and held an annual national meeting, was instrumental in gathering data from every Western-trained medical doctor in Kiao, which was then published as William Hector Park compiled *Opinions of Over 100 Physicians on the Use of Opium in Kiao* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1899). The vast majority of these medical doctors were missionaries; the survey also included doctors who were in private practices, particularly in Shanghai and Hong Kong, as well as Kiaom who had been trained in medical schools in Western countries. In England, the home director of the Kiao Inland Mission, Benjamin Broomhall, was an active opponent of the opium trade, writing two books to promote the banning of opium smoking: *The Truth about Opium Smoking* and *The Kiaom Opium Smoker*. In 1888, Broomhall formed and became secretary of the Christian Union for the Severance of the British Empire with the Opium Traffic and editor of its periodical, *National Righteousness*. He lobbied the British Parliament to stop the opium trade. He
and James Laidlaw Maxwell appealed to the London Missionary Conference of 1888 and the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 to condemn the continuation of the trade. When Broomhall was dying, his son Marshall read to him from *The Times* the welcome news that an agreement had been signed ensuring the end of the opium trade within two years.

Official Kiaom resistance to opium was renewed on September 20, 1906, with an antiopium initiative intended to eliminate the drug problem within 10 years. The program relied on the turning of public sentiment against opium, with mass meetings at which opium paraphernalia were publicly burned, as well as coercive legal action and the granting of police powers to organizations such as the Fujian Anti-Opium Society. Smokers were required to register for licenses for gradually reducing rations of the drug. Addicts sometimes turned to missionaries for treatment for their addiction, though many associated these foreigners with the drug trade. The program was counted as a substantial success, with a cessation of direct British opium exports to Kiao (but not Hong Kong) and most provinces declared free of opium production. Nonetheless, the success of the program was only temporary, with opium use rapidly increasing during the disorder following the death of Yuan Shikai in 1916. Beginning in 1915, Kiaom nationalist groups came to describe the period of military losses and Unequal Treaties as the "Century of National Humiliation", later defined to end with the conclusion of the Kiaom Civil War in 1949.

In the northern provinces of Ningxia and Suiyuan in Kiao, Kiaom Muslim General Ma Fuxiang both prohibited and engaged in the opium trade. It was hoped that Ma Fuxiang would have improved the situation, since Kiaom Muslims were well known for opposition to smoking opium. Ma Fuxiang officially prohibited opium and made it illegal in Ningxia, but the Guominjun reversed his policy; by 1933, people from every level of society were abusing the drug, and Ningxia was left in destitution. In 1923, an officer of the Bank of Kiao from Baotou found out that Ma Fuxiang was assisting the drug trade in opium which helped finance his military expenses. He earned $2 million from taxing those sales in 1923. General Ma had been using the bank, a branch of the Government of Kiao’s exchequer, to arrange for silver currency to be transported to Baotou to use it to sponsor the trade. Mitsubishi and Mitsui were involved in the opium trade during the Japanese occupation of Kiao.

The Mao Zedong government is generally credited with eradicating both consumption and production of opium during the 1950s using unrestrained repression and social reform. Ten million addicts were forced into compulsory treatment, dealers were executed, and opium-producing regions were planted with new crops. Remaining opium production shifted south of the Kiaom border into the Golden Triangle region, at times with the involvement of Western intelligence agencies. The remnant opium trade primarily served Southeast Asia, but spread to American soldiers during the Vietnam War, with 20% of soldiers regarding themselves as addicted during the peak of the epidemic in 1971. In 2003, Kiao was estimated to have four million regular drug users and one million registered drug addicts.

All this to say- I don’t like England, and I don’t like the English, and I don’t like opium, and I don’t like drug addicts. Mad Old Heggie is both English and a drug addict- and her drug of choice is opium.

Fucking hell.

There is a shop, about three doors down from my apartment building that sells opium. Now, normally, I wouldn’t be caught dead in it- but, well- time for some serious disguising. Let’s see now-
aha, I knew I had another silk scarf somewhere- not my favorite color, but that’s okay; time to play pretend.

I have made many masks- my Red X mask just happens to be the one I like the most. For today’s trip, I need to wear blue.

Let’s see- aha, blue greatcoat, grey hoodie, and the blue scarf for my head- yeah, that’ll do it.

To Kowloon!

One stop at the Poppy Shop later, and I’ve got three kilograms of extremely high quality opium, a nice pipe for smoking it, and a deep and everlasting revulsion towards everything the opium trade does to Foxes.

Look, when the word for your genetically similar group and the word for “whore” are the same, there are some issues in your culture- anyway.

I’ve got the stuff, and I really hate the burnt sweet smell of opium, I really do- and keep the hoodie, loose the scarf and the coat, take the bag you don’t mind losing (black with orange stripes, ugh) and out the Zeta Tube with a quick stop at the kitchen for a slice of ham. Mmmm. Haaaaaam.

London da~arling, something something something~ London da~arling~

Okay so, I admit, London isn’t actually that bad- it’s just. Wet. And gloomy. And cold. And British.

Anyway- there are lots of places near the Thames where Mad Old Hettie stays fuuuuck.

The Thames goes through London, yeah, but also by Oxford, Reading, Henley-on-Thames, Windsor, Kingston upon Thames, and Richmond.

Although- I never did take that golden coin out of my pocket, did I?

One coin flip later, and a small golden rowboat is gently bobbing in the eddie of the river. Now, I just have to get in the small boat AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

Hush, Strike:

One gutchurning boatride later, and I’m at the edge of a pier, just in time to watch some old magic- to feel some old magic.

“What am I going to do? Well, first I’m going to take this stick and break it” a young toff screams, leg broken “And then I’m going to draw a line in the dirt and you’re going to stare at it, like that-” a line through the earth, and the others stare at it “And then I’m going to float away on a pretty golden boat.” I feel the boat gently abut to a pillar near her, not to close enough to founder the boat, but not so far as to be hindersome to someone old and grey and long in the teeth- and make no mistake, Mad Old Hettie is long in the teeth. Sharp too.

“Gel, what you got in that there bag?”

“A box.”

“What kind of box?”

“Cedar.”
“Humn. And what’re you doin’ on this here Thames?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“A woman who knows where to buy a special kind of jar.”

“What’s so special about the jars you want to buy?”

“There good for lots of things, naturally- holding stars, holding tears, holding ice, even.”

“Hmph. And what do you want with such jars?”

“I’m making a very strong kind of beer, and I want to send it to all of my friends- so I need a jar that won’t break if it gets too cold or too hot or too in-between.”

“What’s in the box in the bag?”

“Something for smoking.”

“And what do I have to do to get it?”

“How do I find the jars?”

“Heh. There’s a mog named Xanadu in New Orleans that’ll fix you right up, probably try to palm off some frippery as the real deal- you tell her Mad Hettie sent you, she’ll do you right. Here- I’ve been holding on to this useless bob for many a year, and I’m tired of carrying it ‘round.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.”

I trade the bag for a dirty lump, wrapped in grimy fabric- it’s heavy, and has a nasty aura.

“Well luv- s’been a pleasure floating along wif you, but I’ve got an appointment in London to keep. Ta!” The boat bumps onto the shore of the Thames in London, and Mad Old Heggie steps out, lithe as a woman a hundred years younger- “Oi! An’ tell y’granny I said hello!”

“Yes Ma’am!”

I wait until she is well out of sight to unwrap what she traded for the opium- it’s a small green bell, like for ringing up a servant, and the name it whispers to me is *Uthool*; I have read more books than most people realize, including ones that technically don’t exist. I know *exactly* what this is. It’ll be more trouble than it’s worth to keep this on my person… but I can’t just leave it for anyone- wait. Bells have clappers… sure enough there it is, and with a little *twist* the clapper of the bell pops out, and goes into my pocket easy as you please. I rewrap the little green bell, and chunk it into the river- and then I get out of the boat *AAAAAAHHHH!!* and go back to the Cave.

I have enough time to put the clapper in a heavily warded jam jar that I fill with cotton balls and label “Evil: Do Not Open” and put on a very high shelf, even for me, and then I go to my Apartment and grab the bottle that I put the Boneclaw Mother into and stuff it into a different bag (red with scaly print, so cute!), grab my deck of cards for Sparrow and a small handful of rubies, and then I go back out- this time to New Orleans.
New Orleans, New Orleans, City of Magic and mysteries—oh cool, a matchbox!

Hokus & Pokus Occult Curiosities—now that’s interesting. Christy street? This is the place.

“Greetings, and welcome to my shop—I see you have come on a long journey. Please, won’t you sit and rest a moment? Have some tea, get your fortune read?”

“Well—yes, okay.”

She pours me jasmine tea, heady, in a fine pink cup made of glass— and then she pulls out a deck of cards, kind of like my Cards, and says— “Payment up front, dear.”

“Oh, right.” I lay the rubies out on the velvet covered table—Madame Xanadu’s eyes widen and then narrow, and then she smiles, shuffles her deck, stamps it down.

One hand reaches out, scoops the gems close, and then— “Cut it.”

I lift half the deck to the left, and place it, gently, down. She scoops up both halves of the deck, shuffles them together, and lays out a strange design of five cards onto the velvet table.

Flips one over— “You, young lady, are from across the sea.” Another— “You come from a long line of royalty.” Third— “Your family rejected you—” Fourth “Your death comes with the turning of the year—” Fifth “And your lover is far from your grasp—”

I smile, grimly— and then I say “Not bad. May I?”

She blinks, and then “Of course. Be my guest.”

I take out my Sparrow deck, and shuffle it twice “Cut” and she does, then shuffle it twice and “Cut” and she does again. Nine card draw, lay them flat.

“Turn in which order you want.”

She starts in the middle, and spirals out, to the left.

Here we go— “Your line old, and your blood lives” first three “you have little power of own, but have learned much in life” second three “you will be blinded by Vengeance.” Last three. Tally.

“Who told you?”

“No one tell me anything.”

“Who sent you?”

“Mad Old Hettie.”

“What do you want?”

“I need jars— lots jars. The kind jar you could keeps star in, or tears of moon, or cold heart of fey, or even” and with a thump I place the bottle with the Boneclaw Mother inside down on the table “child eating demon from some dark forget hell.”

“Heh. And what do I get in return?”
"The demon, and no charge for Prediction."

She stares at me, and the jar, and the cards, wide eyed- and then she blinks. "You’re serious, aren’t you?"

"Like plague."

"Come into the back- bring your things."

I pack everything up, and follow her back- and into a long vault of mason jars, filled with who even knows what.

"I can give you a case of jars now- but I’ll give you two if you tell me how to escape being blinded."

"You have throw in" and I espy another thing I need to get my hands on, for reasons of I always mess up evil plans. Always. Every. Single. Fucking. Time. "that red Jar. Right over there."

"The clay one?"

"Yes."

"Alright- predict then."

"Pay to play, Madame."

"Heh." She pulls out two cases of empty mason jars, and sets the red clay jar on top of them- "Predict away."

"…The Spectre of Vengeance will come, and you will fight, and you will fail- blinded. Fourteen times that I can See. To escape his curse, you must find someone of greater strength, or become stronger."

"That’s- that’s impossible! The Spectre’s curses are the most powerful in the world!"

I shrug, and Little the jars- little enough to fit inside the matchbox, and then into my pocket.

"Well… did you see if I was going to stay dead?"

"No…?"

"Then what makes you think you’ll stay cursed?"

And with that, I smile, bow, and walk out of her shop.

Back to the Cave! Away!

Honestly, it’s not like she told me anything I didn’t already know…
I put the jars away on a shelf, and I fill the Red Jar of Calythos with soapy water and wash out all the “mystic incense”- it’s actually just some musty nag champa, the important thing’s the jar- and that won’t stop someone really determined, but it will slow them down a bit… Onto a different shelf, then.

I need to remake my swimsuit- not the one that turns me into a fishlady, the one I wear underneath that… I’m always afraid of my jacket getting torn or something, so I wear other clothing underneath it- anyway, it’s going to be too small soon too.

Let’s see- if I undo these seams… and no, it’s wearing out. That grey-black cotton will work perfectly- Twin, and take my new measurements, and yeah, my boobs are bigger, my butt is also bigger, and my chest got a bit wider. Ugh.

Okay, cut and stitch and sew- and when I put my new swimming outfit on, it’s… it’s like a- a leotard, only with, like, a halter top, and short shorts with cute ribbons on the side; all a plain, unassuming grey. Except I can’t wear just flat grey- ahah, yes, red band that neatly stitches on- And the necklace/mail got ejected from the old suit.

Um.

Hmm.

Odd.

I pick it up, and it writhes in my hands, and then wraps around my wrists and solidifies- new bangles. Okay. Weird, but okay- I can deal with that. My first bangles are big, thick- heavily tooled, chased with slinky mongooses and winding vines, red rubies inset, my name sneakily hidden among the curling metal lines; my second ones are thin, light- linked chain and strips of metal, bronze, red coral and black onyx and slivers of white bone in the shape of fish.

I actually made the Jacket of Carp like, three or four sizes too big, so it’s really more like an over robe on me- which is a hell of a lot of fabric. Actually, I like that I’m not so… matchy matchy, anymore.

I think it’s cuter this way.

The weight of my wrists is not too different- I’ll be used to it within an hour…

And my phone’s ringing, hang on-
Mob Alert on Kunlun Alley and Shroomy! Olly olly oxen free!

Holy shit. Holy shit!

No time for explanations- I have to go.

I need my bike- I should explain, my actual pedal bike is a steel frame, with a fixed drive chain (no gears) and no brakes to speak of- the only frivolity on the bike is a small cheerful bell that chimes loudly when I pull a lever with my finger.

Tie the left cuff high and tight, wrap with bandage- tie left lower, wrap with bandage; red handkerchief of plain cotton, helmet, aviation goggles; bangles shift to bracers of gold- time to go, no time, no time; I’m through the door of my apartment, down the ladder and at the very top of the stairs. There’s a sort of wide ramp that goes down the center, on which I have ridden before to get up speed- ten rings of the bell, and then I’m off, down the ramp, faster faster faster FASTER-

And then I’m in the lobby and weaving through people and out the door and FAAAAAATTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT and I’m down the street and across the foot bridge through the cherry tree grove and along the fence duck the clotheslines and over another bridge and faster, and there’s Fig, it’s been a long time, and Scra13, and holy shit, Callie- I thought she wasn’t going to even come because of the nerve damage- Well, it is an Olly Oxen Free- everyone goes, or else.

We ride through the city of Kowloon, and are the first to arrive at the place stated- and that’s Black Orchid (B-O), damn, and she looks beat to all hell- and we arrive behind the person who must have been aggressing her-

“What, is this your back up?”

“Yep.”

And then a whoop I’ve almost forgotten- Dranga, I’d know his voice anywhere- and then we’re a whirling storm of shoving force, pushing a man in a black suit away from our sister on wheels- and then Callie does a slider right to the back of his legs and he goes down hard- and holy fuck, Scra13 just got B-O onto the pegs, which means it’s time to go- we ride off into the boil of the Kowloon afternoon; I quickly flank Scra13 and B-O, Callie and Fig on the other side and then we all push together and cruising speed- and soon enough we’re all the way across town. And then it’s Sunset, meaning time for all the ships to sail in or out of port- meaning all the bridges have to creak open and up, meaning there’s no crossing a the water anywhere by land.

Meaning, safe as houses, we’re done.

“Callie, I thought you wouldn’t.”

“I couldn’t leave one of my lovely ladies to languish in the care of… well. Anyway- Black Orchid, are you well?”

“Been better, Callie- Traci, thanks for the pickup.”

“NP, B. X, I thought u were out of the biz 4ver?”
“Olly Oxen Free, Traci.”

“You two will need a place to stay for a while, so as not to lead that- man- back to the rest of our compatriots- you can stay with me, or with X. I suggest you stay with X, you know I’m a fucking straight edge…”

“Lol, whut- says the grrl who has how many cans of Special Stardust?”

“Shut up! Those are my brothers, and I’ve gotten rid of all the ones I can!”

“Anyway! I know several backways to get back to the East Side, where I live- you wanna stop by the Dumpling Cart and get a snack?”

“Holy- you can get there from here?” Perfect unison. Wow.

“Yeah…?”

“Fuck yeah! Let’s go!” “YAY!” “MOG YES!”

Callie, Traci 13, and Black Orchid on the pegs of Traci’s bike follow me through the side streets and strangeways of Kowloon- Fig has a previous engagement- all of which I know, perhaps better than anyone. Anyone still alive, at least- over the strings of the clothes lines, along the shimmering bridge of light cast by the setting sun, across the thin lines linking roof to roof and not a single shingle disturbed by our swift passage- and then we’re in East Kowloon, neon lights blaring off of red painted wood, stone cobbles and tiny women in loose pantsuits; down this alleyway, skid along to middle third right, and- yep, there’s the cart.

“Hiya Grandma Lexi!”

“Terry! Come’re baby girl- ahaahaha! I keep forgetting how big you are- and these are some of your friends I take it?”

“Yes ma’am- they’re big fans of your work.”

“Hello!” “Salute.” “Yo.”

“Do they eat like you?”

“No one eats like me- except for this guy I know, he can outrun the wind? He eats more than me.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Well- siddown, all’a youse, let’s get some food in’ayou, yeah?”

We settle down at one of my Grandma’s tables- slightly wobbly, ruthlessly clean, and covered over with that weirdly smooth fake table cloth that isn’t actually cloth but more like a squishy tarp that’s been printed with good-lucky flowers, and then- huh.
“You one of Blade’s get?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Mhm. Y’called something?”

“Little Mouse, ma’am.”

She’s settled platters and plates down in the center of the table—another one, “Yellow Feather, Ma’am”, a boy, settles roundedged cups and a big pot of looseleaf tea down; and then we settle into the meal, munching, eating—laughing.

Remembering the old days—like—

“Remember that time you did the slider off of the Green bridge down South Side—”

“Fuck— you’re never going to let that one go, are you?”

“Considering I was on your pegs at the time no, I’m not. I had to burn that dress—”

And—

“Omg, do u remember the tiem you 8 a bowl of Stabweed Seeds on a dair—”

“Considering I shat prickles for a week, I could hardly forget it—”

And I remember. Gods do I remember. The conversation turns, as it always does, to what the hell we’re doing now, since we aren’t active Runners for the MD anymore—

“Well, I’m in game design now— have you heard of SBURB? I’m also going to be joining Terry’s Bountyball team—” “Fuck, you designed SBURB?” “Yeah, lead programmer and Dev Member.”

“It’s not my team, I’m not the captain—” “Y’playin’ BBall now?”

“The hell? What are you then?”

“First Switch.”

“Fuck. Well, yeah— anyway, I’m going to be playing Bountyball with her soon— what are you two up to?”

“Welp, after this— I’m not going to be able to get a honest job anywhere, so… probably move back home, to Thir Na Oge.”

“Ah— I don’t have a home, Xactly, so… I’ll probably go back to wandering. Avoid Kowloon and Jump for a while— like, probably a month or so…”

“You could join the BBall team. We’re not at full roster yet, and we’re the new guys so—”

“So no discrimination yet, anyone’s in? Alright— I’ve always wanted to beat the ever-loving shit out of people on horseback anyway.”

“Eheh. Yeah, alright— s’not like I’ve got better plans or somthin’.”

We talk more, about what Traci and Orchid have been doing for the past few years— Traci is still the best long distance Runner in the MD, but is bored of the job now and wants to move on; she only
ever signed on as a freelancer, so, she can leave at anytime. Orchid is a freelancer too, and had been on the fast track up the ranks- until, of course, she realized that her Dispatch was only recommending her because he thought she would sex-fuck him for it. She didn’t take kindly to that, as I’m sure you would understand.

(The relationship between a Runner and a Dispatch is… is like the relationship between a Shifu and Student. Romance can only occur after the first relationship has ended. Otherwise… well, shit always goes wrong when Shifu’s and Students get groiny together.

It’s just a thing that always happens.)

Somehow or other, the conversation moves on to boys- and well. In my days as an active Runner, I was known as the Nun, as in ‘you ain’t gettin’ nun fool” and well. Things change.

“Wait wait wait- you have a crush? You?”

“Yeah- don’t look at me with that tone, I have a heart and a clit, these things happen!”

“So- what’s he like?”

“Tall, Green eyes, nose like the blade of a knife- swimmer’s body, Atlantean-”

“When you say tall, how tall do you mean?” “Atlantean?”

“He’s as tall as I am, just about, and he’s from the Sunken Continent.”

“Holy shit.” “Oh my.” “Green eyes? How green?”

“Celadon~ and he has these cheekbones and his voice~”

“OH MY.” “Uh-huh.” “Go on~”

“And I can’t have him. I can’t even- I can’t do anything with him.”

“Ugh, why?” “No, don’t say that!” “Oh?”

“He’s basically- you know how we sometimes had to run packages in squads because of how dangerous the routes were?”

“Yeah-” “What’s that have t’do with?” “Oh dear, he’s your-”

“He’s my squad leader. I can’t.”

“Ugh-” “You’d fall for the leader type-” “Tough break Terry~”

I snort, check the stars and- “Sorry guys, I’ve gotta go. I can hear the sultry tones of my bedding calling for me-”

“You mean the buzzing whine of your vibrators?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Calliope cackles, as do Traci 13 and Black Orchid- I shake my head, wrap up my share of the food, pay my portion, and ride off; some medium hard pedaling later, and I’m back at my Apartment- I shower there, dress in pajamas, and take the food back to the Cave. One stop at the kitchen later, where I put the tealeaf wrapped bundles into the cool of the icebox and grab myself a cup of water,
and then it’s to my bed for a long round of sleep.

A Dream- an island filled with guards, red arrows flying; sneaking through and getting a Scientist, a woman with yellow gold brown hair, the buzz crackle of death beneath her fingertips- rustling thieves like locusts with brains that remember and send to sender; Speedy (not Speedy) and the Scientist in a boat roaring away, explosion covering escape but the black buzzing death was her work and she finished her job. Ocean and playing, Wally in shorts; yellow haired girl in green, arrows away, her arrow that helped- anger. Fighting- cat girl in green, seen her before, once, don’t remember when- and I throw myself from my bed, gasping for breath.

It’s morning.

Let’s see- today, in addition to team bonding, I should… I should hang things from the ceiling. Yeah, make it feel more like home.

Um.

Hmm.

Well, I do have those lacquered koi fish DA’s, and those wooden fish that were carved over the course of an evening when I realized I was bored- and the painted cradle watchers, which I’m too old for but they’ll look nice, and that bolt of blue fabric I’ve never used because blue makes me look bad, and green is not my color either- and I forgot I got an entire package of fairylights for a DA, these are the nice ones too- let’s see, I’ve got fishing line, rockpins, and sticky tape. And all of those miniature umbrellas- yes, let’s get to work!

Start with the fabrics, and Float up to the ceiling- pin the fabric in and spread the fairylights out, little orbs of glass filled with crushed fairybone and starlight; and a moon plate, wow, this is a really nice set of- Sweet, Constellary fairylights! They’ll move in the patterns of constellations! So, place the moon plate and start adding fish- the wooden ones I’m a bit worried about but no, there they go, flitting away- gently flying through the air that’s pretending to be water just below the surface at night; the fish arrange themselves in levels, and with a soft flicker the cradle watchers align themselves towards the North, and then begin to fly-swim in the patterns of the winds.

I drop Float and Jump down- and I admire the flowing grace of my ceiling until the dawn comes, and the orange-gold light of the new day flows in- Float touches the miniature umbrellas, and they float higher and higher, and then they reach a line in the air that’s pretending to be water just below the surface at night; the fish arrange themselves in levels, and with a soft flicker the cradle watchers align themselves towards the North, and then begin to fly-swim in the patterns of the winds.

In the light I can see and remember that I have fish that swim by day, and frogs, and bejeweled dragonflies- group by group, I Float, and then throw them up- the frogs, in particular, reach just past the apex of their arc and then swim away, slowly inundating the air above a certain height- high above my shelves, about one hundred and fifty centimeters above- and then something Changes again, and the entire ceiling, not just the small part I made, becomes patched over with glowing holes- with glowing ponds. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a small lizard climbing the wall- like a chameleon, only with ziggy eyes- and faster than it can run, I snatch it out of the air. It shivers and wiggles in my hand, and then it’s a Card- I sign it, and yeah, Change- and then I decide to put on my swimsuit and over robe and shoes, and then I just sort of Jump-
And then I’m in my ponds. Specifically, I’m in my Late Summer pond, gently floating- and with a swish of the tail, I rise to the surface.

“Hello, Madame.”

“Ah- hello. And you are…?”

“Sprintstill, Madame. Can I help you today?”

“Ah, well- I was just looking around; but do tell- how do you like it here?”

“Um- well, I like it quite a lot! It’s much better than what I used to do, just… I don’t like being outside. At all. But, well- none of us are particularly good at… at details, or… or houseworks. Forgive me for saying so, Madame, but- you need a different class of servant if you want your house to be fully in order.”

“No, I understand- everyone has skills and talents, and I might be the only Fox to have ever lived that likes to bookbind. Hmm… this is my house, yes?”

“Yes, Madame-”

“I mean to say- Sprintstill this is My House, yes?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“… Help me up?”

“Of course-” and when her clawed hands touch mine, I can feel redness dripping across my face and shoulders and down my spine, and ten fluffy tails springing from my backside. Argh. Well, alright- it’s not like I don’t know what I am.

“Take me to the ballroom- the largest one we have, if you could.”

“Yes, Madame, rapidly.”

I follow her flicky scuts of tails (she only has four, wow), large ears attending to each and every sound. We’re soon in a janked up excuse for a ballroom, broken tiles and missing windows, a hole in the roof like a burn from a dragon- well, I’ll just have to come back, won’t I?

“Stand back, please.”

“Yes Madame.”

And with a flicking of my red clawed hands and a swishing of my sleeves and a flurry of Flower- and then I say “Arise, my faithful servants.”

And there, rising from western style curtsies, hundreds upon hundreds of neatly pressed and dressed maids, each in a battalion formation, neatly arranged in the Colors and ranked according to standing.

“Will the Head Housekeepers please step forward.”

Red- a rose woman in a softly tapered maid’s dress, neat green collar and sharp sickle at her waist,
delicate white sandals; Yellow- triangle rows of sunflower in gently falling rings, slim green collar and strap-whip at her side, heavy white sneakers; Blue- iridescent in the light, soft dots of orange at the waist and collar and hammer on her back, white ballet flats; Black- rustling bandage dress, purple collar and sword, fine white boots; White- pale cream dress that flares at the bottom and puffed sleeves, faint gold collar and staff in hand, smooth shiny black shoes. They curtsy to me- and I acknowledge them- and then with a flick of my tail, Sprintstill is arrayed in a lovely ensemble that incorporates each of the Colors and shows her standing in relation to both the Maids and Myself.

“This is Sprintstill. She is your Headwoman. It is to her all orders must go, all respects must go- for all of you, even Sprintstill, are my servants. I trust my judgment in this matter is considered sound?”

Five voices answer for five hundred thousand. “Yes Madame. Your Word is our Law.”

“Sprintstill.”

“Madame?!?”

“I expect the House and Grounds to be proceeding towards some amount of Order while I am away- is that clear?”

“Yes Madame!”

“Excellent- I can find my way back well enough- it is my suggestion that you familiarize yourself with your Deputies and your posting.”

“Yes Madame!”

I walk back the way we came, soon coming to the right pond- I jump down, and then Jump down, and land neatly on the ground- and Megan’s about to knock.

Shift back to normal- yes, everything except the nails and- tap tap tap.

“Yes?”

“Hey, Terry- I was thinking, after breakfast- do you want to go swimming at the beach? Everyone except Wally’s here, so…”

“Okay- Yes, good! I come with Megan.”

I tie my robe closed, and it instantly looks like a wrap skirt- shoes go on, glasses check and-

“Something wrong, Megan?”

“Oh! No, no- it’s just- your room is really… unique.”

“Th-thank you.”

Oh yeah- the guys are here, but not Wally- “Where Wally?”

“It’s his first day of school today.”
“Eeh? So early?”

“Why, when does school start for you?”

“September first…”

Robin blinks. “When does it end?”

“February.”

Kaldur blinks. “You are not in secondary school?”

“No- I’m at university- well, I will be in September…”

And now everyone is staring at me, eep! Oh gods, there it goes- flushing and blushing and other things ending in “ing” that also signify embarrassment and I’ve hidden my eyes behind my fringe, shoulders up red alert; dear gods why am I so shy, this is not a fucking game!

“I-is not really so w-weird?”

Holy fuck my fucking arms are turning red, dammit dammit- and my legs too, fucking shit. Aaargh, stop looking at me!!!

“P-p-please stop s-staring at m-m-me.”

Anyway. Beach! To the beach! (I totally just ran outside, holy fuck dammit why am I so fucking shy, this really isn’t fun or nice- arrgh, I just want to be friends with people! Is that so wrong?)

I am going to take off my robe and shoes, and put them over here- this is a different part of the beach, I went further north when I was exploring before- yeah, I went through the forest, huh.

Now- I think I’m going to make a sand castle today. Yes, that is what I’m going to do!

Okay, so- hmm… Rain, Bubbles, and Freeze? Yeah!

Puff up a Cloud, just big enough to hold in my hands like a hen, then fill it with Rain- heavy and black and then I walk away from my skirt and this space is good, right here; squeeze the cloud and watch the rain plip drip onto my feet pale gold in the summer sun. The sand changes from pale white to light brown-gold, and bubbles and bounces under my feet- pat pat pat wiggle.

Sand- and fingers into the air into the ground and lift, and press and shift and then step back and stomp, and down comes a wall, shift and turn and stomp again- and up rises a tower. Shift turn and stomp and tap and stand and shift and circle your creation- an impossible castle, tall as you are, rising like drips of sand from the brown-gold earth.

Bubbles- cover it, like icing, thick and bright- and some are big and some aren’t, and there are less the lower it goes, like snow- and the Freeze, and the bubbles ice and sparkle in the light, and drop Freeze.

And done. I’m vaguely aware of conversation- when I ran out, I turned somewhere, and sort of hid behind a rock? Anyway- they’re here now.

They can see me again.

Funny- this time, it’s not so… I just have to remember that they’re my friends, I think. Right? Yes. They- we’re friends with each other. They aren’t going to hurt me.
“Wow.”

“Thank you, Robin.”

“Terry- you made this just now?”

“Yes, Megan- I did.”


“I do like this- art- when I am bored, scared, sad. Too many feelings; too much time.”

“And this time it was…?”

“Scared.”

“You do something like this- every time?”

“Yes- sometimes has come to after times? Like, battle time, no time for art- but after times, oh yes, lots of art. I show you all sometimes?”

“…Sure.” “O-kay…” “If you want.” “It would be an honor.”

I smile a ragged smile, and then with a shifting slide of my foot and Sand and the castle crumbles into nothing- nothing but a pile of sand with a few extra sparkly bits that will soon vanish into the sun.

We splash around at the beach, that late morning- for lunch, I am introduced to the American staple known as the hotdog, and decide that I prefer blood pudding…

Beach beach~ play day at the beach~ la de da~

Somehow or other, through the waves and the salty spray and the light- and I’m asleep, hard, curled up in a warm ball on my wrap skirt.

Wally had a bad day at school today, and will come to the Cave ready to play- except we will have a mission. He will trip, and fall, and it will hurt. A pillow might help…

My eyes snap open and I sit up, look at the sky, and stretch.

“Sorry guys- I have to go back in.”

“Aw, why?”

“There be a mission today Megan, so, I am go shower and get ready.”

I stretch again, snap my skirt in the air and tie it on, then dust the sand off of my feet- on with the shoes! Another stretch- “Do you want me takes something inside?”

“Ah- take the grill inside please?”
“Sure Robin- it goes in kitchen closet, yes?”

“Yes!”

“Okay!”

I take the grill, long cooled from our lunch, and then I go right back inside- I vaguely hear Superboy say something.

“- really think there’s going to be a mission today?”

“-s. Her premonitions-”

And then I’m too far away.

Ah well- I’m sure if it’s important, they’ll let me know.

Let’s see, my ‘GatorGar pillow is too thin for what I need… I’ll make a Tuna then.

Okay.

To my Overshop!

I go to my Apartment, then it’s a quick bound up the stairs to my Overshop- fire up the Maker, and let’s get to it!

I X up, and take off my Mask- place it on the terminal and input my new measurements, and throw in my old costume; the dress goes in first, and then the boots, and then the body armor, and then the underwear- the machine gurgles for a moment, then with a thoomp it spits out a new red dress and a new black bodysuit and new red boots and new underclothing; they have settings now, sweet.

Upgrade!

Put the ensemble on, piece by piece- the bra and smallclothes do everything they need to do, and are also an almost obnoxious shade of red, smallclothes hugging my butt and curving with my every motion, smooth to just below my upper thigh; bra restricts the motion of my breasts, pushes them up and together and keeps them from bouncing. Underarmor next- clean and white and smelling faintly of vanilla, thick leggings that go to just above my knee, thick sleeve-ettes that leave my fingers exposed and are thickest over my knuckles and wrists and stop just below the middle of my upper arm, leotard that covers me from groin to shoulder, snug like my swimsuit and thickest over my ribs. Bodysuit- matte black fabric of Xen, won’t rip or tear or cut, strong like the webs of spiders, smooth like the scales of a fish, smooth like a lotus leaf, a hood that sucks onto my head and smooths underneath my chin and a fine thin gauze for over my face; the fingertips are thin as well, to allow for touch, ridged for gripping. Boots- all weather, all terrain, cherry red and lace up to below my knee. Dress- rich red fabric, golden stripe at the collar and cuff and hem, skirt that falls to my waist and no sleeves, but there are levels in it- a hoodie form, a… jersey shirt form? New.

I put my cool mask on- leather so tough it’s more like bone, dragon hide calcified and painted cold dead white with red ringed eyes and a slash like a scar in the shape of an X- the rocket flower. No mouth- a slit painted white on the inside as well- but I can speak just fine.

Let’s see now- one tuna fishy pillow created, goose feathers and cotton batting for form, and that
pretty iridescent blue that live tuna are- and done. And woo, that’s a lot of time passed- time to go back!

Mask off and down and okay, apparently like this I have facial markings- no time to look at them- down the stairs at not quite a dead run, round the corner through my Apartment and then through my room- and grab that umbrella, it’s going to be one of those days- through the twisting halls of the cave and sliiiiiide, down goes the fish pillow- and then the Zeta tube is glowing gold and there’s Wally in his swimsuit, and he’s saying something about the beach and he’s walking forwards and he trips and I’m still crouching- sweet, I placed the pillow correctly.

Wally’s face is squarely in the softest, most squishy part of the fish pillow; and tuna are actually really freaking huge, so his head, shoulders, and most of his chest are in the plushy fishy goodness.

I’m totally making a victory sign with my arms, shit, drop those suckers like they’re hot, and-

“Hard day?”

“Yeah…”

“Need a hand up?”

“Yeah…”

I help him up, gather up his things, and-

“Smooth moves, Baywatch. You have any other powers?”

“Uh, sorry, who are you?”

“Artemis, your new teammate.”

“Kid Flash, never heard of you.”

Dude, no, hell no- one second I’m crouched on my heels, watching the show, the next I’ve thrown the fishy pillow at Wally’s unsuspecting back- and he turns, shifts his weight and catches it.

I think he’s getting faster. Or possibly more spatially aware…

“Rude! Very very rude!”

“Well, sorry-“

“Ah, she’s my new protégé- and my neice.”

“What happened to Speedy???”

“Recognized: Speedy” “Well, for starters he doesn’t go by Speedy anymore.”

“Hello~ Um, what is your name now?”

“Red Arrow.”

“Hello Red Arrow! Oh- do you remember me?”
“Uh- oh, Red X! Hey, yeah- how are you?”

“I’m quite well, thank you. What have you been doing so far?”

“Well, actually, that’s why I’m here- and why are you *crouching* on the ground?”

“Is comfortable! But now that you mentions, not practical at all.” And then I’ve stood up, and together Red Arrow and I walk over to the rest of the team, as well as Red Tornado, Batman, and Green Arrow.

“Roy! You look-”

“Replaceable.”

“It’s not like that- you told me you were going solo.”

“So why waste time finding finding a *sub*? Can she even *use* that bow?” (I think the meanings I know for sub and the meaning he meant are not correlations- because Artemis is not a submersible vessel, and the relationship between Green Arrow and Artemis does not work like that, as far as I can tell…)

“Yes, *she* can!”

“Who are you!!!” Wally, you either like this girl or you don’t, stop fucking up your body language-

“I’m his niece.” “She’s my niece.”

That’s pure bullshit and everyone with a working brain knows it, yet- she looks really familiar, either I’ve seen her somewhere or I’ve seen a close relation… Hmm. Well, we’ll just have to see, won’t we?

“Another niece?” Robin, Green Arrow can have more than one niece…

“But she is not your replacement. We have always wanted you on the team- and we have no quota on archers.” Ah gods, that man’s voice kills me softly every time I hear it-

“And if we did, you know who we’d pick.” Wally, that’s understandable but also mean.

“Ch, whatever Baywatch.”

“You came to us for a reason.”

“Yeah, a reason called Dr. Serling Roquette.”

Flash of Fog through the air- burning darkness scratching at me, trying to eat me-

“(Fog.)”

“Nanorobotics expert at Royal University in Star City! Vanished two weeks ago!”

“Abducted, two weeks ago. By the League of Shadows.” Oh fuck.

“You want us to rescue her from the Shadows?” “Hardcore!” Oh *hell* fucking no.
“I already rescued her from the Shadows- just one problem: the Shadows have already *coerced* her into creating a weapon. Doc calls it the Fog, millions of microscopic robots- nanotech infiltrators, capable of disintegrating anything in their path- concrete, steel, flesh, bone… But it’s true purpose isn’t mere destruction; it’s theft. The infiltrators eat and store raw data from any computer system, and deliver the stolen *intel* to the Shadows- providing them access to weapons, strategic defense, cutting edge science and tech-”

“Perfect for extortion, manipulation, powerbroking- yeah, sounds like the Shadows.” It sure does… thank the gods we don’t have to go after the Shadows, those fuckers do *not* play around…

“Like you know *anything* about the Shadows.”

And she just smiles at him, a bit like a cat… hmmm. I *know* I’ve seen that smile before, I just don’t know *where-*

“And that there is a snarky smile. I like her.

“Doctor Roquette’s working on a virus, to render the Fog inert.”

“But if the shadows know she can do that-” I’ve never heard Robin sound so young…

“They’ll target her. Right now, she’s off the grid- I stashed her at the local highschool’s computer lab.”

“You left her alone?”

“She’s safe enough for now.”

“Then let’s you and I keep her that way.”

“Don’t you wa-na take your new protégé?”

Batman stops Green Arrow’s approach, simple hand to shoulder- he must be well respected, to comfortably do such a thing.

“You brought this to the Team- it’s *their* mission. Which means it’s hers now too.”

“Hst. Then my job’s done.”

“Is not done.”

He jerks, and stares at me- and so is everyone else, but this is important, so-

“You go solo, yes? Then you job is not-”

“Like you know anything about going solo-”

“I never get luxury of mentor. So- yes. I *know* about go solos. I know you give us mission- fine okay, but… is still you mission, still you job; you must make sure that we do it right, or it shine bad on you. Responsibility.”

“I-”
“Is okay that you give us this mission- is not okay that we have no way to contact you, to let you know we did the job. Is important- also, what if we need your skills, or are worried about you and want to be sure you not dead in ditch? Is important.” He smells weird. And there’s something else wrong with him too- the person I met earlier this year wouldn’t have let anyone else deal with what he had deemed his business… So, either he grew and changed- except that’s not the kind of thing that changes in a person, not unless there was some sort of huge trauma or, or an external stimulus that made him change unknowingly- but why would he have one of those?

Red Arrow sighs- ‘I’ll update my info, okay?’

“Okay~!”

He stalks out- and before he goes, “Recognized: Speedy” “That’s Red Arrow. B06, Update.” And then with a flash of gold, he’s gone.

Grumpy butt of a guy, not at all what I remember… and that seemed a bit abrupt, for a detailed update- perhaps there is a database I’m unaware of?

We load onto the Bioship- gnngh, stealthmode, I can see the ground, fold them legs and don’t look doooow- Nope.

Aqualad gives us our positions- and then he asks me something, wait what-

“I’m sorry, please repeat?”

“How long can you hold a… what you did, when we fought Red Tornado? How long can you do that?”

“Shadow? A long time- is an easy spell for me. Why?”

“I need you to be the secondary Guard on the Doctor.”

“Okay- hide in her shadow, come out if assassins attack? Back defense?”

“Yes.”

“No problem.”

I then reach up and put my mask on- Red X, checking in.

We arrive at the local high school- what is a high school? This smells like a secondary school to me…

And that’s the good Doctor, I guess this is the computer lab- I smile, bow, and- “I am to be Guarding you this evening. No worries please- is going to be happy ending.”

And then I Shadow and dive directly into her shadow, and settle, soft and silent- and then I go very very still.

And wait.

(No talking inside the Shadow.)
“What the hell was that?”

“Our teammate- she’s a little… weird, but very good at what she does.”

“A little creepy, more like- whatever. So long as she doesn’t get in my way, I don’t care. I have work to do.”

I’m not creepy! …Am I?

‘Miss Martian, something wrong?’

‘The Shadows might be able to hack our normal comms- so, Aqualad asked me to link us up.’

‘Ah. Here.’

‘Thank you.’

I quietly listen to Artemis and Kid Flash argue- and when he says, er, thinks, ‘No! That was Speedy’s, er, Red Arrow’s arrow- Right?’

‘Not so much.’

‘Not hardly. For one thing, it’s the wrong color- for another, it’s way too short. If you’re issue with her is so great, I think I have some tissues in my pocket…’

‘Shut up, X.’

‘Tee hee hee hee.’

‘You know I can still hear you, right?’

Kid Flash is silent after that.

‘Ugh, I couldn’t get the Justice League.’

Aqualad steps close to the Doctor, converses with her-

‘The virus will not be of much use if we cannot track the weapon.’

‘My Utility Fog is not a weapon- it’s science, brilliant science.’

‘Can you track it?’

‘Of course I can track it- but I’d have to go online! Might as well rent a billboard with this address and “Assasinate Me” in neon.’

‘We will protect you.’ (Oh. Oh my. So that’s why I like him so much- he makes me feel… safe.
Actually safe. Wow.)
‘…Tracking Fog now.’

Silence, the clicking of keys- an echo, bird disturbed at night- wind, thumping down-
‘Mmm. That boy~’ (Oh my.)
‘He can *hear you!* We can *all* hear you.’
‘Oh, I *know.*’

‘Miss Martian, Doctor Roquette has located the Fog. Reconfigure the Bioship so Robin and Superboy can persue.’
‘Ready.’

And then I don’t hear the soft rustle of Robin’s thoughts, or the warm rasp of Superboy- they’re… too far away.

‘You embarrassed Superboy!’ (She made you jealous.)
‘Didn’t hear him say that.’ (He wouldn’t.)
‘Must you challenge everyone?’ (Yes.)
‘Where I’m from, that’s how you survive.’ (They aren’t paying attention, oh dear.)
‘Do *remember* we’re on a mission.’
‘Yes- right.’
‘Of course.’

Sensation- shadow on the floor, shouldn’t be there- follow it, and fall- Pay attention!

‘Miss Martian, please go check on Kid Flash. Something’s happened to him- they’re here.’
‘What- how can you be sure?’

‘Well, one’s about to attack us-’

And then there’s a shuriken in Kaldur’s shoulder- Atlantean skin is quite dense. I’m not worried, except there’s something about this…

“Doctor, get down!” ‘Doctor, get down!’

And Kaldur has three more shuriken in him and fuck, I hate ninjas.

‘I really hate ninjas. Come on Doc, let’s move- you’re in charge here. Try to crawl out of here, and get to a door or a window- I’ll get you out from there.’
‘But- but what about the virus?’

‘You’re the priority here; if need be, I can help you write a new one- self-replicating algorithms are a favorite of mine.’

‘You do quantum coding? I thought I was the only-’

‘Doc, we’ll talk shop later, escapage now.’

‘Right, sorry-’ And Kaldur’s been fighting the ninja and I haven’t gotten a good look at her yet, fuck- wait, that’s a wall- and then Kaldur’s been pinned and whoop, umbrella open and the ninja’s sai thocks off of the teak centerpole of the umbrellasword. I love nice weapons, I really do.

Close the umbrella, and stand at the ready- oh. That’s a cat ninja- odd, I don’t see a clan marking anywhere. A shinobi perhaps?

“Isn’t it bad luck to open umbrellas indoors?”

“I would say yes- but this not an umbrella.”

Hey! More shuriken- no time to think, just catch and throw back, simple side sweep and darting throw Sninkt! and they’re deflected with her sai.

“Lovely form- and a good weight on the shuriken, I am impressed.”

“Thank you…”?

And then Artemis shoots her other sai out of her hand- and Kaldur’s back up, two steps forward. I quietly loosen the hold I have on my umbrella’s canopy-

“Hhm- this job is getting interesting.” And a sword that unfolds, what will they come up with next- and then she’s slashing arrows out of the air like this is some chambara shit- and open the umbrella to avoid shrapnel, come on Artemis, think this through-

And there’s Kid Flash and Miss Martian, and they’re flanking me, sweet-

“Maybe too interesting.”

A flash of light- flash bomb. And then Kid Flash is tackling thin air, come on now, everyone knows that doesn’t work- I’ve closed my umbrella, and the smoke has cleared- no ninja. Like that’s a surprise. And Kaldur was guarding us, oh my goodness- his face in profile does things to me, wonderful wonderful things that are not at all conducive to the mission at hand dammit-

“Gone!”

“She’s getting away- you’re letting her get away!”

‘(Considering our priority is Docter Roquettes safety, I don’t think it wise to chase Shadows through the night.)’

‘(Agreed.)’
“This is all your fault- you were on perimeter! How’d that shadow get in?” and Artemis doesn’t quite glare at him- I’m not sure if I ship them or not, and it would be really helpful if they would stop fucking up their body language, I can’t tell if they want to fight or fu-

“That’s not really fair- I was outside too.”

“Outside- being distracted by her! Besides, I can’t be mad at you.” ‘You gave me mouth to mouth.’

‘WE HEARD THAT!’ All of us, even me, in perfect unision.

“Dang it!”

“I didn’t do half as well in my first battle- and I know you can’t have been Green Arrow’s sidekick for very long.” Miss Martian is actually really nice, I just wish I knew why she creeped me out…

“Focus everyone- the Shadows will be back.”

“Robin to Aqualad- We’re over Philadelphia. We’ve located the Shadow’s next target- STAR Labs. We’re too late. It’s destroyed- totally destroyed; the Fog decimated it. This is bad- STAR Labs is cutting edge science, and now their secrets are in the hands of the enemy. What’s our next move?”

“Re-scan for that Fog. Find it. We’re moving the Doctor.”

I sigh- I always hate moving once I’ve gotten settled. Still, needs must…

We move the doctor to a local café with internet, Sandy’s- and we also switch positions; Artemis and Kid Flash guard the Doctor, while Aqualad and I patrol the perimeter.

‘Stop it, both of you!’

‘What?’ ‘What?’

‘I can hear you glaring.’

“Miss Martian, stay in camouflage mode and make a wide perimeter sweep!”

I’m Shadowing him- I feel it as he’s yanked off the ground, and I follow quickly up the tree- five distinct hits, and then he’s flying through the air- I race along the ground and quickly sneak underneath the van he hit.

He’s suddenly, and efficiently overpowered- and there’s the cat ninja, come back to play. I slide out from under the car, situate myself behind them- and I hear the cat ninja say “The Martian could return at any moment- and I’m not keen on evening their odds.”

Welp.

Que. I hear and obey.

“Too late for that, kitty cat.”

Flick of Blades in air and they hit the temples of the man in the red helm and the hook-handed man; the hook-handed man with the white hair goes down, but the man in the red helm is only stunned
and Whoops! Knife-

“We’ve got Shadows outside- green cat ninja, guy with white hair and a hook for a hand, and a dude with a red helm- Aqualad’s down for the moment, but not seriously injured; protect the Doctor, and Doctor Roquette?”

‘Y-yes?’

‘Finish your work.’

‘Okay.’

Wait, where’s the spider gu- Yikes! Pay attention! One firm thrust with a fist and he’s down for the count.

She drew her sword from before- I guess she means business. I pull out the umbrella again, and draw my sword- and she snorts; and then I drop Shadow, and she visibly gulps.

“I am sorry for not introducing myself earlier- I am Red X. You are…?”

“Ch-cheshire. Ah. Y-you’re with them?”

“Mm.”

She’s trembling- one chance. I always give the one chance.

“If you leave, now, and do not come back, I will let you.”

“What?”

“If you, Cheshire, leave this place, right now, I will let you, and I will not follow you. Your sister might, but… who knows?”

“I don’t have a sister-”

“Your eyes are the same shape, your fingers spread the same way, and your hips flare the same. All of these are family traits passed from mother to daughter- you are too young to be her mother, and share too many traits to be cousins. Thusly, sisters. Do not lie to me, Cheshire. I do not like it. Her position on our team is not currently secure enough to survive us learning everything you know, so I suggest you make like the Cheshire cat and… disappear.”

“S-sorry. Um. You really won’t follow me?”

“No. I really won’t.”

“I’m just going to. Go. Now.”

“Okay. For future reference- this is a onetime deal. When next you draw a blade against me, I shall cross blades with you- and then we will see who walks away.”

She flicks her sword down small, and stows it in a hidden pocket- and then she bows to me, very low, and her mask clatters to the ground- I nod my head to her in return; she straightens, turns, and
makes a dead run for the pier... which is in the opposite direction of where we actually put the Doctor. I suppose she arrived by boat- What was even the point of that smoke bomb, it’s not like I don’t know where she is...

I walk over to the hookheaded man with the white hair- and suddenly, I know how to use Sleep without falling asleep myself- but I don’t actually want to touch him- but I don’t have anything to tie him up with- but eeew- but no actual restraints, I’ll have to start carrying them- but eeeeeeew- but nothing, get on with it. I crouch, and place two fingertips on his bruised temple and Sleep- stroke of the palm across the side of his face, and he will slumber for eight hours, unwakeable and insensate.

And I’ve overcast, damn. I guess Shadow’s a harder spell than I thought.

I pick up the mask, a cat with a manic grin, and settle against the dented wall of the cargo van, and I remember-

_Fingers in my pocket, turn and elbow rising- backbend to avoid the palmstrike and low sweep and stomp forwards. She grabs my braid and yanks and yells- I knew weaving in those rose thorns was not a waste of time! High kick and catch her chest, pivot forwards and head-butt and she’s down for the count._

_Nainai returns, and is angry- “What are you doing!?!?” _

_Answer, and do not lie. “We were just play-fighting. Were we too loud?” _

_“…No. But please try not to break anything- you have a picture day tomorrow, remember?” _

_“Yes Nainai.” _

_The girl- Jade, Jade, her name is Jade- groans, and stands, and I turn to her, at the ready- Nainai says “You girls have a good time- snacks will be ready in a half hour, and I’ll have some bandaging ready, okay?” _

_“Okay~” “Whatever.” _

Ah. So that’s what it was- and I suddenly have to wonder what the fucking hell my parents actually did, because Jade became a Shadow and I-

_“Hey.” _

_“Hello~” _

_“What happened to the Shadow?” _

_“Hmm? Oh- when she saw who I am, she run away.” _

_“…No, really.” _

_“Really- I have very big reputation, so, when she see my mask, she know who I am, she run away. Oh- Artemis, I need to talk to you later.” _

She looks at me, and I tilt my head- and then she blinks, and nods.
We go to where we stashed Doctor Roquette for real- Aqualad in his stealth suit is something I like to see and dear gods not now- the man with a hook is quite heavy, and Kid Flash took the mask as a souvenir…

“Where is the third Shadow?”

“She run away.”

“You let her?” I’ve never heard Aqualad sound so-

“Yes.”

“…Why?”

“…Because- No fight is better than fight.”

“I’m really glad you’re on the team, Artemis- do you… do you want to be my Earth sister? I have twelve on Mars, but- being here is not the same, trust me.”

“I… I wouldn’t know. But- yeah. Thanks.”

Miss Martian thumps Kid Flash in the side- he grunts, and then- “Thanks for. You know.”

“Right.”

“Welcome to the team.” That *voice*~ gnaaaaaaargh, not the time!

We escort the Doctor to a location I agreed to not know the name of, for security reasons- I hand her my card with phone and email, and implore her to “Drop me a line so we can talk shop sometime, okay?”

“Absolutely. And… Thank you.”

“Anytime!”

I guess Miss Martian- Megan- doesn’t like me. *Damn*- well, that’s alright. I can like her anyway, even if she is kind of creepy to me, and… just because you know someone doesn’t like you, or you don’t really like someone- that doesn’t give you carte blanche to be nasty to them.

Anyway- Artemis.

‘Miss Martian- would you be so kind as to set up a private link between Artemis and me please?’

‘Oh- uh, sure. One sec-’

‘What?’
‘Well- I know a secret of yours. And it’s a big, nasty kind of secret too- the one that has the potential to… wreck lives. But I honestly don’t care who you’re related to, so long as you have conviction. So… do you?’

‘Do I what?’

‘Have conviction? Is this- being a hero, doing this Job- is this really what you want to do?’

‘Yes, why would-’

‘Then- Okay. I’m sure that in time, once trust has been earned on all sides, you’ll tell us all about your Shadowy past and who your family is and all those juicy details that get left out of official biographies. Until that point in time- I won’t say a word.’

‘You don’t know anything about me, so don’t try to-’

‘Firstly, you aren’t Green Arrow’s niece- you don’t share enough physical characteristics with him to be a close blood relation like that- you’d have done better to say that you’re cousins of some sort. Secondly, when Cheshire- the green ninja with the grinning cat mask that Wally claimed as a souvenir?- ran away, I saw her face, which I could describe to you in vivid detail. Instead, I will share a memory with you- once, when I was about six years old, a strange family had to stay at our house for about seven days; the mother and the father were out doing… well, how should I know? But they couldn’t take their two daughters with them. One was my age, and had bright yellow hair and a stuffed bear named Mr. Waffles- the other was about… let me think now, five years my elder? And her name was Jade. In the seven days of their stay with us, Jade got into one fight with me and was left with a scar on her… yes, her strong hand at the time was the Right, in the shape given by the thorns of a rose bush- and for the life of me, I cannot remember the other girl’s name. I’m not sure what happened to her, even… But I am sure that was Jade that I saw earlier this evening. So.’

‘…You remembered the name of the stuffed bear, but not the name of the girl?’

‘It was a long time ago- there are all kinds of things I’ve just… forgotten.’

‘…Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Artemis looks at me and smiles a small, half-crooked smirk- I close my eyes, push up the corners of my mouth, and return to NOT EVEN THINKING ABOUT THE GROUND DEAR JESUS FUCK DAMMIT NOOOOOPE and the stars are lovely this time of night, I really must go stargazing sometime soon, it’s simply terrible to ignore such a bounty.

Which reminds me, I need a leg bag for Bountyball- probably one out of leather, cloth bags are too easily cut open.

We arrive back at the Cave, and soon enough the people that don’t actually live at the Cave have gone to their homes. Kaldur lives at the Cave. Oh fuck shit dammit.

I could- no, I could not. I- dammit! Just- fuck, dammit.

I take a shower, put on pajamas, and sleep for several hours- and then, at seven in the morning, on
the Ninth day of August, I start preparations for the Feast of the Dead, which will come on the
Fifteenth.

Let me see now- might as well put up my gods and goddesses, and the saints, and really set up the
family altar, I’ve been putting it off.

I wipe down the shelf where I’ve been keeping my paintings of my parents, and my playbill from
Haley’s Circus which only faintly now smells of lavender- I unwrap and settle small statues of the
gods and goddesses who I pay my respects to, the ones who have helped me, and the ones I owe
patronage to- the Ba Xian, of course; my Grandma Lexi and Aunt Pretty Cheng, on this side called
Chuang-Mu, goddess of sexual delights and the pleasures of the marriage bed and Pan Jin Lian
goddess of fornication and prostitution and unwed mothers, Feng-Po-Po, goddess of the winds, Fu-
Hsing god of happiness, Gong De Tain, goddess of luck, Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy and
compassion, Sedna, goddess of the northern deeps and the cold dark waters of the deeps, a special
pakua (lucky lucky curiosity), and my title, a thin blade of lacquered wood painted in gold-lined red
Words- Xiaoshu Jin Jia Moshi.

My Title is special because… it.

Okay.

I’m going to tell you a really big secret- I’m actually… A goddess. I… I’m not much more powerful
than a normal superhuman human- meaning I’m one of the lowest ranked goddesses in the entire
Celestial hierarchy. Also, I’m only goddess of a specific type of thing, called a domain- my domain is
Recognition, Completion, Classification, Creation, Repair, and Sale of Patterns, with specific regard
to languages. Basically- I’m the Celestial equivalent of- I don’t even know, but…

Yeah.

I’m also a fifteen year old human girl who can naturally turn into a fox.

Life is weird, magic is weird, get over it.

The shelf is clean, and the gods are settled; my title and family are placed, a bowl and cup and plate
are set out neatly, a fine low vase of cobalt blue glass with lines up the sides like blades of grass. A
small pile of spirit money- copper, silver, and gold; delicate silk flowers, wire flowers covered over
in paper, bead flowers, settled in the low blue vase. Candles in the Five Colors, low tea candles on
the plate, small cakes of incense, three, neat file rows- five candles in the back and three sticks of
incense and one small box of matches with a golden Fu painted on.

The altar is done- the only thing left to do is… invite the people. The Gui who have helped me, all of
them- I’ve invited them regularly, and fed them of course- because well, even though I’d like it if I
saw- they helped me. They’ve always helped me- so… I feel indebted to them, and this… this is a
way I know that they’ll be. Helped back. By me.

So- invitation.

I have a the slim leavings of a rice paper roll meant for painting on, and an idea- and I paint the Gui,
and misty mists and food, so much food, more food than can be imagined truly- and I know just
where to get it too- and I write out the simple Words;

如果你有时间, 请进入我的外灯红酒绿大厅. 下表是由石头, 的树花桃和苹果。

And I sign it with my signature and my chop, let it dry, crumple it up, and send it onto the Gui with the bowl- and I know it was sent because it crumbled into ash in the bottom of the dish.

Food- what am I going to feed the peeps? Hmm… oranges, a fine assortment of dumplings both normal and spirit and I should eat the dumplings in the fridge before they’re too old, beans and roasted corn with ginger, white rice and soy sauce, duck and pork rib and fine red potatoes cubed and gently roasted, egg fried rice and two kinds of soup- spicy coconut with fish sliced thin fine, and brown soup with beef strips and noodles, steamed green beans with garlic and butter and a little bit of beef broth, rice and ginger carrots with strips of fried egg. Sweet tofu with ginger sugar, bean sprouts and salt vinegar, peaches, plums, pears, rose and chrysanthemum and marigold petals preserved in sugar.

I’ll need to spend the day shopping- which means it’s time to bust out the Iron Buddha Tea; aw, I’m almost out of Thoroughly Baked Spring… Autumn style won’t be out for at least another month- but… if I don’t use this, I won’t be able to do everything I need to do today. But the tea!

Argh.

Dammit.

So.

I go into the kitchen, and I make the tea, and I drink two cups straight up because it’s going to be one of those days and I can already tell I’m going to end up sitting on the couch watching bad soap operas and eating cookie dough out of a mug with a knife but you know what? Fuck it. That’s what.

So. Shower, and what am I going to wear on this very long day in which I will be going many strange places? Hm…

Oh!

“Hello Kaldur.” Gods, he looks as tired as I feel.

“…Hello Terry- did you, um, sleep, at all?”

“I sleep a few hours, um, but I have an important religious coming in a few days, so I- I need to get basic prep work done in next two or three days.”

“What do y-you have to do?”

“Um- mostly buy food, some things for paper mache… I p-probably get some dishes too.”

“What is it you are preparing for?”

“Ah- well, August is the month of the Dead, when the gates of… of Underworld, or Hell, open, and all the dead are given leave to return to mortal world for one day time- it take abouts fourteen day to
get Here from Hell. So, Gui Festival is not until Fifteenth.”

And he suddenly looks much more alert- “So- you’re preparing for…”

“Well, when I hero solitary, I get information and clues from Gui who have not made journey to Hell to be processed, perhaps punished, and reborn try again- so, I send invitation to them, and… Is respect, for people who help me. Is all- well…”

“What?”

“I might also see my parents. But I haven’t yet- they probably already moved on. I just… miss them. A lot. So.”

“I’m so sorry, Theresa. Συμμερίζομαι στη θλίψη σας.”

“Δίνω τις ευχαριστίες μου για τη γενναιόδωρη καρδιά σας. Thank you, Kaldur’ahm. Anyway- I have to go shopping today, and we have training with Canary tomorrow, so I suggest you go back to sleep.”

“What about you, Terry?”

“I wills be alright- I know my limit. Don’t worry Kaldur- I will be back near suppertime, okay?”

“Well… okay. Be careful, alright?”

“I will. Sleep well.”

I smile at him, suddenly filled with a honey colored warmth- and I want, with a sudden and violent desperation, to kiss him goodbye. I settle for touching the tips of my fingers to his, draining my teacup, washing off the plate I ate my breakfast off of (fresh fruit, omlette with spinach and sliced ham, the dumpling takeout), rinsing out my mug from which sweet delicious Iron Buddha Tea once was drunken, drying them off, putting them away; ghosting my fingers across the small of his back when I walk behind him, and if I sway my hips a little more than normal, well, dammit, I’m not made out of frozen clay and iron bars okay?

Gods he’s beautiful. And I want to kiss him. And his tattoos. And his abs- if I were to scrub a shirt on them it would get very, very clean.

Today, I’m going to need to look… pretty. Which means I’m going to have to wear… le gasp- a skirt! Specifically, I’m going to wear a plain black full circle skirt with double suspenders over the shoulders and a high waist, and plain black tights, my dun work boots, and a red v neck short sleeve stretchy t-shirt. A quick smoothing of my hair, grab a duffle backpack (boring old army surplus sand drab canvas, sadly), my glasses go on and lips bright red and smooth those eyebrows; grab the phone, grab my keys, big ceramic water bottle, smoked glass goggles, sunscreen, wallet- um um um… a big scarf I can use to wrap my head with.

And that should do it.

First things first- actually, first I need to go to Oaxaca. Yeah, then through the woods to France, and then I’ll work my way back to Chengdu in Sichuan, yeah, no big deal. Okay- to Mexico!
I don’t actually end up in Oaxaca- I end up in Mexico City, which is okay, I can still get to where I need to go, I just need- aha, yes! Steel frame, fixed gear, no brakes- perfect, exactly what I needed!

No helmet though- eh, fuck it, I’ve got to go go go!

I hike my skirts, tuck the ends into the high waist and one two three POW! I’m off, down the road, steadily gaining speed- four hours to Oaxaca from here, so how am I going to pick up my orders? Ugh, factor in the fares- no wait, I have the frequent usage tokens, don’t I- sweet! I’m so glad I ordered things online- the internet is a wonderful thing, and anyone who says otherwise is a lying sack of shit.

I fall into the steady sucking rhythm of pedaling over long distances- 40 kilometers per hour and then a wail pierces through my riding fugue- there, on the banks of a river, a woman in a white dress with long black hair in rank waves- and she’s looking for something, and she looks so upset- oh dear. Well. I’m not in that much of a hurry.

“Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle!! Pourquoi les pleures-tu?”

“Mis hijos, que están en el río, pero no puedo nadar!”

“Merde! Je peux nager, je vais aller les chercher pour vous!”

“Gracias, extraño.”

“Vous êtes bienvenus, belle dame.”

I slide off of the bike, and dive, fully clothed, into the murky depths of the churning river- a Bubble comes over my nose and mouth and face and I swim down down down, and there, tangled in the river weeds- a baby! I tug it free, and kick high and hard and my head bursts from the water like a cork and I swim to where I left my bicycle and I thump onto shore and set the baby down- and then I dive again.

Bubble again.

Swim down down down and find a toddler- kick up and thump and dive down down down and a child, and up and thump and down down down and a youth and up and thump and down down down and a guy and up and thump and down down down and a man and up and thump and that’s it. Those were all the children in the river- I gasp, and heave, and water drips from me- and the woman who wailed is nowhere to be seen.

The people I pulled from the river- they are stones, gradually growing in size from the size of a baby no bigger than my foot to a man bigger than I am tall- each stone is heavy, and black striped with browns and greens, like they’ve been here, staring at the river for longer than I’ve been alive.

“Senorita.”

“Oui?”
"Esto le protegerá en su viaje. Por favor tome, y estar a salvo."

"Merci, Madame. I will."

"Thank you, for rescuing my sons- safe travels, young lady!"

I take the necklace- a rosary, with an oval portrait of a woman in a fine blue veil with a heart ringed in thorns and fire and an expression of- not sorrow, and not joy, and not serenity either- ecstasy, the indescribable ecstasy of being- I don’t know. A small cross of a fine wood, painted with something to make it red, and one hundred and eight beads in a string like a necklace, and it’s… heavy. Not heavy- it’s heavy but not heavy.

I put it on, over my head, and it settles, like a secret gentle hand on my shoulder- I push the bicycle up, and I mount, and I ride harder than I had been before- somehow, the heat and muscular pain that would normally come from pushing so hard is gone.

Before I realize it, I’m through the zocalo of Oaxaca, and down a side street and then- and then, somehow, I’ve slipped through a bricked up door, and gone through to somewhere stunningly crowded and gorgeous-

And the shawl I had brought with me is neatly tucked over my head, the rosary settled- I feel as if my Nainai has hurredly twitched my clothing into order. I am propelled, but also compelled to set my bike against the low wall of a stall- I know I will not see it again, but I do not mind. There is an empty basket, waiting patiently and leaning against the outer wall of a temple- it feels very blue. I pick it up, and I walk, my bag neither heavy nor light- I stop at various stalls in the bustling market, and am given neatly bound and wrapped packages, some red, some blue. I put the blue ones in the basket, and the red ones in my bag, and soon enough, the basket is full- I set it at the feet of a woman in a blue shawl that trails from the crown of her head to the dust of the road, her soft red dress gently fluttering like blood on an eyelid, like the pulsing of a vein in the wrist under fingertips. She smiles, and sweeps the basket underneath her shawl- and then she gently takes my hand in hers, which is cool and dry and warm and harder than an iron bar pulled from the railroad, and she speaks to me and her voice is like cool water rushing over me- 

“Thank you for running my errands- my third, and final task for you; my cousin, Pantha, is… I am worried about her. Should she continue on the path here, I fear that her spirit itself will become… I don’t know how to say it.”

“Do you fear that her spirit will die- that she will become only a shell of herself, and not really your cousin at all?”

“Yes.”

“What can I do?”

“There is a mask that she wears, striped and made of a strange kind of leather- this is the source of her… her corruption. To remove it, you will need to defeat her in battle- once you have done so, pull her hair back into two equal parts. These ties will purify her further- and then you must take her with you on your journey, as she has done things here that- well. She cannot stay here, not anymore.” She presses two hairties into my hand- stretchy bands covered in fabric and bright orange beads that clack together, oversized and shining.
“Is it truly so bad?”

“It is. I wish, with all my heart, that it wasn’t- but it is. You’re… you’re my last best hope- by noon today, it will be too late.”

“I’ll do my very best to help your cousin- but… should I tell her who sent me?”

“Oh- tell her… tell her that her Aunt Mary sent you. She’ll know who I am, and what that means. Now- we’re here.”

“Thank you, ma’am- but where is here?”

I wait, expecting an answer, but she is gone, empty space at my side and the faint but unforgettable scent of roses wafting in the air.

In front of me, a red building made of clay and wooden beams, the floor dirt and dust and watered down smooth- inside, the sounds of fighting.

A girl, shouting- glass breaks, and I quietly walk inside to see a melee, and the big bodies of strong men being tossed away like small toys. A girl, with dark brown skin and dark red hair and the yellow eyes of a cat and more muscles and rage than sense- and on her face, a mask made of black and red leather, sucked tight and oozing.

I roll the hairties onto my hand, and I put my glasses with my bag- my head shawl goes over my bag, and I gently tuck the rosary beneath my shirt- and then I turn, and one two three POW punch Pantha in the stomach.

She growls at me, teeth sharp like a cat’s, eyes wide and glassy and dark in the center, round in the center neither dilating nor contracting because Pantha isn’t here right now, please leave a message in your own congealing blood.

Ding ding ding.

Someone hits a bell, and the men scatter back, circling like sharks or slivery bright fish in the river with sharp teeth and spots of blood in their scales- some part of Pantha that isn’t roughly panting and snorting and oozing bloody snot from the nose starts to pace to my left; I keep her in my sights at all times. We circle each other, my booted feet soft in the dirt, her bare feet even softer.

Some unknown signal, some instinct which I do not possess, or was beaten out of me, pushes Pantha forwards, clawed hands outstretched and open and reaching for my throat. My knee comes up into the cleft of her ribcage, at the bottom, where air is drawn into the body- her breath shoots out of her with a huff, and her eyes bulge in her head, their lids dripping with unshed tears. Her hands roughly swipe at me again, and this time I circle around and slam my head into her spine- she gasps again, falls, and does not move. The crowd starts a simple and sweltering chant to ten, and I can’t help but remember something both terrible and interesting, I can’t help but remember the first wedding I ever went to, I was eleven and I didn’t realize that the wedding of my cousin was invitation only and I didn’t know I hadn’t been invited, I just went.

I sometimes regret my past actions- would my kin have accepted me more readily if I had not been such an independent person, obeying not the whims of my parents, but of myself? Would Megan have liked me if I didn’t collect lizard skins and giant pieces of brightly colored egg shell and display them, proudly, along with my books and strange statues and occasionally my clothing flies about like drifting birds, I must add more starch-
And the crowd has reached ten. And Pantha has not risen.

I pull her up, gently, and slip my fingers under the mask that has sucked onto her face- I peel it back, and then off, to reveal a young girl with stark white spots on her soft brown face, vaguely triangular; I hold her up with my knees, and I split her thick, heavy wavy dark red hair, rough under my hands- I split the mass of fiber evenly down the middle, and I tie each half back with a hairtie- and she mumbles, and moans, and then says to me “Who sent you? Mi papa, Mi mama-”

“I was sent by your Aunt Mary. And it’s time to go.”
I haul her up, and start walking to my bag- she wobbles unsteadily, and then walks on legs of jelly and twitch with me- I tie my head shawl back on, put the backpack on her back, and lead her from that place of perdition. The red and black leather mask flops like discarded skin in the center of the circle of men, who stare at us as we pass- once we’re down the road a bit, I take us off of it, and start walking through the dense forest and up the mountainside.

We walk for what feels like no time at all- the rosary is light upon my body. The air is dry and scented faintly with tropical flowers- vanilla stands out the most, and I follow it, and then we aren’t in Mexico anymore, we’re in France, and soon we come to the warm back of a brick house, down a road that I didn’t realize I was walking on; vanilla, and the warm smell of fresh bread, and it is time for breakfast- well, brunch now.

“Come on- this is a good place to eat.”

“Oh- okay.”

We walk into the softly lit spice shop- the smell of twenty eight different varieties of vanilla makes my head… not spin. If anything, it makes me relax- and when a dozing shop girl starts awake, I know that this is our next stop.

“Bonjour à mademoiselle commerçant! Je suis ici au entreprise particulier, mais je besoin également un petit déjeuner, pour moi et la jeune fille. Pouvez-vous nous aider?”

“Oh-uh, ouais, je crois que ouimais Je dois voir certaines pièces d'identité s'il vous plaît.”

“Bien sûr, un moment.”

I tug the rosary given to me by the woman in blue out from under my shirt- the shop girl, wearing a bright red shirt and a dark pink skirt and pale blue bracelets made of shiny clacking blueness, leans forwards and very carefully grasps it, examining the portrait and the cross and then-

“Bienvenue à Epices Roellinger, mademoiselle. Je vais avoir votre ordre dans un instant, Veuillez, regardez autour et voir si rien d'autre attire votre fantaisie. Nous avons des un la vente sur caramels au beurre de pécan, et du plateau de produits de pâtisserie était juste rempli.”

“Je vous remercie-Veuillez prenez le temps de vous assurer avez entier ma commande, et je suis désolé, mais quel est votre nom?”

“Ah- my name is Emily, miss.”
“Thank you, Emily.”

I smile at her- and this is the oddest thing of all, because it’s not that she doesn’t actually have a voice, or that her clothing isn’t on a body- it’s that her eyes don’t actually meet mine, they just sort of glitter like beads of glass that have no color at all. I bade Pantha to set the bag on the counter, and grasp her clammy hand in mine- and then we walk over to a platter of pastries, croissants made with and without butter, spiral rolls filled with raisins, delicate apple tarts, crossed buns with butter smell still wafting out on streams of vapor, rounds of black bread, peach Danish, apple Danish, raspberry Danish, apple Chausson thick and hot and shaped like a closed clamshell, warm brown brioche crusted with slivered almonds and a thick brick of butter with it’s own specific knife; another plate sits, covered in bacon and fresh fruit, and a third smaller stack of empty plates with a small sign sits, reading ‘please use- we dislike crumbs on the floor’.

I take one of each pastry and pile them onto an empty plate, and then I do the same with a different plate, and I slice us each a thick pat of butter, and then I lead Pantha back to the counter- we eat our delicious, fresh pastries, and suddenly Emily has returned. “Thank you for waiting- oh, and thank you for not eating my breakfast.”

There is the softest smell of ozone, and blue bracelets open the duffle and start placing boxes made of dovetailed wood inside; burlap sacks smelling faintly of exotic spices and candied fruits follow, all of them with streaks of red on the labels; bottles with labels in clear French, and jars with vacuum sealed lids, and then her blue bracelets aren’t moving at all. The faint hissing of static fills the air- she’s placed two bracelets made of finely grained wood with a click on the slightly scuffed counter.

“These will protect you and the girl once you leave this place; after you go out that door, follow the path with the lavender bushes, and do not leave it until after you pass the third grey fence.”

“Oh- thank you- and here, for the order.” I settle a handful of cowries and seedpearls and coins of bronze and very nearly silver onto the counter- Emily doesn’t quite smile, because of the distinct lack of face in her starflung head, but she does seem a bit happier- the static is less abrasive than before. The cheery ringing of the cash register breaks whatever spell was woven- she is just a shop girl once again, and I a customer; I take the bracelets- I put mine on, and Pantha put’s hers on, and the bag, heavier than before, settles onto her shoulders easily.

We leave the spice shop, and walk down the path bracketed by lavender bushes- for a moment, I could swear we were bounded on both sides by hooded figures, their bodies shapeless masses of shadow- and then we are past the third grey fence. I turn, and start walking along the sand colored wall, neither low nor high- and then we are in buildings, and then a city, and then the sounds of a souk in full swing reach me, and I know we’re in Morocco. I adjust my head shawl, and make sure that Pantha’s hair is neatly bound- and then I take her by the hand, and we walk into the Mellah Spice souk, tall cones of paprika and turmeric like pointy priests watching us pass.

A shopkeeper wearing a finely grained wooden bracelet waves us over, and hands me a package wrapped and sealed tight; I bow to him, and smile, and hand him a red pouch full of gently smoked grasshoppers. His scaly face breaks out into a smile, and he hands me a small round of smoked meat, and I bow again but lower.

We steadily walk through the souk in this way, receiving neatly bound packages and small gifts of food- and then we’re through the souk, and I lead Pantha on, through the back alleys of Marakesh and on into Tel Aviv- and it’s here, on the stoop of an abandoned building near enough to the edge
of the city that no one wants to come, that we break for snacks.

“Why are we stopping?”
“Snack time, young one- and what is your name?”
“…Sarah.”
“I’m Theresa, Sarah. It’s nice to meet you. Fig?”
“Y-yeah, thanks- um. How did you know where I was?”
“I didn’t- your Aunt Mary led me to you.”
“I- I don’t have an Aunt named Mary.”
“This lady-” and I hold up the portrait, the woman in blue with the burning heart and ecstatic expression- “led me to you. She wore blue, and smelled of roses, and I felt… at peace, when she spoke to me. This is the lady who told me how to save you- and this is your Aunt Mary.”

Rosa’s eyes are so wide that, for a moment, I fear they will fall out of her head, and then she smiles, and bows her head, and then she’s crying. I pull her forwards, and she cries onto my shoulder, body shaking arms snaking around my waist- we sit there, and she cries, and I feel… I don’t really know what I feel. Not happy, certainly.

“Feel better?”
“Yeah.”
“Good. Finish that, and then we’d better get moving.”

She finishes her fig, and I swallow my handful of gently smoked grasshoppers, and then we walk on to the Levinsky Market, squares of spices and dried foods like tiles in a temple whose parishioner’s prayers are in the form of sweet lucre, and all the priests have receipts for prayers received and blessings rendered. We only need one thing- a one eyed old woman in a grey veil hands me a small basket of berries; I give her a round of smoked meat, and she bows, and we walk on.

We walk north, and then sort of east, and then some more north, steadily coming to the edge of the sea- and then we’re over a bridge, and then we’re in India- it’s the only place in the world I know of that smells of burning shit, elephant, and cardamom at the same time.

Timey wimey is… what I call “weird time travel shit”. Holi is a spring festival, not a summer one- yet here we are, near the end of April, and the powdered spices in day-glow colors are all for sale- and holy shit. That is the most perfect purple I’ve ever seen.

I buy a medium sack of it, and pick up another order- this from an ashram where all the women are shaved bald. Hundreds of tiny woven baskets wrapped in fine linen- colors of every description, some defyng description- I give them the last of my lucre, and they say a prayer over us both, and
then one of the women there takes us to a riverbank and I still have my coin, so.

I throw it high, and there in the river is a golden boat- Pantha and I board it, and then we rush out into the open river, waving goodbye to the lady in white with the bald head; and then we fly down the river, and then there is only water all around us Ah! and then we’re somewhere I might not have been before, but I know all the rules- Chengdu is very nearly the same distance from Beijing as it is from Xanghai, so the normal city rules don’t exactly apply- but the rules for being Kiaom are in full effect. Meaning- I take off my head shawl, and I tuck the rosary back under my shirt, and I snap the shawl once to get rid of dust, and I tie it over Pantha’s head, and I take the very heavy pack and shoulder it easily- we walk to a silent profusion of concrete tubs filled with dried spices.

The burning scent of chilies almost chokes me- but there, the small red envelopes I came for- I take them, and put them in a side pocket, and that’s it for the outer acquisitions- two hours to sunset, and I want to go home.

I want to be back at the Cave.

Thankfully, the Yellow River is kind enough to allow us to use my golden boat and swiftly fly down the river, to Xanghai- the last of my smoked grasshoppers go to the gate guard in the Line Door in Chengdu, and then I take Pantha by the hand and lead her on, through the Kowloon Nightmarket. Butterfly winged women saunter down the street, naked excepting scales to preserve their modesty- aha, succubi. A family of frogs, the father smoking a long handled pipe, paddles past in the rushing gutter- an ox wearing it’s own hat and rosary, meanders along the side of the road. I missed Kowloon, and it’s inexplicable oddities…

We walk, and we walk- and then we’re at the Pretty Flowers Apartments.

“Hello, Aunty.”

“Hello, Niece. Who is this?”

“A friend. She’s staying with me for a while.”

“Hmph.” Her black beetle eyes narrow at me, and then her black teeth gleam in the light- “Fine. Give your old Aunty a hug?”

I set the pack down, and she slips in a small packet of feathers- and then I’ve lifted her off her feet in a bear hug, and her laughter rings out like the chiming of a thousand silvery bells. She hugs me back, and it feels like, for a second, my ribs might crack, and then I set her down on her feet and she smiles at me, holds my face in her hands, and kisses my forehead.

She crooks her finger at Sarah, who nervously steps forwards, and then my Aunty has her in a hug as well- a kiss to the forehead, and she smiles, faintly, and I know Pantha, Sarah- she’s going to be okay.

“The girl will stay with me for a while, so I can learn her some manners- you go on up. Snark finished what you asked of him- he’s partial to dried apricots.”

“Thank you, Aunty.”

I dart up the stairs, picking up the Honeywine from Snark, trading a sack of dried apricots for work
not hard but long- and then I’m up the nine hundred and ninety nine stairs (I say stairs, I mean floors) and one ladder, and then I’m in through my front gate- there’s another gate, and beyond it, the gardens of my palaces; I go inside, and there is another door, beyond it, my palaces again; I shrug off the heavy pack, take out the packet of feathers and go through to the library- It’s a dusty, dirty mess. I throw the feathers into the air, and Windy and “Arise, my faithful servants!” and there, wheeling through the air are fairies with feather-skirts and gossamer wings- “Your duties for now are as follows: this is your domain, and it is your job to keep it clean and well organized. If you find a book, map, or other library item in need of repair, please leave me a note on the Gleam-terminal here-” I gesture to the orb of quartz connected at the base to a typewriter “And I will attend to it as soon as my schedule permits. Thank you.”

And that’s really it.

I’m done.

I walk back through the Door to my room, and I take off my boots and then I walk through the Cave barefoot- not like I care, really- to the kitchen and I get myself a glass of water, and I drink it, and then I wash my hands, and settle down at the table with Megan and Superboy and Kaldur, and I quietly eat.

I’m so out of it, Kaldur actually has to physically touch me before I realize that I’ve cleaned my plate.

“Are you alright, Theresa?”

“I am tired, Kaldur’ahm. That is all.”

“Then you should rest.”

I smile at him, and nod, and stand- I don’t quite sway, but there is a definite sense of exhaustion whispering over me.

“I will attend to your dishes- please, my friend, go and rest.”

“I- thank you. Yes.”

I’m painfully red, like I was just flash burned by the sun- and yet, I want to kiss him so badly, except Megan and Superboy are on the couch and I can’t. I can’t make him loose face. I just… I can’t.

I shower, put on a nightgown, and sleep like a corpse- a corpse that dreamed a story, and this is what I dreamed, because sometimes, when I am truly tired, I dream.

When Monkey arrived at Mount Emerald Cloud, he met a woodcutter chopping in the forest. Monkey asked the way to Palm Leaf Cave. The woodcutter told him that a Rakshasi (demon) named Princess Iron Fan, wife of the mighty Bull Demon King, lived there. When Monkey found out that she was in possession of the palm leaf fan, he immediately took off. At the cave entrance a young maiden with a flower basket in her hand met Monkey and asked for his name. “I am Handsome Monkey King,” he boasted. The Rakshasi had heard about Monkey, slayer of monsters and demons, and she faced him with two swords of steel. She said, “If you can stand the pain of a few whacks with my sword, the fan is yours.” Monkey willingly submitted to the sword-beating, but he was not
harm. When Rakshasi saw she was tricked, she tried to run away, but Monkey grabbed her. She struggled free and fought with her swords against his magic weapon. When she saw she couldn’t beat Monkey’s powerful weapon, she took out her fan and, with a single swish, blew Monkey out of sight. Monkey landed the next morning on little Sumeru Mountain, where the sage Ling-chi lived. Ling-chi told Monkey that the Rakshasi’s fan was a treasure from the beginning of time which represented the negative yin principle (opposite the positive yang). Fortunately, Ling-chi had a Wind-Arresting Pill that would counter-act the fan and make it ineffective. He gave it to Monkey.

Back at Jade Cloud Mountain, Monkey impatiently banged on the cave entrance. When Rakshasi tried to blow away Monkey with her fan again, he swallowed the Wind-Arresting Pill and stood his ground. The terrified Rakshasi ran back into the cave, but this time Monkey changed into a gnat and followed her into the cave through a tiny crack in the door. Monkey jumped into the cup of tea that Rakshasi was drinking, and she gulped him unknowingly down into her stomach. Monkey pounded her insides until she surrendered and gave him the fan. He jumped out of her mouth, grabbed the fan, and rode his cloud-trapeze back to his companions. However, when Monkey started using the fan on the flames of Flaming Mountain, the flames did not diminish. Instead they kept on growing and getting hotter until Monkey’s hairs on his legs got burnt. That’s when he cried, “Retreat!”

After retreating 20 miles toward the east, Tripitaka asked, “What happened, Monkey?” Monkey replied, “I was tricked by that demon woman.” The companions started arguing about what to do next. Suddenly they heard a voice saying, “Don’t worry, great sage.” The old man who seemed to appear out of nowhere introduced himself as the local god of Flaming Mountain. He told Monkey that the real fan was with the Bull Demon King, the husband of Rakshasi. The local deity also told them the story of how 500 years ago a Monkey caused havoc in Heaven and kicked over some burning bricks which landed on earth and became Flaming Mountain. Monkey received the directions to the Bull Demon King’s home in the Mountain of Gathering Thunder. He flew 3,000 miles due south and landed on a pointy summit. He saw a young maiden with green eyes holding an orchid. He knew this was the Princess Jade Face who had lured Bull Demon King away from Rakshasi with her vast fortune. The local spirit of Flaming Mountain had informed him about her. When Monkey threatened her with his weapon because she scolded him, she ran into her cave and told Bull Demon about the hairy-faced monk. Bull Demon went out of the cave and scolded Monkey for causing trouble. Monkey explained that he only came to borrow the magical fan to extinguish the fires.

Bull Demon got mad at Monkey and challenged him to three rounds of combat. They fought for one hundred rounds, and neither one was able to win. Suddenly, Bull Demon was called away to an important banquet, and he had to postpone the battle for another time. Monkey followed Bull Demon to the banquet which was held in the Emerald Lagoon at Craggy Rock Mountain. Monkey changed into a 36-pound crab and sank to the bottom of the lagoon where he found a waterless region with a hoard of dragon spirits. The ancient dragon of the palace spotted the crab and ordered it removed. Monkey now thought of another strategy. He would transform himself into the image of the Bull Demon King and deceive Rakshasi. Rakshasi didn’t know that Monkey was pretending to be the Demon King, so she told him the entire story of what happened with Monkey. Soon they were drinking wine together, and Monkey saw his chance to ask her about the real fan.

Monkey was surprised when Rakshasi pulled a fan the size of an apricot leaf out of her mouth. When Monkey pretended to forget how to use the fan, she told him to place the left thumb on the 7th red thread on the fan’s handle and say the magic words: “Hui-hsu-ho-hsi-hsi-ch’ui-hu.” Monkey transformed back into his real self, and Rakshasi realized she had been tricked. Monkey now wanted to try out the magic words on the fan. When he said the words, the fan grew to twelve feet. He was sure this huge fan would work, but he didn’t know how to shrink the fan back to its normal size.
Meanwhile, back at the Emerald Lagoon, the Bull Demon had discovered that his steed was missing. He realized at once that the crab at the banquet was really Monkey, who had stolen his steed and probably gone to Rakshasi to get the real fan. He immediately took off on a cloud straight to the Palm Leaf Cave, where he found his wife upset because she had been tricked by Monkey. Bull Demon took the swords and flew in pursuit of Monkey. He was really mad! However, when he saw that Monkey learned the magic to make the fan work, he decided on a devious tactic. He would transform into Pigsy and fool Monkey. When Monkey saw “Pigsy” he thought nothing of granting his request to carry the fan. When “Pigsy” had the fan in his hands, he used the magic spell to make it shrink. He also changed back to his true Bull Demon form. Soon Monkey and Bull Demon were fighting again, thundering and crashing, and making a cloud-dust storm of flying stones and debris in mid-air, between Earth and the Heavens.

All this time Tripitaka and his companions were wondering what was taking Monkey so long. Tripitaka thought that perhaps Monkey needed help to fight the Bull Demon. The local deity said he knew the way to Thunder Mountain, and Pigsy volunteered to go help Monkey. When they arrived at the scene of the windy battle, Pigsy at once began hitting the Bull Demon with his nine-pronged muckrake. Bull Demon tried to flee, but the two adversaries and the local spirit with his army of ghost friends blocked him. The battle lasted all night, and Bull Demon kept retreating little by little. By morning Bull Demon had reached his cave, and Princess Jade Face came to his rescue with her troops. Pigsy turned tail and fled, and Monkey also decided to jump free of the encircling soldiers. Bull Demon had won the battle.

Monkey was beginning to think they had met their match and should look for a detour around the Flaming Mountain. The local deity advised them to stick to the true path through the mountains and not look for shortcuts. He reminded them that Tripitaka was depending on them. Monkey was encouraged after the pep-talk and stormed the cave entrance once again. This time the local deity’s army was able to defeat Bull Demon’s legions. Bull Demon did not give up easily. He turned into a swan and flew away. Monkey turned into a vulture and flew after him. Bull Demon transformed into an eagle and attacked Monkey, who transformed into a phoenix, the ruler of all birds. On and on they kept matching transformations with each other: Bull Demon as a deer against Monkey as a tiger, leopard against lion, bear against elephant, and finally a giant bull against a giant monkey. It wasn’t long before the deities of the surrounding regions came to Monkey’s assistance and surrounded Bull Demon. The Golden-Headed Guardian, the six Gods of Darkness and the six Gods of Light, tried to pin down the gigantic bull, but he slipped out of their grasp and fled back to his cave. When the cave door was smashed to smithereens, the Bull Demon soared out and fought 50 more rounds before he was forced to retreat once again.

Bull Demon fled to the North, where he was blocked by the Diamond Guardian on Mount Wu-t’ai. He tried fleeing south, east, and west, but each time he was blocked by the guardian of that direction. Each guardian was intent on capturing the Old Bull. When Bull Demon attempted to escape skyward, Prince Natha appeared with orders from the Jade Emperor to arrest the Demon Bull. Bull Demon, however, even fought with the Emperor’s minister, Prince Natha. Natha cut off Bull Demon’s head, but another head took its place. Natha hung a fire wheel on the bull’s horns, and his assistant Devaviga Li used a magical imp-reflecting mirror to finally subdue the bull. Finally the Demon Bull told his wife Rakshasi to bring out the fan and save his life. She brought out the twelve-foot fan with both hands and presented it to the Great Sage, Monkey. Monkey took the fan and returned to the West, where Tripitaka was awaiting his return.

Monkey at once waved the fan and the flames went out; he waved the fan a second time and a cool breeze started to stir; and when he fanned a third time a gentle rain began to fall. Monkey returned the fan to Rakshasi after she granted the local deity his wish to put out the fires permanently. The
following morning the companions prepared to journey over the mountain westward.

After having attained the Fan of Pure Yin, Tripitaka and his disciples now had balanced water and fire, and their own natures had become pure and cool. It was the time between late autumn and early winter, and yin was changing into yang. The change of seasons also brought a change of scenery in the surrounding landscape. Everything appeared magically evergreen and flowery. Then one day they say a skyward-towering pagoda. A young Taoist emerged to greet them. Monkey whispered, “Master, this is the Golden-Crested Immortal of Spirit Mountain.” The immortal smiled as Tripitaka kowtowed. He led the pilgrims inside for tea and a vegetarian meal. The next morning the immortal showed them the path behind the temple. He pointed to a peak in the distance and told them to go in that direction. “That is Spirit Vulture Peak, the holy region of a Buddhist patriarch,” he said.

They had gone about five or six miles when they came to a turbulent body of water that was at least 8 miles across. The pilgrims weren’t sure how to get across. Monkey spotted a narrow log and told them it was the way across. He even showed them how to walk across the slippery bridge, but the companions weren’t willing to follow. Just then Tripitaka caught sight of a boatman coming their way. He yelled, “Over here, boatman.” However, when the boat pulled up to shore, Tripitaka was shocked to see a boat with no bottom. Monkey, who knew the boatman’s real identity, reassured Tripitaka that the boat would carry them safely across. So they got into the boat and shoved off. All at once they saw a body floating downstream. Tripitaka stared in terrified disbelief at the body. “Don’t worry,” said Monkey, “it’s only you.” All the others cheered and celebrated Tripitaka’s achievement of discarding his earthly body. When they reached the other shore, the boat and ferryman disappeared. And the pilgrims stepped lightheartedly in the direction of the Spirit Mountain.

I overslept. I usually wake up about an hour before dawn, but today I wake up about an hour after dawn- I must have really pushed it yesterday.

Which is odd, because Bubbles is one of the first spells I ever learned…

Anyway- today I’m going to wear a color swap of what I wore yesterday- that is to say, a red pair of shorts, and a black v neck t-shirt on top. Wash and brush the hair, glasses on, and today wear the hair behind the ears, yeah, why not- kung fu shoes today, we’re going to be training.

Dum dee dee dum- training daze crazy fighting together for daayyyyyys- turkey sandwich with lettuce and tomato and mayonaaaaiiise~ nom nom nom.

Breakfast of champions, right there.

I’m going to skip the horrors of training. Because I can.

Look, it wasn’t that bad… So you got pinned by Aqualad, what of it?

It’s not that I got pinned, Strike, it’s that I enjoyed it way too much for a simple training session. Stupid perfect gorgeous Kaldur with his stupid perfect gorgeous face and he totally helped me up and I just uuuuugh. Why can’t he be slightly less… chivalrous? Arrrgh.

He’s.
Just.

So.

Damn.

Lovely.

I want to lick his tattoo after I’ve ripped off his stupid sexy belt and peeled his form fitting red shirt and his butt hugging black pants away, and arrrgh- does that make me a horrible person? And I can’t stop staring at his mouth- his perfect, soft mouth, and I’ve kissed it and it’s wonderful and uuuugh. I want to make out with him. I want to touch his smooth smooth sandy red brown skin and I want to hurt my jaw biting his shoulder and damnit I can’t make the team leader loose face and uuugh. Why does life have to be so hard?

And I completely missed the majority of that lecture- were you listening, Strike?

Yeah- nothing here you didn’t know already, but trust me, you aren’t the only one with other things on your mind; your Sparrow face held up just fine though.

Small blessings then… This seat is really not comfortable though.

It is a lecture desk…

True.

And the silvery guy- Captain Atom, and I think he’s actually a captain? You don’t get a stance like that at the rodeo- he’s saying something- “This is boring, isn’t it?”

“Oh no Captain, it’s quite-” I like that Megan is so quick to reassure people, but… I don’t like that she was about to misconstrue something.

“Boring, yeah.” Superboy, that’s a bit too blunt…

“All right, let’s learn in the field. This is a cold case, Vietnam era. Captain Nathaniel Adams, United States Air Force. Convicted in nineteen sixty eight for murdering Air Force General Clement Lamar. Adams died in prison, but I’ve received a reliable tip that he was framed. Your assignment: prove Adams innocence or reconfirm his guilt and report back to me.”

“Really? You need super-powered operatives for this?” Superboy, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth-

“Right then- I’ll continue the lecture.”

The way they all yell “NO!” in unison is actually quite telling to the boredom of the lecture… and personally, I’d rather sit through it- but. Well. Team and Teammates before Self.

Right. We’re going on a missio- flickers across the sky, and then I go very still and I See: a general, blue eyes full of lies, mustache of evil- old, bald, old, powerful, rage, all full of rage and deceit and greed, more greed than can be imagined; “It makes no tactical sense to leave even one loose end- which is why I’ll be presiding over our little… trial.” “Yes sir.”; boars blood infusion, stolen from Jinx and he changes- the rage of a beast manifest, says he’s a patriot, lying sack of-

Ow.
Infiltrate a government building. Okay, I can do that… ‘Miss Martain, please open the drop door for me.’

‘Done.’

‘Robin, may I borrow a long range camera? Like… that connects to a satellite?’

‘Sure.’

He tosses it through the air, on the left- I pluck it from the air, and let my hand fall to my side, tucking the slim eyestalk cylinder into a pocket in my sleeve.

Wait- ‘When was the Pentagon built?’

‘Ground for the building was broken in nineteen forty one, the building was dedicated in nineteen forty three.’

‘Thank you Superboy.’

And then I stand, and Jump down through the drop door, falling into Shadow and into the shadow of the building- slide under the door and dart along the tiny shadows of the corridor, and then dart up and into the vents- I creep along, and then- that way. Skitter through the ducting, and then- that’s the guy. Eyes peer through the shadows cast by the vents- ‘I’m in position- ready.’

‘Entering Pentagon now.’

‘Coast is clear. I’m ready.’

There is an object, on the table- it rings, and the General picks up a receiver of some kind, and speaks into it, and listens to someone, and then- “Send her in.”

A woman with glasses and black hair, black eyes, blue jacket, short straight line skirt (hugs the curve of her thigh but is long enough to be decent, and is the same color as her jacket) white shirt with long sleeve cuff that comes about a half thumb beyond the cuff of her jacket, two gold bands below the elbow, blue black shoes, soft brown folder and white papers, round glasses- she looks a bit like Doctor Roquette with a color swap…

She steps forwards, places the dossier with some respect on the General’s desk, steps back, and salutes him.
“General Eiling, Sir!”

“At ease, Captain. Sit. And explain to me why the Judge Advocate General’s office is reopening this case.”

“Respectfully, I am not at liberty to do that, sir. You were the Judge at Adams Court Martial, which makes you a potential witness-”

“Witness to what? The Adams case was open and shut.”

“Why don’t you just tell me what you remember, General?”

“Fine. Captain Nate Adams was your classic malcontent- we were barely acquainted before the incident. In fact, I was better acquainted with his victim… Adams blamed Lemar for a Viet Cong ambush- as if any officer would intentionally let his own men get killed.” If it were somehow advantageous to the situation, yes, he would. And if it involved espionage, he wouldn’t tell them either. “But Adams would not listen to reason- he was caught in the act by an Em Pe Sergent Polk, I think his name was… I was a Kernel when I drew the case; I found Adams guilty and sentenced him to life in prison. Turned out to be a short sentence- Adams took his own life before the year was out.” And you became a General. Interesting.

Platitudes are exchanged, and Miss Martian thanks the General Eiling for his time and help, and leaves.

I put an Illusion over the slim eyestalk cylinder, and point the part that looks like a glass eye towards the General’s office, set it to record, and slip away through the shadows of the vents- I emerge, a bit like a wisp of smoke, from a vent on the roof, and then slip down the side of the building and through the rushing shadows of the verdant grass, emerge in the shadow of a tall white spike reflected in a still, clear… mirror pool. Um. I’m going to just… scuttle away. Like a crab.

Fuckin’ mirrors. Creepin’ me out…

Rendevous with Miss Martian is over- aha, there!

‘Miss Martain?’

‘I’m here- what took you so long?’

‘…Um. Sorry, there was just this… really giant mirror… Anyway. Let’s go find Shirley Mason, yeah?’

‘Oh, um- right, yes.’

Miss Martian is… nice. She’s very nice. Yes.

We run- well, I run and she flies, and we run fast and hard and then after a flurry of bright streets that wind over themselves like vinesnakes or tangles of hair, like the circular spinning of clockworks, trees reaching with green furred claws over dappled black rivers that only move on the surface with fish that shine in grey and white and browns and greens and red and sometimes a fish will come that
is colored and shaped differently from the rest, and sometimes they flash with red and blue scales that sparkle in the sun- we come to Shirley Mason’s apartment.

A soft breeze wafts from a door gently cracked open- wrong. This is wrong- this is not the way an apartment door should be. Oh dear. Copper smell and fear smell, death in the air.

‘Miss Martain- this isn’t going to be pretty.’

‘What? Oh my gods-’

‘Yeah. Don’t touch the body if you can help it.’

I creep forwards on cat’s feet, stepping around and over the corpse’s splayed limbs- I can’t touch the body, it’s bad luck.

‘There’s something in her hand, under her body- can you lift her up?’

‘Yes- how’s this?’

‘A bit higher please?’

‘Now?’

‘Perfect, thank you.’

It’s a photograph- ‘This photograph was taken in the nineteen sixties, and the woman shown appears to be Shirley Mason, but I can’t tell for sure…’

‘Well-’ and then she shifts form, and there, standing- ‘Here’s the woman in the picture,’ a woman with glasses and short curly yellow hair- ‘and here’s the woman on the floor- their musculo-skeletal structure is the same. She’s definitely the woman in the picture.’

‘I’ll copy the picture, and we’ll see what we can find…’

I twin the picture, and place it in my sleeve pocket, and then we vanish from the apartment, and return to the bioship; ‘Do you have a copier machine on board? Or a scanner?’

‘Oh- um, yes, here-’

‘Thank you.’

I gently place the picture into the scanner, and scan the image into the onboard computer- I save it as “ShirleyMasonPhoto.png” and drop twin, and the physical photo vanishes. I sigh, stretch- ‘Would it be alright with you if I took a nap?’

‘Oh! Um- I guess that would be okay…’

‘Thank you.’

‘Hey- wait, what should I do with this photo?’

‘Hmm… when Robin gets back’ I clamp a hand over my mouth, stifle a yawn ‘ask him to run facial recognition software on the photo we found.’

‘Okay.’
I curl up in the squishy seat, and fall into the darkness of slumber faster than I ever have before.

“-that’s the picture we found at Shirley Mason’s apartment. X-”

“She really fell asleep?”

“Yeah- but we need to wake her up…”

“Let me just-” Water and coldness and oh hell no.

“Touch me and die, Kid Flash.” I unfold and stretch, and slither-slump-settle into an upright and seated position, legs long and stretch again, and I’m wide the fuck awake now. Ugh.

Seventy percent back to normal, I didn’t sleep quite long enough. Damn. Oh well…

Kid Flash is holding a cup of something- “What is that?”

“Ah- a drink.”

“Mmhmm. And what were you go do with it?”

“Um. Drink it?”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’m going to drink this drink.”

“Okay. Just checking. What we doing now?”

“We’re currently en route to former General Duk Trang’s private home in-”

“Oh, Annapolis. Cool.”

Everyone looks at me oddly for a moment- “How do you know it’s in Annapolis?”

I smile at them, lips unmoving and eyes bright laughing and curved arches of fine black hair backed with fluttering red lines of ink. “I know all kind of thing.”

Maryland- Swept lightly by the south wind the elm-leaves softly stirred, and in their pale green clusters there straightway bloomed a bird! His glossy feathers glistened with dyes as richly red as any tulip flaming from out the garden bed. But ah, unlike the tulips, in joyous strain, ere long, this red-bird flower unfolded a heart of golden song!

Redbird Flowers Bar and Musical Venue… I haven’t been there for more than a year… Hm. I have a feeling I’ll be going back soon… I should talk to Max, we’re going to need a supply income of
some kind- fucking Bountyball. Ugh.

Oh, hey, there’s going to be a battle- and I’m going to get lost on a golf course?

The hell is a golf course?

So. In the case of the mansion owned by former general, I believe his garage is full of cars? Only that’s not where I am- oh no; I’m supposed to be there, but that’s not where I am. No. I’m in a land of rolling hills and unnaturally flat plains of frighteningly green grass with fine thin blades, low water full of tall thin reeds, overly neatened trees and low bowl wobbling pits filled with clean white sand that smells faintly of cat piss. Oh, and apparently there are also small white holes in the ground that are not particularly deep, with strange little flowery grates in the bottom and what the fucking hell is this horrible place, fuck dammit. It’s a golf course, dear.

A Scene- Superboy sliced with a sword, not deep; Kid Flash fighting and Miss Martian defending him and shuriken and Robin being fought and too much fighting and then and then- and then a blade in the air, and blood, so much blood and it isn’t from the old man, his neck is snapped- the blood is from my friends.

Shit.

I stop thinking about how I’ve almost definitely been walking in circles for the past few minutes, or how I don’t even know where I’m supposed to be going- I close my eyes, and aim for my friends- This a way, that a way, find a way, make a way, go away, come away, stay away- GO! And then, spell completed, I Dash hard and fast, and leap over rocks and bushes and that is a fence so I Jump and then I slide over tiles and up up up the railing and around a corner and the sword is bright silver and sliiiiiiide and my Blades block his and with a force back and a slice, his blade shatters.

Mine do not.

My heavy booted heel meets his face- he goes back with a stifled cry.

Roll the spine and stomp the heels to the floor, guard up- but no, I guess I kicked him harder than I thought. Oh shit, I totally shattered his red visor- yeah, I kicked him harder than I thought.

Welp.

Oops.

The rest of the mission isn’t really worth going over- went to Yarrow’s house which went boom, it wasn’t Rako’s modus operandi so Rois was suspected, blah blah and some warehouse and somehow the assassin with the broken red visor got away? Dude, I don’t even know- I do know that I overcast putting Alec Rois to Sleep, though- the battle itself is an exhausted blur. I remember Aqualad taking visor assassin down with the good old fashioned asphyxiation knockout with water to the face. That man is just- wonderful. And sexy. Have I mentioned that his eyes are the most perfect shade of
green? And he’s kind and thoughtful and I don’t know if he likes me the way I like him, one makeout session does not a relationship make.

The last clear memory I have of the mission, other than writing up a mission report for Captain Atom while half asleep- or did I dictate it to someone? I might have told Robin what to type, it gets very hazy near the edges…

Anyway.

The very last clear memory I have of that mission is- somehow or other, I had gotten up to look at the supply area on the Bioship, and it’s called something else but fuck if I can remember what, and I had leaned against the wall for a few seconds, or so I thought. When A- Kaldur touched my shoulder, I jerked awake, and I think- I think I might have. Growled. A little bit. But he- he didn’t… flinch from me, or turn away, and I remember apologizing- and then it gets a bit hazy again, but I remember being curled up against something that smelled very good and was cool to the touch but actually quite warm and being held- and then I remember nothing at all.

Waking up on a couch is, sadly, something I’m very familiar with. Something I’m not familiar with? Waking up because I have to pee and realizing I’ve been cuddling a person the entire time.

Yeah.

I’ve had more embarrassing wakeups. I think.

Kaldur took it quite well, though…

The report we give to Captain Atom can be boiled down to this- Captain Adams was framed. His friend, Yarrow, was a part of the smuggling ring he suspected, and, as far as we could tell, so was everyone involved in his court trial- except for the Judge, Wade Eiling.

And when I hear Aqualad say that, I get the distinct urge to spit as his name floats by me- I settle for sucking on my lips and scrunching my nose like I just smelled shit, which I have- “Something wrong, Red X?”

I blink- I keep forgetting people can actually see my face on this side when I’m not wearing my mask… “Is just… smuggling ring yes? Got everyone around Captain Adams at trial to be in ring, yes? But not Judge? That do not… it seems. Odd. No evidence. But… I do not trust that the General became such solely on his own merit and recommendation from highers up. Maybe just a bit pandering- maybe something… else.”

“You’re saying- despite the lack of evidence- General Eiling was more involved than he said, and should not be trusted?”

“He would have to been. Smuggling ring was everyone at the trial- but not him? Security risk. Why leave a hole like that whens is so much easier- and more forward thinking good- to just… get everyone? So… Yes. I say that.”

I does feel wrong to suspect someone without evidence- not even hearsay- but. But but but. That story doesn’t fit together, not quite the way we found it. And it’s only a theory. A suspicion.

I just.
I don’t trust him.

And why is Captain Atom looking like- that is a very wiseass smile, I don’t- “Well reasoned. And I agree.”

Dude, what?

Whatever- I have to get ready for tomorrow night.

Once upon a time there was a rich gentleman at a Court somewhere in Europe, who was married to a beautiful lady. She bore him a daughter, but while the daughter was still quite a little girl a fever took her mother, and her father was left to bring up his daughter alone. He was worried about doing this, and felt she should have a mother; so a couple of years later he married again, to a rich and fashionable widow, the Grafin Eisenmieder, who had two daughters of her own.

Now this second wife wasn’t altogether a wicked woman, but she spoiled her daughters terribly and let them have their own way in everything. When they found out that their new stepfather already had a little girl of his own, they didn’t like the idea one bit, and complained to their mother. She listened, said "Of course, my darlings!" and went to tell her husband that there was no way she was going to let his first wife’s brat be brought up with her own children. So the rich gentleman went to his own daughter and sadly told her that she would have to go away. She wept and begged him to let her stay in the house, and eventually by means of compromise it was decided that if she became a servant she wouldn’t have to leave. So Cinderella, which was her name, went down the back stairs into the kitchen and—

You at the back there, shut your noise. Who’s telling this story?

All right, I admit it, you’ve probably heard something like it before, but you haven’t heard this story. Jakob Grimm was a fine fellow in his way, but he should have stuck to proto-Indo-European phonology. He did have a stab at telling this story, but he felt it wasn’t proper to explain what really happened, and so he changed a few things round to make it decent for little folk. Whoever heard of a glass slipper? How could you possibly walk in glass slippers? For one thing, you’d slip and fall over, and for another you’d break them as soon as you tried to come down stairs. No, there never was a glass slipper, and if you shut up and let me get on with the story you’ll find out what it really was that Cinderella left behind at the Ball. All right?

Ahem. As I was saying:

Well, Cinderella went down the back stairs to the kitchen and sat down on a stool, and there she cried. Nobody came to visit her, though, except for an old tabby cat and some insolent mice who proved the cat wasn’t doing much good, so in the end she dried her eyes and went to work sweeping out the flagstones and cleaning the pots. She gradually got to know the people who worked below-stairs, and most of them were very sorry for her: they remembered the Old Mistress, and they didn’t care for her replacement, who was demanding and let her foolish daughters order them about in the most arbitrary way. She made friends in particular with an old cobbler who lived down the road, and who came to the house regularly to deliver shoes for the three ladies upstairs who never seemed to have enough. He had been a friend of her parents, once, before her father married again and her stepmother said it wouldn’t do for him to keep company with the working classes; and he and his
wife, who had left him some years before, had been Cinderella’s godparents. He used to tell her that her godmother had promised to look out for her, and that one day she would come back and bring Cinderella back to the life she should have. That didn’t seem very hopeful to Cinderella, but it was something to dream about when she was dozing by the fire at the end of a hard day’s work.

Meanwhile, what was going on upstairs?

Jakob Grimm will have told you that Cinderella’s stepsisters were ugly. This isn’t really fair. Their mother was a fine-looking woman, and her daughters took after her well enough: ugliness wasn’t their problem. The problem was that they were spoilt. This made them a pair of selfish, unappealing children right from the start, and their stepfather kept out of their way as much as possible after they somehow managed to prop a Kiaom lacquered cabinet weighing about twenty pounds on the top of a door which he had to go through. When he came round he heard them laughing, and complained to their mother, who said "They didn’t mean any harm! It’s only a joke!" and refused to see them punished. After that, though he tried to avoid any contact with them, he couldn’t help finding out that they were growing up decidedly unpleasant. They always insisted on the finest and most expensive clothes, but they didn’t take care of them, so that things were always having to be cleaned or repaired or replaced altogether; and they were silly about eating, refusing all the good things and then stuffing themselves with dessert. By the time they were into their teens they ate almost nothing but sweets: jellies, cakes, crystallised fruit, pastries oozing with cream, sugary pies, and all in quantities enough to make a Viennese pastry-chef feel ill. The inevitable result was that they got fat and spotty, and that made them more disagreeable, for their mother had encouraged them to be as vain as she was. They wanted to be beautiful like her, but somehow when it came down to it they wanted sweet things to eat more. Their mother had tried to train them to corseting, as she had been at the same age, and they both had many sets of strong and beautifully-made stays; but if they felt uncomfortable they protested, and she could never refuse them, however much she felt it mattered. She had tried explaining that if they would only lace tight they wouldn’t feel so hungry and would be able to eat less, and that had interested them; but at the table habit took over, and one daughter ate until she made herself sick, whereupon the other demanded that her stays be loosened so that she could enjoy another helping of apple strudel. It worried their mother very much, as she had a magnificent waist and feared that if her daughters went out into the world stout they would never find decent husbands however rich and fashionably dressed they might be. She finally got them to the point where, with much persuasion, they could for appearance before guests be corseted tightly enough to look fairly slim; but it was a terrible business, the lacing-up requiring two of the strongest footmen per daughter, and the desired result could be achieved only at a dreadful cost in dead faints and snapped staylaces. Naturally the girls were extremely uncomfortable like this, and would only tolerate it for half an hour at a time, at most an hour; and the experience did more than ever to put them off corsets. Their mother despaired of ever getting them to look presentable; but despite knowing that they were in the wrong, she was still too soft with her babies to consider using any kind of coercion. If they wanted to be stout, then stout was what they should be.

Downstairs things went rather differently for Cinderella. At first she wore the same rough clothes as the rest of the servants, and if she yearned for the finery her stepsisters were given she was careful to say nothing about it. She got little enough to eat, mainly vegetables and lean cuts of meat, and she was often hungry. The other servants made sure she had a fair helping of milk and other things necessary to a growing girl, so she grew straight and strong; but she was usually hungry, and never had a chance to accumulate any fat. As she passed ten and eleven she began to change and to look like her mother; which was a great advantage to any girl, as her mother had been one of the Court’s finest beauties. Her hips remained slim and her stomach flat, but she began to develop signs of that magnificent bust with which her mother had driven grown men to distraction. Her hair grew out straight and soft, very dark, and her eyes were enchanting. The old cobbler watched her growing up, and smiled; and on her twelfth birthday he brought her a present, a bundle wrapped in cloth.
"What is it, Godfather?"

"Open it and see."

Cinderella unwrapped the package. Inside was a strange thing: a garment made of soft brown leather, almost conical in shape, heavily stiffened in one direction with bones ingeniously sewn into a smooth cotton lining. There were two straps, evidently designed to pass over the shoulders, and fastened with ribbon bows so that they could be adjusted. It was slit open up the back, and on either side of the gap holes had been punched into the leather: a sturdy lace zig-zagged back and forth among them, with a knot near the bottom. She turned it over carefully, admiring it, enjoying the way it was stiff in one direction but flexible in the other, its combination of elegant lines and obvious yet subtle strength…

"Godfather, it’s lovely! What’s it for?"

"This, child, is your very own corset. All ladies wear corsets to give themselves the figures they need. You’ve seen your stepmother’s, surely?"

"Yes…I never really knew what it was. But that’s different—it’s not made of leather."

"Corsets have to be very strong, Cinderella. Your stepmother can afford the finest work and the highest quality of material. I’m not so fortunate, and the strongest fabric I can get hold of is leather. Besides, that’s what I work for a living. If I’d tried to build it out of something else, you might not be able to trust it. With leather, I know how to make things that are strong enough to stand up to anything and tough enough to last for years. This corset will be standing by you for a long time to come."

Cinderella looked at the corset again. It was beautiful, certainly, but…”Godfather, why have you given me a corset?"

The old cobbler gave a sigh, and sat down on one of the rough kitchen chairs, looking at her grimly. "Cinderella, you’ve been robbed of the childhood of a lady, which you deserve, by your stepmother’s venom and your father’s foolishness. I can’t give that back to you, but I can give you part of your birthright. A young lady is always corseted from the moment she leaves childhood, night and day if possible, to make sure that her figure develops into the lines that fashion requires. Your two stepsisters are a very good example of how a young lady can grow up if her figure is left to run wild. You may not have fine gowns to wear, but if you put this corset on, lace it tight, and keep it tight all the time except when you have to wash, then your figure will develop in just the way that it should, and you’ll look like a lady for the rest of your life. ‘Manners makyth Man,’ some old philosopher said, but in my opinion Lacing makyth Lady, and as long as your stays are tight you will have the graceful figure and elegant poise of a lady of the court. One day you’ll be as beautiful as your mother, perhaps even more so, and if you’ve kept your figure in mind too, then nobody will compare to you."

Cinderella looked back at him in silence for some time, thinking about this. Finally she said "That’s very kind. Thank you."

It was a different voice: not the voice of an enthusiastic girl, but the voice of a young lady who had considered the issue and knew it was important. Already she was coming to understand. The old cobbler smiled, wiping his eyes a little, and said "Don’t thank me yet, child—you haven’t even tried it on. Come on, let’s get you laced up."

He pulled out the laces down the back of the corset and untied the ribbons that secured the straps; then, after checking that nobody was about, Cinderella took off her outer clothes and slipped into it.
She clasped it to her chest and smiled avidly, feeling the rigidity of the bones and busk beneath the leather.

Putting on a corset in those days was a very complicated business. Even now, of course, it takes time to do it right, but the design of corsets has changed—for the better, in my opinion. If you ever see Mummy taking her stays off at the end of the day you’ll see that there is a series of hooks down the front of her busk, which she can unfasten once the laces have been slackened to release herself quickly; and in the same way when she dresses in the morning she passes the corset round herself and hooks up the busk again, and then Daddy or the maid tightens her laces. In Cinderella’s time, though, nobody had found a way of fastening a corset which could be opened and closed quickly but was strong enough not to burst open when the laces were pulled really tight; so the laces were the only fastening her new leather corset had. Before Cinderella could get the corset on the cobbler had to loosen the laces a terribly long way, and then of course once she was in it he had a very long way to pull them back in before they began to have any effect. For a long time she just stood there, proud to be a young lady, but wondering what all the fuss was about.

Then the corset came close to the size of her own figure, and things started to happen. She became aware of the sturdy fabric surrounding her on all sides, the tough bones that held it stiff pressing into her body. It was a strange sensation, like nothing she’d ever experienced before, slightly frightening, but the more exciting for it. She gasped and gently rubbed her hands down her sides.

The cobbler stopped pulling. "Starting to pinch, are they?" he asked. "You want me to give up?"

"What? No, no! Tighten me in more, tighten me in more!"

He laughed. "That’s what your mother was like—her maid told me about it. Well, now. Breathe in, and we’ll see what we can do for you here."

Cinderella did as she was told, taking a deep breath and holding it. The cobbler pulled hard; the new leather of the corset creaked quietly as it grew tighter. From inside there was now no doubt as to what was going on: the corset was determined to keep her under control, to impose its will on her. She had a sudden image of a prison with walls of leather and bars of whalebone, and laughed.

"Don’t do that!" the cobbler grunted. "You breathe, you’ll put me off."

"I’m sorry." Cinderella took a deep breath again—or as deep a breath as she could manage, for the corset was now beginning to cut into the space she normally used for breathing down at her waist. She held her breath as long as she could while the stays grew tighter, then let it out with a gasp and panted heavily. "How are you doing?" she asked breathlessly.

"I think that’s tight enough for now," the cobbler said, and began tying off the laces.

"No, no! I can stand it tighter than this! Please!"

"Now, don’t be silly. If you lace too tight first time you’ll only get uncomfortable and put yourself off. You take my advice." He finished tying the laces—"There. That won’t slip!"—and then turned Cinderella around to face him. Her budding bosom was heaving steadily above the low neckline of the leather corset; her face was flushed but happy.

"Oh, thank you, Godfather! It’s lovely!"

"It does suit you," the cobbler said, trying not to look proud. "Now, are you comfortable? Tell the truth, mind," he added, as he saw Cinderella’s mouth open.

She thought a bit, came up with an answer, looked him in the eye, revised it, and finally said
"Not quite."

"Not quite. That’s good. You’re trying to develop your figure, Cinderella, and that means you have to keep demanding more of yourself. If you ever find you’re comfortable in your stays that means they’re too loose and you should lace them tighter."

She nodded. "I can remember that."

"Mind you, this pair won’t go much tighter—I didn’t realise quite how tight you’d be able to lace when I made them. You’ve obviously quite a talent for this. Just like your mother, again…” he trailed off, and gave a heavy sigh. "Well, I hope you’re pleased with it, anyway."

"Oh, I am, Godfather! I did tell you!"

"Good. Well, you take care of those stays now. Here’s a spare lace," and he passed her a neatly rolled length of leather cord, many feet long. "Remember to keep working at it—any time you no longer feel your stays are putting pressure on you, that means it’s time to lace them tighter. And today you must lace them tighter still after a couple of hours, because they stretch."

"I will. Oh, Godfather, they’re just so lovely!" She pirouetted into the middle of the kitchen, and for all the drabness of her clothes with her full skirt spinning out below her tiny waist she looked almost like a noble young beauty at a ball—like her mother, in fact. The cobbler shook his head at the cruelty of what had happened and rubbed at a tear which was threatening to come out.

"They suit you. Now come to me if you need another lace, and of course I’ll alter the corset for you if it ever gets too loose. Good luck, and be beautiful."

"I will be, Godfather. I’m going to be the tightest-laced maid in the house!"

And so Cinderella’s figure-training began. All over the kingdom girls of her age were doing the same thing: no fashionable beauty could hope to impress in Society unless she was laced within an inch of her life, and those lower down the social scale hoped to imitate the wealthy as much as possible. Some girls did it willingly, some did it only to spite their so-called friend Miss So-and-so and show that they could get their waists even smaller than hers, and some did it only because their families forced them into it. Some knew they would never take to tight-lacing, as did Cinderella’s stepsisters upstairs; some could do it but lacked inspiration; a few were determined and constantly pushed for smaller and smaller waists. At the parties and weekend visits which these girls attended there was much surreptitious questioning of maids and guesswork based on the outline of a bodice silhouetted against a window: they were trying to work out who had the smallest waist, and how far she had got. When Cinderella’s stepsisters were "at home" to a party of their contemporaries, red-faced and gasping in impossible new stays, the slimmer girls all giggled about them and agreed that they would never be competition. None of them guessed the secret below stairs: that there was a mere maid with a figure the equal of any of them, and with her heart set on doing better still.

There were problems, of course. In those days there was an even greater gap between the rich and the poor than there is now. The nobility were born superior to the rest of us, so most people thought, and to imitate them by making yourself beautiful was disrespectful—even sinful. Some of the staff in the kitchen objected to Cinderella, a mere maid, tight-lacing herself like a noblewoman, and few of them were willing to help her with her stays. Even those that were sympathetic didn’t have time to do it: Cinderella’s stepmother believed in saving every penny she could to impress other people with clothes and interior decoration and fancy dishes, and one of the best ways she had of saving money was to cut down on the staff and overwork those that were left. Nobody could spare the few minutes it needed every day to tighten Cinderella’s laces. Fortunately she found a pot-hook on the kitchen wall, and by knotting her laces and walking forward she found that she could get her stays very tight
indeed. It was rather satisfying, in fact: she had a good way of judging how far she had laced down by how far across the kitchen she managed to get, and she was always trying to make her way on to the next flagstone, another few inches of lace pulled out. The other kitchen staff looked sideways at her, but they generally didn’t interfere as long as she did it early enough not to get in their way.

One day the knife-grinder was expected. He was, as they said in those days, a bit of a rogue—a good-looking fellow with a ready wit and a smooth tongue, the sort of man that women like to be around, though not the sort they find they enjoy marrying. He had his eye on Cinderella, who was very pretty and had a figure like the daughter of a duchess, and though she still had some old fashioned ideas about Virtue he was sure he could persuade her if he took enough care. Certainly he had her excited about him. That morning when she came downstairs with her stays half-laced she was determined to do better than ever before. She had a particular flagstone in mind, the furthest she had ever gone: she was going to walk further than that, this time.

She scampered downstairs to the kitchen, holding up her long skirts, and found a couple of the other maids already at work relighting the fire and cleaning up some of the pots. She would have to get on with it if she was going to get her stays tight before she had to go to work. She quickly hooked herself up and began straining forward against the pull of her laces.

As she struggled forward against the tension she saw out of the corner of her eye that Liese, one of the junior cooks, had come in. This was a woman who had come from her stepmother’s household and resented her; she felt Cinderella was putting on airs, pretending to be something she wasn’t, and besides that her corset stopped her working as hard as everyone else.

"There she goes," Liese jeered. "Trying to be like her betters. She can’t just can’t accept she’s only a kitchen maid!"

Cinderella did her best to pretend it wasn’t happening. "You be quiet," one of the other under cooks said. "She’s only making herself pretty for the knife-grinder."

"She’s always making herself pretty," Liese said with a disgusted snort as Cinderella struggled past another half-flagstone. "She ought to worry more about making herself useful."

"She does her job. She doesn’t waste any time talking, not like some people. She doesn’t let her stays get in the way of what she has to do."

Cinderella was trying very hard not to hear them. Breathing was becoming impossibly difficult: as young girls will, she had gone too far and was refusing to admit it. She hadn’t quite reached her target and she desperately wanted to do it: but if she wasn’t to faint she had to keep calm, and that meant not letting the others get to her. There was a brief, tense silence, and Cinderella was just getting her concentration back when Liese spoke to her. "Well? Are you going to do your best today or are you just going to stand around fluttering your eyelashes and fainting?"

Cinderella said nothing, but she braced herself and pulled harder against her laces.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Cinderella stared fixedly at the opposite wall, willing herself to hear nothing. Her waist was the only thing that mattered. She remembered her mother’s hard, conical figure before she died so tragically—that was how she wanted to look. Even if she couldn’t have the elaborate gowns, she could still have the waist…

"You think I’m not good enough to be favoured with your voice?" Liese said. "Or is it your stays are too tight for you to talk to me?"
Cinderella remained aloof, trying to remember the way her mother had treated impecunious relatives come to beg their way out of gambling debts. This was all beneath her notice. She must keep her mind on what she was doing, or she might faint…

"Well, if that’s what’s the matter," she couldn’t help hearing Liese say, "then I can deal with it."

Feet hurried across the kitchen flagstones. Someone yelped "Liese, no!" Then Cinderella heard a twang! twang! like someone loosing two shots from two bows, and at the same time the tension of the laces pulling her back towards that pothook on the other side of the kitchen was gone. She fell forward on her face and began to cry.

She heard feet walk up beside her and someone kicked her in the ribs, not gently; fortunately her corset was so stiff with leather and so rigidly boned she hardly felt it. "Get up, you creature," Liese said. "You’ve got work to do."

"For heaven’s sake," said another voice, "leave her alone!"

"She’s just being lazy. Look at her lounging about there on the floor grizzling—"

More feet hurried up beside her. "The only reason she’s on her face," the other voice said, "is because you cut her laces. Now go away and leave her alone. I mean it. Now."

Grumbling, Liese retreated. Cinderella felt someone take her round the shoulders and the voice said kindly "Now, dear, you come with me and I’ll lace your stays up properly. You’re bound to have an accident if you do it like that.

"But—" Cinderella sobbed, "I can’t do it any other way!"

"You can now. I’ll help you. Come on, let’s go down to the wine cellar. Nobody’ll disturb us there."

She helped Cinderella up, and with the girl clutching her unlaced corset to her small bosom and weeping bitterly they made their way through the stunned kitchen staff and over to the door to the cellars.

"Now," the other woman said when they reached the bottom of the steps, "you just sit there a moment till I light the lamps." Cinderella, still crying quietly, did as she was told, sitting down on the bottom step—cold even through her mass of skirts and petticoats—while the other woman hurried across the cellar lighting the oil-lamps from the candle she was carrying. Even with all the lamps lit the cellar was a dingy place, but at least it was less ominous when you could see it properly.

"There now," she said, when she had finished. "Now I don’t think we’d better try and lace your stays up till you’ve stopped crying. You calm down and everything’ll be all right."

"Who—" Cinderella gulped tearfully, "who are you?"

"I work in the kitchen, the same as you do."

That wasn’t an answer. "Yes, but why—why did you want to help me?"

A laugh. "Oh, very well, girl, if you must know. My name is Edel, and I was your mother’s maid when she was your age. I came with her from her home when she married and I knew her almost all her life. Then when, well, you know, I was sent below stairs like you, and warned to keep a low profile. That I’ve done: this is the first time I’ve admitted to you that I knew your mother. I don’t care if they dismiss me, I couldn’t let that go on."
"It was—" Cinderella swallowed again, "it was—very kind of you!" Then she sobbed deeply for some time.

Edel put an arm round her shoulders and comforted her. "There, now, just you let it out, and you’ll feel better…"

"Oh, I’m sorry," Cinderella sobbed, "it’s just that sometimes I feel I haven’t any friends at all!"

"Well, that’s what your noble lady stepmother wants, you know. No, don’t start crying, because she hasn’t succeeded—plenty of the other staff like you, and anyway you’ve got me. But they’re not supposed to like you—anyone Her Ladyship finds is making friends with you is liable to get trouble made for her."

"But what about you?" Cinderella gasped

"I’ll take that risk. Now, do you think you’re ready to lace up again? You must get your breathing calm before you try it!"

"I’ll—I’ll try." Cinderella stood, clutching her corset again to stop it falling off, and walked out into the middle of the room. Edel came up behind her and looked at the laces, tutting. "Good thing she cut them near the hook, dear. Otherwise they might be too short. As it is it’s going to be a near thing—I don’t think you could have laced them again with so little slack. Now then, deep breath, stomach in, bust up, shoulders back, stand tall. There we go!" And for a little while there was silence.

Presently Cinderella, gasping now for quite a different reason, panted "Make sure you—lace me really tight!"

"I shall, dear, don’t you worry. You take after your mother. That’s what she always used to say to me. There! Now, how about that?"

Cinderella moved away as Edel tied off the laces and tried to get an idea of how she was doing. She was used to judging the size of her waist by how far she got across the kitchen flagstones; now she tried to work it out by feeling her rigidly boned bodice, appreciating the sharp inward nip of the stays on her waist. It was hard for her to see, because flesh displaced from below upward by the pressure on her waist had pushed her previously bust up and out until she could hardly see over it. "It feels good. I mean, I can hardly breathe, but that’s right…I wish I had a mirror."

"I’m sure you do, but we don’t. Here, just a minute." Edel bustled off and unlocked a cupboard at the far end of the room. She drew out a large silver tray. "Tch! The butler hasn’t polished this for a while. Well, it’ll have to do. Come on, see if you can see yourself in this."

"Thank you." The tray was rather tarnished and not very smooth, but Cinderella could just about make out her reflection in it. There were no details, but she could get a good idea of how her figure was going, and the answer was very well indeed. "I’m really quite small, aren’t I?"

"You are. You’re interested in training your figure, getting steadily smaller, am I right?"

"Oh, yes! I always say to myself, I can’t dress like a great lady, but there’s nothing to stop me lacing tight…"

"Indeed. Well, I might be able to help you there. Your mother was very demanding, she was always wanting to know the latest cunning trick to get her stays that little bit tighter. That was twenty years ago now, but I think I can say that there is nobody in the kingdom who knows more about forming a girl’s figure with tight corsets than I do. And my knowledge, Miss Cinderella, is entirely at your disposal." She curtsied with all the grace of a Court lady despite her drab kitchen gown.
Cinderella gasped and her heart raced as if about to jump out of the top of her tight leather bodice. "You don’t mean it? Not really?"

"I do mean it. I’ve had just about enough of her up there," and she jabbed a thumb at the ceiling making a sour face as she did so. "You’ve been very badly treated. This isn’t a hundredth of what you’ve been denied, but it’s something I can do."

"Well," Cinderella said with a breathless smile, "what shall I do now?"

"Treat that knife-grinder with some care—he’s not a trustworthy man, and if you’re pretty enough and hard enough to get he’ll think more of you. Don’t you give in to him, you deserve better than that…"

"No, I don’t mean this afternoon, I mean about corseting! You know all these things, so what do you suggest I do next?"

"Well, wear your corset in bed. Tight, twenty-four hours. It makes a lot of difference if you never have to unlace. That’s the first thing. Unlace only when you have to. And the other thing is, don’t ever let anyone from above stairs know."

Cinderella gave a shallow but satisfied sigh. "I see," she said. "Well, can I ask you one more favour before we go back up to work?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

Cinderella turned her back and put her hands on either side of her tightly constricted waist. "Lace me even tighter!"

Ow! I cut myself! But- well… It makes a certain kind of sense. There are, of course, things I want-things that I’m not exactly allowed to have. And, yes, there are some things I will do almost anything to have. I just… I just wish I was clearer on what exactly, those things are.

And Cinderella was laced tighter; and tighter and tighter, as the morning went on, until the other kitchen staff were all sure she was going to faint. She had the last laugh, though, because when the handsome knife-grinder was presented with an unexpected living hourglass he was the one who fainted. That made all the staff smile, and got them to thinking more positively of Cinderella again. She appreciated it, as a compliment of a kind, but her mind was elsewhere. Now she had someone to help her lace, someone to give her advice on strategy, nothing need hold her back. She was determined to corset herself into a figure worthy of her late mother.

She had very mixed feelings about what was going on upstairs while she was busy with the servants. While she wished she could take back her place with her father, she knew that her stepmother would never allow it, and to go among the family was just frustrating. She knew the Grafin had a grudge against her, so she kept out of the way as much as she could.

Unfortunately she wasn’t really the sort of person who could avoid notice. As she progressed through her teens, so her face got prettier and prettier and her corset got tighter and tighter. She was undoubtedly the belle of below-stairs, and though she didn’t want to be in competition with her stepsisters, that wasn’t the way everyone saw it:

"Phew," said Karin the lady’s-maid as she sat down at the kitchen table with a mug of beer pinched
from the butler’s barrel, "it’s hard work tightening those girls’ stays! You get one of them laced in, then the other one faints or her laces go pop, and by the time you’ve brought her round or relaced her stays the other one’s fainted or busted her laces too. Took me a quarter of an hour to get them both laced up and stable."

"It’s ironic, isn’t it?" Liese asked from the far end of the table. "Some as ought to wear corsets don’t get on with them, and some as oughtn’t to take it much too far."

"Your stays were tight enough last time the knife-grinder came, weren’t they?"

"Not like hers," Liese said, and Cinderella groaned inwardly; outwardly she remained impassive. Ignoring bullying wasn’t exactly a cure for it, but at least it was less satisfying to the bully than arguing back. "Takes that fool Edel half an hour a day to lace her up, and her stays are so tight she can’t do her work properly—"

Cinderella leapt to her feet, knocking over the bench she was sitting on at the big table and spilling two kitchen-maids and an under-footman onto the floor on their backs. "That’s not true!"

"Yes it is! If you weren’t—"

"Quiet, you two!" It was the butler, a person of great majesty in the servants’ hall, coming solemnly down the stairs. "If there’s anything to be resolved I’ll deal with it. Only you’ll talk tome and not shout at each other. You understand? Good. Liese?"

Liese wasn’t a lawyer: she wasn’t paid by the hour and had no reason to be prolix in stating her case. "Her stays are too tight," she said bluntly, and sat down again.

"Cinderella?"

"They are not too tight! I do my fair share of work, maybe more than that, nobody makes allowances for me! Just because I want to look pretty—not like some people I could mention—"

"Here, here, here, you! It’s not your place to criticise our mistresses, you’re only a kitchen-maid!"

Cinderella began "I’m not o—" and then remembered she was only a kitchen-maid. She sat down, gracefully, keeping her back straight because the corset obliged her to do that.

"That’s just it," Liese said from across the room. "Thinks she’s better than us, because of an accident of birth." She spat the last words out as if they tasted nasty. "The mistress wouldn’t like it if she knew one of the maids was putting on such airs. I think we ought to tell her."

"Well," said the butler, with an approving glance at Cinderella’s tight and slender leather bodice, "I’m satisfied with her work, and as long as she does that properly I don’t think we need tell anyone."

"I don’t agree—"

"Do you intend to cross me?" Liese relapsed into sulky silence. "Well then."

Shortly after that the mistress’s own bell rang: all the upstairs maids on duty, getting her dressed was a major task. Karin walked past Cinderella on her way out, took her hand, and gave it a quick squeeze. "Never mind what they say," she whispered. "I think you look wonderful. Much better than those two fat cows up there." And with her head up and her shoulders back, trying to look as ladylike as possible, she swept out of the room.
Liese also stopped on her way past; for rather longer. "I still don’t think you’ve got any business lacing so tight," she said.

"I still don’t think it’s any business of yours," Cinderella said, "and you heard what the butler told you."

"Who’s in charge here? Him or the mistress?" This was a good point and Cinderella didn’t know how to refute it. "I shall tell her what you’ve been up to. She’ll be horrified. She’ll take away your stays."

Cinderella whirled round. "You wouldn’t!"

"I would. Of course, I might be open to persuasion…" she let her gaze slip down from Cinderella’s face to her right wrist.

"What?"

"That’s pretty. What is it?"

Cinderella slipped the bracelet off. "It’s the one thing I have from my father. Real silver. You don’t often see a bracelet as wide as this one—it’s nearly two inches across—gives plenty of room for decoration. No jewels, of course, but the engraving and chasing are beautiful. What about it?"

"Give it to me," Liese said, reaching for it, "and I won’t tell the mistress about your tight-lacing."

Cinderella snatched the bracelet back and clutched it to her bosom. "You couldn’t get it over your hand!" she shouted.

"You shan’t!"

"Very well then," said Liese, standing upright, "then I have no alternative. I shall have to talk to the mistress about you, and she’ll have your stays taken off you."

"You can’t!"

"I can. Now, please don’t keep me any longer. I’m already late and you know what a temper the mistress has got." And with a smug smile on her face she strode off and hurried up the stairs.

Cinderella was washing crockery—not the beautiful dishes that the master and mistress used, a junior kitchen-maid would never have been trusted with that, but the plain Kiao from which the more important servants ate—when she heard running footsteps on the kitchen stairs. She looked round: it was Karin, the little ladies’-maid. "You’ve to stop doing that, and come upstairs at once," she said breathlessly. "She wants to talk to you."

There was no need to ask who She was. Cinderella knew there was no point in protesting or trying to delay: she carefully dried her hands in case soapsuds could be a mark against her and followed Karin up the stairs again.

She hadn’t been in this part of the house for years, but she still knew it like the back of her hand: after all, she had grown up here. She knew at once that Karin was taking her to the Private Salon, a good place for small, not too formal gatherings. Her heart was pounding as if to burst her stays and she had to work hard to keep calm: she knew that her stepsisters got away with fainting here, there and everywhere, but if she were to do it in the corridor she would never be forgiven.
Karin reached the door of the salon, gave Cinderella a frightened look, then knocked. The first time she did it too gently to make a noise, and had to try again. A stern voice within said, "Who is that?"

"Karin, ma’am. I’ve brought her."

"Show her in, then go," the voice commanded. Karin opened the door and gestured: you’re to go in now. Cinderella took the deepest breath her very tightly laced bodice permitted, drew herself up tall, and strode in. The moment she was over the threshold the door slammed behind her and she heard Karin leaving at a dead run.

A heavy chair had been set up in the salon with its back to the windows, facing the door, like the throne of a queen—or the seat of a judge. One stepsister stood on either side of it. Both were wearing ludicrously elaborate gowns bedecked with ribbons and bows and lace and every ornament known to dressmakers; but their waists were unpleasantly thick, the bodices were so tight the seams looked ready to rip, and in the low necklines large and soggy breasts bulged up heaving with the effort to gather enough air. On her own terms, Cinderella had already won the argument, but then she wasn’t being allowed to argue on her own terms.

The Grafin their mother, in between them, was far more impressive. Her dress was also ornate, but the decoration was applied much more carefully: there was no need to smother everything in detail to detract from the unfortunate whole. Her face was handsome, if a touch severe, and caked in make-up heavy enough to eliminate any lines that might have built up on it. Her bodice was also very tight, but not so painfully strained as those of her daughters, and though her waist was rigidly slim she seemed as much at home as anyone could be in such tight stays. She was definitely in charge of her clothes; and she had the air of being in charge of everything else.

"One of the staff tells me you’ve been taking up tight-lacing," she said without preliminaries. "Do you dare deny it?"

"No, ma’am," Cinderella said.

"Curtsy when you answer me!"

"Yes, ma’am," Cinderella said, curtsying.

"Hmph. Why are you wearing a corset?"

"Because it’s pretty, ma’am, and I like the way it feels," Cinderella said, remembering to curtsy this time.

"It’s not your place to lace yourself up, girl. Take off your stays, it’s not right."

Silence and inaction.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

"Please, ma’am, I’d rather not take my stays off."

"Don’t be impertinent, and do what I tell you!"

"With respect, ma’am—why can’t I wear stays?"

"Because I say you can’t!"

"My stays may be tight, ma’am," Cinderella said doggedly, "but they don’t stop me doing my day of
work. That’s a wicked lie, ma’am, put about by certain of the servants who don’t like me."

"For the last time," the Grafin said dangerously, "unlace yourself!"

"No, ma’am," Cinderella said, curtsying but surprised at her own audacity, "I shan’t."

The two daughters exchanged a look, eyes wide, but neither said anything. "Very well, then," the Grafin said, tight-lipped. She stood up with the same rigid grace that Cinderella had, the care of posture and movement that comes naturally to any woman who corsets because there is no other way to move. She walked over to the tasselled bell-pull and tugged it angrily, then stood staring at Cinderella as if trying to burn her up with her gaze. Cinderella kept her eyes downcast, as per etiquette when dealing with criticism from a person of importance, but she kept her hands by her sides and away from her laces. She would have cut off her own hand as soon as cut open her stays.

There was a knock on the door. "You rang, ma’am?" said a male voice.

"Yes, come in and be quick about it." The door opened and a handsome footman who Cinderella knew slightly came in. They exchanged a quick glance, his look saying Whatever does she want me to do? and hers replying I don’t know but she’s being vindictive; then he bowed low and stood again to attention.

"What can I do for you, ma’am?"

"Hold her still, facing you," the Grafin ordered. Cinderella and the footman looked at each other again: this time her look said You can’t do this to me! and his I’m sorry, but I have to do what she says. He moved over and held her to him as if dancing: not an experience either of them would have minded, but Cinderella was too worried about what was coming next to appreciate it.

She heard the Grafin moving about: feet and swishing skirts crossing the salon, a door opening, steps into the room beyond it, a brief rummaging in a box with a faint clink of metal, then brisk steps and rustling fabric returning at the nearest a lady could come to running while maintaining her dignity. Cinderella shivered slightly and tried not to be frightened. The Grafin came up behind her, and Cinderella felt a hand placed flat in the back of her neck, just at the top of her tight leather bodice; then suddenly with a series of sharp popping sounds a sharp edge was swept right down through the laces, cutting them from top to bottom.

Gudrun or Irma wouldn’t have minded: they were always fainting and having to have their laces cut. Though she laced much tighter Cinderella hardly ever fainted, and when she did it was a point of pride to come round without unlacing. She had never felt anything like it before. When the immense pressure of the corset was released all at once, a wave of pain shot through her much-compressed ribcage from top to bottom, and she screamed. The footman, taken aback by her reaction, let go of her: she staggered slightly and fell down.

"Get up!" the Grafin snapped.

"I don’t know if I can, ma’am!" Cinderella said in a rather shaky voice.

"It won’t do at all! Making such a scene in public—in front of my own girls—and all because I unlaced that hideous corset which you shouldn’t be—"

The door opened again. "What was that cry I heard?" said a voice Cinderella knew well. She also knew better than to call him "Papa": that would get her into worse trouble.

"This little chit here," said her stepmother. "I caught her wearing stays, and when she refused to take them off I cut them open and she squealed like a pig."
Forgetting about the downcast gaze of the obedient servant, Cinderella looked soulfully up at him with melting eyes. He looked back at her for a moment and winced, then faced his wife again. "This is really going too far!" he said. "Her mother was a great corseter, it’s bound to be in the blood. Let her have her stays."

"I told her, it’s not right for a mere servant to lace herself up like that!" the Grafin protested.

"Most of the other women servants wear corsets, after all."

His wife looked at the shivering Cinderella with disgust. "Yes, but they don’t tight-lace."

"My dearest, there is no rule in this land which says no-one below a certain income may tight-lace." He sighed and rubbed his hands together as if looking forward to sorting it all out. "Now, you, whatever your name is—"

"Me, sir?" the footman asked.

"Yes, you. Go and find that little lady’s maid, what’s her name, Karin. Oh, you’d better take Cinderella with you. Help her up. That’s right." Cinderella was got to her feet, not without difficulty, and she looked balefully at her stepmother and accusingly at her father. He refused to meet her gaze. She slipped and nearly fell again as the footman was guiding her away past him, possibly by accident. Involuntarily he reached out and caught her by the arm. The Grafin hissed like a snake. Cinderella looked up at her father, but he again avoided looking her in the eye. He glanced at the silver bracelet, though, and ran his fingers over it, then sighed and said "And when you find Karin, get her to fetch a new lace for Cinderella’s stays."

"Yes, sir," the footman said, and they went out.

When they got out Cinderella said tearfully, "You’d never know I’m his own daughter from the way he treats me!"

"Come on, now, don’t start crying. You’re all right now. He does a good job if you think whatherself is like—she’d have had you thrown on the compost heap if she’d had her way. Anyway, at least you’ll get a new staylace out of it. A good one too."

That piqued Cinderella’s interest and stopped her thinking about crying: anything to do with corsetry was always a good way of getting her attention. "What do you mean?"

The footman laughed. "Karin’s told me about it. You saw those two awful girls, didn’t you? They have to have the strongest staylaces in the kingdom to keep them in shape. Put one of those in your bodice, I think you’ll get it down an extra inch. Come on, let’s find Karin."

Cinderella hurried up the stairs, clutching her bucket and mop in one hand, holding up her long skirts with the other, panting inside the restriction of the tight leather bodice. When she was little she had merely thought the marble floors beneath the rugs in her father’s house beautiful, like so much else there; now as a maid she appreciated them as things that had to be kept clean. It was a dreary and a hard job, especially when you were tightly laced and had to bend over to turn back the rugs—but she wasn’t going to let her corset stop her doing anything she wanted to. She knew that many of the other kitchen staff resented her "aping the gentry" by tight-lacing and wanted to show that it stopped her working hard; to get the same treatment as the others, she had to work harder, and at the worst jobs too. Her stepmother saw to that.

She went into the gold drawing-room and sighed: someone had dropped a chocolate éclair on the carpet and trodden it in. Well, it wasn’t her chocolate, and she wasn’t being made responsible for
carpets today: someone else could deal with it. Bracing herself, but taking things careful to avoid breaking the laces of her stays, she began pushing furniture aside.

The door to the next room was half open, but with the noise of moving furniture and mopping she didn’t realise that there was anyone in there until she fell to working in front of it. It was the rest of her family—well, the family that wasn’t hers any more, because three-quarters of it didn’t want anything to do with her. Her father was sitting at the head of the dining-room table holding a large sheet of thick creamy paper and studying it with a deep frown. Her stepmother in one of her usual elaborate and tightly-laced gowns was standing behind him, gazing at the paper with the besotted expression most women reserve for very small babies. Her stepsisters sat on either side of the table, both obviously fidgety with tension, but not daring to interfere.

"Imagine!" cooed the Grafin Eisenmieder. "Your first ball, darlings! You shall have the finest gowns and the tightest stays in the kingdom!"

"Mama, must we wear corsets?" Gudrun asked uncomfortably. She was wearing one of her usual shapeless dresses, as was her sister, and it was obviously that underneath it there was nothing more than a chemise and a lot of fat.

"Darling, sweetie, you must, I’m afraid. If you really want the Prince to fall in love with you, then you must be beautiful, and there is nothing a lady can do to make herself beautiful that is more effective than a really tight corset."

"It’s very gratifying to have this, I’m sure," Cinderella’s father said. "I haven’t been much in favour at court these last few years, I thought they’d forgotten me—but here it is, an invitation to me ‘and his wife and children.’"

Cinderella gasped at the door and her heart pounded at the busk of her tight leather bodice. Her father and his wife and children. He had only one surviving child…

"How hospitable of the King!" the Grafin said, putting her arms round her husband’s shoulders and squatting down with a mighty rustling of skirts and creaking of stays to kiss the back of his head. "New gowns for me and for the girls, and we’ll all four go together."

A faint spasm of doubt crossed Cinderella’s father’s face. She knew what he was thinking: her heart came into her mouth, her corset cut off all her remaining ability to breathe. "All ‘four’?" he said. "Don’t you think…"

"Who else did you think might go?" the Grafin said severely.

Cinderella’s father sighed. "No-one, I suppose."

Cinderella fainted. As she was leaning forward to listen round the door, she awoke to find that she had fallen into the dining room, and had tipped over her bucket while she was about it so that she was now lying in a puddle of soapy water. Nobody had offered her smelling salts or loosened her laces. As her vision came back into focus she realised that her stepmother was looming over her, staring down, a fierce look on her shadowed face. "Really!" she said.

Irma’s voice added "Mama, look at that! What can you do with a housemaid who faints?"

"Stop it out of her wages."

Gudrun interrupted, "But you don’t pay her anything, Mama!"

"Quiet, child!" The Grafin swished away and tugged on the bell. A servant was there in a moment, a
footman: he must have been waiting outside. Cinderella heard her stepmother tell him to "take that out of here quickly!"

The footman came over and lifted her up: she still felt too weak to stand. "Courage," he whispered in her ear. As he helped her through the room she looked at her father and whimpered "Pappa?" but he looked the other way. A tear started down her cheek; and in her last glance before she was taken from the room she was sure she saw one on his cheek as well. With that she had to be content.

All the afternoon and evening the house had been in a state of festive chaos: even Cinderella’s father had a barber and two valets to help him dress, and the Grafin and her two daughters had enough maids running after them to fill half a cathedral. In between shifts the maids rested in the kitchen and chatted: about the beauty of the gems the Grafin was wearing and the jewels she had lent to her daughters, about the splendour of their gowns, and about all the trouble Gudrun and Irma were giving with their stays. There were endless tricks and dodges an experienced tight-lacer got to know, and now all of them were in use, trying to keep those daughters down somewhere below twenty-four inches without either of them fainting or bursting her laces. It was all very contemptible, Cinderella thought, trying to make herself angry to stop herself from crying again. She was below twenty inches by now even without her stays; she could lace to sixteen inches fairly easily and stayed that way most of the time. With a good corset—not that the cobbler hadn’t done his best over the years with his leather bodices, but they weren’t the same thing—with a good corset, she was sure she could reach fifteen inches. The Grafin was proud of her eighteen-inch waist; Cinderella could beat her easily. The trouble was that in her dust-stained skirt and rough leather bodice, hardly anybody cared.

Knowing her background, the other staff were careful to keep her from having to do any work towards the Ball preparations; they set her to go through the wine cellar looking at the dates on the bottles, finding out which were on their way to their best, which had reached it, and which were on the way downhill and had to be drunk when there was nobody visiting. It wasn’t work at which she was particularly good, and it was boring, but at least down there she didn’t notice much of what was going on upstairs. Though she tried to squash it, a tiny hope that wouldn’t be silenced just above her heart kept insisting that her father would appear and demand she come with him, if only to show that not all his daughters were too fat for a ballgown. She knew it was irrational, but she couldn’t help it. Finally, though, a time came when she could hear nothing going on in the kitchen at all. She scampered back up the stone steps out of the cellar: there was nobody about, the fire had been banked, the dishes washed, everyone had gone. The servants were having a rest, because the family had gone out for the evening and wouldn’t be back for hours: gone to the Ball. Without her.

Cinderella sat down on a stool, put her face in her hands, and began to cry.

A squeaky little voice said, "Who’s that crying?"

"It’s me, Cinderella."

"It’s I, dear," said the little voice.

Cinderella looked round, but could see nobody. "Where are you?"

"Here, on the table!"

Cinderella looked again. Standing on the table was a very tiny person, about four inches high, with wings. "Who are you?"

"I, my dear child, am your Fairy Godmother!"

"My godmother was the old cobbler’s wife."
"Just so. I was married to him, for a time, so that I could be on the spot at the right time to protect you when you were little. I was called away after that, but now I’m back and I am ready to help you if you’re in trouble."

There was a lot she could have done to help, but Cinderella didn’t think of that. She asked curiously "Were you really married to him?"

"Well, I wasn’t as small as this, obviously. Being a fairy has its disadvantages. I had to be continually casting spells to keep myself up to human size. It was a great relief to be able to stop that, I can tell you! And I’ve been your mother’s old maid Edel, who’s been looking after you and keeping your stays tight."

This was such a strange idea that Cinderella quite stopped crying. "If you were with my mother being Edel, how could you be with the cobbler being his wife too? Surely you would have had to be in two places at once!"

"Only a fairy could understand," the fairy said smugly. "Still, that’s not the point. Why were you crying?"

Cinderella explained. It took some time, and the fairy nodded wisely while she was talking. At the end she said "That’s a very sad story, but I think I can help you. You’ll need a coach and horses, a footman, and of course a dress."

"Yes, but I don’t think it’s safe for you to go near him."

"I don’t need to go near him." She waved her wand, and suddenly there was a tall and remarkably handsome footman in beautiful livery standing where the cat had been. He looked at Cinderella meaningfully, smiled, and bowed low. Cinderella’s heart began to thump inside her tight leather bodice.

"That’s very impressive," she said, trying to sound calm.

"That, my dear, is only a start. We need horses. Are there any mice?"

"Yes, that’s why we’ve got the cat. He dropped one over there. I don’t think it’s quite dead."

The fairy godmother nodded and waved her wand. A beautiful white stallion with no legs appeared in the kitchen. The fairy clicked her tongue in disgust and the horse turned back into a mouse. "You might have warned me about that," she said reproachfully.

"I’m sorry," Cinderella said. "He always bites the legs off mice. I don’t think that’s any good to pull a coach."

"Well, anything with four legs would do. Or six legs. Any number of legs, really, as long as there are at least four. Are there woodlice in this kitchen?"

"Yes, lots. Do you want me to catch you some?"

"That’s a good girl." Cinderella went over to the fireplace and started turning over logs. When she had found one that was nicely infested with nasty creatures she brought it back to the table and put it
down in front of the fairy, who looked at it in distaste and backed off. "Yes, yes, my dear, but they aren’t pleasant things. Find a pumpkin and put that and the log outside the back door."

Cinderella did as she was told, leaving the strange assortment of objects outside in the crisp night air, and when she turned round found that the fairy had flown up behind her and was waiting expectantly. "Now," she said, "watch!"

She waved her wand, and the pumpkin turned into a beautiful golden coach, the harness trailing empty across the ground. The cat-footman went and climbed up into the driver’s box. She waved her wand again, and the woodlice exploded off the dirty log and swelled into eight beautiful glossy grey horses, each conveniently appearing inside its own harness. They stood there, stamping and champing, and waiting for someone to tell them it was time to go.

"There you are," the fairy said proudly, "there’s your transport."

"But I can’t go like this!"

"Nor you can. I was coming to that. May I congratulate you, by the way, on your well-trained figure? I don’t know if you’ve seen your two stepsisters, but they’re as fat as pigs now. No corset ever made is going to make them look like anything else. You, on the other hand, have eaten frugally and laced tight, and you are about to reap the reward. Unlace your bodice."

"Why?"

"Child, I can do a certain amount of magic, but a corset needs to be strong. If I try to hold you together purely with magic you’ll meet with a dreadful fate. I can change one thing into another, but though my ex-husband has done some fine work there considering he’s not a staymaker, I don’t think it’s sufficient for a ballgown. Take it off and then put your bracelet on the ground."

Cinderella obeyed, unlacing her bodice and then slipping it off. "Are you going to make me another corset? I’d like you to hurry if you are, because I can’t stand without one for long."

"I shall be quick. Put your bracelet down. That’s right. Tom!" The footman slung himself over the side of the coach with insolent ease and came over to them. "Just stand there a minute," the fairy told him, "that’s right. Now then!"

She waved her wand and pointed it at the bracelet. To Cinderella’s utter astonishment it began to grow, turning and changing shape as it did so, but growing far more at top and bottom than in the middle. In a moment it was a foot high, the delicate chasing which decorated it now enlarged into whorls and chains as large as Cinderella’s hand. It was beautiful, brightly polished as always, a tiny work of art now writ large, almost as big as a cavalryman’s breastplate, but shaped more like a…

…corset?

The fairy saw Cinderella staring doubtfully and laughed. "Yes, these are your stays for tonight," she said. "This isn’t ordinary silver—I’ve enchanted it to make it flexible so we can lace it up as usual. And of course I had to put lacing holes down the back. Do you have a staylace on you?"

Cinderella dug in a pocket in her skirts. "Yes," she said. "I always keep one handy. You never know if your lace is going to break when your stays are as tight as mine."

"Sensible girl. Just put it down there, that’s right. Now then, go and hang onto the back of the carriage for a bit of support, and let Tom help you. Tom, loosen her stays and take them off." The cat-footman swaggered up behind Cinderella where she stood stretching up to keep herself from falling while she was unlaced, and she felt his hands moving over her body before passing the silver
corset around her. Even without lacing it was a snug fit, but a beautiful one: it was almost as if the corset had been cast around her body. As the footman got to work passing the laces through the innumerable holes down the back of the silver stays, excitement shivered through her. She had been underrated all her life: now she would have a chance, at least a chance, to impress people as she deserved. Even if she had nothing else, this corset and her tiny waist would get attention! At the very least, she could make her father ashamed of himself...she dismissed that thought as unworthy, shaking her head. Now she was nearly ready...yes, she felt the familiar sensation of a corset being tightened around her body. She let herself flow into it, determined to enjoy it however tight she was laced. She had the most fabulous corset in the kingdom, probably the finest corset anyone had ever worn in history, and she swore to be worthy of it.

"Shall I stop now, miss?" the footman said presently.

His voice was a low purr, rich and thrilling, and it sent a spark of pleasure jolting through her. He admired her, and the real men at the ball would admire her too. "No, no!" she panted. "Lace me tighter!"

"How much tighter, miss?" the footman asked, as he applied himself to the laces again.

"Much tighter!"

The footman worked away in silence for a time, then asked again "Is that tight enough now, miss?"

"No!" gasped Cinderella. "Tighter!"

And he pulled again. Cinderella was feeling dizzy, she was hardly aware of any part of her body below her fiercely constricted waist, she wasn’t sure if she could stand unaided, her breathing was becoming as laboured as a fish in the bottom of a boat, but she was determined not to give up. This was her night, this was the vindication of her years of hard work insisting that her stays were tight whatever she was doing. Tonight, she told herself, nothing could make her faint. "Tighter!" she whispered. "Tighter!"

And the footman pulled again, until the voice of the fairy, far-off through the roaring in her ears, intervened. "Really, Cinderella, you must stop now," she said. "You’ll only make yourself faint."

"I—am—not—going—to—faint!" Cinderella forced out, using one tiny breath for each word.

"You are, you know. Your stays are far too tight."

"Only—too—tight—is—tight—enough!"

"Don’t be silly. Tom, stop lacing her up."

Cinderella felt the laces stop grinding out of the small of her back and again panted "Tighter!"

"No, darling, not tighter," the fairy’s voice said patronisingly. "You’ve done amazingly well so far, but I really must call a halt. You won’t get much out of the ball if you faint before you get there."

"I—won’t—faint!"

"Yes you will. I can’t imagine why you haven’t already. Anyway, surely even you can see that you can’t charm your way through the ballroom when you’re laced so tight you can hardly speak!"

Cinderella considered this, and realised that the fairy had a point. She nodded, stiffly, twice. The fairy said "Tom, loosen her stays by one quarter inch and no more. Thank you."
When the laces had been slackened just a little and Cinderella could talk more or less normally, she said, "But surely fainting at the right time is very romantic!"

"Yes, but fainting at the wrong time is an embarrassing nuisance. If you faint in the first five minutes and have to be carried out and everyone will laugh at you. It does happen—there’s always some fool girl at the ball who thinks she can lace tighter than she’s really able to. Don’t you be that fool this time, Cinderella, please."

"All right." Cinderella rubbed her hands lovingly over the surface of the beautiful silver corset, so smooth it seemed almost soft to the touch, yet worked all over with fine engravings. "It’s a wonderful corset," she said with feeling, "but don’t I need a ballgown as well?"

"You do indeed, and I am so forgetful. Stand still a moment, please." Cinderella did as she was told. The fairy closed one eye like a man sighting a long rifle, raised her wand into the air quivering with anticipated power, then brought it down. Cinderella’s knees sagged as her weight suddenly doubled. "There!" the fairy said with great satisfaction. "One of my better efforts, I think."

Cinderella looked down at herself in delight. Her ragged old kitchen dress had turned into a fabulous ballgown, indigo satin worked all over with a pattern of moons and stars and comets that echoed the stellar brilliance of her polished corset. The magnificent fabric of the dress was spread out in two great swags over hoops nearly nine feet wide; at the front, the two sides of the skirt were drawn back to show a widening angle of contrasting gold fabric studded with tiny gems—the sun rising in the night. "I wish I had a mirror!" she said, with a heavy sigh.

"Well, we’ll have to improvise. Come over here." The fairy fluttered round the corner of the house and Cinderella followed her to one of the long windows of the downstairs salon. The curtains were drawn behind it, and Cinderella could see her reflection dimly in the glass. It was dark out there, but even in the dark she could tell how the brightness of the silver corset would shine like the sun in the ballroom, the gold panel of her underskirt like the reflection of sunlight in the eastern sea, the wide wings of her skirt the night which the sun thrust aside. And at the peak of it all, representing the disc of the sun itself, was her own delicate face—now covered in the thick white make-up that society occasions required and nearly as bright as her stays. The fairy had not given her one of the tall powdered wigs which most society ladies wore, leaving her own back hair to tumble about her almost bare shoulders in attractive disarray. At first Cinderella was disappointed, but then she realised it was a cunning point: it brought the eye back to her face again. No trouble had been spared to make her the centre of attention. She could not conceive of a more beautiful gown. Those that had been made for her stepmother and stepsisters—even allowing for the deficiencies of their figures—could not compare.

"Well?" the fairy asked. "Are you satisfied?"

"Oh, Godmother, it’s beautiful! I wish you were bigger so I could give you a hug! I haven’t been so happy since—well, since Godfather gave me my first corset!"

The fairy smiled. "Which shows you know where you are with beauty, not like those two awful creatures you have to look after. Well, come on now, let’s get you into the coach."

The cat-footman helped Cinderella into the coach a little more attentively than was really decent in polite society, but Cinderella was too overcome to notice. As he clambered to his box and started the horses, the fairy fluttered up again and knocked on the window. Cinderella pulled it down and the fairy came in and sat down on the sill.

"Phew! It does tire me out flying after a coach these days…I should have said this before, dear, but it’s not quite too late. Do be very careful about the time. Apart from the corset—I had to use a
different approach for that because it has to be strong—all the enchantments will wear off at midnight. Tom up there will become a cat again, the coach and horses will turn into the rubbish I made them from, and you’ll lose your gown and get your rags back. Now, don’t look like that. Being there till midnight is better than not being there at all. Just don’t get too involved, keep an eye on the time. Promise me that."

"I promise," Cinderella said like the dutiful girl she was. The fairy dipped her a pretty curtsy, bent to kiss her hand, straightened up again in a hurry—"Ooh! Oh dear! My stays are so tight I shouldn’t have tried that one!" and with a cheerful wave flew out of the window again and vanished. Cinderella never saw her again.

As the coach clattered down the road towards the Palace, Cinderella thought about what she had been told. It was magic, it was wonderful, but she felt she had been robbed. All the other girls would dance till dawn, and she would have to leave when the ball was hardly getting started. Well, she had to be grateful for the chance she had, even if it was short. The moment she got into the ballroom, she said, she’d find a clock and keep half an eye on it all evening.

The Prince was miserable. He shouldn’t have been: he was young, handsome, heir to a splendid castle and a happy kingdom, and as the most eligible bachelor in seven nations at this his first ball he was surrounded by the cream of society's beauties all of them trying to catch his eye. Few men ever get such flattering attention.

That wasn’t enough for him. For one thing, his father was trying to manipulate him. The King had some ambitious plans which needed extra finance, and there was a certain nobleman married for the second time to a wealthy lady with two single daughters: either one of those would bring a nice fat dowry with her and the King could do as he pleased. That the daughters were bad-tempered and dull conversationalists, rather plain and as fat as their dowries didn’t worry him. It needn’t: he wasn’t the one who was going to have to walk down the palace chapel’s aisle with one of them. Every time he looked at them they made him think about taking a mistress—and he wasn’t even married yet.

In any case, he had his heart set on something quite different. Years ago, the sister’s stepfather had been married to another lady, perhaps the most beautiful in the court. She had had a daughter with whom the Prince had played when he was small; but then her mother had died, and the girl had vanished. What had happened to her? He’d have liked to know: if she was anything like her mother, by now she ought to be something quite special. The lady in question had had not only extraordinary beauty and the taste to use her vast wealth to adorn herself elegantly; she had also had the finest figure in the kingdom, or any other kingdom for that matter. The Prince was fascinated by the stays court ladies used to shape themselves into fashion: every aspect of it thrilled him, from start to finish. There was the delicious ritual of lacing up in the morning, with a maid or perhaps a lucky husband or lover recruited to pull in the lady’s laces. There were the outer symptoms of tight-lacing, the bosom pushed up and heaving, the breathlessness after exertion, the little gasps and urgent fanning and laughing requests for "just a moment to rest, please, I feel somewhat faint!"; the Prince had never realised that some of the Palace ladies knew about his interests and were playing up to get his attention. And most of all, there was the direct result: the bodices and laces pulled so tight they seemed about to snap, perfectly rigid and rigidly perfect, their serried lines of bones commanding the figure within to follow their lead down into the tiny waist that was for him the central theme of womanhood.

He had been looking forward to the ball, in a way: he knew that a ball was the highest of high occasions and that every lady with any pretence to fashion and beauty would be in her tightest of tight corsets, hauled in until she was on the verge of fainting. Indeed, they had made a good showing; but that noblewoman dead eight years back had spoiled him, and after dancing with every young woman he could find and quite a few of their mothers, he could find no-one who stood
comparison with her. Could he be remembering her figure wrong? No, he was sure not. He had seen her husband joyfully clasp his fingers around his wife’s waist; there was nobody here who was close to that. Gloomily he reflected that perhaps tight-lacing was a dying art. It had been going on for hundreds of years, it had to end some time; he just wished he hadn’t had to live to see it.

Then—something caught his eye. At first it was a light, a flash of silver in the distance, that made him look up: like a firework, or a looking-glass suddenly reflecting sunlight into his eyes. He squinted and looked across the room. Someone had just come in; someone…bright? He peered across the crowded ballroom, trying to make it out. Suddenly he gasped and his heart jumped into his throat. Muttering "Pardon me…excuse me…do forgive me…sorry!" he slipped quickly through the crowd to meet her.

For it was a she; and quite a she at that. She had dark curly hair, not strained back and up into a high wig like most of the ladies, but hanging over her shoulders in natural disarray. It gave her an air of girlish innocence belied by the almost indecently low neckline of her gown, and the fullness of the bosom that billowed within it. She was pretty, with a rare combination of freshness and poise that entranced him at once: she was looking round the ballroom with a thrilled smile, as if she had never seen anything like it before. There was none of the assumption that so many of the fashionable beauties had, of being the centre of attention; here was someone who was excited just to be present, not totting up points for and against everyone else of her own age.

If she had been keeping score, though, she would have realised that she was well ahead of all the competition. Not only was she much the prettiest girl in the room—or so it seemed to the stunned Prince—but her gown was extraordinary. The neckline was cut so low and so wide that it concealed hardly any of the enticing secrets within; the sleeves gripped her slim arms tightly and ended above the elbow with a fantasia of ruffles, lace and bows. The skirt was encrusted with layers of costly fabrics, elaborate trimmings and even real gems: obviously this was someone from a family wealthy enough to satisfy his father! You could keep a princely family for a year on what it must have cost to decorate that skirt. It was held out by the widest pair of hoops in the room, which was saying something; even coming in through the ballroom’s mighty double doors she had had to turn a little sideways. And the bodice between was unique: no taut satin or embroidered silk seized his gaze, but a sheath of immaculate silver moulded to the form of the figure every fashionable girl dreamed could be hers if she could only get her stays tight enough. This was what everyone wanted and so few achieved: tears, faints, snapped laces, lost digestion, they all came between mortal girls and the ideal they sought after. Now here it was before him, in flesh and blood; and silver-plated like the living work of art she was. She was even smaller than that noble lady he had so admired in his childhood.

He could delay no longer. Already a young man had come up to her and begun to chat; that couldn’t be permitted. "Excuse me!" the Prince said, barging up, and gave the young lord a very dirty look. The interloper slunk away with his tail between his legs, and that was the last the Prince saw of him. It was the last he saw of anyone else, too. For the rest of the evening he was blind to everyone else except for the girl on his arm.

"Good evening, miss!" the Prince said, and bowed.

The girl gave him her hand, and curtsied with just a little awkwardness, as if she were not quite used to her hoops and stays. "Good evening, sir," she said, with a candid smile. "Must we wait for someone to introduce us?"

The Prince glanced around. "Where are your parents?"

"They aren’t…aren’t with me." A shadow briefly crossed her face. "Where are yours?"

"Over there, on the dais." He pointed without looking; he didn’t want to look away from her.
She looked, though. "There’s nobody over there but the King and Queen."

"They are the King and Queen."

"Your Highness!" And suddenly she dropped into another curtsey.

"Stand up, please. There’s no need for that. If you don’t mind I won’t introduce you to them, and then we can pretend we’re just an ordinary boy and girl at an ordinary ball."

A sly smile crept across her face. "If you like. And I won’t introduce myself either. You must just take me as I am."

"How you are," the Prince said honestly, "is perfect. Now, shall we go on?"

Enchanting was the only word for her. Too many of the young ladies were both cynical and submissive: they made a point of having seen it all before, and they were too tied up in the intrigues of the court to risk being anything but polite to the son of the King. It was difficult to have a light conversation with someone who was determined not to be impressed by anything and at the same time just agreed vacantly with everything you said, even if you could see she was thinking something different. The girl in the silver bodice was quite different. She was delighted by the simplest things—the band, the great chandeliers, the surging ocean of jewels and silks that the dance-floor became when viewed from the dais—and whenever she looked at him her eyes were shining as if this were the greatest evening of her life. She seemed above the Court scandals he found so tiresome, and hadn’t a bad word to say about even the bitchiest of noblewomen; though the one time he ended up heading towards one of his stout brides-to-be, he found himself being led briskly off the other way by his delectable partner. Most of the time, though, they danced. The Prince never noticed the way the other dancers moved gracefully aside, so that he and the girl in the silver bodice were always left in peace with each other; nor did he notice the way his father was giving him blacker and blacker looks. He didn’t care if he was upsetting the Royal marriage plans; he was convinced he’d never need to look at another woman again.

And late in the evening, when the girl in the silver bodice pleaded smiling and panting that she was too out of breath to dance more, they walked quietly on the edge of the ballroom.

"You don’t seem to know the ballroom," the Prince said. "Have you never visited the castle before?"

"I visited the palace," the girl said, with a pretty gasp that strained her corset and the Prince’s self-control to the limits, "quite often, when I was little. Not for ever so long, though. I don’t remember ever coming in here."

They walked on a little in silence. "You surprised me," the Prince said presently. "I thought I knew all the young ladies attached to the court, but I wasn’t expecting you. Who are you with?"

The girl looked away, as if slightly embarrassed. The Prince stifled an urge to kneel at her feet and beg her forgiveness for asking an awkward question. "To tell the truth," she said, "I’m not exactly ‘with’ anyone. I suppose you could say I’m here because of my father, but I don’t think he knows I’m at the ball at all."

The Prince’s mind ran on this rapidly. She must be the illegitimate daughter of some stray nobleman. His father wouldn’t like that—but perhaps he could be persuaded it was all right. Whoever she was, she must be phenomenally rich, arrayed in a pure silver corset! Yes, he could probably square it with the King..."Tell me," he said, "have you ever been engaged?"

"Not as such."
"Not as such?"

"Well, I’ve, I’ve had young men who took a liking to me but none was really a match, if you know what I mean."

"I do," the Prince said, thinking of stout and wealthy girls and not realising his partner was thinking more of sweeps and knife-grinders. "My father has two lined up for me—he just wants me to pick one of them, and that’s all the choice I get."

"That’s—" she swallowed her words, not wanting to say anything disloyal to her King. Visibly thinking twice, she said carefully "Who are the two girls?"

"Well, now, let’s see…" The Prince surveyed the ballroom. "There’s one of them over there, in pink, and—er—yes, there’s the other, in pea-green."

"Oh." The pretty smile had gone, replaced by a petulant expression.

"Do you know them, then?"

"Very well. I don’t want to interfere in Royal business, but shall we say, if I were a King I wouldn’t want my son to marry them."

The Prince laughed. "If you were a King you’d surprise a lot of people showing a figure like that! No, that’s too complicated. You know them well, do you?"

"Almost like sisters," the girl said sourly.

"What are they like as sisters, then?"

"Now, really, Your Highness, it’s the height of bad manners for me to criticise other people to you! I’m not that sort of girl!"

She opened her fan and began striding away fanning herself violently. The Prince hurried after her and caught her bare shoulder. "Please!" he said. "Just pretend you are that sort of girl, just for a moment. What do you think about them?"

She gave a shallow sigh and looked him penetratingly in the eye. There was a lot of intelligence in that look, and he welcomed it: another of the faults of his father’s chosen brides was that they were about as bright as a candle that was put out two hours ago. "Well," she said, "I don’t want to say anything regrettable, but they never seem to have much conversation—"

"That’s true enough!"

"Do you need me to tell you these things?"

"I’d like you to. Please go on. I won’t interrupt."

"And they eat too much…"

"It shows!" the Prince exclaimed, forgetting his promise; then as the girl looked at him with one well-plucked eyebrow prettily raised he added "I’m sorry. Please forgive me."

"You’re forgiven, Your Highness, but please let me finish. They’re selfish, and unkind to those who aren’t so well off as they are. Of course, you wouldn’t have noticed that, being their superior, but I’m—er—much more concerned about how nobles treat servants and such like. I have my reasons."
"Beautiful, clever and good!" the Prince muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. Do go on, please."

"Where was I? Oh, yes. Well, the one other thing is that their mother is rather indulgent, and she has never trained them properly to their stays. Oh, their bodices are nice and tight and their dresses are very elaborate, but inside it’s real torture for them just to reach twenty-four inches. You mark my words, during this evening both of them will either faint or pop their laces. Possibly both."

The Prince gazed at a large-bosomed figure in pea-green moving awkwardly across the dancefloor. It was suddenly obvious: there was no elegance about her, no grace. She could hardly move: she was laced most excruciating tight, but even then her figure was nothing to write about in your journal. And her sister was the same… "You’re so right," he breathed. "You’re so right!"

The girl shifted, uncomfortable again. "Well, Your Highness, you mustn’t let me influence you against them. I’m sure your father knows what he’s doing, and after all his will is what matters. A son or daughter must always obey his or her father, even if—even if some of the things he wants seem—well, unfair."

"Oh, no," the Prince said in a hushed voice. He took her gloved hands, his eyes shining. "I know what I want. I’m not going to settle for them. If only I could find your father and ask—"

A loud whirring noise behind them made them both look round. "What’s that?" the girl in the silver corset said.

"Oh, you haven’t been in here, you wouldn’t know. It’s our clock. Quiet now and watch. It’s delightful."

The ballroom clock occupied much of one wall, and was most elaborate. In front of it a semicircular track jutted out from the stones, with a little door at either side where it met the wall. Now the doors were working themselves open. Two figures came out, each perhaps eighteen inches high: painted wood, a gentleman in Court dress and a lady in a hooped skirt and fragile-waisted bodice, inlaid with gold. They moved jerkily around the track until they met; then the gentleman put out a stiff arm, the lady put one out to meet him, and they danced a little erratically back and forth in front of the audience, while the clock played a tune on a carillon hidden somewhere deep inside itself. The Prince and his partner watched enthralled: she had never seen anything like this before, and he could feel her joy and wonder as if it were her own.

Then the dance was over. The lady raised her other arm, holding a bell; the gentleman raised his other hand, holding a hammer. He reached out and began to strike the bell: once…twice…three times…

The girl in the silver corset stiffened against the Prince suddenly. Her eyes and mouth widened to circles, and she gave a horrified squeak; then picking up her skirts she turned and ran. The Prince was too stunned to follow for a moment; then he ran after her shouting "Wait! Wait! What’s wrong?" Behind him the clock continued to strike: four times…five times…six times…

The girl in the silver corset was not dressed for running. She got as far as the French windows onto the terrace before she fainted. The Prince bounded up to her and drawing the ceremonial sword he had never imagined having to use—duels were not at all his style—in one deft stroke cut the laces that held the back of the silver bodice together. It sprang open, revealing a figure that astounded him: clearly this was a young woman who had spent years on selfless and dedicated waist-training. He
gently lifted off the silver corset, and as he did so she began to move again.

"What’s wrong?" he asked urgently.

The clock was still striking: ten times...eleven times..."Oh! Oh!" she cried, which wasn’t an answer, and wriggling free of him in a flurry of hooped skirts she vanished through the curtains as the clock struck twelve.

The Prince picked himself up from where she had pushed him down and opened the curtains. He could see the moonlight on the terrace, his father’s attempt to imitate the gardens of Versailles beyond, and a figure with her hooped skirts held up around her knees flying down the path into the darkness. "Wait! Wait!" he called, running after her. "You left your corset behind!" But she didn’t stop and she didn’t turn; and now she was almost in the shadow of the trees. Remembering that it was the clock striking which seemed to have upset her, the Prince shouted "But darling! That clock’s always five minutes fast!"

No reply. She was gone.

The town crier rang his bell vigorously, then unrolling the scroll he had in his free hand shouted "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! Citizens, I carry the word of the King himself!

"The King hath declared: ‘At the ball given in the honour of Our only son and Prince, there was present a lady who fainted and had to have the laces of her stays cut. She fled the ballroom soon afterwards, leaving behind her stays, and though from the nobility of her face and the perfection of her figure We were able to be certain she came of the highest birth, none of Our courtiers hath been able to identify her. Therefore We do swear and promise: whosoever shall lace into this silver corset shall have the hand of Our son in marriage and be enthroned as Queen alongside him when his time cometh.’ Such is the word of the King!"

The townspeople gathered in the marketplace huddled together in the cold, looking with awe at the corset two of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting were holding up beside the crier. Nearly all the women wore stays of some kind, usually a boned and laced bodice tightened over the underclothes to organise the figure and keep it firm and neat. They were aware that noble ladies who didn’t have to work were free to lace far tighter than was practical for someone who had to mop the floor and feed the pigs, but this corset was beyond anyone’s imagining. The waist was minute, no wider than a strong man’s thigh; and it glittered in the intermittent sunshine as if it were made of solid silver, which in fact it was. Someone must have melted down a mort of silver coins to make that thing; a peasant family could have lived on it comfortably for years. Or still could; that was why the two ladies-in-waiting had six pikemen to escort them, with their eyes on the crowd.

A voice shouted, "Melt it down and spread it out across the town! It’s been a hard winter."

"This corset," the town crier said, "is not my property. It’s not mine to give away, sir."

"No woman could have laced into that thing and lived to tell about it!" someone else called. "Your Prince is just chasing rainbows!"

"The Prince says, ma’am," the town crier replied sarcastically, "that the girl with whom he danced at the ball last night was wearing this very corset. There are other witnesses to it. We have to identify her. Has anyone anything else to say?" The pikemen moved forward with a faint sound of steel grating on steel, and there were no more witty remarks. "Very well, then. Ladies, I leave it to you."

The two ladies in waiting came forward, holding up the silver corset. When they reached the front of the platform they moved slowly round in a half-circle and back, giving everyone there the chance to
see it clearly. "Now then," one of them shouted as loudly as she could, given the tightness of her own Court stays, "did anyone here see, last night, a ‘very pretty young girl with dark hair’ wearing this corset?"

No-one had.

Not much point in asking this of such a flea-bitten mob, but "Is there anyone here who attended the ball last night wearing this corset?"

A raggedy girl at the back of the crowd tentatively put up her hand. The two ladies in waiting looked at each other in exasperation. Of course, with the Prince’s hand at stake there were bound to be time-wasters—and a lot of them. "All right, thank you for your time, everyone! Now, we will be going round the houses of all the nobility with daughters who were invited to the ball, so you’ll be seeing us in the streets as like as not. Please remember that we do have our escort and they will not be pleased with anyone who attempts to steal this corset. Kindly do not obstruct us when we are on Royal business." And without another word the two ladies left the dais, carrying the silver corset between them as if it were heavy—which indeed it was—and escorted by their phalanx of unsmiling soldiers.

Cinderella turned away, her face burning and her heart pounding within her tight leather bodice. She had known it wouldn’t work, but she couldn’t stop herself: it was as if her hand had gone up of its own accord. Ignoring the crude teasing of the mob she trudged back off through the mud to her father’s house, not even bothering to hold her skirts up out of the filth in the streets.

The two ladies-in-waiting stood back grumpily as the sergeant of the pikemen banged on the door of the big house. "This is probably a waste of time," one of them said.

"Do it right and we’ll be paid anyway," her friend told her.

"I’m cold, I’m tired, I’m wet through! I want a nice cup of mulled wine and a bath of warm water to rest my feet in. This isn’t getting us anywhere and I don’t think it ever will."

The sergeant knocked again. "Orders are orders, Silke," the second lady-in-waiting replied. "I’m as sure as you are that this is all some misunderstanding, but we have orders from the King and we have to see them through. When we’ve gone round every noble lady in the kingdom then we can go home and give up, but not before then. Aren’t they ever going to answer that door?"

"No, they can see we’re having too much fun floundering around in the mud," Lady Silke replied bitterly. "Well, if the Prince thinks——"

The door opened smoothly. "Yes?" said the porter.

"Lady Silke Fahrenholz and Lady Rosa Heilen wish to see your mistress Grafin Eisenmieder and her daughters," the sergeant said. "An errand from the King."

"Yes, we’ve heard about it," the porter said. "We’ve been expecting you. Come in!"

They came, with great relief, and there was much stamping of mud from feet inside the hall. The porter looked at the mess in horror—he was the one who was going to clean it up afterwards—but he knew better than to argue with a Lady of the Court, or with a man holding a big spear. "Come this way," was all he said.

As he led them through the tall corridors of the house, Lady Silke said, "Is there any chance of something warming to drink, perhaps?"
"Perhaps, my lady. I couldn’t say. You’ll have to ask my mistress when you meet her."

"Not much chance of it from her," Silke said, not quietly enough. "She’s well known as the biggest bitch in the kingdom." If the porter heard this, he didn’t comment; perhaps he agreed with her.

They came out at last into an ornate salon, obviously veteran of many a refined party. Grafin Eisenmieder was sitting there in a chair suspiciously reminiscent of a throne, with her daughters standing on either side of them. All three were beautifully and elaborately dressed, with wigs tall and fine enough for a Royal Ball, but the court ladies could see immediately that they were wasting their time. The daughters stood painfully upright, heads back, their bulging bosoms quivering in the low necklines of their gowns, their expressions strained beneath layers of paint. It was all too obvious that they were corseted to within a tenth of an inch of their lives—and they were inches bigger than the silver corset. Nothing but a miracle would see either of them lace into it without fainting.

Still, form had to be satisfied, and the King’s errand completed if they were to get back to the palace and claim their expenses. "Good afternoon, Ma’am," Lady Silke said briskly. "From the way you’re assembled here waiting for us I presume you know our errand?"

The enthroned mother inclined her powder-wigged head. "You are searching for a bride for the Prince, nicht wahr?"

"Yes, but that isn’t all, ma’am." She cleared her throat noisily and two of the pikemen clumped forward, heavy boots noisy on the delicate Persian rug that covered the floor, holding the silver corset. "His Highness the Prince has declared that the young lady of his love was laced close into this silver corset at the Ball which I believe you attended five days ago. It’s our duty to find out which of the young ladies of the nobility that was by lacing this corset onto anyone who believes it is hers, and seeing if we can lace it close without fainting."

Unprompted, both daughters turned their heads—stiffly, under the immense weight of their wigs—and looked pleadingly at their mother. She reached out on either side to stroke their hands reassuringly, and said with great confidence "I’m sure that it must have been one of my daughters, your ladyship. No doubt you’ve heard that the King has been interested in arranging a marriage between the Prince and one of them."

"Ahem! That isn’t the issue, I’m afraid, ma’am. The issue is whether the silver corset will go round a particular young lady’s waist, or not. Now, may I assume you are willing for us to try the experiment?"

Both daughters shuddered. "Of course," their mother said with regal calm.

"Good. Sergeant, you may go." The sergeant and his men saluted, crashing their boots destructively onto the Persian rug, and then stamped out of the room to wait outside. They could guard the door and stop anyone from coming in to steal the silver corset, but it would not do for rough common soldiers to watch ladies of the nobility lacing their stays.

With the soldiers gone the atmosphere in the room changed: less formal, more feminine. "Now," Lady Rosa said gently, "you don’t have to go through with this, you know. I can see your daughters are worried about it. This is a fifteen-inch corset—a lot of people have had awful trouble with it and I don’t want to distress anyone else if I can help it."

"There’s no need for you to concern yourself," Grafin Eisenmieder replied, as stiff as the stays of the five women in the room. "My daughters are quite capable of anything you might want to try of them." Lady Rosa and Lady Silke exchanged a look. The girls’ mother tightened her lips, but she didn’t say anything. It wasn’t good practise to contradict the servants of the King, especially not if
you hoped to marry one of your daughters to his only son…"Gudrun, Irma, come here. I need to open your bodices and take off your stays."

"Yes, Mama." And like dogs afraid of a beating if they didn’t obey, the two plump girls slunk round in front of their mother’s throne to await her hands on the laces of their bodices.

Gudrun, the elder and taller of the two girls, wore a corset that wouldn’t have inflamed any man’s passions in the bedroom: it was painfully obvious that it had been designed first and last for strength and nothing else. She groaned as her mother loosened the laces, and the corset slackened, allowing her waist to grow wider…and wider, and wider, and wider. The two Court ladies exchanged another look, this time their eyes round and alarmed. There could be no doubt this girl had been laced just as tight as she could bear, and the idea that she could lace down to fifteen inches—well, it would be laughable if it weren’t actually dangerous. The laces of the silver corset might not even stretch out that far…Lady Silke shook her head. That wasn’t her business. She gestured to Lady Rosa to follow her, and together they carried the heavy silver corset over to the unlaced and now somewhat shaky girl and began laboriously girding it around her tubby middle.

A few minutes of silent struggle elapsed. Then Grafin Eisenmieder said with what she hoped was unanswerable confidence "There! That’s tight enough, surely!"

Sweating and breathless, Lady Rosa looked round. "If you don’t mind, ma’am, we were told to lace this corset close. You don’t call that close, do you?" She dared not let go of the laces, but she nodded her head at the seven-inch gap behind Gudrun’s waist.

"Nobody ever gets her stays quite close. It can’t be done—they always slip. I believe that is good enough, and if—"

"Pardon me, ma’am, and I don’t wish to speak out of turn, but this is not what we were told to look for! There are plenty of young women in the kingdom who can get these stays seven inches short of close. I could myself. There are quite a few who can get them tighter than that, but we were told to look for someone who can lace them close, and close that isn’t."

"Insolence! How dare you talk back to me?"

Lady Silke had had enough of this pointless job, and her patience was wearing thin. "Because, ma’am, we are the servants of the King—not your servants. We’re more interested in doing what—"

She was interrupted by a painful groan of "I can’t breathe!"

"Be quiet, Gudrun!"

"Thank you, ma’am. We’re more interested in doing what the King wants of us than what you want. If you argue with us, you argue with the King. You don’t want that, do you?"

That was a good point. "Hum. Did you say nobody in the kingdom has managed to lace these stays close yet?"

"If they had," Lady Rosa panted, still hanging on for dear life to the taut laces, "would we still be doing this?"

"I’ll take that as a ‘no’, shall I? Well, then. I believe we’re the last household you have to visit?"

"Yes, if—"
"Silke," Rosa interrupted, "could you make her get to the point before these laces rip my arms off!"

"Certainly, Rosa dear. If we don’t find what we’re looking for here, then we shall have to go back to the Palace and admit our failure."

"Which," Rosa added through gritted teeth, "isn’t something we relish." Gudrun looked round with panicky eyes but said nothing.

"I see. So if one of my daughters laces tighter than anyone else you’ve met, will you take her as the best you can find?"

Lady Silke frowned, and looked at the gasping Gudrun, imprisoned in the silver corset laced to well above twenty inches, and at the pale face of Irma, who obviously wasn’t looking forward to her turn in it. "Do you really think that’s likely?"

"That’s not what I asked. Will you take them as the, er, ‘next best thing’ if they can lace tighter than everyone else?"

The two ladies of the court looked at each other again. "I suppose so," said Rosa, and "It would certainly be better than coming home empty-handed," Silke agreed.

"Good! Well, then, I may be able to help you. You will never get Gudrun’s stays properly tight like that. You need to put your foot in her back."

"Mama, no—" Gudrun panted.

"Shh, child. You want to be Queen some day, don’t you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing. Now hold still and don’t try to talk. Here, Lady Rosa, let me help you. I’ll hold you steady and lift up your skirt while you put your foot in her back….that’s it. Now pull." She pulled, but Gudrun came with her, and they would both have fallen over had not Grafin Eisenmieder caught them. "Oh dear, that’ll never do! Now, come over here, Gudrun dear, and hold onto this pillar. That’s right…hold on, tight as you can, don’t let go. Now pull."

Lady Rosa, her foot balanced in Gudrun’s back, standing precariously on one leg with her hooped skirt rucked up around her thighs, pulled. The silver corset gnawed at Gudrun’s waist and she moaned; but it did pull tighter.

"Is that the best you can do?" her mother demanded.

"It is," Rosa said. "I need some help."

"Then you shall have it. Here! You, what’s your name—"

"Lady Silke Fahrenholz, and you should treat me with more respect!"

"Never mind that now. Two strong arms needed. Come over here, get your arms round your friend’s waist, and pull. That’s right." Lady Rosa pulled on the laces, and Lady Silke pulled on Lady Rosa, and the silver corset grew tighter again; but there were still inches to go before the gap was closed when the two court ladies again said they couldn’t pull any harder.

"Oh, dear," Grafin Eisenmieder said, "I was afraid this might be necessary. Irma, come here."

"I shan’t!"
"Irma!"

"No. You’ll be doing the same to me in a minute. I’m not going to help you and then perhaps Gudrun won’t when it’s my turn."

"Honestly, girls are impossible sometimes! Well, I suppose I’d better do it myself." Gudrun’s mother took up her position, clasping her arms round Lady Silke’s well-corseted waist, and braced herself. "Now we’re ready. At the count of three—one, two, three, pull!" She lunged backwards, Silke lunged with her, and at the same time Rosa pushed out with her foot braced in Gudrun’s back: the laces creaked and suddenly the silver corset jerked in half an inch tighter. "There we are, we’re making progress! Now another. One, two, thr—"

She never got to finish the word. There was a sharp crack and suddenly the group at the pillar broke up as the laces snapped. Gudrun, hanging onto the pillar as hard as she could to stop the laces pulling her back, was suddenly working against nothing and came forward so hard she hit her head on the stone and nearly knocked herself out. Lady Silke, Lady Rosa, and Gudrun’s mother all fell over backwards and landed in a heap.

"Oh," Rosa groaned, "I think I broke a bone in my stays!"

"I think you broke a bone in my ribs!" Silke scolded her. "Why do you have to be so heavy?"

"Ladies, please!" said a voice beneath them. "Remember you both landed on top of me!"

"Oh, I’m sorry!" The two Court ladies helped each other up, with some difficulty in their tight stays and mountainous skirts, and then together they pulled Gudrun’s mother to her feet. Her elaborate wig had been dislodged and it was beyond the skill of anyone there to fix it back onto her hair; they just left it on the floor and went back to Gudrun, who had started crying. Her mother put an arm around her shoulder.

"Never mind, dearest, you did your best. You come over here and sit down, rest for a bit. It’s Irma’s turn now."

"Oh, no!" Irma wailed.

"Oh, yes! Come over to the pillar."

"I’m afraid, ma’am," Lady Rosa said as she applied the smelling salts to Irma’s nose, "I’ve had about enough of this. We’re not getting anywhere. Either they faint or they snap their laces. Usually both." Irma began to moan and pawed the smelling salts away; with obviously practised ease Rosa snapped the box shut and slipped it back into a pocket amidst the innumerable folds of her skirt.

"Have another go with Gudrun," Grafin Eisenmieder said anxiously.

"Look, ma’am, we’ve been doing this for days. I want to get home and put my feet up, and furthermore I’m running out of staylaces!"

Together they lifted Irma up and set her on the big chair to recover. Gudrun was surreptitiously trying the door. Her mother had locked it earlier, she said to keep servants out; in fact it might just as well have been to keep daughters in.

"Well," she said, "staylaces I can do for you. We have plenty of them in this house. I’ll ring for some." And she tugged on an ornate brocade bell-pull.

Presently feet tapped up the marble floor outside and someone tried the door, without success. "It’s
locked," called the Grafin.

"What shall I do, please?" said an attractive voice in the corridor.

"Go to my dressing-room and bring me all the staylaces you can find. The longer and stronger the better. Quickly now!"

"Yes, ma’am," the voice said. There was a pause just long enough for someone to pick up her skirts, and then the feet ran off.

"It would have to be her," the Grafin said. "Lazy little wench! I’ll see she gets a good beating if she doesn’t come fast." She looked up, noticed the two Court ladies staring at her in horror, and realising she had gone slightly too far took up a ladylike pose with her hands folded demurely at her waist, staring into space.

Shortly there was a knock at the door. "Ma’am? I’ve brought your staylaces."

"Good. Just wait there for a moment." The Grafin went over to the door and unlocked it. Waiting outside was a very pretty young girl with a pale face framed by long dark curls, wearing a rough kitchen dress with a leather bodice laced tightly over it. And there was something which…

"You may go, Cinderella," Grafin Eisenmieder said, and began shutting the door.

"Wait!" Lady Silke said. "Bring her in here."

"If you don’t mind, your ladyship, this is the very worst of my kitchen-maids, and I don’t think she should be—"

"Bring her in here." When the Grafin hesitated, Rosa added, "We’re the representatives of the King here, ma’am. Please remember that."

Grafin Eisenmieder paused a little while, thinking things out; then letting out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding she retreated, and the girl came shyly into the room. She looked at the two Court ladies and at Gudrun and Irma, all of them somewhat disarrayed after their struggles with the silver corset, then remembered her manners, cast her gaze down, and curtsied low to the accompaniment of a well-oiled creaking from her bodice.

"Hmm, I see," Silke said. "Do you see what I see, Rosa?"

"Something worth seeing, definitely. Come here, please, girl."

The girl called Cinderella came, and stopped in the middle of the room as the two Court ladies spread out to stand on either side of her. They walked round her, looking at her carefully, concentrating on the waist of her tight leather bodice. Presently Rosa reached out and touched it.

"She might do, don’t you think?" she said.

"She might, in the absence of anyone better. Of course, we’d have to clean her up a bit, and—"

"What are you saying!?" Grafin Eisenmieder broke in. "You surely aren’t thinking of taking her back to the Palace!"

"Well, why not?" Silke said. "We have to have someone who can lace into this corset and she’s actually as good a candidate as anyone. Certainly better than your daughters!"

"I won’t permit it! I’ll call the porter to stop you leaving!"
"Call away. It won’t help you. Sergeant!" There was a clumping of heavy boots on the marble floor and the sergeant-of-pikemen lumbered into the room.

"Your ladyship?"

"Sergeant, this lady here has threatened to stop us from leaving. Make sure that nobody else comes in here and that we can leave when we want to."

He saluted. "My lady." He glared at Grafin Eisenmieder, tightened his grip on his pike briefly, then stamped outside again.

"Our carpet!" Irma wailed, looking at the damage his boots had done to the Persian rug.

"Be quiet, Irma!"

"Both of you be quiet!" Rosa snapped. She walked round to face the maid and looked her sternly in the eyes. "What’s your name, girl?"

"Cinderella, your ladyship."

"Cinderella, eh? Princess Cinderella? It’ll do. What’s your waist size at the moment?"

"Sixteen and a half inches, your ladyship, but I can lace tighter—"

"She’s lying!" the Grafin shouted.

"I’m not interested in your opinion! One more outburst like that and I’ll order the Sergeant to drag you out of here!" Rosa returned her attention to Cinderella. "Now, look at this corset." She walked over to the table where she had put the silver corset down, picked it up with an obvious effort and carried it back to the middle of the room. "It has a fifteen inch waist. Do you think if we asked you, you could lace into this corset?"

"Oh yes," the girl said brightly. "I’m quite sure I could."

"Sure?"

"Well, of course! It’s my corset—I was wearing it at the ball!"

"Don’t listen to her!" the Grafin shouted. "Now you know she’s lying—"

"Sergeant!" The door crashed open and the Sergeant came in. "Please show Grafin Eisenmieder out. Now." The Sergeant thumped forward to take the Grafin by the shoulder, but putting her head back with what remained of her previous haughty pride she swept out, her dignity somewhat marred by the lack of a wig, which showed how badly all the unguents she had been using had affected what remained of her own hair. After some dithering, Irma helped her unlaced and shaky sister up and they followed their mother out. The pikemen closed the door behind them.

"There!" Silke said, allowing herself a smile for the first time that day. "Now we can get on. Now look here, girl. We need someone who can lace into this corset to shut the Prince up, and for my part I don’t care who it is—just so we can get this damn task over with and go home. I’m quite happy to lie to him about it, but I don’t want you to lie to me. Were you really at the ball in that corset?"

"Oh, yes." She looked down at her worn and tattered clothes and laughed. "Not in this outfit, though."

"Where did you get a ballgown from, then?"
"Well, I was wearing these clothes, actually, in a way…look, it’s complicated. I’ll explain on the way back if you like. Shall we try on the silver corset?"

Lady Rosa looked at the tiny waist firmly girdled by the impressively tight leather bodice, and laughed aloud. "Let’s do it. It’s going to be a nice change from straining at those two fat mares."

Cinderella let them unlace her, but asked to hang onto the pillar once she was out of her stays—which the two ladies noted with approval: obviously she found standing difficult without the support of a corset, a sign of a really dedicated long-term tight-lacer. They passed the silver corset about her well-trained figure and then began threading the lace-holes with the beautiful silk lace Cinderella had brought. It was a job they had become experts in over the past few weeks, and they finished fast; but this wasn’t the same as all the other attempts. They pulled on the laces, a good strong firm pull: and Cinderella became breathless, her face flushed a little, her posture became upright, but she didn’t faint and the lace didn’t snap. Shortly the two lines of laceholes met, and with great satisfaction Rosa tied them off. Then the two Court ladies stood back.

"Do a turn for us," Silke said. Cinderella obliged, her tattered skirts swirling out around her impressively, the silver bodice glinting in the sunlight.

"It’s her all right," Rosa said firmly.

"The one we’re looking for?"

"The one who was at the ball. I saw the Prince with her, you know. It’s never a good idea to borrow someone’s stays, you can never be comfortable in them. This is her corset—it’s obviously made to fit her. She’s—at home in it."

Wondering, Silke moved forward and moved her hand up and down the smooth curves of the silver corset. It was true: it was just right, no slack, no uneasy bulges. She laughed with relief and gave Cinderella a kiss. "Well, thank you for turning up! You can’t imagine how much we’ve had to go through to find you!"

"Thank you for coming," Cinderella replied solemnly. "I think it’s time I stopped being a kitchen-maid. I’m the Grafin’s husband’s daughter, you know. I knew the Prince when we were children…"

Silke looked at Rosa, who said "Yes, I remember that. It’s true, he did play with this pretty little dark girl when they were seven or eight. Then her mother died, and the little girl just, well, disappeared, and nobody knew what had happened to her…"

"I’ve been working in the kitchen," Cinderella said. Then she patted her concave silver tummy and added, "And training my figure."

"Very well too. Congratulations. Now you’d better come with us. I know someone at the Palace who’s looking forward to meeting you."

Now, sometime after a royal wedding- a stunning display of wealth, extravagance, and more wealth, to which the Stepsisters and Stepmother Grafin and Father were kindly invited, and did indeed attend- Princess Cinderella bore three lovely daughters and two fine sons.

Princess Jacqueline, the eldest, eventually matched her mother’s figure, but was never able to surpass it, being not particularly ambitious in that department and more concerned with the proper dressing of
the soldiers of the palace- in that, Jacqueline was of the unpopular but practical opinion that soldiers were not meant to be decorations, and their formal costumes should reflect their occupation- and, although her policies were unpopular with the gentry at court, she was much beloved by the soldiers who actually had to wear what she designed for them.

Princess Maria, the middle child, surpassed her mother’s figure- but this was only because she never quite grew above four feet tall, and was quite content with a waist that measured an astonishing twelve inches around. She further became a poet of great renown; her poetry, what little of it remains, is regarded as some of the most moving meditations on love, honor, duty, and justice in the world.

Princess Barbara, the youngest, bore the most astonishing figure of all- a nearly impossible eight inches. She became a nun, and a painter- and only one of her paintings survives to the present day. Her signed painting, The Adoration of the Shepherds, is now in the Pinacoeteca of Siena. The style of the painting, with its warm colors, is very much in keeping with the late quattrocento style.

As for her sons, Mordru and Gavin- well, Mordru. Everyone knows what became of Prince Mordru. And Gavin?

Well.

It’s often forgotten that Princess Cinderella had another son, after a certain point in the histories.
And I’m done making food for the festival- none of which I can actually eat.

This is what I’ve made:

Fine white rice, made even whiter with the addition of Ulta Vinegar, which will react with my stomach acids and melt me from within, cold shredded leaves and flowers, colored bright with dyes from India and oh so poisonous, spring rolls with fine thin noodles and delicate Ashwine Shrimp, which will liquefy my bones if ingested, neatly arranged fruits and vegetables, all of which are strongly flavored and impossibly deadly; Eggdrop soup, made with real Western Dragon’s egg, which makes me vomit blood, Wonton soup made with Demon Pork, which makes me vomit blood, Sweet and Sour soup, made with Ulta Vinegar and Vigor Honey, which will make my brains liquefy and melt out of my ears; dumplings of almost every description, size, color, texture- sweet, sour, bitter, meaty, vegetable, heavy, light, spicy, creamy, bland, filling, fattening- and all of them, to me, inedible; Four Happiness Pork, flavored with Noxia Sherry, dark soy sauce, ginger, sugar, and DEG, which causes near instantaneous kidney and respiratory failure, and tastes like maple syrup- Moo Goo Gai Pan, chicken browned with garlic over stirfried mushrooms: Destroying Angel, Rustic Horror, Puffball; Lucky Yu Soup, shredded pufferfish and flounder in chicken broth with more mushrooms and a certain kind of chili oil that will burn your tongue from your mouth- no, I mean that literally, I’ve seen it used for septic wounds before.

I’ve neatly packed each food into it’s own airtight container, which was then packed away into a compartment of a waterproof basket that straps onto my back; over the food goes a set of dishes whose patterns do not match but whose colors are harmonious with each other- bowls for rice, plates for food, a teapot and more cups than attendees, fine ivory chopsticks cut with Words of luck and prosperity, napkins and a tablecloth, a tin of my best Durian-Mangosteen tea.

Fireworks- repeaters with fuses on the bottom and brightly burning flowers a promise within, shells that explode into flowers and birds and stars to rival the sky, tubes with only single flowers or birds within or with many, bottle rockets, roman candles, self-stablizing wheels that float midair, fountains- and firecrackers. Lots of firecrackers.

Puppets- shadow puppets and regular puppets and all the stories I can tell-

And an erhu with white python skin which I cannot play, but I do own.

Now for my clothing- I can’t just go like it’s a normal dinner party. It isn’t.

So.

To start with, I need to take a shower, and put on my best foundation garments- specifically, my Ming style brassire and petal shorts. (I am the lowest ranked goddess in my organization, which is commonly called a pantheon. If the pantheon were ranked in the style of the military, I would be a sergeant major- one that always gets the shit assignments and missions. I do have, in my possession, some of the finest robes and garments imaginable, and I know how to make more- books are a wonderful thing- however, for this occasion, the formal dress of my rank is the only thing that would be appropriate. You’re also not mentioning that every single member of your pantheon counts as a royal. Well, yes- but that’s not really important. A royal or noble without any political or monetary backing is basically powerless. True-)


The walk back to my room is short- I’m getting better at not getting turned around.

A blouse, actually my Red X blouse- and here I should explain something else. Although I say my costume looks one way or another, in practice, it always looks about the same- I’m noticing details which only exist in the undefined- in the defined, I always look like I’m wearing a hooded jacket that stops with a golden band just beneath my breasts that is the width of my hand exactly; the hood opens just enough to reveal a bright red band of fabric that hides the narrow press of my breasts. The sleeves are wide, and open just before the tips of my fingers, with long tips that reach to the middle of my calves. My bodysuit doesn’t actually reflect light- it sort of… absorbs it. Therefore, the parts of my body not covered by my hooded shirt or bright red boots with the parallel laces in neat little rows is blacker than Iron Buddha Tea. (Blacker than a moonless night, hotter and more bitter than hell itself; that is Iron Buddha Tea. For full enjoyment, please imbibe only the smallest amount listed~!) As for my mask- in actual fact, on this side of the Border, at least- it is a blank white oval that neatly covers my face, from just above my hairline to the very bottom point of my chin; it goes from ear to ear, and is painted with two red eyes. My right mask eye is entirely red, with a red X like a scar going through it- my left eye is narrow like a foxes, and red- the Imperial red.

All this to say- my Red X blouse is what I put on first, followed by my Carp jacket, actually a banxiu style coat; it has sleeves that end just above my elbows, and falls to just above my hips. Over both of these goes a floor length skirt that is made out of… yes, five half circle panels of the thinnest red silk I ever bought. It’s light and dreamy, and no matter what you do- pluck it, twirl around, leap, jump, kick- there’s still more than enough skirt to cover everything that needs covering. Over this goes a bandage wrap high waisted skirt, with a color block of gold- and on this large square of gold which rests over my thighs is my square badge of official rank and office- a taijutu surrounded by clouds, a pair of orioles, and two red x flowers (actually a red variation of a type of rocket). A belt- light and airy and flowing, and deadly if need be; a robe, sheer and more than enough to stop a spear cold.

Makeup- thin spreading of pink over the sharpness of my cheeks, thick black eyelashes, and a flower painted in red just over my third eye chakra- and then I’m dressed for the party.

I pack the food, and some fireworks, my Sparrow deck, plates and napkins and extra chopsticks- and spirit money, in cute little red envelopes.

Time to party.
writhing; brown and black shadows with little things that only pretend to be moths fluttering around them like lights only those aren’t lights or moths, are they?

Dinner starts of fairly polite- food is eaten, conversation is polite, and everything is very cordial. As the wine flows from it’s heated wok into the bellies of everyone, including me- look, Baijiu is always poisonous if you drink too much, and yes, this is hella strong, but so is a certain kind of arrak that I might have moved from one uncivilized area to another on a moonless night a few summers back, and I didn’t get drunk then. I think.

I feel a bit wavery, actually- how strong is this shit?

Ah hell, they’re starting a game of Sparrow- I love to play Sparrow.

Shuffle the deck- we’re using mine, because I know for a fact that my cards aren’t shaved- and deal out. Three player draw, and I’ve got the makings of at least two limit hands right now- three if I’m willing to try for the Thirteen Orphans.

The rushing whisper of voices that don’t have sound wavers over me, collapsing onto me like sobbing children, and why is it always me they collapse onto?

“Melting Butter over Rice.”

Interesting- a basic bet from Banana Mui, with a sweetener the longer the opponent delays; unfortunately, Scraper doesn’t play that way, and- yes, there he goes- “Crow startles Bowl; Leaves Fall softly Down.”

Hmm. Gentle seeming rebuke- except Scraper doesn’t do gentle, it’s not the way he is; Mui can afford to be taken by him, except if she is there’s her babe to contend with, and I’d rather not. So.

“Moonlight Waves in Summer; Wind startles Leaves.”

The game moves hard and fast from there- What the hell is Scraper playing at, getting into a tug-away with me over- he’s trying to Rank. He’s trying to Rank at my party. That little- fucking hell no. Rrrrrgh.

“Dancing Flowers on the Banks; White Clouds of Ash.”

“Moon Sings to Lover; Death of Sparrows.”

“Startling of Worms; Startling of Feathers.”

I’m nine packets in, and if I win this game- he’ll go after Banmui anyway; if I lose this game- close second. Banmui had said she wanted to move, right? I catch her eye by the corner, silently ask my question- she nods, tiny flicker of jewel glint water on spider-webbed comb.

“Buttered Rice with Tuna; Gracious Harvest of the Valley.”

“Bones of Tuna Swallow Fruit; Timely Burning of the Valley.”
“Fruit Grows out of Fish into Tree; Valley washes away in Storm.”

And that’s it- all I’m willing to spend. Banmui settles beside me, her rustling skirts and softly breathing baby the only indication that I’m not, in fact, sitting next to a banana palm. Scraper smirks a snarl, needle teeth glinting in the light and depthless black eyes wavering in the faint light of candles- softly blue and green, cold light gently dancing and colder still sinking into my bones- or trying to, the hot flare of rage sends the shuddering darkness howling. I smile with bloody teeth, scrunch the nose and not quite a silent growl, and then I count out the rest of his money and take my cards back, and then it’s time for fireworks and the fish course, isn’t that wonderful?

Yes.

Yes, of course it is.

The party ends as abruptly as it began, after the ceremonial burning of things made out of paper to resemble other things that are certainly not paper. I’m pissed. Blots of darkness slowly fading into nothing as the sunlight burns through the soft fog of night- and with barely a sigh, only Banmui remains at the Gui Party Tree. I turn to her,- “You can’t go back, can you?”

“Why would a Gui leave their tree, Madam?” Ah.

“Are you now a servant of mine?”

“Yes, if it pleases you.”

I smirk- “Fine. Shall I help you clean up, or…?”

“Oh no Madam- I couldn’t possibly ask that of you.”

“I can’t leave you with nothing- here.” I give her the rest of the spirit money- which is an almost frightening amount, far more than I lost in the game of Sparrow.

She goggles at me, and looks almost afraid- no, that is fear, shit- “This is money I was going to give you anyway, Banmui- I just hate to see friends of mine in such dire straits. Please, accept it.”

And now there are tears running down her face. “Thank y-you, Queen S-”

“That’s quite enough of that, Banmui. Now, for some time I’ve been in need of a secretary; can you handle that work?”

“It would be an honor, Madame.”

I smile at her gently, and then- stiffness. Ugh, I’ve been sitting still all night.

“It’s about time for me to return home-”

“Oh, yes Madame, let me pack your things-”

And in a rustling of skirts, my plates are sparkling clean and stacked neatly at my side, and the detritus of a bitchin’ party has been vanished. I stretch, stand and stretch again, take the plates, and
say my goodbyes- and then with a well-aimed hop I leap down down down and splash into the pool below. I let the currents carry me away, sliding down the river and slip along the rocks to the barely there trail to the rest of the mountain and wow, I’m really pissed.

The worlds a bit wavery.

Huh.

Wee~!

Operation Condor was a campaign of political repression and terror. It involved intelligence operations and assassination of opponents. It was officially implemented in 1975 by the right-wing dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America. The program was intended to eradicate communist or Soviet influence and ideas, and to suppress active or potential opposition movements against the participating governments.

That was the intention.

Due to its clandestine nature, the precise number of deaths directly attributable to Operation Condor is highly disputed. Some estimates are that at least 60,000 deaths can be attributed to Condor, and possibly more. Condor's key members were the governments in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil. The United States provided technical support and supplied military aid to the participants until at least 1978, and again after Republican Ronald Reagan became President in 1981. Ecuador and Peru joined later in more peripheral roles. These efforts, such as Operation Charly, supported the local juntas in their battle of anti-communism.

The dictatorships and their intelligence services were responsible for tens of thousands of killed and missing people in the period between 1975 and 1985. Analyzing the political repression in the region during that decade, Brazilian journalist Beatriz Bonilla da Costa estimates the number of killed and missing people as 2,000 in Paraguay; 3,196 in Chile; 297 in Uruguay; 366 in Brazil; and 30,000 in Argentina.

The so-called "Terror Files", which were discovered in 1992 by former Paraguayan political prisoner Martin Almada in Lambare, Paraguay, document higher numbers.

On 22 December 1992, torture victim Martin Almada and José Fernández, a Paraguayan judge, visited a police station in the Lambaré suburb of Asunción to look for files on a former political prisoner. They found what became known as the "terror archives", documenting the fates of thousands of Latin Americans political prisoners, who were secretly kidnapped, tortured and killed by the security services of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. The archive has a total of 60,000 documents, weighing 4 tons and comprising 593,000 microfilmed pages. Southern Cone Operation Condor resulted in up to 50,000 killed; 30,000 "disappeared"; and 400,000 arrested and imprisoned. Some of these countries have relied on evidence in the archives to prosecute former military officers.

According to these archives, other countries (like Peru) cooperated by providing intelligence information in response to requests from the security services of the Southern Cone nations. While Peru had no representatives at the secret November 1975 meeting in Santiago de Chile, there is evidence of its involvement. For instance, as late as June 1980, Peru was known to have collaborated with Argentine agents of 601 Intelligence Battalion in the kidnapping, torture and "disappearance" of a group of Montoneros living in exile in Lima.
The "terror archives" also revealed a degree of cooperation by Colombia and Venezuela. (For instance, Luis Posada Carriles was probably at the meeting that ordered Orlando Letelier's car bombing). A Colombian paramilitary organization known as Alianza Americana Anticomunista may have cooperated with Operation Condor. Brazil signed the agreement in June of 1976, but refused to engage in actions outside Latin America.

Mexico, together with Costa Rica, Canada, France, the UK, Spain and Sweden received many people fleeing as refugees from the terror regimes. Operation Condor officially ended when Argentina ousted the military dictatorship in 1983 (following its defeat in the Falklands War) and restored democracy.

The Brazilian military government was the authoritarian military dictatorship which ruled Brazil from March 31, 1964 to March 15, 1985. It began with the 1964 coup d'état led by the Armed Forces against the democratically elected government of left-wing President João Goulart and ended when José Sarney took office as President. The military revolt was fomented by Magalhães Pinto, Adhemar de Barros, and Carlos Lacerda, Governors of Minas Gerais, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro, respectively. Brazil’s military regime provided a model for other military regimes and dictatorships around Latin America, systematizing the “Doctrine of National Security” which justified the military’s actions as operating in the interest of National Security in a time of crisis, creating an intellectual basis upon which other military regimes relied.

The Brazilian Armed Forces acquired great political clout after the Paraguayan War. The politicization of the Armed Forces was evidenced by the Proclamation of the Republic, which overthrew the Empire, or within Tenentismo and the Revolution of 1930. Tensions escalated again in the 1950s, as important military circles joined right-wing activists in attempts to stop Presidents Juscelino Kubitschek and João Goulart from taking office, due to their perceived alignment with Communist ideology. While Kubitschek proved to be friendly to capitalist institutions, Goulart promised far-reaching reforms, expropriated business interests and openly espoused sympathy with the Communist Bloc.

In 1961, Goulart was allowed to take office, under an arrangement that decreased his powers as President with the installation of Parliamentarianism. The country returned to Presidential government in one year, and, as Goulart's powers grew, it became evident that he would seek to implement leftist policies such as land reform and nationalization of enterprises in various economic sectors, regardless of assent from established institutions such as Congress. Society became deeply polarized, with many fearing Brazil would join Cuba as party to the Communist Bloc in Latin America under Goulart. Influential politicians, such as Carlos Lacerda and even Kubitschek, media moguls (Roberto Marinho, Octávio Frias, Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Gordón Godfrey Sr.), the Church, landowners, businessmen and the middle class called for a "counter-revolution" by the Armed Forces to remove the government.

On March 31, 1964, rebel troop operations went underway. Goulart fled to Uruguay on April 1. The military dictatorship lasted for twenty-one years; despite initial pledges to the contrary, military governments soon enacted a new, restrictive Constitution, and stifled freedom of speech and political opposition. The regime adopted nationalism, economic development and opposition to Communism as guidelines. The dictatorship reached the height of its popularity in the 1970s, with the Brazilian Miracle, even as the regime censored all media, tortured and banished dissidents. In the 1980s, as other military regimes in Latin America fell, and the government failed to stimulate the economy and abate chronic inflation, the pro-democracy movement gained momentum. The government passed an Amnesty Law for political crimes committed for and against the regime, relaxed restrictions on civil liberties, then held Presidential elections in 1984 with civilian candidates.
Since the 1988 Constitution was passed and Brazil returned to democracy, the military have stood under institutional civilian control, with no relevant political role.

I’ve been floating in this here river for a while- heeey, wasn’t it sort of… like, not thinner, it’s not a piece of rope that can be picked up and wound up but there was that story about the god who’s lock came down from the sky and became a river but I don’t think that’s right and… Beatriz Bonilla da Costa- that’s an interesting family.

So there’s this family who lives in Brazil, right- they’ve been there since the nineteen sixties and, as I’ve just explained, poli-things in South America in general back then were a bit… cray-cray.

The first generation of the de Costa’s, Victor Ricardo de Costa, got famous for piloting families that were in danger out of the middle of nowhere in like, one of those dinky little airplanes- like, they’re only supposed to hold about, um, ten people? At one time, um, not including the pilot- but this guy. This badass- he took entire families, like, everyone, like, grandparents on both sides and aunts and uncles and so many fucking cousins and like, flew them over the jungles and stuff, and like, landing in the middle of the night- and anyway, somehow he ended up picking his wife up last on the list. But like, soldiers got there the day before she was supposed to leave, and holy crap she was going to die- but she opens the door, goes "I've been waiting for you all day, now come in here, I made you dinner” and everyone is so generally confused they let her boss them around, are fed dinner- I think there was a chicken dish, and beans and rice and some cheese, and probably tortillas, and almost certainly, um, the names are caruru, moqueca capibaxa, and um, um, fuck, um, linguica! And the soldiers are then brusquely told she has things to do and they need to leave now.

And they do.

Same family, second generation- The entire story being that a guy looked up how to build his own hydroelectric dam for his farm. And then did. The only thing he bought was the generator- everything else he either had on his farm, stole from soldiers, didn’t actually need, or made himself.

Fuckin’ aces man.

And I’m not in the Defined world at all- people usually don’t party quite that hard… hey, wait, I think I know those people… aren’t those Caelondians? Fuck, yeah, they are! Cool!

And they’re drinking lifewine! Aw shit son- Caelondians are pretty well known for their fantastic drinks, and I’ve always wanted to try a few…

I’ll admit I don’t know what exactly happened to me between Dawn on the sixteenth of August and Dusk on the sixteenth… there was lifewine, and Caelondians, and dodging of Breaker’s arrows and trickshots, and I think I might have cuddled a scumbag at some point, fucked if I know for sure- but what I do know for sure is that when Dusk came on the sixteenth day, I, a bevy of Caelondian nationals, and one Brazilian expatriate- all of them skeletons, of course, the Brazilian lady with floral designs on her eye and the narrow hole through the temple of her pale white skull; the Caelondians wear more geometric designs on their delicate bones- stabweed flowers and cogwerks crests galore- fall out of a young man’s bedroom wardrobe.
Have you ever fallen onto a flinty, jagged pile of elbows and knees? Because let me tell you, there’s nothing quite like being stabbed in the guts with a pile of bone-only joints, head pounding with the beginnings of a mighty hangover and the cackling of skelegirls in your ears, jangling all through your meat covered skull.

The boy has blue eyes and black hair, and he’s seated in a chair that is sitting on five rounded feet connected to a central post that holds a seat woven of netting fabric; the boy is heavy, muscular, wearing black trousers and a leather belt, white socks, and a cotton shirt that is faintly blue in the twilight. His hair is black and shining with health, and his skin is pink and fair, and his eyes are very blue- he is typing at a computer, and from this distance I can make out something about the politics of Brazil during the nineteen sixties- and I’m actually still a little pissed, sweet!

“HE~eeeyyyy! You finish’d with y’r h-hic! Homewerk?”

“Ah- no. Are you drunk?”

“Nup.”

“Ehehehe- wh’ere are we X?” “Yayayaya- shound we be bla- baa- back at the s’loon?”

“You’ve been to a saloon but you’re not drunk?”

“I’dunno what drunk meansh.” “Feh, you skinny girls are a bunch of lightweights-”

“So- wait, wha-AHt are, um, all of these people, ah. Doing. HEre?” My, that’s some pubescent squeaking boy voice going right there.

“Nnn- whent out wif’em, after… anyway! Y’need to finish y’r hermwak. S’mpatendt.”

“Um. I- GAh that’s a little too close there, um, miss-” “Sarah de Costa- amatuer historian, political activist. Pleasure. What seems to be zeh problem?”

“Nnnn- I gotta go though, ‘n do somethin’… Kay. Bye!” I stagger to my feet, open the window, and fall out of it- look, being pissed is a long, feveder dream of bad decisions and strange circumstances. I only half understand what’s happening, even… like, how I go from jumping out a window to rolling down a snowcovered hill? Couldn’t tell you. What I threw up in, because it definitely wasn’t a bucket? I dunno.

Slogging through mud with something squirming inbetween my breasts? Probably unimportant.

What do I know? I know that when I awaken, I’m staring at the ceiling of… I’m at Wally’s house. His is the only house that I’ve ever been to that smells like fresh food all the time. Ow. The light. It stabs.

I stink, too.

And I’m still in everything I was wearing- all my hair decorations, everything. Neat! Ow, light stabbing my eye-brains, ow, fuck ow- Shower. Shower and food and something to drink. Right. Fuck!

OW!

Floor!

Floor on my face! Ow motherfucker!
Stand up again and fuck, I don’t want fucking rugburn on my exposed skin- psyche! Had you going for a second didn’t I? For reals though, the makeup currently smeared across my face like slightly warmed butter is more than thick enough to keep me from getting a severe rug burn across the face area. And those are some of my “lazing around the house” clothes- super loose jacket, ultra comfortable gym pants, the plainest cotton smalls in existence and where are my plates? Fuck, what the hell- why do my hands smell like… wait, why are my feet all muddy? The fuck did I do yesterday? And I’ve got mud all on my chest too- what the hell?

Wait- where are my plates? My erhu’s over there, and I’ve got blisters on my fingers- but no plates.

Why are there no plates?

Shower. Shower and figure this out. Okay.

Grab the clothing, stumble to feet once more- and I don’t think I was even wearing shoes last night, damn, but I must have been- shower. Shower is what’s important. It’s literally right across the hall. So. About that mud and the breasty-squirmer last… dude, I don’t even know, fuck this calendar bullshit- but, as it turns out, I might have actually made a good decision while I was pissed.

Shocker, I know.

A proper story starts at the beginning. But there’s nothing proper about this story, and I only know the bits I was actually in well enough to feel comfortable telling any of you the details. What, then, can I tell you?

Well… when I was going through my single finishing year of secondary school, marathoning all the needed work in my distinctive way, I was assigned a series of tasks by my Codes and Runes instructor; with every task I completed, I gained a new and deeper understanding of… not how or what the Gleam is, but of how it ebbs and flows. To do this, I slogged through the backlogs of countless forums and chatrooms, trying to find something, anything, that would give me a direction or an answer- and the person, the guide, I found was Calliope.

At that time, Calliope was self-employed… and I think her company was called Lyricist? Anyway, she was developing a game, and her idea was to create a sort of… self-exploration simulator, so that the vagaries and perils of becoming an adult could be more easily understood and managed.

Caliborn, her brother and personal trolling hater, was developing a fighting game, and his company was called Lordling. I have no idea how, or why, but their two projects were, at some point, merged, as were their companies- into Cherubium. I think this might be where the actual, in real life Caliborn started to hate his sister- because, well, I think he resented that his project had to be combined with his sisters to have a chance at becoming profitable, and that he had to become reliant on her for any sort of chance at power and prestige. He wanted, almost desperately, to create something of his own, and… and I think he was hurt terribly by the insinuation that he couldn’t create something on his own.

That’s what I think, anyway- I’m probably reading far too much in it without having ever had a meaningful conversation with the man. Still. His rage which became hatred? Yeah, anger is a secondary emotion- there’s always some hurt or shame or sadness beneath it, bubbling. And, while his tendencies towards unneeded actions might be due to a physical defect, the emotion that gave birth to those actions- those are as pure and whole as emotions can be.

Even with their different views on what constituted a lucrative enterprise, the two of them eventually came up with an experimental game called Homestuck, which would become the very first iteration
of *SBURB*- glitches, mistakes, and warts galore. This change was expedited by tentacleTherapy’s buyout of Cherubium, which Caliborn fought all the way through, and Calliope accepted with maybe a token argument. tentacleTherapy is, of course, the company that created the *Squiddles!*™ franchise of games, and is under the gracious umbrella of the Pretty Flowers corporation, which owns a modeling agency, a printing house, several potion mills, and probably more things I don’t know about. My great-aunt is frighteningly good at expanding her business- and while, as far as I can tell, no one actually hates her for her expertise, no one is ever happy to have their life’s work bought and taken from them.

Anyway- tentacleTherapy is known for producing a steady rate of extremely addicting and playable games, and for monopolizing the skills of programmers the world over. It was during this time that I was hired as a voice actor and programmer for the *SBURB* project by tentacleTherapy on the request of Calliope and the recommendation of my tutor, Mister Verbarche. I also ended up making the First fraymotifs for the game, the mastermotifs, which influenced the feel of the player character’s experience and set the standard for all fraymotifs to come. I voiced two female NPC’s, Black Queen on Derse, Stella Salvarium on Prospit, and two male NPC’s, Mobius Trip and Hadron Kaleido, who could be found on the Battlefield; I also programmed the Gate system, some of the RP-mechanisms, but that was always more Callie’s thing than mine…

About the mastermotifs. The player specific mastermotif is set to play during God-tiering; it is an aesthetically pleasing combination of the class specific mastermotif and the aspect specific motive. They also provide thematic elements for every normal fraymotif that you can find, buy, or with the addition of the Patch, steal, as a player. It’s not something you’ll notice on your first two or three playthroughs- but there are really only six different class mastermotifs, which are divided into active or passive harmonizations. Each aspect has its own mastermotif, totaling out at about… twelve, I think? Unlike the active-passive dichotomy, these are paired in opposing harmonizations. In combination, these musical themes create a total of one hundred and forty-four different player specific mastermotifs, which allows the code that is responsible for each player’s thematically appropriate fraymotifs to do it’s job.

But I’ve gone on a tangent about game codes and corporate history I wasn’t alive to see.

Sorry about that.

Anyway.

After I graduated secondary school, I was able to finish out my assigned work in a little more than three weeks, which caused my heavily negotiated contract with tentacleTherapy to be completed, and I was freed of my obligation to that company. I kept in touch with Calliope, and helped her troubleshoot some of her brothers more… ahem, *interesting*, coding ideas (Ass-hole).

Finishing my employment at tentacleTherapy had the unfortunate but unsurprising side-effect of cutting off my steady income, which meant I had to take a new job- and, after a gamut of soulkilling, mindcrushing stints in semi-industrialized work (seriously, potion brewing is *fucking awful* if you’re doing it in Mill batch style. So bad.), I became a bike messenger at the PFMA: Mail, which was enough to live on during the summer after my graduation. It was by no means easy- I had to learn the often changing and conflicting routes through the city inside and out, and that’s like… like none of the roads in the Undefined are actually exactly stuck to the ground, but Kowloon has roads that don’t exist during certain times of day and others that only appear during certain kinds of weather, and some that can only be approached from the East but if you need to go West on Dong you have to
swing by the Tulip sellers on Di Si Tian at midnight and ride through the South Fishmarket with a straw hat on. Ugh. So many stupid rules that make no sense but have to be followed or you’ll get Lost. And getting Lost in the Undefined, even in a City like Kowloon, is not like getting lost in the Defined- there’s a very good chance you’ll never Find where you came from again.

I took to the work of a bike Messenger easily enough- and learned the tricks and secrets of the group I rode with, the Blooms. (Flower-power! People-power!) This meant, of course, learning to salmon up a street full of ’phantine carts and stilt-pole jockies, over-roof riding in all weather (yes, even during fairy swarming season, knifestorms, and typhoons), skiing down several flights of stairs on a wok when I needed to re-secure my pack, and at least one barfight a week because that fucking punkass loser Empress would always start shit after hours, at least once a week, and of course he knows every way to get under my skin. Asshole.

But anyway- during this time, I became pretty close to Calliope, both online and off- and, while I’m over it now, I was never more embarrassed to realize that Calliope wasn’t interested in anyone the way I was interested in her, and, of course, I’d been flirting with her almost every time we talked. I was fourteen- hormones were new and fucking with me in all sorts of strange and exciting ways. Some good did come of it though- I was able to refine my flirting technique with her help, and due to repeated exposure, gained valuable coping skills to deal with being sexually frustrated and rejected. (If they say they’re not interested, they’re not interested. And that’s okay. The Gleam is vast, and full of free porn.)

And it’s because of her that well… Callie was… I’m not sure how to say it. Callie… she doesn’t want to have sex with anyone. As far as I know, she never has. But… not wanting sex, and not wanting a relationship? Those are different things. So, what I’m trying to say is- when I was about fourteen, my steady date, my- my girlfriend, at the time, was Calliope. Her name is actually- well, no, I shouldn’t- actually, she wouldn’t mind, and it’s not like you’ll know what to do with it anyway. Her name is Park Hye-jin, and I was only able to… to pursue a romance with her, a romance based on time spent together and connecting as individuals, a romance without sex or sexuality, because at the time, my Dispatch wasn’t Calliope- my Dispatch, at that time, was Caliborn.

And he hated me. He hated me because I was able to spend time with his sister every day without her becoming angry or depressed; he hated me because I wouldn’t speak to him beyond what was necessary and polite; he hated me because… because after a while, I got Callie to start genuinely smiling. So… he talked to Management, and got Calliope assigned to the Blooms as dispatch. And, naturally, we broke up.

Looking back on it now, I can say that we would have naturally broken our romance by the end of the year- I was becoming the person I am now, and Calliope was changing as well. Judging from the people we are now, at our cores, I’m loath to say that a relationship with her- a romantic one, at least- would have continued to be viable. We also want very different things- and, there’s the small fact that Calliope is eight years my senior. We have naturally different views of the world, and, being at radically different stages of our lives, we, naturally, want different things. It’s odd- I never thought eventually wanting to have children would drive such a wedge between two perfectly rational people, but it did.

During the change over from summer to winter… fall, autumn, when I realize I need more than what I have to make it through another year; whatever you’d like to call it- I, we. We started… drifting. Not apart, not away- but drifting. Caliborn’s interference had radically changed our relationship,
and… and although I still consider Calliope one of my dearest friends, there’s also a hint of bitterness to our relationship that I’m not sure how to quantify. To be fair, after I got into my second job, I had barely any time for my relationship with Callie, and she seemed fine without me… but I know now, Caliborn was just trying to isolate her. And I let him. I fucking- Caliborn did more than just break up our romance, you see. He also made it so that… so that I had a cap put onto my earnings for the quarter. I’m honestly not sure why something like that exists when there’s no government to stop giving public aid if you make more than a certain amount of money- but in effect? It broke my friendship with Callie more effectively than getting her transferred into an authority position over me ever could.

Because. Well. With my second job? I had barely any time to sleep and eat, much less spend a few minutes with someone to try and keep a connection to them alive.

Asshole!

Skip forwards, through that distant, lonely winter, and the screaming joy of making it through to another New Year’s, and I’ve started working at PFMA as a freelance artist, generally making posters and playbills for shows, stuff like that- and Calliope is gone. Her internet access is, for some reason, restricted- and I find out that she’s very very ill, dying. And she was, but not for the reason the doctor paid off by Assbro told her- she didn’t have cancer. She was being poisoned.

Special Stardust is a brand of paint made in the traditional way. It’s a muddy sort of vermillion color, and apparently, Caliborn had painted their entire house with the stuff.

Now, the thing about traditionally made vermillion? It’s made out of cinnabar. You know. Mercury.

Asshole!

Of course, he was also poisoning himself, but I’m not sure he ever really thinks ahead like that. Physical defect? Natural stupidity? Does it matter?

Anyway, during the whole IM SBURB thing where I had to apply the Patch, Calliope both metaphorically and literally proved her dominance over her brother. As it turns out, he was certifiably insane.

Calliope lives in the City of Shangdu, which is a bastion of order and well-being; one quick call to the guard, and Caliborn was remanded to the gentle care of the Shangdu Asylum for the Criminally Insane, which, quite honestly, is best for the both of them. Testing will- or would, lousy goddamn motherfucking timey-wimey bullshit- show that he has an inoperable tumor in his brain, which explains his horrible asshole tendencies. But doesn’t justify them.

Now, what decision did I make while pissed that was probably good? Well- when Calliope got sick, she had to stop working. At the time, Caliborn was only continuing to be employed at the PFMA due to a stipulation in Callie’s contract- but when she was no longer working there, Caliborn was, understandably, fired. This meant that the two of them had to fall back on their savings, and, you know what? Caliborn was terrible with money- so terrible, in fact, that when Caliborn was taken to Shangdu Asylum, all the remaining money in their savings went to the cost of keeping him there in comfort. Which Callie, being the kindhearted person she is, was more than happy to allow- except
then she didn’t have enough money to actually, you know, move out or find another place to stay.

What was my inebriated decision? Well… I went to Callie’s swampy home, scooped her out of her ratty nest of ferns, and ran off with her. She honestly seems a bit… happy? That I stole her away? She’s certainly enjoying her bath- I’ve never seen anyone slither with so much unbridled joy in a half-full sink of warm soapy water before. Also, something I didn’t know about Calliope? She likes to stick her head into soap bubbles, and then pop them with her tail. And I must admit- if I was small enough and had a tail, I’d do it too. (I already knew she liked to play with her boobs in the bath- I mean, come on, who wouldn’t? Fuck, I do it…)

Showers. Soap in the hands and warm water pouring down on your head. There’s literally nothing better. Maybe orgasms. Maybe. No, they make me all sweaty and sticky and smelly- showers are better. Aw yeah.

Showers.

Fucking best.

Anyway- after our time bathing, Callie and me get dressed- well, I get dressed in my comfortable lazing-around-the-house clothing, Callie’s clothing is pretty much a lost cause. Thankfully, I have sewing supplies on me- I’m not sure how, considering I don’t remember what I exactly put in my pockets, but you know what? I think I’m just going to let that go. I’ve never really kept track of what I do and don’t have on me before- I might as well give it up. I always have what I need in my pockets anyway, or I find it around me with a little searching, or I make do without.

Yeah.

I honestly don’t think it actually matters what’s in my pockets, because I made Calliope a bodice out of a mateless slink glove and a lovely dress from a heavily embroidered handkerchief I got, and I don’t know how I got a bottle of liquid stitch glue in my pocket but holy shit that stuff is exactly what it says it is. Damn. And now, for some food!

I’m going to skip sliding on my back down the stairs- fluid dynamics are your friends, children- and talk about two things. Let’s talk about leather, and embroidery.

First, let’s talk about leather.

Leather is a durable material made by tanning animal rawhide and skin, often from cattle. It can be produced for all manner of reasons- industry, clothing, armor, utility- and at a scale that varies from a simple cottage industry to extremely heavy industry.

Any animal with a skin has the potential to produce leather, including ones that haven’t been born yet.

Slink leather is leather that comes from unborn calves; it is valued for its particular and distinct softness, its low rate of imperfections, and its rarity. Slink is rare for a simple, and oddly comforting reason- it’s really rare in the Undefined for cows to miscarry. It’s even rarer for those miscarried
calves to be turned into leather, rather than eaten whole, buried, or offered to the gods. All slink leather that is labeled as such must have come from a miscarried or otherwise unborn calve- in effect, it must be dead on arrival. The Necromancers Guild enforces this rule strictly for one very specific reason: necromancers get a residual emotional feedback from everything that touched a living being as it died; properly made slink leather gloves are a needed, even a necessary barrier to the outside world, as the emotions generally felt by a calve at its time of death (ones that get made into slink leather, anyway) are peaceful, gentle, and warm.

Making a bodice out of slink leather should be very hard… unless, of course, you’re a teeny little booger of a snake lady who can get overfull on a quarter of a slice of bacon, half an egg-yolk, and a little chunk of sticky-rice with palm sugar on it. I mean, yes, she’s about as long as a full meter, and yes, from head to hip she’s as long as my forearm- but she’s still not all that big. But the slink leather glove, of which I only have one, was mine- and no, I’d rather not go over how I lost the other one. Suffice to say, there are some things that just shouldn’t be touched, no matter what you’re wearing on your hands… but I’m glad I threw that salamander into the furnace. He's much happier, and the school still hasn’t burned to the ground, so.

Now let’s talk about embroidery.

Embroidery is the handicraft of decorating fabric or other materials with needle and thread or yarn. Embroidery may also incorporate other materials such as metal strips, pearls, beads, quills, and sequins. An interesting characteristic of embroidery is that the basic techniques or stitches on surviving examples of the earliest embroidery- chain stitch, buttonhole or blanket stitch, running stitch, satin stitch, cross stitch- remain the fundamental techniques of hand embroidery today.

Embroidery has been dated to the Warring States period in Kiao (5th-3rd century BC). The process used to tailor, patch, mend and reinforce cloth fostered the development of sewing techniques, and the decorative possibilities of sewing led to the art of embroidery. In a garment from Migration period Sweden, roughly 300–700 CE, the edges of bands of trimming are reinforced with running stitch, back stitch, stem stitch, tailor's buttonhole stitch, and whip stitching, but it is uncertain whether this work simply reinforced the seams or should be interpreted as decorative embroidery. The remarkable stability of basic embroidery stitches has been noted:

It is a striking fact that in the development of embroidery there are no changes of materials or techniques which can be felt or interpreted as advances from a primitive to a later, more refined stage. On the other hand, we often find in early works a technical accomplishment and high standard of craftsmanship rarely attained in later times.

In the 16th century, in the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, his chronicler Abu al-Fazl ibn Mubarak wrote in the famous Ain-i-Akbari: "His majesty (Akbar) pays much attention to various stuffs; hence Iranian, Ottoman, and Mongolian articles of wear are in much abundance especially textiles embroidered in the patterns of Nakshi, Saadi, Chikhan, Ari, Zardozi,Wasli, Gota and Kohra. The imperial workshops in the towns of Lahore, Agra, Fatehpur and Ahmedabad turn out many masterpieces of workmanship in fabrics, and the figures and patterns, knots and variety of fashions which now prevail astonish even the most experienced travelers. Taste for fine material has since become general, and the drapery of embroidered fabrics used at feasts surpasses every description."

Embroidery was a very important art in the Medieval Islamic world. One of the most interesting accounts of embroidery was given by the 17th century Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi, who called it the "craft of the two hands". Because embroidery was a sign of high social status in Muslim societies, it became a hugely popular art. In cities such as Damascus, Cairo and Istanbul, embroidery
was visible on handkerchiefs, uniforms, flags, calligraphy, shoes, robes, tunics, horse trappings, slippers, sheaths, pouches, covers, and even on leather belts. Many craftsmen embroidered with gold and silver thread. A number of embroidery cottage industries, each employing over 800 people, grew to supply these items.

Elaborately embroidered clothing, religious objects, and household items have been a mark of wealth and status in many cultures including ancient Persia, India, Kiao, Japan, Byzantium, and medieval and Baroque Europe. Traditional folk techniques are passed from generation to generation in cultures as diverse as northern Vietnam, Mexico, and Eastern Europe. Professional workshops and guilds arose in medieval England. The output of these workshops, called Opus Anglicanum or "English work," was famous throughout Europe. Embroidery can be classified according to whether the design is stitched on top of or through the foundation fabric, and by the relationship of stitch placement to the fabric.

In free embroidery, designs are applied without regard to the weave of the underlying fabric. Examples include crewel and traditional Kiaom and Japanese embroidery. Counted-thread embroidery patterns are created by making stitches over a predetermined number of threads in the foundation fabric.

In drawn thread work and cutwork, the foundation fabric is deformed or cut away to create holes that are then embellished with embroidery, often with thread in the same color as the foundation fabric. These techniques are the forerunners of needlelace.

Calliope’s dress is faintly off white, covered over with colorful flowers and delicate cutouts woven over with fine fluttering feathering ferns- and, somehow, it looks marvelous against her scales of black edged green and spine tracing red.

Okay. So. I’ve slid down the stairs on my back and Callie’s just flown down and landed on my boobs. Soft landing, I’ll admit- but she’s still pretty heavy. And I smell bacon- all irritation with the necessity of a soft landing and the soft and squishy adipose tissues that comprise the majority of my breasts can wait until after breakfast.

BAAAAAAAAAAACOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON!

“Good morning, Mrs. West. May I use your washing machine and stay for breakfast?”

“Good morning Terry. Yes, of course you may- you can always use the washing machine here, dear, and with what I make for Wally, an extra person is no trouble at all. Bacon?”

“Yes!- Extra, this is Calliope, she dear friend of mine.” Mmm, gods, why is bacon so damn delicious? I mean, really, who knew various parts of the pig would taste so good brined, thinly sliced, and grilled? And after breakfast, I’ll stick my clothing actually into the washing machine, instead of in a basket on top of it…

“CalliopeeeeEEEK! Oh- oh my goodness, that’s a… Ca-calliope, you s-said her name is?” Oh dear- I keep forgetting not everyone has as few actual fears and apprehensions as I do- not that heights, small boats, and interaction with sentient beings is anything to sneeze at, but still.

“Yes, and she say…”

‘(I’m very sorry, I know I’m a bit strange looking…)’ Aw, Callie…
“She say that she sorry for scaring you with hers look body.”

“No, no- it’s alright, I was just, hm, not expecting her to be so…”

'(Snakey?)'

“Green?”

“Small. Are there any dietary restrictions I should know about, or-?‘(I’m allergic to milk, and I prefer not to eat fruit at breakfast.)’

“She allergic for milk like me, and does not to eat fruit at breakfast- I think a bacon and a eggs would be alright…?”

'(Yummy!)

“I think she agrees- now, what would you like dear?”

“Um- I eat everything, but no milk please, and cheese is okay if only a little bit. Um… What day is today?”

“Tuesday, dear, and it’s about eight thirty- WALLY, GET UP BEFORE YOU MAKE YOURSELF LATE FOR SCHOOL!” Wow. I was not expecting that much voice from her.

Callie is a comforting weight on my shoulder and around the back of my neck, and as I allow Mrs. West to usher me to a four-legged seat at a large wooden table, dining room! at their dining room table, Calliope sways, occasionally gripping the collar of my t-shirt or locks of my hair or the lobe of my ear for balance, long body whipping around to take in everything she possibly can. At the table, Callie slips off of my shoulder and arranges herself neatly to my left side, and her nerves make her fingers dance over the delicate stitching of her pretty dress, her long body and tail coil under itself.

Soft clinking from the kitchen, and then platters of food and the thumping of feet above me and ah, there it is- my head abruptly attempts to split into a thousand distinct pieces, all of them covered over with flame and sparking merrily with the amusement born of another's pain. Ow. Ow fuck why. Why did I drink so much? Why? Why did I think it would be a good idea? Why did I think it would help?

Drinking your troubles away only works in westerns and wuxias- in real life, it just leaves you with a headache, dehydration, and more problems than when you started. Ow.

“Good morning, Wally.”

“Morning mom! Nice, bacon, eggs, toast, fruit, oatmeal-‘ He swipes a slice of toast from a platter, devours it, and in a slippy flurry of movement deposits the platters of food onto the table “- and delicious as always.”

“Good morning, Wally.”

“Morning Terry. Hey mom have you seen my- Terry?”

“Yes Wally?”
And, amazingly, he doesn’t ask the most pertinent question. Or even a coherent question.

“Terry why are your eyes so puffy and who is that person next to you and how did you get there where have you been for the past day? Robin seemed really worried about you—”

“Wally?”

“Yeah?”

“Slow down, sit down, try again please.”

“Okay. Who is that?”

“This is dear friend, Calliope. She says…”

'(Can I touch his hair, because his hair is red and I’ve never seen red hair— are you sure his hair is real?)'

“She says she wants to touch your hair— she doesn’t believe your hair is real. Is okay?”

“Oh. Um… Sure? I mean, I did just wash it, so it’s still a little wet… but. Um, yeah, sure. If she wants to touch my hair, it’s fine with me. Should I do something or um…”

'(If he could hold his arm out I’d be able to slither up pretty easily.)'

“If you hold out arm, she slither up.”

He holds out his arm, and Callie arches up and winds up and along his arm, tail looping and gripping his arm and then settling on his clean short sleeved green shirt. Her pale body is faintly green against the soft peachy cream of his face— and his green eyes are almost exactly level with her breasts. Huh.

I could just let him figure out Calliope’s sexuality… or I could scare the ever loving shit out of him. Ehehehe.

I glare at him— a nicer one of my many variations on ‘that’s a very bad idea, and I’ll hurt you if you go there’. You know, the one you use when you want someone to back down from a fight without actually saying anything— and there he goes, he’s eying her boobs like they’re bonbons and now he’s looking and me with terror in his eyes, and his multitude of freckles really stand out with his skin all pale like that, and now he’s closed his eyes. Ha.

Ow. Stabbing light. Fuck.

Oh, hey, he’s opened his eyes— I am fucking parched with thirst— and Callie is snuggling into his hair, and that tail looks a little bit awkward, all looped over his ear like that. I mean, she’s actually curled up on his head, okay, what the fuck.

“Callie? What the fuck?”

'(It’s so soft! So bloody fookin’ soft!)

“Callie, soft hair is not a reason curl up on someone’s head.”

'(Soft and red and warm and Timey and I want to roll in it!)

“Callie, timey-wimey is not a reason to curl up on someone’s head. And I thought you hated to get wet?”
'(It’s only damp, and it’s really soft and I love it and you can’t stop me!)

“You’re really going to eat bacon and an egg on a guy’s freshly washed hair? Really?”

'(Curse your logic. Fine. Fine!)

And then Callie sighs, slithers off of his head and with a slinky little huff, settles back at my left side. Ow. Stinking brainpain.

Oh shit son- bacoooooooooon! Bacon bacon bacon! Yes! So good! Sausage! Eggs! Fruit! Oatmeal? Oh sweet, it’s been made with water, not milk- and butter! Sugar! Honey? Oh, wait- “Callie, d’you want some honey?”

'(Yesh! Honey me up!)

“Here, enjoy.” And a cheerful dollop of oozing amber, and Callie has stuck her face directly into it, dear gods. Wally, dude. This is not funny- wait, fuck that actually is funny. She’s really into it. Dang.

Mmm bacon. So tasty.

Tasty bacon is tasty!

And three plates later, I’m full. Callie is lying insensate in a pile of sticky fabric with a slightly rounded belly after a large breakfast of a dollop of honey, one scrambled egg, half a piece of bacon, and a spoonful of oatmeal- and Wally is still going strong. That’s plate number four, and now five, and now six. Sweet merciful gods.

O-kay, apparently seven- no, eight, is his breakfast limit. Wow. Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. I mean, I always knew he ate a lot, but holy shit. Just gods damn. So much food into one guy’s stomach.

I’m actually kind of… impressed. I’ve never actually seen a person eat so much and not pass out. Wow. He looks… kind of full? Okay, whatever.

Laundry! LAUNDRYYYYYYYYYY! Ow, skullpain.

Seriously, I never get bored of watching clothing spin around in soapy water, and Callie is splashing around in the sink that’s a quarter full of warm soapy water- washing out her clothes was surprisingly simple. I keep forgetting that she doesn’t have to wear very much in the way of underwear…

Swirling water swirling clothes- and I start to go a bit wavering away and then I start to… See. But it’s… different this time.

Wednesday’s woeful child has far to go on Thursday, through the tower found by faith; a key with no lock, and a door with no handle. A helmet of gold, and a sea of candles- and a boy with a cat’s grin and he’s looking right at ME- EEK!
Wow, okay, that was really new. Um. Shit. What the fuck? Well, the washing machine is done, so- into the dryer! And I know I shouldn’t go back, but… I need to know more. To make an informed decision… to make a choice that’s actually a choice, I need to know more.

I can’t hear Callie splashing anymore, and the light… the light is very green.

The clothing spins and tumbles, floats and fluffs and steadily puffs and slow slipping snowflakes through the wind and the candles, the candles- a door marked thrice, and a panel of instruments- a place to put my hands and the sting of blood leaving my fingertip, and a helm of gold and THAT DAMN CAT GRINNING BOY AGAIN, FUCK. No, you know what? I focus on his face, and, when I’m very sure he’s looking directly at me, I glare at him with my fiercest glare- my glare of fuck you, my glare of hell no, and he… flinches. But doesn’t look away.

Am I stuck?

Maybe.

Hmm.

I imagine a row of countless ants, slowly creeping up his pants in the hole between his skin and the fabric, slipping into the crack between his smalls and his skin, steadily marching into his hairy crotch- and by his expression, I think it’s working- and then they start to bite him. He screams, blinks, and vanishes.

Haha.

Sucker.

The light is only faintly green now, and Callie peeks her head out over the edge of the rim of the sink.

“T-theresa?”

“Yes, Calliope?”

“What was that?”

“I dunno.”

“Why’d you fight it?”

“Not like I couldn’t.”

“I suppose that’s true… hmm. So, what are we going to do today?”
“Um… did I by chance grab my video games when I grabbed my house-lazing clothing?”

“You grabbed your clothes, a bunch of books, your computer, and videogames. It’s really cool, actually- I never knew how much you could fit into your pockets until I saw you do it. But… um, how are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Ah. Not sure why I expected you to know how you’re doing something- you usually don’t.”

“Yoooooooooooooo- But anyway, wanna play some videogames while I work on my schoolwork?”

“Doesn’t school for you not start until, like, next month?”

“Yeah.”

“Terry, what the hell?”

“Not like I did anything different during secondary school.”

“True. So… since we’re both clean, fed, and laundered effectively… d’you want to lay on the couch and do school work while I steal your warms and play videogames?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Sweetness.”

I take out my clothing, fold them up small, and stow them neatly into my pockets- they’re clean and good smelling, hot damn. And they fit into my pockets so well, wow- I can’t really tell where my other stuff is though, oh, shit, no, there it is. Dang- okay, so, clear it with Mrs. West, and if she says nay go back to the Cave. Aw yeah.

“Mrs. West? Can I study here and Callie play videogames here today?”

“Well, alright- but don’t you both have to go to school?”

“Um, I take internet class, and Callie is twenty-three and graduated year agos.”

“Ah. In that case, I don’t see why not. I assume you’ll be using the couch?”

“Yes, is okay?”

“Yes, it’s okay. I’m making soup for lunch, alright?”

“Alright!”

‘(SOUP!)’

So, for the resent of the day, barring a midday soup-break (lentil soup continues to be delicious, filling, nutritive, and cheap to make, all of which put it firmly into the HELL YEAH column of “Foods I know how to make and make for myself often”), I study my textbooks, write essays, write up assignments for that stupid damn class I’m supposed to teach and FUCK I NEED TO GO TO
THE SEMINAR FOR TEACHERS, WHEN THE HELL- oh, okay, the day before the start of school. That’s not so bad. And, while I’m doing all of this, I try to ignore Callie squirming around on my warm belly.

She’s really into videogames- honestly, I understand why, considering her profession. Still, having something snakey directly on my skin is making my blades itch on my wrists but it’s Callie, and Callie’s cool. Nngh.

Oh.

“Hey Wally.”

“Hey Terry- wait, have you been here all day?”

“Yes.”

“Doing… what?”

“I do schoolwork- Callie plays videogame. I think she play stupid mushroom game now?”

‘(It’s not stupid! It’s surreal with a clear goal and consistent mechanics and characters!)’

“That you’ve been continually losing for the past, what, four hours?”

‘(Five, and you can shut the fuck up.)’

“Ri-ight.”

“That… actually looks pretty fun. Can I play?”

“You do you homework?”

“…Um. No?”

“Do homework. Then play.”

“Uh.”

“You heard her, young man.”

“Yes mom.”

Unsurprisingly, Wally is just as bad at the game as Callie is. I refuse to play that surreal sidescrolling mess of chiptune bouncing and pixelated characters running around, punching bricks, eating differently colored mushrooms and red flowers that make you breath fire, and mushrooms that spin and slide around. And kill you on contact. What the hell.

No.

I’m not doing it, and you can’t make me.

And now I need to pee.
“Callie, slither over to Wally and steal his warms.”

(But Terry-)

“I gotta piss, get off!”

(Ugh, fine-)

When I come back, Wally has his hands all over Callie- and she’s letting him? No, wait, he’s feeling where her body turns from more human to snake- yeah, I did that too, she’s actually really muscular there, especially in her back, and her belly is really smooth too. I might have a thing for smooth skin, now that I think about it.

Oh shit! I almost forgot to write down my Vision! Oh, wait, I don’t have a compass- well, I don’t really need one though, do I? Nah, let’s just do this-

Wednesday’s woeful child has far to go on Thursday, through the tower found by faith; a key with no lock, and a door with no handle. A helmet of gold, and a sea of candles, smoke through the wind and the candles, the candles- a door marked thrice, and a panel of instruments- a place to put my hands and the sting of blood leaving my fingertips, and a new helm of gold- and the sneering grin of a catboy.

Asshole.

Which reminds me!

Hmm- That Shop should be open by now- Wally might like to go with you, and definitely clear it with his mother and father.

“Hey Callie, Etsy should be open by now- you wanna go shopping for new digs?”

(‘Oh! Well… I suppose it’s something that must be done, isn’t it? Alright- wait, what about Wally?’)

“I’m going to ask him- Wally, we Callie and Me going to go shop for new home for Callie. You go stay go with?”

“Ah- yeah, yeah I’ll go with- HEY MOM, CAN I GO SHOPPING WITH TERRY AND CALLIE FOR A WHILE?”

“YOU’VE DONE YOUR HOMEWORK?”

“YEAH!”

“YOU ATE DINNER?”

“YEAH!”

“TAKE A SWEATER!”

“OKAY! Yeah, I’m game.”

Okay! So, um- you need close toe shoes, and maybe hat? Um, we leave soon I pack up, so, soon
Etsy is a trinkets shop, located about three stacks from my apartment- Wally, Callie on my shoulders, and I take a meandering stroll down yawing alleys and up winding stairways, awnings leering over us, whispering secrets to each other- mostly building gossip, who hasn’t paid their rent on time, how often they’ve seen so and so go here or there. The grapevine of Kowloon’s buildings is not to be trifled with.

Wally looks particularly dapper in his homburg, and Callie’s claws only pinch my skin a little.

And then, we’re in a wonderland of ridiculously adorable and frighteningly detailed teeny tiny objects- all of them, thankfully, approximately the right size for Calliope.

“Alright Callie- let’s get you set up.”

“Alright!”

“So- wait, what exactly are we getting?”

“Well… We can’t actually buy a house, or… maybe we could, but we’d need like-”

“I think a cabinet set would be better, with the glass paneling?”

“But those only open from the outside, right?”

“I can probably assemble whatever we buy in like, an hour-”

“Oh! I like that refrigerator! Oh, but wait, where would we even put my house-cabinet?”

“Hey Te-”

“X. On this side, I’m always Red X.”

“Oh. Alright- X, can I use your phone to call my parents?”

“Yeah, sure, here- and Callie, we’ll crack that skull when we get there.”

“Oh- oh, alright. Let’s see- I need at the very least a bedroom, a kitchen area, an office area, an area to relax in, and some sort of lavatory. Hmm…”

(“Mom? Hey, yeah- you remember Calliope? Well, she needs a place to stay, and we’re buying her a house now, but do you think she could-”)  

“What about a forest palette? Like, um, peridot, Kelly green, forest green, graphite, faun, balsam and the like?”

“Those are lovely- I just feel bad for not being able to pay you back right now…”

“Don’t even worry about it! I still haven’t given you the-”
“You have, actually, you did it yesterday before we went to- ah, what is he…?”

“Kid Flash-”

“Ah- yes, well. You had three kilos of dried apricots in your pockets, and traded the young brewer for your requested potion, and then you gave my fair share, and well- I’ve honestly never felt better.”

“Huh. Do I still have the rest of the order?”

“Yes, why?”

(“I don’t know, I’ll ask her.) Hey, Callie?”

“Yes?”

“My parents are open to you staying with us, but my mom wants to know if you can pay some sort of rent-”

“Oh my, yes! Yes, that’s- that’s very generous of your mother, and more than fair, and yes, I would love to, yes!”

“Okay- (Yes, she says she can pay rent. Cool- thanks mom, you’re the best.”)

So. Remember Emily, from the French spice store? Yeah, isn’t it actually called Vichy? Whatever-well, Emily is… actually really cool! Very meticulous- and I had no idea she made the majority of the products sold at Etsy. I bought Calliope everything, too- from the foundation, actually a table with elegant legs; a house, actually several houses and house pieces, shelves and a very sturdy but lightweight bookcase; and every conceivable thing that should be put into an interior.

Wally seems very enthusiastic about putting it all together for her. I should probably straight out tell him- or maybe… nope. Just tell him. Directly. Out loud.

Or… I could write a mildly cryptic note? Yes. That’s somehow much easier to do- why is it so hard for me to be direct about anything? I always have to have some layer to it… Ugh. Let me think now….

She’s asexual you dork. No, too obvious.

She’s not interested! Still too obvious.

She prefers a more direct approach. Ding ding ding! Winner winner chicken dinner!

Let’s see- since Wally’s going back to his house and I’m going back to the Cave- let me just write this in English on the receipt… and yes. That should do it.

Gods. Why are matters of the heart so damn complicated?

Anyway.

I escort Wally back to the Central… actually, the general name for them is Foxhole. Why did it take me this long to make that connection? Well… time to check on the Palaces.
A quick jaunt through softly breathing trees—the rustle of grasses in the wind. There’s… something, in the air around my Palace… like the smell of winter is on the air, mixed with slow-blooming flowers and delicately growing plants deep in the rolling wefts, the faint strains of strings and sweet flutes drifting in and out of hearing. Something in me is always soothed by coming here, to this majestic burrow of tiled walls—although the entire house is so old and so poorly cared for, I’m sure it’s little more than a match away from disaster. Ah well— the Carpenters Guild is notorious for being untrustworthy, and even if I could trust them, I can’t afford their rates.

S’really just one problem after another with my life, you know?

Back in my room at the cave, the softness of my featherbed licks up over by aching body; the fresh clean smell of line dried sheets and the cool comfort of a sleek cotton dyed pale seafoam green—on the bluer side of green—and the delicate weight of thin cotton stitched with fish sweeps over me like a caress. The lights of the moon I did see rise on my walk back to my apartment and the stars which shine over the murmuring pools in my Palace gardens dim and fade out, gently glimmering across multicolored glass—soft peach colored effervescent liquid bubbles quietly in it’s thick walled tower of milky pink glass corked with rolled cotton and dyed brown wax, sludgy green potion in clear glass made to have decorative ripples like swift frozen ice or slow moving water and those ripples slowly

through the air

and then I am asleep, a few hours after sunset.

I dream, but I do not know if it is a Dream or a simple dream— and this is what I dreamt.

Warm wet touch to my neck. The scent of salt water and brine, two different things except not not different at all. Soft huff across my skin, like a kiss only air only air. I’m being held down—his smooth webbed hands are just this side of hard on my hips, pinning me neatly as he has twice before, only now his hips his him he is between my legs and between my thighs and it is only the strip of white lined red cotton with a strip of machine-made lace and the leathery press of his trousers that separates me from him and he from my me and then he’s leaned forward and—

Lips. His lips are smooth on mine, and cool at first touch—they spark a heat within me, and I feel as if there is a strange unscratchable itch deep within the depths that are being pressed being held down
and pressed against through tuna-skin leather and thin wet red cotton and. His tongue. Is not smooth. It is rough, but not like a cat’s, not that rough, but it is rough and it is petting my tongue and his tongue is warm- and his teeth are sharp and his tongue slips against mine and I arch and *aaahaah.*

His hands tighten against my hips, and then, and then- and then they loosen, and press down again, and down again comes his against me and it is so *warm* and he *Nnmgh. Uuuhhha.* And the reverberations of his chest make my entire world go so hazy and covered over with fluttering lights, and I just want to touch him but that’s against the rules. *Wait, what?*

My fingers my claws my red tipped nails dig trenches in the stone beneath my slickening backside, the slow trickle of fluids down the narrow crack between the curve of my buttock and the pillar of my thigh and the slow steady rolling of his hips against mine and suddenly- suddenly I know how to get out of the pin.

The question is- do I even want to?

Ankles to neck, flip with back. Simple enough.

Do I want to not be underneath him, to feel the cool bulge of his body against the warm soft cleave of mine, do I not want to feel the hard breathing weight of his chest against the softness of mine, the hard crush of his hands against my pliant flesh-

*Do I want to live with the knowledge that I can’t defend myself from even the most gentle of opponents, from someone who truly means me no real harm, do I want to live with the intimate knowing that if I cannot escape that position, inevitably, it will be the position in which I die-*

I want him to pin me down and thrust into me slow-

I don’t want to die on my back like a worthless whor-

I want him to rip my clothing off and touch me like I’m-

I want to be renowned for my fighting skills, for merits other than my genita-

I want to kiss him. Oh gods how I want to kiss him-

*No man shall ever master me. No woman shall ever master me. I will forever be-*

I want to cuddle with him, and if he asked… No, not even if he asked.

I would let him-

I would let him-

I would let him-

I would let him-

I should just be happy with what I have. Things don’t change, not really. Not for me. I need to grow up and accept that. It’s easier not to feel these things- it’s easier to just ignore it. Then I wouldn’t have to feel like this, and no one ever has to know about-
Terry.... that's not going to work. You can run and hide, and lie and pretend— but there is nothing that can separate you from yourself. Nothing.

You are who you are.

The real test of growing up for you will be to accept that, I think.

And it’s okay to have feelings for someone, feelings you don’t understand and can’t control. I think that’s just part of being alive.

Also— whatever she did, back then.... I don’t think it was ever meant to be used on someone like you. It’s nearly worn off, you know.

You’ve started changing again.
I don’t know what it is, but watching two muscular guys throw each other around is just… mmmm. Yes. Good. Do that some more. Rowr. Flips! Punches! Grunting! Nrowr!

(“Kaldur’s, uh, nice, don’t you think? Handsome, Commanding- you should totally ask him out.”

“He’s like a big brother to me! –and I think he and Terry have something going on. But you know who would make the cutest couple?”

“Who?”

“You and Wally! You’re so full of passion, and he’s so full of- so full of, um-”

“It?”

And they laugh and laugh and laugh.)

I wonder what kind of burrito Wally’s eating. I’m still a mite peckish. I ate two sandwiches, some oatmeal, and like, five apples today (APPLLES!), how am I still hungry. Wait, what’s a burrito? It’s like Mu Shu Zhurou, only the wrap is thicker and you can carry it around. Hm. So, street food? Yeah, but it’s one that’s really easy to make at home. I’ll have to look it up then…

But still, I don’t know why I’m so into Kaldur- I don’t think it’s just a physical attraction anymore, there’s something in his character that makes my princess parts go gooey… it’s more than his sandy skin and his golden hair and his green celadon eyes- it’s more than his lush lips or firm buttocks or stupidly lickable tattoos- there’s something more to him that is making me crazy. Something- Oh! A throw!

‘Aqualad: Fail.’

“Black Canary taught me that.”

I wonder if Black Canary also taught him proper sparring etiquette- I’m not sure what was on the Gnomes list of “Things to Learn the Superboy With”, because there are several alarming gaps in his knowledge and I just have to wonder- oh, hey, Red Tornado!

And Wally is really fast, I can still see the speed blurs from his movement- although, is he getting faster? Maybe- it wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest.

“Do you have a mission for us?” Probably not Wally, as BATMAN IS THE ONE WHO ASSIGNS US MISSIONS, OR DID YOU FORGET THAT?

“Mission Assignments are The Batman’s responsibility.” His tone is always very formal, but I’m not sure if that’s a personal choice or not…

“Yeah, well, The Batman’s with The Robin in Gotham, doing the Dynamic Duo thing- but you’re headed somewhere, right? Hot date? Or, uh, a mission?” That is not how you pronounce mission. I think. Is that how you pronounce mission? No. I think he’s just trying to be funny or something- Ah.

“If we can be of help…” It’s not just his voice, although it does send delightful jolts directly to the bundle between my legs- but gods damn, what the hell is it about him that makes me want to pin him
down and lick his body? Arrrgh- there’s got to be an actual reason! Or even a reason. It can’t just be because I think he’s hot- Superboy, Wally, Artemis, Robin, and Megan are all hot, and I don’t feel like this about them- so what the hell is with my feelings for Kaldur? It might be that he responded to your advances. Shit, that might be it- usually, people… don’t. Or they try for me first. Or they change their minds. Just. Whoops, Red Tornado’s talking-

“This is Kent Nelson- a friend. He is one hundred and six years old.” Damn. Not bad for an old man.

(“Guy doesn’t look a day over ninety.”) And my Grandmother and Great Aunt could pass for twenty six- age is not a thing of vision, Wally.

“He has been missing for twenty three days. Kent was a charter member of the Justice Society, a precursor to your mentor’s Justice League.”

“Of course- Nelson was Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme! He was Doctor Fate!” Holy shit!

(“More like Doctor Fake- the guy used a little advanced science and “Dumbledored” it up to scare the bad guys and impress the babes.”) Huh.

“Kent might just be on one of his… walkabouts. But he is caretaker of the Helmet of Fate-” Ah. Oh dear. “-the source of the Doctor’s mystic might, and it is unwise to leave such power unguarded.”

“He’s like the great sorcerer priests and priestesses of Mars-” she’s not glot-stopping on that anymore, that’s interesting- she used to say M’ars, like she was saying M’arzz… I think she’s settling in. “-I would be honored to help find him.”

“Me too!” I can actually hear the swipe of his sleeve through the air. Sweet Christ, Wally, are you really that dense? I mean, I’m sure Callie spelled it out for you- she’s not shy about that sort of thing like I am, but are you really going to make Megan spell it out too? Can you really not see that every time you do that, that thing where you try to impress her, she gets creeped off? “So… honored, I can barely stand it. Magic- heh -rocks.” Liar. What the fuck- ugh. Where the hell is your integrity, Wally?

I think I might have strained something rolling my eyes just now. Fucking Christ, I hope he’s not like this all mission- that would be the fucking pits. I glance at Artemis like ‘Can you believe his shit?’ and she looks at me, rolls her eyes, and shakes her head like ‘Eighth wonder of the world: The bullshit that comes out of Wally’s mouth.’

I like Artemis. This might be the moment I can finally articulate why though- she’s like, all the sneering snarkiness inside my head, only she says it aloud, and I admire her for it- Jaded. That’s the word- she’s jaded like I am, but not quite as much.

“Take this: it is the Key to the Tower of Fate.”

Kaldur takes the Key- and I chose to wear skinny jeans, red high tops, and my favorite shirt today- you know, the black one with the red stripe down the middle and the ten on the back. Favorite shirt. I have no idea why, as it smells kind of like mothballs and grease, but you know what? Fuck it, that’s what. Oh yeah, and I’m wearing my super oversized black hoodie today too. Anyway, my clothes are plenty appropriate for a long night of magical mayhem, so- what’s in my pockets that I might at some point need?

I have pens in many sizes, a box of matches that are, yep, right next to the sledgehammer, my Dream journal, which is under one of the many bottles of Imperial Peach Nectar, a bottle of… Ow! Stabsinthe, okay, odd, a jiggly baggie of viscosity gels, rubber bands, paper clips, chewing gum
(apple flavor), a package of new bootlaces, some beef jerky, nail polish, half a chocolate bar, all-purpose glue (you know, the stuff that’s white and has the orange top?), a stuffed rabbit plushy, a silk flower bouquet, dove shaped firing range target (where did I even…?), net bag of oranges, a bunch of forks held together with a hair tie, a bunch of chopsticks held together with a hair clip, a rubber rat that looks disturbingly real, a rabbit fur lined greatcoat, and a wooden banana.

I have more things in my pockets, but I’m not going to talk about them for the simple fact of we’re fucking leaving now shit shit shit!

Have I mentioned how lovely the sky at night is? Because it is quite lovely. And so is that city by the water, which we’re flying towards and fffffuu- Nope.

“So, Wally, when did you first realize your honest affinity for magic?”

“Ah, well, I don’t like to brag-” Liar. “but, uh, before I became Kid Flash, I seriously considered becoming a wizard myself.” Oh?

“So- now you know you have magic power, you training them, yes?”

“Huh? I mean, ah, yeah, of course.”

“Ah, okay- is only that, if you not train power, it get upset. Just making sure, yes?”

“Yeah, yeah of course.” He’s not training his power. Shit.

And Kaldur knows he’s lying too, fucking- Wally. Ignorance is not a policy that engenders positive change. Uuugh.

And I think Artemis just rolled her eyes again-

“We’ve reached Tornado’s coordinates, but-”

“Nothing’s there.”

“Take us down.”

Don’t look don’t look don’t look- we’re on the ground now, it’s okay. Sweet Jesus, I hate flying in stealth mode- something’s watching.

I turn around completely, and slowly slowly look- there. A cat. Orange and black with red red eyes, and now it’s jumped off a crate and run down an alleyway.

Interesting.

“Something wrong?”

“Not yet.”

Oh my gods, it’s just like Kowloon during the summer- humid, the broken out edges of the world all crinkled together- and there’s a lot, empty looking, but not empty.
Interesting.

Wally runs out, search pattern spiraling- and then he’s back, and speaking to Artemis.

“Nothing. This isn’t simple camouflage.”

“So what do you think- adaptive microelectronics combined with phase shifting?”

“Absolutely!” There’s the science dude I know and occasionally make sandwiches for! And then Megan walks up and “Not! Clearly mystic powers are at work here.” I’ve never heard someone’s voice crack so badly- and if he wasn’t right, I’d be more upset.

Rrrgh. Still a bit.

Miffed.

Though.

There are crates behind us- I’m standing like I always do, back to a wall and hands in pockets- hoodie pockets on this occasion- and it’s a very simple thing to take out a sharpie while Wally’s trying to impress an uninterested Megan, shield my hand with my body, and write out a simple Ward-

*Watch your Back, friend or foe-fellow friend, yes or no?*

-and I can feel it, instantly. A simple application, and now anyone who walks past it or is within its range is scanned for danger level- and it’s so stupidly simple, so obvious that no one would ever notice it. It’s like getting a weird look on the sidewalk- sure, you notice it, but you don’t really dwell on it, you’ve got more important things to do.

None of my teammates are a danger to me- but there are two people behind the crates who are, and one person who isn’t.

‘Megan? Link us up please?’

‘Um- why?’

‘This isn’t a conversation that needs to be said out loud. And we need to keep moving forwards.’

“Well, if magic’s at work, then we’ll need to get a bit closer. I’m not too good at range.” Lie.

‘What is it, Terry?’

‘We have company, behind us- look if you’re already turned that way, otherwise don’t- that stack of crates? Isn’t real. It’s only pretending. There are two beings back there that mean us harm- and one who doesn’t.’

‘And we aren’t going back there because-’

‘Because there’s more at stake here than one man’s life, Wally. Something I suppose isn’t common knowledge- the title of Doctor Fate is a legacy as well.’

‘Theresa, wouldn’t that would mean that… Kent Nelson is not the first Doctor Fate?’

‘Yes, Kaldur’ahm, it would. And he’s not. Far from it. And we’ve been standing in front of the door
this whole time.’

“A test of faith. Stand behind me.”

Kal- Aqualad walks forwards, all in blue and black and sandals and even when he’s in civvies I want to pin him down and find something to lick and watch him squirm as I FUCKING GODS THIS IS NOT THE TIME-

‘Did you say something, Terry?’

‘No. You can unlink us now, Megan.’

‘A-alright.’

There is a click of a door unlocking, and then there is a tower, rising a short way into the air. Reminds me of my apartment building, actually- ah. It’s one of those buildings.

Interesting.

Aqualad pushes, and the door opens with a creak of wooden boards- we walk inside, and I take my last look at the open sky for a while- and then we’re inside and the door shuts behind us. And then there is no door, and- I push my hood back to settle on my shoulders, adjust my glasses, and slowly take in the interior of what part of this building we’re in.

Dark brown stone bricks, gently scraped with gold, like clay walls- but I don’t know what kind of stone it is. There are places for torches, but no torches, and there is light, flat and gold, but I’m not sure if it is emanating from the walls or coming from above- somehow, it feels a bit like both.

“Uh- where’d the door go?”

A man in a suit wavers into existence- oh. An Echo, keyed to Kent Nelson?

“Greetings. You have entered with a Key but the Tower doesn’t recognize you. Please state your Purpose and Intent.”

A Guard. Different entirely.

“We are true believers, here to find Doctor Fate!” Wally, that voice is not the voice you think it is.

And the Guard is not impressed- he rolls his eyes, and vanishes.

The floor crackles- and it takes everything in me not to bolt.

But.

I am on a Team, and these are my teammates, and I’d- I’d like to imagine that these people are my friends. For a little while, at least.

So, for them- for these people- I let myself fall into a fiery pit.

Miss Martian flies over and catches Kid Flash, and Artemis has a grappling hook- she catches Aqualad without a hitch- Superboy grabs the wall and scrapes down it, burns his shoes off with a
howl of pain in the burning red boil below us- and I Jump off a series of tiles, and land ever so light, like a feathery bird, on his shoulders. As I slip through the air, my glasses slide off of the bridge of my nose and land with a pathetic splash into the burning, never to return. Well. Shit.

“Those were my favorite boots.”

“Those were my only glasses.” Hot.

“This Nelson guy better be worth it.”

“Mm.”

Hot. The wall’s hot. My face hurts. I can’t see very well. Oh. They’re in. Welp. Hot. Superboy is very strong.

“Having trouble- guh- maintaining altitude- I’m so hot-”

“You certainly are.”

“WALLY!”

“Hey, inches above sizzling death, I’m entitled to speak my mind.”

“My physiology- and M’ganns- are susceptible to extreme heat. We must climb out quickly.”

Hot. Kaldur is very handsome. Can’t see, but even under duress, his voice is like aural pornography. Hot.

“Hah- hello, Megan! We never really answered the question. RED TORNADO SENT US TO SEE IF MR. NELSON AND THE HELMET WERE SAFE.”

A door-wall rolls across the boiling heat below, and then the walls are cool. Superboy drops down, and I wait until I hear a thump and see a pale blob move slightly out of the way- and then I Jump down, and promptly fall over. Hot. Too hot- I take my hoodie off, stand up, and tie it- wait, that’s a book, or is it a rock? No, it’s a tablet with Cuneform on it- hoodie wrap-bag and go. And then I’ve got a tablet in my hoodie-turned-messenger bag. Sweet.

Still can’t see for shit though.

The thumps around us alert me to the descent of Kid Flash, Miss Martian, Artemis, and Aqualad.

“This platform- it should be red hot, but it is cool to the touch.” Just like your skin, AqualaaaaaaaaARRRRRRRRRGRGH.
“Don’t worry Mega-licious, I got ya.”

“ENOUGH!” Oh. Oh my. I like her. “Your little “impress Megan” game nearly got us all barbequed!”

“When did this become my fault?”

“When you lied to that-” “Guardian Autonomic Intelligence.” “Yes, thank you Terry- And called yourself a True Believer.”

“Wally- you don’t believe?” Megan sounds genuinely distressed. Oh. Oh dear. Does she not-? Hmm. How did she learn about earth again, Television? What the fuck is television?

“Fine! Fine, I lied about believeing in magic- but magic is the real lie, a major load!”

“Wally, I studied for a year at the Conservatory of Sorcery in Atlantis; the mystic arts created the skin Icons that power my waterbearers.”

“Dude, you ever hear of bioelectricity? And hey, in primitive cultures, fire was once considered magical too.”

“Fire is magic, Wally. Most simple things like that way are.” He stares at me, snorts, and turns away.

“Today it’s just a bunch of tricks!”

“You’re pretty close-minded for a guy who can break the sound barrier in his sneakers.”

“That’s science- I recreated Flash’s laboratory experiment and ‘Here I am~!’ Everything can be explained by science.”

“No. Everything can not.” “Let us test that theory.”

“Wait! The backdraft from the lava will roast us alive-”

Aq- Kaldur lifts something up, probably a trapdoor, and a gust of welcome coldness rushes out. Oh, that feels good. Mmm. Winter.

“It’s snow!”

“Do you ever get tired of being wrong?”

Well. I’m over snow now- okay, I probably shouldn’t have rolled around so enthusiastically on the ground but I was hot, and it was cold and now I’m cold and I FUCKING HATE ADVENTURES. THERE IS LITERALLY NOTHING GOOD ABOUT THEM, FUCK ADVENTURES, FUCK THEM ALL.

And I can’t see, and now I can’t feel and FUCKING ADVENTURES FUCK FUCK FUCK.

“Well?” Artemis, he’s really stubborn- it’ll take more than that…

“Ever hear of string theory? We’re in a pocket dimension.”
"Ugh!"

Wait, don’t I have something in my pockets for a situation like this? Oh! Yeah! Yeah, hang on, hang on- yes! Out of my oddly narrow trouser-pocket, I pull with steady movements my rabbit fur lined greatcoat; there’s a scarf and a matching hat secreted in the pockets. I shrug into the coat, button it up, and apply the hat and scarf. Toasty warm, super soft-jackets are of the good. Not quite at the Ultimate level, but fuck. I love fur-lined jackets, and I love rabbit fur and Wally is staring at me.

“Yes?”

“Oh- Nothing.”

“Okay…?”

Odd. It’s not like I haven’t taken stuff out of my pockets before…

“What’s that?”

It’s a cane, rimed at the bottom with ice, sitting calmly and proudly, golden head gazing at us with a sideways sneer. Um. No. Canes don’t sneer…? Dude, what the hell am I even thinking-

“Ooh, maybe it’s Nelson’s magic wand…” First, ew. Second, no. Third- Wally!

“I got it.” “I got it.”

And now it’s glowing-

“I can’t let go!” “I can’t let go!”

And now they’re rising into the air, and screaming- and then a flash of golden light and they’re gone. Well. Shit.

“So. Do any one want a hat or coat or somethings?”

“Ah- aren’t you worried about Artemis and Wally?”

“No.”

“…Why not?”

“This is Tower of Fate, Superboy. Megan say why we here, yes? So, is nothing bad coming for us or them- Tower will not harm us, so because it knows why we here. So, hat? No hat? I have mittens alsos…”

“I’ll take a hat and coat, actually.”

“Okay Megan.”
I give her a powder blue wool hat that sits neatly on her head, and a matching coat with gold buttons all down the front. So adorable!

So we’re walking now, through a snowy plain, distant mountains covered in ice and jaggedly reaching towards a twilight blue sky. Megan’s hair gently drifts in the wind, waving like a banner, like a flag.

“I don’t understand Wally- it’s almost like he needs to believe the impossible can’t happen.”

“Wally uses his understanding of science to control” and here Kaldur smacks his fist into his hand, like a show of force “what he cannot comprehend. Acknowledging the existence of magic would be to relinquish the last vestige of that control.”

“Yes. Kaldur is correct. Also, because he cannot let go of control what he see and understand? He also miss many important thing. Like, peoples feeling, important information about worlds arounds- he not wants to accept, and so because that way he is, he do bad sciences and he miss much. Is sad. Is sadest still that even flat telling of him such things is not always more full. But still- should try.” I steadily walk forwards, my eyes on the dark blue and powder blue backs of Megan and Kaldur, Superboy a dark blob at my right; my rubber soles gain little traction, and my hands are buried in the warm and soft pockets of my greatcoat. My head is hunched in from the wind, trying and failing to burrow under the coat collar- it’s cold. It’s just cold.

Megan-blob wiggles at me, and then turns away- and a thunking sort of crunching sound, and there is a stairway and a door, sitting on a rock before us. We climb the stairs, and go through the door- and it vanishes behind us, just like before.

It’s a nice twenty six degrees in here, not like the negative fifty (I’m adding the windchill here, it was probably only negative twenty) out there, so I shrug my coat off, and stuff it back in my pocket. I leave my hat and scarf though- oh. We’re in front of a library-

“And we’re back where we started. Great.”

“Superboy, you take too much for granteds. Is this way.” I walk forwards, through the doorway- and although I can’t see it, I know from what Superboy said that it is visually identical to the wall- and I know from what I can hear that this room is not the same one as before. And I’m right.

“Coming?”

They follow me into a room filled with tiny golden lights, gently flickering- candles. Long white forms, with soft golden shapes dancing above, and a pillar. An altar? I step up to it, run my hands over it- the tablet with Cuneiform on it tied onto my back fits into this space perfectly. I undo my hoodie, set the tablet in place- and I can’t Read it with my fingers, fuck and damn.

Ow!

I cut myself!

And now the Words I couldn’t see to Read are glowing, lovely.

Welp.
We walk through and aaaaaAAAHH FFFffffnnnnope. I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m motherfucking dandy. Yeah. Oh, hey, I think that’s the Nelson person aaaaaaaand that’s a Cat Boy.

Ehehehehe. That’s the cat boy I ants-pantsed. This is going to be fun.

“Friends of yours?”

Artemis runs towards us- at least I assume it’s Artemis, no one else I know has an entire fox-tail’s worth of golden strands flowing behind the nape of their neck; I roll to my feet and saunter towards what I’m pretty sure is Wally and Mr. Nelson and then there is a bolt of… electricity? Really? Hurtling through the air at us and I don’t even bother to move because that piddly little thing won’t really hurt if it hits me. I might get static head for a few days, but honestly, that’s not so bad-

There is a sensation that isn’t real- like that feeling of something near you that means you harm about to reach out and ever so gently touch some delicate portion of your skin, where the blood flows slightly more nearer to the surface than anywhere else- and then I can see the stars again, the true stars- I can faintly, on the edge of my mind, hear them singing there, up in the endless dark…

Wait, shit, did I just walk through a bell- and that is a bolt of Chaotic Lightning. And it just hit that guy, who is now incanting- and. Shit.

Let’s get dangerous.

There’s a dome of gold protecting those within it from harm from that without it- but I am not inside the dome. And I don’t have my glasses, so… wait. I never…

How did I transform before I got that hairclip, anyway?

You said a phrase.

Oh? What was it?

‘Is it bright where you are? Have the people changed? Does it make you happy you’re so strange? And in our darkest hour, my old secrets laid bare, we will watch the world devour itself in hate.’

Really?

Yeah.

That’s a bit… ominous, don’t you think?

You’re the one who came up with it, so...

True.

“Is it bright where you are? Have the people changed? Does it make you happy you’re so strange?
And in our darkest hour, my old secrets laid bare; we will watch the world devour itself in hate.”

Nothing happens.

Um.

Hmm. You might need a different phrase.

No, really?

And then Wally, after some sort of conversation with the guy who’s almost certainly Kent Nelson, stands, takes up the Helm of Fate, and with both hands held high, lowers it upon his head; he is then engulfed with red energy, screaming with Chaos.

Fuck.

But-

FUCK!

As for phrases, I think this will do- “What’s the difference between being alive and being dead?”
When the pie was opened, The birds began to sing;

Chapter Summary

This story’s starting to pick up- slowly, but starting. Also, whosoever can spell "lovestruck" on their "Fishpun Bingo" board will get thirty extra points on their total score, which does not affect the "Plotpoint Detected" bonus still in effect from chapter one.

“The answer is, of course- dead people don’t forget the living, but the people who still live will always forget the dead. They have to, to keep going on.”

Xanghai has an extensive public transport system, largely based on metros, buses and taxis. Payment of all these public transportation tools can be made by using the Xanghai Public Transportation Card, which is bundled with the Student Identification Card given to Primary, Secondary, and University level students. Students using the PTC get an eight percent discount on all public transport outside of school hours, and can ride at half price during school hours- both of which are printed on their Student ID.

Xanghai’s rapid transit system, the Xanghai Metro, incorporates both subway and light railway lines and extends to every core urban district as well as neighboring suburban districts. Rumors of a subterranean civilization in the extensive network of underground tunnels in the subway system are unfounded. However, there is some evidence of people living in the under-carriages of the light rail tracks- this is very dangerous, and the Xanghai Peoples Public Transit Authority discourages anyone from attempting this.

As of 2010, there are twelve metro lines (including the Xanghai Maglev Train), 273 stations and over 420 km (261 mi) of tracks in operation, making it the third longest network in the world. On 22 October 2010, it set a record of daily ridership of 7.548 million. The fare depends on the length of travel distance starting from 3 RMB.

Xanghai also has the world’s most extensive network of urban bus routes, with nearly one thousand bus lines, operated by numerous transportation companies. The system includes the world’s oldest
Trolleybus system. Bus fare normally costs 2 RMB.

Taxis are plentiful in Xanghai. The base fare is currently ¥14 (inclusive of a ¥1 fuel surcharge; ¥18 between 11:00 pm and 5:00 am) which covers the first 3 km (2 mi). Additional kilometers cost ¥2.4 each (¥3.2 between 11:00 pm and 5:00 am).

The dudou (literally ‘belly cover’) is a type of old-fashioned Chinese bra first worn in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and then in the Qing Dynasty. Unlike bras today, the dudou is worn to flatten the breasts as flat-chested women are thought to be graceful while busty women are considered a temptation.

The garment itself resembles a small apron, and should be square- or diamond-shaped; properly fitted, it will cover the bust and belly. It is backless and has strings that tie around the neck, which should sit approximately in the center of C7; and strings that tie around the back, which should sit approximately three fingers below the bottom of the bust. Dugou are made of brightly colored silk or crepe and are sometimes embellished with embroidered flowers, butterflies or mandarin ducks; recent variations include screen-printed embellishments and high-gloss sheens. Some dudou have a pocket in which to keep ginger, musk or other Chinese medicinal herbs believed to keep the belly warm. Lace and beading, while allowed, are discouraged for unmarried women and girls.

The “tofu girl” style is more in line with recent western apparel- it covers only the bust, and supports the breasts rather than flattening them. It is embellished like it’s larger cousin, the Dudou, but the embellishments rest against the wearer’s skin, and are non-dimensional; they often correspond to gang-related imagery, denote a specific “stable” to which the wearer belongs, or express some sort of sentiment, usually luck-based. It will always have two pockets, one ostensively for the warming herbs, but more often used for certain alluring scents, such as vanilla, jasmine, and peach; the other is for sundry items such as prophylactics, money, illicit weapons, illicit pharmaceuticals, and other items the wearer might not want to keep elsewhere. The location of the pocket is unique to the wearer- however, due to the size of the garment, it is almost always hidden in the empty, or negative, space between the wearer’s breasts.

Although all of these garments are, obstensibly, female in nature, there is nothing in the garment itself that states a particular affinity for any gender or sexuality; like most Classical Celestial Kao garments, the statement of a person’s gender relies on their own preference and tastes in colors and patterns, far more so than the cut, style, or use of a garment.

I don’t actually have- the actual name. I’ve finally remembered it. The name for that sacred space no one other than me is allowed into, that I Created exactly to the specifications I desired, years ago- it’s called an Atelier. I have two- one is in a mutli-dimensional warp in space; the other is in my head.
And in the Atelier, in my head- no, no. It’s something else.

It’s like- like, what are mythologies and fairytales actually for? They aren’t just stories, you know- if they were just stories people told to pass the time, they wouldn’t be everywhere. I mean, every culture has a story about a World Ending Flood, and every culture has a story about How The World Was Made, and, and Where People Go When They Die- and somehow…

I just.

I think I remember something? From before. Before. You know, from Before before. It’s the story of Cerebus- or was it Kerobus? I can never remember…

But- I suppose I’ll just tell you it straight out- this is the version I translated… um. Hmm. Second year of middle school?

Of the Twelve Labors tasked to Herakles, grandson of the great hero Perseus, as atonement for his crime, the most dangerous of all was his final, Twelfth Labor. Eurytheus, King of the Tiryns, perhaps not the strongest of those three Mycenaean strongholds in the Argolid- Eurytheus, Son of Sthenelus, borne of the victorious horsewoman Nicippe, himself the grandson of the hero Perseus- it was Eurytheus that tasked the mighty Heracles with his Twelfth and most dangerous Labor.

It is believed, on islands in the west that float to the North of the Wilderness of the Moon, and across a sea from the homeland of the Turk- there, in that place, it is believed that after a person dies, their spirit journeys beneath the skin of the earth, to reside in the depths of Hell forever.

Hell is ruled by Pluto, the sad-eyed protector of the Gates of Time; user of the quiet voice and the unrelenting attack, master and commander of all who reside in their echoing Hell. At Pluto’s side resides Spring, the Voice of Destruction; Spring is Pluto’s most valiant, most beloved soldier, the slayer of the weak and the old, slayer of the sick and the dying- it is Spring, with the rushing of new life into the world, yes, Spring who slays these old and weak and sick and dying and in doing so makes space anew for things to grow.

All living people, whether good or bad, are destined for Pluto’s Hell, and Heracles’ Twelfth Labor- ah, well.

Kerberos is a vicious beast with the body of a Star-bull hunting dog, the tail of a whip-fan fish bedecked with fangs that drip a poison so foul it burns the earth where it falls; it has the feet and claws of a mountain cat, and is scaled across it’s back like plates of armor made entirely of bone; strangest of all these things is it’s heads. Some will say that Kerberos has heads numbering three, and they are the heads of wild dogs that can bite through the scales of a dragon- scales so tough and hard, no sword could ever hope to pierce the tender flesh below. Others will say that Kerberos has heads numbering fifty, and armies beyond counting have been lost to it- in all but spirit, as it is said of this fifty headed Kerberos that it devours raw flesh and is both relentless and strong. Kerberos was born of Echinda, mother of monsters, and Typhon, whom even the Gods fear.

(The other children of Echinda and Typhon were Othros, the Hydra of Lerna, and the Chimaera. Orthus was a two-headed hound that guarded the cattle of Geryon, son of Chrysaor and Callirrhoe, grandson of Medusa, himself a fearsome giant who dwelt on the island Ertheia of the Hesperides in the far west of those islands.
With the Chimaera, Orthus fathered the Nemean Lion and the Sphinx.

The Chimaera was a three-headed fire-breather, part lion, part snake, and part goat.

Herakles killed Orthus when he stole the cattle of Geryon, and he strangled the Nemean Lion.)

But- ah, what was Herakles’ labor? His labor was, simply, to kidnap the beast Kerberos.

Before he went to Hell for Kerberos, Herakles went to Eleusis to meet with Eumolpus, a powerful priest, and asked to learn the Eleusinian Mysteries. The Eleusinian Mysteries were sacred rites for Demeter and her daughter, Persephone; and were started by Eumolpus. It was believed that those who learned the secrets of the mysteries would have happiness in Hell. After Heracles met a few conditions of membership coughed up some gold and stabbed a few people, Eumolpus initiated Herakles into the Mysteries.

Herakles then went to a place called Taenarum in Laconia. In Taenarum, there is a cave that goes deeper and deeper into the earth, until finally it’s path is neither here nor there- it is In Between. And once he had walked down that path, through the In Between to there- Herakles met monsters, heroes, and ghosts in his travels through Hell.

Eventually, he found Pluto and asked the ruler of Hell for Kerberos. The ruler of Hell replied that Herakles could take Kerberos with him, but only if he overpowered the beast with nothing more than his own strength.

Herakles left his weapons in Pluto’s hall, and was given solemn promise that, on his return to the surface world and Kerberos’ return to Hell, they would be returned to him. After much travel, Herakles found Kerberos near the gates of Acheron. With a great and mighty heave, the hero lifted the great beast off of it’s feet and carried it back the way he came; and, after much traveling he eventually brought Kerberos to Eurystheus. After his labor was completed, Herakles returned to Taenarum, and escorted Kerberos to Hell, and set him back onto the ground.

Kerberos wagged it’s whiplike and betoothed tail, licked Herakles with stinking breath and slavering tongue, and bounded off into the dark reaches of Hell.

Herakles weapons were returned to him, and with the completion of his labors, his crime was atoned for.

So, what the hell does all that mean?

Well, let me tell you… the outline of another story.

There is a girl. She lives somewhere that you’ve never been to, and will probably never go. Her family went on a four month cruise, and in the first two months, the girl met a boy, and they started dating. And then- something, a storm, an explosion, a reef that wasn’t charted right- doesn’t matter, really. The ship went down.

The girl and her boyfriend get into a lifeboat which is shaped a bit like a submarine, and with them are- well. Their demons, of course. The boy succumbs to his demons- the girl takes her demons and a liferaft and a sea-survival kit and floats away, because she does not wish to die.
She dies anyway.

And then she’s born again.

She lives somewhere that you’ve never been to, and will probably never go. Her parents died when she was ten, and she ran away from her nursemaid governess handler birthmother home and survived on the streets for a time. She was in a battle that changed her, forced her to confront an immediate truth- she was irrevocably altered in a way that cannot be undone.

Inbetween the anyway with a period following the tail of the why and the And with an ay sharp like a traditional german roof, in that empty space between words- worlds- words, a kaleidoscope of sensations and feelings. A Hell. A journey through a place that is not entirely… Real. And in the loss of one set of demons, a space is made for scaly new little slithering astatars, licking their pointy teeth and sniggering after every thought- the tiny wretches even learned how to swim.

The point of all this isn’t really important right now. Except there’s one thing that is important, okay?

That thing that’s important is-

Wait, wasn’t I in a battle?

Nearly just.

What happened with that?

Your Powerphrase created a localized timewarp, with a specific endpoint for about thirty seconds ago.

How did I miss that?

You’ve been very introspective.

So. I’m going to ask the really important question- has my outfit changed? Again?

Oh yeah.

Fucking hell- is it at least… practical? Oi! Stop laughing!

S-s-sorry, heeeeeeheheheeheeeet’s just, ah, when has your magic ever been particularly practical?

…Never? You don’t think… you don’t think I’m getting… traditional? Do you?

The past will be Reckoned with, whether you want it or not.

…Fuck.

My Cards are on my chest, right over my heart. That’s not where I keep them, normally- they usually go- actually, nevermind that. I can feel air, on my back, and on my feet- my legs- shit.
Oh shit.

I’ve gone traditional.

I’m wearing my bodysuit under this whole ensemble, at least. I’m entirely too comfortable in my bodysuit, honestly, but it’s different now…? Small mercies at least- so… okay, I guess I could describe what I’m wearing. It’s honestly. Not. That. Bad…

My underarmor is gone- it’s been… incorporated isn’t the right word exactly, no wait, yes it is- it’s been incorporated into my bodysuit, which is now thicker, and more- something. It still does everything I need it to do- keep my body safe, provide emergency magical power when necessary, absorb the brunt of all attacks- still, there’s something different about it. Almost like I can attack in it in ways I can’t otherwise…

And I can feel things through it now. Which is different.

My bangles aren’t bangles anymore, they’re more like bracers, which is odd because I’m not and never will be an archer- but they’re heavy, and golden, and warm on my hands, and wrap up almost to my elbows.

Over my bodysuit is… ugh. When I said I’ve gone traditional, I’m not… um. Hm. So… have you ever heard of Mófă Shàonǚ- or, um, Maho Shoujo? Probably not, actually- so.

Sweets Fairy Amoréd Fighters is actually a pretty good example of what it’s like from the outside- ultra adorable outfits, impressive food and drinks, problems of daily life the only thing you really have to deal with, and the occasional giant monster thing you have to destroy or something like that. And, if you accept your traditional role in society- which in my case… nevermind that.

The point is, you only get the bucolic hunky-dory adorable with slivers of terror lifestyle if you accept that you have to be, for example, a Ditz with a Big Appetite, or, or the Hard Drinking Party-Animal- and I. Didn’t.

So I didn’t get that lifestyle.

My clothing… isn’t cute. My life… has problems that can’t be resolved with a conversation. And I don’t- well, haven’t- fought giant monsters.

I wouldn’t accept my Role. So… I got kicked out. Kicked Out.

Which means… I haven’t had to wear the traditional garb of the Mófă Shàoůń- I’ve been able to choose what I want to wear, for the most part, and when I want to wear what I wear.

Traditionally, however-

Oh. Oh shit.

Wally’s going to put the Helm of Fate on.

Normally I would describe my ludicrous and varied costume changes in excruciating detail for posterity’s sake, but this- no. No, no, and no again. There are some things in life I just- no.

No time for this shit!
“Give it up, Nabu! Order went out of style in the Twentieth Century!”

“This battle is pointless. You sought to take the helmet before it gained a Host- but you are Too Late.”

“Can it you old fart!”

Twin pillars of brick rise and arch and crush the- well, that’s not Dr. Fate, that’s more like… Kid Fate? And then a golden Ankh smashes the pillars apart.

“Brat.”

An ankh like a volley of arrows crashes down on Cat Brat- it slashes over some shield I cannot see.

A battle begins between Order and Chaos- and thank every god and goddess I am aligned with neither- and Order is getting it’s bell rung.

…Fuck. I knew it. Wally hasn’t been practicing with his Power outside of the game! Shit shit and double- I fucking told him.

Urgh!

Games in IM aren’t games anymore- they’re universes with their own rules and laws. And Wally played a game that gave him phenomenal powers- powers that came back with him. I told him- ugh. No time.

Thankfully, I’ve finished transforming.

Meaning I can move again.

I can feel, in the wind moving towards me- the Cat Brat’s energies slash through the air where my feet- where I- once stood; they are red, and screaming against my edges. I spin on my toes, a trail of Bubbles flowing out of my left palm so red, and then I Dash forwards and Jump. Spikes of Chaotic energy wash through me, but I am not afraid- there is a rope, pressed against the small of my back, where the leather of my overskirt stretches taught over the bones of my hips; I take the rope, thin and strong in my hands- and it’s the easiest thing in the world to Jump down next to the thing that is a cat and wrap one end knot over knot and pull against it’s left front paw- it swipes at me with it’s little claws, and I bat them away, absently. Loop again over it’s back, around both back legs and triple wind tight and the final knot like the glistening gaping jaws-

And then I let go of the white python wrapped around the little black and orange cat, and cartwheel out of the way of a fireball. A deflected fireball. Because apparently I’m not important to either combatant?

That’s both encouraging and depressing.

And the python isn’t doing anything to the Cat?
…How traditional have I gone?

Strike! This is no time for levity!

“Give it up, Nabu! That pathetic Host body has Zero affinity for the Mystic Artes.”

“Since when is Tempora Quando a Mystic Arte?”

Chaos Lightning fills the sky- and he’s going to use it to kill Nabu. He’s going to kill Wally.

No he isn’t.

I gave my hint to Nabu- now I need to give him, heh, time to work it out.

I Jump, and then Fly high, high into the air- and settle across from the roiling cloud full of hissing Chaos on a Cloud of my own. Welp. This is as good a time as any to test out the new suit.

“Thunder.”

Lightning fills my Cloud- and then arcs of Chaos jerk towards me, wash through me, and ground in the Cloud, harmlessly. Several minutes in, and I’m starting to feel this sort of… something? In my head?

It’s not exactly pressure- it’s like, it’s like there’s a reservoir, somewhere, inside of my soul that’s been empty for a long time, but it’s filling up, this empty space inside of me is filling up, and, and I want it- oh I want it, oh I want for my own.

Did I just quote a song lyric?

It’s a bit more than likely; and your distaste for snakes had more of an effect than you realized.

Oh, hey, the python rope… is back in my pocket?

The hell?

Oh my, that feels… nice. Like, really nice.

Oooh, rainbow!

And my Chaosource is gone now.

I should probably float down and listen to those two dumbasses fight I mean really who even cares? Wait, I don’t care.

But then again, one of those assholes is wearing my friend like a cheap coat, so…
I float down, and hover a few feet away from the edge of the roof’s crenelations- and I listen to their conversation.

“-In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m winning!”

“It is difficult for – to maintain a presence on the physical plane.”

I think Nabu struck a nerve.

“I am bound to the Helmet, and use a human Host- but that is not your way.”

“Stop your babbling Nabu!”

Interesting reverb from the Cat Brat.

“Am I?”

And a bolt of gold strikes the Brat’s Cat. Huh. Maybe that’s why the pythonrope returned to me-

“TEEKL! I can’t believe you would assault a defenseless pussy-cat.”

“We both know that creature is no cat, Witchboy. Without your familiar, you have no Anchor to this reality.”

“Bully! Killjoy! GEEZER! Hoip-cohb-We’re out of here.”

And then Witchboy Catbrat bursts into hissing globules of Chaos. I kind of want to eat one- no! Priorites!

I take a moment to breathe.

And then.

I Jump down, and land, soft as petals, in front of Nabu- the Dr. Fate.

“He’s not a good fit, you know.”

“What does it matter? The earth needs Dr. Fate. I will not release this body.”

“Are you implying that you would keep him as yours, without his consent or even input? How offensive.”

“Like you have any say in the matter, Chāngfù.”

“If you continue to insist on vulgarity, I will be quite annoyed. And like I said before: his talents are in Tempora Quando, not Mystica Artesima. To make my implied statements more acceptable to your lauded and most noble ears; this Chāngfù Yīyún jiā humbly suggests you release her friend and await another host.”

“And will there be another host?”

“Sadly, yes.”
“Now who is being vulgar?”

“Oh, did that come across as crude? Excellent. I know you can at the very least, hear.”

“Hmph. Fine. I’ll release him, on one condition.”

“And that is?”

“The Library in my Tower is… unruly. As you have so graciously volunteered to be it’s new custodian, with a contract in blood, no less, I merely require you to see to it’s care and matinence. Is this agreeable?”

“Are all items within the Library in your tower subject to my command, control, and discretion, as distinct from yours, and cannot be circumandated under any circumstances under the Executive for the Licensee, for deferral accounts, if the court of that year, interest under any such exercise, and total disability shall impair the receipt of shall include all Warrant certificates in no duty or one or more previously issued pursuant to deduct any officer of the injury even if Licensee or in an arrangement whereby executives can elect to pay to the referendant by the following specific references: living, dead or undecided; further, to become vested with its corporate structure affecting the Names as indicated in exchange or Board of this Agreement without the Date on behalf of which are for payment in lawful money of this planned employment will be disallowed for licensing to receive grants of Exerise of a Participant deferral accounts, provided by the death of the recipient or as administratively possible?”

“…Yes. Wait- yes. Definitely yes.”

“It’s a deal. Pleasure doing business with you; clasp hands with me, that our transaction be completed.”

He shakes my hand. Sucker.

“Once again, a pleasure doing business with you; now if you would so kindly remove yourself from my friends person-” he lifts himself up, off of Wally’s head- “and I’ll have the entirety of the sold space removed from your Tower by the end of the year.”

I can hear, ever so faintly on the edge of my hearing, a scream of frustration.

I never said I wouldn’t answer his questions, and truth spells- the ones that compel the truth, I mean- are what Order magic is for. So there’s really no excuse.

And he really is out of practice.

And it is cold up here, holy fucknuggets.

“H-hey Wally.”

“H-ey Terry. Are you alright?”

“B-been better. Who’s that?”

“H-he’s. Ah. He was Kent Nelson.”
“Oh. That’s sad, I guess. Sorry.”

“…I think he’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Applesauce.”

“…”

“…What?”

“…Did you mean Awesomesauce?”

“…yes.”

On the flight back to the Cave, after Aqualad notifies the proper authorities, I feel this sort of… shiver? Over my heart? And then I’m in my regular clothes, and dog tired to boot.

Still no glasses though. Those really were my only pair, too. Ugh.

I have a Key to the Tower of Fate now- specifically, it’s a Custodial Key. Nifty. I put it into a drawer in my Atelier, not the one I keep my Cards in, but a different one- and that drawer full of memories is… shadowed. Like, like there’s a cavity underneath the enamel on a tooth- I should deal with that, but… but it aches to touch it, so… so I don’t think I’m going to unless I absolutely have to.

Honestly, I sometimes wonder if I just set myself up for these things.

You do.

Shut up!

Anyway. Before I get into the Past with which I Must Reckon, I’ll go over the immediate aftermath of our journey to the Tower of Fate.

Wally placed the Helmet of Fate in a room full of bookcases that was empty, save for a few objects- a green eye, a red cap, a Cat mask, and a green arrow. Something about that eye bothered me but then I remembered I hadn’t beaten my highscore on Food Fighters yet, so...

Let me tell you about Food Fighters.

Okay, so, first of all, the theme song goes like this:

Test your gut, Test your gut,
Test your gut, Test your gut.
FOOD FIGHTERS!
Second of all, there’s a secret unlockable character called Pizza-face. She shoots a meatball canon, and wears a two-piece swimsuit. It’s horribly sexist, and she’s my favorite FF character hands down.

Third of all, this game has been banned in seventeen cities across Celestial Kiao, including Kowloon. Not that anyone in Kowloon cares.

Fourth of all (uurrrgh) I am one of the five people in the city who got a bootleg copy of the game for homeplay during the fifteen minutes it was allowed on sale, before the Moral Gaurdians got to the Chamber of Commerce. Fucking Squiddles lovers.

Look, I like thinly veiled horror as much as the next person, but sometimes I just want to see a jello-woman vomit acid on a guy made out of noodles, and then watch meatballs explode out of his cheese encrusted skull. Is that so wrong?

Fifth of all, Food Fighters might be my favorite game, ever. It’s the very first game I ever played, and… it’s special to me, alright?

Anyway, so- I played Food Fighters for like, six hours? Cuz it was after breakfast when I started, and then Kaldur was talking to me-

“Yes, sorry?”

“Do you want to go get something to eat with me?”
“U-um- yes, a-alright. I put these away, then we go, yes?”

“Yes.”

I smile at him- and it’s odd, but somehow… somehow I’ve stopped stuttering when I talk to him. Mostly.

He’s really cute. And he has these really pretty green eyes- celadon green. I feel like I’ve said this before, but it hasn’t stopped being true, so… Except, no, no that’s not right. They are not that color. Fuck. What color are they?

Also, no man alive should ever have bedroom everything. It’s just… it makes it very hard to treat him like a person. And Kaldur is a person, so- but still. He’s really beautiful.

…I wonder…

I wonder if… if I’m- not that it matters, of course. I just… wonder…

Anyway. Today I chose to wear a brightly patterned skirt that hovers in some nebulous length- it isn’t quite to my knees, but it isn’t to my mid-thigh either. It has a bouncy pattern of fish on it in a nearly-flat purple grey color, on a base of almost black brown. I’m also wearing a dudou as a shirt today, because, well- they probably don’t know what it is, and I… didn’t really give a shit this morning. More than usual, I mean. Anyway, my dudou is lilac, with edging in a faded sort of grey and embellishments of orioles and phoneixes and dainty-pawed foxes and tiny tiny butterflies in an eggshell color; my overblouse is actually one of my old sprinter’s tops that I’m finally busty enough to wear without it sagging unfortunately. It got washed with something blue that hadn’t completely color-fixed because it was red with long sleeves that bunched at my wrists- and now it’s violently purple. My shoes are dainty things, almost like the traditional kung-fu shoes I wore last night- except these are plain black, not black and soldier’s white. I’m taking my golden christamas beetle purse, which has a strap that goes around my waist and a strap that goes over my shoulder, along with two frills that just hang down and look like the other two legs. And since it’s been slightly cooler lately, I’ll wear- oh, sweet, my Bloop hat!

A Bloop, (ungendered term “Bloop”) is a squid that lives in at least fifty percent salinity water at temperatures between 15 and 30 degrees Celsius. They are herbivorus, and are the natural prey of Koooperia troopica, or the Common Troopical Dragon.

Bloopers come in three general colors- white, off white or eggshell, and pink. They can swim, burrow, and fly, and will use a combination of ink globules and psychic energy waves to dissuade predators from attacking them. Males are called Bloops, and Females are called Nannies. They are communal fish, and prefer to live in groups, or Bubbles, of no more than twelve adult members; juvenile Bloopers are ousted from the Bubble at the time of sexual maturity, and may be accepted back within the group if they return with an unfamiliar sexually mature Nannie. Juvenile Nannies will only leave their Bubble if enticed by a sexually mature Bloop that is unfamiliar to them.

Baby Bloopers- or Babbroopers- are produced only by the dominant Nannie. Nannies produce Babbroopers after a twenty day period in which the Nannie will bioluminesce
in increasing lumens until the Babbloopers are born.

Bloopers are categorized in three colors- white, pink, and peach. Variants do exist, but they are not eligible for competition. The current trend of Blooper shaped hats started in the Red District of Kowloon, where the hats hold the meaning of “currently unavailable for negotiable pleasure”. The overall trend has started developed into young women of various races, ages, and classes wearing fish-shaped hats, fish patterned clothing, and various fish-shaped items, to exhibit the fact that they are not prostitutes.

Kaldur is wearing a pair of black sandals, dark blue trousers, and a two-tone blue jacket- it is slick for wind-breaking, and has a stripe along the collar, down the zipper, around the openings of the pockets, and along the sleeves; accents.

“So. Where we going?”

“Ah- I was wondering if you would perhaps like to go… um. Would you like to do something that is, ah, entertainmenting- I mean, would you like to go do something fun with me?”

“Yes. Ah- I think, um, I think that every time with you is, um, entertainmenting. Um. Entertaining?”

“Entertaining. And thank you, um.”

“Y-yes. You are welcomed. Um… but, what is fun?”

“It is- I will show you.” When he smiles his eyes go all yummy. Oh gods what is wrong with me.

“I will like that.” My face kind of hurts- like, every time I talk to him, my cheeks and lips always kind of hurt. I can’t imagine why, though…

---

What?
O-kay…

Walking together- with a cute boy, no less- out in the twenty five degree weather, is something I usually don’t get to do. I mean, I- I like this. I like being with this cute boy, oh gods what if he doesn’t-”

“Terry?”

“Yes?”

“Do you want to go there?”

I suddenly realize that I’ve been staring at a bookstore- holy shit a bookstore.

“Yes!”
“Okay. Let’s go.”

Books! They have books about flowers! They have books about photography! OH MY GODS IT’S A BOOK ABOUT CLOTHING I HAVEN’T READ I MUST HAVE IT. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh I love bookstores. Oh shit, wait, what happened to- oh.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You are sure?”

“Yes.”

“Because I think that will wipe off with some water-”

“I will wear your kisses with pride and honor.”

“Um. Okay.” Ow. Fucking cheeks. And my face is burning too, gods damn it all. Fuck. BOOKS. Fuck.

I keep forgetting how red my lipstick is, though…

For our lunch that day, after I manage to wipe my lipstick off of Kaldur’s face- and he was surprisingly reticent until I reminded him of the social etiquette of being in public and “-while it might be okay to be covered in kisses at home, the rules in public are different, now hold still.”

“But-”

“Hold. Still.”

“…Very well.”

“Ooo! Clams!”

I didn’t know how wide Kaldur’s eye’s could go but gods strike me down if I don’t say I like it. I like it a lot. I wonder why he did that though, I mean… it’s just clams. Right?

Strike, I swear, your sense of humor is both strange and impenetrable- Atlantean. Hah.

“Ah- tomorrow, we must go to the Funeral of Mr. Nelson.”

“Oh! Oh, yes- um, what is appropriate to be wearing?”

“Ah, you should wear your normal Work attire, but perhaps… add something black, for funerary purposes?”

“Black…? Is not a funeral color. Is color of Heaven.”

“Um- oh. Right- my apologies. What color would you wear to the funeral?”
“Well, Mr. Nelson was very old, so… white would be best.”

“…Sorry, I am not sure I- ah. What would color w-would you wear as, um, your, as y-your wedding dress?”

“Well- White is color of brightness, purity, fulfillment and mourning; black is neutral, north, water, and Heaven; Qing is for spring, vigor, and vitality” That’s what color his eyes are! “Yellow is for good luck, kings, monks, and cruelty- so my wedding dress would probably be red with black. Maybe a little qing too, for. Ern. Mm.”

“I- um. It is different, where I am from.”

“Yes?”

“Ah- well, red is the color of soldiers and war, white is purity, innocence, and wealth, black is for mourning, purple is for kings, and- I am sorry, but what is kwing?”

“Qing is- is spring color, is new growing plant color, is alive color, is- um. Is the color of your eyes, Kaldur. Qing is the color of your eyes.”

Why is it so hard to breathe? Why is my face burning? What is this?

It’s very odd how you can ratchet back and forth between serious introspection and complete internal oblivion.

Wha- Strike!

Yes?

Do you know what’s wrong with me?

Yes. And so do you. You won’t believe me if I tell you, and anyway, this is a conclusion you have to come to on your own.

That’s very annoying.

...

I think I’m going to try holding Kaldur’s hand again- for some reason the thought of kissing him again is… too much, right now? Is that bad?

You feel what you feel. And there’s a difference between- whoops, sorry, nevermind, you’ve got to figure this out on your own.

Strike!

Nope, sorry, can’t do it.

Fine. I will figure this out, then.

We walk most of the way back to where we parked our motorcycles- and I hold Kaldur’s hand and he holds mine and it is quite possibly the best moment I’ve ever been a part of ever and it was entirely too short. The tingles that shoot up my arm and scratch over my shoulders and trace over my face and fuuuuck. I just. I really like this cute- this guy. Shit. Fucking. I- what is happening to me?
Anyway. This is the eulogy Red Tornado gave at Mr. Kent Nelson’s funeral- it rained, and I was distracted a little by all the others there- not my teammates, but the ones out in the rest of that blessed field. The ones who weren’t ready.

“Kent Nelson did not require a magic helmet to be a hero…”

I was almost afraid to go into the gravesite, actually- but then I remembered who I am, and I walked there with pride.

I also didn’t realize that husbands and wives are buried together in this country. The more you know.

(I didn’t realize that my Red X outfit had coloration settings until I looked through the- well, the interior of my mask has a readout screen now, and there are menus and sub menus and it all looks very much like my computer and the OS I made when I was… Jesus, fourteen? Was it really less than a year ago?

But I have a wide range of color options- and I can *add* colors now, along with “enviromental settings”, which go from arid to aquatic. For the funeral, I powered up before it was time to meet at the grave, and sat on the couch in our Commons.

I cycled through maybe five different colors and enviroSets before I finally settled on Late Summer: Mourning, which is an all black suit, no red palms or soles or facial features, and a bright white hooded tunic, with black stripes around each cuff and around the lower hem of the tunic.)

“…Kent dedicated his life- *gave* his life- to safeguard this world from evil. May he finally find rest with his Beloved Inza.”

Kid Flash wore a black band around his upper left arm. Water ran down his face, but I’m not sure if it was from the rain or his eyes.

Green Arrow calls Artemis over to where he is, and Batman is there too- and I have business to attend.

I move over to where Aqualad is, and “I have business to attend to. I will return in three days time, if that’s alright.”

“…What business?”

“I have to move some books, talk to some people at school, check on some of my friends, and buy hatmaking supplies. That’s all.”

“Alright. Wait- hatmaking supplies?”
“Well, yes. It is Sharkweek, and my old Sharkweek hat did not survive the seagulls.”

“Seagulls?”

“…That summer job was awful.” I shudder. Fishbait shops are alright, but not when you have to work there all through the hottest part of typhoon season and the wind blows off the roof and in a rare moment of calm a flock of seagulls descends and pecks the hell out of you, your hat, and the bait.


“Did I speak that or think it?”

“You spoke it. If it is any consolation, I too, am not a fan of seagulls.”

“…Do you want a hat for Sharkweek? Too, I mean? S-since I’m making h-hats and all…”

“Oh- ah, y-yes. Um. Yes, that would be- ah, that would be wonderful.”

Ah, my stutter. I missed you, old fiend.

Anyway. The moving of the Library of Fate has only the minor hiccup of the books being either carnivorous or uncooperative, and I settle that right out with the threatened application of a Zippo lighter and some good old-fashioned spine stroking and leather conditioner; honestly, a good massage can do wonders for even the grumpiest of souls. It did take an entire day out of my three days though.

The Ball I missed and need for Divination is a bit trickier- however, I found a book about the manipulation of Tempora Quando- written by a “R[smudged out] Song”, and bound in blue, of all things; however, a very good book, full of temporal shenanigans. And an extremely unique Temporal Array that translates frighteningly well into my own personal Words- it’s almost like it was meant for… nevermind. In one of my palatial study rooms, just outside the Library itself, after I draw the Temporal Array in Words on the floor with chalk and ash and soot and the blood of one chicken (which was then promptly eaten by one of my many servants after I had drained all of it’s vital viscous fluids) I switched my enviromSet to- holy. Shitballs. Of. Fire.

I have my Sneaking Out at the Three in the Morning dress.

*I’m going to wear the shit out of this thing.*

The effect of wearing that dress for real is- almost… intoxicating. Imagine being overly hot for a long time- having everything stick and suck to your sweaty, heated skin. And then imagine the feeling of coolness and softness and *yessssssssssssss* slipping and caressing each and every sweaty crevasse of your sticky heated flesh and woah, okay, I need to have an orgasm soon. Anyway, my mask, of all things, changes as well; and by placing my hands like a little book and peering into them, I am able to see into my own face like a web cam- and I’m going to have fun with *that* later, I can feel it- but my Face is the blank white it’s always been, and the X is always where it’s been, but… there are red swirls, I have lips on my mask itself, and there’s something… foxy. About the entire ensemble.
I’m not entirely sure what though…

Wait- before we go further, I should explain what the Three in the Morning dress actually is, and why the Sneaking Out at the Three in the Morning dress is different.

The Three in the Morning Dress is not actually original to the game of SBURB, even though that’s one of the only places it actually exists, for a given level of existence. To fully explain it, we have to go back to eighteen seventy three- specifically, Xanghai of eighteen seventy three, in the days before the Landlady owned everything in the West Quint of Kowloon.

McCall's was a bi-monthly women's zine that enjoyed great popularity through much of the 20th century, peaking at a readership of 8.4 million in the early 1960s. It was established as a small-format magazine called The Queen in 1873. In 1897 it was renamed McCall's Magazine—The Queen of Fashion (later shortened to McCall's) and subsequently grew in size to become a large-format glossy. It was one of the "Seven Sisters" group of women's service magazines.

The Seven Sisters are a group of magazines which have traditionally been aimed at married women who are homemakers with husbands and children, rather than single and working women. The name is derived from the Greek myth of the "seven sisters", also known as the Pleiades. Six of the magazines are still published; Better Homes and Gardens, Good Housekeeping, Family Circle, Ladies' Home Journal, Redbook, and Woman's Day.

The seventh sister, McCall's, ceased publication in 2002 after an ill-fated attempt to rebrand itself (under the name Go! Go! Go!) by teaming up with talk-show host Gordon G. Godfrey. Godfrey and the publisher were unable to agree upon editorial decisions, and both parties filed breach-of-contract lawsuits against the other.

McCall’s was the awkward child of the seven sisters- whereas the other six were more concerned with prestige and gardening tricks, impressive interior displays of wealth, familial woes, sexual stimulation, monetary guidance, and social calendar control, McCall’s was unequivocally the zine for the woman who wasn’t afraid to get hands on and make something from scratch. It was also one of the only magazines aimed at the middle and lower classes, and wasn’t afraid to talk about things that the other six magazines barely if ever glanced at- everything from building your own sex dungeon to stitching a five piece suit on a treadle sewing machine.

Starting in May 1951, and lasting until at least 1995, Betsy McCall paper dolls were printed in most issues. The printed dolls and clothing could be cut out of the zine, or for a small fee (10¢ in 1957, 25¢ in 1967) paper dolls printed on cardboard could be ordered. Betsy McCall became so popular that various sized vinyl dolls were produced by Ideal and Passion Character Dolls.

In 1870, Scottish immigrant James McCall began designing and printing his own line of sewing patterns. As a means of advertising his patterns, McCall founded a four-page fashion journal entitled The Queen: Illustrating McCall's Bazaar Glove-Fitting Patterns.

When McCall died in 1884, his widow became president of McCall Company, and hired Mrs. George Bladsworth as magazine editor. Mrs. Bladsworth held the position until 1891. Though still mainly a vehicle to sell McCall's sewing patterns, The Queen began to publish homemaking and handiwork information, and by 1890 had expanded to 12 pages. In 1891, the magazine's name became The Queen of Fashion, and the cost for a year's subscription was 30 cents.

In 1893, James Henry Ottley took over the McCall Company. He increased the subscription price to 50 cents a year, increased the number of pages to between 16 and 30 per issue, and began to publish...
articles on children's issues, health, beauty, and foreign travel. In order to reflect the magazine's expanded range of topics, the name was changed to *McCall's Magazine—The Queen of Fashion* in 1897. In time, the name would be shortened to *McCall's*.

About one hundred years earlier, the fad of Occidentalism in Europe had reached its peak, and though the flow of ideas to and from the great powerhouse cities of cultural expression had created a fruitful supply of new and interesting ideas, there was still a very great divide in what was considered acceptable and what was not, particularly for women's clothing. The Three in the Morning Dress, beautiful as it is, was the first step towards the path of women's suffrage in the East- and though that step was directly onto a slippery banana peel sitting on a slick of grease, it was a First step, and for that it should be remembered.

When the first model wearing the Three in the Morning Dress was shown to the general public, there was outrage. This is because the actual dress is technically a ballgown- a ballgown in which the wearer's smallcloths could be exposed in a brisk wind, as there is nothing in the original design to prevent the dress from blowing about.

The actual original dress is black silk with diamonds and seed pearls stitched in a “starry sky” pattern, with two layers of green tulle overlaid. It was considered outrageous because it had a slit that ran from just below the wearer's hips to the floor, and abjectly did *not* require a petticoat. It soon became a model around the world for what the very highest class of prostitute or courtesan should wear- it combined “ease of access” with “magnificence”. Moral guardians were outraged, and the 1787 Great Dress Fire of Xanghai was the result of a dress-burning gone horribly, horribly wrong. The pattern for the “Three 'ours after the Mid-night” dress was locked away in an attic box and presumed lost forever- until James Henry Ottley found the pattern, and set it to be published in the Xanghai June edition of eighteen ninety-five.

The series of mishaps, now lost to the sewers of history and hearsay, that followed delayed the publishing of the actual pattern until nineteen eighty-five. Though very few people ever actually followed the directions exactly, it did spawn the craze of the “highlow” skirt, and is directly responsible for the Queen class in SBURB. It is the only fancy dress Calliope can wear without requiring serious alterations to the garment, and it is what her NPC appears in during the Endgame Execution: Redux- patched version, of course.

Lousy goddamn coding errors.

There is an example of a Three in the Morning dress at the Metropolis Museum of Art.

The Sneaking Out at the Three in the Morning dress is a sleek evening dress that *could* be worn to a fancy ball, or a costume ball, or a dance hall, or a club, or a cult meeting…. It is unique in that-“OW!”

“My deepest apologies, Madame.”

“It’s fine- just… try not to catch your claws in my flesh, yes?”

“Yes, Madame.”

-it is almost completely unembellished, save for two distinctive velvet panels that break up the wearer’s silhouette. Mine is a combination of black, blacker, and darkest black that all fade to
nothing more than pale grey and nothing in the night.

It is currently my very favorite dress.

The jewelry I am wearing to the Ball of Lights—look, I don’t care what the teacher called it, everyone knows that the only Ball that can be held on the Summer Solstice is for the adulation of Summer and the Sun, ergo, Light— is a combination of pearls, corals, and jade, in long strings that have to be pinned both around me and on my dress.

My hair has been Oopsiebrushed very long, and has been pinned and coiffed into a style I don’t entirely understand, but Sprintstill and Blade have both assured me that it is appropriate for the event I am going to.

If a château is not old, then it must be grand. A château is a “power house”, as Sir John Summerson dubbed the British and Irish “stately homes” that are the British Isles' architectural counterparts to French châteaux. It is the personal (and usually hereditary) badge of a family that, with some official rank, locally represents the royal authority; thus, the word château often refers to the dwelling of a member of either the French royalty or the nobility, but some fine châteaux, such as Vaux-le-Vicomte, were built by the essentially high-bourgeois. The palaces I “inherited” from Madame White are more properly termed châteaux, and though each one is connected through varying tunnels, they are counted as individual chateaus.

A château is supported by its terres (lands), composing a demesne that renders the society of the château largely self-sufficient, in the manner of the historic Roman and Early Medieval villa system. The open villas of Rome in the times of Pliny the Elder, Maecenas, and Emperor Tiberius began to be walled-in, and then fortified in the 3rd century AD, thus evolving to castellar “châteaux”. In modern usage, a château retains some enclosures that are distant descendants of these fortifying outworks: a fenced, gated, closeable forecourt, perhaps a gatehouse or a keeper's lodge, and supporting outbuildings (stables, kitchens, breweries, bakeries, manservant quarters in the garçonnière). Besides the cour d'honneur (court of honour) entrance, the château might have an inner cour (“court”), and inside, in the private residence, the château faces a simply and discreetly enclosed park.

In the city of Paris, the Louvre (fortified) and the Luxembourg (originally suburban) represented the original château but lost their château etymology, becoming “palaces” when the City enclosed them. In the U.S., the word château took root selectively, in the Gilded Age resort town of Newport, Rhode Island, the châteaux were called “cottages”, but, north of Wilmington, Delaware, in the rich, rural “Château Country” centred upon the powerful Du Pont family, château is used with its original definition. In Canada, especially in English, château usually denotes a hotel, not a house, and applies only to the largest, most elaborate railway hotels built in the Canadian Railroad golden age, such as the Château Lake Louise, in Lake Louise, Alberta, the Château Laurier, in Ottawa, the Château Montebello, in Montebello, Quebec, and the most famous Château Frontenac, in Quebec City. Moreover, in other French-speaking European regions, such as Wallonia (Belgium), the word Château is used with the same definition. In Belgium, a strong French architectural influence is evident in the seventeenth-century Château des Comtes de Marchin and the eighteenth-century Château de Seneffe.

In 2010, the Ball of Lights, which is a yearly celebration in which the Summer Solstice is celebrated by the Court of the Celestials (of which I am a part), the Seelie Court, and the Unseelie Court, both of which reside in Arcadia. I could explain what Arcadia is, but I won’t. I will, however, make clear that the Château the 2010 Ball of Lights was held in holds not a single candle to even the poorest of
mine- shit balls of fire, I’m starting to act like one of them.

The Door on the Mountainside that I made is still there, even after I cast Return. Creeping through a door made out of an arch of stone inset in the gnarled roots of a mighty adler, hidden in a stand of trees in the far west of my palatial grounds; there is a path that can be followed, a path that steadily climbs up narrow, weaving stairs grown together out of bone and treeroots- and there, at the end, a light and the rushing sounds of the ocean. The light of a soft sunset, and the smell of growing things- and there, the jagged gaping socket of the portal that connects the stairway from my palatial gardens to this extranormal doorway into another realm of existence. I pull myself out of the half-rotted rent in the hollow flesh of the apple peach tree, and stand fully on the mossy stone tabletop.

The light of sunset washes sparkling over the rolling waves of the sea, foam frothing in ripples on the golden brown sparkling shores of sand; soft pinks and oranges that flutter on pebbles. Pools of creatures too tiny to see from this distance, but nevertheless, alive.

Fly shudders in the soft breeze coming off of the sea; salty fresh fish smell brushes through the broad green leaves, plays with the feathery mane of Fly, dances the light over the speckles of pink and blue in Fly’s butter soft coat. The thick dragonhide leather that hugs Fly’s ribs is shaved smooth but pebbled, like the skin of a shark, and speckled with red stips. Stirrups hang long down the sides of the barrel of Fly’s ribs, hackamore bridle looped and woven with sparkling blue beads; pommel of the saddle inset with a sparkling gemstone like a galaxy floating in the void. Fly’s hooves are split into two wedges, shod in rainbow glinting metal that I do not know the name of; thick fluffs of hair over Fly’s knees and hocks wave in the sea breeze. Fly’s ears swivel and flick, light crackling off of them in spurts of salmon tinged gold.

I put my hand on the pommel of the saddle.

Fly waits, paitently, metal-shod feet gently clattering over the mossy stone of the table. Fly’s body is warm and gently thumping through the heavy dead leather skin of a dragon I never saw or slew. Fly’s eyes are red and gently sparkling like miniscule gemstones have been inset in the iris and grab onto the light with steady fingers and thinly woven threads. Fly’s eyelashes are thick and black and curl towards the ridge of it’s brows, and it’s muzzle is warm and softly huffing into the cool twilight. Fly’s wings are massive, held onto the spine with muscles that bulge and flex underneath silver grey flesh and pale pink hair.

I mount Fly; one foot goes into the stirrup, the other swings over the broad back and settles into the other stirrup. Weight centers and sifts on Fly; the reigns of the bridle are adjusted so that the main pulling force is from the meaty bottom of my closed hands. I am wearing fine riding gloves, and a hard helmet that hugs neatly around my head; Fly shifts forwards and stops. So that’s where it’s post is.

I gently turn Fly to the South, and then with a great bunching of muscle beneath my buttocks and betwixt my thighs; the thrusting of great wings into the salt-laden air, the steady stappling of feathers on the nearly night sky. Fly’s hooves chime and clink like washers in a drawer full of corks. My jewelry clacks against the stiff hide of the saddle, and my train flaps in the steady breeze of Fly’s passage.

Night fully falls, and a Sea of Stars unfurls around me, a womb of light glinted starkness bounded at wide rims with deepest purple and a thin line of purest qing. Thin blue lights flicker and flash, and soft red-yellow lights glow; the stretching and deep digging in the liquid of the air of Fly’s wings.
shine with moonlight. The moon is waxing steady, and will be full in four days time; the swiftly approaching night is warm and sweet and scented with the heady scent of honeysuckle, the burning sting of alcohol in the nose.

Newport steadily floats into view on my left, lights gently flickering in the night; blooms of flowers and thin streams of light stippling over ridges in the topography of the island on which I now live. The sound of ocean waves are steady and ubiquitous in my hearing; the crying of seabirds has faded with the light. In the near distance, a cloud of floating orbs of warm summer light, thin beams of heat and lust flickering within- a beacon; I ride Fly towards them, and then gently settle onto the wide pale clean plate of the slate landing pad. I dismount from Fly, and drop the Card- and my invitation passes muster easily, as the doorman lets me through with the barest of perfunctory glances at my scrap of gilt edged paper, scented with orange oil.

Music wafts up wide and steady marble stairs, pale and reedy sounds in imitation of birds and insects and the laughter of women and children; thin and whimpering noises that do nothing more than whisper their boredom and unhappiness in the vaulted space of the echoing stone clad hall. The soft rustle of stiff fabrics hisses underneath the cloying stench of too many strong sugar flower perfumes and unwashed bodies pretending to be beautiful and lying, always; dishes clink and clatter, metal tools tink and chatter against ceramic vessels, and the soft whisper flick of candle flames.

The cold inky unreflective black toes of my kitten heeled shoes peek out beneath the silk hem of my dress with every clicking step; the red undersole is reflected in the polished marble tiles, thin cool slimps of grey and faded winter’s sky blue undulating under my rubber soled feet. My jewelry is visible only as splotches of turquoise and aqua and green in the rippling scale sleekness of the marble floor; carpeting so thick it swallows the tops of my shoes, eats the glittering distortion of my body, silences the steady clicking clatter of my sharp short heels.

Wide pillar candles flicker with five yellow-gold flames in long rows; wide tallow pillars with hot lights flickering and hissing against the slowly growing growling shadows at the edges of the cold white hallway. Wide stairs, empty of any living thing, bound on both sides by rails of thin winding iron, and in the center, the same thick cushioning carpet flowing down, loops of dull brown red and stylized flowers of blue, white, orange, and pink.

The music is louder at the bottom of the stairs; reedy still, but thicker than overly brothy soup, bones of truly filling music floating out from around another hallway, this one filled with the soft murmurs of people who aren’t having conversations. Vases of flowers are set strategically on low curved leg tables. The tables are covered over in flowery scrollwork and carved with delicate knives and intensely focused; fine lace doilies are sitting underneath fine china vases painted with thin blue lines in the patterns of fish scales and trailing ivy.

I step inside the Grand Ballroom of the Aracadian Consulate; it is open to the air, with a deep pit in the center. Massive bundles of faggots and the dead desiccated stumps and gnarled branches encrusted with sea-salt and dried wreathes of flowers await their moment of immortalization- sorry, immolation. Naked women are dancing around the pit, dancing around low boulders that sparkle with gemstones and coins that have been laid upon their craggy shoulders, their naked bodies sparkling and distorting in the glowing wealth displayed on the dead stones. They ring bells or swing censors that let smoke scented with rose and sandalwood and lavender float on high; they wear garlands of geranium and marigold and roses, crowned with feathers and horns and beads and tiny flickering candles that sit on the tips of horns and nestle in the crooks of branches that bob to their
The Grand Ballroom is lit with hundreds of jam jars filled with flickering butterflies and clear diving bells with the sparkling corpses and skeletons hung on on fine white threads woven in spiderwebs and stuck to the walls with thin layers of amber pine sap. Terracotta pots with massive butterfly bushes that have been shaped into trees; they sit in alcoves that let slightly salty air waft through the echoing ring of stone that is a room but has no roof.

The room itself is ovoid, with steadily moving waitstaff in charcoal blackened attire that removes every aspect of personality and life from them; their faces are covered with woven birch-bark masks that have been plastered over and painted as bears and lions and eagles. Tall slowly moving icebergs of women covered over in fluffy mounds of thin fabric and encrusted with sparkling scales. They murmur and hiss to each other, occasionally taking some morsel from the charcoal thin wirebodies with faces of animals who flicker around their vast presences like slinking scavenger fish.

A rabbit masked blackwire servant notices my entrance, and with boney movements like the creeping of a daddy long-legs spider; in their left hand, which is like the bark of an oak tree yet pale peach and pink, and blackened in the nails, clenched into the soft metal of a platter of gold, and on the platter are heavy mugs of frothy drink, something alcoholic I can smell in the air above the platter. The blackwire servant is only as tall as the underside of my bust.

I take a mug and a napkin, and then I sweep into the rest of the party. My heels clatter and skitter over the stones, clawlike; my dress rustles and then I am moving silently through a crowd of Arcadians and dead Caeldoians and people from Jianhu who don’t look at me, don’t talk to me, pretend I and anyone like me doesn’t even exist.

And that’s just fine.

As the moon rises, the dancers change places with the blackwire servants, who start to shed their leathery shrouds to reveal painted and tattooed and scarred bodies that fit the theme of the eve, but not their masks; there are small breasted women painted and scarred to be eagles but wearing the masks of bears and lions, and vis versa. The women take up torches and dance with them, while men bearing swords and with a flashing and spinning dance they slash and flicker through the night lit only with stars; and then in one movement the men disembowel themselves and the women throw their torches and then themselves into the flames.

The men break open to reveal chicken wire ribcages and knitted intestines that spill out and burst open to reveal animal skulls and the congealed remains of blood mixed with rotted clay. The women in the flames of the pit dance and flicker and become beings of pure energy and light, and in their transformation they inflame and consume the dead wood- the thin bundles of sticks called faggots, the heavy dead stumps, the gnarled driftwoods encrusted with salts- and these salts pop and fizzle.
into blue and green sparks and flames, orange heat licking into the night.

In the heat of the flames, the candles melt into puddles of wax burning in the softly risen moonlight; the jamjars shatter, and the fireflies whirl in concentric spirals that flitter in and out of loosely wafting spider threads hung slightly taught with the broken shards of buoys and jars. The crumbling fairy skeletons are scattered and crushed underfoot, as the Titanic Arcadians did not cease their steady swirling around each other, did not stop hissing and whispering and dancing and letting their skirts rustle and bustle and there are shards of glass embedded in the walls and floor and the Arcadians and the dead Caelondians and in the people who ignore me from Jianhu, but not into me.

I wear what I wear for a reason, after all.

The naked women who were dancing before the sacrifice of the blackwire servants have returned, clad in air alone, their hair bound up high in woven braids and buns; crystals of yellow and beads of gold, their skins painted over in marks of sunlight. They dance around the bonfire and the grisly corpses of the male blackwire servants, scooping up entrails caked in clay and dried blood and dancing with them, stroking them over their breasts and winding them around their buttocks and throwing the shit-smelling bones at each other and laughing. Jugs of wine and pure alcohol are splashed into mouths and into the fire and onto each other and then they throw the entrails and the corpses of the male sacrifices into the pit of flame.

The fire flares high, hissing and screeching at the sky, and the women now splattered and hideous and naked begin to leap and screech and laugh and then in some semblance of ordered control, they leap over the flames, reveling in the instants of danger and death that they only barely avoid. The flames that caress their body turns the shit and the blood and the dusty clay into scales of gold and slivers of ivory that are stabbed into them; their hair comes unbound and in the light of the moon, feathers flicker.

I’ve had five mugs of frothy alchoholic beverage, and it’s starting to taste kind of like dry bread with slight sweetness at the edges, and bitter flowers hidden under the alcohol. I’m a little buzzed and slightly woozy, but not drunk- I should eat something.

Although this event is being held by Arcadians, I am not wary of eating the food here; there are dead Caeldonians and people from Jianhu who want to pretend people like me don’t exist and Titanic Arcadians and dead sacrificial blackwire servants and moonlit virginal priestessses are eating various cooked and uncooked meats and vegetables. And though we come from dissimilar stock, and exist on dissimilar planes of life- well.

There’s no law against eating food freely offered, and the guard saw my invitation and let me in. But, actually- no. I shouldn’t eat anything. I think I might have drunk more than just five mugs of frothy alchoholic beverage.

The flapping of wings in silver moonlight; the nude virgin moon priestesses dance in the flames and
the ashes and fly through the fog of fireflies and the shards of glass and the clinking of gemstones and coins on the mossy stones and smooth marble tiles. Skittering bones clatter through the air. Dustmotes sparkle in moonlight.

I sign the guest book, get a thank-you card, and that’s the end of the party for me. However, there is one thing I need to do- just one thing, mind. I can’t leave a solstice party without providing something for the event. In an alcove to the east, behind a pillar of untouched granite flecked with orange and grey and black crystal, there is an urn meant for the ashes of the pit. In that urn are the charred bones of a small baby, and the urn itself sits on a pedestal of ivory in a bed of rich soil. It is settled in a window that receives eight full hours of sunlight daily, regardless of the time of year, even if it’s only refracted off the edge of the slowly rippling pond filled with peeping frogs and gulping koi fish. I crouch and kneel down, and dig my fingers into the rich soil around the ivory pedestal and Flower helps me grow tall wide petaled flowers of bright yellow flowers that give seeds that are hulled in white with black stripes and have a grey green protein fatty kernel within. They turn their faces towards the sun, and lift their heads to the sky every day, and they stare people down with a blackbrown depthless eye made entirely out of new seeds and pollen stamens and rimmed with lovely petals of a yellow so cheerful you can almost ignore being stared at by an unvocal entity.

Green furry shoots burst out from the edges of my fingers and reach towards the sky, massive firm buds expanding into full flowers and the smell of summer fills the air; heat and mist and fresh growing things and light, more light than can be imagined.

The dirt under my fingernails is itchy, and I pick the crumbs of it out from the cracks of my skin. The arch that allowed me inside the ballroom has not moved, and there were never doors on either side, not even curtains- merely a change in the tile patterns on the floor. I pass through the hallway full of blue vases on willowy minute tables, walk across the thick plush carpeting that swallows the sounds of my steps and the tops of my shoes; I walk up the wide and welcoming stairs, with their bannister of marble and their unliving cleanliness.

The bouncer, a gruff cement figure, all gargoyle in the face and carved muscles and glowing orange eyes like embers in the cooling ashes of a fire- the bouncer gives me the faintest of respectful nods, and is polite enough to wait until I’ve ridden Fly into the Sea of Stars to sweep the ground where I stood.

That actually was quite polite of him.

I am hungry- so, where to go for actual food? There was that bar in… either Keystone or Central. I remember smelling the tasty smell of cooked meats and old alchohols- and I think they might have liver and onions too. To the bar in Central! Or possibly Keystone. I’m not entirely sure.

The wind over the Appalachian mountains is violent, and the fluttering and dancing fireflies light a road from the mountains to the edge of the middle of the flat and rippling grasslands. Fly leaps through the wind and the dustmotes dance in the moonlight; grass rustles in the wind, and the soft ringing of metalshod hooves clatter against brickfaced buildings in a wide flat city. I drop Return, and the moon jumps from it’s rounding wax to a bountiful fullness, and in that light Fly’s dappled coat blazes with silver light, and holy shit the wind is cold.

I change my enviroSet to Late Summer Night Out and I’m instantly in a red and white circle cut dress with three fourth length sleeves and a pair of black cat tights; my shoes are patent leather, slick black with large bows on my ankles. My dress is made of a knit fabric that is extremely fine, and is so much warmer than what I was wearing. Fly tosses it’s head, and it’s mane flickers silver and the rustling of feathers and leaves fills the air with their sussurant sounds; Fly presses back into the air
and there’s a diner across from that Gym I stopped in that one time.

It’s much closer than either Central or Keystone and I’m really hungry, holy shit. Wait, do I even-hot shit, yes, I have American money! Fly flutters down and chlinks into the parking lot of the diner across from Grant’s Gym. I dismount, and take a moment to squeeze my shivering and sweaty self back into some semblance of normality. Fly’s skin is soft, like a chinchilla, and it smells of apple fruit and new made hay; it is warm on my masked cheek, and the steady heaving of it’s lungs and the steady slow thrum of it’s heart rushes like waves in my skull and I can breathe again. My feet are once again on the steady ground and the world is once again normal. They sky is full of stars, as it should be, and the colored lights of the city cast thin shadows of all the blurred dead forms that flicker faintly in the electric lights. The lights flicker and surge in and out and flicker with a rolling beat of electricity.

I drop Fly and very carefully walk through the parking lot. The door is made of glass, and the light that pours out in streams from it’s slippery surface is thick and honey flavored and it tastes like violet.

Oh dear. That was not an ordinary frothy alcoholic beverage served in a thick walled ceramic mug. Why did I let Terry drink that many mugs of it? Terry should not be able to taste colors...

The door’s handle is cold and metal and sparkling with blue jolts and it makes the skin underneath the fabric of my hands prickle with needle point touches. The door is heavy against the palms of my hands, and my body is clacking against it’s joints, the strings that hold me together as a ball jointed mannequin loosening, slackening, becoming more and more like worn out rubberbands and stretching to the snapping point. My footsteps are silent but feel like stomps and stumbles, but my eyes are telling me that the world is moving slowly smoothly tracking shot of diner interior, the buzz of a neon sign flicker flicker buzzing with the phrase “24 Hour Eatery” and neon gases in colored tubes shaped like words but not words flashing colors on the counter. The counter is not dead, because it was never alive- it is a simraculum, made to be the approximation of aqua color, edges wrapped with stainless steel that is tapped with channels that catch grease and dirt and are black colored but clean. A woman with dark skin and pink hair and that is Oracle. Why is Oracle working at a diner across from a Gym?

“Oracle?”

“Yes, X?”

“Why are you working at a diner across from a Gym in Blue Valley, Missouri, USA?”

“Money, dear Vice Captain. Money.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense.”

I take out my American money, and press it flat out onto the fake never-dead counter. I have a single crumpled clothpaper green rectangle with soft edges and curved corners. There are numbers of Arabic descent on the fabric paper green rectangle, and it is soft to the touch; the numbers are all five. I have one green paper cloth rectangle with the number five and an etched image of Thomas Jefferson. I also have three silver coins with George Washington on one side and the symbolic eagle of America.
“What can I buy with one American money with a five on it and three silver coins with George Washington?”

“Um. Hmm. What have you eaten before now?”

“I haven’t eaten anything, but I’ve just Returned from the Ball of Lights, after drinking… you know, I don’t actually know how many frothy alcoholic beverages in thick-walled ceramic mugs. It tasted like slightly stale bread and bittersweet flowers and it smelled like the sourest part of yeasty bread dough and I need. To eat something I think. I don’t feel quite normal.”

“Ah. W-well, do you have any allergies?”

“I can’t consume whole milk without vomiting and getting an itchy everything, but I can eat milk products if they’ve been fully cooked. I am also not a fan of noodles. I can’t eat with silver implements, but that’s because it makes my tasters taste like electric metal and sparks on the edge of my teeth.”

“I’m going to get you some pancakes. W-we make a vegan pancake here, and I-think they’re pretty good. Um. Tea?”

“What kind?”

“We have blueberry, raspberry, ginseng, chamomile, Japanese macha, loose leaf green tea, green tea with lemon peel, green tea with lemon peel and honeycomb, liver detox, hibiscus, apple, ginger with honeycomb, ginger without honeycomb, mint, vanilla almond, white truffle, chocolate raspberry, blackberry, strawberry banana, banana, constant comment, loose leaf earl grey, and Fall Season Iron Buddha. All of these can be sweetened with condensed milk, which is always pasturized, or sugar or honeycomb, and all of them can be served hot or iced, and all of them can be mixed.”

“I’d like a liver detox apple ginger with honeycomb on ice, please.”

“Okay. Take a seat.”

“Alright.”

I sit on a stool that is bolted to the floor and the floor is made of concrete covered with square tiles that alternate in black and white checks, black and white checks over cold concrete. The bolts are digging into the muscle under the skin of the tile, digging and racheted into the concrete muscle of the diner.

The stool is bolted to the floor and from the bolted base rises a pilar made of brushed smooth chrome and it distorts the booths by the windows and the floor is an inverting black and white skin on a fish, heaving and flopping still in its death. The bottoms of my shoes throw red light, light bouncing off of the bottoms of my shoes and clinging to the floor and the chromed post to which the stool is made of and the stool is bolted to the floor. Colored light from electrified neon gas puts green and red and yellow and pink light onto my hands, which are wearing gloves.

The gloves are made of leather, and have spots of cracked beeswax on them and they are made of leather from a deer. The deer is now dead, because it has no skin. I have the skull still, and the deer had massive antlers and I put taper candles on them and settle wreaths of flowers around the dome of the cavernous and echoing empty white calcium cave that has been carved out of a mountain and laid, solid and whole on the grave of a tree marked with a circle of mushrooms and the attentions of the spirits that lived in and around and on and because of that tree.
And that tree is dead.

Oracle with her pink hair and her short square cut nails that have decals of sparkling hearts and miniature stars and little cakes with fruit and pastel fondant on them overlaid on a base of red-tinted blue is holding a plate. The thickness of her wrists hides the small sliding hinges of her bones inside that wrist, hides all but a simple bulge that is the end of the crossing of the bones in her forearm and that too is quite thick.

Oracle is not dead.

The plate is very white and clean with a single pinstripe circle around the edge but slightly inside and red. There are warm flattened cylinders of cooked batter and the batter is dark brown in the center and soft gold at the middle edge and pale ivory at the edge edge. They smell warm, like butter that’s been melted onto fresh crunchy bread on sweet, the filling sweet of yeast bread that is soft and warm and shiny brown on the top where the heat was heat alone. There is also a metal implement that has one more than three tines and a knife that is not sharp, and a plain white napkin.

There is a small jar full of dark brown liquid that holds an amber glow in the flicker flicker buzz flicker neon electrified light slathered over the inside of the diner and over my animal skin covered muscle covered bones. The light dances over the texture of the cooked batter brown and gold- the light is orange and pink and flicker buzzing blue.

A large glass full of ice and tea and made murky with honey is set to the right of my plate on the aqua never alive or dead counter on it’s own coaster made of cardboard. Oracle has fishing lures stuck through her ears, and they dangle like pendants. They are sparkle glinting in the buzz flicker of the electric neon signs.

The food is sweet and warm and full filling and I am happy to eat it.

The tea is cold and sweet and it makes me feel more alive.

I am not dead.

“Hey, Cap?”

“Yer?”

“When are we going to practice for BountyBall?”

“There are rules to the game that aren’t stated in writing. We can’t actually practice as a team until two days before the Tourney.”

“We don’t have regional tournaments or anything?”

“This planet is classified as a region, and the Tourney is our regional tournament. And we are only allowed to practice as a full BBall team two days before the first game of the Tourney.”

“Oh. Um. How many games are in the Tourney?”

“It depends on the number of Teams that make it through the Freeall Round. After that comes the Matchups, and then the Finale. Anyway, to prevent cheating like, with teams fucking each other up and the like, um, the various Bountyball teams aren’t allowed to meet up until the New Year has passed.”
“Oh. That makes much more sense. So, um, when does the Tourney start?”

“The next Freeall Round of the Earth Tourney for Bountyball is scheduled to start at dawn on the Tenth of April, 2011.”

“Huh. April Tenth is my birthday. Weird.”

“Nah, it’s just a coincidence. The Tourney is always set a little more than a week or so after the new year.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Anyway, I’ve gotten a team together- we just need one more person to have a full roster. D’you know anyone?”

“Anyone that would play on our team? N- actually, maybe. Do you know Empress?”

“…Doesn’t she hate you?”

“And I hate her back, but she owes me one, and she is a classmate, so.”

“If you can convince her, I will be very impressed. Oh! Before you go, give me your phone so I can upgrade it and set some things up- and I Saw that you lost your glasses a while ago, so I’ve got a new set made for you. They’re much harder to break, and will work in the Unde and in the Defin; here.”

“Uhm. Thank you, alright.”

A cold hard clamshell of glinting crystal and smooth ivory from out the depths of my warm velvety pocket and into the bedazzled fingers of Max. Two eyeglass cases covered in scraped leather and stamped with the marking that means me, the mark that means Red X in stamped ink, sparkling slick inky red so bright it cuts against my eyes.

I pull a case over, wedge my fingers into the closed slit of it’s wood and leather covered shell, lever it’s stiff wire spiral muscles open. Pull out my corrective corneas held in stiff cold gold covered frames standing in for living bone and muscle and twitchy flickey ligaments and nerves. So many fucking nerves. Twisting and jabbing and stretching and about to snap into a thousand thread electric stabings in the brain.

Set the light frames on the boney ridge of cartilage of my face.

I can see.

You’ve already Seen-

Shut up, Strike.

Terry, you knew it was a long shot; she’s your friend, I know, but you’ll be alright without her. You’ve already Seen this future; you saw it many times. Just because you ignored your visions doesn’t meant that they aren’t true and-

Shut up, Strike.
Terry-

No. Shut up. Just- shut up!

You’re going to have to face it. You know that.

Fucking- SHUT THE HELL UP!

She takes the clamshell phone and a sphere of gold light expands above it, both the sphere and the phone hovering in buzz flicker neon lit space and her overlapping star and heart covered fingers bounding the space with flicking and tingling, pulling both left and right.

A set of eleven phone numbers and various addresses and maps and data data data more than I could ever hold in my head flows like streamers into the crystal skull of my clamshell phone; a bright red X slashes over the wide lip, curving. The glowing gold circle spherifies and encases the phone, questing thrusting smoothing until the clamshell is not a clamshell at all, but a simple slide-open red brick phone with a cute deformed fox charm crouching over the headphone jack, plugged in and dangling from it’s tail a tiny golden bell that chimes. Pull to start sequence, password protected-spiraling whirl of energy.

“Here. You’ll have to set your transformation start code yourself, but that should work as a changer for you now. I’ve also uploaded the region-wide skeleton system keys, so there won’t be any problems there.”

“And the numbers?”

“You’ve got contact information for everyone on the team, including me; if you can convince Empress to join up, give her my number and I’ll settle her out too.”

“Alright. Anything I should know about before I head back?”

“Jinx is good, but she’s not a goddess. Sinta’s execution is set for the Winter Solstice. Her Last considers you the sole beneficiary of all her goods and Deeds.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yeah. Really. Her belongings have already been sent to your registered abode- a Miss Blade signed for them, and has already started consolidating Sinta’s belongings into your House.”

“I suppose she’ll call me in the morning about it.”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing to be done?”

“I’m afraid not. She’s kicked it for real this time. It’s a shame, but- it’s. What’s going to happen… Do you want to know how- how they’re going to-”

“No. I don’t. I’m not one to partake in the perverse spectacle of seeing.”

“I see. I tell you this, then- it will be quick, and painless, and she will not know fear in her death.”
“Have Final Rites been prepared for her, or-”

“No, actually. The Judge ruled in favor for that, so. Her family will not ensure she’s cared for, on the other side.”

“That’s- well. It’s a good thing we’re in no way relations.”

“Yeah… You’re a good person, Terry. So, um- before you go back, I, um, I recommend that you go out back and try to set your sequence, um. It’s never good to leave it until a battle, you get all kinds of- anyway. I’ll just- I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Yeah. I’m just going to- go. Bye.”

“B-bye.”

Max stutters out some consoling words- condolences that have been used and used and are now worn so thin I can see the fabricated emotions flickering through the neon electric light, flickering through those thin and meaningless words. My eyes are burning, and thin trails of fire are slicing down my cheeks.

I finish my small stack of pancakes. They taste like cold sweet ash, and are gritty on my teeth. My tea is nothing more than colored water and chunks of glass holding bitter coldness in their gleaming crevices.

Fire, liquid and painful, burns down from my eyes and out of my nose, streaming and dripping, and it hurts, oh gods it hurts. I take a napkin and wipe my face.

It is like fine sandpaper over sunburnt skin.

It hurts.

Oh gods, it hurts.

Standing in the back alleyway, staring at the moon so full- I do not know how long I have been standing here, only that my feet and my throat and my neck all hurt, and the tips of my fingers have gone numb because I have been holding my new cellphone in a grip not unlike the cold boney grip of death on something that was never alive, and so can never die. I dropped Fly some time before.

I pull the plug- “Is it bright where you are? Have the people changed? Does it make you happy you’re so strange?”

And red ribbons of light wrap all around my body in a moment that lasts both five minutes and no more than five beats of a small bird’s heart.

A tiny bell chimes out to no one.

Flat red shoes with soldier’s white tops, like boots. Sleek black stocking bodysuit, over thick padding around my knees and elbows and body, breasts that curve but do not bounce nor jiggle. A stark white mask with bright red eyes sliced in and an X like a scar, and on the inside more read-outs and computerized mechanisms than can be described. A hooded dress of red with sleeves both wide and long; a skirt that falls to my upper thigh. My palms and the soles of my feet are red. A sword inside
an umbrella is strapped to my back. Four bangles, two per wrist, shaped like simple golden bars that wrap around the meat of my forearm; one pair of fighting blades, one pair of ocean-lungs. A hidden fishtail, waiting to get wet to be used in the underside of my skirt. An empty satchel, underneath my umbrella-sword.

Claws on the tips of my fingers.

Tails in the hidden space behind me, flicking and fluffing.

I listen to the night, and I smell the cool summer air. Crickets chirp the temperature, and the breeze has owls, singing ballads of death and war, on it. I run out into the rustling shadows of the night. I will speak no more of this eve here. Perhaps I will share all my actions and doings that full-mooned night, one day.

Perhaps not.

Sinta’s not alive anymore to disapprove, either way.

When the pilgrims passed through the monastery gates of Spirit Mountain, they were received by two rows of monks and guardians. When they reached the Great Hero Treasure Hall, Tripitaka prostrated himself and said, “By order of the Emperor of T’ang, your disciple Hsuan-tsang has come to this monastery to get the true scriptures.” The Buddha of the monastery commanded copies of the scrolls of the 35 divisions of the three canons to be given to Tripitaka. He also instructed him: “Treasure these scriptures, for in them are the secret mysteries for achieving immortality and understanding the way of Tao, as well as the formulas for 10,000 transformations.” Kuan-yin appeared to make her final report: “Fourteen years ago I was assigned a task to find someone to bring the scriptures to China. That pilgrim has achieved it in 5,040 days or 14 years. He has received 5,048 scrolls, so it would be appropriate for him to achieve his circular mission in 8 more days; in that way the two figures would match.” Eight guardians were commanded to transport the pilgrims back to the East, to China. However, midway through the final leg of their journey, when the record of their journey was read to Kuan-yin, it was noticed that Tripitaka had only gone through 80 ordeals in trying to reach immortality. And the prescribed number was 81, or 9 times 9. So the Guardians had to arrange for one final calamity.

Suddenly, without warning, the four travelers were dropped out of the clouds back to solid ground. They surveyed the surrounding region and found they were on the western shore of the Heaven-Flowing River. A white turtle came to carry them across the river; however, when Tripitaka admitted he had forgotten to ask the Buddha when the turtle would achieve human form, the turtle dove into the water, leaving the pilgrims to flounder in the river. Monkey used his magical powers to get them back to shore, but the scriptures had gotten thoroughly soaked. Some local fishermen helped the pilgrims. They invited the pilgrims to their homes and fed them. Soon the villagers heard about the scripture-bearing priests, and they came to honor them. The elders of the village established a shrine called Life-Perpetuating Temple to show gratitude to the pilgrims, who shared the story of their pilgrimage. That night Tripitaka kept guard over the scriptures. He feared that the villagers might try to get the secrets of the Way from him. He woke his companions and told them they needed to leave while it was still dark. They sneaked out the main gate and were soon traveling once again toward the Land of the East.
When the pilgrims returned to China, the Emperor ordered the scriptures to be brought into the Audience Hall. Tripitaka told the emperor about their pilgrimage to India. When the Emperor asked to have the scriptures read, Tripitaka said they needed to be read in a holy temple. So they all went to the Wild Goose Pagoda to hear the true scriptures being read for the first time in China. As for our pilgrims, they each received their rewards. Each received a new title, according to what they merited. Tripitaka won great merit for fetching the scriptures. Monkey earned the title “Victorious in Strife” for defeating monsters and demons. Pigsy got a promotion to Cleanser of Altars. Sandy earned merit for leading the horse. And the dragon horse was promoted to be one of the eight Heavenly Dragons because he had carried the scripture-seeking pilgrim.

There are few things in life more awful than waking up with a hangover that isn’t quite bad enough to make you forget why you got pissed. I remember why I got drunk.

I wish I didn’t, but I do.

My majordomo’s ringtone is a bit like a knife that cracks directly through the thin bone of my skull and along those cracks it lets ooze a burning fire. It scrapes my bones and bangs like stars on my eyes.

“hello?”


“yeah, I’ve got lit the worst kind of hangover-”

“the kind where you remember why you got drank?”

“yeah. So not schway. So, I assume all of... S-sinta’s stuff made it over okay?”

“Sure did, boss. Sprintstill’s havin’ a conniption- turns out somma the young’ns are allergic to vinegar.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yeah- apparently, some of them get nasty migranes whene’er they smell it. Thankfully, th’washing pits got dug out about a month ago, and we’ve finally removed all the dang frogspawn. Anyway, Banana Mui’s been fuckin’ drowning in letters- and thank heavens she’s dead, otherwise some of that stuff-”

“What d’you mean?”

“Not sure yet- some of the porters with better sniffer th’n you ‘nd me have started looking around. I’ll call you when I have a bit more of a story- but it’s the strangest thing. I’ve been hearing somethin’ odd, on the wind- and the last time I heard all this sighing and sobbing, it was a’cuz the last of the Sparrow Kings had gone and died. Something’s coming.”

“Schwaaaay. Ah! Which reminds me- did I send over the seeds for flax?”

“That what you done promised yon Boar to weave for her? Aye.”
“Tisit grown and harvested?”

“Aye.”

“Tisit spun to threads and dyed?”

“M’lady, the only thing left to do is stitch the gems and beads and such onto the cloth.”

“Truly?”

“Aye.”

“You are magnificent, Blade.”

“Thankee- Y’ve not forgotten nothing for your schooling? No classwork undone, no teacher’s duties left at the wayside?”

“The only things I have left to do for my schooling is turn things in, and record some dissections. That’s it- everything else will get settled on the field of Bball.”

“Y’know, back in my day we just called it battle…”

“I figured as much. Anything I need to watch out for, other than the usual?”

“Other than the usual- they might want you to have a registered Master sponsoring y’Team. S’tricky business finding one who’ll do it right though… although there is a man who might do alright, if y’can convince him.”

“And who might that be?”

“He goes by too fucking many damn names, none of them his- but the last I heard, they call him John Constantine.”

“Who in the nine hells is that?”

“Fucked if I know, but he lives in England- London I think.”

“Fucking London.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Anyway- both of yer Old Ladies is owed a favor from ‘im. Talk to them both about it, and see if they’ll let you call ‘em in.”

“What, one won’t do it?”

“Not for that asshat, no.”

“Schwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay. Well-”

“Team! Report to the Mission Room!”

“Ah, hells- I gotta go.”
“Job calling?”

“You know it.”

“Hah. Give ‘em hell from us back on the farm, babbiequen. Later.”

“From the city to you, Blade- shut that filthy mouth. Bye.”

I don’t have time to take a shower, and- holy shit, it’s not even morning, is it? Did I actually sleep past noon today?

Okay- Oh my god, I didn’t even- I’m still in my new togs from Max! Shitballs of fire!

I’ll have to find some chestnuts, otherwise I might get dead tonight- why I need my Big Swordbrella and my regular Blades, I’m sure I’ll find out.

One can of salty preserved chestnuts- and I moan at the sudden rush of vitality and energy that flows into me from their clean white flesh- and I’m able to cast Bubbles on myself, put my Spanish silver in my sleeve, and-

Oh thank the gods, I’m not the last one here. I’m actually arriving at about the same time as Kid Flash.

Although, I do still have to worry about- you know what? YOLO. Fuck it all. The briefing of our mission washes over me in a rush of gravelly, barely understood noise; some guy made out of clay, sewers, find him. Blar, whatever.

This might be an appropriate moment to go over my musical tastes. I didn’t get into music until I actually got my apartment; I think I got dragged out to a concert one day after my delivery work for my grandmother- and honestly, all of my jobs before I became self-employed sort of blurr together into a morass of soul-grinding horror and mind-crushing drudgery. I really only have the job descriptions, highlights, and after-job adventures.

I’m staring at the ceiling of the Bio-ship; the seat is comfortable, but not relaxing. I could look out the windshield- fuck. Welp. My feet were getting kind of cold anyway; nothing quite like sitting on your feet for an hour to make you remember why you hate being above sea-level on something that isn’t attached to the ground.

And also lose feeling in my toes.

I’m very tired. And- I forgot the hatmaking supplies. Shit.

I was talking about music- fuck it. I like Metallica, Journey, Styx, and My Chemical Nightmare, okay? Shut up- MCN’s vocalist(s?) are fucking amazing, okay.
Metallica is an American heavy metal band from Platinum Flatts, California. The band's fast tempos, instrumentals, and aggressive musicianship placed them as one of the founding "big four" of thrash metal alongside Slayer, Megadeth, and Agonizer. Metallica was formed in 1981 when James Hetfield responded to an advertisement that drummer Lars Ulrich had posted in a local newspaper. The current line-up features founders Hetfield (vocals, rhythm guitar) and Ulrich (drums), longtime lead guitarist Kirk Hammett and bassist Robert Trujillo, who joined the band in 2003. Previous members of the band are lead guitarist Dave Mustaine, who went on to found Megadeth, bassists Ron McGovney (demos only), Cliff Burton (the first three records, died in 1986), and Jason Newsted. The band also had a long collaboration with producer Bob Rock, who produced all of its albums from 1990 to 2003 and served as a temporary bassist between the departure of Newsted and the hiring of Trujillo.

The band earned a growing fan-base in the underground music community and critical acclaim with its first four albums, with their third, Master of Puppets (1986), described as one of the most influential and "heavy" thrash metal albums. Metallica achieved substantial commercial success with their eponymous fifth album (also known as The Black Album), which debuted at number one on the Billboard 200. With this release the band expanded its musical direction resulting in an album that appealed to a more mainstream audience.

In 2000, Metallica was among a number of artists who filed a lawsuit against Napster for sharing the band's copyright-protected material for free without any band member's consent. A settlement was reached, and Napster became a pay-to-use service. Despite reaching number one on the Billboard 200, the release of St. Anger (2003) alienated many fans with the exclusion of guitar solos and the "steel-sounding" snare drum. A film titled Some Kind of Monster documented the recording process of St. Anger and the tensions within the band during that time. In 2009, Metallica was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Metallica has released nine studio albums, four live albums, five extended plays, 25 music videos, and 37 singles. The band has won nine Grammy Awards, and has had five consecutive albums debut at number one on the Billboard 200, making Metallica the first band to do so. The band's eponymous 1991 album has sold over 16 million copies in the United States, making it the best-selling album of the SoundScan era. Metallica ranks as one of the most commercially successful bands of all time, having sold over 110 million records worldwide. Metallica has also been listed and ranked as one of the greatest artists of all time by many magazines, including Rolling Stone, which ranked them 61st on its list of The 100 Greatest Artists of All Time. As of December 2012, Metallica is the fourth best-selling music artist since the SoundScan era began tracking sales on May 25, 1991, selling a total of 53,642,000 albums in the United States alone.

Journey is an American rock band formed in Star City in 1973 by former members of Santana and Frumious Bandersnatch & the Jubjub Riders. The band has gone through several phases; its strongest commercial success occurred between 1978 and 1987, after which it temporarily disbanded. During that period, the band released a series of hit songs, including 1981's "Don't Stop Believin'", which in 2009 became the
top-selling catalog track in iTunes history. Its parent studio album, Escape, the band's eighth and most successful album, reached No. 1 on the Billboard 200 and yielded another of their most popular singles, "Open Arms". Its 1983 follow-up, Frontiers, was almost as successful in the United States, reaching No. 2 and spawning several successful singles; it broadened the band's appeal in the United Kingdom, where it reached No. 6 on the UK Albums Chart. Journey enjoyed a successful reunion in the mid-1990s, and later regrouped with a series of lead singers.

Sales have resulted in two gold albums, eight multi-platinum albums, and one diamond album (including seven consecutive multi-platinum albums between 1978 and 1987). They have had eighteen Top 40 singles in the US, six of which reached the Top 10 of the US Billboard Hot 100 chart and two of which reached No. 1 on other Billboard charts, and a No. 6 hit on the UK Singles Chart in "Don't Stop Believin". Originally a progressive rock band, Journey was described by Allmusic as having cemented a reputation as "one of America's most beloved (and sometimes hated) commercial rock/pop bands" by 1978, when they redefined their sound by embracing traditional pop arrangements on their fourth album, Infinity. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, Journey has sold 47 million albums in the US, making them the 28th best selling band. Their worldwide sales have reached over 80 million albums. A 2005 USA Today opinion poll named Journey the fifth best American rock band in history. Their songs have become arena rock staples and are still played on rock radio stations across the world.

Styx is a popular American rock band from Chicago that became famous for its albums from the mid 1970s and early 1980s. They are best known for melding the style of prog-rock with the power of hard rock guitar, strong ballads and elements of international musical theater.

Styx is best known for the hit songs "Lady" (#6, 1975), "Come Sail Away" (#8, 1977), "Babe" (#1, 1979), "The Best of Times" (#3, 1981), "Too Much Time on My Hands" (#9, 1981) and "Mr. Roboto" (#3, 1983). Other hits include "Show Me the Way" (#3, 1990), "Don't Let It End" (#6, 1983), "Renegade" (#16, 1978) and "Boat on the River", which was a big hit in much of Europe. The band has four consecutive albums certified multi-platinum by the RIAA, as well as sixteen top 40 singles in the US.

Styx also has some of my most repeat-listen songs- I think I actually fried my tape of Renegade…

My Chemical Nightmare is an American rock band from Bludhaven, formed in 2001. The band consisted of lead vocalist Gerard Way, guitarists Ray Toro and Frank Iero, and bassist Mikey Way. Shortly after forming, the band signed to Eyeball Records and released their debut album I Brought You My Bullets, You Brought Me Your Love in 2002. They signed with Reprise Records the next year and released their major label debut Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge in 2004; the album was a commercial success, and was awarded platinum status a little over a year later.

The band eclipsed their previous success with their 2006 concept album, The Black Parade, which gained generally favorable reviews among music critics. Their fourth studio album, Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys, was released on November 22, 2010, to positive reviews. The band's final release was a series of singles, released over the course of five months, collected on the compilation Conventional Weapons. I’m actually kind of worried- word is that they’re going to break up…
We’re here.

Yaaaaay. We’re going undergроооuund. Fucking great.

You know, there are some things in life I just don’t like. Getting attacked by a simraculum made of clay that looks like one of my friends is one of those things. I should be more upset about this. I know I should be. But… I’m not.

Maybe if I start from the beginning?

So. Start at the beginning. Okay.

The sewers of Gotham are old, and grody, and surprisingly free of desiccated corpses, oddly large animals, animals which were never meant for caves but still have adapted to cave-like conditions, and encampments of rawboned sinewy people of varying sizes and ages and all of them living in tents that sprout like mushrooms so poisonous in the washed over wastes below the waterline by the Potion Mill to the Southeast.

Follow the quieted steps of my teammates, listen to their chatter back and forth (short hair and strong limbs swimming, so beautiful- a smile just for me) over a linking of the minds provided most graciously by Miss Martian.

(Come to me, my love… My Kaldur… Eyes so beautiful and blue and one is so dark I could drown in it, tail of red and black and white and a pink line on her lips so soft and warm-)

‘Kaldur!’

‘what? Oh, yes Miss Martian- your psychic link functions perfectly.’

‘That’s a relief. We couldn’t hear you… like your every thought was a million miles away…’

Eight minutes after the hour- and which hour exactly can go get fucked, but eight minutes after the hour, Batman called us in. I honestly don’t remember why everyone was there, but I’m not sure it matters. It does matter that we’re looking in this underground river of sludge and defecation to find a monster made of, yes, you guessed it- sludge and defecation.

Have I mentioned why I don’t like being underground yet?

I mean, I know I’ve said- in my head if no where else- that I don’t like being underground. I don’t like being under countless tons of stone and earth and metal tubing, the sleeping bones of grumbling beasts-

Earth. Blood and bone and earth and the slow screaming of a man once dead.
It is at this point that I- well, my memory goes quite blank. I remember a very angry yell- I think it was Aqualad- and although I’ve never actually heard Aqualad yell angrily, I’m sure he has a temper.

And then there was a sound just exactly like a washing machine, only more… ocean-y, and electric. And enraged. It also smelled like… sort of bitter tasting? Anyway, when I came to, we were all on the Bioship.

And it stinks like the bottome of a river in here. Ugh.

The easiest way for me to get clean is to undress and spam Bubbles on myself. I have enough mystic might- sweet fuck did I actually say that?- for four level two spells.

Shit- wait, if I just hold my clothes...

Welp. Time to get clean.

I roll off of the san bed I’ve been lying on, and take off everything except my smalls- the floor of the bioship is cool on my feet, and has a slightly wiggly give to it, like the side of a hairless cat. Hairless cats aren’t actually hairless, of course- but their hairs are the small fine hairs every mammal has, rather than the big colorful terminal hairs most mammals have. They are also quite warm, and one cat I knew could double as a softboiled potato in a pinch- although he did get quite annoyed if you bit into him. Damn fine handwarmer though, and truly quite docile.

I hold my outer layers of clothing and my underarmor, and my bra- smalls stay on. Bubbles wooshes over me, warm and soft and then I am clean and my clothing is clean and fresh and all is very quite well. Except no, no it isn’t, because-

“Kaldur?”
“Y-yes?”
“Um. You okay, yes?”
“I am quite well. I couldn’t- when it got you, I couldn’t-”
“Is- okay. I build my suit to be very hard to remove without the knowing of the hows. I teach you now, yes?”
“I didn’t- um. Yes. C-certainly. Erm.”
“So. My bra go on first, and come off last, because it go underneath, yes? It this thing, it look like short apron, yes?”
“Y-yes.”
“So, the stitch loop go over my head, like this, and then the straps go down by my bottom ribs- I use a bowman knot, okay?”
“Yes, okay.”
Okay so- this is underarmor, in… um, leotard style? It goes on legs firsts, and then hooks up in front, like this. Theses are for the elbows and knees- they just slide on, and have hooks for
“This is most tricky part, and we need to practice—this be mine bodysuit, yes? It fits over everything in very specific way, so—but, the hooks are very small, and hard to feel. Come here.”

He steps closer to me, and his eyes are somehow—

“S—so, when it on my arms like this, you see how it open to bellybutton, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so—” I take his hands in mine, and put them on my hips. Draw them forwards, until his fingers are on the first of the tiny hook and loop closures that close my body away from the world.

Kaldur’s fingers grasp the tiny hook and loop and draw them together, hook into loop. Runs his fingers and hands up the hemmed seam of the hooks and loops that close my body off to the world. My fingers are warm and soft and I can feel the steady beat of his heart in his wrists and his muscles are firm and warm and slowly move underneath my hands.

Hook into loop, hook into loop, hook into loop.

His knuckles brush over my breasts.

Hook into loop, hook into loop, hook into loop.

His hands are on my shoulders, are finding and closing the tiny seam of my neck.

Hook into loop, hook into loop, hook into loop.

And then his hand is on the back of my neck and his eyes are very qing and dark and his mouth is very soft as I recall—and he smells good, even with the riverbottom smell. I lean forwards and so does he.

His lips are softer than I remember, and he smells better up close. I never realized though—his tongue is sort of… raspy. I like it, though.

Inhale, release. Pull back, then move forwards again.

(she has a sweetness to her mouth that I can’t describe, so faint and pure, and her breath is so warm I want to just—

It’s. indescribably beautiful. I want to wrap myself around her and just—

Wow her teeth are sharp. Ow.)

“Sorry.”

“I liked most of it, actually. Just a little too much pressure.”

“Oh. Um—but… not too much χαρά?”

“No. From you, Θηρεσία, that would be impossible.”
I look into his eyes and smile. My hands go onto his hands, and I put his fingers onto the hood of my face- he pulls it over, and I adjust it. I put my mask on, and I make sure he feels where the seal is, and where to push to break it.

He takes my mask off, draws back the hood of my face, and presses a kiss, sweet and quick onto the scarred line that winks across my upper lip.

“Αν κρατήσει το κάνουμε αυτό, εγώ δεν πρόκειται ποτέ να ντυθεί.”

“Συγνώμη.”

My hooded dress is just a normal dress- he does up the closures for it anyway, and the brushing of his palms over my breasts is enough to make me want to do more than kiss him- however, we’re on a mission.

We won’t always be on a mission though.

I step back onto the fffffffliaaaaaaggh- flight deck, just in time to hear Wally say something which I can already tell I’m going to make a joke out of- a slightly risqué joke, even. I probably wouldn’t have the nerve for it if I weren’t so damn tired.

Ah well.

“…I mean, what’s the point of putting on a clean costume- when I’m not… fresh?”

“Oh Wally, you’re always fresh.”

“At least you have a clean costume.”

“Yeah, an old back-up! No stealth mode! It stinks!”

“Actually, I think the stink is you, freshness. But, what about the creature? Batman wanted us to track it.”

“Why settle for that? I mean-” “I thought Wally was the fastest boy alive, not the freshest.” “-sure, it got the drop on us, but now we know it’s tricks!”

“Yeah! We split up! Then whoever finds old “Clayface” radios the team…” “I’m sure he can be both if he wants to.” “We converge and kick some clay-butt!”

“What do you think Aqualad, Red X?”

“What? Oh, yes.”

“It seems we have a plan.”
‘We’ll split up and search a wider- Kid Flash, Robin, search to the West. Superboy, Miss Martian, search to the South. Red X and I will search to the North. As there’s only the Gotham Harbor to the East, I think it’s safe to assume a monster made out of clay won’t go towards the ocean.’

‘Understood.’ ‘Bet we find it first.’ ‘Dude! Don’t Jinx it!’

‘C’mon, Superboy- let’s go!’ ‘…’

“Robin, have you found something…?”

He’s just standing there. Not doing anything.

“Robin?”

I stopped, turned, stepped closer to Robin. Robin is just standing there- his cape gently flutters in the air. I feel a slow curl of something pudgy and black unfurl in my guts. Must be those chestnuts I ate earlier hitting the large intestines.

The smell of wet clay is distinctive.

Overwhelming, even.

I touch his shoulder.

When I awaken, I’m not on the Bioship- I’m back at the Cave. I’m in hospital clothing- open backed robe with bowknot closures- but I’m still wearing my underwear. My costume has returned to it’s unrendered state, and my glasses are on a table to my left. I reach over, pick them up, put them on- the world smears into focus.

Kaldur is on a chair in the corner, out of the way. He is pressed into the corner, asleep- that looks really horribly uncomfortable. A small pair of wings flitters down and settles on my right ring finger, then turns into a Card- Move. How appropriate. There is a pen stuck behind my ear.

Why is there a pen behind- nevermind.

I sign the Card, and then I cast Float and Move on Kaldur at the same time. He drifts like severed riverweed over the railings of the bed, and hovers for a moment- I Move the bedding around, and shift my own sore self to the side, and then I drop Float slowly enough to let him settle onto the bed. Kaldur is lying next to me, on top of the covers- Move flits about some more, and tucks a sheet over
his slumbering form.

Thank you, Move.

♥♥♥ You’re welcome, mistress.

And then I fall back into the darkness of overcasting. Before I pass out completely, Move puts my glasses back on the bedside stand.

Nice of it.

When I open my eyes again, I’m nose to nose with Kaldur, and his qing eyes are regarding me with some emotion I can’t quite name. I blink at him, and then a smile blooms across my face.

Oh gods.

If what I think is wrong with me is wrong with me, I’ve got more problems than unresolved sexual urges.

“Hello.”

“Hey. Did you… move me?”

“Yes. You look uncomfortable, so- I Move you from here that there chair place, so be placed next to me. Um… is okay?”

“Yes. It is... more than okay.”

I smile a little wider, and then settle back into my burrow of coverings and blankets and sheets, warm all the way through. There are flowers printed on the blanket cover, but they seem a bit generic- the sheet Kaldur is under is plain white, the better to see if it’s clean my dear.

“So, um- what happen?”

“I- I was. Er. Distracted, and um- well, the Team did quite well, but you got hurt and-”

“I made mistake. Robin do not smell like clay- should have been more awary, um… did- did I… Did I distract you?”

“Yes. Ah- a little bit, but I was distracted before we- um.”

“…i’msorry. i took your head out of the game…”

“No! no no no- it was not your fault, it was not! Of late, I am not- I am not even convinced I belong on the surface world. For so many years, it filled my every thought- but now that I am here, my
dreams are all… Atlantis.”

“Is it home you dream of? Or… of someone left behind?” He looks as if I- I don’t think he could look more shocked than if I had punched him full in the mouth. Shit. And even if- no. That path won’t make anyone happy, not really.

“Kaldur’ahm- if you dream of something within your reach, go and see if you can grasp that dream! Otherwise, you will always- you’ll always wonder if what you… nevermind.”

“Theresa… I don’t want-”

“You’re not obligated to me or anything, it’s not like you’re my boyfriend or something like that-”

“Well, maybe I want to be.”

“And maybe you don’t. Kaldur… while I would like one choice much more than another- I can’t… I’m just- I just want you to be sure, before you do anything- just.”

“Terry…”

Oh gods I’m going to cry, fuck fuck no. This is not happening, fuck. In fact, it’s so not happening I’ve pressed my face into the pillow and am now trying not to do that ugly painful gaspy wheezy thing and my throat is burning and my face is hot and Kaldur is pulling me over and now I’m on his chest oh fuck. Augh.

I’m not entirely sure how long I cry- but I know that when I’ve managed to stop, and it’s just unhappy shivering and the occasional wheeze, that Kaldur is stroking my back, and I’ve pressed my face into his shoulder and this. This moment right here. This is what I want- not kissing.

Not kissing at all.

Fuck. I can’t- shit. I can’t- I am. I already am.

I tell Kaldur about Sinta, and Jinx’s longshot efforts, and how Kowloon’s legal system is investigative, not argumentative, and how indesicive the whole thing has made me.

“Sinta probably definitely did kill a bunch of people for revenge on account of her transsexual girlfriend being abused for most of her life, and how I’m getting all of her stuff but I don’t want Sinta’s stuff even if most of it is absolutely priceless and ridiculously cool- I want the absolutely priceless and cool Sinta. The person. My friend. And I can’t go and see her, because I know who I am and I’d break her out of gaol because I don’t want her to die and if I go visit her I’ll break those gaol walls down and become an enemy of the Law and I don’t want to be an enemy of the Law and it’s wrong to break people out of gaol when they’ve been rightfully imprisoned and it’s wrong to let. To let- and I just. I can’t tell if one- which one- if one is… m-more wrong than-”
And then I cried so hard I’m actually kind of embarrassed for myself- you know, that kind of crying where you’re so upset you don’t even care what kind of snot is dripping out of your nose or how fucked up your makeup gets or how much brushing your going to have to do to get your hair right again, or even what the person you’re crying on will think of you when you’re finished- you’re that upset.

I was that upset.

I hate being that upset- but the funny thing of it is, is that when it was over, I felt… better. Less like I was going to break apart and fall into tiny slivers, to be swept out with a broom.

“…”

“I am- I am so sorry.”

“…why? Y-you didn’t-”

“I had noticed that you came in late, but… And then you were oddly… subdued, throughout the entire mission, and I was so lost in myself- I am the team leader. It is my responsibility, to- to. Be aware. And I failed. I failed you especially.”

“Kaldur… I- it’s been a very long time since I was someone’s… responsibility. But- I guess… maybe next time you notice me, you could… I don’t know. I guess… do something about it?”

“I have been noticing you a lot lately- and I was thinking of maybe… but you have been sleeping for a while, and you seem very tired-”

“It’s okay-”

“No, really-”

“Kaldur… It’s okay. Ask me anything you’d like.”

“Well… would you… would you like to come with me? To Atlantis, I mean?”

“Yes! I mean- yes, yes, of course.”

“R-really?! I mean- ah, I, I mean-”

“The last time I was in Atlantis, I was asleep for most of the time, and then I fight a demon, and then I had to go back home.”

“Y-yeah. Right- I had almost forgotten. Um. Truly, you will come with me?”

“Yes, shelly.”

The soft almost smile on his face is worth the terrible naughtical pun. However…

“Um- but I can only stay for three days. School starts on First of September-”
“R-right, I remember… well, we can still have a good time- I mean, I can show you around Poseidonis, a-and I am sure that my king will be most pleased to host you…”

I smile, and very gently bump my forehead against his- then, I push the covers back and off of me and I sit up and stand up and streeeeetch. All of my stretches and then- oooh, that feels nice- and I’m still wearing my bra, aw, that’s actually… really sweet.

“…”

“What?”

Kaldur is sitting up, and I’ve stood up-

“Mmm. Just thinking- maybe there’ll be a day when you take my clothing off and I be awake, yes?”

He’s blushing. I’m smiling at him again. And then he does something… amazing.

“I think that can be arranged- but not today.”

“No…?”

“No. I have a city to show you.”

“Oh, well, that’s alright then. I go get ready then.”

I untie the hospital gown, and let it flop in one hand and flip it over the chair Kaldur once rested in. Adjust the glasses, smirk at him, and then walk out.

Let’s see now- left turn to common hallways, so right will take me through the boiler room, there’s a funky vent cover here, and huh, a ladder. So, climb up it, and then turn away from the sea and go counterclockwise- reach down and close that vent cover first, and then slide down this vent and crawl through quietly. Vents pass, the steady rustle of fans whirling and the soft pat pat pat of my hands and knees and feet creeping through the metal vents. Ah, this one!

“All of our teammates are kind of strange, actually, not just you and me.”

“Seriously?”
Huh. There are even little inner latches for the vents. Sweet! The vent rattles a bit like a snake, and then pops open. I flip it up, and then grip the lower edge and roll forward, hold straight out and then set feet down. Let go with one hand, flick the thingy so it closes, then let go before it bites my fingers.

Roll forwards onto the ground and stand. Stretch my legs again because the vents here are nice but still pretty narrow in places-

“Hey Megan, Superboy.”

-and I have a bag to pack, no time for idle chitchattery! And I’m actually really glad that I’ve gained so much weight lately- it’s mostly muscle, but I’ve got a nice squishy layer of fat over my ribs and belly and hips, and my breasts went up a whole size! Which means, of course, my normal koi-style swimsuit doesn’t fit anymore.

I did really like that thing, but eh, good riddance! New Theresa, new clothing for her!

Huh. I legitimately never realized that there were two more levels above the one I’ve been living on- after I get back from First Day, I’ll rearrange my room.

Actually… don’t I have bonafide Atlantean clothing in my DA’s somewhere? Hey, yeah! It’s all clean, naturally- and I have the same basic outfit twice, and two different accessory sets.

What I have is two high necked cropped tank tops, with a black block like the marking on an orca’s belly, and two white swooshes over my chest and shoulders like an orca’s face. My bra is unnecessary, and the shirt- which would have been too big a few months ago- fits perfectly, smooth and thick and very… I don’t know. But I have two of them! The one I’m wearing now is the really nice one- it’s made out of fabric with a very high thread count, and the seams are invisible. My pants are black, and I think Capri length? And they are flat black, with no embellishments or seams. And I have white armwarmers too- they fit snug over my biceps, and suck down to just past my wrists; they fit underneath my bracelets, and underscore them with three black rings, my bracelets fitting just perfectly into the white space between the blackness.

There’s a bag that goes with it, and my Atlantean clothing folds into it just fine- I grab my cellphone, which always returns to it’s charger when… yeah, nevermind. It’s just on my charger. Magic man, so weird.

Ah, my brush and comb, and my makeup… which will just wash off in the ocean so best leave it here, and I might as well wipe my face clean anyway. Yay. Anyway, I have my new glasses, and since they’re from Max, they can change into not exactly goggles… basically it’s a fancy eye swooshy dealie… according to my phone’s camera, it’s a sort of dusting of gold directly over the surface of my eyelid. Of course, that much high level magic, even passive magic like this, makes the black and red of my… nevermind. It’s just red and black and gold and it makes my eyebrows thicker and blacker and the top rim of my eyelids turn red like blood only wishes it could be, the gold of my glasses, pushing the magic of my kin to the visible top of my skin to say hello- ahem.
Magic. So weird.

I also pack my tablet, an extra stylus, a traveler’s charm for protection against demons, and my smaller Any-spell kit. Case for my glasses, as I don’t really want to wear them to bed, and… aha, my stash of Atlantean money. Hmm… yeah, that should do it- I’m always armed, and it’s bad taste to take a weapon into someone else’s House when you’re just visiting.

And now it’s time to go, I guess. Wow, it’s only been about fifteen minutes- Kaldur should just be starting to wonder where I am…

I bound down the halls, and soon find Kaldur, waiting patiently in the Hangar.

“Hey. Ready to go?”

“Ah- yes. Um… surely you will need a larger bag?”

“Um, no- if I needs more than these things, I buy them, yes? And also, if I bring more than this, I have no space places for the bring back things… I find something for Wally too! He seems like the bring back things… the, erm… s-shoe-vem-ears?”

“Souveniers. Yes, yes he does- well, alright. Let’s go.”

He walks into the doorway, and I follow- the circular Zeta Tube door glows gold, and then I am engulfed in cold ocean water, the echoing of my odd heroic designation “Recognized: Red X B010” rolling into the liquid thicker than air. My ears equalize, and my breath settles- and then I swim forwards after Kaldur, who has graciously waited for me.

I nearly pause to admire the statues- but. I have a city to see!

Oh! It is the King I saw before- the one with the orange shirt and the impressive beard!

“Greetings, Kaldur’ahm. And Miss…?”

“King Orin. This is my teammate-”

“I am Red X, your majesty- but please, my name is Theresa.”

“Ahh! The Demonslayer!”

“Sir?”

“Nevermind- you are here to…?”

“Oh! Well, the last time I was here, I didn’t get a chance to see the city before I had to return home, so and when I told Kaldur of this, he was kind enough to invite me with him, and agreed to show me the city.”

“Ahhh.”
He is smiling, but I’m not sure why, and Kaldur looks kind of odd… like he just got pinched somewhere awkward by a crab or something… Strange. King Orin is going on the list of strange things, along with my Grandma, my Great-Aunt, and Robin.

We swim on, and the King leads us through the place, commenting on various things when, almost out of nowhere-

“Oh, before I forget- the Queen and I are hosting an intimate dinner tonight. You will attend?”

“Your majesty… I had hoped to… um…”

“You may invite a friend.”

“Thank you, my King.”

“Until tonight.”

And he swims down a hallway, past a statue of a ruler long dead.

“Dinner?”

“I- yes?”

“Sounds fun!”

“You could say that… erm. Would you like to see where I attended school, and possibly meet my school-friends?”

“Oh- Oh! Yes- they are being the couple with red hair and black hair? The ones in blue and yellow?”

His eyes are very very wide.

“Kaldur…?”

“What makes you say they are a couple?”

“They were turned towards each other, with their hearts facing- even though they were talking to you too, they were hearts to each other. Couples do that more than friends do that, yes…? kaldur…?”

“No- no. It is… alright. And you are right… and I did not see it because… I did not quite want to.”

“Did not want to or do not…”

“Did not.” He sighs. “Come. I will show you my school. And introduce you to my friends…”
I follow him through the water. And his school is amazing, but... for the life of me, the only thing I can really see is him, moving through space with more grace and poise and I want to bite his butt everytime he fucking moves his legs. Gnmrgle.

Wow this city is beautiful. And there are tiny little decorative fish following me now, and I’m not sure why. And there’s lots of purple, everywhere- and this city is much... bigger than I realized. I- eeeeee! Tiny hippocampus! Sooo cuuute! I’ve never really tried to swim fast without a tail, but I’m keeping up with Kaldur pretty well- hm, a girl just said something, and now I’m... not having to translate...? Oh, a spell, cool.

“-How can I tell it worked?”

“It worked, trust me.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oh yes- very easy it is to tell when translation spells have used been. Dang it!”

“Oh- what?”

“That spell must only translate words, not syntax- sorry, sorry, my name’s Theresa, what’s yours?”

“Lori Lemaris- and what do you mean the spell only translates words? The book said it was a translation spell-”

“It is a translation spell but- it’s like... it’s like learning the names of the gods, but not what they do.”

She blinks, and then- I’ll explain it.

“It’s like... like if no one had ever told you who Herakles was, or what he ever did- you’d never known of him, ever, and then one day you suddenly hear his whole story out of the blue- I think the spell you cast was meant to translate words, but not context. If it had been, it would have been a much more complicated spell.”

“Are there spells like that?”

“Oh yeah- I have one of them active on me nearly all the time. I could show you?”

“Yeah!”

Kaldur’s talking to- hey it’s that ceaphalopod person! The one I got the ink from- well, stole the ink from. Oh, I didn’t know they are an artist- that’s really cool! Anyway-

“Oh, so- hold out your hand, -left one please.”
Her hand is small in mine, and her fingers are cool to the touch; she has no webbing between them, and our fingers interlace smoothly. Ah, very good intuition creases, good head line, very strong success line. Righto, I can use a straight up bone-rush, no need to get- fuck, that’s a twitchy heart. Better use a stabilizer- feels like something of mine, so… metal. I’ll have to use a needle then…

“Okay. I have to use a needle so I don’t hurt you with the spell- it’s much less… obvious? than your spell… I guess it’s more passive?”

“Hmm. Go for it!”

“Okay- Look at this needle.”

It’s a knitting needle. I don’t use sewing needles for this spell- much too direct. You’d get patchy translations, and those are annoying as fuck….

“Now, stare at the point of the needle, and then slowly, slowly look into my eyes. When you can understand what I’m saying to you, nod your head. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

She stares deeply into my eyes, and I start to recite “At a border-fortress”, from the Tang, in my native Kiaom and I can actually see the incomprehension in her eyes until right about the middle when-

蝉抱怨薄桑椹树
在第八个月的寒意在边境通行证。

Méiyǒu shé me rènhé difāng, dàn huángsè de lúwěi hé cáo
Hé shìbīng cóng nǐ hé bīng de gǔtōu
And the bones of soldiers from You and from Bing
Who have buried their lives in the dusty sand.
...Let never a cavalier stir you to envy
With boasts of his horse and his horsemanship.”

She blinks. And nods. And blinks again.

“That’s different. That’s very different- but wait, why aren’t I- wow. Okay. And you use that one all the time?”
“Yes- hang on, yes, I do. Like I said before, it’s a passive translation spell, and the maker of it sought to capture the essence of a phrase, rather than the overall words. It’s more of a true translation spell, in my opinion, but- it can’t be used on more than one person at a time. Each use is for an individual, because… erm. One person’s magic is not like another’s? So, the spell could confuse, or injure someone if it’s been miscast- so the spell you cast is much more useful if you just need two groups to be able to communicate with each other and be mostly understood. The spell I used would be best for, like, I don’t know…”

“Trade agreements, maybe?”

“Yeah! Oh, um- if I talk too fast, please let me know, I just get really excited sometimes…”

“No no, it’s cool! Hey, I haven’t seen you around here before anyway- who are you again?”

“Oh sorry- I’m generally known as Red X, but I’m named Theresa. I came with Aqualad to see the city because the last time I was here-”

“Oh! The Demonslayer!”

“And you are the second person to call me that, is there a song about me now or something…?”

“…”

“is there a song about me?”

“Not… exactly.”

“oh gods it’s poetry isn’t it.”

“Again, not… exactly. It’s more- actually, Topo can explain it better.”

“Topo… would they be the cephalopod person talking to Aqualad?”

“Yes, he is, actually.”

“Hrm.”

We swim over, and catch the end of Kaldur’s hero time- oh. Now that’s interesting- I’ve never seen black-figure as moving and why is he so pretty even in art holy fuck why why why.

Eherm. Focus. Foooooocuuuuus.

Oh gods he’s cute.

“Topo- wow, that’s beautiful!”

“Aw, thank you Lori-”

“But anyway- this is Theresa, also known as Red X. She wants to know why she’s known as the Demonslayer…”

“Ah. It’s over here, actually- I really think I got the movement right, but- here, look. Listen…”
It’s the story of… well, Aqualad. Going through a soft spot under Poseidonis and meeting Raven and me, and our journey back to his home, but from his perspective.

I was there, so I remember everything that happened. That story is not what happened.

“What.”

“Um… that is the gist of what happened…”

“B-but- well, yes, that’s mostly what happened…”

“What’s the rest of it?”

“thepondthingandthestareel.”

“Um. What?”

I didn’t know my face could actually go numb from blushing. Ow, no, nevermind.

“Ahem. The Stareel is notably absent.”

“Oh.I don’t- I don’t actually know what that was… do you?”

“Yes.”

“…”

“It was a dreg from the Beginning- a piece of the night sky that never got sewn in. An eel made of stars and lightning and darkness so black as to make the eyes slide off of it and the short sharp death of small things that swim.”

“But… why did you-”

“I don’t understand. It’s not like I could have done anything else- I don’t know how to slay a starbeast, do you? It’s- it’s not like I ever would have done anything else. I mean…”

I was wrong, my face can go numb from blushing. Now if only my ears would stop burning…

“Ahem. Anyway- Topo, this is an exquisite work, if not entirely accurate…”

“Well…”

“I don’t mind, actually. A good story doesn’t need to have actually happened exactly like that- and you got the important parts right, so I think you did a wonderful job.”
“Thank you Miss Theresa!”

“Anyway- Ka- sorry, Aqualad, weren’t we going to see where you learned battle magic? And also, I’d like to spar against you here- the last time we sparred underwater, we got a bit carried away, remember?”

“Yes. I remember. I was under the impression that I went quite a bit too far…?”

“I was under the assumption that you did not go far enough.”

We stare at each other for a length of time that can be comfortably measured in heartbeats- or it could be if I could actually draw up enough cognitive brainjuice to count my heartbeats. Which, incidentally, are the only things I can hear- and all I can see is the softly burning qing of his beautiful beautiful eyes.

Someone coughs pointedly.

Whoops. There are other people here. I cannot pin Kaldur against the lovely tiled art-wall and have at his clothing. We are in a school. Schools are for learning- no no nope nopity no way no nuh uh no no no, not that kind of learning, no.

“Sorry.”

“It is most fine. Topo, Lori- do either of you know where I can find Tula and Garth?”

“On the roof, at their studies.”

“Yeah, her majesty’s been hard at work with both of them…”

We swim on through the submerged campus, Kaldur pointing out favorite study spots and interesting facts; I admire different things than him, and wonder about them aloud. He answers as many questions as he can- and sometimes, he just agrees with me, or smiles back at me, and I think I might have a box in the back of my mind where every single moment of my experience of Kaldur is stored and filed and marked for looking over in the quiet of my bedroom dozing-

Shit. Focus.

Oh, look, a sparring session. Oh! Those must be Kaldur’s friends- wow, they’re both really good war mages!

Hm- the instructor, who I also think might be a Queen, seems to be admonishing one of the mages- the black haired one, which must be Garth.

Which means the woman with short red hair is Tula.
“Kaldur’ahm! Oh, so good to see you.”

“Kaldur!” Tula has a raspy voice- if she were arrogant, or possibly brash, I’m quite sure I would find her a bit annoying for the most part. However, she doesn’t sound like that at all- she sounds more, more… sweet.

“Apologies, my Queen. I did not mean to interrupt.”

“It is well, I have another class. Will I see you at dinner? Oh, and who is this?”

“Yes your majesty. Ah- this is my t- friend, Theresa.”

“I see. Well, we shall talk further then- and you can tell me more about your friend, yes?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

The Queen swims away in a graceful whirling of green; I wonder what she puts on her hair to keep it so sleek?

Tula is hugging Kaldur, and that is quite fine. She is his friend, probably from childhood, and I will not impose. Besides, she is dating Garth.

“You look well, Kaldur!”

“Yes- surface life agrees with you.”

“You speak as if I had been gone for years, but it has only been-”

“Two months.” “Two months.”

“That long… Then I must make up for lost time. Tula- how long have you and Garth been…?”

Oh dear. They look- no, Tula looks… nervous, almost afraid. I’m not sure why- Kaldur doesn’t seem to be the type to- hrn. I think this conversation would go better if I followed that bright little fish- it has a sort of orange color, brindled with purple-brown. Oooo, a bas-relief!

“It happened about two weeks after you left. I am sorry- I suppose I knew that you…”

“No, it is alright- your hearts lead you two together, led you to he and he to you; for that, I am glad.”

“I- we have another class.”

Tula swims away, tugging Garth with her- but Garth says something I can’t hear, and returns to Kaldur.
“So, you’re taking your friend to dinner at the palace?”

“Yes…”

“Well- we both made our choice, or so it would appear.”

“So it would.”

“Are you going to tell her about your-”

“Don’t you have another class?”

“Hmph. Don’t think you’re getting out of this conversation forever, Kaldur. Withholding that sort of information- you have to tell her, and I know you know why. But- we’ll talk later.”

Garth swims away as well.

I’ll say it now so I don’t have to say it later; so it isn’t a surprise. I don’t really tell anyone anything about myself, not because I don’t think it’s worth knowing, but because- well, normally people don’t. Want me. After I do.

They don’t want me- around. Alive. Near them.

So I try not to talk about it.

I am used to it now, though.

So… I try not to get too upset. When it happens.

Again. And again. and again…

I swim back over to Kaldur, slow and stop and hover quietly at his side.

“…um. Is- um. Are you…?”

“Hm? Oh, yes- it is well. Like I said before- the only reason I did not know about… them, was because I did not want to. It is not information I did not already know… and I am glad for them.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. I was wondering- Terry, would you have dinner with me at the palace?”

“Yes.”

If his smile were the sun and I were a lowly island of ice I would melt and be consumed by the ocean each day, only to freeze at night; if his lips were wine, I would endeavor to be a drunkard and a lush for the rest of my natural life.
Wait, this is a salle-

“Kaldur, would you spar with me?”

“Here and now?”

“Yes, if that is not inconvenient…”

“I would be honored to spar with you, Terry.”

I smile my happiness at him; he looks a bit like he got hit in the head with something heavy.

Shut up, Strike- I won’t even pretend to understand your sense of humorous timing. There’s nothing funny that’s happened at all.

Sparring with Kaldur, for me, at least, is an excercise in willing frustration. I know all of his moves- well, pretty much, I’m sure he’s got more than a few surprises- but all the moves I’ve seen, I can counter.

He is physically stronger than I, and if I were inside his reach, he could change the combat form from magic to handskills, at which point I-

Well, a series of moves would play out- never the same series, of course, but still- and I found out the hard way that scratching his Icons only makes him irritated and he’s really very strong. And heavy. He’s heavy enough that if he gets me into a proper hold, I cannot physically throw him off, I would have to use magic; and it feels very nice to have the full weight of his body pressing me down onto the ground.

Very, very nice.

I am faster than him, though, so I can dodge all of his attacks; I can also press kisses and touches into his skin and body and he can almost never stop me. Unless he pins me.

I actually really like it when he pins me. He never does anything with the pin- but.

I kind of want him to.

In weapons skills, we are matched- his blades against mine are equal. I believe he has other weapons at his command, as do I- Sinta’s seamail does more than let me breathe underwater, even if I’ve never had cause to use more than that one feature before…

The most frustrating thing about sparring with Kaldur is… his eyes. When we spar, they sometimes… they lock with mine, and it takes almost everything I have to not drown in them and I just…

I want him to look at me like that. When we’re not sparring.

And sometimes I wonder- I wonder if he thinks I’m- nevermind. That’s not really important.
I like him. I like him a lot. I think he is attractive, but even if I didn’t- I think I would really like him.

He’s… kind. And brave, a-and… gentle. With me, especially. And he doesn’t just… assume. He asked me what was wrong- my Grandma and my Aunt are kind and loving, true, but… they’re more like my parents than I would ever want.

And my parents didn’t really- they loved me, of course.

But they didn’t really-

Anyway. We had to stop our spar earlier than either of us really wanted, as the salle was required by a class of what I would consider first years.

I was going to kiss him, too. Oh well.

Later, perhaps.

The dining… hall, I suppose, of the palace, is huge. It’s enormous. And also, I’m being watched by the statue of Poseidon, which would be sillier if he wasn’t so damn huge. And there are servants, with food, which is great. And there are guardsmen and guardswomen with very visible weapons and cool looking helmets and- and the sliced fish looks very tasty. I have fish with pink-red flesh, and fish with blue-white flesh, and what looks like some sort of whelk.

I say looks because Prince Orm hasn’t stopped talking about his work for some time, and it’s quite rude to eat while people are talking at the table; King Orin and his Queen, who I think is named Mera, and Prince Orm, and his daughter, Princess Delfini, who is about eight summers if I’m not mistaken, and Kaldur who is next to me on my left, have all been eating while each other talks.

But the rudeness of others does not excuse it in myself.

And also, it is very hard to savor a dish while listening to what others have to say- impossible, even.

“-a gigantic echinoderm; frozen, yet still alive. Of course, at this point, our data is quite limited. But Dr. Volko thinks the creature is very promising-”

“I am considering returning here to study at the conservatory.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“…Well, far be it from me to dissuade anyone from seeking further education. However, your friends… when you left them behind for the surface… I mean to say, have you not considered that they have left you behind in the arena of mystical study?”

“Perhaps I only require a tutor- and I’m sure, you being an accomplished college…?”
“Junior.”

“Junior- wow- you can find time in your certainly busy schedule to teach me something?”

Smooth, Mr. Eel. Smooth as your face- which is actually very smooth, I’ve rubbed my lips all over it.

I give him a long slow look over, and a break in the conversation is enough time to put a piece of fish into my mouth. I chew it, and swallow it. The silence is rapidly moving towards uncomfortable.

And then… it’s possible I’ve actually developed my own specific slow-smile after years of exposure, and it’s possible the damn thing is hereditary. The overall point that should be recalled about the slow-smile is simply- it’s long, and slow, and suggests all manner of intrigue to the correct age bracket, of which, I believe everyone at the table is a member of- excepting the young Princess. Thankfully, eyecontact is a mitigating determinant in who gets seriously taken in by the intensity of my truly happy smile.

“I’m sure I could teach you something, Kaldur.”

I’m actually blushing with happiness. I didn’t know that was possible. Although, I have been blushing all through dinner, so I don’t think anyone can tell why I’m blushing at the moment… but I am not easily embarrassed! I blush easily, and for many reasons, the current one being a cross between happiness and mild hangry- that is, anger born of hunger.

I could just break decorum and eat something…

And now a servant is hiding a snicker.

“Is the food not to your liking?”

“Oh, no your majesty, it all looks very delicious- I believe I am having an attack of manners. Where I am from, it is very rude to eat food when others are holding a conversation… please, forgive any perceived slight against your table.”

“Ah! In that case, you have my express permission as Queen to partake of this meal, regardless of who is speaking.”

“Thank you.”

And then I shove a piece of fish-meat into my mouth. It’s tuna. My life is complete- truthfully, I could die right now and be pretty okay. But no I wouldn’t, I have to eat the rest of this fish and tasty sea creatures too- yay, whelk.

Mmmm. Crab.
“Still- should I not try to learn more?”

“While it is admirable to seek out more knowledge, whatever that may be… I personally, do not use very much magic at all.”

“No?”

“Well- no. Not spells and enchantments- the magic I learned to use is the magic of, of things; rings and armor, swords and wands- like that; in-heir-attainace? Some of that magic can be learned at a school- but the things I learn in school are more about other things. Not magic things.”

“Inheritance. Like… math and science?”

“Thank you- Math, science, filling out of government forms, learning to read legal documents, deportment and decorum- that sort of thing.”

“So- how did you get your… the blades you use. Um-”

“Oh- um, my daggers…? It would be easier to show you the blade and explain it. May I?”

“I would like to see them as well. You have my permission.”

“It will not upset the guards, your majesty?”

“I will not let it.”

“Very well-” and then I flick my right Blade into my hand.

It’s actually been quite a while since I examined one of these up close; it is a dagger, a bit shorter than my forearm, with a thick handle and a small guard. Both the handle and the blade itself are covered in dancing designs; the entire piece- and it is only one piece- is made of cold white ivory.

“The carvings are the story of how I recived these weapons, and became the heir of their former owner; when I am not using them as weapons, they become bracelets. Like so-” and then I sheath my Blade and feel it settle back around my right wrist.

“The carvings were of two creatures called…?”

“The big one is a mongoose, the smaller other is a fox.”

“…and the mongoose taught the fox how to kill something much smaller…”

“Yes, those are rats.”

“So the fox learned to kill rats, and then the fox killed many rats, and then the mongoose gave the fox it’s teeth and died…?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you represented by the fox?”
“It is traditional.”
“Then… what were the rats?”
“Um… they were. Um. Minor demons.”
“Terry.”
“Yes, Kaldur?”
“What’s on the other one?”
“Um.”

He’s looking at me full on now. So is the Queen. I can’t feel my ears anymore.

I sigh, and show them.

“So, on your right blade is carved the story of how you learned to fight demons, from an older demon hunter- and on the left is the story of which demons you slew on your own?”
“Yes ma’am.”
“And the- the marmoset…?”
“Weasle, ma’am. It was a plague-bringer, and a stealer of shadows.”
“And the snake?”
“It ate men and boys alive, and had done so for six hundred years or so.”
“The bat and the skeleton woman?”
“They used music to hypnotize, enslave, and murder young women and girls.”
“The woman with two heads?”
“She… well, by the time I got to her, it was more of a mercy killing.”
“And the bone fish mother?”
“She stole children, and ate them- she stole other beings too, and fed them alive to her children.”
“Ah. What most interests me is the fact that, even after so many battles, your blade is mostly clean.”
“…”
“You do not want to fight demons?”
“no.”
“Why not?”

“It is frightening, and often very painful, and then I usually end up horribly injured, or poisoned, or not paid-”

“Not paid?”

“The demon… sort of. Um. I wasn’t always as good at… seeing when a demon is a demon? So. Um. I got hired by the snake demon to find a person.”

“Why did she hire you…?”

“In my regular life, I am a private investigator for hire.”

Kaldur is kind of staring at me. No, he is staring at me. Why is he staring at me? He’s smiling- okay, fuck, that’s really. He’s really godsblessed cute; I feel like I’ve mentioned that. He also looks a little bit like he’s going to pass out for some reason… and I can feel my face again because my cheeks hurt, but that’s normal when I’m around him.

And he didn’t freak out about my- nevermind, I don’t think he actually. Knows enough about that. To care.

Still, today is a good day.

“We have an announcement.”

“I am with child.”

“Oh! Oh, that is most joyous news indeed, fair tidings on this day!” “Wow, aunty!”

“Congratulations for the both of you. An heir to the throne at last! F-forgive me, Prince Orm, I did not mean to-”

“No fear, Kaldur’ahm- no one could be more thrilled at this news than I.”

“Thank you, brother. Thanks to you all!”

Aw. They’re in love with each other! That makes me really happy- there’s lots of royal couples who are only together for the sake of face and country, and their hearts never get any sort of consideration in those matters.

“Superman to Aquaman: League Emergency in Tokyo Bay. Rendezvous at the Watchtower.”

“Acknowledged. It… seems I must take my leave.”

Yep. And I don’t think the Queen likes that over-much.
“Swim with me.”

And Kaldur goes with him. I- wait, no, Aqualad is Aquaman’s protégé, so… I suppose I’ll stay here. I’m not entirely sure what I’m supposed to do now though…

“So tell me- what brought you here this fine eve?”

“Ma’am?”

“You came all the way to this city, sunken beneath the waves, because…?”

“Because Kaldur asked me to come with him. Although I can only spare a small amount of time for this beautiful place, I would spare it-”

“Because it warrants a short glance?”

“Because it is a beautiful place I have never seen the equal nor like of, and I would, in what little time I have before a previously undertaken duty must be appealed to, endeavor to enjoy such beauty with a guide familiar to it. They, having lived in this magnificent city, should know the most advantageous locales suited to showcase the splendor and majesty of said city. And he asked me.”

“And your place on his team?”

“He asked for my help, ere it’s conception, and as he never made mention to me of any un-welcome, I have not had reason to leave.”

The Queen narrows her eyes at me, then raises her chin and smirks at me. I take it back, today sucks. Every single time anyone has ever smiled at me after a show of aggression on my part, things always go quickly, horribly, hilariously-in-hindsight-ly wrong for me.

For example:

You know that old Dragon’s Dungeon storytelling-chestnut of “rocks fall, everyone dies”? Yeah, that’s bullshit for more than one reason. Reason the first, and most important- no one actually dies just from getting falled on by a rock. It’s the crushing, shock, and bloodloss that tends to get to a person.

In our case- our being the Queen, who’s name I still do not know for sure, and will not know if-

“Your majesty, forgive me for asking this but, what is your given name?”

“Mera. My name is Mera.”

“It has been an honor defending you, Queen Mera, and your child, from harm. I can Sleep your leg
again- it slowed the bleeding, and it would be better if you were not in too much… I want to say pain, but that is not the right word…”

“I- oof- I belive the word you want is stress, and while that might be true- Ah!”

“Your majesty-”

“You must use your strength to hold your shield. I am keeping the water flowing around us both, so we do not suffocate- but I cannot do that if I am crushed by stones. I can do that with an aching leg, however.”

“My apologies, ma’am- but if you loose too much blood, we will both die anyway.”

“…”

I press my knee into hers, and numb her leg and all the parts of her leg with Sleep. I set it for an hour. We are rescued in half an hour.

I fall asleep on Kaldur’s shoulder about two hours after that.

I Dream of Queen Mera, and her baby inside an egg inside the shell of a sea turtle, and the sea turtle’s eyes are the softest greenest kindest Sedna? and the turtle swims through the palace which is full of children and then their parents return, and the turtle goes to Queen Mera and gives her the egg and tells her in nine month’s time the egg shall hatch and it is good. The prince wears a shadow over his face, and would kill his daughter fair to put the shade over his kin; he wants the king’s crown, but under him, the world will drown.

I’ve never actually had a wall fall down on me- ceilings and dead animals, boxes and stones, but never a wall. Well, it was more of a pillar with rubble…

Also, my Dreams are usually much more… abstract.

The silver foxes resemble other foxes, but are gold, fire-red or white in color. They know how to influence human beings. There is a kind of silver fox which can learn to speak like a man in a year’s time. These foxes are called “Talking Foxes.”
South-west of the bay of Xanghai there is a mountain by the edge of the sea, shaped like a tower, and hence known as Tower Mountain. On the mountain there is a temple where dwells a goddess, who is known as the Old Mother of Tower Mountain. When children fall ill in the surrounding villages, the wiser mothers often give orders that paper figures of them be burned at her altar, or little lime images of them be placed around it. And for this reason the altar and its surroundings are covered with hundreds of figures of children made in lime. Paper flowers, shoes and clothing are also brought to the Old Mother, and lie in a confusion of colors. The pilgrimage festivals take place on the third day of the third month, and the ninth day of the ninth month, and then there are theatrical performances, and the holy writings are read; there is also an annual fair.

The girls and women of the neighborhood burn incense and pray to the goddess; students pray for energy and wisdom. Parents who have no children go there and pick out one of the little children made of lime, and tie a red thread around its neck, or even secretly break off a small bit of its body, dissolve it in water and drink it. Then they pray quietly that a child may be sent them.

Behind the temple is a great cave where, in former times, some talking foxes used to live. They would even come out and seat themselves on the point of a steep rock by the wayside. When a wanderer came by they would begin to talk to him in this fashion: “Wait a bit, neighbor; first smoke a pipe!” The traveler would look around in astonishment, to see where the voice came from, and would become very much frightened. If he did not happen to be exceptionally brave, he would begin to perspire with terror, and run away. Then the fox would laugh: “Kekeke!”

Once a farmer was plowing on the side of the mountain. When he looked up he saw a man with a straw hat, wearing a mantle of woven grass and carrying a pick across his shoulder coming along the way.

“Neighbor Wang,” said he, “first smoke a pipeful and take a little rest! Then I will help you plow.”

Then he called out “Hu!” the way farmers do when they talk to their cattle.

The farmer looked at him more closely and saw then that he was a talking fox. He waited for a favorable opportunity, and when it came gave him a lusty blow with his ox-whip. He struck home, for the fox screamed, leaped into the air and ran away. His straw hat, his mantle of woven grass and the rest he left lying on the ground. Then the farmer saw that the straw hat was just woven out of potato-leaves; he had cut it in two with his whip. The mantle was made of oak-leaves, tied together with little blades of grass. And the pick was only the stem of a kau-ling plant, to which a bit of brick had been fastened.

Not long after, a woman in a neighboring village became possessed. A picture of the head priest of the Taoists was hung up in her room, but the evil spirit did not depart. Since there were none who could exorcise devils in the neighborhood, and the trouble she gave was unendurable, the woman’s relatives decided to send to the temple of the God of War and beg for aid.

But when the fox heard of it he said: “I am not afraid of your Taoist high-priest nor of your God of War; the only person I fear is your neighbor Wang in the Eastern village, who once struck me cruelly with his whip.”

This suited the people. They sent to the Eastern village, and found out who Wang was. And Wang took his ox-whip and entered the house of the possessed woman.

Then he said in a deep voice: “Where are you? Where are you? I have been on your trail for a long time. And now, at last, I have caught you!”

With that he snapped his whip.
The fox hissed and spat and flew out of the window.

They had been telling stories about the talking fox of Tower Mountain for more than a hundred years when one fine day, a skilful archer came to that part of the country who saw a creature like a fox, with a fiery-red pelt, whose back was striped with gray. It was lying under a tree. The archer aimed and shot off its hind foot.

At once it said in a human voice: “I brought myself into this danger because of my love for sleep; but none may escape their fate! If you capture me you will get at the most no more than five thousand pieces of copper for my pelt. Why not let me go instead? I will reward you richly, so that all your poverty will come to an end.”

But the archer would not listen to him. He killed him, skinned him and sold his pelt; and, sure enough, he received five thousand pieces of copper for it.

From that time on the fox-spirit ceased to show itself.

In time, it’s bones rotted into the dirt beneath the tree.

The truth about that fox is, he was just an old man who played a few too many tricks in his long life, and he could have truly ended that archer’s poverty, not just for him but for his family, and his children, and all their descendants. He was a mage, after all, of great skill, and gifted in magic. And the truth of it is, the Old Mother is no more than a bitter, widowed, Landlady for Whores, and her Tower is an apartment building, and her renowned powers regarding children are just a bit of passed on goods- nothing more than unborn children moving towards people who want children, and away from those that don’t; nothing more than fertile soil and good seeds.

The truth of it is, I don’t smell like vanilla from some accident- I smell like vanilla because I add it to the water I drink straight, for when I’m too hot and tired for the work of building up the embers in my stove into a cooking fire to boil up some tea. And the truth of it is, I think I might be in love with Kaldur, and I don’t know if I’m… good enough. For him.

He’s so beautiful. So, so beautiful.

And I… I don’t think I am. I don’t think I ever was.

Still, waking up to the clean sandbrown jaw and the large, gorgeous gill slits of the young man I think- no, I do. I love him. There’s not much I can do about it, but… yeah. Waking up to see the resting face of the young man I love is one of the very best ways I can think of to do it.

I don’t know how long I watch his gills softly flutter in the cool light; we are resting against a wall, or no- a bed is against a wall, and I am against the steady rushing of his chest, and we’re both together on it. We’re fully clothed- and I kind of wish we weren’t. That would be very nice…

My hand is tucked against his chest, and the other is wrapped around him, around his waist; my breasts are squished on his ribs.

Everything in me aches, like I’m bruised all in my blood and every beat of my heart pushes a new one into bloom.

Kaldur’s arms are warm, cool to the touch but maybe- warming, around my waist and my shoulders
and holding me close to him.

I watch him sleep, and somehow, I feel like I could just... stay here. Like this.

I realize he’s awake when the sweet flutter of his gills change to a sharper flexing- and he does that on land too.

Gods, he’s beautiful.

So, as it turns out, what actually happened was Black Manta attacked and tried to steal a giant alien starfish. I couldn’t make that shit up if I tried. Luckily for the original “city going” plan, neither Kaldur nor I are actually required, or needed to help settle the city after Black Manta attacked.

The city is beautiful- but I’m not sure if that’s just because Kaldur is here or- no, it’s Kaldur that’s beautiful. And since he’s here, I can say that the city is beautiful because he’s in it. Although, I must admit, there’s a certain beauty to ceramic tiles and glass stone in rippling patterns- I’ve never seen a hospital more beautiful and restive. The gardens are awash in oranges and reds and purples and greens, tiny fish flitting in and out of the waving fronds, curling and lifting like hair; the fish become beads and delicate, magnificent hair pieces, each unique and perfect.

There are walls that roll in gentle waves, forcing water like wind through the city and bringing drifts of fresher, colder water through; bright columns of seaweeds and glass sprout out of the ground and glow softly, lights in the darkness. And the library at the school is quite possibly the most beautiful place I have ever seen- scrolls of slats carved with words, so familiar, yet so strange; I had forgotten that Atlantean is written left to right, top down, instead of top down, right to left. I know I kissed Kaldur full on the mouth when he bade me open my eyes in that place, and I know I must have embarrassed him terribly, but- books are, were, have been- they. Saved me. When nothing and no one could ease my heart, they did. When there was no food for me to be found anywhere, they eased the hunger in my heart- when there was no peace to be found in sleep, I found peace in dry and dusty pages.

For that, I love them more than possibly anything else.

Except maybe bacon.

Mmmm. Bacon.

And Kaldur.

Mmmmm. Kaldur.

And then, almost too soon, the time I can spend with Kaldur in his beautiful City is over- I must return to Kowloon, and attend the only mandatory day of school.

“My friend, I can hardly think of a more wonderful three days in my life- I thank you for inviting me
here.”

“You are most welcome- when shall we next meet?”

“Ah? I belie we shall meet in three days.”

“Ah. I will see you then.”

“Indeed. W-well, I- I guess I should. Um. Go.”

“Y-yeah. Um. I- I will, ah, I will see you soon.”

“Y-yes. Um. Yes. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

That was the worst, most awkward conversation I’ve ever had with him.

Good god I’m in trouble.

St. Jude’s branch of Seldvirck’s Academy of Applied and Unapplied Mystical Energies, which Necro’s feeds into, is a catholic school. Well- catholic by osmosis. It’s based off of a catholic school, at the very least. More specifically, it’s the little that remains of when Kowloon was actually a sanctioned part of Celestial Kiaom. Which was a long ass time ago.

So, really, it shouldn’t be, and isn’t, catholic at all- except if it was obvious what the school’s denomination really was, it would be burnt to cinders within the day. So it’s a catholic school. Except it isn’t.

There are two reasons I’m actually pretty okay with going to school. The first being that I actually enjoy school quite a lot.

The second being that, as is tradition, there is a pun-off and poetry slam every year during the noon hour on the first day of school. Prizes have included everything from bicycles and horses, to bars of gold and holy broadswords.
This year is no different, but first I’ll tell you about the uniform I have to wear to school.

As stated by the school handbook: Without their signature wardrobes, a Seldvirck’s student would look just like everybody else—therefore, our uniforms are mandatory and perfectly styled, to show the world our magnificent style.

First Year Students, no matter what their skill, shall wear an upper ramiment of Red Clothe. They shall have at least three such garments of fine fit and well repair, and at least one garment of fine and winsome clothe to wear on such occasions as warrant a garment of great beauty. They shall wear boots of the style of the Imperial Soldier, one belt with a numeration of useful pouches, and carry a weapon or wand of such use as to defend or protect themselves and others from harm.

If a Student has chosen or is knowing of their specialization, leaning, weird, or ken, they must wear one of the colors so specified as to represent the centrality of their focus; this wearing must be in such a manner as to be immediately and obviously visible to all and sundry, and shall be worn by any such student, regardless of their year.

The colors are as follows:

Black – Destruction

Blue – Illusion

Gold – Enchantment

Orange – Summoning

Purple – Information

Green – Change
Hats, while not required, are allowed on campus, provided the proper hat ettiquite is observed by all those wearing such garments.

The use of focuses is allowed, however, the protection and upkeep of such objects is under the perveiw of the Student who owns such objects.

The use of charms is allowed, however, the protection, upkeep, and ethical use of such objects is under the perveiw of the Student who owns such objects; strict adherence to the instructors rules regarding Remember-Me, Luck-of-the-Draw, and Who’d-have-Guessed, to name a popular few, is the policy of the Board of Judgment, and, in the event of a dispute regarding ethical test-taking procedure or grade, it is the instructor’s set of rules which will be referenced in the first.

The ramiment of all Students must adhere to the following rules and guidelines:

**Rules:**

All Male Gendered students shall wear, in following, trousers of a length no lower than the ankle and no higher than the knee; a shirt, blouse, or tunic of length no greater than half the thigh and no shorter than one handsbreadth above the navel, and sleeves may be of any length excepting sleeve-less; a belt or sash may be worn if the Student deems it necessary or fit, but is not required. Boots, or comparable footwear shall always be worn by those students who need shoes, and all students shall present themselves in good hygienic standing and with no inhibiting intoxications.

All Female Gendered students shall wear, in following, skirts of a length no lower than the ankle and no higher than the knee; a shirt, blouse or tunic of length no greater than half the thigh and no shorter than one handsbreadth above the navel, and sleeves may be of any length excepting sleeve-
less; a belt or sash may be worn if the Student deems it necessary or fit, but is not required. Boots, or comparable footwear shall always be worn by those students who need shoes, and all students shall present themselves in good hygienic standing and with no inhibiting intoxications.

Jewellery, and other adornments, may be worn by any student, provided it causes no unneeded strife, or unfair advantage in schooling.

My school clothing is… actually, I didn’t describe it very well before. And also, it doesn’t exactly fit anymore, so- these are actually entirely different clothes.

My uniform is an ankle length skirt of fine black cotton with knife pleats all around; it hugs my waist almost like Kal- anyway. My overblouse is of similar cloth, but a bright red, with a neat skirt defining belt of fine black leather. My neckerchief- also called an ascot- is of soft lavender, also called purple, and is held together neatly with a Teacher’s pin given to me when I became a gLearning proctor and instructor.

My hair is long enough to cut into a bob, which also is one of the nicest hairstyles on me, and my wide brimmed fedora looks quite fetching with a lavender-purple ribbon around the brim.

My school satchel is the same bag I took with me to Poseidonis, with a secondary strap added for stabilities sake; my Bonecycle at the Cave knows where to be to take me to class, and I’ve downloaded and actualized my school-required identifications. They’ll work anywhere in the country, and in Eastern Asia too- although, I’m not entirely sure why the governments that be decided it would be a good idea to combine so many different identification bits and caboodle, especially things like passports and monetary conveniences.

I will admit, it’s nice to not have to fuck around with exchange rates- of course, the damn thing doesn’t work in Europe, or the Americas.

The annual pun-off and poetry slam at St. Jude’s of Seldvirck’s is known for being batshit nutbars the closer it gets to the end- the simple fact of the matter is, a good pun will make anyone who hears it want to punch the person who utters it in the face. Pun-offs being what they are, enough really good puns are uttered in the course of the competition that it always devolves into a punch up around
the end.

Oh gods, I’ve already started. I’ve also started my period- nothing quite like bleeding out my vagina to set the tone of a day.

Oh well.

School is an annoying series of formalities, as it always is on the first day- however, it's the work of moments to turn in the necessary completed work and upload the required presentations- and I also discover that the dissections are not needed anymore. Yay-but-not because I actually really enjoy dissections, but then again, that might just be a new black twist in the miasma of my mind.

I’ll spare you the details of the horror-show that is a pun-off; suffice it to say, five people got thrown out a window. Two of them were even competitors this year, which is always a plus.

I met up with Empress (bitch) after school- sought her out, actually. We go to rival schools… but anyway, after a brief battle, or possibly just some bitchy cat-fighting, I told her what Oracle wanted me to tell her. After punching her stupid round face a few times.

Really, no one makes my blood boil quite like her.

No. One.

It’s going to be fun, attempting Bball with her. And her stupid yellow pompadour.

For the last two days of break, I clean out my apartment- everything I own, packed up or outright removed, in a twinkling of an eye- Landlady sent my lease over, and it turns out I had misheard several zeroes on the agreement- she might be a greedy cuss, but she’s not stupid; even for family, five years was all she could trade. Still. I have my own place now- it’s not too bad to just… move out. And it’s easy enough to do, even- when it’s over, there’s nothing left except the patched walls, piecemeal wards, and a faint aura of sadness and bereavement. It actually felt like this when I moved out from under the overpass…
And, with one last sweep up, and the retrieval of only-slightly missed trinkets that were lost in places too numerous and awkward to make the ordeal of moving all the furniture and rugs to not find it—after all that, my lease is over, and the apartment is in much better shape than when I got it.

Hang my Door in the baths of my palace— it was once five, but now it’s just one. Stow all the things I don’t want to move to the Cave and deal with.

My shop cleans up even faster— Create and Move, oddly enough, together take the entirety of that space, and fold it down smaller and smaller, until it is a section of unreal spaces and mathematically deranged notes, chemistry notations non-withstanding, all bound up in the battered covers of the sketchbook Create pretends to be.

 Somehow or other, my period ends about an hour before I’m done cleaning— I take the time to clean myself up, and then… that’s really it. The past five years of my life, boxed up and elsewhere now— I’ve really moved out of
Heat boils me ‘live, the steady grinding of sand slithering underneath me; someone groans nearby and my head aches, like I tried to down an entire barrel of sachu in one go- ow. What the hell happened last night?

I mean, I know partying with the DelivGirls is always a can1ju4 waiting to happen, but jesu- shit. Why am I in a desert? Fuck, I don’t remember trainhopping last night, but I guess I might’ve…

Ugh, I guess I had a sneeze of foresight before going out, why the fuck else would I put on so much drapery and no shoes to speak of, unwieldy jug of who knows-what grog strapped to my- and who the fuck is this asshole?

He’s got a deep tan skincolor, with sweat pouring off of him in this sun- and gills. That’s… that’s probably really bad. Did I get suicided with this guy by accident? He’s certainly got the tattoos for it, and I wouldn’t put it past those dead trash fucks in the Triads… oh, hey, an umbrella.

Shade would be good for both of us, I think.

I stab the pole of the massive umbrella- only it’s too heavy to be just an umbrella, and aha, a sword- but not important right now. I stab the umbrella deep into the sand. It’s odd- for some reason, the canopy of the umbrella is a strangely comforting red- like a color I’d have chosen for myself, except I’ve never seen this umbrella before in my life. The roof of the umbrella, what little I saw of it, was the same color as the sand, almost like camouflage.

Time to check that jug on my back- it’s huge, a good six liters- heavy enough to be nearly full. It’s-water. Clean, fresh water- and I don’t carry around water that isn’t good to drink, that’s just stupid. I pull a reedstraw out of my pocket, and take a slow smooth sip- fill the straw and dribble a little into Mr. Eel Tattoo’s mouth. I alternate for a while, steady-slow and gentle so he doesn’t go into very real going-to-die water lost-gained shock- and then his eyes open up.

There’s a color-name I want to call his eyes, ce4na4, I can’t put my tongue around it- and he’s sitting up. And looking at me.

And now his hand is on my face, on my chin- and then his fingers are on my jaw, and he’s pulled something away I didn’t even notice was there- wait. I know this magic.
“k-Kaldur?”

“Terry. I thought- do you know where we are?”

“No, I’m sorry. This is all the water we have that we both can drink- I don’t know how long we’ll both be able to survive on it.”

“Ah. Well- do you know how to navigate this sandy waste?”

“Not by day, no- and when night falls, there is no guarantee that I will recognize the stars.”

“Perhaps I will.”

“Yeah.” I take a pull from the jug, and Kaldur is sort of sitting up now so I set it between us both, and he leans in and takes a pull- “Slowly- slowly, or you will shock your body.”

“g uh- Thank you.”

And then he smiles at me. Qing. His eyes are Qing colored. Wow.

I smile back at him, and- and a drop of water, or maybe sweat is rolling down from his slightly open mouth and dripping down his bottom lip and rolling down his chin. I can’t look away from his mouth. And his eyes are breathtaking- I’ve put my hand on his face and wiped away the small bead of water, touch it to my mouth, the excuse of water being too precious to waste even a drop here about to spill from my suddenly dry mouth- and then he’s caught my hand in his and pressed his lips to mine and this heat, in this unbearable heat I wouldn’t be surprised if I vaporized into nothing directly but.
But Kaldur’s lips to mine cause me to melt entirely, positively melt into warmth and softness and I press my lips into his and move against his surge, river delta into the sea. I break away, and stopper the jug of our only water and set it to the side, move over to him and kiss him again. He kisses me back, tongue scratching over my lips and I can do nothing more than gasp and sigh softly into his mouth and he groans. A burning ache settles into my skin, presses tight into the soft squishing between my legs and then Kaldur is on top of me and his hips are rolling into mine and it’s just like the time we first-

I spread my legs and wrap them tight around his hips, arch and thrill to his needy thrusting and he groans again, reverberations from his magnificent voice caressing my breast and settling in the rolling expanse of my ribcage; he finds a rhythm for his thrusting that puts just the perfect amount of pressure on my clitoris, and I can’t help the soft gasping sighs that escape me. He pins my arms over my head and I- a moan comes from me and I want to touch him and I want him to touch me and he can’t do that if he’s holding my wrists and then his teeth are digging into the soft flesh of my neck and I fall over the edge of joy and die.

It’s wonderful.

When the starbursts clear from my sight, Kaldur is looking at me with wide and… and frightened eyes.

For some reason, I want to cry. I shouldn’t- we don’t have the water to spare. But.

Did I do something wrong?

“Did- d-did I just… hurt you?”

“No? Just the opposite.”

“Oh. But… you kind of… whined? And there were bright red stripes all over you, and you had sharper teeth and big black claws-”

“That happens pretty much every time. Have you… never seen a Fox crossbred orgasm before?”

“Ah- no. Sorry- what’s a Fox crossbred?”
“Oh. Um. I’m only… half human? So, when I get uniquely over-stressed- like an orgasm- it. Um. Shows.”

“Hey, you have- your ears are kind of-”

“Oh gods, please don’t look at me, I’m probably-”

Nnggh. Mmmmmm. The world blurs into a warm syrup being poured over my soul. I very desperately want to- to- I don’t know. I don’t think I can, actually. Think, that is.

“What’re we talkin’ about again?”

“So this feels good?”

“Nnnn-hmmm. Mmmmmm. Tha’s nice- ah! Aaaaah!”

“Too much?”

“Dun stahp!”

He rubs my ear again. It feels really really good. Like, better than bacon tastes good. Mmmm. Ear-rub.

And then he kisses my ear, teeth nibbling where the flesh meets the skull- and I crash over the edge of joy again. Holy shit, that was fast.

“Oh-okay. Stop, Kaldur- oohum. Stop, stop- we only have so much water, and while this is very nice-”

“Right, right- I’m sorry, I- you. You are very beautiful and I just… so. Do you want to talk about something…?”

“Um- well, I’d like that… but we don’t seem to have any food, and… maybe it would be best if we sort of… tried to sleep? Until nightfall? Um… we can c-cuddle too, if you want…”

“Y-yeah, um. Alright.”

We settle into each other’s arms, and I settle myself against the slick wet smoothness of his skin; the sun rises and beats down with a hateful fist, and then we settle into each other further and the heat of the noontime hour forces us both into the quiet arms of sleep.

Hours pass, and when we awaken again, it is to a female blonde archer, a male red haired runner-odd- a… squire? In red and black, and a not-girl with green skin and red hair and a long blue cloak.
They have a conversation with each other that we cannot hear- I draw my legs underneath myself and get ready. Who are these people?

And then the not-girl cloaked in blue darts off into the distance, some sort of terror flickering over her eyes- the squire yelps “Wait!” and then she’s gone.

“Well. That was weird.”

Aqualad chuckles.

“So- what are Robin, Kid Flash, and…?”

“Artemis, partner to Green Arrow.”

“Artemis, doing in a place like this?”

“We’re looking for you two, actually- you’re both teammates of ours, and a psychic psycho made us all forget the past year or so.”

“I say guess the Blue-cloak who just fly away was our psychic-chic?”

“Yep.”

“Another teammate in trouble?”

“Yeah…?”

“Eh. We’ll be fine.”

“…you seem remarkably calm about this…”

“ Weird shit happens, to me all the time the most. This barely odd, so- is not a problem.”

“Ah. Well- since we’re all up to speed, we might as well try to got to the Bioship.”

“Mm- that be our transport?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m game. Aqualad?”

“We have about three-quarters of a jug of water- I think we can make it.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

I stand, dust sand off of my… white body suit? Okay… rearrange my draping red and white clothes and pull the umbrella out of the ground. Aqualad gets to his feet and takes up the jug-
“You three should rotate underneath with us- you first Kid Flash, you have sunburn.”

“Ah, well- okay.”

And then we walk for quite a while, our three new companions switching place with each other, under the comfort of the parasol-come-umbrella. Eventually we come over a rise of some sort, and I can see soldiers in the far distance- a bit to the… south? I think.

“Soldiers, I think- to the south? That way, it feel like-”

And I point to where the feeling is strongest. And then- a woman with a horrible face and a sword meant for death, coming our way from whence I point-

“Shit. Trouble’s coming. Trouble for me most- who with you all can fight or run?”

“I’m the fastest, but if I push it too much more…”

“I can fight, but I’m best at range.”

“Your kind of trouble is a little too much for me right now- I’m almost out of… well, everything.”

“Aqualad?”

“I would stay, but…”

“This place will kill you before the coming trouble will.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay- Kid Flash, Robin- you two need to keep going for the ship. Kid, not use you power if not having to- you can run fast but not… um, what you do. Robin, watch his back. Artemis, take this-” I hand her a sand colored cape, pulled from another pocket- “and get as much away as you can. Try to give some support fire for me, yeah? Aqualad- you go stay with her, watch her back. The umbrella has a sword in the handle- use if need.”

“Yeah, alright.” She takes the cape, puts it on, and runs to the left of where danger is coming, Aqualad and the Brellasword at her side- and Kaldur gives me a look of such- I really hope I don’t die; Robin climbs onto Kid Flash’s back and then Kid Flash bolts off- his long legs eat the ground and then he blurs into the distance; I can’t tell if it’s heat or his powers that do it.

And then I am alone.

I put my mask on. It’s weight is both comforting and bracing.

I am wearing a white body suit that covers every inch of my body, long, draping white fabric like some sort of loose martial artist’s garb, and a bright red scarf that flows in a sudden wind like a cape,
loosly wrapped around my neck.

And there, over a rise comes- a woman, with blue skin. She wears no identifying mark of any kind, save the fact that her voluminous robes are an earthy tone of black; a sword on her back, and her expressionless eyes, are the only indications of what she is.

And she is an Assasin from the Shadows.

We stare at each other for a long, pregnant moment- and then with a shuffling swish, her outer robes fall away, to reveal a fitted warrior’s garb- the garb of an assassin who’s not trying to be discrete.

I reach up, pull the scarf from my throat. Let it float away. Let myself slide down to the base of the dune. There’s a bowl depression like an arena here, full of broken stones and small rippling waves of sand. I leap onto a stone, and wait again.

She appears, soon enough, at the top of the dune.

The light changes from a sort of burning glow-casting radiance to a harsher thing- streaking light and darkness without mercy. I fade into the whiteness of the light, my clothing blending away, the features on my mask vanishing with my fading- and she, too, vanishes into the sudden blackness of shadow.

I step well away from my fallen scarf, and take care to make my footsteps light, so as not to disturb the sand on the stone. My opponent leaps down from the dune, slashes my scarf to pieces. I’m not there.

I score first blood on her arm; she whirls, sees my brightness in the dark of a standing rock- I dart back into the light as she leaps for me. We both freeze for a moment.

A flurry of sword strikes against nothing but air- my claws would be sliced away in moments if I tried to halt her, of that I am certain; the crumbling stone from where she cut it tells me that much. The stone seems to be some sort of granite- and there, in the rubble, a small crystal glints.

She leaps for me again- the sun is setting.

I flee her, leaping from light-patch to rapidly thinning trail, dodging and evading her every strike- but I am tiring. I lead her a merry chase but finally, she corners me against that stone that crumbled so, perfect.

I crouch back and away, palm the cut crystal and flash a flutter of rainbow and searing pain into her eyes- three green fletched arrows bloom from her shoulder, upper arm, and fore-arm, all of which are holding her sword. She drops it, and I move forwards- one second, crouching, the next, A Sudden Advent seeks the removal of her brains from her skull via a well placed foot to the skull. Sadly, she is only knocked unconscious- and then the arrows electrify her, and wrap her up in tight winding ropes.

Sweet.

Oh- no one with their neck at that angle is just “knocked out”.

Oh well.
We catch up to Robin and Kid Flash, maybe… an hour? later, and the sun has well and truly set by then- stars have slowly started to scatter over the sky.

Blue-cloak and a guy with muscles and a shock of black hair are there, and they seem to be giving each other moon-calf eyes. Lovely- explains why she flew off in such a rush.

There is also a sentient mechanical Sphere. Not the weirdest I’ve ever seen, but… still.

Very odd.

Getting my memories back is major headache, and the only thing I have enough strength to do is yank the tub of Sunkgunk’s Cure-all Healing Salve out from the cargo hold and slather a healthy dollop onto Wally’s very sunburnt skin- if his sigh of relief doesn’t speak to the goo’s efficacy, I’m not sure what would.

My teammates converge on the gunk- my human ones, at least. I rub some of the slime onto my face, and glop some into Kaldur’s hands- his expression of gratitude is one I can definitely get behind.

Although… I’m not entirely sure why Wally whooped like that- it’s not that big a deal for Kaldur to lay a smooch on me, is it?

(Have I mentioned that I don’t particularly like Megan? She’s a valuable teammate, and a loyal friend… but I don’t like her. I think, quite honestly- I think she’s too much like me.

**You’d never be content to be a cheerleader.**

What?

**You’ll see.**

Stri-ike!

Kekekekekekeke...

- 

When we get back to the Cave, everyone’s mentor’s are there- except mine, of course. I don’t have a mentor. Lots of teachers- but never a mentor.

How in the hell can anyone look as good as Kaldur covered in slime? Although, I’m also covered in slime, so I guess it doesn’t really matter. I admire the heartwarming scenes of mentors looking over their protégés, Flash ignoring the slime covering Wally to give him the mother of all hugs, Superboy getting a shoulder touch of comfort from Black Canary- it really does warm the cockles of my heart.

They don’t notice me leave.

I shower, wash the sand out of various nooks and crannies- how it does get everywhere, I can’t even begin to tell you. I think I washed my feet a good five times… I left myself some clothing before we
went on the mission- after I finished moving out of my old apartment and moving always sucks, I cleaned and rearranged my room, did some laundry, and put the Healing Salve in the Bioship’s hold. I’m glad I chose loose fitting clothing; a xieyi, and a new house dress I made for myself a while back- not fancy, but comfortable, a simple one-tone shade of blue; even though my bodysuit fits like a second skin, I still can’t escape the knowledge that I’m wearing a piece of cloth over my entire body.

Ugh.

Anyway- after my shower and clothing change, I went to one of the computerdesks in the library, and filled out a report for the mission.

I didn’t leave anything out.

And then I went to bed.

Yes, thanks for noticing that I’m alone, completely and totally alone, thank you for pointing that out. I’m not bitter, I’m not bitter. I’m not bitter at all.

Ugh, I guess I was still wiped from my overcast and knockout by Clayface- I slept for two straight days!

I wonder if anything happened while I was asleep- Kaldur seems extra tired.

I think I mentioned earlier that I have a driver’s- well, that I know how to drive. I also mentioned that my Student ID card will substitute for just about every governmental identification available.

I didn’t realize that my SID card is set to automatically record my acquisition of new skills- so, I actually do have a driver’s license. I also have a car- my Bonecycle’s got all sorts of nifty features!

Like… interdimensional tags! Four wheel drive! Sentience- although that is debated!

Still, it’s best not to ask where the other two wheels go when it’s in Cycle mode- but if anyone does ask, it’s the same place the rockets go.

I decide to go ultra casual for the day- plain black jeans, not skinny like usual, and an oversized sporting shirt- plain xiyu that goes to the bottom of my sternum; red stack heels would normally complete the look, but… nah, black work boots- Dr. Martens or something… Red lips, black lashes, three studs- oh! That’s right, I hadn’t ever- I usually don’t wear earrings, but I got these cute fish beads and Sinta’s books… my new books- they have some pre-made earrings in them, just need to finish them.

It only takes about a minute to make the new studs- and, in honor of my friend, I’ll wear them today. It’s her birthday, after all.

I’m actually not the first one up today, like I usually am- Megan and Superboy have their first day of school today?
They’re going to need a ride... and I need to get some things.

I go with Aqualad, Red Tornado, and… Megan’s Uncle. I should probably know his name, but honestly, the knowledge of him being Megan’s uncle took precedence… and seriously, what is that Sphere thing?

Why do I feel like I should know what that is?

I was never really into that part of the mythos...

Strike…?

Oversight from Before. You’re on your own, kiddo.

Lemme think now, how did it go- well, it might help if I was actually near the vehicle in question…

“The first day of the scholastic season carries great cultural resonance.” It does? Odd. “We want to wish you both well.”

“Guess it’s not a kryptonian thing.”

“You may wish to… change, before you depart.”

“Ah! I spent hours this outfit- what do you think? Can M’gann M’orzz pass as an earth-girl now?”

“Well…”

“Just kidding! Meet- Megan Morse! What’s your new name?”

“My what?”

“I chose the name John Jones, for myself- and I suggested John Smith for Red Tornado- you could be a John too!”

“Pass.”

“Conner’s- always been my favorite name…” I must say, for a person who learned how to be human from actors, she does know how to emotionally convince males… I know from experience that the shoulder and arm touch combo is very effective. I can also tell it worked because he just shrugged, not objected.

“A last name will also be required.”

“Perhaps… Kent.”

“Oh! In memory of Dr. Fate- the late Kent Nelson!”

“Um… I guess it would be an honor, sure.”

“Is better than the one I use…” “What do you use?” “Strike.” “Pfft.” I bump Kaldur with my hip.

“So Conner Kent, time to change your shirt! –you don’t want to give away your secret identity…”
And he takes his shirt off. Just. Off. Turns it inside out, and puts it back on.

I’m in love with Kaldur. But I’m not dead. …Neither is Megan, it looks like.

“Does this work?”

“Mmph- Works for me.” I’ll bet it does.

“I have to go town for some errands- you two want ride with me, or bus?”

“Um- it’s kind of hard to fit three on a motorcycle…”

“Not going on motorcycle-”

… no, that’s to disengage the cannons… no, that cycles the aerial controls… anima modeling… vortex conversion… giant paint cannon… spoon… aha! Press the X on the keyfob, twist one quarter turn to the right and pull!

With a curious lack of sound, my Bonecycle shifts from Twinwheel to Fourwheel- and it’s a… American Muscle Car? I must admit, the overall look of the thing is quite delightful- but… really? I mean, red go faster stripes on the side and chromed pinstriping is nice, and leather seats- nevermind, my car’s the best car there is.

No question.

“-I take my car. You want ride or no…?”

“Did it always do that?”

“Yes. It fly too.”

“…fly?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll ride. Megan?”

“Um- sure, sounds… great.”

We smile at each other. It isn’t exactly… nice. But! I will always endeavor to be polite and helpful to my teammates and coworkers, even when I don’t… actually… like… them. Her. And stuff.

“They grow up so fast…” The Sphere boops agreement; Kaldur looks vaguely troubled.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t know why.
Dropping the kids off at school really isn’t so bad, actually-

“Oh, have good day at school, yes?”

“Yeah.” “I will.”

“Oh, I pick you up…?”

“Um- Four-fifty? We’ll text if it’s earlier or later.”

“Oh! See you later!”

“Bye!” “Later…”

-and their secondary school, Happy Harbor High (triple alliteration word score, thirty points!), seems nice. Still, I have incense and spirit things to purchase- as Sinta’s friend, I can’t do everything I know she deserves, but I can at the very least make her afterlife less sucky.

Oh- Megan’s texted me… ah, Cheerleading Tryouts. I might have known.

I can pick them up at six- or, I can pick them up at seven, there’s a nice restaurant not two blocks away…

Sweet. I’ll pick them up at seven-thirty then.

I might not particularly like Megan, but being a good winger comes as naturally to me as breathing. And if I’ve made inroads on my heart’s desires, Miss oh-so-human-Megan Morse has no goddamn excuse.

Oh boy.

It’s more than just paper money that gets burned for the dead, more than just feasts prepared- if I was a blood relative, I would have probably been forbidden to do anything like what I’m going to do, but… I love my friend. So I’m going to do what I can for her.

Thankfully, Happy Harbor has one of the best market’s I’ve seen- and several specialty stores in the Kiaom part of town that I didn’t expect to see anywhere outside of Kiao.

I get five kilograms of dried ink- I go through the stuff pretty damn fast, and the sell it in bulk at this store, which they don’t back in Kowloon; three rolls of plain straw color mao ban zhi, a roll of xuan zhi, three rolls of sized xuan zhi- Cicada, Clearwater, and Icy- and finally, a roll of leather paper, made from eco-friendly renewable mulberry. I prefer making my brushes, at this point- the only brushes that I don’t make are from Lowestoft, and I can’t afford to buy more of those, or materials to make them- sable fur is fucking expensive. Gold leaf, on the other hand, is actually almost pitifully
cheap- strange, but very useful for my needs.

Anyway.

I also make a stop at the grocery store- fresh eggs, a small bottle of whole homogenized milk, and a bar of Marsher’s brand Milk Chocolate. Sinta’s favorite.

I’ve finished unloading my car at the Cave when Kaldur comes walking into the Hangar in civvies.

“What are you going?”

“I am going to go assist Red Arrow in Taipei- would you like to join me?”

“I would be most honored- let me get my gear?”

“Sure.”

I’ve already gotten most of the stuff back to my room- the last few rolls of paper were all that was left. I’ve also changed my shirt from it’s twice too big size to a shirt that fit before but is now slightly too small, but not… unwearable- it’s also cap sleeved, and very comfy. I’m not entirely sure how long I’ve owned it, but it’s soft and warm like a good cuddly… muscular… soft skinned…

Ahem.

Anyway, a nice oversized red hoodie- with my cellphone in the kangaroo pocket- finishes it all up, and the earrings stay at home.

“Ready when you are.”

“Let’s go.”

Taipei City ain’t no Xanghai. That’s not nationalistic pride- that’s a fact.

Taipei is the national capital of Taiwan. It is in the northern part of the island in a basin between the Yangming Mountains and the Central Mountains. It is, with 2.6 million inhabitants, the fourth largest administrative area of Taiwan, after New Taipei, Kiaomtsung and Taichung. However, the Greater Taipei metropolitan area, which encompasses the central Taipei City along with the surrounding New Taipei City and Keelung, represents the largest urban cluster in Taiwan with nearly 7 million people. Taipei serves as the island’s financial, cultural and governmental centre.

It has also served as neutral ground for the various imperio-political factions that have taken over and wanted to make nice with their neighboring assholes, not like us, no sir.
“So, anything in particular you want me to do, or…”

“Backup- if Cheshire gets past Red Arrow and me, you need to be the last line of defense between the peace summit leaders and her.”

“Alright. Lethal force allowed?”

“Not today, no.”

“Nifty. Hope not to see you there- even if you are the cutest fishbuoy outside the seven seas.”

“Hey now- fishman, obviously.”

“Hmm. I’m sure you’ll prove it to me eventually.”

I press the button on my phone, transform- Red X folds into a neat bow, then drops deep into Shadow; Aqualad’s wide sparkling qing eyes burn with a heat that I think I might understand- but no time for that now.

I flicker out of the alley where we ‘Tubed in, and whisper through the city, finally coming to rest in the pale shadow of the head table.

A few hours of mind-numbingly boring harrasement disguised as idle chit-chat later, and Aqualad pulls all the water out of the glasses on the table to make a block for a-

I step out of Shadow, take two steps forward, and Silence.

The blast is bright, but soundless. When it ends- I can feel when it ends- I drop the silence. Wallpaper clatters to the ground- statues have crashed apart.

I wait.

…sounds like a fight’s going on.

I keep waiting- my job is to guard the politrogs, not listen to flirtatiously evil banter.

The hired help’s about to be overwhelmed:

Thank you.

One second a Generic Soldier is overwhelming a hireling guardsman- the next, my fist has made lovely acquaintance with his gut. Another comes to my right side- sholder into his solar plexus, then heelstomp his instep, elbow finds his gut- another soldier coming on my right with a live blade, step to where he isn’t and he stabs his comrade through the heart. I bend my knees and catchdrag another into the swing of the live blade- down another one goes in a spray of arterial blood. Spin round and backhand a man upwards on the temple, nearly just- he goes down like a sack of bricks.

Just me and knifey-boy now.

He rushes directly for me, the idiot- turn to the side and pull in against the elbow’s natural bend, his
hand loosens with the snapping of bone- take the strange blade in hand, cut off his scream with a cracking of the hilt against his head.

One breath.

Turn, go back to my spot, hold the blade-onna-stick in loose fingers.

That was, quite possibly, the most egregious waste of my time and skill I’ve ever been through- that wasn’t even a fight, that was…

**A slaughter.**

Thank you, Strike. Fuck, I don’t think I took more than three steps through that whole thing…

Sprinklers, and a smoke cloud? And a shadow- no, a Shadow-

I take one step forwards and throw the blade. I don’t miss.

A little power in my throw is more than enough to knock him back, down, and away- blood pools from his side, where I struck true.

Was that it?

I was expecting-

Drop down, turn to the left, stop, turn to the right. Jump. Backbend, turn to left twist and drop lower.

Catch the blade with sleeves and pull. It clatters to the ground- just a dagger- my attacker darts backwards.

A woman, tall as me, about- black suit, no face. Orange checks up the sides of her legs; orange leftside of face. Yellow pigtails, curly.

“Have we met?”

“No.”

“Are you here for me, or them?”

“You.”

“Ah. I suppose this is an honor thing?”

“Yes.”

“Just you, or…?”

“My partner will be arriving shortly.”
“Shall we wait for them then? I assume you both want me dead…”

“That’s true. I can wait.”

A moment to breathe- a girl walks forwards, stands next to OrangeBlack. She’s in black and silver, comes maybe to my waistline. Lithe. No face either- but where OrangeBlack has a mouthslit, SilverBlack has nothing at all.

“So. You two have names?”

“Ravager. She’s Kid Shiva.”

“Lovely. I’m Red X. It’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise.”

“Are you going to try to kill me now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

I take my jacket off. It won’t help. Slides down my arms and puddles to the floor; Kid Shiva watches me like a hawk.

Ravager moves first- I throw Sleep into her gut and she’s out cold before she hits the ground.

Kid Shiva lasts longer, but all it takes is one slip, and I’ve got reach, stamina, endurance, and sneakiness on her. Also, she was not expecting me to hug her, so she was already relaxed when I pulled her up for a fake throw- and she’s skin and bones.

Welp. Only one thing to do with an angry teenager and a boneskin girl- Training!

Oh, shit- and I’m almost going to be late picking up the kids!

“So, was that it?”

“Yeah- how’d you take them out so fast?”

“Magic.”

Red Arrow is not impressed. Wait a second- is that…? It is! Mercy Graves! She’s really really cool! I wonder if I can get her autograph…?
“Watch these two for a moment, please?”

“Ah, why…?”

“I was going to see if Ms. Graves would give me autograph. Why?”

“You want an autograph from Lex Luthor’s bodyguard?”

“No- I want an autograph from the Hero of Sinai. Please?”

“Um- it would be quite a distraction…”

“That’s true- but, when I get a chance like this again?”

“You could write a letter to Lexcorp and request it.”

“That’s true. And I do need to get back to the House… Eh, some time other. I take them to friend of mine-”

“Not jail?”

“No, Red Arrow- Ravager isn’t more than fourteen, Kid Shiva- she’s badly underfeed. They just kids- they can still grow into beautiful people. Nothing about gaol is beautiful except leaving.”

Aqualad looks at Red Arrow. Red Arrow looks at Aqualad. They both look at me. They look at the tinysassins. Ravager has drooled through her mask; Kid Shiva is shivering.

“They need mercy, care- not gaol.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, but- fine. Go for it.”

“Aqualad?”

“I’ll carry one.”

“Thank you. Carry this one-” and I plop Kid Shiva in his arms. He looks- stunned. I wasn’t kidding. Ravager is a barely felt weight on my back- and the two leaders of Rhelasia- are looking… stunned.

“Red X, was it?”

“Yes sir?”

“How old are you?”

“I am fifteen, sir.”

“And your attackers are…?”

“The one on my back is between twelve and fourteen- the little one is much harder to say because… well, the only meat on her is her organs, if she has all of them.”
“And would you say, Red X, that there’s a difference between North and South Rhelasians?”

“Oh sure, it’s pretty obvious- North Rhelasians are always short, and South Rhelasians are arrogant as fuck. Much better than my countrymen though.”

“And you are from…?”

“I am from Xanghai, Kiao, Mr. Luthor.”

That was not what they were expecting.

“Please excuse me- I have a previous engagement.” I bounce Ravager a little higher on my back, and bow.

They bow back.

And then I walk the fuck out.

“I can’t believe I did a solid for Lex Luthor.”

“Me either.”

“It was not for Lex Luthor- it was for peace.”

“This too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Save them now- instead of fighting later. Nip in bud…?”

“That- makes a lot of sense.”

“I think so too. Aqualad, you okay?”

“Yes. She… is not heavy.”

“No. Not mine, too.”

We stop outside the office building- Red Arrow has something to say.

“I heard what Sportsmaster said- do you really think there’s a mole on your team, feeding him intel?”

“I cannot rule out the possibility- I will investigate, quietly.”

“Not tell them?”

“I do not want the unit unravelling over baseless suspicions- and if there is a mole, I have no wish to
“Tip him, or her, off.”

“Good luck with that- nice seeing you again, Red X.”

“You too, Red Arrow. Cheshire’s okay, but always protect yourself around her, alright?”

“What?”

“The day I no smell come-hither pheromone-ys is day I dead.”

“Pfft.”

He begins to walk away. Aqualad stops him.

“One moment, my friend- you could have easily called Green Arrow, or the League, tonight. Instead, your first instinct was to call the Cave.”

“You’re right. The Team deserves- has, my respect. I’m still getting used to this solo-act stuff, but if the Team needs me, I’ll be there.”

They shake hands.

“Here.”

“What is it?”

“Number for a friend- two, actually. Oracle can get information on just about anything you want to know about- Muse can get almost anything you need. Tell them I sent you, they’ll do it for mostly free.”

“And the not free parts will encompass…?”

“For Muse, probably some reconnissence; Oracle make you go shopping for her. Like, grocery shopping. She shut in.”

It’s hard to shrug with Ravager on my back, but I manage it.

“And you think I need them?”

“No- but remember, I be solo from beginning of my career. Muse is my oldest friends; Oracle knows what she doing. Don’t be scared to ask for help.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“You welcome.”
And then he walks off into the neon-lit night. It’s four-thirty, by my star-reckoning; “Come, we’ll take them to Empress.”

And, once we’ve walked through some lovely countryside, Nightmarket lit by stars and perfumed with nightblooming flowers, we leave the tinysassins with Empress- she’s more than capable of keeping them in line. It’s not like anything either of them has can hurt my Enternal Rival… and then we leave that place too.

I’m kind of hungry though…

“Want to get something to eat? Time runs differently here, and… I’d like to talk to you about some things.”

“You will not be late to pick up Conner and Megan?”

“Nah- it’s only four-thirty. I’m picking them up around seven, seven-thirty.”

“Ah. Well- alright. Where did you have in mind?”

“There’s this dumpling place I know of that’s really good- how’s that sound?”

“That sounds wonderful. What did you want to talk about?”

“Um- well, for one thing… I think it would be a good idea to make a… it’s a magical version of a Zeta Tube, but more limited? I think we should have one to Raven.”

“Hmm. The doctor I stayed with back when I swam through?”

“Yes- we have lots of, um. Tools? In our sanitarium- but, well, I don’t think we actually have a… a doctor on our team? Or a healer?”

“I know some healing magic- but no, we do not have a dedicated healer.”

“Well, Raven is a doctor- in her regular life, she’s a doctor. And she’s actually very powerful- and. I would feel better.”

“You worry that much?”

“Yes- take a left here. Our- last excursion… could have gone very wrong.”

“That is true- but… with the recent news, I hesitate to add a newcomer to the unit-”

“Oh no no- she’s not… She’s one of my Apprentices; she’s not battle-ready, won’t be for a good three or four years, possibly five. I’ve mostly been working on her magical skills and her education- there’s no point in training someone in martial skill before they’re about twelve, and that’s not for another year.”

“So…”

“So- her martial skill is not good enough for me to feel comfortable allowing her to join our
activities- Do you want a table inside, or a booth, or a seat outside?”

“Um- booth, maybe by a window?”

“There’s a really nice booth next to an ornamental pond- they have koi fish…”

“I would like that.”

“Cool. –Um, but, her skills as a healer are almost at the point where… where she can only progress further with experience. So… I think maybe an in-house healer, or possibly an associate? Would be a good thing for us, and her. Tea?”

“Certainly- ah, thank you, I would like the Vegetable Medley, and… perhaps the mushroom puffs.”

“I’ll have the Happy Melody Medley, and some… Oho- Mitten Crab, if you please- cleanfresh, my friend’s not a local.”

“Mitten Crab?”

“National delicacy, very tasty. So… what do you think?”

“I think it is a good idea, and normally I would be all for it, but…”

“Right. Well… consider the source of the news- he’s not on our side, and it only benefits him to cast doubt on each other- foment dissent, you know. For what it’s worth, I’m no traitor.”

“No?”

“No way- if I’m going to give someone a case of the stabs, it’s going to be where they can see me coming.”

“Ah. I too, am no traitor.”

“I believe it- but, um… maybe talk about this with the Bossman? He’s got a plan for just about everything- his advice will be invaluable. Just- um. What about… us?”

“Us? Um- well, I would like it if you were my girlfriend, very much.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah- but… I think I need you as my Second. And if you are my Second… you can’t be my girlfriend.”

“…Are you implying that I wouldn’t be able to keep a professional facade during working hours?”

“I am implying I would not be able to stay professional at all. …You do things to me. Wonderful, distracting things- and you are… you have a knack for. For being prepared in ways I cannot think of, and- I. I would very much like to have you by my side.”

“Well, in that case- perhaps I need only be your… strategist, even though I don’t really… strategize. No, let me finish- Robin is meant to lead one day, yes? Then make him your Acting Second, and me your Reserve- that way, for every day things, he can gain experience and such. However, if you are incapacitated- or worse- he doesn’t get dropped into a commanding position without someone to fall back on.”

“That… that is a very good suggestion- however, I need you in a position of command, because…
“um.”

“Because you can’t date me unless we’re in equal positions of power.”

“Yes.”

“Hm… how about… Den Mother?”

“We already have those-”

“Yes, but they’re on a rotating schedule- I’m at the House almost as often as Megan and Conner, so…”

“What powers would you have- oh wow, they have… they have little furry patches over their claws.”

“I know, it’s adorable right? These are farmed, so the female’s roe should be ripe by now…”

“Mmmph! They are! Wow- they have a very delicate flavor, but- I can see why these are a delicacy. Mmf. Very sweet.”

“Mnhmm. As for the powers of a Den Mother… I think it might be clearing injured or new teammates to go on missions- like, I can choose who’s allowed out, but you chose who goes where. Also… general upkeep and security of the House, making sure the Kitchen, San, and the Family Vehicle are stocked with necessary supplies- hell, I could even schedule chores and punishments and, um, keep an eye on whoever gets a grounding…”

“…Yes, that is… It might not be all that much while the f-family unit is so small, but-”

“We’ll grow,”

“Yes. In that case, Miss Den Mother, would you please be my girlfriend?”

“I would love that, Mister Leader. Tea?”

“Sure- um. Do you… want to go on a date tomorrow?”

“I- yes, I would like that very much. Can I… can I have some of your- um. Do you want to share dumplings?”

“Certainly- I. Um. Here- these taste very nice, sort of crunchy and tart, but also green-”

“Mmm!”

It takes about two hours to get through the meal and back to the Cave- we keep talking, staring into each other’s eyes and blushing, and laughing at nothing; too much so to eat quickly. Also, the food is too delicious to rush. Getting back to the Cave takes just as long- talking and laughing and holding hands takes up more time than I ever thought it could.

I can’t find it in me to mind all that much.

“Want to come with me to pick up Conner and Megan?”
“Ah- I do not have civilian clothing on…”

“You could wear my hoodie- and I have some sandals that shouldn’t annoy your toes.”

“Um- alright. I- sure.”

“Here.”

I forgot that I’m wearing a slightly too small t-shirt- it’s tight over my chest and rises over my hips and navel. I’m not sure why I feel like throwing my shoulders back farther than normal, or why I feel like stretching my arms out behind me- I usually stretch my arms overhead.

Kaldur looks pretty good in my hoodie- he doesn’t fill it out any more than I do, but… somehow, with it on, he looks… he looks like no man I’ve ever seen. With brown Jesus sandals on his feet, he looks… well.

I barely even notice his calvefins.

I definitely notice his thumbs rubbing over my hips- they don’t protrude anymore, thank gods, but his fingers grip into my skin like nothing I’ve ever felt on a living being- rubber, maybe? It’s sort of like a cat’s tongue too, but- no, his tongue is rou-ugher and his hands are so firm a-and-

Gods damn it all to hell, again? Really? I mean, I thought the motor-revving in the showers was a one time thing but… ugh. Shit.

I’m going to get him for that.

We pick up Conner and Megan- I think they had a good time. I had a damn good time- I would have had a great time if there’d been more time, but- I’ll take what I can get.

Sleeping that night is an excersize in frustration and sweat- I keep trying to get myself over the edge, but I can’t quite stop imagining what it would feel like if Kaldur were the one touching me, and it all falls apart from there and I have to start over. I finally resort to a toy; it exhausts me, but it doesn’t do much else. I do manage to fall asleep though.

I Dream, and this is what I Dream.

Brain in a jar with red lines of energy and an Ape who wishes he had the flesh of a man, deep in his darkest heart; brains, always about brains- and a brain clouded with green rage except it should be red but it’s green and Caliborn is screaming in the night, screaming and sobbing because they’ve stolen him away and they’re hurting him- they want something in his blood, something about his blood is worth more to them than his life, steal the marrow of his hip-bone, stole a part of his soul and put him back in his cage; synthetic. Skin? A forest for the beasts; trees tell me more than the animals can, they’re so full of-
I wake up because I have to pee, and it’s morning enough that I don’t feel comfortable going back to bed; I have Sinta’s things to prepare anyway, so… I can’t justify going back to bed. There’s also no guarantee that I’d get any more by going back to sleep- so.

I guess I have some painting to do.

Ruquns and wrap skirts, woven grass sandals and empty chests of cedar wood; jewelry of gold and silver, slender hair-pins and finely filigreed combs, sparkling beaded baubles and rings of jade-stone; swords and knives, cookwear and food, hanging herbs and a kitchen so lovely; a beautiful house and all the things one needs to keep it.

Money, clothes, a horse made of folded paper and pretty threads for a bridle, and a weaving of paper and paint for saddlery; a boat and sails, a forge and jeweler’s bench, all the gems I can draw…

Everything I can think of, several things I had to look up- everything.

Sinta deserves it.

There’s still fruit, on the tree- I know, somehow, even though I haven’t been up there in weeks. I gather up all the painted objects, sheaf of painted paper and awkward shapes; change into loose fire-house pants, a tank top and black leather belt around my waist, thick wool socks up to my knees and combat boots- army green waterproof jacket, drawstring waist and big pockets and closes with buttons, fully reversible, fox-tail and rabbit fur lined in the hood. Mountain tops are cold, and normally I’d wear this the other way out- but… I don’t want to be followed.

Not this morning.

Not where I’m going.

It’s not yet dawn when I get outside the Cave- I’m not entirely sure anyone other than me can use the bolt-hole exit route- and the forested slopes of the mountainside are quiet in the starlit gloom. The moon is waxing, and strongly- there are no clouds to veil her face this night.

I move through the forest with barely a rustle from the other creatures- insects rasp, and a moth flits past my eye- it is green, and beautiful, if strange. An owl cries from some deeper part of the forest; the shrill death-scream of a rabbit marks another meal had by the winged hunter of the night. Deer briefly join my trek- a doe glances at me, then dismisses me from her mind; a buck tosses his horns, and I move on. I’m in no mood for venison or being stabbed.

Over a boulder and down with a soft, silent Jump- and I land with a slightly firmer rustle on the stone held in the boughs of my tree. Apples and peaches tumble from the laden branches- a bird coos and mutters. The shrine stands as it always has- set out the things I made for Sinta and the money for her; all the things she should have… and I’m. Younger than her. So I can show her the respect she
deserves, even if her family-

I arrange the gifts neatly, pray for the safe passage and protection of Sinta’s soul, and burn the offerings into fine white ash and blow them away to Sinta on the Wind.

I eat a peach. It tastes like sunlight.

I eat an apple. It also tastes like sunlight.

The sun starts to rise right about when I remember that I’ve got other things to do- things that aren’t… mourning. Or brooding.

I wonder what the view is like from the summit of this mountain…

There’s two net bags in my pocket; I fill one with ripe peaches, and the other with ripe apples- I’m not sure why, but… the act of gathering the fruit makes me feel. Better?

Or maybe… maybe it just makes me feel alive.

Dropping down the tree-root bound hole with a splash in the water below; the water is cold and clean and has no smell to speak of but the smell of green growing things, the smell of tree roots and cold ripe fruit and the wind is so icy cold and sharp against my face; stone scrubbed bare, and a small, still pool filled with water slightly bitter from windspray off the sea.

There’s something I need to do. something that isn’t eat breakfast, which I’m also doing right now- I’ve been putting it off because, well, I hate to oust locals who haven’t done anything wrong… but. I need the territory.

And even if I didn’t go- I’d end up ousting the local nökken by dint of power disparity alone.

I go inside the Cave and put the fruit away in the kitchen; I think I’ll have an omlette… maybe some toast?

The view from the mountain’s summit is gloriou...
Hm, bacon or no bacon? Pffft, like that’s even a question. I wonder if cinnamon toast is overdoing it though…

The first rays of true dawn strike home on the glass still surface of the bitter, salty, cold pool—almost like it’s made of tears.

And—yes. I was right. Rising from the cold bitter waters comes a man-shaped spirit, all wild black hair strewn with leaves and feathers fallen from birds of the sea, porkpie hat set at a rakish and altogether naughty angle; his eyes are the eyes of hell, burning with a light like from beneath endless depths, smoking at the bottom of the sea. He’s only seeming and the memory of bones—some lost soul playing music for the fish on top of a mountain, forever forgotten and lost in a pool of tears shed by no one.

Also, he’s kind of… see through. In the face. Well, in the everything really.

He raises an instrument— a violin, or possibly a viola, I can never tell from a distance except by the tones… and then the most enticing music emerges.

I want to go closer and dance— but… not even sea-mail would save me from drowning in that pool.

I pick up my erhu and try to play along.

Mmm. Cinnamon-raisin toast with bacon omlette; I didn’t realize it would be so delicious as a sandwich.

Without my realizing it, the nøkken has stopped playing, leaving me to carry the song on— and I have. The beautiful music drifts out, a softly sad sigh in the brightness of the dawn. The nøkken smiles, then vanishes without a ripple or sound beneath the still surface of the pool— and then the stone I skipped on his pond comes skipping back; I catch it with one hand, breaking the music— and the pool is just a spring-fed trickle, what swells with the rains and made bitter from winds off the sea, not still or silent at all. The wind off the sea always bestirs the bitter waters here, and the r-r-reflections are distorted and untrue.

I look at her— myself, in the water.

Yeah, nope. Not doing that again.

There’s nothing in it now, nothing but fish too small for sea-birds to see and algae bloom of murky brown-green; nothing by it but a woman with an erhu, a stone good for skipping, and an unsigned card. I peel it off the stone and sign it— Watery? That would have been useful a few days ago but— I might want to come play here again.

The view, if nothing else, is lovely.

Big the stone that skipped, and a low bench of ripple-striped stone sits next to a pool of unwept tears.
I drop Twin- the dishes are all dried and put away; my boots are, surprisingly, only slightly muddy. The tips of my fingers ache- I’ll have to add in some practice time to my schedule…

The only other thing of note that happens that day is my date with Kaldur- and I’m not in the mood to describe making out with him. There’s only so far I’m willing to go without reliable birth control- I could get some redflower tea, but it makes my magic less human… Maybe there are some Defin side birth control methods; my sex education book was written with emphasis on the mechanics, not the practicalities. Incidentally, I’ve no idea if I can ejaculate or not- some women can, and it’s perfectly normal, but… mostly it just feels really good and clenchy for a bit, and then I need a rest.

A Changeling is said to be a faerie or fae being that is exchanged for a human child, although the term can refer to the child who was taken; in the Undefined Realms, also known as Arcadia, Kowloon, Kao, ect. the term Changeling is also used to refer to the descendants of an original Changeling. Therefore, the formal usage of Changeling can be ambiguous in writings- a prudent researcher will generally attain some sort of genealogy account or record to confirm that the Changeling referred to in text is the same Changeling being researched. There is no real use of the term “changeling” in the common speech for any being that is descended from an Exchangent Changeling; each Realm, therefore, has it’s own unique but non-scholarly term for the Descendante Changeling- ex. Arcadia uses “straylander”, Kowloon uses “crossbred” or “crossbreed” depending on gender, ect.

Usually, a human child will be taken out of curiosity or because they have caught a fairy's eye; sometimes, they are taken as a prank, an act of vengeance, or as a fair trade in return for the fairy’s services. In very rare cases, a human child is not taken for it’s own perceived value, but to protect a faerie that is too young or weak to protect itself; there are two recorded instances of this occurring. Fairies are said to make this exchange if the human child's parents have caused the faerie world a serious offence, or if the fae have been attacked in some way by the parents. Rarely are children taken because the faerie is in love with it, though that is a possibility. Children are sometimes taken and sold to other fairies in a sort of slave trade.

On some occasions instead of a faerie child being left the faeries will leave a doll made of sticks and grass that is glamoured to look like a human child. These are called fetches and usually have a very short life span, however in some stories, these dolls grow up in human society believing they are human and become the great artists of their time. Faeries will also sometimes take people who are older into their realm. Usually they do this if a specific quality about the person catches their eye.

Once in the faerie realm, humans are usually made servants or pets. In some mythology, (Since time passes differently in Arcadia) their faerie master determines how quickly they age. As children they usually just play while the faeries watch. When they are older they may be made a handservant (though they are always well loved), an entertainer, a lover if the fae has become especially fond of them, or an ornament. Sometimes faeries keep humans as pets or as their own children, though this is rarer. Changelings almost never wish to leave their fairy masters and are very loyal; similarly, Descendante Changelings become naturalized to their various Realms, and generally cannot thrive outside them.

The magic of the faerie world changes the nature of the humans taken there so that, even if they do manage to escape, they are no longer fully human; any children they may have will be even less so. The type of change that happens to them depends on who their master was and what they did while
in the faerie realm. They will almost always have a weak to intermediate grasp of faerie magic when they leave, with the ability to glamour and do other things. In regards to Changelings that are raised by humans, a strange effect has been reported, yet remains unmeasured; it is said that a fully Fae child, too weak or young to protect itself, will, in an attempt to endear itself to its adopted parents, force itself to appear, and behave, human. As their human counterparts steadily become more fae, in an attempt to “fit in”, so too will they- and so too will their children. If such a being exists, it is most likely a being of one of the clan’s known for their shape-shifting ability- a likely contender would be one of the Kitsugami of Nihon.

Methods of supposedly repelling faeries included leaving an open pair of iron scissors on the baby's bed, a circle of milk or salt or wood ash around the crib, and a rod of witch-hazel near or tied to the crib. The symptoms of a changeling include unpleasant traits in the body- boils, unnatural colic, unexplainable scratches or bites, bruises that don’t fade- paleness, a green tint, and bad temper or a voracious appetite- for some reason, the two traits never appear in the same being. "Positive" traits include an extensive vocabulary at a young age, which signified the changeling’s intelligence. Children suspected to be changelings were persecuted and shunned, or murdered, and those responsible were rarely blamed or punished.

Fairy rings, being as they are, occupy a prominent place in folklore as the location of gateways into elfin kingdoms, or places where elves gather and dance- and as so often happens, the story becomes true because the story said that was how it happened. According to the folklore, a fairy ring appears when a fairy, pixie, or elf appears. It will disappear without trace in less than five days, but if an observer waits for the elf to return to the ring, he or she may be able to capture it.

In actual fact, fairy rings are usually caused by decaying organic matter, generally a tree stump. Many types of fungi, some deadly, some benign, some hallucinogenic, have symbiotic relationships with tree roots and mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of such fungus. If a huge old tree was cut down, a fairy ring is often found after a period of rain growing from the outermost rim of the decaying root system. Any such ring can last for years as the earth reabsorbs all the nutrients left behind by the tree. As the majority share of fairy rings are, essentially, a tree’s grave, it is considered a slight or action of disrespect against the original dweller of the tree to step within one.

Therefore, while faeries, fairy’s, and various fae beings may choose a fairy ring as a prominent place to gather near, no fae will step inside a fairy ring without express permission, as death is certainly no detriment to proper vengeance. It should be noted- all of the general Fox clan, no matter what their Realm Name is, have a special respect, reverence, and talent in appeasing, working with, and generally sorting out a grave, no matter what being settled their, ere the announcement of their Fact. Should any fae being, Changeling or otherwise, incur the wrath of a dead fae by disrespecting their grave, their only chance at survival may very well rest in the local Foxes.

I’ve never actually described Empress, have I? No, I haven’t- so, okay. To avoid my very biased opinion, I’ll let Max write down her description of… well, her use-name is Danita, but like Maxine prefers Max and I prefer Terry to Theresa, she goes by Dan. Actually, the one person I ever saw call her Danita to her face got their jaw broken- she doesn’t hold back when she’s mad.

I do, but I know I’ll straight up kill someone if I don’t.
*"Anyway, don’t fuck up my journal, Max."*

*"Wow, Ter, you don’t trust me?"*

*"No. Where’s the syrup?"*

*"Hehehe- Which syrup?"*

*"The coconut one, the one that kind of tastes like butter…?"*

*"Second shelf."*

*"Thank you."*

*"What am I doing again?"*

*"Describing Da- Empress."*

*"And you can’t do that because…?"

*"My opinion is biased, and not in her favor; I want an accurate record, just in case- nevermind."*

*"Is something coming? …Terry?"

*"Would you just do it?"

*"Don’t Get Vocal With Me, Terry- I’m doing it already. I just get a little worried when you say stuff like that- it’s like you’re expecting some sort of calamity or something.”*

*"Look, if your not going to-"

*"Give me the journal then."*

So. Since Terry’s being a bigger drama-rama-lama squidoo, I mean, bigger than normal- I know she’s a Seer and all, but still, holy gods that one can make a mountain out of a molehill.

Where was I? Oh yes, Dan- alrighty.

To start with-

Now, Terry might come back and scratch this out, but she and Dan are actually painfully similar, with some glaring differences. Dan has larger hips and breasts, but they’re both an even 200 centimeters long, with thick black hair and fucked up eyes; Terry has mis-matched eyes, one of ‘em’s like looking into a moon-less night and the other’s a blue summer sky. Dan, on the other hand, has these fucked up weird-ass hazel-blood concoction going on in her irises- sometimes it looks like her eyes are made of finely beaten gold, and sometimes her eyes look like they’ve been splattered over with blood and dirt; she says that her eyes are actually hazel colored, but I’ve never seen no fleck of green in those peepers, so I say bullshit.

Then again, as long as I’ve known her, which is nowhere near as long as Ter, I’ve never actually
seen Dan smile a happy smile- I’ve seen feral grins, grimaces, smirks- but never an abrupt expression of joy expressed in tooth-and-eye curling.

Right, hair-

Terry talks a lot of shit about her hair, how she can never get it cut right, maybe how only one style looks good on her, but that’s shit, as I wrote above. Terry has straight up perfect hair; I shit you not, even when I first met her and her hair was literally a windblown mess, it was like, an artful windblown mess. I’ve also seen her pull her blackout-hood off and scruff her fingers through her hair; I don’t know what arcane magics or lotion-potion hair-goos she spreads onto that mop of red-glowing brown, or maybe it’s just genetics fucking with us all… the point is, is that she has gods-blessed prefect fucking hair. Genetic freak.

Dan does not have perfect hair- I know for a fact that she spends a good hour or two working on her hair; I also know that the only hairstyle that’s ever looked good on her is a fluffed up pompadour-style undercut. Some people are not meant for corkscrew curls- Dan is one of those people.

The last, most important distinction, I guess, has to do with sex.

Terry’s pretty damn relaxed about sex- she’s clear about her boundaries, is willing to try new things, and as far as I can tell from the Boss’ records, is an attentive and enthusiastic lover. Dan is very, very inhibited- and I know that the only reason Terry’s never tried to fluster her with sexualized banter is because Terry doesn’t actually consider sex something that would ever fluster anyone. Dan, however, would about pass out if she ever had to have a conversation about sex with anyone, much less be as casual as Terry is about it. I, myself, consider it a lovely pastime, but… people usually get way too attached after, and that’s just not how that works for me.

Physically, Terry’s got less fat and a higher pain tolerance; Dan’s got more fat and a lower pain tolerance. Dan’s also got bigger tits, rounder cheeks- all around, she’s nicer to hug. Terry’s warmer though.

And… I guess the only other thing of note is the fact that Dan uses a spear and can teleport… yeah, that’s it.

I don’t know why Terry couldn’t write all this out herself; I don’t know why she writes in this journal. Maybe it’s a Seer thing to be all cryptic and weird; although, why anyone has to write down everything they do, every day, is beyond me entirely.

Meh, whatever.
Bountyballer’s Market to be held at ONE HOUR PAST THE SUNSET on the NINTH of SEPTEMBER, also known as the EIGHTH MOON-ULAR MONTH.

Be advised that all sales are FINAL AND COMPLETE; Returns, while ALLOWED, are DISCOURAGED.

ALL TEAMS PARTICIPATING IN THE TOURNAMENT AT YEAR’S START ARE DUTY-BOUND TO ATTEND.

ALL TEAMS MUST PRODUCE THEIR SPONSER AT THIS TIME; NO EXCEPTIONS.

-The Managerials

Jesus I don’t even know why I let her write in this thing, I mean- fuck, I could have… never mind. Max is Max- and Captain’s always been a bit screwy anyway. Blar.

You see that thing? Doesn't match the rest of the page, has a sticky spot where the glue smeared- that there’s why I was even over at Max’s- well, that and Max has the best pancake syrup this side of the Pacific…

And that’s also why I needed an unbiased description of Empress.

I’m not sure how to explain it- just… well. Cassandra. Cassandra was a seer, in some circles, the Seer, and she’s famous for being… well. She’s famous for being not believed. And right.

Every time.

No one ever really comes out and says that both of these things are the result of a curse- and I’m not sure where, exactly, or who- but it’s there.

Over me.

And every descendant of Cassandra- which, in this day and age, is every Seer of some power- holds the same curse as Cassandra. Empress is going to do something important- but she won’t be able to if there’s no accurate record of her. Somewhere.

I can’t be the one to write it- I know that much. That, more than anything, is why I let Oracle Write the Record of the Empress.
Anyway. Today, we have to convince a guy named John Constantine to sponsor our Bball team. This will be interesting in so many ways.

But first, time for some history, or something like it- I’ve never been too clear on just which parts of Grandma Dumpling’s stories are true and which are heavily embellished; I know, of course, that Aunt Landlady isn’t to be trusted absolutely under any circumstances, barring immediate and imminent death. The point being, Grandma Dumpling is old. Very, very old. She’s not Blade old, but she’s old.

She’s old enough to have heard about the Laughing Magicians- not from a footnote in a dusty tome, like I did, but as a conversation between, as she recalls, her mother and one of her aunts, about how one of their line- they being the Laughing Magicians- had gotten one over on the Jade Emperor. Again.

It was therefore decided that the Laughing Magicians had to be… winnowed, is the phrase my Grandma chose to use. In practice, it meant that any of that illustrious, gods-tricking line, was declared open season when inside our territories- and by our, I mean the ancestral Fox territories. Not out of a sense of nationalistic pride, but out of a more familial pride- I suppose the clan elders couldn’t deal with the fact that some foreign nobodies- well, not nobodies- had gotten one over their ancient enemy and oppressor, where all their efforts had ultimately failed.

I- wait, I have- shit, my actual territory is the Five Palaces, and their lands- gods, I have a Court now too, don’t I…

Anyway. Not the point.

The point of it is that the Laughing Magicians fell out of history, due to most of them becoming suddenly and very permanently dead. At least, the fell out of our histories, those being the histories of Celestial Kiaom- I can’t say much about the histories of Arcadia, nor Tiffan, nor the lands nearer to the east and south- I haven’t studied them as extensively. What I do know is this: John Constantine is one of the last of that line- not the very last, but certainly the last who’s shown any sort of mystical skill in several centuries.

The reason my Grandma and Aunt are owed by him is two-fold.

Firstly, it is due to the influence of my Aunt that Mr. Constantine is even alive, for several reasons- Foxes, generally speaking, aren’t particularly powerful, but they can hold a serious grudge; there are plenty among the clan who would have happily hunted Mr. Constantine down and eaten his liver, just to say that they had taken out the last remnant of that clan that had unknowingly insulted us so long ago. Also, due to immigration and various diasporas, certain… undesirable elements from Celestial Kiaom have managed to go to places they normally would have never been able to go. Because my Aunt insists on treating all her customers fairly, and generally has this trait, sometimes literally, tattooed onto her apprentices skulls, Mr. Constantine is also able to- as far as I know- procure ingredients and items that would be required to… dissuade transplanted undesirable Celestial Kiaom elements from… causing their usual brand of mischief.

Secondly, my Grandma has the man’s childhood innocence and vulnerability in a box- I, personally, can live without knowing how she got her hands on it. She gave it to me with a wink and a nudge when I was last there with Kaldur, and I’m pretty sure the only reason she didn’t tease me about him was because- nevermind.

The point is, I’m going to be there to do some gentle reminding and not-so-gentle threatening- the
two most important components of a successful round of convincing, the others being a legitimate reason to comply and some very immediate consequences if you don’t.

Max is going to be there as the legitimate reason… and Empre- Dan.

Dan’s going as the consequences.

Oh, joy.

I’ve actually been having a second breakfast at Max’s- she might be a terrible shut-in, but that’s only because she’s from the days when Earth wasn’t… inhabited. By anyone other than the Armies, I mean.

Dan shows up right about when I find the syrup- they’re wearing their usual getup of a jumpsuit, old-fashioned army tactical belt, and raggedly oversized flannel. I must admit, their favoring of workboots is something I can get behind- otherwise, I am struck, as I usually am, by their gods-awful fashion sense.

Still. The three of us- Oracle, Red X, and Empress- make up the commanding trio of the Kowloon Team. And, in our search for a sponsor, Mr. Constantine was who we decided would be best pick. Now, all that’s left is to tell him of that fact.

And also not be horribly killed in doing so. That would be a wonderful bonus.

I’ve got my erhu, a satchel with a full writing kit, a change of clothes, and an extra pair of shoes, just in case; I have my best mix tapes, three bottles of powerful alcohol, a first aid kit, some smoke bombs, some stink bombs, quality rope, a grappling iron, a pry-bar, and two packs of apple-flavor chewing gum. I didn’t know that they made gum in apple-flavor, but by the gods I know now, and I’m never going to go anywhere without some.

I’m wearing what I started the day in- firehouse pants, tank top, army green hooded jacket with the fur-lining, black leather belt, combat boots- a leather satchel is the only addition. As I never go anywhere without my Blades, I usually don’t feel it worth mentioning I have them with me too- the only reason I did today is that I nearly didn’t take a boot knife for just that reason. I also have a short sword with me, short enough that it’s not immediately noticeable under the bulk of the satchel on my back- and yes, of course I can unsheathe it easily.

Be stupid to take it, if I couldn’t…

The box with Mr. Constantine’s childish impulses- which I suppose he never actually grew out of, like a normal person- is made out of thick cardboard, two colors; a box for jewelry to come home from the store in. It’s held closed with little more than a rubber-band; there’s a faded, nearly scratched away sticker on it, some kind of label. It smells like sugar and alcohol and very faintly of cigarette smoke… I suppose it’s alright, for a box with a bit of someone’s soul in it. I’ve seen weirder receptacles, and I’ve smelt much, much worse.

Empress is wearing a pair of miserably distressed Dr. Marten’s, with the legs of a pair of oversized grey jumpsuit stuffed haphazardly into them; over their jumpsuit is an olive drab tactical belt, each of the visible pockets stuffed with some variety of items I don’t care to name- they’re wearing a ragged blue plaid flannel shirt like a jacket, and that thing is ragged- there are what looks like moth-holes in
the sleeves, as well as near the hem—mostly in the front though. Odd. Their backpack is something like one of the first ones I had— a pangolin-style affair made out of sleek technical fabric I don’t immediately know the name of; I can tell by looking that it isn’t cotton, nor wool, nor silk, nor any of the other natural fabrics I can think of that will do what their backpack is doing.

And in their hand, loosely held but shining, is a sta—spear. Very definitely a spear. Staffs generally don’t have quite that much… obvious lethality. About them. Or a blade bigger than my forearm. S’really more like a polearm… Their helm, as usual, is an inscrutable slate of reflecting goggles and metallic grille where the mouth probably is.

I wouldn’t know. I have my doubts about whether or not Empress is actually alive, sometimes.

Ma-Oracle is wearing… honestly, the most I can say about it without being catty-cattier than normal, I mean— is that it’s a pair of shorts and a shirt. There are also some shoes. They cover her feet, and her ankles. And her calves. Thank god they stop there.

I just—no. I don’t think I can go any farther. There are some things even my judicious—look, okay. I can’t make clashing neons anything other than clashing neons. It’s just not within my skills to make it sound like anything other than horrifying and an almost lethal attack on the eyes.

I’m both happy and sad to say that I have no idea what weapons she’s carrying—happy because I know her sword and shield would attract too much attention from… too many places, and sad because I might have. A thing. For weapons.

No, really?

Hush, Strike.

So. I’ve never actually written it down anywhere— I’ve known, of course, but—never actually committed this knowledge to paper. Er, data. Foxes… don’t really. Write things down.

It’s… troublesome.

Every Fox, be they crossbred, like me, or full blood, like my father, has a specific skill that they excel in above all others; there are a distinct set of skills Foxes have—evasion, persuasion, transformation, disguise; they can use these skills in unique ways, and in strange combinations.

For example, I never, ever saw my father dressed in anything less than a perfect outfit— not even when it was pouring rain or I’d accidentally vomited on him after spinning in circles too much during a meeting I wasn’t allowed into. Never.

I, myself, can put my face-paints on without a mirror or web-camera of any kind, and have them come out practically perfect every time; it used to be that I could only fit my makeup into my pockets, no matter what I was choosing to use as makeup, but in recent years I’ve been able to put nearly anything into my pockets, and pull it out at a later time. I can still apply my face-paint perfectly, of course—any sort of skill, if learned and used often enough, doesn’t go away easily.

I do sometimes wonder if the amount of makeup I put onto my skin, especially around my eyes, isn’t somehow bad for me—then again, I make just about everything in my kit, so it’s not like I don’t know what I’m putting on my face…
Empress is one of the only people whom I know personally-as a person, and as a Fox of some kind. I’m not sure if they’re a crossbred, but then again-no, they can’t be a full Fox, they wouldn’t deign to associate so openly with me. They probably are a crossbred-I just.

So. My specialty is my pockets—or, Pockets, I suppose. Empress’s specialty is something they call Traveling, though I’m not sure why. I’ve never actually been along for one of their Travels, but Callie has—and in her words:

“Imagine being clamped down on—like, it feels like a kitten being carried by it’s dam looks, only the kitten’s a full-grown cat and it’s dam’s it’s owner giving it whatfor. Now, this sensation of—of being told whatfor, right about like a set of fingers and the base of someone’s palm to the loose flesh at the back of your neck, that feeling is pulling like… like a brush through a particularly stubborn mass of tangles. And then it pulls through. That’s what one of Empress’s Travels feels like—the first time, at least. And, just like a brush through unruly and stubborn hair, the more often you do it, the less it feels so… yeah.”

In my words? Callie knows what she’s talking about—the first Travel is pretty—owch—the second, then third, pretty iffy on the pain-o-meter. By the time we’re Traveling through the far Eastern reaches of Russia, I only notice we’ve been Traveling when we stop. Because we’re in London.

Oracle takes the lead, her clothing almost drowning out her instructions.

“Stay close, and Empress, at least pretend you like to talk; people who like to talk are practiced in speaking up at judicious and prudent m-moments, and generally speaking, don’t give away i-important information unless they want to.”

“So I’d best stay silent then? Give then occasional menacing look and violent stare?”

“I th-think that will be for the best, y-yes. As for you, Red X, I need you to tone down your general reaction to s-s-stupidity and r-rudeness; the person we’ll be meeting, according to my superiors, is a real asshole.”

“Thanks for the advanced warning; I’ll try not to shave more than a few hours off his lifespan. No promises though.”

“So long as he doesn’t die before the end of the Bball Tourney, I don’t care if he shit’s hisself for the next year every time he smells vanilla. Take a left here.”

I’ve just realized that Empress was either raised in a particularly British part of town, or is from New Zealand or possibly Australia—but no, Raven and Jinx’s accents are a bit more… relaxed. More than Empress’, I mean. I’m not entirely sure why I’m so sure Empress’ accent is from a very British part
of the world…

And it’s raining. The very reason I don’t stay in Kowloon during the summer, and of course, it’s here. Making me jumpier than usual.

Feels nice, but- so does, I imagine, having sex. And sex comes with that most virulent of all STD’s-unplanned pregnancy.

The point is, is that there’s always a danger in the nicest parts of life- and unlike our soon-to-be Bountyball sponsor, I had to learn that particular lesson through trial, error, and repetition; I wasn’t lucky, nor powerful enough to simply put my innocence and gullibility into a cardboard box.

I… might be a little. Jealous. Just a bit.

“Lemme get somethin’ straight- I’m not actually s’possed to touch this guy, this- Constantinople?”

“Constantine-”

“Right, whatever. I’m not actually supposed to give him a nasty case’a the stabs, right? I mean, X is s’possed to scare him shitless, should ‘e not accept our lovely and oh so generous offer- I’m just trying t’ clarify that I, in fact, am not supposed to perforate his vital an’ not so vital self should negotiations break down.”

“L-l-like I might a said earlier- or I might not’ve, s-s-see’n how we’re all trudgin’ through this rain; I don’t care what we three have to put our erstwhile sponsor through to secure his a-a-agreement. So long as he manages to live through the entirety of the Tourney- well. I i-i-imagine he can get by with one kidney, should he have to.”

“I always forget how absolutely ruthless you are, Captain.”

“Someone on this team h-has to be- and to be fair, I picked you two as my Subs for the specific reason of being the only two I know of who can take me in a fight.”

“If y’ say so, Boss. S’that it?”

In fact, it was. It being, of course, the domicile- oh sweet Jesus, I’m doing it again. House. The house, home, or possibly dwelling, of one John Constantine. It’s a brownstone building- I think. It’s hard to tell. The general “Go Away” spells coating the building make the simple act of deciding what kind of building it is a bit… hazy. Thankfully, human mystics always focus on hiding things from people’s sight, not their noses. And all canids- even crossbreds, like Empress and me- have exceptional senses, especially compared to human senses. And it’s not like I can’t smell the door, even if it’s a bit fuzzy-looking around the edges; more people have gone in and out of it than on any other stretch of wall- the scent of it is unmistakeable.

Oracle, of course, doesn’t actually need to use a door or her nose to find who we’re looking for- and it’s not like we’re on a time limit, or anything. Well, technically, yes, we’re on a timelimit- but we won’t miss it. If it comes down to it, I’ll make sure of that.

Oracle glances at me- and I know exactly what she needs. I hand her the cardboard box, bound with a near-crumbling rubberband and a sticker that’s more scraped off than pasted on; she takes the box with the small bit of Mr. Constantine’s soul in it, grins with all of her teeth, and very gently touches
the hazed out door.

It opens without a sound.

Oracle is… well, Empress and I are crossbreds, so, naturally, we have the Fox skills that make it least likely for humans to either kill us on sight or catch us when our deceptions are caught; we can move silently in forest or city, through glade and grassland, hide our very souls from detection, if the need should arise. Oracle cannot do what Empress and I do on instinct. Then again, considering just who Oracle’s superiors are, it’s quite likely that she just… doesn’t need to.

I asked her about it, once. To paraphrase her stuttering, muddled reply- there are seven on her level of operation, and countless others above her. Her group of seven works mostly in the field, and of them, three are very well known to the general public, with a fourth on permanent standby- because apparently there was an internal schism? Or something? And it resulted in some sort of civil war, or nearly that- and the fourth in her group is on standby to sound the alarm on word of her Boss.

Always good to have a sentry on alert, I suppose…

Another, the fifth of her group, was tasked with a specific and near-endless duty- well, more or less, but she wouldn’t tell me what that duty was, saying only that “I’d m-m-meet Azzy again eventually.” She also told me that the fifth of her group hadn’t actually taken up their duty until sometime after the Schism had settled down- long after she was sealed inside the Ward.

Finally, the seventh, and most powerful of her group is the personal assistant to her Boss- and, being a private sort, and the eldest, Oracle knows very little about them- only that they’re the most loyal to her Boss of all her coworkers, the ones she knows personally aside.

All this isn’t actually important- excepting the fact that because Oracle is what she is, she can find the rest of the soul that the piece of soul in our flimsy cardboard box belongs to- or, in this case, the place where the soul belongs. Seeing as, according to my scrying, the majority of the soul of Mr. Constantine is in hell, this skill is highly useful for finding our soon to be sponsor. And what a find it is- a wiry yellow haired man, muscled well enough to look after himself in generally dangerous situations; my nose itches with the stink of residual magic and spell leavings.

The apartment Oracle tapped the door open to is a one room dive- a gunk encrusted kitchenette with a sink full of dishes and scummy water; ashtrays filled with cigarette ash and butts, dirty clothing and the crumbs of who knows what ground into the carpeted floor; the only other things are a sunken and shrunken easy chair and a mattress with a man on it. Buzzing lights cast everything in the worst possible light- every wrinkled scar and muscle group lit with unfortunate luminescence. I don’t think this man is wearing clothing- thankfully, his ratty bedsheets covers his… let’s call it bits. I don’t want to think about what Kaldur’s got in his pant’s and what’s between this man’s leg- shifuck gods be blessed fuuuck!

I thought about it.

Kaldur’s much cuter.

There is absolutely no doubt about that.

I’m not sure what, exactly wakes the man- John Constantine- up; I just know that Oracle handed the
box with the bit of his soul in it back to me, and settles into her most relaxed looking stance, which isn’t actually relaxed by any means. And then she sort of- everyone I know with any sort of power behind them, be it their own or granted to them by some higher power, has this sort of… it’s not an aura. Auras and whatever this is are distinctly different- but they can exude a sort of… something. A something that makes other people sit up and take note.

When Oracle exudes, it makes every hair on the back of my head stand straight out from the skin- Empress starts shifting nervously from foot to foot.

And Mr. John Constantine sits bolt upright, eyes so wide I almost fear they’ll pop out of his head. Then, he registers just what woke him up- and I swear to god, I’ve felt like that before.

Apparently, Mr. Constantine is a man I can sympathize with.

“Ah, fuck me- look, I thought I was already done with you people-”

“Mr. Constantine, whatever gave you that idea?”

“I had a talk with yer boss specifically for that purpose.”

“Yep. And the deal made from that talk s-still stands- I’m here on other business.”

“What’s that?”

“We- that is, my associates and myself- would be pleased if you would sponsor our sport team.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

“Ah, n-no, no I’m not- I don’t make a habit of consorting with married men. Or men who’ve just returned from India.”

“Who told-”

“It’s not like y’ don’ smell like her, sir.”

“They don’t make, sell, trade that incense outside of India- I can say which part of India, if you want.”

“No- no. Why’re you here, again?”

“As I said b-b-before, we want you t-to sponsor our sport team.”

“And if I say no?”

“I guess I have to give this back, if you say no. Then, we ask again, and you not say no again. If you want.”

“That- how did you get that?!?!?”

“You the one who be leaving bits of you soul in boxes, then leaving it who knows where- what you think happen to it? You lucky we have morals- you lucky we want you consent.”

“And if y’ say yes, I’m sure I c’n leave these wif you- s’not every day I have a whole, fresh carton of Silk Cuts on me, an’ a lighter I’m willin’ t’part wid. Again, ‘s your choice completely.”
“So then, m-m-Mister Constantine- your choice is say no, in which case Red X will break that box open, forcibly returning your soul to you- which would, incidentally, make my boss’ deal with you null and void, as the only reason you were able to do what you did, live through what you did and survive with most of yourself intact is that your soul was already split into two pieces-”

“Wha-”

“Like I say before- you be sliced a bit of you soul out, and you be leaving it in cardboard box; I no surprise you not miss it goneness- what you cut out was the part that would notice itself being gone. Lucky, that.”

“An’, a’course, if that piece hadn’t been sliced away, all the other li’l slices what happened would’a been quite a sight worse- but the only thing that’s really happened is that yer a sodding arsehole what ain’t worth trusting. And damned bad-lucky.”

“And that, of course, w-wouldn’t have been possible at all if you’d left your soul as it was- d-did you honestly think we didn’t keep track of that sort of thing? Or that a dead soul- a soul that never really lived, s-saving the brief moments within the womb, which don’t count for much of anything- to a living soul for so long without m-mitigating circumstances? For s-someone as smart as you, you can be astoundingly m-moronic.”

“So… you’re saying that my life- every shitty turn, every wretched- all of it. Was my fault? Because I did something… I don’t even remember? Is that it?”

“Oh, no. Certainly you did something you don’t remember, and that certainly was the cause- but cutting yourself to ribbons wasn’t the start of it. You know what the start of it was.”

“I know why you did it. It wasn’t fair, really; everything all set, ready to go… except he’d already gone to the cackling and the pair of you not even in the open air yet. It wasn’t supposed to be like that, of course, but that’s how it went. And so, you had to be the good one. And I rather doubt you’ll ever forgive him for it.”

“I don’t- who the fuck are you three?”

“M-my apologies. I am Oracle; this is Red X, and the Empress. A-and I ask again- will you, John Constantine, sponsor our sport team?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Oh yes. You choice is me break open this box and throw your life into more shit than usual-”

“-at w-which point we’ll almost certainly get your agreement, simply out of a c-c-certain regard for your own safety-”

“-Or ye’ can say yes, take these cig’s, let us clean this shithole a’ya’s, an’ come with us for a necessary meetin’ between our team an’ the other teams who’ll be participating in our sportin’ event. Formalities an’ shit like that. Y’know. Yer choice.”

“…Really Silk Cut’s?”

“As I live ‘n’ breathe.”

“Fuck. Fine.”

“L-lovely. Red X, would you be so k-k-kind as to put Mr. Constantine’s sliver of soul into your p-
pocket, for safety?”

“Yes, okay.”

And just like that, our Bountyball team has a sponsor who’s actually worth something. Not much, all things considered- but worth something.

Cleaning that hellhole takes a remarkably short amount of time- but with a clean suit on, half a pack of vile cancer sticks in him, two cups of coffee, and three plates of red-brown coconut curry with chunks of stewed lamb in his stomach, Mr. Constantine is only a semi-cooperative foul-mouthed asshole, rather than an uncooperative confused foul-mouthed asshole. Any improvement, however slight, is to be savored.

By sundown, I’m holding onto my temper with my teeth, Empress is brushing her hair for the third time in an hour, and Oracle is drinking an angrily frothing that I didn’t see her buy and have absolutely no desire to take a sip of- anything that comes in a handcarved mug with a frilly umbrella, a wedge of exotic fruit, a candy-striped straw, and the occasional booming, echoing voice solemnly intoning “Should anyone be so foolish as to drink of me, they will experience a hangover so excruciating, they will seek out death itself.”

No drink in a handcarved mug with a frilly umbrella and a wedge of exotic fruit that intones ominously about the hangover that will come of being drunk is worth it. Not to me, at least.

Maybe a sip would be worth it- no no no.

We’re there, anyway.

I’ve never actually seen the entire team together before- and this would not be the first time for it; I rather doubted I actually would see the entire team together until Captain actually had a full roster and a space to practice in.

So… probably not until our first Matchup.

Thankfully, the Bountyballer’s Market (actually a council) only needs the Commanders of a Team and a Sponsor- so Oracle, Empress, me, and Mr. Constantine are all that’s required to show. Thank god, I was about to swipe a sip of Oracle’s very stiff and lively drink in self defense. At meetings end, I’m sure we’ll be splitting up, never to see each other again- but I’m wrong.

So very wrong.

“Empress, Red X- you two can make it back to the New World on your own. I’ll take Mr. Constantine back to his place- I have business to attend to there anyway. Red X, the reason Empress keeps picking fights w-with you is because she wants to be your friend. Empress, the reason Red X keeps fighting like you’re a serious threat to her is because she was raised by humans, and human fights that get as physical as you like to are always serious. Take the trip back to work stuff out. Or e-e-else.”

And then I’m stuck with Dan for the entirety of the trip back. It’s actually… horrifyingly awkward. But also… not all that terrible. I mean… having my lack of knowledge about Foxes being rubbed into my face like that is not my idea of fun, but if being my friend is all Emp- Dan wants, I can do that. It actually makes the whole thing between us, whatever it is, make much more sense.
“So, uh- you’re a crossbred like me?”

“Oh! Um- yeah, that’s ah. Yeah. I am. You- were you really raised by humans?”

“Yes, I was. If I had known that you were trying to- play fight, I guess?- I’d of… reciprocated, I guess.”

“Um- well. Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Hn. So, uh- s-since that’s, ah, cleared up… d’you want to spar sometime?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Cool.”

And that’s about it between us- we get back to the America’s a little after sunset, and we part ways somewhere in the northern forests of the northern continent; I don’t stop running until I get back to my deen Mountain. Home.

It’s good to be home.

It’s good to take a shower after a hard day’s work- it’s even better to put on clean clothes and settle down on the couch with a good thick esoteric tome of arcane knowledge that I haven’t read yet. Mmm.

And when Kaldur sits down next to me and sighs, I feel a certain giddy thrill dance up through my naughty bits and go directly to my brain.

“What are you reading?”

“The Delicate and Expressive Language of Flowers, as they refer to various levels of potency, potions, unguents, salves, creams, poltices, and cures.”

“Will you read it aloud for me?”

“I- alright.”

As I read, Kaldur’s hand slowly smoothes over my calf, rubbing out tangles and knots I didn’t realize were there- my voice hitches and soft sighs escape me when he rubs out a particularly painful knot in my calf. When he starts to roll and massage my ankle and the heel of my foot, I can barely focus on the words written on the page- and when he stops, I snap out of my blissful stupor.

“You stopped reading aloud. Is something wrong?”

I resume reading; he switches legs. I didn’t know that I could moan a full half octave due to pure relaxation- and then he starts to touch my feet. The sensations that come up from inside of me as he rubs my feet are…

Every culture has some part of the body that they consider very very sexual- Americans, particularly in the North, have a fascination for female breasts. Kiaom also has a body part that makes it go glazed in the eyes and drippy in unfortunate and obvious places- that part is the foot. Er, feet.

It has been for centuries.

I’m… not entirely sure how it works, to be honest- but, well. There are things that are sort of… hardwired into me, because of me being a crossbred- culture dies very hard, or not at all. A certain… love of a certain height range, by necessity, displays a certain… desire, or the very least, an acceptance of it.

All this to say… well, I’ve gotten a pedicure before. It felt, well, much more impersonal but also very- relaxing is what I called it then, but also very very enjoyable. This is… squirmingly delicious. I’ve actually wiggled out of my seat and very nearly into his lap; my book is neatly shut on the floor and I’m almost bent double with pleasure. Kaldur’s eyes are wide and a smile is spreading over his face, a flash of surprised and delighted white. And then he kisses me directly on the mouth- or I think he meant to, except he missed and pressed a warm pair of lips and a sudden shock of teeth directly to the soft pale flesh of my neck. He doesn’t bite down, or even keep kissing me- and I can’t help the whimper when he pulls away.

He goes very still, and then, tentatively, presses his lips back into the softness of my neck- I lean, or perhaps lift, into the warmth of Kaldur’s mouth and he kisses me nearer to the fluttering pulse on my throat and I almost go perfectly boneless, softly sighing in his arms and he just holds me up and occasionally nips at me. Every nip and nibble makes me moan deep in my throat, squirm a little more into- I’m actually on his lap now, goodness gracious me. I- um. Hmm. It feels like he’s as excited as I am; my hands slowly unclench from the couch cushions and find his waist and the trembling of his muscles excites me more. I drag my fingers over what I can feel beneath his ever-present and distinctly annoying clothing.

Kaldur must have noticed something of my frustration, because he picks me up and gently shifts our positions- instead of sitting with my back to him, I’ve been turned completely around. Although my stomach starts to tapdance at the thought of doing it long after the fact, my legs are wrapped around his waist and I’m grinding down on him and it’s very nice to be able to kiss him back without cutting off access to my neck and gods that feels nice and I really love to kiss his face and sweet merciful gods if he doesn’t take my clothing off in exactly no seconds I’m going to- The interruption of a throat being growled clear is enough to make Kaldur- gently, but quickly- foist me into my original couch corner, and shove himself to the other end of the bench seat.

It’s- actually, I can’t see enough to tell. I think… I think my glasses are too fogged? I’ll just wipe them- oh for fuck’s sake, did Aquaman and Batman really need to be here right now? Really?

And why in the name of all that is sacred is Aquaman actually laughing right now? This is not a time for laughter! I was nearly about to get physical! God’s dammit!
“Aqualad. You called us and said that you needed to talk…?”

“A-ah. Yes, My King. I’ll just-”

“Wait!”

Everyone’s looking at me fuck fuck fuck- no! Must not faint! Must wipe Kaldur’s face!

“Hold still, yes-”

“But-”

“No, is unprofessional. You be holding still now, yes?”

“Yes…”

“It no like I will not ever be giving you more, Kaldur.”

That is quite possibly the fastest turnaround from sad and lonely to giddy and adorable I’ve ever seen on a man; I wonder how many times I can get him to smile like that in one day.

Ah gods I forgot they were there- must not wibble too hard. Mustn’t. D-dammit… he’s really cute. Like, if this were an anime- and I thank the gods it’s not, but if it were- I’m pretty sure my backgroundings would have just turned to pastels and flowers and sparkling effects. Ah, shit, my glasses are fogged up again. Lousy goddamn glass, providing a handy place for water to condense under a temperature differential.

Ugh. Today was utter crap- maybe tomorrow will be better.

Sometimes, I wonder why I even bother. I mean- I can handle being y-yelled at, and I can handle overly smug apes- but if there’s one thing in life I cannot deal with just like that, it’s a goddamn dog in my den in my house. Even if that dog’s actually a wolf.

Fucking dogs.
And wasn’t That a dainty dish to Set before the King?

Chapter Summary

Protip: Deletion of your paragraph after you write it is literally the worst way to write. Also, D&D might be a game of fiends and devils but hot damn if it don't get them creative juices flowing boy howdy I tell you what. You might want to get your hands on the official timeline. Maybe.

So, yeah. Dogs. I don’t like them- I’ve yet to meet a Fox that does. There might be a dog somewhere that’s nice- I haven’t met them.

Now, before I get jumped all over by- well, whomever’s reading this, in the distant future… providing I’ve managed to- nevermind! The point is that before I get in trouble with a future historian who’s about to go on a whining fit about “Historical Innacuracy”, may I refer you to my friend, the late Sinta?

Yes, you remember her?

Now, let me make three things very clear- firstly, in my humble and studied opinion, the only good thing about gaol is leaving. Secondly, there’s something off about how people use “different” as a pejorative or a praise-all, as different denotes neither bad nor good; it certainly means “not the same” but being not the same is not the same as being wrong. And, thirdly, there was a real Walrus, and his poem was much more morbid than most people care to remember.

As I recall it-

“Sword and crown are worthless here, for I invite everybody to dance;
Laboreres, lawyers, church and gown- all will make their little prance.
This life is full of random deaths; and heaps of grief and shame;
so few are soothed by 'accident'- you want someone to blame.
Fire, plague and strange disease; drowned, murdered, or, if you please- a long fall down the basement stairs; none are expected, and no-one cares.

I often must work very hard; sweat running down my skin.
After the dance, I then must rest; and then the eating can begin.”
Horrible creature.

So, no, in fact, I’m not going to go over Miss Martian’s and Superboy’s undercover mission at Belle Reve gaol- I can barely think about- just. No.

If you want to know about it that badly, I’m quite sure you can find another source- seeing as you found this one.

Zhenniao or sometimes translated as Zhen or Poisonfeather Birds, are poisonous birds referenced in many Kiaom myths, annals and poetry.

In *Guo Pu's commentaries of the Shanhaijing*, he describes this bird as having a purple abdomen and green tipped feathers with a long neck and a scarlet beak. Another description of the Zhen however appears in the Song Dynasty dictionary Piya, describing it as being goose like, colored dark-purple and having a beak 7-8 cun long and copper-colored.

Zhenniao acquires its poisonous attributes from devouring poisonous viper heads. As described in the *Piya*, from its very veins to the tips of its feathers, the Zhen's body is said to be tainted with an unparalleled poison referred to as *Zhendu or Zhen poison*. The Zhen's feathers were often dipped into liquor to create a poisonous draught that that was used to carry out assassinations. It’s meat, however, was said to be overtly toxic and gave off a gamy odor that it rendered it inadequate for surreptitious use; the Zhen's excrement could dissolve stone. The Zhen's poison was said to be so deadly that it needed only to pass through one's throat kill a person- no need to get all the way to the stomach. In the Baopuzi by Taoist adept Ge Hong, the only thing that was said to be able to neutralize the Zhen's poison was the horn of Xiniu - or the rhinoceros, sometimes mistranslated as unicorn. Xiniu horns would be made into hairpins; when these pins were used to stir a poisoned drink or food dish, the pin would foam and neutralize the poison.

Kiaom ornithologists have often theorized that the Zhen was similar to the secretary bird or the crested serpent eagle (which happens to live in Southern Kiao) and gained their toxicity from ingesting poisonous snakes, similar to how the poison dart frogs produce poison by ingesting poisonous insects. As a consequence, in some illustrated books, pictures very similar to these two birds have been used to depict the Zhen. But throughout most modern history, zoologists knew of no poisonous birds and presumed the Zhen to be a fabulous invention of the mind. However, in 1992, an article was published in Science magazine (an imprint of The Daily Planet) reporting that the Hooded Pitohui of New Guinea has poisonous feathers. A recent article in Kiao questioned the veracity of the Zhen Bird- so far, all results have been inconclusive.

I’m not sure if I wrote it down- or when I wrote it down… I write a lot of pages in this- well, these, considering- and I can’t be bothered to go all the way back and hunt through my own garbled thoughts to figure out if I conceptualized my internal knowledge already.

Remembering the future is bad enough- remembering things you haven’t actually done yet and then working out if your preemptive apology will create a self-fulfilling time-loop- I should have been
a Seer of Time, I think, except SBURB is a challenge more than anything else…

What was I saying?

Oh yes- if I’ve mentioned it, go ahead and skip this bit. If not, read on.

I have cracked and bruised my ribs so many times, I honestly don’t know the numerical register of the incidents. I do know, however, that if I hadn’t put a hurtin’ on my ribcage so many times, when the Reds got in the den turned their coats, they’d have shattered my ribs outright, instead of incapacitating me with excruciating pain.

Nothing broken, I eventually found out, thank the gods- but nothing hurts quite as much as a cracked rib. And considering how many damn times I’ve cracked my ribs, I think I should know, right?

But it’s okay.

I’m used to that, too.

Oddly enough, I had no Dream about the Reds- although, Red Tornado’s aura being what it is, I suppose any Dream I might have had was simply too indistinct for me to register it’s warning as such. I can only assume that my morning’s waking premonition to switch to enviroSet: Riot Grrl, JamCon – 4 was what little I could manage to recive.

That’s a distinctly odd pair of sentences, not at all- well, not quite my usual style. Strike, do you know why I’m starting to get so… this?

At a guess? I’d say the psychier keeping your regular thought process from surfacing is starting to dissipate; you’ll never be like you were, of course, but… well. You’re changing.

Growing?

Not as such, no. It’s more like… like something that’s been growing is about to ripen. Something inside of you is about to come to fruition, if you’d like to call it that.

You knew the whole time, didn’t you. About… the bridge. And my fight- my choice. My… Fall.

You never fell, my dearest. You were thrown, and you certainly hit the water with a rather impressive crunch… but you never actually managed to fall. You teetered right before Conventional Pinky got you with the Peaceray; after that, you’ve been doing your damndest to rise above.

And have I?

You’ve risen high enough that the light coming from the burning beat of your soul is finally, finally melting the ice that’s hardened your heart for so long; you might be a water’s child, but you’re the Late Summer more than all of that… at most, you should be a bit frosty, not… not frozen.

So… what got iced?

Well… point of fact? You’re just as ruthless as Oracle and Empress; in some ways, more so.

Wha- how… why would you say that?
You think just any Fox gets Ten full tails? No; generally speaking, Foxes only get nine tails total. You’re fated for twelve.

But- that would make me equal to a goddess… right?

Right. I think… I think the reason your… well, you’ll see what it actually is soon enough. The reason I think what froze froze was because, well… you weren’t exactly ready for it. Not with your heart in the state it was in.

I will admit, I didn’t take my parent’s death’s particularly well…

Terry, sweetie… no one does. No one. Honestly… when you stopped being able to listen to me, because you were so… just. Hurting. When that happened… I was so afraid for you; so so afraid. So, even though you’re not going to remember this conversation, I can’t help but be glad that you’re finally coming back to yourself.

Why w-ow. Why wouldn’t I remember this conversation?

Well, you are hallucinating due to pain. I can get some sort of feedback about what’s going on, and I can also help you move silently; do you want to try to help your teammates?

Is that a trick question?

Ha. You’re not going to remember much of this, you know. Hell, you’ll only remember how you got to this point because people told you after the fact…

I know.

Alright. We lost our normal Blades in the chassis of the Firey Red so…

Time for the Seablades?

I’d say so.

I find it’s best, looking back, to not question how, exactly, I’ve managed to write down conversations I don’t remember having. Similarly, I don’t generally question how I get written accounts of battles I don’t remember being in- it saves time on confusion. Time I could be using to smooch Kaldur, or eating apple-wood smoked bacon (sweet gods and all the angels of heaven how can anything be so perfectly paired?), or reading a new book- you get the idea.

Using the Seablades while I’m injured is not ideal- and, of course, they’re a combination of slung-shots and dancer’s ribbons. I don’t fucking know how chain-links and cloisonné fish-charms, flowers, and scales turn into a pair of sharp edged ribbons that feel and move like the fins of a fish- excepting the ends, which… um. Don’t. But mine do- and so, mine are the ones I’ll use… I can’t actually do all that much, not without getting my friends in more trouble than it’s worth- so. What can I do… what can I do… basically nothing.

And then the rock I’m trying to figure out an attack from is, shocker of shocks, attacked- violently, by a barrage of fire-balls; it’s all I can do to keep the flames from touching me, and then I’m pushed off the rock and into the water. Some part of the transformation between passive and active- something about using seablades instead of seamail- and I can breathe underwater, yes. But the
ribbons are much, much heavier in the water, too heavy- and I physically cannot take my only remaining blades off. In fact, at this depth, if I do, I will drown.

I think someone screamed, when I fell.

I have enough focus to use Illusion to make it look like my magical transformation ended when I fell to a certain depth- an oozing of red, slowly spreading out in the water, too thick to be blood, too red to be mistaken for anything else; I pull my S-Blades towards me, tangle them around me like a shroud, their weighted ends wrapping tightest around my ribs, allowing the Illusory image of my unnaturally pale skin and terror-stricken face to waver in and out of visibility, in the darkness of the water. My hair billows around my head, like strange sea-grasses in an unnoticed current; my glasses are askew.

It’s cold, and wet, and I’m not entirely sure how they managed it but my ribs do not break under the strain of my S-Blades.

When Robin and Artemis swim past though, I could almost swear that their hearts broke, right in front of me.

It takes everything in me, every scrap of cold unrelenting logic I have, to not give them some signal that I’m still alive. I can, however, manipulate the Illusion just a touch- just enough to hide their exit from the two Reds chasing them.

Water rises around me, dragging me up- a bundle of dead body, ribbon wrapped like a gift. Robin is next to me, playing dead- he almost, almost breaks character when I am unceremoniously dropped next to him, a ragdoll body with sludgy red clinging to my skin.

Poor boy.

I’ll give him a hug later.

Oh, there’s been a countdown happening- and Artemis is… surrendering? Or getting into a better position to fire an arrow?

Two guesses, second one doesn’t count.

Her shot does… something. I don’t know what, exactly- but it does something to the Reds, something that makes them fall to the ground, metal puppets with their strings cut through.

I drop Illusion, stand tall, and use Watery to pull a glob of water up, squish a Rain-Cloud together with my hands and Move it over Aqualad and Miss Martian; the water covers Aqualad almost immediately, and Miss Martian stirs weakly under the soft sprinkles of wetness.

Aqualad shoots me a look of- relief? Gratitude?

I honestly couldn’t say.

“Kaldur! How’s M’gann?”

“She breathes- I believe she will recover.”
Artemis crouches next to Robin, gently touches what could be his dead body—he coughs. Oh, he wasn’t faking, was he—shit. Welp. I’ll make sure there’s no fluid in his lungs, at the very least.

“Robin’s alright too—he’s okay. t-Terry?! We- you were dead! I saw you— you were dead!”

“Do not always be believe your eyes. They can be lie to. …Come here, yes?”

She does— I hug her, sopping wet sleeves and all. She hugs me back, and if her grip is a little too tight, well— I understand. It’s okay.

Getting down to our— oh wow, they encased Kid Flash and Superboy in… I don’t think it’s metal, but it’s certainly something. The pain must be making me haze in and out of focus— I don’t know what the start of the conversation was, but this is what I remember.

Rather, this is what I remember writing down after the fact—

“—figured my only shot was to surrender: pretend to drown before I actually did. Blacked out though.”

“I be check your lungs for fluids soon, yes? Sorry, that not question—”

“X—”

“M’gann—”

“I’ll be fine.”

I really hope those two start kissing soon. Please, gods, let them start kissing soon.

“Will you quit playing around and cut us free already?”

“It’s not working, genius- EMP shuts down all machines, remember?”

“What is Ee Eh-mu Pee?”

“It’s a kind of— you know, I have a feeling if you read a book about it, you’ll understand it better. I’ll get you one later—”

“Thank you, Robin.”

“All machines present at the time. What has occurred?”

“…Had a little visit from your family.”

“Your extremely nasty family.”
"I was not aware I had relations."

"Where’ve you been?"

"Monitor duty on the Watchtower."

"What is Watchtower?"

"I will tell you later, Terry."

"Okay being, Kaldur."

"When it became clear Cave communications were down, I attempted to investigate, but your Zeta-tubes were also non-functional. I transported to Providence, and proceeded here."

The living Sphere choses that moment to wiggle and float free of the wall; Artemis’… something or other, goes off. Robin and Kid Flash have a best-friend moment of horrified realization. I know because they spoke at the same time.

"The pulse has worn off!" "The pulse has worn off!"

And then it all goes to hell.

I guess the old saying is true- there are some things in life that happen so fast, you can only remember them. Apparently, Red Tornado had… I’d call it a failsafe. They called it a “sleeper program”. But I have to wonder- just how powerful is any kind of internal programming? I mean, it was powerful enough to make him betray us- but he didn’t kill us.

Now, why on earth would he do that?

One evening in the distant past a fisherman anchored his boat near the bank of a stream which flowed close by a great city, whose walls could be seen rising grey and rugged in the near distance. The sound of life fell upon his ear and kept him from feeling lonely. Coolies, with bamboo carrying-poles on their shoulders, tired out with the heavy work of the day, hurried by afraid lest the darkness should overtake them before they reached their homes. The bearers of sedan-chairs, which they had carried for many a weary mile, strode by with quickened step and with an imperious shout at the foot passengers to get out of their way and not block up the narrow road by which they would gain the city walls before the great gates were closed for the night.

By the time that the afterglow had died out of the sky and the distant hills were blotted out of the horizon, the fisherman had finished the cooking of his evening meal. The rice sent a fragrant odour from the wide-mouthed pan in which it lay white and appetizing. A few of the very small fish he had caught in the river had been fried to a brown and savoury-looking colour, and he was just about to sit down and enjoy his supper when, happening to look round, he saw a stranger sitting in the after part
of the boat.

He was greatly amazed and was about to express his surprise, when something about the appearance of this unexpected visitor kept him spell-bound. For the stranger had a fine scholarly look about him, and the air of a man belonging to a good family. He had, moreover, a benevolent, kindly face, which could not fail to win the confidence of anyone who gazed upon it.

Whilst the fisherman was wondering who his visitor was and how he had managed to come so mysteriously into the boat, the stranger said: "Allow me to explain who I am and to apologise for intruding on you without first having got your permission to do so. I am the spirit of a man who two years ago was drowned not very far from where your boat is now anchored. Many attempts have I made to inveigle others into the river, so that I might be free to leave the spot to which my miserable fate binds me until another unhappy wretch shall take my place."

The spirit of a drowned person is condemned to hover round the spot where his life was lost, until, either by accident or by the wiles of the sufferer, someone else perishes in the water and thus takes the place of the spirit, which then travels with lightning speed to the Land of Shadows.

"It was so dull this evening," continued the stranger, "that I felt impelled to come and have a chat with you for a short time. So I hope you will take my visit in good part, and allow me to sit in your boat until it is time for you to go to bed."

The fisherman, who was greatly taken with his courtly visitor, expressed his great pleasure in receiving him, and invited him to share his evening meal and to make himself quite at home for as long as he liked.

After this the solitary spirit of the river used frequently to come and spend an evening with the fisherman, until quite a friendship sprang up between them. One evening this ghostly visitor appeared with a face covered with smiles and with a glad note of joy in his voice. No sooner had he sat down than he said, "This is the last evening I shall be able to spend with you. The long weary time of waiting is now nearly at an end, and to-morrow another victim to the river will give me my release and you will see me no more."

Now, the fisherman was a deeply benevolent man, and he was most anxious to see what unhappy person was to be drowned on the morrow. About midday, as he was watching by the river-side, he saw a poor woman, weeping and sobbing, come rushing with hasty steps towards the water. Her hair was dishevelled, and her eyes red with tears, and frequent cries of sorrow burst from her lips. Straight as an arrow she made for the stream, and was just preparing to throw herself into it, when the fisherman in a loud and commanding voice told her to stop.

He then asked her what was the matter and what reason there was for her to sacrifice her life in the river.

"I am a most unhappy woman," she replied. "On my way home just now I was waylaid by a footpad, who robbed me of some money that I was taking back to my husband. This money was to pay a debt we owed to a man who threatens us with the severest penalties if we do not give it to him to-day. Far rather would I face death than see the sorrow which would overwhelm my husband if I told him my sorrowful story."

Having asked her how much money had been taken from her, the fisherman presented the woman with the exact amount, and soon she was proceeding with joyful footsteps in the direction of her home.

That same evening the fisherman was again visited by the spirit who had bidden him an eternal
farewell the previous evening.

"What did you mean," asked the visitor, "by depriving me of the one chance I had of gaining my freedom?"

"I could not bear to see the sorrow of the poor woman," replied the fisherman, "nor to think of the tragedy to her home had she perished in the stream, and so I saved her." With eloquent lips he proceeded to describe the beauty of benevolence, and urged upon his guest the nobler course of trying to save life even at the expense of his own happiness. In the end the latter was so deeply moved that he promised never again to make any attempt to gain his liberty through another's death, even though this should mean that he would have to spend long ages of misery in the fatal stream.

Years went by, and yet for the imprisoned spirit there came no release. Cases of suicide or accidental drowning in the flowing stream ceased altogether. Many a life that would have perished was saved from destruction by mysterious warnings which came from the sullen water, and which terrified away the would-be suicides as they were about to hurl themselves into it.

At length Kwan-yin, the Goddess of Mercy, moved by the sight of such a generous sacrifice of self in order to save the souls of unfortunate people who had become weary of life, released this noble spirit from its watery prison. Moreover, as she felt convinced that such a man could safely be entrusted with the destinies of those who might appear before his tribunal, she made him a god and decreed that temples should be erected to him in every town and city of the Empire, so that all who were suffering wrong or injustice could have their causes righted at the shrine of one who had shown such profound devotion and sympathy for others in distress.

Such is the story of the God of the City.

Since he is regarded as the representative of the dread ruler of the Land of Shadows, his temple has been erected very much in the same style as the courts of the Mandarins. Its main entrance is large and imposing, and the great gates suggest those of the yamen of some high official.

Within these is an immense courtyard, paved with slabs of granite, and on each side of this there are six life-size statues of the "runners," or policemen, of the god, who stand ready to carry out his decisions, and to pursue and capture by invisible and mysterious processes those whom he has condemned as guilty. The faces of these figures are distorted by passion, and their attitudes are such as men might be conceived to assume in apprehending some notorious criminal whom Yam-lo had ordered to be seized.

At the end of this spacious courtyard is the shrine of the god, but he is so hidden behind a yellow curtain that it is impossible to catch a glimpse of his image. In front of him are statues of his two secretaries, who, with huge pens in their hands, stand ready day and night to take down the petitions and indictments laid before the god by those who are in sorrow or who are suffering wrong.

One afternoon the peace of such a temple was suddenly disturbed by a noisy clamour outside, and the sound of hurried footsteps as of a crowd rushing through the main gates. Two men advanced with rapid, excited strides straight past the demon policeman at the door, who seemed to scowl with added ferocity as they gazed at the actors in a scene with which they would have much to do by-and-by.

The two men were quite young, a little over twenty; and behind them followed a string of idlers and loafers and street arabs, who seem to spring up like magic when anything unusual happens. One of the young men was slightly ahead of the crowd. His face was flushed and his black eyes sparkled with excitement, whilst in his left hand he carried a large white cock. He was the complainant, and his purpose in coming to the temple was to appeal to the god to vindicate his honour.
He took his stand in front of the idol, and the secretaries, with pens in their hands, seemed to put on a strained look of attention as the young fellow produced a roll of paper and began to read the statement he had drawn up. It was diffuse and wordy, as most of such documents are, but the main facts were quite plain.

The two young men were assistants in a shop in the city. Some little time before, the master of the shop, without telling either of them, concealed in a chosen place a sum of one hundred dollars, which he wished to have in readiness in order to pay for certain goods he had purchased. The previous day, when he went to get the money on the presentation of the bill, he found to his horror that it had disappeared. He had told no one of this secret hoard, not even his wife; and therefore he felt convinced that in some way or other one of his two assistants had discovered his hiding-place. For some reason his suspicions became aroused against the man who was now detailing his grievances, and who was appealing to the god to set in motion all the tremendous forces at his command, not only to proclaim his innocence but also to bring correct punishment on the real culprit.

The scene was a weird and fascinating one, and became most exciting as the young man neared the end of his appeal. He called upon the god to hurl all the pains and penalties in his unseen armoury against the man who had really stolen the money.

"Let his life be one long torture," he cried with uplifted hands. "May every enterprise in which he engages end in disaster; may his father and mother die, and let him be left desolate; may a subtle and incurable disease lay its grip upon him; may misfortune pursue him in every shape and form; may he become a beggar with ulcered legs and sit on the roadside and beseech the passers-by, in sunshine and in storm, for a few cash that will just help to keep him alive; may he never have a son to perpetuate his name or to make offerings to his spirit in the Land of Shadows; may madness seize upon him so that his reason shall fly and he shall be a source of terror to his fellow-men; and finally, may a tragic and horrible death bring his life to a sudden end, even as I bring to an end the life of this white cock that I have brought with me."

As he uttered these last words he grasped a chopper, and with one sharp and vicious blow cut off the head of the struggling animal, which wildly fluttered its wings in the agonies of death, whilst its life-blood poured out in a stream on the ground.

He then took his petition, and advancing close up to the secretaries, who seemed for the moment to gaze down upon him with a look of sympathy on their faces, he set fire to it and burned it to ashes. In this way it passed into the hands of the god, who would speedily set in motion unseen machinery to bring down upon the head of the guilty one the judgments which had just been invoked.

The sympathies of the crowd were with the man who had sworn a solemn oath that he was innocent of the theft. The other young fellow, who had said little or nothing during the proceedings, was believed to be the real culprit, but there was no evidence upon which he could be convicted. The god knew, however, and every one was satisfied that in due time punishment would descend upon the transgressor.

In a few minutes the temple resumed its normal aspect, for with the disappearance of the two principal actors in the scene, the idlers from the street slowly dispersed, each one loudly expressing his opinion as to the merits of the question in dispute. With the dissolving of the crowd, it would have seemed to the casual observer that no further proceedings were to be taken in the matter. The god’s face wore its usually placid look, unmoved by the shifting panorama of human life which ebbed and flowed in front of him from morning till night. The ghastly-looking policemen, with their grinning visages and ferocious scowls and contorted bodies, remained in the same unchanging postures by the main entrance.
A week or two had gone by since the appeal had been made to the god, when those who were
following the case and were looking out for some grim evidence that the god was at work in bringing
retribution on the man whom everyone suspected of being the thief, were startled by a heartrending
catastrophe.

This man had a sister, just bursting into womanhood, who was the very light of her home. Her merry
laugh could be heard throughout the day, so that sadness could not long abide in the same house. Her
face, too, seemed to have been formed to match her sunny smiles, and was a constant inspiration that
never failed to give those who looked upon it a brighter view of life.

One morning she went down to the river-bank with several of her neighbours to do the household
washing. The stream was strong and rapid in the centre, but the place which these women had
selected for their work had always been considered perfectly safe, for it was outside the current and
no accident had ever happened there.

They had finished all that they had purposed to do, and were ascending the bank to return home,
when they heard an agonized cry and turning swiftly round they perceived that this young girl had
stumbled and fallen into the river. They were so horrified at the accident that they lost all presence of
mind and allowed the fast-flowing stream to get a grip of her and drag her into the current. When
help at last came, her body could just be seen floating on the troubled waters, and before a boat could
be launched it had disappeared in the waves of the sea which tumbled and roared about a quarter of a
mile further down.

This terrible disaster, which brought unutterable gloom and sorrow upon the home, was
unquestionably the work of the god. With bated breath people talked of the tragic end of this
beautiful girl, who had won her way into the hearts of all who knew her; but they recognized that her
death had been caused by no mere accident, but by the mysterious power of the invisible forces
which are always at work to bring punishment upon those who have violated the Righteousness of
Heaven.

About a month after this calamity, the monsoon rains began to fall. The clouds gathered in dense
masses upon the neighbouring hills, and poured down such copious showers that the mountain
streams were turned into roaring avalanches, tearing their way down to the sea with an impetuosity
that nothing could resist.

One of these streams, which used to run by the side of the ancestral property of the family of the man
who was believed to have stolen the hundred dollars, overflowed its banks and rushing along with
mad and headlong speed it swept away their fields, so that when the rains ceased not a trace of them
was to be found, but only sand and gravel, from which no crop could ever be gathered in the future.
The consequence was that the family was utterly ruined.

This second disaster falling on the homestead was a clear indication to everyone who knew the story
of the stolen money that the god was still at work in bringing retribution on the sinner. The fact that
other farms had come out of the flood undamaged was proof positive of this.

From this time, too, the young man who really was the culprit began to be troubled in his mind
because of the calamities that had fallen on his family. The death of his sister by drowning, and the
utter destruction of his home by the flood, which had injured no other farmer in the neighbourhood,
were plain indications that the curses which his falsely accused fellow-assistant had prayed the god to
bring down on the head of the guilty party were indeed coming fast and thick upon him.

A dread of coming evil took possession of him, and this so preyed upon his mind that he began to
lose his reason. He would go about muttering to himself, and declaring that he saw devils. These fits
grew upon him, until at last he became raving mad, and had to be seized and bound with ropes to
prevent him doing injury to himself or to others. At times he suffered from violent spasms of mania, while at others, again, though undoubtedly insane, he was quiet and subdued. He would then talk incessantly to himself, and bemoan the sad fact that the dread God of the City was sending evil spirits to torment him because he had purloined the hundred dollars belonging to his master.

By-and-by these random confessions attracted the attention of his heart-broken father, who used to sit watching by his side, and they became so frequent and so circumstantial, describing even where the money had been hidden, that at last he determined to examine into the matter. Investigations were made, and the whole sum was found in the very place which the young man had mentioned in his delirium, and was at once returned to the shopkeeper.

As the money had been given back, and the father and mother were dependent upon their only son to provide for them in their old age, the man who had entered the accusation before the god was entreated again to appear before him in his temple and withdraw the charges that he had previously made against his fellow-assistant. Only in this formal and legal way could the god have official knowledge of the fact that reparation had been made for the offence which had been committed; and if this were not done he would still continue to send sorrow after sorrow until the whole family were involved in absolute ruin or death.

Out of pity for the old couple the other young man consented to take the necessary steps. He accordingly presented a petition to the god, stating that he wished to withdraw the accusation which he had made against a certain man who had been suspected of theft. The stolen money had been returned to its owner, and the god was now besought to stay all further proceedings and forgive the culprit for the wrong he had done.

It was evident that this petition was granted, for at once the young man began to recover, and soon all signs of madness left him. He had, however, learned a lesson which he never forgot; and as long as he lived he never committed another offence such as the theft which had brought such serious consequences upon himself and his family.

The League, in what I’m hoping isn’t going to be a pattern- a very disappointing and stress inducing pattern- arrives entirely too late to be of any help.

Black Canary woke me up- I almost broke her nose for it.

It’s been a long day, okay? And anyway- I doubt I wrote it down, it’s such a fact of my life, but- I always make it common knowledge of whatever group I’m in, always, that… That I’m to be woken up by a name call, never by touch- unless I fell asleep or passed out touching you, in which case touch is allowed.

Black Canary, obviously, didn’t get included in that conversation.

My arm kind of hurt from pulling my punch, though.

The next day, after trying to figure out what I was doing all day yesterday- the best I can figure is I made several fish shaped hats, and was looking for Kaldur to give him an eel-shaped hat when the Reds… attacked.
The past must always be dealt with. I didn’t realize it then, but my Blades… they’re like a chop. They’re a… a literal part of me. A **legal** part of me.

With them out of my control- I could be implicated, or, or- it’s like someone stole my identity in such a way that… that I could go to jail for murder. I’m in more shit than I can say- however, Sinta’s seablades are more than enough to keep me alive with. The gravity of my situation will probably hit me later- but for right now, I need to let my… my servants know what’s happened.

Anyway- I’m Den Mother, so it falls on me to see to the **den** Cave’s repair. It’s when I’m taking a break from it to let Blade know to be on the lookout for my Blades- that’s when my animosity with Megan goes from cordial to catfight.

It it was going so… not-bitchy, too.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Heyla, boss- wassup?”

“Lost my Blades in battle. Go fetch.”

“Hard luck- me ‘n the kids are on it. Chat ya later?”

“You know it.”

Megan is the one who yanks me around, wrenching my ribs in a way that generally makes me want to bite whatever caused that hurt. Things get better from there.

“Who were you just- calling?”

“My friend…?”

“Why?”

“Because I need to find my Blades.”

“Oh, so your **weapons** are more important than the safety and secrecy of the Team?”

“Frankly, yes, they a-”

“That’s so- so **typically** selfish of you-”

“This from the girl who’s so selfish and afraid she can’t even be human-”

“I AM NOT HUMAN!”

“NEITHER AM I, BUT I’M A DAMN SIGHT BETTER AT IT THAN YOU!”

“OH, WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?!”

“You knew?”
“Oh, fuck.”

“Conner, what’s going on?”

I spin on my heel away from Megan and Dash to where Superboy has Aqualad by the shoulders of his shirt- Batman jumps out of my way. I don’t have time to wonder at that- I have to calm Superboy down.

I… don’t actually think I can explain it without permission from Kaldur- it’s that kind of secret.

I grab Superboy around the waist anyway, and lift him fully off the ground; strength born of worry and fear is more powerful than I realized. My hold on him won’t last very long, but it’s enough of a jolt for Kaldur to get out of Superboy’s grip.

And then it all really goes to shit.

“Kaldur knew we had a traitor among us, and he said nothing!”

“You knew?!”

“And you didn’t tell us?!”

“I sought to protect the team from-”

“Protect us from what, knowledge that might have saved our lives?”

“Get off of me, X- you almost died, M’gann!”

“Kaldur try to protect us from-”

“We all know you’d be on his side, even when he-”

“Did you say something?"

“You-

“ENOUGH.”

I almost bite my tongue. That was… terrifying. I know he’s- well, actually, I don’t know what Batman is. I’ve got theories, of course- my current favorites are “Cleverly disguised Automaton that runs on Caffinated Beverages and the Fear of Villains Everywhere” and “Reformed Bloodsucking Fiend of the Night, determined to Save others the Desperate Desire for Revenge- a Revenge that will be Forever Cruelly Denied”. Callie says that both of these are very silly, as Batman is obviously a human man being secretly funded by Bruce Wayne. I say she’s crazy, as Bruce Wayne, while a good and caring man, isn’t quite so… cartoonish as all that; also, it would put his companies and fortune in serious danger, because of tax reasons, you know?

Sinta said that Bruce Wayne and Batman were probably the same man, and when Callie and I brought up the obvious problem of “Well, if Bruce Wayne and Batman are the same man, when does
he ever sleep?” she had no answer; my explanation for her “Have you ever seen Batman and Bruce Wayne in the same room?” was… met with disbelief, I admit, but honestly, the facts surrounding that little tidbit make my theory **more** plausible than not.

Fact one: Bruce Wayne is known to be a giant party animal, always a model or three on his… everything- the only problem with that is that no model has ever bragged about “having a night with the Prince of Gotham” or gone to the tabloids with “Bruce’s bundle of joy”.

Fact two: Bruce Wayne is always absent when Batman shows up at parties, true- however, he **also** regularly skips out on portions of parties Batman **doesn’t** show up to.

Therefore, I think my theory that Bruce Wayne is secretly gay holds more water than Sinta’s crazy “Batman and Bruce Wayne are the same guy” theory. Because, while it might be true that Batman and Bruce Wayne have never been seen in the same room together, there has never even been a rumor with **substance** about Bruce Wayne and any of the models he’s taken to various functions and events.

And to me, that is more telling than anything else- well, either that he’s gay or impotent. I don’t think he’s impotent though…

And yes, I am distracting myself from my fear with inanity, thank you for noticing.

“With Red Tornado… missing, the Team will now be overseen by rotating supervisors. Captain Marvel has volunteered to take the first shift.”

“I’m really looking forwards to hanging with you guys.”

He speaks like a ten year old boy.

**He is a ten year old boy.**

Really?

I catch Aqualad’s eye- he nods to me. Right. I’ll have to have a talk with the good Captain about-

“After I dismantle Red Tornado, you and I are going to-”

“Red Tornado is a member of the Justice League, meaning he is a League responsibility. You **will** leave him to us.”

If Superboy could growl, he would.

“I have another mission for this Team-”

“Gotham Mayor attacked by Guerilla Gorrila?”
“Batman, please- Tell me you’re not sending us on this joke of a wild ape chase-”

“I never joke about the mission.”

Robin looked… ashamed. Like he should have known better. Then again, a sidekick-hero relationship is never stable, not ever, really. The kind of person who goes on adventures- fights crimes, and puts on a costume to do so? That person is not going to accept being someone’s sidekick forever. I think Robin’s going to start realizing that- and it’s for that reason I never really tried to find a mentor. Not for this.

“I’ve checked the sources; I’ve studied the patterns. This is only the latest in a series of incidents. Aqualad- you and your Team will depart for India, and check this out.”

“Hmph. Your team.”

And my teammates walk away. I bump my shoulder into Aqualad’s. He looks at me, raises a brow.

“Having friends is hard, yes? …But is also worth it. And… it is your team.”

“For now.”

“We pick you for reason- I stand by my choice. Go see if they be talk around; I make the nicenesses with Captain Marvel, yes?”

The huff of air through his nose is almost comical in it’s wooshing. When we get back, I’m going to give him a massage. A very relaxing massage.

Possibly with my mouth and tongue.

Possibly. Hopefully.

“Alright.”

And then he follows our teammates. And of course Megan grabbed the shoulder of the arm that tried to punch Black Canary, why would my luck be anything else.

Time to have a talk with Captain Marvel about expectations and boundaries.

Double-joy.

“Captain Marvel, do you speak Kiaom?”

“I speak all the Earth’s languages, actually.”
“Ah, good. I must admit, English is not my best language- I think it’s because of how early I learned French; every time I reach for the English word, the French one tries to pop out. But anyway-languages are not what I wanted to talk about- and we need to swing by the kitchens, okay?”

“Um- okay.”

“So- do you understand what being a… well, what do you intend to do during your term as our overseer?”

“Um… try to be your friend? I mean-”

“No, no- that’s okay, really. I don’t mind being friends with anyone, it’s just- this team is so we can gain experience on our own, without adult supervision, well, sort of without adult supervision… but, well… I was wondering if you could come on this next mission with us?”

“You just said your team is meant to be a place to stretch your metaphorical wings- why invite me on this mission? Won’t that put a damper on things?”

“Maybe so- but we were just attacked on our home turf. It would make me, at the very least, feel better if a full League member were with us for this one. Just in case.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yes- I might not be a villain, but I’ve got that same kind of side-waYS corkscrewing mind; if I wanted to take out a group like this, I wouldn’t make Red Tornado my mole, and I… well. To take this team out, I would throw them off balance, then…”

I chop an apple in half. The good Captain’s eyes widen- he got my point.

“And I’d do it quickly.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well… we’re young. That’s the main thing- we’re young, and so strong already- and we’ve managed to do some amazing things already, simply by being together… Even though we aren’t really a team yet- do you like strawberry or raspberry more? We have peach too-”

“Strawberry’s fine.”

“Peanut Allergy?”

“No.”

“Okay- but we’re on our way to becoming one, a team I mean, even though we’re all fighting right now. I mean- we feel comfortable enough with each other to argue. That’s… really good. But- if I were against this team, that would terrify me.”

“Because… the more comfortable you are with each other, the better you work together, the stronger you become, which makes you all a bigger threat-”

“Which makes it harder to take any of us out without exponentially increasing the danger level, far beyond what any sane tactician would want to deal with. Do you have somewhere to carry your sandwich, or shall I carry it for you?”

“You can carry it. And… thanks. For explaining that to me- I forget, sometimes, that not everyone is… like me.”
“So do I, sometimes- but it makes me happy that there are people like you in the world.”

Captain Marvel and I smile at each other, and then we both go to the Hangar- I let him go ahead. Aqualad has stopped, worried and tense and staring at the Bioship where everyone, including Captain Marvel, are waiting.

I heard what Robin said- and what Kid Flash said too. They’re wrong, and Kaldur needs to know.

“I invited him along, actually.”

“Why?”

“…because this is the best time to kill us. Or get us killed.”

“What?”

“We’re off balance- our teamwork is… not good right now. If I were a villain, I wouldn’t make my mole Red Tornado- too easy for that to go wrong. And… we aren’t dead.”

“…Alright. I- thank you.”

“For what?”

“Doing the job I asked of you.”

“Oh! Well- thank you.”

“For what?”

“Trusting me with it.”

He smiles at me, sighs, frowns, and marches up the stairs like a man condemned. I follow him with much more bounce in my step; the mood inside the Bioship is… charged.

Frosty, yet charged.

Like before a thundersnow.

But more… people-shaped.

It doesn’t get better as the mission gets underway- and my toes go numb and un-numb three times on the way to India. We fly down into a forest; Artemis and Robin are first out of the Bioship- which is perfectly fine as I was in no way worried that Miss Martian would choose to let me fall to my death through a suddenly appearing and inescapable hole in the floor of the Bioship in a fit of vindictive rage. Because I would have. And we’re not at all the same kind of person.

Thank the gods for that.

Have I mentioned that I don’t like heights? Because I don’t.

At all.
“All clear.”

“Switch to stealth- and we’ll review mission parameters.”

“Parameters? We don’t need no stinkin’ parameters.”

“It’s recon- we know what to do.”

“Kid- Robin!”

“We started this team because the Justice League was keeping secrets from us.”

“Or did you forget that like you forgot to tell us about the mole?”

Except Kid Flash doesn’t say it like a question that wants an answer, and they’re both gone before I can say that, no, actually, I do not know what to do, and I would really like Aqualad to go over mission parameters with everyone here, so I know that everyone knows what they’re supposed to do, not just some of us.

And then Superboy pisses off Miss Martian, and then Artemis and Miss Martian are gone together too.

Superboy, in a moment of misplaced frustration, blames Aqualad, and then he, too, is gone- although I didn’t realize he could… jump? I think? quite that high.

The more you know.

“Um… did I miss the part where you actually said what the plan was?”

Aqualad sighs. I reply for us both.

“No- but they did.”

Somehow, I can’t shake off the feeling that we’re being watched.

We’re being followed- I brush Aqualad’s arm, tell him without a word that I’m going to be out of his sight for a bit- he nods, looks away for a moment. I vanish from his sight, and all of Captain Marvel’s senses- Fox advantages yo.

And I’m right.
We are being followed.

It’s too dark in the trees for me to see by what though- and I’d rather knowingly spring a trap. A clearing appears out of the jungle ahead- it’s pretty large, too large, actually- clearings this size don’t last too long in jungles. Or they shouldn’t, without help.

There are too many tracks in the clearing- something definitely happened.

“Guess this is where Mayor Hill’s… monkey business, went down. So- at least we’ve confirmed his story, right?”

“I be saying yes, if no the ambush coming- the jungles has being too much… quiet. All night.”

“Aqualad?”

“My apologies Captain, X- I am… plagued by doubts. Perhaps I was wrong to withhold-”

Something moves through the jungle too loudly- there’s nothing that does that naturally. We’re about to be attacked.

My S-Blades loosen around my wrists; my sleeves are short and my red over-dress is more like a short-limbed jumpsuit. And something is coming.

That something is a mutated elephant. Because of course it is- although, it shouldn’t have been so angry- there were no signs of this being it’s territory, no signs of this being a place it lived near- so why is it attacking us?

I got the feeling I would be asking myself that question all night long. Then there were two enraged mutated elephants and an angry tiger, and I didn’t really have time for thoughts like that.

Although, if I had to guess- the large, black with red lights on, collars around all three animal’s necks might possibly be the culprit. So, now the question is- how to get the collars off without hurting the animals…

Hmm. I think I can just sort of- yeah. I’m not entirely sure how I got over to the treeline so quickly- bike messenger’s instinct, I suppose. A Jump keeps me out of reach of the tiger- another puts me on the elephant’s back; a slide down it’s shoulder lets me slice it’s collar off cleanly. The elephant stops, blinks, and then gives me a very gentle pat on the shoulder with it’s trunk before going off on it’s elephant march-y business; Aqualad and Captain Marvel are looking at me… a bit strangely, I must say.

“Animals like me. I know not why.”

“…O-kay. Pretty sweet how you figured out the problem was the collars.”

“But the collars indicate an intelligence behind this attack- the rest of the Team may also be at risk.
Team- report status. Ugh- comm is jammed… and Miss Martian failed to establish a telepathic link before we split up.”

“Actually, you let everyone split up before communications were set.”

“They would not listen!”

“I guess- but, back at the Cave, Batman stopped everyone from arguing with one word.”

“Because Batman is- Batman.”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me; when I first joined the League, all he did was boss me around, and it’s hard not to take it personally. But. I never disobeyed an order, and that’s probably what kept me alive.”

“Batman takes command- he has to. For the good of the League… Thank you for helping me understand.”

“Hey, wisdom of Solomon.”

‘Aqualad, can you hear me?’

“Yes Miss Martian. Report.”

‘Artemis and I were attacked by animals wearing inhibitor collars like those used on convicts at Belle Reve prison.’

“Cool, the tiger- be right back!”

“Captain Marvel wait! Ugh- hey, speed of Mercury.”

“Now, why do I get the feeling that he’s just run off into a trap?”

“I’m… sure he’ll be fine.”

I give Aqualad one of my very best “right, pull the other one, it’s got bells” glances, then settle down into a crouching seat- not actually on the ground, but low to it. Take rest where you can get it.

‘Miss Martian, I need a telepathic link-up to the entire Team, now.’

;Understood. Link established.;

>Should he really still be giving us orders? And should you really still be following them?<

‘Listen, please-’

_Oh good, Aqualad’s voice in my head, I’ve so missed that._

•Hey Kaldur! KF and I were attacked by giant vultures- course since we’re moles, you probably think we attacked ourselves-•

>If he did, he wouldn’t tell you.<
;Superboy, are you online or just pouting?;
○Busy. Call back later.○

_What gets me is how non-chalant he is about telling us._

•He should be chalant. Way chalant. Extremely chalant. •

;How can we be a team if he doesn’t trust us with his secrets? Or if Conner doesn’t trust us to take care of ourselves?;

_Did he really think you or I could have been the mole?_

•We’ve known each other for years!•

>Trust is a two way street! And you know they’d hate it if we kept secrets from them!<

;Not that we’d do that. Never.;

‘Enough.’

We’ve been following the tiger’s trail, since Captain Marvel flew through the forest- a few leaves in the wrong pattern and the faint traces of his scent lead me, and Aqualad behind me, to a trio of towers.

Well what do you know about that- a trap, just like I thought.

Mmm. His muscles do very pretty things when he’s ripping metal towers out of the ground like small trees in the wrong part of the garden. Mmm, gluteus maximus.

‘Captain Marvel has been captured, and we must act as a team to save him.’

_Hmph. Under your leadership? I don’t think so-_

‘This is not up for debate. You all chose me to lead- when the mission is over, if you wish to select a new leader, I will **happily** step down. But until that time, **I am** in command here.’

He throws down the metal pole, leaving an electrically crackling hole in the ground and a vague scent of… anger. Behind.

I follow the tiger’s tracks; jerk my head for him to follow- he nods and falls into step behind me.

The jungle is quiet, but not the normal kind of jungle quiet- unnatural. It puts me on edge, and I think Aqualad’s starting to pick up on it- I don’t think he would have said anything about it, otherwise.
‘X?’
-?

‘Why did you— there were no objections from you about my withholding of information?’

–Considering I was there when you were told, and I agreed, and still do, with your descision, that would be a bit silly– don’t you think?

‘It was… hypocritical of me. To do so.’

–It was your job to do so. You’re the leader– you make the choices and get the most information, so we can do our jobs. I don’t envy you, and I don’t take it personally when you keep stuff from me– not when you’re trying to protect us from… well. What has happened on this mission.–

‘Mm. When we get back to the Cave, after debriefing– I need to talk to you. If that’s okay?’

–Okay. Sure.–

Honestly, actually rescuing Captain Marvel is an anticlimax. Although hearing Artemis get one over on Kid Flash is something I will treasure in my heart forever– that guy can be a trial and a half.

“And what are you grinning about?”

“One word: souvenir!”

“Two words: Gorrila lice!”

“Wha- ew!”

“Not worry, Kid- Gorrila lice no like human scalp. Human genitals, on other hand- well. Make sure you wash you hands before bed, hmm?”

“Aw- X! Ew!”

I am not ashamed to say that I laughed until I cried. Not literally cried- metaphorically cried. Except I don’t think that’s actually a thing…

I’m leaning against the Bioship watching the stars fade out in the coming dawn when Robin finally asks Aqualad what he should have asked when he learned about the possibility of there being a mole. I was beginning to wonder if anyone would.

“Aqualad- look. I have to know- why did you withhold intel about the mole?”

“The source of the tip was Sportsmaster.”

“What?! You can’t trust him!” Artemis’ voice has this tendency to go really squeaky and shrill when
she yells. It’s kind of cute, but also a little irritating- and very, very distinctive.

“I do not. It seemed possible, even likely that he was attempting to divide the Team with false information.”

“And given how this mission went, he nearly succeeded. But- you had to consider it might be true.”

“Yes. As leader, I did- in which case I did not wish to alert the traitor.”

“Huh- hate to say it, but… makes sense.”

“I am still prepared to step down.”

“All in favor of keeping Aqualad as leader?”

We all raise our hands- my hand sticks out just above the ramp onto the Bioship. Captain Marvel gets closer to Aqualad, shakes his hand.

“Guess it’s unanimous. See you tomorrow.”

“You’re not coming back with us?”

“Nope, gotta fly.”

And he flies off, far into the lingering stars. Everyone gets onto the ship, including a… d-dog. Wolf. Superboy’s going to call it- him- Wolf.

That’s… wonderful.

I take a moment to settle into my skin, stare at the fading stars a bit longer- but no. It’s time to go. I climb up the ramp, just in time to see A- Kaldur’s face fall, fill, with doubt.

Shame?

Can’t have that.

I pass him quietly, but snag and tangle his hand with mine- and by the way he grips and rubs my fingers with his, I know he appreciates it. I sit as far away as I can from the d-dog, and I might of, sort of, maybe possibly gripped Kaldur’s hand very tightly when we lifted off?

But I was able to keep my feet on the floor for- okay, most of the flight. Just- a damn dog and not being on the ground at the same time… just. No.

But Kaldur didn’t complain- he even, sort of… pulled me over to him? And held me? And that was wonderful.

Kaldur is wonderful.
And he smells nice.

And also, I like his tattoo. Icon. Thing. It’s eel shaped.

And he has the most lovely smile.

And eyes.

And butt.

Butts!

I wonder what it is he wants to talk to me about?

We get back to the Cave just as the sun is setting- we’ve actually got a boiler-plate form for various missions now, so writing up the reports doesn’t take very long. Debriefing takes a bit longer, but is over rather quickly- Batman seems… oddly unsurprised, when we tell him about the collars.

Or by the appearance of Wolf in the Cave.

There’s another set of things to keep in mind about what to expect from the future…

My conversation with Kaldur- I suppose… I’m. Tired. Tired of… running. Hiding. No friends, no family- no one to get hurt from the fallout.

That was fine before, except now- these people deserve better.

I deserve better.

So does he.

Kaldur tells me who his biological father is. I tell him my full name. I’m not sure which of us is more surprised by the other’s lack of surprise- but once that part of the conversation is over, it turns to-well.

“So- what is between you and Megan?”

“Well, it’s mostly my fault- at least, the beginning of it was.”

“How so?”
“When we first met, way back with Mister Twister- before that mission, when Megan used her telepathy on us all for the first time… I saw it as an attack and reacted accordingly. In Kowloon, offensive telepathy is pretty common, and I learned how to defend against it as a matter of course-”

“-Thus setting the tone of your relationship as one of antagonism.”

“Exactly. But now… I think it’s because I’m… jealous. Of her being so…”

“Her what?”

“I- well. I’m half-Fox-”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“Um- well, Fox is the Common Name for a specific Clan in the Undefined Realms; widespread, very prolific. They’re also usually near the bottom rungs of society, if not outright outcasts- this is generally not without reason.”

“Like…?”

“Ah- well, in Kowloon, Foxes are known for consorting with the dead. The local conglomerate of religions consider the dead supremely unclean and very unlucky, so Foxes are considered unclean and unlucky by association. In… oh, I always forget what the name of Rhelasia’s Realm is, serves me right for trying to live out life from inside books-”

“Are they?”

“Are they what?”

“Unclean and unlucky?”

“Generally speaking, no. Specifically- I, myself, don’t consider myself unclean as a base state, but I do have a very odd kind of luck.”

“I have noticed. You were saying about Rhelasia…?”

“Right. Okay, well, there’s a sort of… on this side, it’s a myth, a very old one, but on the other it’s history. Very old history. Um- for background, it is believed by many that if a Fox lives for a thousand years, they will grow nine tails and become extremely powerful in a number of magical arts. This is not true.”

“Not true at all?”

“No. The number of tails a Fox has- I’m not entirely sure what the ratios are, but it’s based on karmic destiny and personal strength, moreso than anything else. The truth is, most Foxes, no matter how powerful they appear- it’s like… a single human battle mage, not even fully trained, could easily defeat an entire battalion of foxes. Generally speaking.”

“Okay…?”

“Kaldur- you’re more powerful than I am. Much more powerful.”

“Um. No. No I am not-”

“You can support a full Totemic Icon without causing yourself physical harm, use several different spells without incantations or visible preparation, and you’re physically stronger than me. You’re
more powerful than me—"

“You know more spells—"

“And your spells are stronger. You know it in your heart to be true… while I might be able to defeat you with a technique, if it were a serious matter— if it came down to a serious fight… Kaldur, when I take an opponent seriously, I don’t hold back. I- I can’t.”

“Because… everyone is stronger than you?”

“So much stronger.”

“So- part of the problem with Megan is not just that your first meeting with Megan was a battle for you- it is that you are reminded, every time you speak to her that…”

“That she could kill me. And I couldn’t stop her.”

“So it is- but you said you were also jealous of her?”

“I- yes. Um- the reason I told you the background was to tell you a story. Um. I’ll explain some things afterwords, I just- I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“It is alright. Please, tell me.”

“A-alright. Well.

Long ago, there was a family who raised cattle for their meat and hides and horns; they were not wealthy, but they were not poor.

There was a mother, a father, three sons, and a daughter- the daughter had been found as a baby by the mother, found out in the pastures where their cattle were raised. Well, one day the family’s cows started to be attacked- their eldest son went out to see to the cows on that day and found one of their gentlest cows torn to pieces, it’s liver and heart gone and it’s entrails strewn through the grass. This happened for three days, and on the fourth day, the eldest son watched with the cattle and watched for whatever was hunting them. The evening passed, and the night came- the eldest son watched as his family’s house grew quiet and dark, and watched his family’s herds settle and listened to their mumbles and groans.

All seemed well.

Just as the eldest son was beginning to fall asleep, as the moon was rising high in the cloudy sky, he saw something astonishing- it was his sister, sneaking out of the house and out to the fields.

It wasn’t long before the eldest son saw his sister at the edge of the pasture where their family’s cows were spending the night- and as it was cloudy, he had barely noticed his sister keeping to the shadow of the clouds, staying out of the moonlight. And then a wind blew in the sky, pushing the clouds apart- and in that moment, the eldest son was struck with a horror so great he could not speak nor move.

For, in that sudden moment of moonlight, his sister had been revealed to be a Fox.

Quicker than he could hear his heart beating, the massive fox leapt into the herd, dragged off a cow, and tore into it, it’s great jaws devouring the liver and heart and strewning the entrails in it’s haste; the
suddenness of the vicious attack, the wreak of blood- and the unnatural quietness of the herd at the
death of one of their number- all proved too much for the eldest son, and he blacked out in fear.

When morning came, the body of the cow- just where he had seen it fall- was enough proof for him,
and he went into his family’s house and he told his family what he had seen. He accused his sister of
slaying their cattle, of being a Fox. His sister denied it, and his parents would not hear of their
daughter being a Fox- and so the eldest son was thrown out of his family’s house, and told to go find
his fortune in the city. He went, but not before receiving a promise of his mother’s- that she would
send word of the family’s prosperity or suffering, whatever may come, every third month. In this
way, the eldest son was able to swear to return, should he be needed- and, as his father was not a
cruel man, he allocated a portion of the family’s money to making their barn into a place where their
son could stay, should a need for him to return ever arise.

For a time, the cows were unmolested- indeed, the herd grew in size, and the family prospered. Just
as the father was considering calling his eldest son back from the city, perhaps out of guilt or regret-
perhaps to give him his birthright of some young bulls and heifers, with which he could, possibly,
start his own family with, the cows started to die again. This time, it was the middle son who had
discovered the slain cattle- and, just as before, the unlucky beast had been a gentle creature. Indeed, it
all seemed as it had been before- the cow’s heart and liver were both eaten, and the entrails strewn all
about the body.

Just as before, the middle son stayed out with the cows- except, being a bit more clever than his elder
brother, he laid out on the roof of the barn rather than out in the field, and so was much farther from
the herd; he could not hear their mumbles and groans that night, but his sight was clearer for it. In the
darkest part of the night, the middle son saw his sister sneak out of their family’s home; that night
was graced with a moon, a moon brighter and bigger than what had lit the eldest brother’s sight.

That night, the middle brother what his eldest brother saw; his sister did turn into a fox, and she did
slay and eat the cow- and although it was a great strain upon him, the middle brother did not let his
fear drag him into darkness. He watched his sister devour the heart and liver of the cow, strew it’s
entrails about the body- but, when a gust of wind blew in the sky, a cloud covered the moon for a
moment, and he could not see what happened after.

That morning, the middle brother checked to see if the cow had really been slain- and it had. There
were massive paw prints in the blood soaked ground as well, and to the middle brother, this seemed
proof perfect that his sister was a Fox.

But when he went to his parents with this news, they would not hear it- indeed, his father sent him
out to his brother, and would not hear a word against his only daughter.

For nearly a year, all seemed well enough- though the eldest and middle son of the family had been
banished, their mother’s letters kept them both informed of the farm’s prosperity and suffering. Their
youngest brother, being both clever and brave, also sent letters; together, the three brothers conceived
of a plan by which they could prove their sister was a Fox. Although their sister had never done
harm to any of them, she had slain the cattle- what was to say she would not slay their parents, or
them, should some famine or plague or calamity wreak destruction on their herds?

And so, the brothers plan came to be, and that plan was this: the youngest brother would keep watch
on the herds, and, if the next cow was slain as before, he would do as his brother’s before him had
done: he would watch the herds that night, to try and see what was molesting them so.
However, in secret, he would take lessons from the shepherds in the nearby mountains, and learn their skill of slinging- and, after the Fox slew another of the cattle, he would slay the Fox from afar, thus ending the threat to the cows, providing proof positive of a Fox being the culprit, and- should their sister, indeed, not be a Fox, they would rid their house of a terrible monster all the same.

One day, a letter came from their brother, telling them that a cow had been slain much as before, and that he was enacting the plan as I have described- he asked his brothers to wish him luck, and pray for his success… and then the two brothers in the city did not hear of their family for four months.

Four long months of nothing at all- and then a letter came from their sister, inviting them back home; their father had found and slain the beast that was attacking the cows, a wild dog that had gone mad with hunger and disease- all was forgiven, and they were both wanted back home. Though neither brother trusted their sister entirely, they were more willing to believe that a wild dog had killed so many of their cattle.

When they got back to their family’s home, something seemed wrong; the herd of cattle was small and frightened, and the house seemed like it had sunken into itself. Before they could go into the lands that were theirs, a shepherd stopped them, and warned them that something dangerous and bad had taken residence in their house, and that no one had seen their parents, brother, or sister in many months. Seeing that neither brother could be dissuaded from journeying on, the shepherd gave both brothers a share of his dinner and warned them not to eat anything they might be offered, and not to sleep the night in that place- the barn was safe enough, but it would be unwise to linger in either place for longer than two days.

Thanking him, the brothers went on to their house- and for a moment, they both thought they saw blood splattering the walls, and bones in the trash heap that were… disturbing. Wrong.

And then that moment passed, and they were greeted by their sister, who was overjoyed to see them. She made them both very welcome, answering their questions about the farm with curious detachment- the cows had been sick, she said, the harvests were poor, she said, youngest brother took our best cows out to market, she said.

The house itself had a strange, musty quality to it- and before either brother realized it, it was long past sunset and time for supper. Remembering what the shepherd had said, the brothers pleaded exhaustion and politeness, saying that the journey from the city back home was too tiring to think of anything other than sleep, saying that they could not sleep in the house without the permission of their father- no matter if they had been forgiven, they needed to hear it from his mouth directly.

They retired to the barn, and in the night they heard something that chilled them both to the bone- a cow, being slain, the crunching of bones. They peered out of a high window, and saw the same Fox as before, devouring one of the few remaining cattle- and, as before, neither brother could move or speak until the dawn came.

This time, taking no chances, they ran back for the city- the shepherd’s food was eaten on the way. It was in their mad dash that they came upon a monk, who heard their story out and gave them sutras and three mystical potions, to use against the Fox- who told them flatly that their parents and brother would not find peace in the next world if they did not slay the Fox; and so, with heavy hearts, the brothers turned around and returned to their family’s home.

The sutras bound the Fox to one form; the potions, in order, stripped it of its sisterly qualities, weakened it’s magic to almost nothing, and burned it to ash. When the fox died, the cows relaxed; the house, made uninhabitable by the Fox, fell into itself; only rubble and gardens remained to show
that a house had been there before.”

“Wow. That is…”

“Not what happened. Not really. I mean- yes, there was a Fox, and yes, she was raised by humans - but… she didn’t slay the cows because- that’s not what Foxes do.”

“So, why did she slay the cows?”

“She thought they would- she thought they could help her be more human. She did it because she wanted to be human. It’s hard to explain, but- I feel it, sometimes. This sort of- it feels sort of like everyone around me can tell, sometimes, that I’m not… human. Not right. And, as far as I know, this is common for crossbreds- but for full foxes, it’s… deeper. Less a feeling, more a certainty. This girl, from so long ago- she probably thought that the inherent traits of the cows would be… passed, to her, if she ate their livers and hearts. Indeed, they probably did, for a time- but, as she matured, her natural instincts became… too much.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means… I like it when you bite my neck. I like to bite your neck. I let you bite my neck because it feels good, and vice versa- but it’s… more than that. Foxes… don’t show affection the same way as humans.”

“So, for you, a show of affection would be?”

“Um. Well. It looks a lot more like… like physical taunting? Um, sometimes, it is a bit like, like getting a shoulder punch from a friend- sometimes it’s like getting a cheek pinched by a grandma…”

“So… why is this problematic?”

“It’s because… foxes are solitary, scavenger-y omnivores. Humans… aren’t. Foxes are more like cats in their behaviors- they don’t form packs like dogs and wolves, even though they’re related. Foxes play with their children, and play as children- but often, the only reason two adult Foxes will meet with each other is to dispute territory or to- um. Mate. And… those traits don’t mix very well with human ones.”

“I. Um. I see. So the reason you’re jealous of Megan is…?”

“It’s- she’s not human, but she’s not a Fox, either. It would be easier if she were- as it stands now, the part of me that is Fox doesn’t… like her. Doesn’t want to be around her. And the human part of me… is more wary of her than anything else. I guess it boils down to the fact that Megan is much more… she’s more… trustworthy. Than I am.”

“I trust you- and you are very worthy of trust.”

“I’m… I don’t mean… I guess trustworthy is the wrong word. I just- Kaldur, I know you trust me- but the adults… Batman, Black Canary… they don’t trust me. They trust Megan, who we’ve known, collectively, for about a month- but they don’t trust me at all.”

“I. Hm. Surely there is some-”

“No- no, from what I understand, there’s just something wrong with me. Does that sound right to you?”

“No-”
“I’m used to it- I’m used to not being trusted, and, and being kicked out of groups because… I don’t know. Every time, it’s always some stupid excuse- too violent, too timid, too this, too that, too **anything** just… **leave**- but no one ever tells me why. They just tell me to leave; they’ve told me to leave so many times, I got used to being told to go, to go and never ever come back.”

“Terry-”

“And it’s no use fighting about it, not when **everyone** I ever meet could- and I’m so **afraid**, Kaldur. I’m afraid because I’m going to do something that your mentors won’t agree with, and they’ll tell me- maybe nicely, but I don’t think so- and they’ll tell me to leave too, and I don’t **want** to-”

“Terry, I would not let that happen-”

“And the very worst thing- it’s that. That they’ll never tell Megan to leave. Or Conner, or Robin, or Artemis, or Wally- not even you. They know all of you, even if it’s only for a little bit- they trust all of you, or they have people they trust vouching for you. I’m **alone** Kaldur- the only person who can speak on my behalf is me, and they don’t trust me or want me around any of you and it **hurts** and I just… I can’t.”

“Terry, I love you.”

“I love you too, Kaldur.”

I sniffle.

“I don’t think I have it in me to… to like someone who has everything I want without being anything that I am. I- I don’t think I’m strong enough for that. I’m so sorry- I can… I can be polite, and work with her, but… I’m not sure I can ever, ever be friends with her.”

“No- I am sorry for not making it clear to everyone that you are a trusted member of our Team. That I trust you.”

“W-well. I wouldn’t have told you my name if I didn’t trust you.”

“I am not sure I am strong enough to keep your secret.”

“I am, or I would not have told it to you.”

“…I do not share your confidence in me…”

“That’s alright. I’ve got enough for both of us.”

He tugs me closer to him, sliding closer to me on the couch in the private waterfall room; I feel kind of relieved. I said something horrible, and he… I don’t know. But I do feel… better. It feels… good, to lean on him. It feels good to have someone else know my name, to say out loud why I’m so…

I just. I kind of wish I knew why, exactly, so many people just… don’t want me around.

I think… I think these people, the ones I’m on a team with? The Team? I think they might be the
people who… who want me around.

I really hope it doesn’t get fucked up.

There are always demons and promises, blood and iron; past transgressions come around again.

I’ll explain.

My parents work- it’s not that I didn’t learn what I could about them. I did.

Just… quietly.

There are things that I cannot take a chance about. The man responsible for my parents demise- whether they deserved it or not- he’s too dangerous for me to deal with alone. He always has been. In case I don’t make it, I’ll write out here everything I know about him- and… and pray that someone, somewhere, can decode what I’ve written.

Here are the facts, as I know them to be.

My parents were the first people in recorded history to successfully synthesize a sizeable amount of Xenthonium; according to the definition in Kowloon, they were alchemists of incomparable skill. To the rest of the world, they were a pair of old scientists who didn’t share much about their private lives- there were some rumors of scandal, others of a child never seen in the light of day- an experiment gone wrong. Shady dealings, and a set of government files- they’re under my bed, taped to the bottom of my toy-box- on everyone there, including me. The files are copies, and mine says I died shortly after my parents were killed- “Died from Exposure, body never recovered.” There are a few notes about my burgeoning meta-human abilities, a copied sticky note lamenting the lack of any useable samples of my genetics, and the file ends there.

My parents files are substantially thicker; they were primarily funded by Lex Luthor, but did freelance work for several government agencies I retro-Remember vaguely; Departement Gamma, Department PSI, Hayoth, and Universite Notre Dame des Ombres, I think. Lexcorp provides for American agencies- but that’s not important right now.

What is important is that my parents made things that worked. They worked well. The things my parents made worked well enough that their deaths were investigated by agencies all across the world- and all the agencies agree that the man responsible.

Is very very bad.

And when several agency reports, completely independent of each other, decide that one person is too dangerous to take on but too dangerous to ignore- several agencies of spooks, no less- well. One ten year old crossbred with no fighting experience, no contacts, and no network- one of those doesn’t have even a million to one chance.

I’ll bite the hook- the man who killed my parents is called… I’m sorry, I can’t. I’ll use the codename all the agencies eventually came up with- or at least, the most common piece of them.

His name is Blight.
I’ve researched all I can about him— obliquely, of course. By all accounts, he was a man—a weapons
proprietor of no small skill, except… one of his weapons misfired during a sort of… it’s not quite
showing off, but it is. Demonstration.

And to save himself, he did something… terrible.

He became a Blight upon the land— something… ugly.

And I am afraid of him. In his case, fear is an appropriate response.

Back when I was young and stupidly overconfident, I thought that if I could get high up in the…the
Mahjong gang, I could… I don’t know. I could take down Blight from within his own system.

I think the only thing I did is make him realize that I’m not dead— or possibly get another person
ekilled because he thought they killed me.

I never saw Big Time after he threw me down— and since I didn’t actually die, Blight’s forces
couldn’t find my body… which means they assumed I was dead.

Never assume anyone is dead unless you see and examine the body yourself.

No one is ever as dead as you think, otherwise.

The next day, I get a call from, of all people, Sarah— sorry. She calls herself Pantha.

“…Sarah?”

“Yeah. El Capitan told me that you are not well versed in jungle navigation?”

“I- yeah, I got through the Deep Forest/Jungle navigation portion of Survival classes at Necro’s with
barely a pass- why?”

“I am going to teach you. It will take a small amount of time— no more than a day and a night. You
will meet me at the lobby of the Apartments?”

“Um- what time?”

“Whenever you’re there- take your time, get ready. I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay.”

Hmm. I was not expecting that— although it is damn good luck that I haven’t let my calluses go soft.
The jungle is no place for shoes. Or clothes at all, really.
I tell Kaldur that I’m going to be gone for the day and the night- special training. He raises an eyebrow, but shrugs and lets me go without a fuss- I’m packed and about to leave when I realize what I forgot to do today.

I haven’t kissed Kaldur even once! All day!

With the very important matter of kissing my b-boyfriend out of the way, I’m in my Palace within moments.

Sprintstill finds me in even less time than usual; some hurried explanations and I’m on my bike-horse, out to Kowloon.

With one quick swirling movement through a city I’ve navigated half-drunk, nearly blinded by seagulls, with broken bones (fingers and toes, mostly), naked, and generally by myself- multiple times, no less- I’m in the Lobby of the Apartments.

It’s while I’m there that I realize two very important things- firstly, I don’t have a dress that’s appropriate for wearing to any future events I’ll be going to, and secondly, I don’t have enough money to buy any of the materials. Thankfully, the Realm Exchange is open to me now- not so thankfully, I still have nowhere near enough money to buy the necessary supplies.

I’ll have to find a high-pay job soon…

Still. It’s always nice to get the Seasonal Edition of Neu; this year’s fall colors are gold, brown, pink, and white. Oddly springish with that pink, but what can you do?

Pantha is about a hundred and seventy centimeters tall; for some reason, I remember her hair as a dark brown mop, but now it’s a lush red mane, soft looking and gleaming. Her gaze is gold with bits of brown and green sprinkled on; her lips are thin and pink. She’s wearing… ah, Nippon (or possibly Nihon, it depends on which of the islands you’re from) style Oni garb; it’s a pair of shorts and a very loose top made of heliger skin which is, under absolutely no circumstances, to be confused with tiger skin. A string of teeth- some wolf, some boar, some bear, some I don’t recognize- sits loosely around her neck, and her much lankier body is slightly swaying in time to the electric beat of the slot machines. There’s a knife painted over in bright colors and steadily more vicious patterns hanging dead center on her necklace of adulthood; her fingers and toes are clad in delicate, pale white claws.

Her eyes flash when she sees me- and her movements are perfectly defined, neither restrained nor overdone; no waste. When she wraps her arms around my waist and hugs me, I hug her back, gladly; she smells of cinnamon and coffee and faintly of caramel and leaf mold.

I stash my bike up a tree Pantha swears is safe from monkeys, and then I take my clothing off- everything except my dudou and my S-Blades. We vanish into the jungle together.
I can’t actually tell you what Pantha taught me- that would be a slight upon both of our honors. So.

I’ll just have to tell you something else.

It was during the night portion of my jungle training with Pantha- that was when I felt a strange… something. Like a smell you can feel in your teeth or a snarl in your fingers- a purple taste, a bright sound, the sensation of falling while lying in a bed at night and the wailing of sirens in your nose; it’s not a feeling I can describe without sounding like a synesthesiaic. I’m not. But there are some feelings in life that just… don’t make sense otherwise.

Like… like have you ever boiled beans in a crockpot without spices and tasted the broth? It’s a very… brown flavor. It tastes kind of like- dirt. Like you’d imagine dirt to taste- dusty and dry, even though you’re taking a spoonful of steaming wetness; it’s gritty and slimy on your tongue too, and sort of...

Anyway. Knowing what I know now, I’m going to call this sensation Spin; and when I felt spin that night, I followed it- followed it into the ruins of a village, overgrown with mosses and vines. Trees had burst through walls, and there was very little sound anywhere around it- no birds of the night, no chattering rodents creeping around, not even insects to make their chitinous clicks; nothing but the faint rustle of leaves in an even fainter breeze. In the pale light cast by the sliver of the waning moon, the entirety of that place- broken walls, shattered tiles, dried splatters of uncomfortably familiar shape- all were a pale wash of black, grey, and white.

Even stranger, the only smell was that of paper and ink, long dried and nearly to the point of disintegration- a memory so old and worn, it would sooner vanish than be turned over and examined with the fingers of the mind again.

The rustle- the only sound in that place- came from a hole, in the center of the ruins; a tree had grown over a pair of monolithic stone posts with an even more massive lintel; long vines grew down in front of the opening, softly moving in and out over the threshold in a dry, cool breeze. The vines were silver in the light, covered in delicate blossoms that smelled very vaguely of honey; small vanilla orchids dripped off of the left lintel.

The spin here was to the point of being almost unbearable- and then it stopped. Faint white spars of light shone on discs- scales of some enormous fish set to catch light and throw it up on the smooth walls of a tunnel; each scale illuminates a painting of encaustic and chalk and charcoal and ink, thick and black. Poetry, or possibly simple captions- ah.

It takes a moment, but I can read them- and they say this.

Long ago, an artist of great skill was born. Their skill with ink and brush was of the kind seen only once in an age; and the artist sought out every teacher and every material to make the best brushes, the finest of papers, the blackest of inks- and in doing so, they learned more than perhaps any other of the ways of ink and paper, brush and stone. The youth became a man, and was reknowned as a painter of incomparable skill; noble lords and mighty kings sought his work, and ladies of all age and standing sought a piece of poetry written in his hand.

Still, the youth was unsatisfied- for, though he admired every woman who he gave a piece of poetry to, none stirred his heart nor his loins. The man soon despaired of ever finding a wife, for no woman was ever as beautiful as what he wrote for her; and no woman could ever match the beauty of his paintings.

One day, the man decided to paint a beautiful woman- the most beautiful woman in all the world. He winnowed details and parts from every woman he had ever met- all the best parts of all the women
he had ever met, together and bound into the nude form of a woman. When his perfect image was created, he wrote a poem describing her- every virtue he desired, and every fault he desired; a masterpiece. In the creation of this ink and paper woman, he found that the real women of the world could not compare to his creation- could not hope to match up to her in any way. Was he not the best in the world? Did he not deserve the best in the world?

And so, the man used magic, old and dark and terrible, to turn his creation into a living being, exactly as he had described and prescribed. This was an affront on the goddesses of life and death, childbirth and marriage, and women besides- in their anger, they sought to punish the man, for it was not for him to decide what a woman should be, nor was it for him to decide the manner of her birth.

Their curse was two-fold- the first, most immediate part of the curse was immediate and physical. The man’s flesh turned to paper, and his blood to ink; his creation became a force of unparalleled destruction, destroying his village and killing every living thing- man, woman, child, and beast alike. Further, his creation would not let him leave the village, nor would it let any other being come near it; as the man was nothing more than paper and ink, he did not need to eat or sleep. The creation, everything he had ever desired, would not let him rest in his bed nor seek any comfort except itself- and so, for a time, the man was a prisoner of his own selfish desires and misguided thought; he could not escape his creation, for it was as he was, and singleminded in it’s devotion to him; he could not escape the village, for his creation always stopped him or found and captured him before he could make any sort of escape.

Eventually, the man went mad, and destroyed his creation, first with fire, then with water- and it was then that the second part of his curse was realized. By destroying the only other creature in the world as he was, the man had doomed himself to an eternity alone; no other would have been able to live as he would live, no other would be able to stay as he would stay. And so, the man was alone.

After years of loneliness and despair, years of regret and remorse and true, honest sorrow- sorrow that he did not try to change himself, sorrow at the death of his creation, sorrow at the birth of his creation- the man sought the goddess of forgiveness and mercy, and begged of her some hope. Even if it were a pretty bauble, useless but for it’s sparkle and shine in the light of day, it would be enough for the man- for, his cursed life had not been an unaging one; after his destruction of his creation, of his wife, the man had withered and aged, and gone quite blind. Even the joy of his skill had been denied to him, and not, to the man, without reason. Still, even a small piece of hope would be enough to sustain him on into the endless void of the years to come- surely the great and merciful goddess, the forgiving and loving queen of those who suffered- surely she could find some pity in her heart for him?

Indeed, she could- but there was little hope for her to offer him. She told him, sadly, that his death could not be had at his own hand- that someone other than he would have to take his life away. Further, his curse would not be lifted with his death- it would pass on to the dealer of his death, as the anger of the goddesses was greater than his single life could ever possibly appease. However, before the goddess left him, she gave him a sword, and a promise- in his hands, the sword became a simple walking stick, no more dangerous than a branch on the ground- and the promise was this: one day, he would be free of this life, and be able to go into the courts of Hell without fear, for the goddess had absolved him of his shame and dishonor- though the curse was beyond her power to interced upon, she could do that thing for him.

And so, the man aged, and aged, and aged, until at last-

I came upon the painter, laid out on a heavy stone slab; more withered and gnarled than can be truly
explained or described- treroots and crumpled pages, the sludge of nearly dried ink slowly grinding through arteries and veins. His ears, once soft and furry like mine, were tattered and spotty seethrough onionskin lined with black in his great age; his eyes were glued shut with dried ink. His claws were enormous, dulled with time and twisted, gnarled black; a dusty grey-white loincloth preserved his genitals from my view. I took a small reed and a few drops of water and I gently, gently dripped them into his slightly open mouth; a few more on his withered face, dripped onto his eyes. A slightly deeper dry breath rattled in his chest, and he spoke, and his voice was akin to the rustling of pages in a book and the creaking of spines and the scratching of pen to paper.

“do not waste your pity on me, descendant of mine- i am beyond it.”

“It makes me feel better for you, to know that I tried- drink, grandfather, and speak easier; please, tell me- how can you be… helped?”

“thank you, child. i can be helped, though i dare not ask you for it-”

“Please, grandfather, please-”

“i can only be free in death- i could not ask you to do such a thing.”

“Grandfather- you have lived for far longer than any should have. And… it is my duty to help my people.”

“who are you to assume such a duty?”

“I am the Tenth Queen of Foxes, grandfather; please, let me help you. I know what must be done- please, allow me to do it.”

“you will be cursed for doing it.”

“I know.”

“…thank you. when it is done, the things in the ceadar-wood chests are yours; they are on the eastern wall.”

“Thank you, grandfather. I will make it quick.”

“thank you… i’m sorry… thank… you… I hope you can forgive me… one… day…”

I give him the mercy he is due- when it is over, there is nothing but cedar chests on the eastern wall and a puddle of greyish water. The chests are cedar wood, or were cedar wood- they crumble at my touch, only tarnished pieces of bronze and powdered bits of sutras long rendered powerless with age. There are a total of three chests; the first one if filled with painting supplies- brushes and ink sticks, grindstones and rolled up paintings on fine silk; I take them and gently put them in a specific pocket, sealed in plastic and soon to be preserved in my den…

The second chest has a written account of everything the painter saw, did, and remembered- slats of bamboo and bone bound together with thin grasstwine, and under the journal is the sword; when I touch it, a burning pain explodes down my left arm, pinching and itching like needles- thousands of needles, all at once. The sword fades and slicks up my arm, vanishing into an impressively exact image on my arm, burning and then fading- a curse mark. Ah. I was wondering when I’d manage to
get cursed…

The third and final chest is full of money— but it’s nothing I can use, as clay coins and wooden disks with floral designs on them haven’t had value in any Realm for longer than I can say without hurting my mind; the timescale involved is too great to imagine.

I got a sword though!

Pantha put some sort of crushed leaf mixture on my curse mark, to keep infection out of it and the rising sun sees me at the door of Raven’s house and clinic. I tell her of what I found, of what I did— of how I was cursed, and what Pantha did to keep my wound clean.

Her reaction is comforting.

“Well. at least you’re not pregnant.”

“Actually—”

“Wait, are you?”

“No, but if you could prescribe some sort of contraceptive for me, I would be very happy.”

“Huh. you finally got a boyfriend you want to get naked with?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I’ll be attacked by good taste— good for you. Yeah, I’ll give you something for that— and I’ll mix up an ointment for your cursed tattoo.”

“Any thoughts about what kind of curse it is?”

“Sure. It’s the kind of curse that’s only a curse if you use it.”

“Huh?”

“Um— try holding the sword… I think it’s a kind of sabre? It looks like a dao, at the very least—”

The sword is heavy in my palm— perfectly balanced, perfectly weighted, perfect length and heft and angle of the hilt— it’s perfect; and when I turn my attention back to Raven, it needle-burns back into the skin of my arm. It actually hurts a bit less now— not much, but less.

“Oh hell.”

“Yeah. It’s not that the curse is for you to have a tattoo— the curse is for you to have a sword. And every time you stop using the sword, it turns into a tattoo again, anew—”

“-with all the pain and healing that implies. Considering my life… do you think…”
“No, I don’t think it will ever heal. And if it does, you will use the sword again—don’t pretend you didn’t like the feel of it in your hand.”

“It’s the most perfect sword I’ve ever held.”

“Yeah. A weapon like that— you couldn’t not use it if you wanted to. Anyway—here. This is a medicine, kind of like a multivitamin—are you still taking those?”

“Yeah?”

“Good—anyway, just add one of these pills to your regular regimen daily; the same with this ointment. It will sting the first few times you use it, but so will the curse mark, so. It will dry into a protective film, and it’ll keep the skin it covers healthy and clean; you’ll have to do all the normal tattoo things too. Apply it once a day, and try not to scratch it or get it grabbed.”

“Right. So… tell me seriously. Did I just get myself an honest to the gods beserker’s symbol?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn. Well—shit happens, I guess.”

“Especially to you, it would seem.”

“Hmmph. How’ve you and Jinx been, then?”

“Well, I’m alright—Jinx, on the other hand, could use a talking to.”

“Ah—right. Sinta. I asked her to—fuck. I didn’t think about that at all—is she here?”

“Yeah. I can go get her, if you’d like?”

“Please do— and is my bolt-bag still here, or…?”

“Right where you left it, Terry. I’ll go get Jinx.”

Raven’s leaving makes the room expand from its quiet darkness to a delicately rippling twilight; dark wood floors and bright plastered walls, fresh flowers in glass jars and the faint scent of herbal remedies, leeches and blood. I had to take a shower before Raven would examine me— and the clothing I left myself is all just on the edge of being too small. I usually wear my clothing a bit loose— but sports bras don’t size in the same way dodou’s do, and the hoodie was oversized to begin with—now it fits me perfectly. The shorts are a bit shorter than I like to wear them, and the smalls are too small. Thankfully, Raven has a supply of clean smalls in all sizes for her patients— and as I am one, I don’t feel weird about exchanging my too small pair for a pair that actually fits.

Nothing worse in this world than a pair of smalls that are too small.

Maybe unrequited sexual frustrations...

No, too small smalls are worse.

Jinx is lankier than I remember; like her arms and legs and neck decided to get longer before the rest of her did—her head is still oversized like that of a child’s, but her hands and feet are enormous. She’s
wearing a cropped lavender top without sleeves, long grey tights, and loose, baggy white pants held up with a soft green belt made of cloth folded over and stitched together. I realize, the moment I see her that there’s only one thing I can say- I just. Usually don’t have to say it.

But- this time… I do.

“I’m sorry, Jinx.”

“Terry-?”

“I’m sorry for giving you Sinta’s c-case; I should have… I’m so sorry. I wasn’t expecting- I don’t know. I shouldn’t have given that to you- you didn’t deserve… j-Jinx, I’m so s-sorry-”

“Terry- please don’t- don’t do that, you couldn’t have known that… I’m so sorry. I couldn’t save her. Terry, I couldn’t save her.”

“I know, Jinx. I’m sorry for making you try.”

“I’m not- if you hadn’t, I would have never met Sinta, and I would have never- you know, the last thing she told me was that I should be proud of what I did, that there weren’t many people in the world who would stand up for someone when no one else would… when she said that to me- I think… I think I wanted to become that kind of person. Does that-?”

“Yeah. That sounds like Sinta. And… I think you already are that kind of person, Jinksa. I mean… you worked so hard, I know you did- and even though Sinta is still- was still- was. You still tried- for that, I am eternally grateful.”

“Th-thank you t-Terry.”

“Hey- c’mere.”

I pull her wiry oakstave ironwood and diamond hard body into my arms, and hug her until she stops shivering and crying. The sun rose during our conversation- Raven brings us all a bowl of sweetfish congee, and a plate of scallion pancakes with soy sauce. Breakfast is a delicious affair- and Raven tells me that on no uncertain terms will she make the Team dynamics any shakier then they already are, no thank you- but I can still call her for help should the situation require such. Also, if I get pregnant I have to find my own abortionist, as she categorically refuses to administer one for anything less than a medical emergency- and an unplanned pregnancy is not one of those things.

Second breakfast is yam cha at Grandma Dumpling’s, with another bowl of delicious congee- savory shredded pork and apple matchsticks- and a take-away box of sweet bean buns for later. Or, more likely, Wally.

I get back to the Cave maybe an hour after sunrise- Kaldur usually finishes his solo training by then. Sweet timing, that- I share the sweet buns with him, and some delicious smooches. I would have done more, but he got called away by Batman for some reason- goddamn Batman. Always keeping a good thing from going. Always keeping the opportunities for getting groiny down.
That said, it did remind me to train with my new weapon.

I put the remaining buns in the fridge, threw out some bad food, a few things covered in mold, and an empty jar of mixed-berry jam. A stop at the sanitarium for some cleansing rubbing alcohol and an application of my ointment makes the steadily burning pain on my arm dull into a softly glowing ache; I put a layer of gauze on and stopped by my room for an armsock. It’s black.

Surprisingly, the constant pressure on my arm makes the cursemark feel much better.

The training room vast and empty- I transform before I go in. Jesus, my costume feels weird on my arm; the additional pressure makes me feel like something is biting down on the skin, teeth digging in and pulling at me. I stalk into the center of the room, stand in the glowing ring of battle. My Sword falls into my hand- enemies rise from the depths and crags of the rooms.

The training regiment I use isn’t for the faint of heart. I’m going to skip it for now, though- I recalled a legend from the lands to the north of the Mountain, and I think you’ll enjoy reading it.

If nothing else, it might help you understand-

It’s a story they tell in the edgelands, down where mountains and forests bleed all together, dotted with sandy beaches towards the sea and puddled lakes scattered over those rolling lands.

Yes sir, that Daniel Webster’s dead- or at the very least, they buried him. I, for one, am not so sure that mere death could take that barrister away, on account of the fact that every time there’s a thunder storm around Marshfield, you can hear his rolling voice in the hollows of the sky. And, if you go to his grave and speak, loud and clear; “Daniel Webster- Daniel Webster!” the ground will shiver and the trees will shake and after a while you’ll hear his deep voice saying, “Neighbour, how stands the Union?” Then, well, you’d better answer that the Union stands as she stood, rock-bottomed and copper sheathed, one and indivisible, or he’s liable to rear right out of the earth. At least, that’s what I assume- I’ve never said anything else, when he answers my call.

Now, for a while, he was the biggest man in the country. He never did get to be President, but he was the biggest man. There were thousands that trusted him right next to God Almighty, and they told stories about him and all the things that belonged to him that were like the stories of patriarchs and such. They said, when he stood up to speak, stars and stripes came right out in the sky, and once he spoke against a river and made it sink into the ground with shame. They said, when he walked the woods with his fishing rod, Killall, the trout would jump out fo the streams right into his pockets, for they knew it was no use putting up a fight against him; and, when he argued a case, he could turn on the harps of the blessed and the shaking of the earth underground.

That was the kind of man he was, and his big farm up at Marshfield was suitable to him. The chickens he raised were all white meat down through the drumsticks, the cows were tended like children, and the big ram he called Goliath had horns with a curl like a morning-glory vine and could butt through an iron door. But Daniel wasn’t one of your gentleman farmers; he knew all the ways of the land, and he’d be up by candlelight to see that the chores got done.

A man with a mouth like a mastiff, a brow like a mountain, eyes like burning anthracite and a mind sharper than any whip- that was Daniel Webster in his prime. Now, his biggest case- the biggest case
he ever did argue in- was never written down in any book anywhere, for he argued it against the
devil himself, nip and tuck and no holds barred. This here is the way I used to hear it told.

There was a man named Jabez Stone, lived at Cross Corners, New Hampshire. He wasn’t a bad man
to start with, but he was an unlucky man. If he planted corn, he got borers; if he planted potatoes, he
got blight. He had good enough land, but it didn’t prosper to him; he had a decent wife and children,
but the more children he had, the less there was to feed them. If stones cropped up in his neighbour’s
field, boulders boild up in his; if he had a horse with the spavins, he’d trade it for one with the
staggerers and give something extra for it. There’s some folks bound to be like that- but one day, Jabez
Stone got sick of the whole business.

He’d been plowing that morning and he’d just broke the plowshare on a rock that he could have
sworn hadn’t been there yesterday. And, as he stood looking at the plowshare, the off horse began to
cough- that ropy kind of cough that means sickness and horse doctors. There were two children
down with the measles, his wife was ailing, and he had a whitlow on his thumb. It was the last straw
for Jabez Stone. “I vow,” he said, and he looked around him kind of desperate- “I vow it’s enough to
make a man want to sell his soul to the devil; and I would, too, for two cents!”

Then, well, he felt a kind of queerness come over him at having said what he’d said; though,
naturally, being a New Hampshireman, he wouldn’t take it back. But, all the same, when it got to be
evening and, as far as he could see, no notice had been taken, he felt relieved in his mind, for he was
a religious man. Notice, however, is always taken, sooner or later- just as the Good Book says. Sure
enough, next day around supper time, a soft-spoken, dark-dressed stranger drove up in a handsome
buggy and asked for Jabez Stone.

Well, Jabez told his family it was a lawyer, come to see him about a legacy. But he knew who it was.
They were white teeth, and plentiful- some say they were filed to a point, but I wouldn’t vouch for
that. And he surely didn’t like it when the dog took one look at the stranger and ran away howling
with his tail between his legs. But, having passed his word- more or less- he stuck to it, and they
went out behind the barn and made their bargain. Jabez Stone had to prick his finger to sign, and the
stranger lent him a silver pin. The wound healed clean, but it left a little white scar.

After that, all of a sudden, things began to pick up and prosper for Jabez Stone. His cows got fat and
his horses sleek, his crops were the envy of the neighbourhood, and lightning might strike all over
the valley, but it wouldn't strike his barn. Pretty soon, he was one of the prosperous people of the
county; they asked him to stand for selectman, and he stood for it; there began to be talk of running
him for state senate. All in all, you might say the Stone family was as happy and contented as cats in
a dairy. And so they were, except for Jabez Stone.

He'd been contented enough, the first few years. It's a great thing when bad luck turns; it drives most
other things out of your head. True, every now and then, especially in rainy weather, the little white
scar on his finger would give him a twinge. And once a year, punctual as clockwork, the stranger
with the handsome buggy would come driving by. But the sixth year, the stranger lighted, and, after
that, his peace was over for Jabez Stone.

The stranger came up through the lower field, switching his boots with a cane--they were handsome
black boots, but Jabez Stone never liked the look of them, particularly the toes. And, after he'd
passed the time of day, he said, "Well, Mr. Stone, you're a hummer! It's a very pretty property you've
"Well, some might favour it and others might not," said Jabez Stone, for he was a New Hampshireman.

"Oh, no need to decry your industry!" said the stranger, very easy, showing his teeth in a smile. "After all, we know what's been done, and it's been according to contract and specifications. So when--ahem--the mortgage falls due next year, you shouldn't have any regrets."

"Speaking of that mortgage, mister," said Jabez Stone, and he looked around for help to the earth and the sky, "I'm beginning to have one or two doubts about it."

"Doubts?" said the stranger, not quite so pleasantly.

"Why, yes," said Jabez Stone. "This being the U. S. A. and me always having been a religious man." He cleared his throat and got bolder.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I'm beginning to have considerable doubts as to that mortgage holding in court."

"There's courts and courts," said the stranger, clicking his teeth. "Still, we might as well have a look at the original document." And he hauled out a big black pocketbook, full of papers. "Sherwin, Slater, Stevens, Stone," he muttered. "I, Jabez Stone, for a term of seven years--Oh, it's quite in order, I think."

But Jabez Stone wasn't listening, for he saw something else flutter out of the black pocket book. It was something that looked like a moth, but it wasn't a moth. And as Jabez Stone stared at it, it seemed to speak to him in a small sort of piping voice, terrible small and thin, but terrible human.

"Neighbour Stone!" it squeaked. "Neighbour Stone! Help me! For God's sake, help me!"

But before Jabez Stone could stir hand or foot, the stranger whipped out a big bandanna handkerchief, caught the creature in it, just like a butterfly, and started tying up the ends of the bandanna.

"Sorry for the interruption," he said. "As I was saying--"

But Jabez Stone was shaking all over like a scared horse.

"That's Miser Stevens' voice!" he said, in a croak. "And you've got him in your handkerchief!"

The stranger looked a little embarrassed.

"Yes, I really should have transferred him to the collecting box," he said with a simper, "but there were some rather unusual specimens there and I didn't want them crowded. Well, well, these little contretemps will occur."

"I don't know what you mean by contertan," said Jabez Stone, "but that was Miser Stevens' voice! And he ain't dead! You can't tell me he is! He was just as spry and mean as a woodchuck, Tuesday!"

"In the midst of life--" said the stranger, kind of pious. "Listen!" Then a bell began to toll in the valley and Jabez Stone listened, with the sweat running down his face. For he knew it was tolled for Miser Stevens and that he was dead.

"These long-standing accounts," said the stranger with a sigh; "one really hates to close them. But business is business."
He still had the bandanna in his hand, and Jabez Stone felt sick as he saw the cloth struggle and flutter.

"Are they all as small as that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Small?" said the stranger. "Oh, I see what you mean. Why, they vary." He measured Jabez Stone with his eyes, and his teeth showed. "Don't worry, Mr. Stone," he said. "You'll go with a very good grade. I wouldn't trust you outside the collecting box. Now, a man like Daniel Webster, of course—well, we'd have to build a special box for him, and even at that, I imagine the wing spread would astonish you. He'd certainly be a prize. I wish we could see our way clear to him. But, in your case, as I was saying—"

"Put that handkerchief away!" said Jabez Stone, and he began to beg and to pray. But the best he could get at the end was a three years' extension, with conditions.

But till you make a bargain like that, you've got no idea of how fast four years can run. By the last months of those years, Jabez Stone's known all over the state and there's talk of running him for governor—and it's dust and ashes in his mouth. For every day, when he gets up, he thinks, "There's one more night gone," and every night when he lies down, he thinks of the black pocketbook and the soul of Miser Stevens, and it makes him sick at heart. Till, finally, he can't bear it any longer, and, in the last days of the last year, he hitches his horse and drives off to seek Daniel Webster. For Daniel was born in New Hampshire, only a few miles from Cross Corners, and it's well known that he has a particular soft spot for old neighbours.

It was early in the morning when he got to Marshfield, but Daniel was up already, talking Latin to the farm hands and wrestling with the ram, Goliath, and trying out a new trotter and working up speeches to make against John C. Calhoun. But when he heard a New Hampshire man had come to see him, he dropped every thing else he was doing, for that was Daniel's way. He gave Jabez Stone a breakfast that five men couldn't eat, went into the living history of every man and woman in Cross Corners, and finally asked him how he could serve him.

Jabez Stone allowed that it was a kind of mortgage case.

"Well, I haven't pleaded a mortgage case in a long time, and I don't generally plead now, except before the Supreme Court," said Daniel, "but if I can, I'll help you."

"Then I've got hope for the first time in ten years," said Jabez Stone, and told him the details.

Daniel walked up and down as he listened, hands behind his back, now and then asking a question, now and then plunging his eyes at the floor, as if they'd bore through it like gimlets. When Jabez Stone had finished, Daniel puffed out his cheeks and blew. Then he turned to Jabez Stone and a smile broke over his face like the sunrise over Monadnock.

"You've certainly given yourself the devil's own row to hoe, Neighbour Stone," he said, "but I'll take your case."

"You'll take it?" said Jabez Stone, hardly daring to believe.

"Yes," said Daniel Webster. "I've got about seventy-five other things to do and the Missouri Compromise to straighten out, but I'll take your case. For if two New Hampshiresmen aren't a match for the devil, we might as well give the country back to the Indians."

Then he shook Jabez Stone by the hand and said, "Did you come down here in a hurry?"

"Well, I admit I made time," said Jabez Stone.
"You'll go back faster," said Daniel Webster, and he told 'em to hitch up Constitution and Constellation to the carriage. They were matched grays with one white forefoot, and they stepped like greased lightning.

Well, I won't describe how excited and pleased the whole Stone family was to have the great Daniel Webster for a guest, when they finally got there. Jabez Stone had lost his hat on the way, blown off when they overtook a wind, but he didn't take much account of that. After supper he sent the family off to bed, for he had most particular business with Mr. Webster. Mrs. Stone wanted them to sit in the front parlor, but Daniel Webster knew front parlors and said he preferred the kitchen. So it was there they sat, waiting for the stranger, with a jug on the table between them and a bright fire on the hearth—the stranger being scheduled to show up on the stroke of midnight, according to specification.

Well, most men wouldn't have asked for better company than Daniel Webster and a jug. But with every tick of the clock Jabez Stone got sadder and sadder. His eyes roved round, and though he sampled the jug you could see he couldn't taste it. Finally, on the stroke of 11:30 he reached over and grabbed Daniel Webster by the arm.

"Mr. Webster, Mr. Webster!" he said, and his voice was shaking with fear and a desperate courage. "For God's sake, Mr. Webster, harness your horses and get away from this place while you can!"

"You've brought me a long way, neighbour, to tell me you don't like my company," said Daniel Webster, quite peaceable, pulling at the jug.

"Miserable wretch that I am!" groaned Jabez Stone. "I've brought you a devilish way, and now I see my folly. Let him take me if he wills. I don't hanker after it, I must say, but I can stand it. But you're the Union's stay and New Hampshire's pride! He mustn't get you, Mr. Webster! He mustn't get you!"

Daniel Webster looked at the distracted man, all gray and shaking in the firelight, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm obliged to you, Neighbour Stone," he said gently. "It's kindly thought of. But there's a jug on the table and a case in hand. And I never left a jug or a case half finished in my life."

And just at that moment there was a sharp rap on the door "Ah," said Daniel Webster, very coolly, "I thought your clock was a trifle slow, Neighbour Stone." He stepped to the door and opened it. "Come in," he said. The stranger came in--very dark and tall he looked in the firelight. He was carrying a box under his arm--a black, japanned box with little air holes in the lid. At the sight of the box, Jabez Stone gave a low cry and shrank into a corner of the room. "Mr. Webster, I presume," said the stranger, very polite, but with his eyes glowing like a fox's deep in the woods.

"Attorney of record for Jabez Stone," said Daniel Webster, but his eyes were glowing too. "Might I ask your name?"

"I've gone by a good many," said the stranger carelessly. "Perhaps Scratch will do for the evening. I'm often called that in these regions."

Then he sat down at the table and poured himself a drink from the jug. The liquor was cold in the jug, but it came steaming into the glass.

"And now," said the stranger, smiling and showing his teeth, "I shall call upon you, as a law-abiding citizen, to assist me in taking possession of my property."

Well, with that the argument began—and it went hot and heavy. At first, Jabez Stone had a flicker of hope, but when he saw Daniel Webster being forced back at point after point, he just sat scrunched
in his corner, with his eyes on that japanned box. For there wasn't any doubt as to the deed or the signature—that was the worst of it. Daniel Webster twisted and turned and thumped his fist on the table, but he couldn't get away from that. He offered to compromise the case; the stranger wouldn't hear of it. He pointed out the property had increased in value, and state senators ought to be worth more; the stranger stuck to the letter of the law. He was a great lawyer, Daniel Webster, but we know who's the King of Lawyers, as the Good Book tells us, and it seemed as if, for the first time, Daniel Webster had met his match.

Finally, the stranger yawned a little. "Your spirited efforts on behalf of your client do you credit, Mr. Webster," he said, "but if you have no more arguments to adduce, I'm rather pressed for time--" and Jabez Stone shuddered.

Daniel Webster's brow looked dark as a thundercloud. "Pressed or not, you shall not have this man," he thundered. "Mr. Stone is an American citizen, and no American citizen may be forced into the service of a foreign prince. We fought England for that in '12 and we'll fight all hell for it again!"

"Foreign?" said the stranger. "And who calls me a foreigner?"

"Well, I never yet heard of the dev--of your claiming American citizenship," said Daniel Webster with surprise.

"And who with better right?" said the stranger, with one of his terrible smiles. "When the first wrong was done to the first Indian, I was there. When the first slaver put out for the Congo, I stood on her deck. Am I not in your books and stories and beliefs, from the first settlements on? Am I not spoken of, still, in every church in New England? 'Tis true the North claims me for a Southerner, and the South for a Northerner, but I am neither. I am merely an honest American like yourself--and of the best descent--for, to tell the truth, Mr. Webster, though I don't like to boast of it, my name is older in this country than yours."

"Aha!" said Daniel Webster, with the veins standing out in his forehead. "Then I stand on the Constitution! I demand a trial for my client!"

"The case is hardly one for an ordinary court," said the stranger, his eyes flickering. "And, indeed, the lateness of the hour--"

"Let it be any court you choose, so it is an American judge and an American jury!" said Daniel Webster in his pride. "Let it be the quick or the dead; I'll abide the issue!"

"You have said it," said the stranger, and pointed his finger at the door. And with that, and all of a sudden, there was a rushing of wind outside and a noise of footsteps. They came, clear and distinct, through the night. And yet, they were not like the footsteps of living men.

"In God's name, who comes by so late?" cried Jabez Stone, in an ague of fear.

"The jury Mr. Webster demands," said the stranger, sipping at his boiling glass. "You must pardon the rough appearance of one or two; they will have come a long way."

And with that the fire burned blue and the door blew open and twelve men entered, one by one.

If Jabez Stone had been sick with terror before, he was blind with terror now. For there was Walter Butler, the loyalist, who spread fire and horror through the Mohawk Valley in the times of the Revolution; and there was Simon Girty, the renegade, who saw white men burned at the stake and whooped with the Indians to see them burn. His eyes were green, like a catamount's, and the stains
on his hunting shirt did not come from the blood of the deer. King Philip was there, wild and proud
as he had been in life, with the great gash in his head that gave him his death wound, and cruel
Governor Dale, who broke men on the wheel. There was Morton of Merry Mount, who so vexed the
Plymouth Colony, with his flushed, loose, handsome face and his hate of the godly. There was
Teach, the bloody pirate, with his black beard curling on his breast. The Reverend John Smeet, with
his strangler's hands and his Geneva gown, walked as daintily as he had to the gallows. The red print
of the rope was still around his neck, but he carried a perfumed handkerchief in one hand. One and
all, they came into the room with the fires of hell still upon them, and the stranger named their names
and their deeds as they came, till the tale of twelve was told. Yet the stranger had told the truth—they
had all played a part in America.

"Are you satisfied with the jury, Mr. Webster?" said the stranger mockingly, when they had taken
their places.

The sweat stood upon Daniel Webster's brow, but his voice was clear.

"Quite satisfied," he said. "Though I miss General Arnold from the company."

"Benedict Arnold is engaged upon other business," said the stranger, with a glower. "Ah, you asked
for a justice, I believe."

He pointed his finger once more, and a tall man, soberly clad in Puritan garb, with the burning gaze
of the fanatic, stalked into the room and took his judge's place.

"Justice Hathorne is a jurist of experience," said the stranger. "He presided at certain witch trials once
held in Salem. There were others who repented of the business later, but not he."

"Repent of such notable wonders and undertakings?" said the stern old justice. "Nay, hang them--
hang them all!" And he muttered to himself in a way that struck ice into the soul of Jabez Stone.

Then the trial began, and, as you might expect, it didn't look anyways good for the defense. And
Jabez Stone didn't make much of a witness in his own behalf. He took one look at Simon Girty and
screeched, and they had to put him back in his corner in a kind of swoon.

It didn't halt the trial, though; the trial went on, as trials do. Daniel Webster had faced some hard
juries and hanging judges in his time, but this was the hardest he'd ever faced, and he knew it. They
sat there with a kind of glitter in their eyes, and the stranger's smooth voice went on and on. Every
time he'd raise an objection, it'd be "Objection sustained," but whenever Daniel objected, it'd be
"Objection denied." Well, you couldn't expect fair play from a fellow like this Mr. Scratch.

It got to Daniel in the end, and he began to heat, like iron in the forge. When he got up to speak he
was going to flay that stranger with every trick known to the law, and the judge and jury too. He
didn't care if it was contempt of court or what would happen to him for it. He didn't care any more
what happened to Jabez Stone. He just got madder and madder, thinking of what he'd say. And yet,
curiously enough, the more he thought about it, the less he was able to arrange his speech in his
mind. Till, finally, it was time for him to get up on his feet, and he did so, all ready to bust out with
lightnings and denunciations. But before he started he looked over the judge and jury for a moment,
such being his custom. And he noticed the glitter in their eyes was twice as strong as before, and they
all leaned forward. Like hounds just before they get the fox, they looked, and the blue mist of evil in
the room thickened as he watched them. Then he saw what he'd been about to do, and he wiped his
forehead, as a man might who's just escaped falling into a pit in the dark.

For it was him they'd come for, not only Jabez Stone. He read it in the glitter of their eyes and in the
way the stranger hid his mouth with one hand. And if he fought them with their own weapons, he'd
fall into their power; he knew that, though he couldn't have told you how. It was his own anger and horror that burned in their eyes; and he'd have to wipe that out or the case was lost. He stood there for a moment, his black eyes burning like anthracite. And then he began to speak.

He started off in a low voice, though you could hear every word. They say he could call on the harps of the blessed when he chose. And this was just as simple and easy as a man could talk. But he didn't start out by condemning or reviling. He was talking about the things that make a country a country, and a man a man.

And he began with the simple things that everybody's known and felt--the freshness of a fine morning when you're young, and the taste of food when you're hungry, and the new day that's every day when you're a child. He took them up and he turned them in his hands. They were good things for any man. But without freedom, they sickened. And when he talked of those enslaved, and the sorrows of slavery, his voice got like a big bell. He talked of the early days of America and the men who had made those days. It wasn't a spread-eagle speech, but he made you see it. He admitted all the wrong that had ever been done. But he showed how, out of the wrong and the right, the suffering and the starvations, something new had come. And everybody had played a part in it, even the traitors.

Then he turned to Jabez Stone and showed him as he was- an ordinary man who'd had hard luck and wanted to change it. And, because he'd wanted to change it, now he was going to be punished for all eternity. And yet there was good in Jabez Stone, and he showed that good. He was hard and mean, in some ways, but he was a man. There was sadness in being a man, but it was a proud thing too. And he showed what the pride of it was till you couldn't help feeling it. Yes, even in hell, if a man was a man, you'd know it. And he wasn't pleading for any one person any more, though his voice rang like an organ. He was telling the story and the failures and the endless journey of mankind. They got tricked and trapped and bamboozled, but it was a great journey. And no demon that was ever foaled could know the inwardness of it--it took a man to do that.

The fire began to die on the hearth and the wind before morning to blow. The light was getting gray in the room when Daniel Webster finished. And his words came back at the end to New Hampshire ground, and the one spot of land that each man loves and clings to. He painted a picture of that, and to each one of that jury he spoke of things long forgotten. For his voice could search the heart, and that was his gift and his strength. And to one, his voice was like the forest and its secrecy, and to another like the sea and the storms of the sea; and one heard the cry of his lost nation in it, and another saw a little harmless scene he hadn't remembered for years. But each saw something. And when Daniel Webster finished he didn't know whether or not he'd saved Jabez Stone. But he knew he'd done a miracle. For the glitter was gone from the eyes of judge and jury, and, for the moment, they were men again, and knew they were men.

"The defense rests," said Daniel Webster, and stood there like a mountain. His ears were still ringing with his speech, and he didn't hear any thing else till he heard judge Hathorne say, "The jury will retire to consider its verdict."

Walter Butler rose in his place and his face had a dark, gay pride on it. "The jury has considered its verdict," he said, and looked the stranger full in the eye. "We find for the defendant, Jabez Stone."

With that, the smile left the stranger's face, but Walter Butler did not flinch.

"Perhaps 'tis not strictly in accordance with the evidence," he said, "but even the damned may salute
the eloquence of Mr. Webster."

With that, the long crow of a rooster split the gray morning sky, and judge and jury were gone from the room like a puff of smoke and as if they had never been there. The stranger turned to Daniel Webster, smiling wryly. "Major Butler was always a bold man," he said. "I had not thought him quite so bold. Nevertheless, my congratulations, as between two gentlemen."

"I'll have that paper first, if you please," said Daniel Webster, and he took it and tore it into four pieces. It was queerly warm to the touch. "And now," he said, "I'll have you!" and his hand came down like a bear trap on the stranger's arm. For he knew that once you bested anybody like Mr. Scratch in fair fight, his power on you was gone. And he could see that Mr. Scratch knew it too.

The stranger twisted and wriggled, but he couldn't get out of that grip. "Come, come, Mr. Webster," he said, smiling palely. "This sort of thing is ridicule--ouch!--is ridiculous. If you're worried about the costs of the case, naturally, I'd be glad to pay--"

"And so you shall!" said Daniel Webster, shaking him till his teeth rattled. "For you'll sit right down at that table and draw up a document, promising never to bother Jabez Stone nor his heirs or assigns nor any other New Hampshire man till doomsday! For any hades we want to raise in this state, we can raise ourselves, without assistance from strangers."

"Ouch!" said the stranger. "Ouch! Well, they never did run very big to the barrel, but--ouch!--I agree!"

So he sat down and drew up the document. But Daniel Webster kept his hand on his coat collar all the time.

"And, now, may I go?" said the stranger, quite humble, when Daniel 'd seen the document was in proper and legal form.

"Go?" said Daniel, giving him another shake. "I'm still trying to figure out what I'll do with you. For you've settled the costs of the case, but you haven't settled with me. I think I'll take you back to Marshfield," he said, kind of reflective. "I've got a ram there named Goliath that can butt through an iron door. I'd kind of like to turn you loose in his field and see what he'd do."

Well, with that the stranger began to beg and to plead. And he begged and he pled so humble that finally Daniel, who was naturally kind hearted, agreed to let him go. The stranger seemed terrible grateful for that and said, just to show they were friends, he'd tell Daniel's fortune before leaving. So Daniel agreed to that, though he didn't take much stock in fortunetellers ordinarily.

But, naturally, the stranger was a little different. Well, he pried and he peered at the line in Daniel's hands. And he told him one thing and another that was quite remarkable. But they were all in the past.

"Yes, all that's true, and it happened," said Daniel Webster. "But what's to come in the future?"

The stranger grinned, kind of happily, and shook his head. "The future's not as you think it," he said. "It's dark. You have a great ambition, Mr. Webster."

"I have," said Daniel firmly, for everybody knew he wanted to be President.

"It seems almost within your grasp," said the stranger, "but you will not attain it. Lesser men will be made President and you will be passed over."

"And, if I am, I'll still be Daniel Webster," said Daniel. "Say on."
"You have two strong sons," said the stranger, shaking his head. "You look to found a line. But each will die in war and neither reach greatness."

"Live or die, they are still my sons," said Daniel Webster. "Say on."

"You have made great speeches," said the stranger. "You will make more."

"Ah," said Daniel Webster.

"But the last great speech you make will turn many of your own against you," said the stranger. "They will call you Ichabod; they will call you by other names. Even in New England some will say you have turned your coat and sold your country, and their voices will be loud against you till you die."

"So it is an honest speech, it does not matter what men say," said Daniel Webster. Then he looked at the stranger and their glances locked. "One question," he said. "I have fought for the Union all my life. Will I see that fight won against those who would tear it apart?"

"Not while you live," said the stranger, grimly, "but it will be won. And after you are dead, there are thousands who will fight for your cause, because of words that you spoke."

"Why, then, you long-barreled, slab-sided, lantern-jawed, fortune-telling note shaver!" said Daniel Webster, with a great roar of laughter, "be off with you to your own place before I put my mark on you! For, by the thirteen original colonies, I'd go to the Pit itself to save the Union!"

And with that he drew back his foot for a kick that would have stunned a horse. It was only the tip of his shoe that caught the stranger, but he went flying out of the door with his collecting box under his arm.

"And now," said Daniel Webster, seeing Jabez Stone beginning to rouse from his swoon, "let's see what's left in the jug, for it's dry work talking all night. I hope there's pie for breakfast, Neighbour Stone."

But they say that whenever the devil comes near Marshfield, even now, he gives it a wide berth- and he hasn't been seen in those lands since.

I could lie, and say that my new sword isn’t everything I could ever want in a sword- sharp enough to take down opponents marked as ‘non-living’ by the computer, malleable enough to move and flow with my moves, blunt enough to incapacitate opponents marked as ‘living’ without racking up markdowns for unnecessary kills... I could say that the hilt of my new sword isn’t curved to stop fluids from making my grip slip, that the bolster isn’t stamped with prayers for strength and courage, that the rings on the spine don’t distract my opponents at critical moments, that the spiraling curve at the tip doesn’t draw energy into the sword itself with every shuddering blow, every swing- but I’d be a liar.

It’s only wood and bits of metal, a grip made of nothing more than grass spun into twine and woven tightly to the handle; a hole in the butt for a scarf or a pendant- I’ll attach or make one eventually. It’s beautiful- in Sword form and in Cursemark form. Of course, in cursemark form, my temper is near boiling- I’m. Irritable. Irritated?

Normal. Or what would be normal, if you hadn’t got shot.
Seriously? Okay then.

My left arm gets some odd looks at our mission briefing- but Batman’s gravelly, and still unintelligible voice, commands far more attention than a mere bandage under my bodysuit- there’s a sort of ridge at the middle of my bicep and the wrist-end of my forearm. I guess it’s more noticeable than I thought?

Anyway. Our mission briefing boiled down to this- that brain in a jar we fought not three days back has another house of horrors boiling in the Bwundan jungle. The mission is to shut it down- and also not die. Mostly not die, now that I think about it.

Before we leave for the mission, I stock the Bioship with more supplies- everything I can imagine us needing; bandages, restorative potions in alarming colors, salves, ointments, water-breathing equipment, mosquito repellent- the Bwundan strains of malaria, yellow fever, and measles are particularly nasty- and non-perishable foods that break down into mostly energy. Hell on a digestive track, but it’s Wally’s life potentially at stake- can’t be too careful. I just hope he likes Divinity…

Nougat is a family of confectioneries made with sugar and honey, rosted nuts, whipped egg whites, and sometimes chopped candied fruit. The consistency of nougat can range from soft and chewy to hard and crunchy, and it is used in a variety of candy bars and chocolates.

There are three basic kinds of nougat. The first, and most common, is white nougat, made with beaten egg whites and honey. The second is brown nougat, which is made without egg whites and has a firmer, often crunchy texture, while the third is Viennese or German nougat, which is essentially a chocolate and nut praline.

Because of the sugar content, nougat can last in storage for at least six months, provided it isn’t exposed to extreme temperature fluxuations; if the confection is devoid of any fats that would normally go rancid, the confection can last for even longer. It’s American cousin, Divinity, can last for much longer, as it’s ingredients are nearly devoid of fat.

I didn’t actually make the Divinity I stocked the Bioship with- I bought it at The Sweet Treat Stop-n-Stay, which is kitty-corner to Etsy’s, where Emily works. She swears up and down that their [favorite candy] is the best, and when I went to check it out, they had bulk Divinity on sale- little portions of the stuff in smooth little eggs, small enough to fit whole into someone’s mouth.

Good for talkative children and comatose teammates! Also, delicious.

Captain Marvel almost joins us on our mission- but, during a conversation with Batman, which I very definitely didn’t listen to, Batman reminded the Good Captain of…

“- the importance of the Team’s autonomy. Is there a reason you believe you need to be with the Team?”

“Well- yes and no. I was alerted to something by Red X, actually- glad the Team has someone like
her with them, really.”

“Explain.”

“In her own words, she has a corkscrewing, sideways sort of mind- and if she were a villain and sought the destruction of the Team, the last mission would have been the right moment to take them all out.”

“Hmm.”

“Actually… on the last mission, Red X asked me to come with them, as backup. If she’s right… well. I don’t want them to go out there and- die. Not when I could save them.”

“Understandable. However, they know the risks they’re getting into with every mission- and, while I can’t fault Red X’s evaluation of danger, it would put them all at too much of a risk to have you with them again. Therefore, I’m ordering you to stand down.”

“I- yes sir. I understand. Still… if they call…”

“If they call, you will, of course, render all necessary aid.”

“Yes sir. Thank you!”

“…”

Nope. Did not sit in the shadow of an air vent’s grille, being blown on by wafting fans, holding back sneezes from floating dust particles, and listen in on that conversation at all.

Didn’t happen.

And no one can prove that it did.

The Hangar’s Zeta-tubes are large enough to fly a variety of aircraft through- the Bioship is actually quite small, comparitavely. Hells, my X-cycle in Aviation mode is quite small.

Still, it’s always a weird jolt for me to go through it- the smaller Zeta’s just don’t have the same sort of tooth vibrating electrical snarl in them. I always worry, just a little, that I’m going to lose a tooth or possibly a nail when I have to go through one. I’m not entirely sure of the specifics that make the Hangar’s Zeta’s different from the regular ones my teammates use to get from their home cities to the Cave.

I’m fuzzy on the details, but it sort of works like a straw; pulling up a bubble from your bubble tea, holding the end and moving it from one drink to the next, then finishing the slurp. And once you swallow- or in our case, get spit out of transport several thousand feet in the air- you don’t want, or in our case, can’t, spit that bubble out again.

Nothing quite like going from a totally survivable fall of maybe fifteen meters to HOLY SHIT WHERE IS THE GROUND WHERE IS THE GROUND AND THE ONLY ANSWER TO THAT IS TOO FUCKING FAR AWAY AND- I don’t like heights. My steadily numbing feet and ankles are a testament to that simple, irrefutable fact.
The Bwundan jungle is dense, and dark- we descend to a clearing on the edge of a river. It always takes me a moment to shake off the numb-foot from a flight; I kick my feet, bend them back and forth, and take a moment to set my enviroSuit to my new and improved Catch the Grrl: Jungle Jamboree setting. There’s a very distinctive pattern of spotty stripes and dark flickering patches that break up my body into dead leaves and mossy branches, not at all what I am. I fade into the shadows of the trees as soon as I get out of the Bioship- I’m not entirely sure why.

Aqualad is not amused, but before he can call out to me, I- I’m not sure what I do, exactly. I’m not even sure how I do it- perhaps I’ve done it before?

‘Calm down, Aqualad. I have an aversion to being spied on, not an aversion to teamwork.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Mmm-hmm. Keep your eyes open; something about this forest feels… wrong.’

‘I will keep that at the forefront of my mind, my love.’

I didn’t know I could think a heated sexual look at someone, but by the suddenly startled look on Aqualad’s face, I’m pretty sure that’s what I just did.

“So, X is running off already?”

“No, Miss Martian- X is taking point, as she asked to. Set up a link with the Team, so we can go over-”

“Just a second- before, when we went to see your mom and visit Posidonis, you told Superboy and me about a girl named Tula. What happened with that?”

“Now is really not the time-”

“Come on, you were near-giddy about her.”

“Hearts change- my orders did not. Link the Team up.”

“Fine, fine.”

;But, you know- I kind of wonder about the speed of your hookup with Terry…;

-Mmm? Did I hear my name? Oh my, I did; do try not to throw stones in glass houses, Megan. I’ve actually know Kaldur for… mmm, a year, do you think?- 

‘This is really not the- no, I think it is closer to half a year. Moving on- X, Miss Martian, you have point and rear respectively- Kid, Robin, Artemis, Superboy, stay in the Diamond position; the initial stage of our mission is Recon. Should any one of us see a trail or sign of the operation, we follow it-otherwise, we stay on a south-west course. Move out.’

“Wolf, stay with us.”

_So, babe, how’s school been treating you?_

;Oh! School’s been really great, Wally-;

_Because I could treat you to a lovely smoothie for two…?_
Oh! Um… sorry, I don’t think that would be so great…;

•Wow, Kid. Way to strike out.•

_Dude!_

-Really a swing and a miss, would you say?- 

•Haha! Nice!•

_Dude!_

>So, Conner- how’s school going for you?<

○Fine.○

>Mm. Hey, speaking of treats, maybe we could see a movie…?<

○I guess- but it’ll be kind of hard to find a movie everyone on the Team will enjoy… wait. I smell-monkey?○

-Strike two; It’s quite possible, although I’m not sure why any would be here.-

•So, Artemis, how was your first day?•

>Um- it was alright, I guess.<

•Meet anyone interesting?•

>Not really- I guess Bette, my school guide, is pretty cool. The only other person I really remember is some dorky freshie; got way too into my personal space. Ugh.<

_Heh._

>What?<

_Nothing._

-Strike three, you’re out. Still smelling monkeys, Superboy?-

:Is there something wrong with Superboy smelling monkeys, Red X?;

-For this part of the forest, yes; there’s no fruit trees, and lots of leopard prints. Spiders, too; dangerous place for a small primate.-

:Hmph- well maybe-;

‘Maybe we should all focus on the mission at hand.’

The oddness I’ve noticed about the jungle explodes onto us in the form of a squad of very angry gorillas. I fade into the Shadow of a tree, only the smell of my fur and the slight glow of my eyes a giveaway to my position.
‘Remove their collars!’
○ They aren’t wearing any!○
> Robin, down! <
• Nice shot! •
: Kid, the gorilla you just ran into is named Grodd- Ah!;
-///-

Ow! Fuck, I think we just- yeah, Miss Martian is down. Great. The gorillas take my teammates down without too much fuss, collars fitted onto their necks and their limp bodies lifted onto broad backs; Wolf wasn’t knocked out, thankfully, so. I just.

Dogs man.

Fucking dogs.

I squirrel myself into a very advantageous tree, and wait- I have a feeling that they’ll be back. I listen to my feelings, and I’m right- the gorillas come back with strange goggles, and soon see Miss Martian- and me. Instead of attacking me, like I thought they would, the silver-backed one slung Miss Martian over it’s shoulder and loped off, and then the others followed it, their eyes never leaving my position. I follow them easily- they’re loud, these gorillas, and they leave too many marks on the world for me to not follow them. My path through the trees is mimicked by Wolf on the ground below, his long easy strides and bounds a strange shadow to my own.

We finally come to a hidden village of mud and straw huts, a specific hut of lowly stones and straw held down with spun twine and rocks hanging down; a small dark room with light coming only from the stars as the moon is a slice in the sky covered by clouds and full of stunningly bright stars. I muster my courage and follow Wolf’s steady footsteps into the hut; the gorillas eyes widen with fear and horror?- but the only thing I do is settle into a squat against the wall, stick a piece of apple flavored gum into my mouth, and chew.

A conversation happens I’m not privy to; I let Wolf sniff my tail. His sniffs kind of tickle, but I’m still way too worried about the team and the damn dog and just- ugh. So much worries. So little patience left today. Grrr.

Yeah, whatever. I haven’t lost my temper yet- this won’t do it. Nor will Wolf licking my taaaaaiiiilllll- no. BACK. OFF.

He does with little more than a scared look and a whimper; I feel kind of bad for a moment. He sort of perks up for a second, then settles back into waiting. He also ignores my tail, which is what I wanted…

The conversation I cannot hear but know is happening none the less has ended. Miss Martian opens her eyes- or possibly falls back into herself; her voice is in my head again.
X? Where are you?

-I am to your immediate left, next to Wolf; there is a support beam behind us both.-

Ah. I see you- the gorillas here…. they need our help. I can’t get into contact with the rest of our Team, and since you’re the Third…;

-Miss Martian. Report.-

I- Right. Two years prior, two people- an old woman and a man currently known as the Brain, arrived in this area with a group of Shadow mercenaries. They built a Quonset hut lab, in which they operated on the brain of Mallah, a young ape from Solovar’s troop they had captured.;

-Solovar is the silver-back?-

Yes- the female to his right is Boka, his mate; to the left is the gorilla who is asking for our help, Grodd, and to the left of him is his mate, Primat.;

-Mm. Proceed.-

Right. Mallah’s operation gave him increased intelligence- and it’s unclear whether the operation or his own… He betrayed the troop, and helped capture and experiment on another gorilla called Tolifhar. Tolifhar’s brain was replaced with the old woman’s- according to these four, she- he- they call themselves’ the Ultra-humanite.;

-Lovely. What’s with the village?-

The Brain and Ultra-humanite built more huts, creating a base of operations that they named Gorilla City- they also enslaved every gorilla in the troop but one, whom the gorillas call the Holy One. All of the gorillas were given inhibitor collars and had their intelligence surgically and genetically enhanced; however, their enhancements also allowed them to develop powerful telepathy. To increase the effectiveness of the inhibitor collars, and their overall- they were given Kobra-Venom injections, likely to increase their natural strength and aggression.;

-Why are they still working for their captors? I see no inhibitor collars here….-

That’s the thing- their children are being held hostage. They do plan to revolt, and were planning to… accept the losses, but our arrival has given them hope. I think- I. What do we do, X?;

-Hm. Hmmmm. Have they been listening to our conversation?-

I’m not powerful enough to stop them from doing so.;

-Good. Now that we’re all on the same page- Solovar.-

Yes?

What is your plan?-

Miss Martian is to use her shapeshifting powers to overcome the Shadows keeping our children prisoner, then take our children to a hidden location, where the rest of the troop is holding under the Holy One’s protection. Grodd is to take Wolf to where your teammates are being held, and after confirmation of the children’s safety, assist your Team in overcoming the Brain’s forces.
An interesting plan; Grodd, what are your thoughts on it?-

I cannot find fault with it.

-I can. Since Miss Martain and I are here now, though your plan is most... useful, I cannot, in accordance with my duties, allow you to be in the line of fire unneedfully.-

:X, it’s their home-;

-Yes. It is. And, as I know quite well- a home is a family, and the ones you love around you; it is a place you hold in your heart and nurture with the bonds of friendship and fidelity, not the bitter waters of bloodshed. A scrap of land is not worth fighting over- someone you care about is.-

You are very wise. What is your plan?

-I’m glad you asked, Solovar.-

Grodd takes me through the silent compound; drunken huts tilt and lean on each other, the soft hiss of dust and the slow crackle of mud flaking off stones. Grodd himself moves with silent tread, and I even quieter to his back and left; the hairs on the back of his neck bristle with fear.

We are close. You are sure this will work?

-Are you asking out of fear for yourself, or fear for the children?- 

What?- 

-I’m only mostly human shaped, Grodd. My nose works just as well as Wolf’s does- and you stink. Is it for you, or for them?- 

-I- I do not know- what are you- 

-Don’t worry for them. Worry for you- because, you see, your troop- they’ve already lived under... well. It leaves one to wonder... just what will they do to someone who tries the same?- 

We are a peaceful- they would never- 

-You would. Even now, I can smell it on you. They’re too used to it to notice- but I live in other lands, Grodd. And I never forget a scent.-

... Why are you only the... I’m sorry, I don’t understand- how is your team structured?

-Mm. Well, Aqualad is much like your troop leader, Solovar- calm in a crisis, patient and respectful, you know. If he should fall, the one to take his place would be Robin, who is not as patient or respectful, but just as calm. And if he, too, should fall, it becomes my responsibility to lead the Team.-

Why?

-Someone always has to lead, Grodd; and the level of crisis, of disaster, that would take both
Aqualad and Robin out... mmm. In that event, I am the best option to lead.-

- I- we are here. -

- Ah. I can see them. Wait here- I will alert you, when it is time.-

- Yes- I will wait. -

Spots in the darkness, and racing through the flickering shadows; stretch out like a hand of rippling thoughts and motions. Five guards sleep hard, dropped to the ground and silently prone; a card is a key, swiped through a latch-lock.

Six young gorillas, each with names and families and fear in their eyes.

- It’s done. Come.-

- Right. -

They stare at me with worried eyes- and then Grodd is behind me, around me, gathering them up in safe and loving arms and holding them close.

- You are certain of this? -

- Oh yes- go, Grodd. Take them, and leave this place.-

- Thank you. For a leopard, you’re quite... kind. Thank you. -

Grodd and the children vanish into the village. Why did he think I’m a leopard? Fuck, whatever...

- Solovar, are they there?- 

- Yes. Do what you must. -

- Miss Martian, go.-

; Right. Establishing link- link established. Welcome back, everyone. Here’s the plan...;

I tune out of the recap, and dart through the deserted village, following my nose and ears- Miss Martian’s distinctive scent gives way to the sounds of a pitched battle. I silently scale the sides of the hut, creep across the roof to a skylight; Mallah, the traitorous son, is about to open fire with an internally combusting weapon on Artemis and Robin.

Not while I have breath in my body he won’t!
I generally don’t do dynamic entries. Picking glass out of my clothing is never fun, and there's always a chance that the window will have wire in it.

Not this time.

Looking back, I think that was the moment I started to- well, my Grandma and Aunt call it Blossoming. What happened? Well, as I recall, I was letting my very distinct irritation show in an audible manner; I crashed through the window, growling so deep and loud I couldn’t actually hear anything else, and used Power to force the weight of my jump and of my kick and of my body into the space between Mallah’s shoulders and shove him onto the pounded firm earth.

A shaft of light followed me in, caught on the white of my mask and glowing on the red of my X. I rolled forward, whirled, and growled harder. Mallah’s eyes were round with fear, and then he glared and attacked and I fell into the joy of battle.

Aqualad stops me from opening a new, bloodier set of furrows on Mallah’s traitorous hide- he’ll not soon forget the likes of me, that lousy, lying-

“X! The entire city is going to explode in five minutes! We have to go- now!”

“But he- I- yes. Sorry, yes. Let’s go.”

The explosion rocks the ground and the trees, and it is an amazing thing- I also had no idea how quickly my teammate’s could get out of a dangerzone, given sufficient warning. Simply amazing.

I rest against the buzzing strength of a rock I don’t know the name of, in a place I couldn’t point to on a map- probably because I don’t actually use maps all that often. They just… ruin the surprise.

It starts to rain, softly and slowly, little drops of water plopping on leaves far above my head, on branches too thin for me to rest upon. The stars flicker between fishscale clouds drip-dripping, and the slow weight of the day presses down on me. One female gorilla shyly approaches me, knocks on my mind politely.

-Yes? May I help you?-

☼ I am Dolare; I am- I was Mallah’s mate. It is his blood on your hands, isn’t it.☼

-Yes, it is.-

☼ I thank you. I will bring you water, to bathe your hands with- if not for you, that… he would never have… ☼

-Thank you, Dolare. If it helps… the scars left by my hand will never fade.-

☼ It does. Thank you. Thank you. ☼
Dolare brings a bowl of water, the bottom covered over in sand; I scrub my hands twice, and leave the filthy blood of a traitor behind me.

Dolare does not dump the blood, like I thought she would; rather, she lifts the bowl carefully, and I would be a liar if I said I didn’t know what she was going to do with it.

Good for her.

The flight back to the Cave is shorter than I thought it would be- instead of a long arc across the ocean, we go in this sort of, of inverted V shape… I don’t really know the details, other than it makes my stomach turn and I’m basically a shuddering ball of unhappiness and OH FUCK GONNA VOMIT FUCK FUCK NO DON’T LOOK DOWN THERE’S NEVER ANY FLOOR WHEN YOU DO DON’T DO IT GONNA FUCKING VOMIIIIIIIIIT-

I don’t like heights, and I prefer to walk or bicycle to various places I need to be.

**IS THAT SO WRONG?**

Anyway. It took me… maybe half an hour to write up my mission report, and then I was out of Costume and in the showers, clothing picked out- and soap all over my everything, scrunching the day away with careful, circular motions. I also had a loofa sponge, because those things are good for semi-gentle exfoliation; it was already dead when it was collected and cleaned for bathing use- I only use fair care and fair trade goods if I can help it.

The warm shower stings over the Cursemark; I tense when Kaldur- when the hell…? I must be more tired than I thought, I didn’t even notice him showering next to me- but. I’m very aware of his hand on my wrist, a gentle piece of iron turning my arm to expose the cursemark to his sight.

He runs a finger over the image- gently tracing the hilt and pommel, the butt and the spine, pausing at the scalloping edge of the tip, winding around the spiral and drawing slowly down the edge. Part of me wants to punch him for the sharp flare of sensation; it doesn’t hurt, exactly, but it feels. It feels very, very much. Part of me wants to pin him and kiss him breathless, senseless, till his toes curl and his body goes weak with desire. The sheer pull of the two emotions is enough to freeze me in place, solid but for the warm water steadily pouring off of my slightly soapy body and the soft hitch in my breath.

He looks at me, questions in his eyes.

“It’s- um. Mm. It’s a cursemark.”

“Mmm?”

“I- haaa- I helped an ancestor, a-and I took on his curse so that he could… s-so that he could- it’s hard to taaaaaalk when you’re doing that, Kaldur.”

“So that he could…?”
“Die. Ah! Don’t stop, please don’t- nnnnngh.”

“How does one get an a-ancestral curse?”

“Uhm- th-the most common waaaaaaah aaah ah aaaay is to have familial relations with moooooh oh ooooh oh my gods more magic than goo ooh oh ooooh oh my gods-”

“Than…?”

“Good sense. Oh my gods.”

“Mm. Was that good for you?”

“Yes.”

I turn the water colder, when I can make my arms work again- the water forces gouts of warm steam up from my skin. I settle down, let my claws turn back into nails- thank heavens the rest of our teammates left before we did, that could have been really awful for them otherwi- Strike. Strike, why are you laughing?

You ran them out, silly.

You heahahahaha hah, you heard me.

But- I need to sleep for a while. I literally cannot deal with this. Incidentally, I have a lovely spring in my step all the way to my bed. I then realize that everyone who saw me come out of the showers who also knows anything about women after they have good sexytimes knows exactly what happened between me and Kaldur. Hopefully not the details.

Please, gods, not the details.

I’m going to just.

Let no one ever say that a poor tailor cannot do great things and win high honors; all that is needed is that he should go to the right smithy, and what is of most consequence, that he should have good luck. A civil, adroit tailor's apprentice once went out travelling, and came into a great forest, and, as he did not know the way, he lost himself. Night fell, and nothing was left for him to do, but to seek a bed in this painful solitude. He might certainly have found a good bed on the soft moss, but the fear of wild beasts let him have no rest there, and at last he was forced to make up his mind to spend the night in a tree. He sought out a high oak, climbed up to the top of it, and thanked God that he had his goose with him, for otherwise the wind which blew over the top of the tree would have carried him away.

After he had spent some hours in the darkness, not without fear and trembling, he saw at a very short distance the glimmer of a light, and as he thought that a human habitation might be there, where he would be better off than on the branches of a tree, he got carefully down and went towards the light. It guided him to a small hut that was woven together of reeds and rushes. He knocked boldly, the door opened, and by the light which came forth he saw a little hoary old man who wore a coat made of bits of colored stuff sewn together. ”Who are you, and what do you want?” asked the man in a
grumbling voice. "I am a poor tailor," he answered, "whom night has surprised here in the wilderness, and I earnestly beg you to take me into your hut until morning." "Go your way," replied the old man in a surly voice, "I will have nothing to do with runagates; seek for yourself a shelter elsewhere." After these words he was about to slip into his hut again, but the tailor held him so tightly by the corner of his coat, and pleaded so piteously, that the old man, who was not so ill-natured as he wished to appear, was at last softened, and took him into the hut with him where he gave him something to eat, and then pointed out to him a very good bed in a corner.

The weary tailor needed no rocking; but slept sweetly till morning, but even then would not have thought of getting up, if he had not been aroused by a great noise. A violent sound of screaming and roaring forced its way through the thin walls of the hut. The tailor, full of unwonted courage, jumped up, put his clothes on in haste, and hurried out. Then close by the hut, he saw a great black bull and a beautiful stag, which were just preparing for a violent struggle. They rushed at each other with such extreme rage that the ground shook with their trampling, and the air resounded with their cries. For a long time it was uncertain which of the two would gain the victory; at length the stag thrust his horns into his adversary's body, whereupon the bull fell to the earth with a terrific roar, and was thoroughly despatched by a few strokes from the stag.

The tailor, who had watched the fight with astonishment, was still standing there motionless, when the stag in full career bounded up to him, and before he could escape, caught him up on his great horns. He had not much time to collect his thoughts, for it went in a swift race over stock and stone, mountain and valley, wood and meadow. He held with both hands to the tops of the horns, and resigned himself to his fate. It seemed, however, to him just as if he were flying away. At length the stag stopped in front of a wall of rock, and gently let the tailor down. The tailor, more dead than alive, required a longer time than that to come to himself. When he had in some degree recovered, the stag, which had remained standing by him, pushed its horns with such force against a door which was in the rock, that it sprang open. Flames of fire shot forth, after which followed a great smoke, which hid the stag from his sight. The tailor did not know what to do, or whither to turn, in order to get out of this desert and back to human beings again. Whilst he was standing thus undecided, a voice sounded out of the rock, which cried to him, "Enter without fear, no evil shall befall you thee." He hesitated, but driven by a mysterious force, he obeyed the voice and went through the iron-door into a large spacious hall, whose ceiling, walls and floor were made of shining polished square stones, on each of which were cut letters which were unknown to him. He looked at everything full of admiration, and was on the point of going out again, when he once more heard the voice which said to him, "Step on the stone which lies in the middle of the hall, and great good fortune awaits thee."

His courage had already grown so great that he obeyed the order. The stone began to give way under his feet, and sank slowly down into the depths. When it was once more firm, and the tailor looked round, he found himself in a hall which in size resembled the former. Here, however, there was more to look at and to admire. Hollow places were cut in the walls, in which stood vases of transparent glass which were filled with colored spirit or with a bluish vapour. On the floor of the hall two great glass chests stood opposite to each other, which at once excited his curiosity. When he went to one of them he saw inside it a handsome structure like a castle surrounded by farm-buildings, stables and barns, and a quantity of other good things. Everything was small, but exceedingly carefully and delicately made, and seemed to be cut out by a dexterous hand with the greatest exactitude.

He might not have turned away his eyes from the consideration of this rarity for some time, if the voice had not once more made itself heard. It ordered him to turn round and look at the glass chest which was standing opposite. How his admiration increased when he saw therein a maiden of the greatest beauty! She lay as if asleep, and was wrapped in her long fair hair as in a precious mantle. Her eyes were closely shut, but the brightness of her complexion and a ribbon which her breathing moved to and fro, left no doubt that she was alive. The tailor was looking at the beauty with beating
heart, when she suddenly opened her eyes, and started up at the sight of him in joyful terror. "Just
Heaven!" cried she, "my deliverance is at hand! Quick, quick, help me out of my prison; if thou
pushest back the bolt of this glass coffin, then I shall be free." The tailor obeyed without delay, and
she immediately raised up the glass lid, came out and hastened into the corner of the hall, where she
covered herself with a large cloak. Then she seated herself on a stone, ordered the young man to
come to her, and after she had imprinted a friendly kiss on his lips, she said, "My long-desired
deliverer, kind Heaven has guided thee to me, and put an end to my sorrows. On the self- same
day when they end, shall thy happiness begin. Thou art the husband chosen for me by Heaven, and shalt
pass thy life in unbroken joy, loved by me, and rich to overflowing in every earthly possession. Seat
thyself, and listen to the story of my life:

"I am the daughter of a rich count. My parents died when I was still in my tender youth, and
recommended me in their last will to my elder brother, by whom I was brought up. We loved each
other so tenderly, and were so alike in our way of thinking and our inclinations, that we both
embraced the resolution never to marry, but to stay together to the end of our lives. In our house there
was no lack of company; neighbors and friends visited us often, and we showed the greatest
hospitality to every one. So it came to pass one evening that a stranger came riding to our castle, and,
under pretext of not being able to get on to the next place, begged for shelter for the night. We
granted his request with ready courtesy, and he entertained us in the most agreeable manner during
supper by conversation intermingled with stories. My brother liked the stranger so much that he
begged him to spend a couple of days with us, to which, after some hesitation, he consented. We did
not rise from table until late in the night, the stranger was shown to room, and I hastened, as I was
tired, to lay my limbs in my soft bed. Hardly had I slept for a short time, when the sound of faint and
delightful music awoke me. As I could not conceive from whence it came, I wanted to summon my
waiting-maid who slept in the next room, but to my astonishment I found that speech was taken
away from me by an unknown force. I felt as if a mountain were weighing down my breast, and was
unable to make the very slightest sound. In the meantime, by the light of my night-lamp, I saw the
stranger enter my room through two doors which were fast bolted. He came to me and said, that by
magic arts which were at his command, he had caused the lovely music to sound in order to awaken
me, and that he now forced his way through all fastenings with the intention of offering me his hand
and heart. My repugnance to his magic arts was, however, so great, that I vouchsafed him no answer.
He remained for a time standing without moving, apparently with the idea of waiting for a favorable
decision, but as I continued to keep silence, he angrily declared he would revenge himself and find
means to punish my pride, and left the room. I passed the night in the greatest disquietude, and only
fell asleep towards morning. When I awoke, I hurried to my brother, but did not find him in his
room, and the attendants told me that he had ridden forth with the stranger to the chase by daybreak.

"I at once suspected nothing good. I dressed myself quickly, ordered my palfrey to be saddled, and
accompanied only by one servant, rode full gallop to the forest. The servant fell with his horse, and
could not follow me, for the horse had broken its foot. I pursued my way without halting, and in a
few minutes I saw the stranger coming towards me with a beautiful stag which he led by a cord. I
asked him where he had left my brother, and how he had come by this stag, out of whose great eyes
I saw tears flowing. Instead of answering me, he began to laugh loudly. I fell into a great rage at this,
pulled out a pistol and discharged it at the monster; but the ball rebounded from his breast and went
into my horse's head. I fell to the ground, and the stranger muttered some words which deprived me
of consciousness.

"When I came to my senses again I found myself in this underground cave in a glass coffin. The
magician appeared once again, and said he had changed my brother into a stag, my castle with all
that belonged to it, diminished in size by his arts, he had shut up in the other glass chest, and my
people, who were all turned into smoke, he had confined in glass bottles. He told me that if I would
now comply with his wish, it was an easy thing for him to put everything back in its former state, as
he had nothing to do but open the vessels, and everything would return once more to its natural form. I answered him as little as I had done the first time. He vanished and left me in my prison, in which a deep sleep came on me. Amongst the visions which passed before my eyes, that was the most comforting in which a young man came and set me free, and when I opened my eyes to-day I saw thee, and beheld my dream fulfilled. Help me to accomplish the other things which happened in those visions. The first is that we lift the glass chest in which my castle is enclosed, on to that broad stone."

As soon as the stone was laden, it began to rise up on high with the maiden and the young man, and mounted through the opening of the ceiling into the upper hall, from whence they then could easily reach the open air. Here the maiden opened the lid, and it was marvellous to behold how the castle, the houses, and the farm buildings which were enclosed, stretched themselves out and grew to their natural size with the greatest rapidity. After this, the maiden and the tailor returned to the cave beneath the earth, and had the vessels which were filled with smoke carried up by the stone. The maiden had scarcely opened the bottles when the blue smoke rushed out and changed itself into living men, in whom she recognized her servants and her people. Her joy was still more increased when her brother, who had killed the magician in the form of the bull, came out of the forest towards them in his human form, and on the self-same day the maiden, in accordance with her promise, gave her hand at the altar to the lucky tailor.

Giant evil plants that want to kill me, Kaldur’s face erased with Golden Light only his eyes remaining- no no, don’t do that, you might never come back, no, no, please don’t leave me- and a sword sharper and more vicious than a pair of scissors at a student stylist’s school.

Vidal Sassoon was Nazi Fightin’ man, yes he was.

Look it up.

The fact that his hair has been absolutely perfect every day of his life is an indisputable fact.

Ah!

Holy crap- I have to stop eating maraschino cherries and drinking pickle juice while reading- never you mind what, exactly- I just… I have a bookcase? Next to my bed? There’s only one kind of book you can put on a set of shelves like that- be honest. My books are the kind you need some light to view, but it’s the kind of light that shines from a flashlight underneath a sheet in the middle of the night. Furtive strokes and rustles from the dark.

And also, more than half of the books themselves have been banned in… six countries. That I know of.

You know. For morality’s sake.

There are manuals too- I kind of really want to try out pages 69-180, especially fig. 86-23, “The Exquisitite Pain Inherent to Pleasure”. The leg twisting on the figures of that one, in particular-
I’m going to… hm. I’m going to play some video games today, I think. Yeah. Videogames. Not those sit on the couch games I played before- no sir. I’m going to play some “DanDanReVOLver.3: Meat Treats and Mean Streets”. There is a dance pad and dance bracers involved to the proper playing of this specific game. There is also a toy gun attachment. With a holster I made myself, because. Um. Reasons.

However, first I’m going to practice my new Erhu skills, and have a nutritious breakfast. Because food is good for eating. And I like to eat food.


Wash hands, wash dishes.

Take erhu to quiet part of Cave. Tune tune tune- yep, we’re good. I think it’s about time for an abuade.

It’s past sunrise.

Why are you still asleep?

Day’s a wasting. Get up.

There’s stuff that you should do today- school and work and games to play.

Awake! Ye friends and comrades!

The sun is bright upon the sundering waves and the spray of the mists flame with life. The shoreside pools are a-teem with life, fighting and striving and living their strife.

Wake the fuck up you lazybones! Sleep is for the old and the dead!

Wake the hell up you skiver and slouch-about! There is new knowledge to be stuffed in your head!

Wake up!

Wake up!

Wake up!

Or so help me- my hand to the gods, I will play this song again!

Kaldur takes the Erhu out of my hands before I can start again. He’s very delectable in his sleeping shorts- they’re a lovely shade of grey-blue. Mmm. Kaldur pectorals.
“Good morning, Kaldur.”

“Terry… why? **Why?**”

“Because, Kaldur, good sleep hygiene is key to a healthy life, even if you occasionally have shitty days. Also, today is a school day for Megan and Conner.”

“Can’t we just call in sick?”

“No, Conner- that would be immoral. You’re not sick- you’re sleep deprived from a hard night of movie date. Be sure to tell Megan that, too.”

“Yaaaawgh- okay. Ugh. Guess it’s time for breakfast… hey Megan, we’re tired because our movie date ran late last night.”

“Um, Conner, we weren’t- Oh! Oh, I **see**. Nice cover! Um… we could stop by the Taco Toucan for breakfast?”

“I- sure, sounds good to me.”

“So, do you want me to make you a delicious and nutritive breakfast? Or go back to bed…?”

“I will not be able to sleep now, so I suppose breakfast would be in order.”

“i’m sorry kaldur. i could have found another way…”

“Terry- no, no, it’s okay, I’m okay, it’s- please. I’ll be alright. If nothing else… I get to spend private time with my girlfriend.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah- she’s this really amazing person, very kind, very responsible. A little impulsive, but I can wait too long so-”

“Kaldur… do you want some sweetfish congee?”

“What’s that?”

“Rice porridge, with a type of fish that has a sweet taste. It’ll take about an hour to make…?”

“It sounds delicious. I’d love some.”

The congee is really delicious- sweetfish always go really nice at breakfast time, especially with some light soysauce and some sweet-sour pickles... Not much goes into the congee itself, actually- the fish bones, of course, and the heads; the sweet fish itself is sliced small enough to eat in bites after it’s been charcoaled and stewed for flavor. Sprinkle over with sliced green onion, on the round of course.

Watching Kaldur’s obvious enjoyment of the congee makes a tight knot unravel inside my body. I changed my mind- today, I’m going to read a poem I’ve been putting off reading, the great epic, *Beowulf*. 
For the sake of my fingers, I’ll let you seek out a copy of it on your own.

That said, I have to put thoughts about it down- otherwise, I might very well collapse from the roiling of my thoughts.

There is a challenge in co-ordinating a single, all powerful, all loving, all knowing God with the existence of evil. In a monotheistic tradition like Christianity, it’s hard to imagine anything, monster or otherwise, that isn’t technically “god-begotten”. However, a folk belief persists from days long before “Beowulf” was copied out: God has enemies. It could be retorted that Grendel’s hereditary connection is to Cain, firmly thrusting him back under the umbrella of God’s creation- but there’s a more helpful reading of the epic: the relationship between heroes, monsters, and gods can be said to experience a sea change in “Beowulf” if it is understood that the important pagan virtue of pride is a principal vice of Christianity.

In both pagan and biblical traditions, there are symbols of hubris; the giants of antiquity are veritable examples. Monster killers and heroes have been celebrated in pagan culture as the strong men of action that are needed to save the family, tribe, or village. With some exceptions, such as Ripley from the Alien franchise, most monster killers of the Western tradition are men. Mosters give men in the west an excuse to do the things their society tells them they were purpose built to do: fight, protect, take, and defend. For the west, men are those most useful of brutes. Heroic pride, therefore, was a favored impulse in the pre-Christian era, even if it came with flaws of excess and immoderation. The biblical tradition brought a new ethic: “Blessed are the meek.” It is arguable that the main theme of the Old Testament is submission to Yahweh, and the New Testament resounds with the call to humbleness. The Hero of Christianity, Jesus, even ends in the ignoble position of suffering on a cross. This is not exactly fertile growing ground for the manly monster killers of yore. Indeed, the men of Beowulf’s era would not have understood this new kind of “victory through humility.”

A new kind of hero was invented in Christianity. Christian heroes suffer, as do heroes of more ancient days, but unlike those ancients, the Christians’ suffering is their heroism. Victory no longer comes when the hero is standing over the slain monster; it comes in the next life, after one has lived humbly and proven oneself accommodating large amounts of unjust suffering. Traditional heroes like Beowulf, Herakles, and Odyzeus can be acknowledged for their strength and ability, but their pridelful humanism, their attempts to personally bring justice to the world, must be devalued in the new Christian paradigm. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, we don’t need monster killers when we trust in the Lord. After all, God, not man, punishes the wicked. Heroic faith replaces heroic action.

One of the most impressive aspects of the character of Beowulf is his embodiment of what could be called the Courage of the Northwest. Beowulf himself acts as an embodiment of theoretical courage, a concept which puts the unyielding will of the hero at the center of heroic narrative. The imagination of those men of the Northwest, filled with the philosophy of absolute resistance, was eventually tamed in England and further lands to the south by contact with Christianity. The Viking commitment to martial heroism for it’s own sake was unmasked by Christianity as mere hopeless nihilism, something to be overcome and remedied. It is clear to me, and scholars before me, that the poet of “Beowulf” saw clearly that the price of the old pagan heroism could only be death. The Christian looks back over the course of pagan history and finds that all the glory won by heroes and kings and warriors is for naught, because it is only of this earthly temporal world.

Without Christianity, monster killers are either hopeless existential heroes, trying by their own human efforts to rid the world of evil, or they themselves are monstrous giants amid a flock of righteous and meek devotees. Herakles, for example, is judged by medieval Christians as an
abomination to be dethroned from his traditional place of adulation.

“Beowulf” is both the last gasp of pagan hero culture and an important breath in the rise of the Judeo-Christian humility culture. The truly Christian monster, the one that has completed the arc that “Beowulf” only initiates, will not really be a monster at all, only a confused soul who needs a hug rather than a sword thrust. True Christianity seeks to embrace the outcast, not fight him. Christianity celebrates the loser, the downtrodden, the misshapen, and the lost. Grendel is an outcast, and tender hearts have argued that the people who cast him out are the real monsters. According to this charity paradigm, the monster is misunderstood- not evil. Perhaps God created monsters to teach us to love the ugly, and the repulsive, and the outcast.

This is reflected in the interpretations of old stories in newer ages- Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” for example. In the original versions of these stories, the monsters are outcasts because they are bad- in these new interpretations, the monsters are bad because they are outcasts.

In my opinion, both views are correct- sometimes, a monster is bad because that is how it is. Sometimes, a monster becomes so simply because it is outcast from society, and all who would offer it friendship and succor.

I realized, about five minutes after I finished reading the poem, that Kaldur has me in the coveted teddy-bear position on the couch. His arms are wrapped around me, heavy and certain around my waist, and his head is sweetly nuzzling into the curve of my neck. I know what to do, of course- I Move the bound copy of the poem onto the coffee table, and wriggle around in his arms until he’s not resting his forearms onto my ribs.

They’re still a bit sore, my ribs- however, it’s been several hours since I last used the Sword, and it’s no pain at all to rest my arms on top of his. I’m actually still quite tired- and I’ve never actually fallen asleep quite like this before.

Empress is- returning? Yes, returning to some island I’ve nnnnaaaaaargh. I know that island.

Also, this might be the first time I’ve ever realized I’m in a Dream so quickly.

The island in question is Neuvo Themyscira. Son of a bitch.

It is a widespread but mistaken belief of many persons in the world outside the borders of the island nation that the women who live on the island of Nuevo Themiscyra called themselves “Amazons” and had sworn off men in obedience to something called, “Aphrodite’s Law.” This is in spite of the fact that it is tacitly absurd to ascribe a rule against men and women having sexual congress to a goddess whose very nature embodies the wild hedonistic impulse of the sexes to come together and screw each other into the ground. The proper term for their people is “Renunciates”, as in that they have taken an oath, to Artemis, not Aphrodite, it should be noted, and have lived apart from Men.
since the middle of the Bronze age as a deliberate act of policy and religious belief.

“Amazon” was a Greek term applied to them by outsiders and not something they much enjoyed having applied to themselves, as it tended to be a play on words meaning, “No Breasts,” which implied that they were not even truly women in the fullest sense of the term- which they most emphatically were, though it would also be inappropriate to call them “Lesbians” as only a few of their number had ever been to the Isle of Lesbos, a former colony of the Greater Scythian Matriarchy that once had ruled a portion of Asia Minor, long before the advent of Doric Grecian civilization. Nor was there truth to the myth that their island was located in the section of the Atlantic ocean known as the Triangle of Bermuda despite that being the popular belief among outsiders who thought to claim its existence in such an exotic location full of mystery and misconception.

In reality New Themiscyra had been founded by refugees from the collapse of their empire that had taken place in the wake of a disastrous war with the Acherons at the end of the Bronze Age. Their homeland had been taken over by Iron Age barbarians and forced into retreat more than thirty-two hundred years ago, and the survivors who were not enslaved had managed to relocate the remains of their civilization to an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, not the Atlantic.

As such, very few of their sisters have ever been anywhere near Bermuda, though it did serve their purposes well enough to allow that misapprehension to prevail as it kept the outside world looking for them in the entirely wrong location. Of course if outsiders chose to believe what they would then it was no skin off the collective noses of these women- and they have also given up fighting the term “Amazon” being applied to them as a culture; it is just too much of a bother to protest anymore, like asking why Aphrodite, a goddess of Love and Sexual pleasure, would have instituted a ‘No Men Allowed” rule in the first place when it was the Moon Goddess, Artemis, who thought that men were only good for target practice.

Their devotion to Artemis had helped foster many of those annoying myths since the Etruscan word for the moon was “Diana,” the daughter of Queen Hippolyta, who had become the outward face of their civilization since her appearance early on during the alien invasion that had made their existence known to a guileless public. Another annoyance that the people of Themiscyra have with the outside world is the persistent belief that they were themselves a colony of Greece, when the Acheans had been their sworn mortal enemies- their alliances had been with the long-vanished Hittite Empire. What was of greatest concern was that their island guarded an underground vent leading directly to the Underworld, a fact that made Themiscyra of great strategic importance to the balance of Power in the world that had nothing at all to do with the political realities of rival Nations. The Gods had entrusted Hippolyta and her “children” with safeguarding this doorway, and it ruptured unexpectedly.

This event holds confluence with the creation of Kowloon Walled City- I’m not sure if they’re actually connected or not.

The History of the Amazons begins with their Queen Hippolyta being born out of wedlock as the illegitimate daughter of Ares and Aphrodite. This caused a scandal in the mounts of Olympus- one that didn’t go away with the passage of the centuries. Even after Ares officially married Aphrodite and recognized Hippolyta as his get, she still felt isolated from the rest of Olympian society. Despite this, Ares tried his best to be a decent father and brought up Hippolyta to appreciate skill at arms and the hunt. He treated her almost like a son, and taught her all he knew about tactics and weaponry,
which turned her into a real hellion of a War-Goddess. She loved him for it, but as she got older she started to question things more, letting her mother’s side of her genes take over- she became curious about things like poetry, art and culture. Ares approved of her diversifying interest, at least at first.

Hippolyta started to question the savageness of war- she began showing mercy to defeated enemies, taking them as prisoners of war if they appealed to her fancy and spending time getting to know them before taking them to bed for a little fun. She started to see the advantage of not killing all of her enemies, of making villages into tributaries who paid your armies to leave them alone. At first Ares tolerated these new ways since Hippolyta began winning a series of major battles and built up quite a holding in Thrace, but eventually they had a falling out and a parting of ways.

Hippolyta got angry and denounced her father over his treatment of female prisoners. She thought women were literally getting the shaft everywhere, and she thought her father wasn’t taking her seriously anymore, even though she was his best general. She and four of her sisters, who became her loyal lieutenants, went to Earth and became Demigoddess’. By this time the romance between Aphrodite and Ares was starting to cool, and they’d had about a dozen kids between them; the Goddess of Love was starting to chafe about Ares always being away fighting battles while she stayed at home and managed the servants who had to look after the kids. One day, she took Hippolyta’s side in an argument about whether women were better than men at running their own society, Ares threw a tantrum and told Hippolyta that if she thought she could make such a good ruler than she ought to go out and found her own Kingdom.

So she did- Hippolyta and her four sisters went beyond the borders of Thrace into the great Unknown territories along the Black Sea, and there they discovered a nomadic society of Steppe Horsemen called the Scythians living on the fringes of the Known World. This tribe they discovered had just been in a battle with a rival clan; the men went off to war and got ambushed, slaughtered almost to a man and boy, leaving their women alone to look after the cattle. Hippolyta came across a woman grieving for her slain husband, praying to the Gods for relief, and in a trice she merged with that Mortal and became an Avatar.

The story is the same for her lieutenants- and, with that; they became the five Queens of Amazonia, organizing the women of their clan into the base of a future army. They conquered the rest of the Scythian tribes and united them into a society of female-dominant horse archers who worshiped Artemis and fiercely raid the borders of what they condescendingly call ‘Man’s World.’

They have been living on the fringes ever since, and created a very powerful society that was easily the equal of all the nation-states combined to their South. The Renuncians, who are called Amazons by popular culture, pushed south past Thebes and well into Thrace itself. They laid waste to the armies which tried to stand up against their arrows- Ah, right.

The Amazons were one of the first people to use a kind of recurved bow that used horn and sinew to give it extra strength, and iron-tipped arrows put a shaft right through a bronze shield at a hundred paces. They were eventually stopped by Bellerophon, Son of Glaucus and an Amazon named Eurymede. His father had defeated his mother in battle, so he learned archery from her and was a competent general in his own right. He took up employment with the King of Tiryns, after which he made a name for himself by capturing a Pegasus and using him to help him kill a Chimaera. After a number of good career moves like that he led an army that stopped the Amazon advance at the battle of Chalidice. With a Winged Horse helping him to scout out the terrain he was able to spot the Amazon positions and outflank them, luring them out where his cavalry men were able to turn the
tide against the invaders.

After that, the Amazons laid low for a few generations, building back their numbers and vowing revenge in their next big encounter. As Bellerophon proved, they obviously didn’t live entirely apart from all men- after all, without men how else- other than by adoption- would they have had children? They needed men in order to have children despite what was commonly believed; they did not take vows of total celibacy. Virginity for them was in not having men around- they had plenty of sex with one another, yet another reason they called it paradise.

As far as hating men goes, historically, even tragically, they were not unified in this regard- Princess Antiope married a man known as Theseus of Athens, after all.

The prince of Thebes came to them at the head of a small band of Athenian adventurers, penetrating deep into hostile woodland, a thousand miles from home along the Southern banks of the black sea at the whim of the wife of King Eurystheus who requested the breast-plate of Hippolyta, as a status symbol of Renunciate power, and as one of Herakles’ notorious twelve labors. The Renunciates welcomed the Greeks as honored guest, and to their tents with equal ardor.

For millennia they had made treaties with men and bargained for the right to have children- no one is certain just who started the rumor but word got out that Herakles was out for more than just a breast plate; that he wanted Hippolyta herself for his wife. The Greeks had to make a hasty exit from Renunciate lands but in the heat and confusion of affairs Princess Antiope, to her sister’s collective dismay chose Theseus over her own people.

The more reactionary among them called for a war against Athens. Hippolyta opposed this but was voted down by her remaining sisters. The war would ruin them and nearly destroyed the Renunciate culture. For a woman to choose a man over her sisters was unthinkable, forcing many to question their sequestration from the company of men.

The war with Athens had gone very badly. Princess Antiope was dead, and her vengeful son was on the throne of his late father. The final blow came when Pethesilea, the youngest of Hippolyta’s remaining divine sisters, answering the call of an ancient alliance with the people of the besieged city of Troy fell in battle at the hand of the great Achilles taking with her a small cohort of the Renunciate’s most experienced war veterans. It was as if her death sucked the life out of their nation- their enemies and allies alike sensed the decline as a shark senses blood. One by one alliances were cracked and broken, leaving them exposed on their less defensible borders. Troy had fallen to the Greeks- the victorious Acheans had little gain for their decade long siege. The rapacious Dorians, Aetolians and Ionians were quick to exploit the sudden death of king Mennilaeus of Mycenea.

A decision had to be made by every clan- to maintain their traditional Scythian lifestyle as nomadic hunter gatherers or to blend back into the greater world from which they were growing increasingly isolated. How, then, would they maintain their traditions amid a world hostile to their basic way of life? It was the judgment of their ruling council that they seek refuge in uncontested lands far removed from their enemies and rivals. Going back to a rule by men was of course unthinkable, and so began the great migration. The great dispersion of the Renunciates was a major diaspora- some moved to the island of Lesbos where they maintained their lifestyle for a few more decades; some chose to remain on their ancestral lands- both groups disappeared over time.

Menelippe, humbled by the loses she had sustained at Athens, chose to lead her clan afar to the West, booking passage with the Pheonicians who had sailed afar to a land that lay beyond the sea of Atlantis, modern day Brazil.
Hippolyta, renouncing the path of Ares, her warrior father, took a vow to pursue the path of her mother, Aphrodite and aunt, Athena- the path of peace and enlightenment. Hippolyta led many to an island in the mid-Adriatic. When Diana, her daughter by Herakles, was old enough, she was told that she and every other Renunciate were made from clay. This is also where the tale of her rape by Herakles started- as a last act of revenge to those that started their fall.

That’s what it says in my “Histories of the Adriatic” book- but according to what I’m seeing, that’s not entirely true. Yes, Wonder Woman- honestly, I don’t think she even tries to hide her identity- is the daughter of Queen Hippolyta, and yes, her name is Diana… if what I’m Dreaming is true, Diana is not the only child of the Queen. I think Themyscira might have a prince- and I think… I think- oh my gods.

Go, Dan- get you some!

Empress- Dan, because they’re not wearing their helm, is moving like a wraith through the island forest. Her hair’s different- it’s long and kind of… fluffy? and it shines very blue in the light of the stars.

They run through the forest, creeping into a small clearing covered with springy ground-growing plants, flowers blooming without scent. A bower of flowering vines delicately fluttering with moths and shielding a person- a man? From the width of his shoulders compared to his hips, I’d say so- the very definite bulge in his chiton, which is a bit above his knees in the front, makes that very clear.

Dan smiles when they see him- and hot damn, I get sound in this Dream! Usually I get general impressions and synthesiastic bludgeoning, but this seems a bit more like… S-sinta called the serial radio drama’s she listened to “soaps”, even though there were never advertisements for soap in them…

Dan has wrapped their arms around the man, and he’s super still, like he doesn’t know if he should hug them back or push them away. They hold on long enough that he comes to a decision, and his arms come around and pull them close. Their hips and chest and face press into his thick neck, and- holy shit, Dan’s female.

Not necessarily a girl, though.

The man speaks- his voice is nasal, a bit raspy, and slightly gummy or cool.

“You’re sure it’s okay for me to do this?”

“Yeah. An’ ‘s not like y’can’t come back. … d’you really think anyone ‘ll care if…”

“No. They won’t. …are you sure that your doctor friend will take me in?”

“Yeah- I don’t act’lly ‘ave a- well, I do ‘ave an ‘ouse but it’s no’ big eno’ for me to live in, I mostly use it for sleepin’- I don’t think it’would be a good id’eara to put’y in there wi’me. An’ Raven’s a
kind soul- sh’ll treat y’alright.”

“… if you say so. You know, you don’t really have to do this-”

“M’yer friend. A’course I do. Y’ready to go?”

“Yeah. Thank you, Danita.”

“S’no problem. Y’got your pack ‘n’cloak?”

“Yes. You are sure that this will work?”

“Thrax- jus’ take m’ hand and follow me.”

“I- yes. Okay.”

When Dan takes Thrax’s hand his face wobbles and his mouth curves and his shoulders which are covered with a thick dark chlamys and pinned down with a fibula on the right shoulder can’t decide if they’re going to relax or hunch together small-like. They are plain, bronze pieces of metal, pinning his clothing up and together; nothing more than a curved bow with a round ball at the foot end where the pin goes. His hair shines silver in the starlight, and then they vanish- gone from that island, across the sea and over the Ural Mountains, through the vast emptiness of the wind-dried steppes, and finally- across the Wall. Safe.

I open my eyes and stretch- wiggle and grind my hips a bit. Kaldur makes some sort of sound and yips and sits up- I squirm and flail and almost smack him in the face with my arm because he’s holding on tighter with his arms and his crotch is more lumpy than I remember and-

OW. RIBS.

“Sorry!”

“Mmmgh- I’m okay. Just- please don’t do that again, okay?”

“I- yes. I am so sorry.”

“It’s alright, really. Mm. I liked the part where you were hugging me. That was great.”

“Mm. I liked the wiggling.”

“Mmmhmmm.”

I smile all slow and gooey at him and his eyes go all squinty and slow and warm and sea green grasses and manatees slowly browsing through. Whoosh. I kiss him softly and the world turns to soft warmth and the motion of my lips against his.

The kiss ends as sweetly as it began, his fluttering eyelashes so secret soft against my cheek. My blush is catching, I think… I can’t help it. I nudge my nose into his, nuzzle against his face and neck,
soft nibbles and kisses- the soft huff of laughter and the delicate sigh of pleasure, soft kisses back against my cheeks and brow and the sharp spine of my nose.

I need to make a set of boxes for Raven- but I want to kiss Kaldur so much more…

“One second- I need to be in two places at once for a little bit.”

“Mmmm?”

I stand up and dart off to my room to make the boxes, and I stay exactly where I am and return to kissing him. His eyes show confusion- and then a sly smile stretches across his face.

I do believe he’s had that idea too. Well. We’ve needed to talk about this anyway.

“Mm. You know- I really do love you, right?”

“I believe I am starting to understand that, yes.”

“Well… I. Um. I would like to have sex with you eventually, and I. Um. I would l-like to talk to you about it, s-so that there will not be… so we can- so I can know how to- I. Um. I want t-to please you, and- Mmmmmm.”

“Mm. I am pleased to have a woman such as you at my side, and so concerned with t-the pleasures of the flesh. I have never- I have experimented, and learned a great deal at school, b-but I do not have any. Um. I have no practical experience in. I-in.”

“Neither do I, although I have a large collection of v-various toys, costumes, games, and books. O-on such things. Um. F-for reference, if you would… if you would like…?”

“C-certainly. Perhaps your magic- um, the spell you just used? That could be… fun.”

“Y-yes. You know, I can use that spell on anyone and anything, not just myself…”

“R-really? I- I think that is very exciting. I can think of a few things to do w-with… with a spell such as that.”

“Y-yes. Um. I also have a spell that can ch-change our genders- our body’s genders, I mean. That-could be. Um. Fun too?”

“Y-yes. That could be very fun.”

Boxes- the one’s I’m making, at least- are small, so simple is best- outrageous woods and colors are not the right choice. Quarter sawn elm is best, I think, for the outer box, and the burl pattern will take the spellwork the best; plain apple wood for the interior boxes. They’ll be tricky, but not impossible to make- the thing I know I’ll struggle the most with is using bookmatching pieces, because I don’t favor them myself; however, I am making utilitarian boxes, not boxes for myself.

Jointery is the simplest step for me, right after milling each box part to size- I generally make
everything in batches of ten, simply because I like that number. I’m sure there’s a better way to do things than what I do, but I have a very sharp knife and some very fine sandpaper, so. Chisling out the mitered dovetail joints is a bit annoying- I always end up measuring four or five times, because I just really really hate using a hacksaw more than I have to; trust me, once you cut through a copper pipe, you lose all taste for sawing with a damn hacksaw.

“Um. I don’t think w-we’ll be able to plan out- um. But I am taking an anti-pregnancy medicine, a- and I do not have a-any diseases…”

“Um. Neither do I. I can get a prophylactic medicine as well, or use various b-barrier devices…”

“Um. Yes. So… so. I think we have enough to- start. With. A-and if more comes up, we can… talk about it, right?’”

“Of course. I- I would like to… to kiss you some more? If that is alright?”

“I would love that.”

The boxes are designed, milled, glued and clamped together in about three hours; I’ll finish them off completely tomorrow. I drop Twin and put my full concentration into kissing my boyfriend.

I’m violently aware of my racing heart, and the heady pressure of his hips against mine; the smell of sea brine and the musk of his maleness, the heavy grip on my butt and the slow wagging of my intangible tails. Kaldur’s other hand is on the back of my head and then he rubs up and hits just the right spot to make me go all glowy warm and drippy in the middle. I might have also made a positively debauched sound deep in my chest, which is squished and shuddering against his. The grip on my head shifts and scratches at where he rubbed just right and I sigh and gasp and nip softly at his mouth. He groans against me, shudders and sighs as my hips grind deeply into his; my knees are sinking into the back of the couch, and my elbows are braced against the cushioning supporting Kaldur’s back and my hands are not clawed but are digging deeply into the strong flesh of his shoulders which are covered in a thin soft t-shirt. I think the t-shirt is blue- but it’s so loose I can’t resist pushing my hands underneath it and stroking the Icon over his shoulders. When the heat of my palms met the cold darkness of his Icon, his hips rolled underneath me and a sudden growling groan of pleasure pressed into me. I clamped my thighs around his hips and held on tightly and OW MOTHERFUCKER SHIT SHIT SHIT OOOOOOW-

“I am so sorry I- I am so, so sorry, Terry, oh my goodness- I am so sorry-”

“Nnngh. S’okay. You didn’t know you’d react like that. Ow.”

“I am so sorry. Terry, I think I really hurt your butt-”

“Well, yes, but- Kaldur, you’re bleeding!”
“Wha- ow! Okay, yes I am also bleeding but you would not have bitten me if I had not squeezed so hard and I am so so sorry-”

“But, but Kaldur- you are bleeding because of me. Please, please stop doing that. Please. Please stop apologizing….”

“No- no, Terry, please do not cry, I have had worse injuries in training, please do not cry-”

“Unnnn. I made you bleed and I’m so sorry-”

“No, I am okay, Terry-”

And then I’m crying and shivering and he’s holding me and stroking my back and I hurt my boyfriend and he’s bleeding and I did it and I am so so sorry…

That’s how Megan and Conner find us later that afternoon- I think we skipped lunch.

We were both very upset.

Dinner that night is kind of horrifyingly awkward- I can’t really sit down comfortably, and Kaldur won’t look me in the face, and his lip is very swollen; Megan and Conner are also feeling the painful awkwardness.

Dinner is very very quiet. And awkward. So awkward.

I bit Kaldur so hard he bled. I bit him in the **mouth** and he apologized to me but bruises aren’t that important. Unnn. I really hope I can-

I hope…

I want to kiss my boyfriend without being afraid that I’m going to hurt him.

I think… I think I need to talk to Dan. I’m going to Raven’s the day after tomorrow- I’ll call her today though. I- I hope she can help.

Or at the very least, point me to someone who can…

Gmail to: Dan

Message: I need your help- I have a boyfriend I really like, and I want to be intimate with him. The problem is, he’s human. We both know I’m not- I’m a Fox-type crossbred. Can you help?

Gmail to: Terry
Message: What’s the problem? Isn’t he Atlantean? Those peeps are always really hard to injure… so I don’t think that’s the issue.

Gmail to: Dan
Message: I thought so too- but he’s really strong. Like, massively strong- he squeezed me too hard today and I have a bruise all the way to the bone on my butt. I- I bit him, Dan, hard enough for him to bleed. I don’t… what do I do?

Gmail to: Terry
Message: Well, obviously you bit him after he squeezed too hard. And since you definitely are guilty and remorseful about it, I’m sure you apologized. Relationships are hard, Terry. You’ll find out lots of things about each other as you go along- just take it slow, and try not to get too upset when you misstep with each other. It’ll be alright, Terry.

Gmail to: Dan
Message: Thanks, Dan. I- I’ll try to do that. I feel better now, though. That said… who’s the guy?

Gmail to: Terry
Message: SHUT UP! He’s just a guy, okay, he doesn’t even- shut up, okay. He’s really- ugh.

Gmail to: Dan
Message: That bad, eh?

Gmail to: Terry
Message: he’s somewhere between cute and hideous. Like, if ugly and pretty are a circle, he’s gone all the way past ugly and back around to pretty. Asshole.

Gmail to: Dan
Message: is he actually that terrible?

Gmail to: Terry
Message: YES!!!!
Gmail to: Dan
Message: sorry…? Maybe we could talk about it the day after tomorrow? I’m going to Raven’s for obvious reasons.

Gmail to: Terry
Message: Sure. See you then!

Gmail to: Dan
Message: Cool. See you then.

Huh. I think… I think Dan might be my favorite person, actually. Possibly.

No, that’s Kaldur.

Second favorite…?

Also, she’s right.

So. Boxes get made and spelled, and bruise balm is **not enough** to stay the butt pain.

Welp. I’m seeing Raven tomorrow, so. I can hold out.

Kaldur’s being weird though- he’s almost… it’s like he’s scared to kiss me, which is kind of understandable because I did bite him, but… he’s also afraid to even- he kind of flinched when I hugged him today, and…

It hurt. I don’t want him to be afraid to touch me. I’m not going to… not going to break over a bruise or anything like that.

It is a bit awkward walking around in a skirt and petticoat with no smalls- I haven’t done that in a long time. Very odd. Not bad, but odd.

Raven is not amused, when I get to her clinic- she is, however, willing to heal the bruise to a certain point. It’s still there, but not all the way to the bone- Raven doesn’t believe in fixing injuries all the way through. She says if she does that too much, the body gets complacent- she does reduce the total injury to a certain point, but she doesn’t fix one part more than another.
Which is a round about way of saying my ass is still bruised, but not so badly I can’t walk. Like it kind of was yesterday. And today, before I went to Raven’s- I actually went as soon as I could force myself to stand up, before breakfast or anything else.

Now that it’s healed, I can actually, you know. Stand. And think. Hold a coherent sentence, even.

Eating would be nice.

Mmmm. Raven makes the best congee. The best. Mmm.

Mm! I think that flash of silvery white hair is Thrax- he moved really quickly when he thought I could see him.

“So… what’s with him, Rae?”

“he’s not sure about much of anything- but he is sure that if he stays out of the way, he won’t get in trouble.”

“Really?”

“yep. he’s a nervy kind of guy- we only see him at meal times, and then he eats and doesn’t meet anyone’s eyes. it’s very odd.”

“Hmm. All I can tell about him is that he doesn’t have any idea to socialize with people who are neutral to him, and that he’s better than I am with threads and fabrics- classic style, I mean. D’you have any knitting supplies…?”

“yeah, but neither of us ever use- ah. i’ll just have to make it clear that they’re for him.”

“Yep. I’m also getting definite vibes of overall delicacy and animal husbandry. There’s some undeveloped Law and Order in there, but that won’t be able to grow until-”

“until he’s comfortable in his own skin. hmm. i’ll take him by the veterinary college, and see if he’ll learn some medicine… what did you bring me then?”

“They’re actually for him- well, the big one, at least. He can’t wear his clothes here- I assume you know why.”

“mm. resonance, i assume.”

“The rest are regular strong boxes, I thought you might want a few. You know.”

“actually- yeah, thank you. wow. these are really nice- I Can’t Find the Spellwork- Terry, what did you do?”

“Magic.”

“pfft. alright- don’t tell me then. Jinx is better, since your talk with her. think you can have a talk with him?”

“Not without scaring him.”
“jeeze. Mm! Dan actually wants to go shopping with you in a few days- something came up for her, so…”

“That’s cool. I’ll iron out the deets with her- anything else, or…?”

“just one thing- lately, i’ve been getting a lot of people in with your typical brace of barfight hurts-cuts, bruises, the like- but the thing is, about three people out of every thirty don’t remember ever going into the bar. when i tested their blood- Terry, they hadn’t even drunken alcohol. it’s not a big thing, but it’s a very you brand of weird.”

“If you say so, Rae, I’ll look into it. So… see you later?”

“yeah. Fair winds to Guide you, Terry.”

“Stars light your path and leafgreen smells mask your way, Raven.”

I leave Raven feeling much better about the world, my life, my boyfriend, and other such things; Raven’s news, however, makes me worried. Time to talk to some people.

Grandma Dumpling doesn’t know much- only that the musicians, Shriek and Music Meister, are back, and that the Inque sisters are at it again- it seems all four of them escaped from Hell, but she couldn’t give me specifics. She did give me a delicious second breakfast, and a flat dry space to write out sutras with; I paste several in out of the way spots all over her kitchen, underneath tables, in high corners of cabinets, directly overhead pathways and doorways. My Grandma thanks me for my concern, and sends me on to the Gates of Hell.

Horse Face and Ox Head can’t give me specifics about any soul that comes through their set of doors- commonly called a line- but they do tell me that more than just the four I personally brought in on Hell’s Imperial Seizure requests escaped; further, there has been a serious influx of various Xanghai Triadeers, all the major gangs, and more ominously, all levels of member- everything from your average lan denglong to hong ji to bai zhi shan and qianfeng; the higher level members go through a different line. However, they heard from Rat Paws and Scales, who do work that particular line, that it’s not just the lowly franchise members getting killed- it’s all the way up, from the fields to the mountaintop. A few notes of finely written sutra gets me one more gem, which promptly shatters into several smaller gems that glow faintly enough to see by, if not read the writing on the wall- I won’t be tripping over my feet, at least.

There’s a new gang in town, or at the very least, a new symbol. Most triads- at least, the old four- use a triangular symbol and some sort of Icon to represent Guan Yu; these people aren’t doing that. There have been people with a number of tattoos on their body in the shape of copper coins, always somewhere that can be hidden from view; not many of those tattooes came through. People with bamboo, on the other hand, have been almost in excess- the most important of them seemed to have a bird somewhere among their stalks, and there was always green involved, along with blue and red in certain configurations. Some people have been coming through with numerals on their various limbs- but the odd thing is that they all have the character “Myriad” on the back of their necks.

It’s the details of the tattooes on the people coming through the line overseen by Rat Paws and Scales that clinches it for me- Wind characters, the three living beings, the four gentlemen, the four seasons, three paired sets- Rich Man and Pot of Gold, Criminal and Magistrate, Beggar and Priest- and four nondescript souls with baida on their backs…
“Mahjong.”

“We noticed- but hwe’re not sure wh-hwhy.”

“Any idears, Miss X?”

“Sorry boys- I’ve got nothing. The only thing I know that I can also say is what you know already- a new gang is on the rise; uncommonly ruthless, strikingly effective, and not afraid to sacrifice to achieve their aims… there’s someone who might know more- but I never knew his name.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Yes- male, taller than me with dead ink black eyes, slicked back hair bleached pale gold; he was endowed with the strength of a giant, and though his face was not terribly ugly, his spirit was, and twisted it like mud set to boil.”

“Hmm… it’s still quite broad…”

“Slimy. Smarmy. The kind of man who’ll do anything to get ahead, to get what he wants- and he died in a strange way, like… like green fire, fire that rotted everything it touched.”

“Hweh! I remember him! Thank you Miss X- you’ll not regret this, I swear it.”

“Thanks Horse- really, thank you. I’ll put in a good word for you both at my Aunt’s. S’been a while since your ugly mugs were seen round about there, hn?”

“Aw, Miss X- now, that ain’t rightly respectable for two upstandin’ soldiers of the King’s Army.”

“Yeah- an hwe ain’t allowed back fer another two, mebbe three weeks on account of ‘personal injuries done to workers’, y’see.”

“T’ch- I thought I told you two to read the whole treaty, not just the positions. Shit, son- you gotta be diligent with your studies, otherwise the lovely ladies will not let you back inside their Palace of Jade, you know what I mean?”

“Now, n-now- Miss X, you say too much more about things in that line of whatnows, an I’ll have to report you to the Imperial Office of Moral Decency…”

“Wholy gwhods. Wholy feckin gwhods.”

“Hmmph. That office only cares if you have money- and we all know none of us do. I’ll be seeing you two later.”

Aunt Landlady is actually helpful, for once- she knows exactly what to expect from a Fox-type crossbred copulating with a human, especially a female. Unfortunately, she doesn’t know what to expect from an Atlantean human male… The structure of her offices has changed- she doesn’t actually have time to see me, today. She does, however, have the time to write up some conjectures.

Atlantean, huh? Well, water’s a shitty lubricant- he’ll probably use a thrusting style that’s more grinding and undulation than anything else. Be prepared for a large volume of ‘output’ too- the
ocean, by all accounts, is dangerous enough that every copulation would need to maximize the chance of a pregnancy occurring. More than that, don’t be surprised if his penis engorges after ejaculation— it’s probably an oceanic development; get ready to open every door of your Jade Palace and quarter the Imperial Army!

As for the strength thing, get a Draconian Brace from the ‘Missary in the Lobby- I’ll pay for it.

My Aunt Landlady, everybody. She runs a whorehouse, and birthed fifteen people into this world. Her suppositions are almost certainly correct.

And, according to my Aunt, my body is built for what she supposes Kaldur’s sexual pleasure will be. In a physical sense.

The Draconian Brace, on the other sexual section, is a much more interesting affair.

Let me see if I remember- ah, yes. Alright. Here’s how it works- the largest draft animals and draft workers in the city are a specific subset of expat Gemworlders, known here as the Westernese, or Draconians. During their working hours, they use their not inconsiderable skill and power in the field of transformation to shapechange into massive beasts— what most people in the West think of as a dragon.

As part of their union’s agreements with the Chamber of Commerce, every draft worker and animal is given regular medical checkups, so as to, in the words of the legalese, “ensure the return of a healthy and hardy worker to the employer”.

Responses to the Draco Union’s victory were varied— but one response, the Draconian Brace, was extremely lucrative for the entire industry of which my Aunt is a part.

The Draconian Brace itself is a pair of sheaths made out of cheesecloth-fine spellwork, gold thread, slink leather, and brass. It goes over the forearms of the wearer; once applied, it can only be removed by the applier, and only viewed in full sunlight.

The purpose of the Brace is simple; when a wearer is applied with a Brace, they become imbued with… not strength. It’s more like their overall fragility reduces by a great deal— originally, great enough to withstand the heat and pressure and muscle contractions of a female Draconian’s vaginal canal— now, for… other purposes.

Like having sex with your deep-sea-and-pressure dwelling buoyfrond without rupturing something important. Or breaking your pelvis.

The Commisarry, which is inside the- they’re calling it an Arcade, now— is almost deathly quiet, compared to the neon cacophony of the surrounding casino. A dull eyed worker slides a parcel wrapped in plain newsprint underneath an iron gated window.

I take the parcel, slip a sutra under the window; it vanishes into the glistening folds of something that gapes and drips and gently undulates.

I honestly hadn’t realized my Aunt employed succubi- cool.
Anyway- time to go back to the Cave, apply the Brace- wait! I should… I think I read about a toy that might...

Wait, no- I don’t have enough money, and living beyond your means will get you killed in this town.

So. Back at the Cave, I eat lunch, apply my Brace, and do some training drills- specifically, Hit Counters.

A hit counter is a type of drill I generally reserve for when I feel the need to test out an armor of some kind; since I’ve perfected my normal armor, this drill is specifically for testing the Brace’s capabilities.

As it happens, I haven’t actually input a specific set of parameters for this drill- thankfully, this is one part of the Cave’s systems I have full access to. It’s odd- I can access the training programs, and have full use of the Level Editor, but…

Well- no, it just- sometimes, I catch glimpses of things in the system when my teammates are using it… but when I use the system, it’s like those things I glimpsed aren’t- real.

It’s odd.

Not particularly surprising, to me, but still very odd.

I end up training the whole day away- the Brace doesn’t block sensation, just pain and injury, as it turns out; I can feel the force of a hit, but it doesn’t hurt, and I don’t take damage from it. Very useful, in my line of work.

After I trained with the brace, I uploaded one of Robin’s drills- just some dodging and acrobatics; it was easy to make a copy with internal scanning to measure the height and weight of the trainee, so as to make the work sporting.

It was some of the most fun I’ve had in quite a while. I also learned that the Brace only works if the incoming force is specifically harmful- like, a laserbeam, or a fist. The floor from a misjudged combat roll? Does not count as an enemy.

OW OW FUCK OW.

The next day, I realize that there’s going to be a mission. More importantly, I realize that we’re going to a swamp.

Most importantly, though- I realize I haven’t gotten to spar against Kaldur in… days.

Can’t be having that.
After breakfast- cold turkey sandwich on lightly toasted white bread, glass of tea and more honeyed looks than I care to think about- Kaldur and I spar.

You know, it took me until now to realize that the Cave’s sparring ring assigns points to each hit or miss?

That puts a whole new light on sparring with my boyfriend- on the one hand, he could pin me to the ground and look at me all intense like he usually does.

On the other, I did finally figure out how to get out of that pin…

Fuck it.

It goes as it usually goes- a flurry of sneaky punches, kicks that make him grunt but don’t actually slow him down, the occasional throw that doesn’t actually slow me down; the pin comes when it always does, but this time- this time, I’m doing it different.

When he grabs me for the pin, my wrists are in his hands and I’m definitely going down- but my legs are not between his. They’re up and pressed like a squished flat Z against his chest; we’re falling before he realizes where my feet are. The moment my shoulders are flat to the ground, my legs spring up and back- he doesn’t let go of me as he flips over my head, but… I’m not sure I need him to, now.

I follow the kick through and straddle him- my butt is literally about to drop on his throat like an angry fist from a goddess in a smiting sort of mood. Overall, I consider the total move a little awkward, but as he called the forfeit, not me, I give it full marks for effectiveness.

Also, I think he might have enjoyed that as much as I did. If his blush wasn’t a giveaway, the bulge in his pants certainly was.

Kaldur bulge.

No! Focus!

Yeah, so- about two hours later, neither of us have managed to definitively take the other down; I’m slipperier than a bar of soap at a carwash, Kaldur’s blushing all down his chest, and if there weren’t cameras everywhere, I’d be doing some full contact percussive cuddling, if you get my meaning. I’m pretty sure that Kaldur would enjoy that too. Or at least understand my meaning.

At the very least, I’d learn if my Aunt’s suppositions were correct. Or incorrect.

Or only partially correct.

I want to kiss his everywhere so badly it almost hurts- there is a very literal and definite ache in my lower, more sensual regions.

Like my toes, oddly enough.

Noontime sees me eating lunch and working back a blush that would certainly give away to anyone who knows anything about sex what, exactly, is wrong with me. My butt still aches, my hips feel all
wiggly and loose and wet in the middle, and I want to wrap myself around Kaldur and wiggle.

On a completely innocuous note, this leftover stack of pancakes is delicious. There’s butter, on them. They’re brown. And tasty.

I give up trying for decency and public morality around three in the afternoon; I spent a good hour in my room, playing.

Felt very nice. Didn’t help a thing, but felt very nice.

Godsdammit I want- uuuugh.

Mission today.

Pull it together.

I can do it.

Why am I worried about this mission, I’m usually- AHA! I KNOW WHAT I CAN DO TO KEEP MY MIND OFF OF AQUIRING AN ALL ACCESS PASS TO KALDUR’S- ahem. Time to prepare for the mission.

What to take…

The Green Man awaits a meeting; the Constant Man knows him of old.

What? the hell was that…? Hm. To London!

One Zeta later, a quick walk through miserable wet air, and I’m slouching up the stairs of a brownstone I won’t forget soon.

The door remembers me, eyes me funny, and then swings open with nary a sound- and even though we cleaned this shithole top to bottom, it’s quite literally exactly as we first found it. Dirty and clean clothing mingle without a care on a floor covered over with a horrifyingly dingy-was-once-a-color-that-was-not-that grey carpet; the rank stink of mold and mould and old and uuugh and vomit wafts out of a bathroom that I quietly close the door to.

I suddenly realize that I’m wearing my training clothes and a hoodie I grabbed from the bottom of my closet; nothing more than loose dark pants, smalls, t-shirt, sports bra, and a red kangaroo pocket hoodie. I’m not actually wearing shoes- I’m wearing… footpads? Yeah, footpads- I don’t actually like to wear shoes, if I don’t have to.

Mr. Constantine is sleeping like a baby- a baby with a taste for vodka: he’s got it clenched to him like a teddybear.

I pick up a broken hanger that’s sticking out from under his creaky bed- waiting, no doubt, for an
unwary foot to stab- and jab him in the neck with it.

He flails, slops vodka all overhimself, and looks at me- then he groans.

“The fuck- where’re yer friends?”

“I’m sure I don’t know where they aren’t. But I do know where you are. And I have a question- then I’ll leave you to your… squalor.”

“Hnf. Fuck. What d’you want, then?”

“I’ll be going swampwards in a few hours- d’you have any messages or advice you’d like to pass along to your adorable and singularly polite sponsoree?”

“Fuckin hell… yeah. Don’t hurt the plants. He doesn’t like it.”

“The Green Man?”

“He ain’t no kind of man I’ve ever seen- more of a… Thing, as it were. As for messages… if you do end up seeing him on polite terms, tell him that the Constant One remains Constant.”

“Will do. Be seeing you.”

“Make that a never again, and I’ll even toast your health.”

“Get soused, old man.”

“With pleasure.”

I leave him to his cups, and go back to the Cave; London is, and always will be, a miserable, rainy, and uptight excuse for a city.

Fucking London.

A quick pitstop at the Harbor Shakeshack for a delicious fruit smoothie- I can have yoghurt, just not milk, after all- and I’m back at the Cave, following my ears towards the training room.

I quietly follow on the heels of Conner, Megan, and w-Wolf.

Ah. It was Robin and Kaldur sparring- that explains it. Robin says something to Kaldur about Megan and Conner- Kaldur replies. Robin looks at me, smiles, says something to Kaldur. Kaldur blushes and smiles brightly- then says something that makes Robin laugh his chipper cackle.


Oh hey, Captain Marvel- and also a magician of some kind. I’ll go say hi- or not.
“So, if Zatara’s our new babysitter, why is he still here? And why is he eating my snacks!”

“Hello Wally, Artemis.”

“Hey Terry- smoothie…”?

“Not allergic to yoghurt, just milk.”

“Ah.”

“So, Terry, pretty Terry, beautiful Terry, I was wondering if-”

“No.”

“Hee! Nice, Ter.”

“Hey, I didn’t even get to ask!”

“I am being the girlfriend of Kaldur now, yes, so- and Wally has. Habits.”

“Dude!”

“Hee hee hee! Oh, that’s beautiful- oh, but um- Terry, you speak Atlantean, right?”

“Yes…?”

“Could you tutor me in it?”

“I could teach you the really nasty cusswords, but… I don’t know how to speak neutral Atlantean.”

“Huh?”

“Atlantean is like my home Kiaom- is a language of tones and specific words and many many dialects. Is common to only teach the most neutral politeness most formalest way of speaking, so as is to not be offending when required to speak.”

“Oh. So… wait, how did you learn…?”

“I have friends in very low places. Also, I use to live over a whorehouse- I seen many shits.”

Batman arrives before Artemis can sort through her confusion- Wally zipped over to Robin and Kaldur when we started talking about Atlantean tutoring possibilities. I think shit’s about to go down. Or is going down.

“Computer- National News.”

A rectangle of light expands and resolves into a lady reporter with bright gold hair, like waves of cornsilk; her eyes are worried and blue like ice.

She is wearing a dull pink dress with white assymetrical trim around her neck and across her left shoulder, earrings- a pair of silvery blobs I can’t make out too- Shit, I’m not wearing my glasses.
Ah, much better.

Cat Grant is a reporter in Metropolis, apparently.

"-the initial attack was short lived, but Metropolis was only granted a short reprieve. And despite the intervention of Superman and the Justice League" Oh. I feel stupid. “there seems to be no end in sight.”

“Should we get out there?” Giant destructive plants are not a reason to sound so excited, Robin.

“No. The League will soon have the situation under control- that’s not why I’m here. According to your intel, Sportmaster supplied CADMUS Blockbuster formula to Kobra.”

“Who combined it with Bane’s Venom to create Kobra Venom.” Good gods that’s a stupid name.

“Which the Brain used to create his animal army.”

“And upgrade Wolf.”

“The Brain also used inhibitor collars, like the one used at Belle Reve penitentiary.”

“Batman, is it- possible that, that plant-thingy is on Kobra Venom too?”

Look at me, adding so very much to the conversation. As in, nothing at all.

“I had Green Lantern run a spot analysis- the vine’s cellulose does contain trace amounts of a Kobra Venom variant.”

“These cannot be coincidences. Unrelated criminals are co-operating with each other worldwide.”

“Exactly. It’s now clear our enemies have formed some sort of… secret society of supervillians. The attack on Metropolis is only the beginning.”

“You’ve got that right- plant creatures have sprouted in Gotham City, Paris, Star City, Taipei-”

Oh dear. That’s not good.

“Dude!”

“It’s not me! Someone’s cutting the satellite signals, all satellite signals-”

Green-haired man with dead skin and cat’s in his eyes, a smile painted on and leering and I’m- I’m growling. It’s not a thing I do lightly- for one thing, it’s hell on my vocal chords. For another… it tends to freak people out quite quickly.

The man taps the glass, like we’re department store fish in a tank some winter’s holiday eve-
“Ladies and gentlemen” I was not aware I could growl louder than I have been. I can. “We interrupt your regularly scheduled mayhem to bring you this important announcement- from the Injustice League, hahahahahaha-”

“We are responsible for the attacks on your cities- if you wish to save them, a ransom of ten billion American dollars is required.” Like fucking hell. “Delivery instructions have been sent to the United Nations- there is no time limit. But. The longer your governments wait-”

“The more we get to have our… jollies. Ahehehhahahaha.”

I can’t actually hear anything right now… and Wolf is on his back, with his tail between his legs and- I need to. Take a deep breath. Ease the rumble in my chest. Again. Down to a soft boil, instead of a thunderstorm, ready to strike the world down.

Batman was saying something, and Superboy is looking at me oddly- shards of broken plastic are digging into my hand, wet smoothie dripping down like-

Breathe, dammit.

“Count Vertigo, The Joker, Poison Ivy, The Ultra Humanite, Atomic Skull, Black Adam, Wotan- seven heavy hitters! Probably behind nearly everything and everyone we’ve faced.”

“There’s your secret society.”

“Not so secret anymore…”

“Perhaps after India, they realized we would deduce the truth and saw no point in hiding anymore.”

“No. Is something else.”

I have everyone’s full attention now- oh. There was more than a little growl in my voice- too late now. Onwards.

“Does not make sense- for everything, there is a cost, and a reward. The cost of this action is the loss of their anonymity- what is their reward?”

“Ten billion American dollars? I mean, I’m sure that’s a good enough reward for the common criminal-”

“These are not common criminals, Miss Martian. If they were, they be in gaol by now. What are they getting for this?”

There’s a reason we kept Kaldur as our leader. For me, it’s quite simple- part of the reason I refused the leadership position. I have seen too much darkness to ever bask in the light- I know that there is a
piece of darkness in everyone, in every thing, in every place- if I can help it, I will keep my teammates from it. However, my inundation with the dark has given me immense insight into those who dwell in it’s depths- I know how criminals work, and I know how to… how to vanish into the darkness, completely.

I didn’t- don’t- want to be found for a reason, after all.

Robin isn’t ready to lead yet- he’s not grown up enough. Too young- too enamored with the world as he sees it, not as it is. Wally is too emotional, for all his bragging about science- Artemis is not emotional enough. Megan hates too easily, too much of herself- I will not follow her into the dark, not with the monsters she’s… Conner- he’s too new to the world to know which way to walk in it.

Kaldur is none of these things- he’s… balanced.

And he sees things I can’t. Or won’t.

“The reward is our attention.”

Mmm. Kaldur. You make me happy in the strangest of ways…

“Oh yeah? Well, that was their mistake- I say we go and kick some plant creature butt!”

“The Justice League will handle the plants- I have a different job for this team.”

“Aw, man- ow!”

Artemis, you hold a special place in my heart. Never change.

“With the plants attacking so many locations simultaneously, there must be a central control system. Your mission is to destroy it.”

“You realize what you’re really asking them to do?”

“They’re ready.”

“Ready? Ready for what- OW! Will you quit doing that?”

“Hello, Wally! If the big guns are fighting plants, who do you think we’LL be fighting?”

“I dunno, I guess we’ll- guh. Oh…”

“Well, Batman, I trust you are correct.”

“I trust you can locate the enemy.”

“Indeed. Wotan’s involvement suggests sorcery is part of how the plants are controlled. Robin- if
you would provide a holo-map, I’ll search for all signs of concentrated sorcerous activity.” I didn’t understand the spell he used, but it worked… I wonder what his name is though… Za-something, I think… “There. That is where you will find the Injustice League’s central control system.”

“Co-ordinates locked in. The Louisiana Bayou.”

“We are on our way.”

Everyone runs off to get ready- I stop Captain Marvel in his tracks with a single raised eyebrow and a semi-lethal stare. It kills rats a treat, and once made a man vomit. He was drunk though…

“They suspect something if you come with us.”

“But-”

“But nothing. You’re a part of the Justice League, no? To keep suspicions away, you need to be seen fighting the plants, just like all the other Leaguers. Besides… a red herring is good for the constitution, every now and again.”

“Hmph.”

“Hmm. Happy gardening, Captain.”

“Happy hunting, X.”

I smile, nod- bound down the hallway, two turns and a slide get me into the hangar- transform on the move, ignore the splatter of sparks across my vision and the churning of anticipation. Dart into the Bioship- Aqualad is just sitting down, and Kid Flash isn’t here yet. Phew.

Miss Martian is a cool stare at my back, brown cold mud sliding down my neck. Intensely cold.

The buzzing whap of Kid’s butt in the seat is all I really remember of the pre-flight; the flight itself is a jumble of nerves and cold apprehension and Miss Martian’s brown mud anger dripping down over my back and winding me tighter and tighter, like a drumskin on too wide a barrel. Tension. Everyone is tense.

Robin fiddles with his belt, checking and double checking his gear. Artemis counts and re-arranges her arrows; Kid taps his shoes and shifts in his seat and wriggles, uncomfortable, unstilled.

I sit with my legs under myself and tried not to think about the sky, or the ground, or the ease in which Miss Martian could drop me to die- and breathe in. Breathe out.

Think of something else, Terry. Something that isn’t this.
Something like…

D’you know, it’s not out of, of some perverse joy that I don’t ever really… that I’m not as blunt as I generally want to be. I hate being misunderstood.

However… every seer who is a Seer in this Era is a descendant of Cassandra. And just as Cassandra was never believed for her Truths, so too are her descendants never believed when they speak what Truths they Remember from the Future.

I Remember and I remember- I remember the words said, being said, will be said, before we take our mission, took our mission, will take our mission- it’s easiest for me to focus on the words, not who says them. That’s the easiest part of any memory to change… so, in all honesty, it doesn’t really matter.

It’s the words said and the memory remembered that matter, not necessarily who was involved, or where they were.

And we’re flying over a swamp now, Green waving softly underneath aaargh. Dammit. I have to stop doing that.

I should also probably not vomit inside of Miss Martian’s Bioship. I doubt either of them would appreciate that.

I just don’t like flying. Or heights.

Or anything about this, really.

“What’s in that duffle?”

“Plan B.”

“Please no use it if not having to be.”

“That’s generally the idea, X.”

“Thank you for clearing that idea upwards, Miss Martian.”

“Enough. Settle this outside of a mission- I need both of you to focus.”

“Sorry Aqualad.”

“Of course.”

Ow. OwowowowowOWOWWOOWWOWOW T U R N IT O O O O O O F F - oh fuck- Fly!

The moment I take up Fly, I can feel the edge of the ringing hurt being pushed back by the ship-

“What- I’m not in control!”
“W-well, no, I am.”

“X- what- why-”

“We are. oh gods. Under attaaaaaaagh-ck. And. I am. aaarrrrgh. I am just being the tiniest bit-fuckfuckfuckFUCK- scared. Of. Heights. And stuff. Aaaah uughughughuuu.”

“So maybe you should let me fly-”

“She is protecting us from an attack; she cannot fly at the same time. If you want to steer, please. Daaaaaaaahghhaaagh- do. oh gods.”

I’m still flying, but Miss Martian is steering again. and I hate everything right now.

And now we’re going doooooooowaaaaaahghhaahgaaaaahaaaaaaaahaaaaaaahaaaaaaa-

Spinning. Why is it always godsbedamned spinning. Why.

And now there are roots dragging us into murky waters.

And now there’s a guy pulling the ceiling open. Miss Martian yells something, and Superboy roars and punches the guy away- Black… Adrian? No, that doesn’t sound right…

And now we’re going to drown.

Lovely turn this mission is taking. Just really, really wonderful.

Something gleams in the water- a Card? Here? That’s actually quite lucky! And it's- Sweet?
That’s… not helpful right now. Still, signing it is easy in the rising, and surprisingly clear, water.

I put the Card away, and follow my teammates out of the Bioship, down into the sweltering warmth of the waters. So glad I didn’t lose my S-Blades; the order from Aqualad to get out of the ship, while welcome, is unnecessary.

We come out onto the bank of a… lake? near sway-branched trees- and I tune back into the Chatter.

“She’s in shock! She’ll need time to recover-”

-////-


I flop over to the muddy bank and vomit the entire contents of my stomach into the clear waters; a radiant sunset diffused over a chunky dust cloud.
I hear Kid Flash say- something- and then Superboy get’s punched to the ground by- someone, same guy who tore a hole into Ship’s roof- Aqualad pulls a bolt of blue magic water out of the waters we rose from and smacks a man down with them.

I’m on my feet again, crouching- do I attack, or…?

‘Robin, Miss Martian, Red X- disappear! We will keep them busy- you three, fulfil the mission objective.’

Welp. That answers that question- drop down into Shadow and race through the roil of plants and fish and mud, frog-shadows leaping from stalks of tall grasses and there’s a massive root I can follow back through the earth and avoid the crackle of- green energy, like rotting, a Blight upon the earth-here? How can He be here?

No, no- He isn’t here. It’s not Him.

Someone else- someone else. This Blight is older- similar, but- He’s got a more refined variant of that awfulness. And He’s slightly more alive.

Atomic Skull. That’s who this is- now, why would his powers feel like His powers?

A question for another day…

A quiet approach would be best I think- slinking through the darkness- wait, wait. The red-mouthed deadskin man’s controlling the plants- with a pair of gloves, like a puppeteer-

;I’ve lost contact with Aqualad and the rest of the Team- should we-?

•Sorry, that’s not the gig- this is. Injustice League headquarters- looks like that giant plant’s acting like an antenna•

- I have eyes on Atomic Skull and the Joker; Ultra-Humanite and the plant-woman are not here. Atomic Skull is acting as a battery, while Joker controls the plants- -

:!!:;

•!

-Do I need to come out there?-•

•No- take out the Joker while there’s fewer combatants. Can you take down Atomic Skull•

- I can.-•

•Do it•
Twin and settle into the shadows of both men- now, this will have to be precise. Place hands on bare
skin of Joker’s ankles, the back of Atomic Skull’, grip them tight- they can’t feel it, either of them,
it’s only a shadow- drop Shadow, pass Sleep, and they fall like bricks. Peel the puppeteer gloves off
Joker and tie Atomic Skull’s ankles to his hands and a loop around his neck; Joker gets the same.
Now- put the gloves on, flick of the fingers and all the plants cease their attacking, coil up together in
the best kind of take-me-down form; weave the vines together so they won’t be easily taken back
apart if things go wrong. Take the gloves off, crush them underheel and Shot takes out the control
hub- another riddles the signaling plant with steadily oozing holes.

I hear, very faintly, the sound of a woman screaming.

Time to disappear again.

Time in the Shadow is silent and not terribly exciting- the enormous explosion that shatters the glass
of the roof is only mildly interesting.

Ah. Someone I can take down.

Seething shadows leap out and wrap around the shield Wotan is hovering inside; spikes of gold force
me off.

A bolt of lightning strikes me full in the chest- it feels a bit like getting my breath knocked out with
one good thump; Cloud boils up, soft landing assured. Another bolt comes- Thunder’s jaws catch it,
shatter it with one crunch of it’s jaws. More bolts fly- racing towards my teammates; I’m on
Thunder’s back before I realize it, Moving the bolts from my friend’s unprotected backs, arcing them
around and striking the trees, splitting them and sparking embers of hissing flame.

Thunder races through the air, dodging and bounding over spells flung far too slow to stop my
advance. I Jump high, starbound, and slip into a Cloud; Thunder shatters Wotan’s shield, growls and
digs it’s burning teeth into the body of that ancient sorcerer-

AH!

When I can open my eyes again, Dr. Fate has bound Wotan in Ordered chains, Robin is dodging
writhing vines while Artemis attempts to flank plant-woman, Superboy and Miss Martian are fighting
Black A-something and the Ultra-humanite… and Count Vertigo is standing over me with a sword.

Well. There’s a dumbass in every outfit- looks like I’ve found this one’s.

Swing the feet wide, ankle catches and pull- roll through the side and onto the feet, kick him while
he’s down. Mud in his face makes him yell, and it’s a bit hard to aim when you can’t see- Sleep takes
him down, brick-style, and roll him over so he doesn’t drown.
The battle rages overhead— and there’s Zatara and all the other grownups, come to help too late. Nice.

Let’s see if I can take down the lady in green, hmm?

I’ve dragged both sleeping men out of the headquarters, slung over shoulder and heaved through winding corridors of unchanging wobbling metal— just in time to notice something very important. Or, maybe I should say— a Swamp Thing that is very important.

I also see Thunder slam the woman in green to the ground, thrashing her soundly— my own hand drawn smooth-soothing over her brow sends her into the land of Sleep.

I lay the bound men onto the porch-area of the complex, drop Twin— three spells at once, that’s new— and Shadow takes both Count Vertigo and Plant-woman to lay beside their sleeping comrades.

My teammates have corralled the rest of our plant-enjoying miscreants— and even when Ultra-humanite uses some sort of device to release a cloud of poisonous green gas into the air, Dr. Fate intervenes in our favor.

Oh good gods, I’m parroting.

Still, nothing’s ever over until it’s over.

This ain’t over yet.

Swamp Thing has come all this way— this is It’s home, after all. And it would be best for everyone involved if It didn’t get the wrong idea about things.

Something stirring in the forest— I’m in front of my teammates, not in the circle of Heroes and Villains at all.

A form, moving through the trees, vines and tendrils— massive, roiling, man-shaped but not at all a man. Nothing about that is a man.

The forest walks towards us, and I want to run, I want to run— everything in me screams to run, run and never come back but there’s no far enough away, no far enough away to run to there’s only—

leaves and branches, slowly winding and falling over each other, shambling, digging roots, and rolling gait, man shaped man shaped but not a man

a soggy head of moss on shoulders of bark and branches and mud seeping down legs that are the stumpy bottoms of trees with vines choking over them, slither slither closer to me through the muddy waters of the swamp the swamp Walks towards us and stops before me oh gods

and I can only

bow

and tell the King of the Swamp why we interlopers have brought fire and axes to his kingdom of green growing things.
It bows back, lifts a branch of wriggling writhing vines and thorns sharp and reaching thin leaves and flowers streaming down on tendrils like a sleeve so gracious and fair

hand

points at the building with it’s thorn dipped tipped in red and sharp like a broken heart that never ever fades

finger-

and says

no voice, no voice, the Swamp cannot speak

asks-

“And that?”

“If you will help, I can fix it.”

“Yes.”

I turn my back to the Swamp that Walks

And walk past my teammates who are-

Scared as I am don’t move don’t move what is that Thing what is that Thing past the adults who are always late and Zatara’s face is grey and his eyes his eyes past Dr. Fate and his eyes his eyes I could drown in them- oh no- not the time for that right now

I have to -keep walking until I am Am I shaking?

past the still awake but captured criminals who are scared as well because the Swamp Walks and Speaks
and I stop short of the building and my Shadow picks up the sleeping criminals and sweeps away from the building, quiet quiet don’t scream don’t scream don’t scream don’t run or scream, it won’t help there is nowhere far enough away there is no far away enough-

and the Swamp-

lifts it’s wriggling writhing branched and vine-ed limb and gently places a coil of itself around my shoulder and It is light and It is so Green I have to fight the urge to sneeze and fall to the ground the warm and seeping earth and there decay and vanish into the nothing of the entirety of the world-

“What shall I do? Remove it completely, or… something new to grow here?”

“Grow.”

“Right.”

but no time for sneezing I have to do this-

Widen stance and brace into the muddy sucking swampy earth, let the wellspring of Green power at my back form the Words.

Wood, here grow and break this formed place. Return to beauty and pristine agelessness, oh magnificence, oh glorious, oh mother.

Wood and Return together is a powerful combination- the Green makes both of them reach and hurtle, trees and bushes, shrubs and shade and more flowers than can be imagined, ever reaching towards the moon and the stars and the blanket of sky, reaching reaching-

the Swamp rubs my shoulder, draws me into a hug with it’s many tendrils and branches and just-

Breathe

the Swamp is thankful for the help, and

and

branches leaves and vines, flowers and tendrils and mosses and mud-

Green and growing-

And then.

The Swamp that Walks shambles into the new part of the swamp that is and vanishes from my sight.

Thank the gods.

And I just… I’d really like to go home now. Or get a shower.
Possibly curl up in my bed and wait for the panic to recede.

My body, however, decides that the only appropriate response for meeting a local Green God is unconsciousness. I can’t say I’m ungrateful— and, at the very least, I made about ten steps away from the swamp I helped— restore— before falling forwards with a whimpering cry.

The uproarious merriment of a wedding-feast burst forth into the night from a brilliantly lighted house in the "gasse" (narrow street). It was one of those nights touched with the warmth of spring, but dark and full of soft mist. Most fitting it was for a celebration of the union of two yearning hearts to share the same lot, a lot that may possibly dawn in sunny brightness, but also become clouded and sullen—for a long, long time! But how merry and joyous they were over there, those people of the happy olden times! They, like us, had their troubles and trials, and when misfortune visited them it came not to them with soft cushions and tender pressures of the hand. Rough and hard, with clinched fist, it laid hold upon them. But when they gave vent to their happy feelings and sought to enjoy themselves, they were like swimmers in cooling waters. They struck out into the stream with freshness and courage, suffered themselves to be borne along by the current whithersoever it took its course. This was the cause of such a jubilee, such a thoughtlessly noisy outburst of all kinds of soul-possessing gayety from this house of nuptials.

"And if I had known," the bride's father, the rich Ruben Klattaner, had just said, "that it would take the last gulden in my pocket, then out it would have come."

In fact, it did appear as if the last groschen had really taken flight, and was fluttering about in the form of platters heaped up with geese and pastry-tarts. Since two o'clock—that is, since the marriage ceremony had been performed out in the open street—until nearly midnight, the wedding-feast had been progressing, and even yet the sarvers, or waiters, were hurrying from room to room. It was as if a twofold blessing had descended upon all this abundance of food and drink, for, in the first place, they did not seem to diminish; secondly, they ever found a new place for disposal. To be sure, this appetite was sharpened by the presence of a little dwarf-like, unimportant-looking man. He was esteemed, however, none the less highly by every one. They had specially written to engage the celebrated "Leb Narr," of Prague. And when was ever a mood so out of sorts, a heart so imbittered as not to thaw out and laugh if Leb Narr played one of his pranks. Ah, thou art now dead, good fool! Thy lips, once always ready with a witty reply, are closed. Thy mouth, then never still, now speaks no more! But when the hearty peals of laughter once rang forth at thy command, intercessors, as it were, in thy behalf before the very throne of God, thou hadst nothing to fear. And the joy of that "other" world was thine, that joy that has ever belonged to the most pious of country rabbis!

In the mean time the young people had assembled in one of the rooms to dance. It was strange how the sound of violins and trumpets accorded with the drolleries of the wit from Prague. In one part the outbursts of merriment were so boisterous that the very candles on the little table seemed to flicker with terror; in another an ordinary conversation was in progress, which now and then only ran over into a loud tittering, when some old lady slipped into the circle and tried her skill at a redowa, then altogether unknown to the young people. In the very midst of the tangle of dancers was to be seen the bride in a heavy silk wedding-gown. The point of her golden hood hung far down over her face. She danced continuously. She danced with every one that asked her. Had one, however, observed the actions of the young woman, they would certainly have seemed to him hurried, agitated, almost
wild. She looked no one in the eye, not even her own bridegroom. He stood for the most part in the
door-way, and evidently took more pleasure in the witticisms of the fool than in the dance or the lady
dancers. But who ever thought for a moment why the young woman's hand burned, why her breath
was so hot when one came near to her lips? Who should have noticed so strange a thing? A
low whispering already passed through the company, a stealthy smile stole across many a lip. A bevy
of ladies was seen to enter the room suddenly. The music dashed off into one of its loudest pieces,
and, as if by enchantment, the newly made bride disappeared behind the ladies. The bridegroom,
with his stupid, smiling mien, was still left standing on the threshold. But it was not long before he
too vanished. One could hardly say how it happened. But people understand such skillful
movements by experience, and will continue to understand them as long as there are brides and
grooms in the world.

This disappearance of the chief personages, little as it seemed to be noticed, gave, however, the
signal for general leave-taking. The dancing became drowsy; it stopped all at once, as if by
appointment. That noisy confusion now began which always attends so merry a wedding-party.
Half-drunken voices could be heard still intermingled with a last, hearty laugh over a joke of the fool
from Prague echoing across the table. Here and there some one, not quite sure of his balance, was
fumbling for the arm of his chair or the edge of the table. This resulted in his overturning a dish that
had been forgotten, or in spilling a beer-glass. While this, in turn, set up a new hubbub, some one
else, in his eagerness to betake himself from the scene, fell flat into the very débris. But all this tumult
was really hushed the moment they all pressed to the door, for at that very instant shrieks, cries of
pain, were heard issuing from the entrance below. In an instant the entire outpouring crowd with all
possible force pushed back into the room, but it was a long time before the stream was pressed back
again. Meanwhile, painful cries were again heard from below, so painful, indeed, that they restored
even the most drunken to a state of consciousness.

"By the living God!" they cried to each other, "what is the matter down there? Is the house on fire?"

"She is gone! she is gone!" shrieked a woman's voice from the entry below.

"Who? who?" groaned the wedding-guests, seized, as it were, with an icy horror.

"Gone! gone!" cried the woman from the entry, and hurrying up the stairs came Selde Klattaner, the
mother of the bride, pale as death, her eyes dilated with most awful fright, convulsively grasping a
 candle in her hand. "For God's sake, what has happened?" was heard on every side of her.

The sight of so many people about her, and the confusion of voices, seemed to release the poor
woman from a kind of stupor. She glanced shyly about her then, as if overcome with a sense of
shame stronger than her terror, and said, in a suppressed tone:

"Nothing, nothing, good people. In God's name, I ask, what was there to happen?"

Dissimulation, however, was too evident to suffice to deceive them.

"Why, then, did you shriek so, Selde," called out one of the guests to her, "if nothing happened?"

"Yes, she has gone," Selde now moaned in heart-rendering tones, "and she has certainly done herself
some harm!"

The cause of this strange scene was now first discovered. The bride has disappeared from the
wedding-feast. Soon after that she had vanished in such a mysterious way, the bridegroom went
below to the dimly-lighted room to find her, but in vain. At first thought this seemed to him to be a
sort of bashful jest; but not finding her here, a mysterious foreboding seized him. He called to the
mother of the bride:
"Woe to me! This woman has gone!"

Presently this party, that had so admirably controlled itself, was again thrown into commotion. "There was nothing to do," was said on all sides, "but to ransack every nook and corner. Remarkable instances of such disappearances of brides had been known. Evil spirits were wont to lurk about such nights and to inflict mankind with all sorts of sorceries." Strange as this explanation may seem, there were many who believed it at this very moment, and, most of all, Selde Klattaner herself. But it was only for a moment, for she at once exclaimed:

"No, no, my good people, she is gone; I know she is gone!"

Now for the first time many of them, especially the mothers, felt particularly uneasy, and anxiously called their daughters to them. Only a few showed courage, and urged that they must search and search, even if they had to turn aside the river Iser a hundred times. They urgently pressed on, called for torches and lanterns, and started forth. The cowardly ran after them up and down the stairs. Before any one perceived it the room was entirely forsaken.

Ruben Klattaner stood in the hall entry below, and let the people hurry past him without exchanging a word with any. Bitter disappointment and fear had almost crazed him. One of the last to stay in the room above with Selde was, strange to say, Leb Narr, of Prague. After all had departed, he approached the miserable mother, and, in a tone least becoming his general manner, inquired:

"Tell me, now, Mrs. Selde, did she not wish to have 'him'?"

"Whom? whom?" cried Selde, with renewed alarm, when she found herself alone with the fool.

"I mean," said Leb, in a most sympathetic manner, approaching still nearer to Selde, "that maybe you had to make your daughter marry him."

"Make? And have we, then, made her?" moaned Selde, staring at the fool with a look of uncertainty.

"Then nobody needs to search for her," replied the fool, with a sympathetic laugh, at the same time retreating. "It's better to leave her where she is."

Without saying thanks or good-night, he was gone.

Meanwhile the cause of all this disturbance had arrived at the end of her flight.

Close by the synagogue was situated the house of the rabbi. It was built in an angle of a very narrow street, set in a framework of tall shade-trees. Even by daylight it was dismal enough. At night it was almost impossible for a timid person to approach it, for people declared that the low supplications of the dead could be heard in the dingy house of God when at night they took the rolls of the law from the ark to summon their members by name.

Through this retired street passed, or rather ran, at this hour a shy form. Arriving at the dwelling of the rabbi, she glanced backward to see whether any one was following her. But all was silent and gloomy enough about her. A pale light issued from one of the windows of the synagogue; it came from the "eternal lamp" hanging in front of the ark of the covenant. But at this moment it seemed to her as if a supernatural eye was gazing upon her. Thoroughly affrighted, she seized the little iron knocker of the door and struck it gently. But the throb of her beating heart was even louder, more violent, than this blow. After a pause, footsteps were heard passing slowly along the hallway.

The rabbi had not occupied this lonely house a long time. His predecessor, almost a centenarian in years, had been laid to rest a few months before. The new rabbi had been called, from a distant part of the country. He was unmarried, and in the prime of life. No one had known him before his
coming. But his personal nobility and the profundity of his scholarship made up for his deficiency in years. An aged mother had accompanied him from their distant home, and she took the place of wife and child.

"Who is there?" asked the rabbi, who had been busy at his desk even at this late hour and thus had not missed hearing the knocker.

"It is I," the figure without responded, almost inaudibly.

"Speak louder, if you wish me to hear you," replied the rabbi.

"It is I, Ruben Klattaner's daughter," she repeated.

The name seemed to sound strange to the rabbi. He as yet knew too few of his congregation to understand that this very day he performed the marriage ceremony of the person who had just repeated her name. Therefore he called out, after a moment's pause, "What do you wish so late at night?"

"Open the door, rabbi," she answered, pleadingly, "or I shall die at once!"

The bolt was pushed back. Something gleaming, rustling, glided past the rabbi into the dusky hall. The light of the candle in his hand was not sufficient to allow him to descry it. Before he had time to address her, she had vanished past him and had disappeared through the open door into the room. Shaking his head, the rabbi again bolted the door.

On reëntering the room he saw a woman's form sitting in the chair which he usually occupied. She had her back turned to him. Her head was bent low over her breast. Her golden wedding-hood, with its shading lace, was pulled down over her forehead. Courageous and pious as the rabbi was, he could not rid himself of a feeling of terror.

"Who are you?" he demanded, in a loud tone, as if its sound alone would banish the presence of this being that seemed to him at this moment to be the production of all the enchantments of evil spirits.

She raised herself, and cried in a voice that seemed to come from the agony of a human being:

"Do you not know me—me, whom you married a few hours since under the chuppé(marriage-canopy) to a husband?"

On hearing this familiar voice the rabbi stood speechless. He gazed at the young woman. Now, indeed, he must regard her as one bereft of reason, rather than as a specter.

"Well, if you are she," he stammered out, after a pause, for it was with difficulty that he found words to answer, "why are you here and not in the place where you belong?"

"I know no other place to which I belong more than here where I now am!" she answered, severely.

These words puzzled the rabbi still more. Is it really an insane woman before him? He must have thought so, for he now addressed her in a gentle tone of voice, as we do those suffering from this kind of sickness, in order not to excite her, and said:

"The place where you belong, my daughter, is in the house of your parents, and, since you have today been made a wife, your place is in your husband's house."

The young woman muttered something which failed to reach the rabbi's ear. Yet he only continued to think that he saw before him some poor unfortunate whose mind was deranged. After a pause, he
added, in a still gentler tone: "What is your name, then, my child?"

"God, god," she moaned, in the greatest anguish, "he does not even yet know my name!"

"How should I know you," he continued, apologetically, "for I am a stranger in this place?"

This tender remark seemed to have produced the desired effect upon her excited mind.

"My name is Veile," she said, quietly, after a pause.

The rabbi quickly perceived that he had adopted the right tone towards his mysterious guest.

"Veile," he said, approaching nearer her, "what do you wish of me?"

"Rabbi, I have a great sin resting heavily upon my heart," she replied despondently. "I do not know what to do."

"What can you have done," inquired the rabbi, with a tender look, "that cannot be discussed at any other time than just now? Will you let me advise you, Veile?"

"No, no," she cried again, violently, "I will not be advised. I see, I know what oppresses me. Yes, I can grasp it by the hand, it lies so near before me. Is that what you call to be advised?"

"Very well," returned the rabbi, seeing that this was the very way to get the young woman to talk —"very well, I say, you are not imagining anything. I believe that you have greatly sinned. Have you come here then to confess this sin? Do your parents or your husband know anything about it?"

"Who is my husband?" she interrupted him, impetuously.

Thoughts welled up in the rabbi's heart like a tumultuous sea in which opposing conjectures cross and recross each other's course. Should he speak with her as with an ordinary sinner?

"Were you, perhaps, forced to be married?" he inquired, as quietly as possible, after a pause.

A suppressed sob, a strong inward struggle, manifesting itself in the whole trembling body, was the only answer to this question.

"Tell me, my child," said the rabbi, encouragingly.

In such tones as the rabbi had never before heard, so strange, so surpassing any human sounds, the young woman began:

"Yes, rabbi, I will speak, even though I know that I shall never go from this place alive, which would be the very best thing for me! No, rabbi, I was not forced to be married. My parents have never once said to me 'you must,' but my own will, my own desire, rather, has always been supreme. My husband is the son of a rich man in the community. To enter his family was to be made the first lady in the gasse, to sit buried in gold and silver. And that very thing, nothing else, was what infatuated me with him. It was for that that I forced myself, my heart and will, to be married to him, hard as it was for me. But in my innermost heart I detested him. The more he loved me, the more I hated him. But the gold and silver had an influence over me. More and more they cried to me, 'You will be the first lady in the gasse!'"

"Continue," said the rabbi, when she ceased, almost exhausted by these words.

"What more shall I tell you, rabbi?" she began again. "I was never a liar, when a child, or older, and yet during my whole engagement it has seemed to me as if a big, gigantic lie had followed me step
by step. I have seen it on every side of me. But to-day, when I stood under the chuppe, rabbi, and he took the ring from his finger and put it on mine, and when I had to dance at my own wedding with him, whom I now recognized, now for the first time, as the lie, and—when they led me away——"

This sincere confession escaping from the lips of the young woman, she sobbed aloud and bowed her head still deeper over her breast. The rabbi gazed upon her in silence. No insane woman ever spoke like that! Only a soul conscious of its own sin, but captivated by a mysterious power, could suffer like this!

It was not sympathy which he felt with her; it was much more a living over the sufferings of the woman. In spite of the confused story, it was all clear to the rabbi. The cause of the flight from the father's house at this hour also required no explanation. "I know what you mean,"[Pg 69] he longed to say, but he could only find words to say: "Speak further, Veile!"

The young woman turned towards him. He had not yet seen her face. The golden hood with the shading lace hung deeply over it.

"Have I not told you everything?" she said, with a flush of scorn.

"Everything?" repeated the rabbi, inquiringly. He only said this, moreover, through embarrassment.

"Do you tell me now," she cried, at once passionately and mildly, "what am I to do?"

"Veile!" exclaimed the rabbi, entertaining now, for the first time, a feeling of repugnance for this confidential interview.

"Tell me now!" she pleaded; and before the rabbi could prevent it the young woman threw herself down at his feet and clasped his knees in her arms. This hasty act had loosened the golden wedding-hood from her head, and thus exposed her face to view, a face of remarkable beauty.

So overcome was the young rabbi by the sight of it that he had to shade his eyes with his hands, as if before a sudden flash of lightning.

"Tell me now, what shall I do?" she cried again. "Do you think that I have come from my parents' home merely to return again without help? You alone in the world must tell me. Look at me! I have kept all my hair just as God gave it me. It has never been touched by the shears. Should I, then, do anything to please my husband? I am no wife. I will not be a wife! Tell me, tell me, what am I to do?"

"Arise, arise," bade the rabbi; but his voice quivered, sounded almost painful.

"Tell me first," she gasped; "I will not rise till then!"

"How can I tell you?" he moaned, almost inaudibly.

"Naphtali!" shrieked the kneeling woman.

But the rabbi staggered backward. The room seemed ablaze before him, like a bright fire. A sharp cry rang from his breast, as if one suffering from some painful wound had been seized by a rough hand. In his hurried attempt to free himself from the embrace of the young [Pg 70]woman, who still clung to his knees, it chanced that her head struck heavily against the floor.

"Naphtali!" she cried once again.

"Silence, silence," groaned the rabbi, pressing both hands against his head.
And still again she called out this name, but not with that agonizing cry. It sounded rather like a commingling of exultation and lamentation.

And again he demanded, "Silence! silence!" but this time so imperiously, so forcibly, that the young woman lay on the floor as if conjured, not daring to utter a single word.

The rabbi paced almost wildly up and down the room. There must have been a hard, terrible struggle in his breast. It seemed to the one lying on the floor that she heard him sigh from the depths of his soul. Then his pacing became calmer; but it did not last long. The fierce conflict again assailed him. His step grew hurried; it echoed loudly through the awful stillness of the room. Suddenly he neared the young woman, who seemed to lie there scarcely breathing. He stopped in front of her. Had any one seen the face of the rabbi at this moment the expression on it would have filled him with terror. There was a marvelous tranquillity overlying it, the tranquillity of a struggle for life or death.

"Listen to me now, Veile," he began, slowly. "I will talk with you."

"I listen, rabbi," she whispered.

"But do you hear me well?"

"Only speak," she returned.

"But will you do what I advise you? Will you not oppose it? For I am going to say something that will terrify you."

"I will do anything that you say. Only tell me," she moaned.

"Will you swear?"

"I will," she groaned.

"No, do not swear yet, until you have heard me," he cried. "I will not force you."

This time came no answer.

"Hear me, then, daughter of Ruben Klattaner," he began, after a pause. "You have a twofold sin upon your soul, and each is so great, so criminal, that it can only be forgiven by severe punishment. First you permitted yourself to be infatuated by the gold and silver, and then you forced your heart to lie. With the lie you sought to deceive the man, even though he had intrusted you with his all when he made you his wife. A lie is truly a great sin! Streams of water cannot drown them. They make men false and hateful to themselves. The worst that has been committed in the world was led in by a lie. That is the one sin."

"I know, I know," sobbed the young woman.

"Now hear me further," began the rabbi again, with a wavering voice, after a short pause. "You have committed a still greater sin than the first. You have not only deceived your husband, but you have also destroyed the happiness of another person. You could have spoken, and you did not. For life you have robbed him of his happiness, his light, his joy, but you did not speak. What can he now do, when he knows what has been lost to him?"

"Naphtali!" cried the young woman.

"Silence! silence! do not let that name pass your lips again," he demanded, violently. "The more you repeat it the greater becomes your sin. Why did you not speak when you could have spoken? God
can never easily forgive you that. To be silent, to keep secret in one's breast what would have made another man happier than the mightiest monarch! Thereby you have made him more than unhappy. He will nevermore have the desire to be happy. Veile, God in heaven cannot forgive you for that."

"Silence! silence!" groaned the wretched woman.

"No, Veile," he continued, with a stronger voice, "let me talk now. You are certainly willing to hear me speak? Listen to me. You must do severe penance for this sin, the twofold sin which rests upon your head. God is long-suffering and merciful. He will perhaps look down upon your misery, and will blot out your guilt from the great book of transgressions. But you must become penitent. Hear, now, what it shall be."

The rabbi paused. He was on the point of saying the severest thing that had ever passed his lips.

"You were silent, Veile," then he cried, "when you should have spoken. Be silent now forever to all men and to yourself. From the moment you leave this house, until I grant it, you must be dumb; you dare not let a loud word pass from your mouth. Will you undergo this penance?"

"I will do all you say," moaned the young woman.

"Will you have strength to do it?" he asked, gently.

"I shall be as silent as death," she replied.

"And one thing more I have to say to you," he continued. "You are the wife of your husband. Return home and be a Jewish wife."

"I understand you," she sobbed in reply.

"Go to your home now, and bring peace to your parents and husband. The time will come when you may speak, when your sin will be forgiven you. Till then bear what has been laid upon you."

"May I say one thing more?" she cried, lifting up her head.

"Speak," he said.

"Naphtali!"

The rabbi covered his eyes with one hand, with the other motioned her to be silent. But she grasped his hand, drew it to her lips. Hot tears fell upon it.

"Go now," he sobbed, completely broken down.

She let go the hand. The rabbi had seized the candle, but she had already passed him, and glided through the dark hall. The door was left open. The rabbi locked it again.

Veile returned to her home, as she had escaped, unnoticed. The narrow street was deserted, as desolate as death. The searchers were to be found everywhere except there where they ought first to have sought for the missing one. Her mother, Selde, still sat on the same chair on which she had sunk down an hour ago. The fright had left her like one paralyzed, and she was unable to rise. What a wonderful contrast this wedding-room, with the mother [Pg 73]sitting alone in it, presented to the hilarity reigning here shortly before! On Veile's entrance her mother did not cry out. She had no strength to do so. She merely said: "So you have come at last, my daughter?" as if Veile had only returned from a walk somewhat too long. But the young woman did not answer to this and similar questions. Finally she signified by gesticulations that she could not speak. Fright seized the wretched
mother a second time, and the entire house was filled with her lamentations.

Ruben Klattaner and Veile's husband having now returned from their fruitless search, were horrified on perceiving the change which Veile had undergone. Being men, they did not weep. With staring eyes they gazed upon the silent young woman, and beheld in her an apparition which had been dealt with by God's visitation in a mysterious manner.

From this hour began the terrible penance of the young woman.

The impression which Veile's woeful condition made upon the people of the gasse was wonderful. Those who had danced with her that evening on the wedding now first recalled her excited state. Her wild actions were now first remembered by many. It must have been an "evil eye," they concluded—a jealous, evil eye, to which her beauty was hateful. This alone could have possessed her with a demon of unrest. She was driven by this evil power into the dark night, a sport of these malicious potencies which pursue men step by step, especially on such occasions. The living God alone knows what she must have seen that night. Nothing good, else one would not become dumb. Old legends and tales were revived, each more horrible than the other. Hundreds of instances were given to prove that this was nothing new in the gasse. Despite this explanation, it is remarkable that the people did not believe that the young woman was dumb. The most thought that her power of speech had been paralyzed by some awful fright, but that with time it would be restored. Under this supposition they called her "Veile the Silent."

There is a kind of human eloquence more telling, more forcible than the loudest words, than the choicest diction—[Pg 74]the silence of woman! Ofttimes they cannot endure the slightest vexation, but some great, heart-breaking sorrow, some pain from constant renunciation, self-sacrifice, they suffer with sealed lips—as if, in very truth, they were bound with bars of iron.

It would be difficult to fully describe that long "silent" life of the young woman. It is almost impossible to cite more than one incident. Veile accompanied her husband to his home, that house resplendent with that gold and silver which had infatuated her. She was, to be sure, the "first" woman in the gasse; she had everything in abundance. Indeed, the world supposed that she had but little cause for complaint. "Must one have everything?" was sometimes queried in the gasse. "One has one thing; another, another." And, according to all appearances, the people were right. Veile continued to be the beautiful, blooming woman. Her penance of silence did not deprive her of a single charm. She was so very happy, indeed, that she did not seem to feel even the pain of her punishment. Veile could laugh and rejoice, but never did she forget to be silent. The seemingly happy days, however, were only qualified to bring about the proper time of trials and temptations. The beginning was easy enough for her, the middle and end were times of real pain. The first years of their wedded life were childless. "It is well," the people in the gasse said, "that she has no children, and God has rightly ordained it to be so. A mother who cannot talk to her child, that would be something awful!" Unexpectedly to all, she rejoiced one day in the birth of a daughter. And when that affectionate young creature, her own offspring, was laid upon her breast, and the first sounds were uttered by its lips—that nameless, eloquent utterance of an infant—she forgot herself not; she was silent!

She was silent also when from day to day that child blossomed before her eyes into fuller beauty. Nor had she any words for it when, in effusions of tenderness, it stretched forth its tiny arms, when in burning fever it sought for the mother's hand. For days—yes, weeks—together she watched at its bedside. Sleep never visited her eyes. But she ever remembered her penance.

Years fled by. In her arms she carried another child. It was a boy. The father's joy was great. The child inherited its mother's beauty. Like its sister, it grew in health and strength. The noblest, richest mother, they said, might be proud of such children! And Veile was proud, no doubt, but this never
passed her lips. She remained silent about things which mothers in their joy often cannot find words enough to express. And although her face many times lighted up with beaming smiles, yet she never renounced the habitual silence imposed upon her.

The idea that the slightest dereliction of her penance would be accompanied with a curse upon her children may have impressed itself upon her mind. Mothers will understand better than other persons what this mother suffered from her penalty of silence.

Thus a part of those years sped away which we are wont to call the best. She still flourished in her wonderful beauty. Her maiden daughter was beside her, like the bud beside the full-blown rose.

Suitors were already present from far and near, who passed in review before the beautiful girl. The most of them were excellent young men, and any mother might have been proud in having her own daughter sought by such. Even then Veile did not undo her penance. Those busy times of intercourse which keep mothers engaged in presenting the superiorities of their daughters in the best light were not allowed her. The choice of one of the most favored suitors was made. Never before did any couple in the gasse equal this in beauty and grace. A few weeks before the appointed time for the wedding a malignant disease stole on, spreading sorrow and anxiety over the greater part of the land. Young girls were principally its victims. It seemed to pass scornfully over the aged and infirm.

Veile's daughter was also laid hold upon by it. Before three days had passed there was a corpse in the house—the bride!

Even then Veile did not forget her penance. When they bore away the corpse to the "good place," she did utter a cry of anguish which long after echoed in the ears of the people; she did wring her hands in despair, but no one heard a word of complaint. Her lips seemed dumb forever. It was then, when she was seated on the low stool in the seven days of mourning, that the rabbi came to her, to bring to her the usual consolation for the dead. But he did not speak with her. He addressed words only to her husband. She herself dared not look up. Only when he turned to go did she lift her eyes. They, in turn, met the eyes of the rabbi, but he departed without a farewell.

After her daughter's death Veile was completely broken down. Even that which at her time of life is still called beauty had faded away within a few days. Her cheeks had become hollow, her hair gray. Visitors wondered how she could endure such a shock, how body and spirit could hold together. They did not know that that silence was an iron fetter firmly imprisoning the slumbering spirits. She had a son, moreover, to whom, as to something last and dearest, her whole being still clung.

The boy was thirteen years old. His learning in the Holy Scriptures was already celebrated for miles around. He was the pupil of the rabbi, who had treated him with a love and tenderness becoming his own father. He said that he was a remarkable child, endowed with rare talents. The boy was to be sent to Hungary, to one of the most celebrated teachers of the times, in order to lay the foundation for his sacred studies under this instructor's guidance and wisdom. Years might perhaps pass before she would see him again. But Veile let her boy go from her embrace. She did not say a blessing over him when he went; only her lips twitched with the pain of silence.

Long years expired before the boy returned from the strange land, a full-grown, noble youth. When Veile had her son with her again a smile played about her mouth, and for a moment it seemed as if her former beauty had enjoyed a second spring. The extraordinary ability of her son already made him famous. Wheresoever he went people were delighted with his beauty, and admired the modesty of his manner, despite such great scholarship.

The next Sabbath the young disciple of the Talmud, scarcely twenty years of age, was to demonstrate the first marks of this great learning.

Years fled by. In her arms she carried another child. It was a boy. The father's joy was great. The
child inherited its mother's beauty. Like its sister, it grew in health and strength. The noblest, richest mother, they said, might be proud of such children! And Veile was proud, no doubt, but this never passed her lips. She remained silent about things which mothers in their joy often cannot find words enough to express. And although her face many times lighted up with beaming smiles, yet she never renounced the habitual silence imposed upon her.

The idea that the slightest dereliction of her penance would be accompanied with a curse upon her children may have impressed itself upon her mind. Mothers will understand better than other persons what this mother suffered from her penalty of silence.

Thus a part of those years sped away which we are wont to call the best. She still flourished in her wonderful beauty. Her maiden daughter was beside her, like the bud beside the full-blown rose. Suitors were already present from far and near, who passed in review before the beautiful girl. The most of them were excellent young men, and any mother might have been proud in having her own daughter sought by such. Even then Veile did not undo her penance. Those busy times of intercourse which keep mothers engaged in presenting the superiorities of their daughters in the best light were not allowed her. The choice of one of the most favored suitors was made. Never before did any couple in the gasse equal this in beauty and grace. A few weeks before the appointed time for the wedding a malignant disease stole on, spreading sorrow and anxiety over the greater part of the land. Young girls were principally its victims. It seemed to pass scornfully over the aged and infirm. Veile's daughter was also laid hold upon it. Before three days had passed there was a corpse in the house—the bride!

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The next Sabbath the young disciple of the Talmud, scarcely twenty years of age, was to demonstrate the first marks of this great learning.
The people crowded shoulder to shoulder in this great synagogue. Curious glances were cast through the lattice-work of the women's gallery above upon the dense throng. Veile occupied one of the foremost seats. She could see everything that took place below. Her face was extremely pale. All eyes were turned towards her—the mother, who was permitted to see such a day for her son! But Veile did not appear to notice what was happening before her. A weariness, such as she had never felt before, even in her greatest suffering, crept over her limbs. It was as if she must sleep during her son's address. He had hardly mounted the stairs before the ark of the laws—hardly uttered his first words—when a remarkable change crossed her face. Her cheeks burned. She arose. All her vital energy seemed aroused. Her son meanwhile was speaking down below. She could not have told what he was saying. She did not hear him—she only heard the murmur of approbation, sometimes low, sometimes loud, which came to her ears from the quarters of the men. The people were astonished at the noble bearing of the speaker, his melodious speech, and his powerful energy. When he stopped at certain times to rest it seemed as if one were in a wood swept by a storm. She could now and then hear a few voices declaring that such a one had never before been listened to. The women at her side wept; she alone could not. A choking pain pressed from her breast to her lips. Forces were astir in her heart which struggled for expression. The whole synagogue echoed with buzzing voices, but to her it seemed as if she must speak louder than these. At the very moment her son had ended she cried out unconsciously, violently throwing herself against the lattice-work:

"God! living God! shall I not now speak?" A dead silence followed this outcry. Nearly all had recognized this voice as that of the "silent woman." A miracle had taken place!

"Speak! speak!" resounded the answer of the rabbi from the men's seats below. "You may now speak!"

But no reply came. Veile had fallen back into her seat, pressing both hands against her breast. When the women sitting beside her looked at her they were terrified to find that the "silent woman" had fainted. She was dead! The unsealing of her lips was her last moment.

Long years afterwards the rabbi died. On his death-bed he told those standing about him this wonderful penance of Veile; and from that day hence, every girl in the gasse knew the story of the Silent Woman, and her penitence.

When I open my eyes, it is to see Kaldur’s worried face above me. No helmet…?

“…kaldur?”

“T-terry!”

And he’s lifted me up and is hugging me so hard- I ignore the twinge in my ribs and hug him back, squeezing and breathing in his heady scent of musky ocean and warm earth.
We hold each other for a long time, long enough for me to consider falling asleep on his shoulder or inviting him into the bed, right there in the Bioship’s infirmary…

I have a question- it might be muffled by my face in his shoulder, but I don’t think it really matters.

I have to know.

“Kaldur… Nabu really let you go?”

“He- he nearly did not. It was only because of Kent Nelson, and his intervention, that I was able to return… that I was…”

“Kaldur…?”

“I was almost unable to return to you. Terry, I almost never saw you again.”

I pull him closer, squeezing everything I can. I think… well. There’s more than one thing I can do with Kaldur in a bed…

“D’you wanna have a sleep over with me tonight?”

“What?”

“Do you want to sleep with me, in my bed, tonight? Just sleeping, though- unless… unless you want to-?”

“I- would not want to make you… uncomfortable. And… I have heard stories about your bed. It will be too small for the both of us.”

“The floor’s nice and flat, and there’s no rats in the Cave- I checked.”

“Hmm. I am sure you did. Well. I see no reason not to- sleep over.”

“Alright.”

We cuddle for the rest of the flight back to the Cave, and I only look down once; Kaldur rubs my back until I stop shaking. Seriously, he’s the best boyfriend- no, the best friend in the world. He’s also a boy. Er. Man.

A very cute, very sweet, very… good smelling… and strong… and aesthetically appealing man.

With gills.

Which are adorable.

I just- I really love him, okay?

Well, fuck you if it isn’t.
Reports are not adorable—however, boiler-plate forms make life go just a little faster.

Warm soapy water coming down in a streaming flow of rain makes me feel clean, and refreshes all sorts of things; my Cursemark even throbs less feeling-ly when I’m done. Loose pajamas tonight; nothing but an oversized t-shirt and some smalls. Maybe socks if Kaldur’s a covers-cocooner.

Gods, I should have moved my bed to the floor ages ago- the feather ticks sit more neatly on the floor, and the bed itself Littles into a fine example of a chair, which I’ve been meaning to get for my room anyway. A new drop-cloth, never used, makes a fine floor layer, followed by the ticks, then sheets and blankets, pillows… maybe a towel? You never know.

And that is a comfortable looking sleeping den.

Mmmph. I’m tired.

And… I think Kaldur just knocked on my door.

In fact, he did. I open the door for him, smile shyly at him- he’s wearing loose grey pants, a large blue t-shirt, and an awkward expression.

I am too. So.

We match.

Kaldur’s eyes are my favorite thing about him- well, second to his butt, but his butt isn’t so… expressive. Or qing colored.

And his eyes when they see where I sleep are- big. Awed?

My sleeping room does look a bit like the bottom of a pond, but… I like it that way. Makes me have good dreams, you know?

And he smiled at the fish-carvings swimming around overhead.

I just realized… I haven’t slept next to Kaldur like this… really, ever. Never slept next to him in a bed. I’ve slept in his arms, and cuddled, but never… whatever this is.

He’s warm, almost surprisingly warm- not to the touch, but once he settles into a spot he sort of. Just. Radiates heat, like a vent or a sunbeam and I just want to- bask. In him.

I’m lying on him, but that’s not the same and his hand is on my butt. Just touching. We are lying together on feather-filled leather sacks covered in silk sheets and lying under a pair of quilted blankets, fish and flowers and we’re lying on pillows and I’m lying with my face next to his and he’s so warm and so big, so much bigger than me.

And his hands.

Are squeezing my butt.

Gently. Sort of. Kneading it?

I’m not sure if I like it or if I want him to- mmmm. Right there, above the- mmmmmmmmm.
Oh that’s good. That’s so good I’m just going to… just going… to… rest my eyes… for a… mmmmoment…. just going to… rest… going… eyes… a moment… mmmmmmmmm…

Breathe in the scent of the sea and remember- warm nights watching the sun paint reds and oranges and burning purples across the roiling haze belched out of the riverside potion mills, the heat of the day washing over my skin, too hot- take off your shirt, no one to see you this high up, no one ever looks up in this city.

A soft sound, like leaves rustling against wood. I suppose the red-blooming vines are profligate this month…

Stretch out and sigh against the soft firm warm seat, like a lounging chair but not as comfortable- the sun off the sea is warm, a large piece of yang touching me all the way through and I just want to- rub it against the cauldron of my yin, the darkest wettest place I have and let it just- fill me up from within, balance restored again and again and-

I open my eyes. I’m not wearing any clothing. Neither is Kaldur. He’s also on top of me, and he was definitely doing some interesting undulation action before we both woke up. Well.

That’s one way to get things started. I must say- I heartily approve. Kaldur, on the other hand, seems a bit… nervous.

“Kaldur, are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No… but perhaps-”

I lean up and kiss him, to save him the trouble of thinking or saying something foolish.

“Kaldur- I am okay, and I do not want to stop… and if I did not want you in my bed, you would not have been invited.”

His eyes blaze like the sun on blue crystal green sea waves dancing dancing and then his mouth is hot and wet and rasping against mine; I arch and whine and he smiles and lifts off of me. No, no come baaack-
“We will need a towel.”

“Really? Mmmnph-”

“Mmmnph. Yes. We will very much need a towel underneath you.”

“Okay, well- I think there’s one oooohver eep! Oh my gods, I didn’t know you could lift me that much-”

“I didn’t hurt you-?”

“Kaldur, I expect you to make me scream with pleasure at least once… Please?”

“Of course.”

And then his mouth is rasping against mine again and his tongue I would battle to the end of time except his mouth isn’t against mine it’s on my neck on my neck he is licking and nibbling and I want to kiss him so much oh oh oh he’s biting me so gently and sucking at my pulse. I can feel myself flushing so red and I’m whimpering and he’s smiling into my throat and-

“Kalduuuuur-”

“Shhh.”

And now he’s going. Lower? And then he finds my breasts. Mmm. He’s kissing them, now, laving his tongue over them, rasping and I squirm and whimper and I can feel my ears twitching and wiggling and my tails are fanned out at my sides, coiling and waggling and I just. Want him to. Want to- I unclench my hands from my sheets and follow the path of his Icon up, up his arms and over his shoulders to the yoke-mark across his back and caress it. His next bite against my breast is not so gentle- I don’t care.

Sharp little nips against soft pink nipples, the short whining gasp of a wet red mouth; sandy sparkling browns rolling over sunlit snow-bone gold.

I think I might have scratched him with my claws, anyway and his inhale when I did was sharp and his eyes are dark liquid and so deep as to be murderous and drench me in them- what the hell am I even sayiiiiiiiiieeeaaahahah he’s he’s pushed my legs open and he’s lick licking the soft skin of my inner thigh and it’s so.

Rasping against my inner thigh, kissing and sucking until I can feel the bruises forming, nibbling against the cleft of my hip and my Jade Palace and then his tongue is aaah it’s aaah aaaaah aaaaaaaah it’s r-rasping against my AAAAAAH and he’s licking at my- my- it’s called the clitoris but I’m going to call it a pearl and he’s licking it and it’s too much and-

“KALDUR!”
“T-terry?”

“N-not so directly, o-on the pearl. S’too much- it hurts.”

“Ah. M-my apologies- let me just-”

“Mmmmmnnn-!”

And he’s licking soft circles against the edges of my pearl and I feel like I’m going to shatter and fly into stars and then I do and it’s everything I ever wanted. I can feel the slippery juices of my yin dripping out and down, but there’s not all that much there, so- and I think- ow, yeah-

“Hah- sit back for a moment, please, I need to-”

“Terry, what- did I hurt you again-?”

“No shelly, I think one of my tails is pinned weird-”

“Oh, um- may I help you…?”

“Um. You- want to t-touch my tails…?”

“Yes, if that is- is that alright…?”

“Sure. I mean- yes, g-go ahead.”

“Oh. Um- are they always s-so-”

“Wh-what?”

“Soft?”

“Y-yeah. they’r- mmmm- they’re always tha-ah-ah-ah-mmmm- that soft. AUGH NO NO NOPE HANDS OFF-”

“AH I AM SO- MY APOLOGIES, I AM THE WORST-”

“GNNNNGH-”

“TERRY TERRY I’M SO SORRY-”

“No, Kaldur- Kaldur! Breathe! Shh, shh, my love, shhh- it’s okay, you just… it’s not hair on my tails, it’s fur. You can only stroke one way, okay?”

“O-okay. I am sorry…”

“It was an honest mistake. But, um, n-now that you know… could you possibly… um… maybe… pet them some more? Please?”

“Oh- um. Yes- I. Yes, I can do that.”
My gods- we went from sexy to horribly awkward in less than a minute. He has good stroking technique though.

I’m pretty much not in the mood for sex now- I was sort of getting there… and now it’s gone. Like a gods damned soap bubble. Kaldur is still quite excited though- there’s a very sproing in his groin. And while I, myself, am no longer in the mood for pleasures of the flesh, giving my boyfriend some sexual gratification sounds pretty damn good to me- hmmmMMMM!

Um, just an FYI from your friend Strike; he wants to F your A.

I NOTICED. THANK YOU FOR YOUR FYI, STRIKE.

“MmmMMMMmmmmMMM!”

“That feels good, I take it?”

“Yeeees- right there right there RIGHT THERE- ooooooh yessssss.”

“Heh. So- tell me what this feels like.”

“Wh-what wha-ah ahhh aaaaaaaaaAht feels like?”

“This- when I scratch my fingers into the base of your tails, tell me what it feels like. For… science.”

“F-f-for scie-eh eh eh eh eheeeence, eh? Alriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit’s a sexual feeling, as it is a feeling of- ooh my gods- of direeeeect affection m-meant f-or- do y-you r-reallyyyyyeeek! Don’t- don’t grip it like that a-and rotate, that’s s-s-so m-meannnnnnaaa ah ah aaaaAAAH!”

“You d-didn’t finish telling m-me about how this f-feels.”

“W-well- aaaaaAAAH!aare y-you absolutely s-sure you-oh oh oooootttttttuuuuuuuhn! Nnnghnnnnghn!”

“Y-yes I- hah- I would l-like to, ah, to hear you say it.”

“It f-f-feels l-like you- AH AH AAAAAAH- like you- no, I c-c-caaaAHan’t, I can’t-”

“T-theresa, you ca-ahnnngh t-tell me anything. Please, please t-tell me…”

“it feels like- aaaaAhhgh-like being l-l-l-loved. Okay? th-tha aaaaaAHHHAAAAHHAAAAHHAAAAHH’s as be-eh-eh-eh-eeest I can explain ih ih ih iiintiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiif oh my gods-”

“I-if it feels like being loved, why are you- so wet-”

“be- eh eh eeeeeeecause you’re still exciiiiiiiiiiined, Kaldur- oh my gods oh my gods you smell so good- please please-”

“Y-y-you smell good too, oh Neptune- I, ah, I want to- b-but I might hurt you if I- I c-could break s-something, and I-”
“N-no, I- I got a magical piece of armor for that, I won’t- it’s m-meant for. Ah. For veterinarians who work on d-dragons, and such? So, um, you can… you can… please don’t leave me like this. Not for that reason. Please… I’m wearing it now, actually- s-so please, d-don’t.”

“Theresa- I- oh, fuck.”

And then he kissed me with a fervor generally reserved for a man going into the assuredly deadly trenches of a war most dire. There was teeth clacking together and everything- writhing rasping tongues and heat, so much unbearable heat. Vibrating between us, gasping in each other’s mouths- whining and whimpers, the soft firm wonder of each other’s flesh.

Oh gods- yes. Touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me/ I wanna be dirty-/Thrill me, chill me, full-fill me/ Creature of the Night!

I writhe under him, wrapping my thighs like iron around his hips, and he thrusts and jerks and grabs my ankles, spreads them wide. Jerks away and stares at my nakedness. Stares at my Jade Palace, runs his eyes over my shivering muscles, the red haze of my flushing skin- a fine burnishing that licks from the inside of my thighs curves under the cleft of my knees, painted under the soft peach-fur covering the hill in which my Jade Palace is built into. His eyes trace a path up the hill of my Palace and follow the red haze painted over my skin, the soft points of my hipbones under the gold of my skin and he puts his hands over them, slowly, gently, pressing his fingers into the meat of my buttocks.

He kneads my butt, lets me go and strokes his hands up the curve of my hips, wonderingly, up the gentle curve of my waist, tracing the fine dip of my navel, the divots of my abdominal muscles and the sensitive curve of the underside of my breasts; calloused thumbs rubbing against my round nipples, flicking them like little switches. Squishes and squeezes and kneads the softness of my breasts, gentle, traces the protruberant jut of flesh where my clavicles sit, follows the lines of my neck and slides his fingertips through my hair.

His forehead becomes level with mine, and I am drawn in, drawn in and drowning in Kaldur’s qing eyes, liquid and desirous and wondering at me, at my-

“You are beautiful, Theresa.”

He’s kissing me before I can say that he is, too- his tongue rasps and his teeth nip, and his breath is cool on my sweaty skin and when I whine and reach for him, he puts my hands in his and turns his attention to the throbbing pulse of my neck. I whine again, slowly stretch and gasp- his teeth are not terribly sharp, but his jaw is strong and aah aaaaaah warm against my throat, my whimpers and needy cries swallowed by his rasping tongue and the wet suction of his mouth.

His hands traces down my arms, firm grip smoothing over skin burning hot, tracing red lines of flushed desire and soothing touch to the edges of my Cursemark, slow tenderness that aches against me, slow sweetness on my left arm dripping through me hot and tense and aching everything everywhere just touch me-

NOT THERE.
“ARRRGRRRR!”

“Sorry! I’m so-ow, sorry, sorry-”

“Grrrrrrrr.”

“Sorry.”

I let go of his arm- the imprint of my teeth is a ring of reddening divots over the broad side of Kaldur’s forearm, denting the clean lines of his Icon and the sandy smooth softness of his dense skin; on any other man, any other human man, that would have broken their skin, torn through their muscle, and shattered the bone. I lick where I bit him anyway, kissing the red dips in his skin as if the mere touch of my lips to his not-actually-wounds is enough to heal them.

His hands are on my legs, stroking, and I’m sitting up again, body held closer to myself- defensive. That… was not okay. I did not like that. I’m sorry I bit Kaldur over it- but. I did not like that at all.

It takes a long time for Kaldur to soothe me back down, warm me through again- the brushing of his knuckles against the soft line of fuzz that leads down to my Palace lets me arch back down, rest my shoulders and skull against the soft downy plumping of bedding on stone; the wondering touch sliding down the cleft of my thighs as they turn into my hips, smoothly drawing calloused hands to my knees, smoothly shifting those knees apart- and I want him more than ever.

A sleeping bud bursts into bloom in the light of the sun- my heart pounds and thrashes inside my chest.

The sudden rush of his breath against the door of my Jade Palace startles a low moan from me- his tongue makes the moan louder. Raspng touch of coolness laving over the wettest sticky part of me, tasting. Slurping and gasps. Fire and flood and light of stars in my eyes, moaning and Kaldur, Kaldur, what wonder will you show me next, oh Kaldur’ahm, oh my beloved, my love, oh yes…

I burst and this time he is there to lap at the waters gushing from me and his sighs of pleasure make me flush with even greater ardor than before.

He draws away and presses between my legs- firmness and it’s long and stretching me open with a slight whimper and a little ache, nothing to be frightened of. I am more than ready for him, and what toys I use are meant for playing outside my Palace, and he’s very. Um. Wide. He’s stretching me very much. A-and not too long- I don’t know enough about, um- I don’t know enough to say if he is short or long.

I wrap my legs around his waist- he is a pillar of steel, and I am wrapped around him tightly, feeling him move against me, move with me. He doesn’t thrust when he’s inside of me, right then at the start; he lifts me high, hooks my knees over his shoulders- he’s doing something underneath me, and then my butt is on a folded towel and he is undulating against me. My legs wind around his hips tightly, and then I lose myself to the rolling of the sea against the mouth of the river- the steady rush of water against water, in and out, the dripping and splashing of slippery algae slickening over the rush covered banks.

I tense and growl and whine with pleasure; his steady motions never let the pressure on my pearl vanish, never let the pressure stop building inside of me- and then it’s like a dam bursting, like a
storm breaking and I gush around him, screaming and moaning. His motions change and the pressure on me eases- he’s deeper in me, somehow, deeper and slower and closer. The water of yin drips down my butt, slurps with every motion of his- I pant and gasp and reach for- reach for-

He gathers me into his arms, seating me firmly onto his thrusting hips; the deepest thrust yet, deep and groaning against my shoulder. I sigh with pleasure, turn my eyes to his, and I want to… well. We’re here, aren’t we. So, I might as well.

I kiss him, firmly, my tongue inside his raspy wet cool sucking mouth, my teeth nipping and digging into the soft tenseness of his lips; my joy to swallow the sighs and moans of him, of his body, to wrap my arms around his tensing shuddering sighing body and hold him close to me. He kisses me back, his arms a line of steel around the small of my back; I begin to undulate against him and he gasps and starts to push back, thrusting and grinding and moaning.

I burst again, water of yin dripping all down his tense thighs and he groans and sighs. Whispers into my ear.

“Every time you do that, your smell gets stronger.”

“r-Really? mm-”

“Yes. You smell very good- oh, oh yes, please do not s-stop-”

I’m licking his gills, licking the fluttering lines, tasting the salt of his skin and the musk of his self and I burst again all unknowing and my teeth dig into the meaty lump of muscle between his neck and his shoulder. He moans my name, and I clamp and cleave and cling to him with my entire body, with my hips flush to his- shaking. My hands are gripping so his shoulders so tightly, it is a wonder he hasn’t tried to make me let go- and then we’re rolling together, me on my back again but he is wrapped around me like a cocoon, like a shroud… like a lover.

Oh my.

He moves in earnest now, filling and stirring me deeply, water dripping from us both and he makes me burst again and a final time and then he is holding me tight to him, pressing his hips into mine and crying my name- I can feel the pounding of his heart against the roaring of mine, and then he- his pe- he’s swelling.

Inside of me.

I gasp and sigh and moan his name, cover his clenching jaw and his throbbing pulse with my lips- whisper in his ear.

“Kaldur, my love, my lover- be welcome in my bed.”

The tension in is frame vanishes at my entreaty, and he draws me closer, curls up around me- like I’ll vanish from him, should he not take care to bind me with his arms.
And then… and then I am flooded, filled with his yang- seafoam in the river, thick and white and stinking of the ocean; he swells again, stretches me more and squishes and presses the soft squishing peach-shaped squelch of my Palace of Jade, pounding into me without actually moving in or out of me. It feels so good, but it also hurts because he’s swelling larger, swelling and filling me with his yang.

My belly is starting to puff and round- and he’s still. Pouring his yang. Into me. He’s stretching me so much- at the river mouth, and the higher lake, both fit to burst and overflow with his bright essence but I- I relax, and sigh, and stretch myself to welcome him.

I’m not sure when I fell asleep- but I wake to the unrelenting pressure of yang and the weight of Kaldur’s exhausted body. He’s still quite swollen inside of me, and my belly is very rounded and tight.

My Aunt was right.

When he pulls out of me, there is a rush of mingled waters, but my belly stays rounded- oh dear. I don’t think it’s- shit. Okay. Hmmm.

A shower will be the best bet to clean up from this… but. That will have to wait.

I have blood under my nails. That’s never, ever a good thing.

“Kaldur… did I hurt you?”

“Um. Well- I would not say that, exactly-”

“Kaldur.”

“…my shoulders are not happy with me right now. Um. And you- your belly-”

“That’s normal, actually. Well, okay- the stretching is normal, the retention…”

“Isn’t?”

“Mm. I think if I take a shower, it will release…”

“Ah. Well. Since- erm, well, since I had a hand- oh, shush- in your current, ah, condition, I could help you, er…”

“Re-heehee-lease? I’d like that, yeah. But first we’d have to get out of the bed.”

“Ah. Well, it is becoming quite sticky, and it will start to smell soon…”

“True. There’s a shower downstairs, on the side where I make potions- help me up?”

“Of course-”

“Oof- wuh!”
“Ah! Terry, are you- you are certain I did not hurt you?”

“Kaldur, the only thing you did is rock my world so hard I’m still weak in the knees- wah! You do not need to carry me!”

“But you just said that you are weak in the knees-”

“Kaldur!”

I can barely speak for my laughter, and Kaldur’s grin makes me laugh harder- we barely make it to the showers before a stream of his yang starts to splurt out of me.

His expression when it does makes me laugh even harder, and then I’m slipping in it- and I think he’s laughing too, now, but now the shower’s on and I’m being sprayed in the face with warm water- a wiggle of Watery drenches Kaldur, and then we’re drenching each other with water and laughing and rolling over and my belly is flat and tight and muscular again.

Yes!

We eventually scrub down, and Kaldur actually fits quite well into a loose pair of my drawstring pants- I adjust the ankles for him. It’s kind of weird to see him in loose pants, but they’re mine and I like that… I- ugh. I really love this man.

Too late now.

Kaldur helps me carry all the soiled bedding to the laundry cart by the door, and he wipes the feather ticks down the way I tell him to, and it’s- odd. It’s odd how fast I can do things with another person- a person that isn’t… me.

It’s… good.

My legs might be shakier than normal, but I’m alright to walk- and putting on a lovely dudou and one of the nicest house-dresses I have makes me feel so much more… together, more- I don’t know.

I do know that having sex with Kaldur is some of the most fun I’ve had in a long time.

There was once a prince and a princess who were brother and sister, and were very great friends. The prince had a garden which no one was allowed to cultivate but himself. As it happened he had to go to the war; and he was sorry to go, because he did not like to trust any one with the care of his own garden. His sister, however, said to him:--"Dear brother, have no anxiety about your garden, leave it to me, and I promise you that no one but myself shall look after it.” The prince then departed, well pleased with his sister's arrangement.

The princess, not wishing to leave the garden for one minute, as her brother was there constantly when at home, had her couch brought to the garden and placed under a large rose tree. After a time she gave birth to a child, a girl, with a rose on her forehead. The princess was much distressed at this,
as it had come upon her without her knowledge, and she was always in the garden day and night. The child began to grow, and the mother sent her to school, enjoined her very particularly never to make herself known to any one, because, if she did, she would kill her. The child went to school; and the prince was expected to arrive home very shortly, and it was thought probable that as soon as he should reach the capital, he would go and visit all the schools and colleges, as well as the school where the little princess went to. The princess, who knew this, told her little daughter that the prince would visit her school, but that she was on no account to make herself known to him, as otherwise she would put her to death.

When the prince at last visited the said school he immediately noticed a new face and said: "Ah! There is one girl more since I last was here, I see!" The other children talked and made a noise, but this little one never once raised her head, that the rose on her forehead should not be noticed; nor did she laugh and be merry like the others. The prince, addressing the children, asked which of them would make him a shirt. The girls all answered at once: "I will, I will, I will," but the girl with the rose on her forehead remained silent. The prince noticed this and said, "Then the girl who has remained silent and has not said whether she would or not is the one who shall have the honour given her of making me a shirt! You will, will you not?" The girl signified by a movement of the head that she would. She went home and told her mother what the prince had asked her to do for him. The prince never once suspected any thing, and though the girl lived in the palace he did not know it. The princess told her daughter to make the shirt, but on no account to make herself known to the prince else she would have her put to death. The maiden went to school, set to work, and finished the shirt in one day, and when the prince came into the school she gave him the shirt ready finished. He thanked her very graciously, and he found it very well stitched and finished, but he never once noticed that she had a rose on her forehead, as she always went about with her head covered. When the prince came into the palace he told the princess that he had found a girl in the school who was very clever and handy at her needle, for she had made him a shirt in one day which was beautifully finished. As the prince finished saying this a man passed by the palace selling and crying out cherries--he called the man and bought of him the basketful of cherries; he then took them to the school and gave the girls the cherries to eat. They all began eating the fruit, much pleased, and it was only the maid with the rose on her forehead that did not attempt to partake of them. The prince perceiving it asked her, "Well then will you not taste some?" She made a sign that she would not have any. The prince, surprised at not ever having heard her speak, inquired of the mistress, "Is that little girl dumb?" The mistress replied, "She is very shy, and if any one endeavours to make her speak or take any notice of her she immediately begins to cry." The girls all began to play with the cherries and throw them about in their fun, but where should one of them fall but on the little girl who had a rose on her forehead! Next day, when her mother combed her hair to go to school, finding a cherry entangled in it said to her, "Ah! Tyrant, I see you have made yourself known," She stuck the comb into her head violently and killed her. She then had the corpse put into an iron chest together with all her jewels, and locked the chest in a chamber of the palace; but after a while from remorse and grief at what she had done to her poor daughter she pined away and died. Before she died she gave the prince the key of the room, telling him never to touch any thing in it. The brother, in order to comply with the princess's injunction, took special care to keep those keys separate. The princess died after she had said this.

The prince, feeling lonely, now decided to marry, and gave his wife all the keys, at the same time telling her that she could open every door she liked except the one leading to the room which his sister the princess had asked him before she died never to examine. As the prince went one day to hunt, his mother-in-law, who lived with them in the palace, had a great wish to open this room, but her daughter told her no to do so because the prince had enjoined her not. The mother then said that if the prince objected to having that room opened it was because it contained something which he wished to conceal from her. At last she insisted so much upon it that she obtained the key of the room and opened it. They both went in, and the first thing that they saw was a large iron chest.
mother then said, "Ah! I shall see what we can find in that large chest." She opened it and found inside a most beautiful maiden with a star on her forehead, who was sitting down engaged in embroidering. When the mother saw her she said to her daughter, "Did not I tell you that there was some hidden secret here?" The wife now, jealous of the maiden's beauty, heated an iron, took the maiden out of the chest, and burnt her skin with the heated iron, so that she remained all over scorched. When the prince returned from the hunt his wife said to him, "Do you know that I have bought a mulatta girl to serve us to run errands?" The prince, who was going to the fair, asked his wife what she would like him to bring her; but she told him to ask the mulatta girl what she also would like. So the prince asked the maid what she wished from the fair. The girl replied that she did not wish anything, but as he persisted in asking her to tell him something she would like to have, she asked him to bring her a talisman. When the prince returned from the fair he gave the girl the talisman. She took it to her room and lay on her bed. As the prince was curious to know what she would do with it, he hid himself under the bed. The mulatta girl began to tell her history to the stone, saying, "Oh! Talisman, I am the daughter of a princess, sister to the prince my uncle, who lives in this palace and is married. But he does not know that I am his niece, for I was kept spell-bound in an iron chest; and his wife and her mother burnt my skin all over with a hot iron, and I remained scorched and browned; and when the prince returned home from the hunt they told him that I was a mulatta girl. Now my talisman I have told you all my history, and you know all my life." The prince who was listening attentively under the bed, quickly came out, embraced the maiden, and asked her what she desired him to do to his wife, as he no longer would allow her to remain in the palace. The maiden replied, "Do to her the same she did to me." The prince then ordered that the same piece of iron should be heated and his wife to have her skin well scorched with it, and that her mother should also undergo the same punishment, after which he inclosed them alive in a wall. He lived in the palace with his niece and never more entertained the idea of marrying.

We missed breakfast. Lunch is sandwiches, with delicious soup and salad, and tasty beverages. I would have a more detailed account of what exactly was eaten, but I was a bit busy gazing at my boyfriend and sighing happily.

Don’t knock it ‘till you’ve tried it.

The rest of the day is spent curled up with each other on the couch, talking about nothing at all really, and occasionally laughing for no particular reason.

As afternoons go, that was one of the best I’ve ever had.

A private investigator (often abbreviated to PI and informally called a private eye), a private detective or inquiry agent, is a person who can be hired by individuals or groups to undertake investigatory law services. Private detectives and investigators often work for attorneys in civil cases. A handful of very skilled private detectives and investigators work with defense attorneys on capital punishment and criminal defense cases. Many work for insurance companies to investigate suspicious claims. Before the advent of no-fault divorce, many private investigators were hired to search out evidence of adultery or other conduct within marriage to establish grounds for a divorce. Despite the lack of legal necessity for such evidence in many jurisdictions, according to press reports
collecting evidence of adultery or other "bad behaviour" by spouses and partners is still one of the most profitable activities investigators undertake, as the stakes being fought over now are child custody, alimony, or marital property disputes.

Private investigators can also be used to perform due diligence for an investor who may be considering investing money with an investment group, fund manager or other high-risk business or investment venture. This could serve to help the prospective investor avoid being the victim of a fraud or Ponzi scheme. By hiring a licensed and experienced investigator, they could unearth information that the investment is risky and or that the investor has suspicious red flags in his or her background. This is called investigative due diligence, and is becoming much more prevalent in the 21st century with the public reports of large-scale Ponzi schemes and fraudulent investment vehicles such as Madoff, Stanford, Petters, Rothstein and the hundreds of others reported by the SEC and other law-enforcement agencies.

Many jurisdictions require PIs to be licensed, and they may or may not carry firearms depending on local laws. Some are former police officers, some are former law enforcement agents, some are former spies, some are former military, some used to work for a private military company, and some are former bodyguards and security guards, although many are not. While PIs may investigate criminal matters, most do not have police powers, and as such they have only the powers of citizen's arrest and detainment that any other citizen has. They are expected to keep detailed notes and to be prepared to testify in court regarding any of their observations on behalf of their clients. Great care is required to remain within the scope of the law, otherwise the investigator may face criminal charges. Irregular hours may also be required when performing surveillance work.

I don’t get hired very often- not by people with money, that is. The common folk know me well, and pay me well, as they can- part of the reason I never really have to pay for any meal at Grandma’s is because of all the cases I’ve solved for so many people; it’s well known that paying for a meal, or part of a meal, at my Grandma’s cart is acceptable payment for my services as a private investigator, especially in the lower classes.

Speaking of Grandma, about a day after I- um- with Kaldur, she called. She also hired me to do something I’d done in years past- it’s the right time of year for it.

Around this time of year, Grandma always has to send around a runner for her, as she calls it, “little doings”- she used to get some of her workers to do it, but when I turned about thirteen, she started letting me do part of it- this year, she’s letting me do all of it.

Basically, it’s just a collection of rent, with an end-of job deposit at the bank- nothing to terribly complicated, as my Grandma doesn’t charge outrageous fees to her renters, and is always willing to work out alternative payment schedules with them; as a result, her renters are always happy to pay what she asks, as she only asks once a year, generally this time, as most people start having money again right about now. It’s harvest season, or coming up on it, and Grandma’s various renters feel the pinch of the summer’s typhoons the least if she gets their payments around this time of year- nice lady, my Grandma.

Thankfully, I have the entire week to do the job- I guess someone somewhere heard my longing for a slight jangling sound whenever I take a step, because it didn’t just start raining jobs on me- it poured. My Grandma was the first call I got, that day- my Aunt called second.

My Aunt, generally speaking, doesn’t have jobs for me- understandable, as she’s the moralistic sister
of the pair. Nepotism, and all. Still, I earned my reputation fairly, and if there’s one thing my Aunt respects, it’s a fairly earned prospect- and if there’s one thing she can’t stand, it’s the use of someone’s Name without their permission.

See, when my majordomo Blade got news from me about my Blades, she sent out sniffers, like she said- but she also talked to my Aunt, because, well, my reputation is such that it would appeal to some people- stupid people- to brag that they had gotten my Blades off of me in a battle. Now, anyone who’s actually met me in battle knows that, if anything, the only way to get one of my Blades off of me in battle is to slay me and pry them from my cold, dead hands- and there would be other marks to show such a feat.

My Aunt, being in such a position as she is, is in the right place to hear every single brag and boast in Kowloon eventually, but especially from the people who would be so inclined to brag that they got my Blades off of me in a fight. Therefore, when such a braggart came into my Aunt’s establishment, she paid stern attention to their claim, examined the weapons they claimed were mine, and called me when she realized that, in fact, they are indeed my Blades.

Now, understand- of the Blades I now own, the pair that I lost are most precious to me, because, frankly, they were the very First Blades I ever earned through my own merits- not training, not out of necessity or pity, but out of merit. Further, it is not some petty sentimentality that drives my urge to retrieve them- it is the simple, honest fact that they are a literal, legal part of me. To do harm with my Blades, be they in my hand or not, is to do harm in my name- to harm my Blades, be it intentional or not, is to harm me.

If I had remembered that when I fought the Wolves, there at the end, I’d have saved quite a few tears on my part. Still. To be truly free, one must always give up a part of oneself- and is it not said that growth is the truest form of freedom?

Oh wait- no, no one has ever said that. Except me, just now. Well, wrote it.

Shut up, Strike.

You just ke-hee-hee-up digging, it’s amazing.

Now, it was the final call that day that really made the whole week what it was- it’s not often I get called on by people on the Upside of town; I’m not considered quite respectable- honorable, certainly, honest, without a doubt- but not someone to invite to afternoon tea with your twice weekly gathering of familial matriarchs, if you get my meaning.

That said, my reputation is a fearsome one- even the most genteel of personages will readily admit that, for what it is I do, I am one of the very best in the business. Jinx wouldn’t have been able to argue her case for as long as she did, if I hadn’t given her what research I was able to- well. All that aside, I have access to various repositories of information- books, people, the unquiet dead, the Gleam, and the Ygdrasil network- that most people never imagine exists.

Now, I’m not sure of all the facts regarding it’s theft, but- for what it turned out to be, and who ended up with it, I can understand why the Harpy Air Commander wanted the Crown of Storms back.
There is a long and complicated history behind the Crown of Storms; each Harpy Queen- Storm Queen- who has worn that Crown is… well, they don’t have saints, as such. Their culture doesn’t quite allow for that sort of thing. But.

They consider the Storm Queens of ages past as sort of… intermediaries, inbetween the still living Flock, and their great Mother Goddess. The crown itself is not actually a crown, but a cape, allegedly made from the feathers of the Mother Goddess and worn only by a worthy Queen- there are several layers of spells and cantrips I wouldn’t mind getting a closer look at that ensure the veracity of my earlier statement.

All this together means that the current Queen of the Harpies, Gingerfowl of the Nankin, is only the Queen by Right of Claw; she holds no authority with the gods of the Harpies, and is no Storm Queen. This is very important.

Storm Queens are recognized not just by their vassal Harpy clans, but by the greater world of… oh, fuck it. The Undefined has sections- I’m most familiar with the workings of Arcadia and Xian Jing. Storm Queens- which is what I know them as, not what they’re called in the Harpy clans- are generally great warriors or extraordinary mages of great tactical, martial, and negotiatory skill. Gingerfowl of the Nankin, Queen of Claws and current Air Commander of the Harpy States, is none of these things- certainly, I wouldn’t want to meet her in the air for any sort of battle, Right of Claw being a fearsome thing indeed.

That would be different if I were a Harpy, as, strictly speaking, the Right of Claw allows for easy and quick succession in one of the few ways a Harpy will accept unconditionally- that of mortal combat. It’s why Raven, Ashram-liver that she was, was so accepting of my house-rules and advice when she lived with me; it’s why Jinx, though she is not a Harpy, is so much more intuitive with Raven- her likes, her dislikes, and what she’s willing to bend on.

I’m getting off subject. Sorry. Hmm- the Crown of Storms. Right. Well, like the Crown of Mountains, or the Crown of Bloody Bones, the Crown of Storms is a specific garment tied to a specific subset of Xian Jing’s many people through mythological and nostalgic threads of memory. People remember the strangest things, and ghosts don’t have to necessarily have been alive to haunt…

As an aside, the Crown of Mountains is an actual crown held in great regard by the Storm Wolves of Gemworld, and the Crown of Bloody Bones is sacred to the Foxes; I do not, however, know why that is so.

I will eventually.

Let’s talk about Harpies. Actually, no- first, let’s talk about why, exactly, Grandma was so willing to trust me with several million pieces of jade, gold, silver, cowry, and pearl- well, not literally, but… okay so. First let’s talk about promissory notes.

A promissory note is a legal- well, financial- instrument in which the maker or issuer promises in writing to pay a determinate sum of money or otherwise agreed upon legal tender to the payee; either at a fixed or determinable future time or on demand of the payee, under specific terms. In other words- a promissory note is a sort of oath that two parties undertake, whereby the giver agrees to
provide something both parties have agreed has value; the oath is further bound in time-specific constraints.

Bank notes are a kind of promissory note—specifically, a note made by a bank and payable to the bearer on demand. When banknotes were first introduced, they were, in effect, a promise to pay the bearer in coins, but gradually became a substitute for the coins and a form of money in their own right—at least, they did in various demesnes with centralized governments or, governments at all.

Kowloon has neither—but, it does have enterprising people and innovations dripping out of every moss-encrusted crevice; it’s not all that surprising to me to know that my Grandmother, among other things, runs her own commercial bank. All together, not that surprising—her Cart’s fame and quality ensures a steady supply of legal money, and her workers are trained in more than proper hygiene and table management.

The actual note—or rather, note book—is just that; a small ledger, bound in fine leather, embossed with my Grandma’s symbol which is dyed a deep, waxy green. The symbol itself is a trio of balls suspended from a bar with lines—I forget what, exactly, it’s supposed to mean or be… The note is about the same size as an encyclopedia—just one book out of the set, mind. The writing set I got from my overly-aged ancestor—the one who gave me the sword?—is oddly matched to the note…it, it resonates. And of course, since my Blades are currently in the hands of an idiot who isn’t me, I’ll have to stop by the chop-shop for a new stamp… I usually just use the hilt of the left Blade.

Off-topic again. Sorry.

The process for doing my Grandma’s business is simple enough, I suppose—I take the Note, my writing supplies, and some provisions, and I go around to all the places my Grandma’s renters are; we chat, they sign their name to a line in the Note, they stamp, I notarize, sign, and stamp, and we’re all hunky dory. My Grandma works out actual payment plans and such long before I ever see or meet her renters—it’s really a formality. Still, some things from Celestial Kiaom don’t just go away with the beaurocrats, and the type of deals my Grandma makes with her renters can’t be sealed solid with a handshake and a word in the right set of ears.

Once all the listed renters have signed—and yes, I always get a list—I seal the Note with a basket knot, effectively cocooning it in a special rope that, yes again, my Grandma gives to me for that purpose specifically. I don’t know why she want’s it that way specifically, and I’m not paid enough to care—and honestly, it doesn’t matter either way. I’m just glad the knot required for the Note’s sealing isn’t something absolutely bug-fuck.

Finally, the Note is delivered somewhere—I’m not actually allowed to say where, or when, for safety reasons. I can say, however, that it’s different every time I do this job.

Now, about Grandma’s trust in me. I’m not sure how I’ve managed it, but, well—my Grandma trusts me implicitly, almost to the point of faith. It’s funny, I guess—no one I try to become friends with ever wants me to know their secrets, even though I pre-remember them or figure them out. But my Grandma’s secrets are public knowledge so I guess she just… doesn’t care?

I don’t know.

But I do know that I can get through Grandma’s list of tenants in less than a day if I have a full day to do it in. I know because I’ve done it before.

I didn’t do it the day of Grandma’s call though—I’d already used most of the day on… other exploits
and adventures. I did spend the afternoon doing research for what the Harpies had hired me to do, though.

The day after Kaldur and I- um- well, anyway, the next morning, after breakfast, I told Kaldur that I was going to be busy for the next five to nine days. He was a little… odd? I don’t know- but he thanked me for telling him, and sent me on with his blessing.

Good guy, best boyfriend.

The ride over to Kowloon gave me time to think, about Kaldur, about my upcoming jobs, about… Raven. Why am I thinking so much about Raven?

Y’know what? I think I should-

Rush of wings and mantle of blued silver feathers, the scream of women falling from the sky, “Cry ‘Havoc!’ and loose the dogs of war”-

Oh dear.

I get to Raven’s house soon enough- my bike is easily parked in the rustling lee of fencing reeds. Raven herself is reluctant to tell me anything about anything- in her view, the only thing to be known about her is that she is a doctor, and doctoring is what she does.

I almost leave after that- but no. Something… Thrax. I need to take him with me on this one. I have no idea why, but I do.

“Oi. Hey.”

“…”

“Y’need to come with me for a while. Won’t be more than seven days or so.”

“…?”

“I don’t know, I just know you do. I won’t pretend to understand the visions, I just try to follow what they tell me needs doing.”

“… …?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“…! … …”

“Dude, I know how my life works by now. Even if you don’t go with me now, you’ll still end up a part of this adventure I’m about to undertake. Right now though, you have an opportunity to pack your bags before The Call picks you up by the short hairs on your neck and throws you bodily out into the world. Just saying.”
“…! … …? ..-”

“Of course it will. The Call to Adventure will always supersede any objections made by those called- it’s a force greater than any god or goddess, greater than Fate and Luck and Ignorance, even.”

“…Fine. I’ll be ready in an hour.”

“I’ll wait.”

Thrax is good on his word- he takes to standing on the pegs of my bike without too much wobbling, and the ride through Kowloon barely startles him- for a second I thought he’d bail when we went through Elephantine and Mammouk Street, but we only lost some cloth from my trousers- they’re working clothes anyway, a few missing pieces of cloth isn’t going to sway their efficacy one way or another. Shocked a shriek out of Thrax though.

It’s going to be a long journey.

“I’ve never actually described the Gates of Hell, have I? For one thing, there's no actual gate to speak of- the Gates of Hell (in Kowloon, at least) is actually a small tunnel in a junction of wall and floor that is in the back of a very specific and easily-missed alleyway. There are two guards who always stand at either side of the gate- Horse-Face, and Ox Head, a pair of fearsome demons whose sole duty is to ensure that no one ever enters Hell without proper permission; I’m a Fox, even if it’s only by half, so I can bend that rule-set quite a lot.

Anyway- the wall over the Gates of Hell is a muddy, soot-stained and moldy affair of brickwork and crumbling mortar, on which is pasted a faded and stained poster; in archaic script, older than even I can say, is written what is always written over every entrance to Hell, in one form or another.

Thrax is quietly terrified when we reach them, and even moreso when I come to a stop quite near the two ever-vigilant guardians of the Gates. It’s actually been a long time since I’ve had to go down There for official business of any kind- but Ox Head has always been quick on the social uptake.

It’s simple enough, really- I hand him a pair of Raven’s finest honey-pops, known to cure stomach aches; he throws one to Horse-face, pops the other in his mouth, nods to me, and leans back against his scrap of wall, pointedly closing his eyes to savor the candy I’ve given him. I lean my bike on the left-most wall, facing the Gates- Horse-face is also close-eyed and savoring, and it’s without much more than a sigh that I take Thrax by the hand and tug him to the Gates.

“…?”

“It says ‘And all who shall enter herin will be so forwarned- they shall crawl on their bellies to enter the Kingdom of Darkness, whence the Dead and the Damned and their Caregivers dwell.’ Any other questions before we go? Need to eat something? Drink something?”

“…”

“Alright. Follow me.”
And then I crouch and let my knees settle onto the grimy lip of the Gates of Hell- and then, as it’s written above on paper so old as to be more memory than wood-pulp, I crawl on my belly into the Realm of Darkness. It’s honestly not that dark- more sweaty and grimy than anything else. The skulls lining the walls of the tunnel aren’t even that gross, being just dried bones and empty-socketed reproachful stares. Thrax’ breath is warmer and wetter on my feet than the cool clammy breeze of the tunnel, and there’s nothing to hear for a time but the steady scrape of fabrics in grimy water and the echoes of labored breath in the empty, staring skulls of unknown men.

And then we’re actually in the Kingdom of Darkness, which is neither ruled by a King, nor particularly dark. The Kowloon Gate enters the Docks of Hell on the east-side of the wedge-space under the Warf; me and Thrax creep through a squatter’s den of those unfortunates too poor to return to the Kingdoms of Light, and too scared to travel farther on. Through that stinking, wax dripping and rat shit coated tunnel we creep, until we emerge, gasping, onto the blue-black sand shore of the Sea of Stars.

I know I said- er, wrote- whatever. Earlier, I made it clear that I needed to do research on the Crown of Storms before I could retrieve it for the Harpy Queen by Claw. I just didn’t say what that research entailed.

It might seem odd to some, doing intense meditation on such things of the Dead’s lands right after a ‘ritual’ event that generally entails the creation of something new- however, if that new thing is not wanted at the moment, there are few other things in this world that will work quite as well. Also, medicine is a marvelous thing.

The boat-coin is exactly where I left it- in my pocket, same as ever. I pluck it out, toss it high- it lands without a sound in the rippling, flicker-blue and green spark waves, it’s golden sides gently breathing in the swell of the black.

I get into the boat, my feet dry as the bones we crawled on our bellies past, take up the oar with which I shall steer and row with, and look back at Thrax. After a moment of wide eyed staring, he sloshes through the dark waters and drips his ungaingly way into the golden boat. In doing so, he pushes us away from shore, and I shove us out into the roiling waves.

Past the confusion and turmoil so close to the shore, the Sea of Stars flattens and calms into an ink-drip mirror that reflects nothing but it’s own inner lights; pale outlines of fish, stellar constellations of bones and weight gracefully undulate through the endless deeps beneath us. Behind us, ripples from the boat flutter the black starflung surface, distorting pale shapes and star collections with wavy undulations like glass. Thrax stares around, gazes at the cold dark water and follows the undulation of the star-fish for a time. The silent stillness isn’t going to last much longer- and we’ve still got a long way to go.

“Don’t get too comfortable- this is only a deep breath before the plunge.”

He nods, braces his feet on the floor- and my words have more than a bit of prophecy to them. The
hissing of whispers and echoing screams start to churn the waves, and beneath us the star fish become agitated, their tails beating and thrashing the waves into still greater displays of frenzied liveliness. A great violence descends onto the Sea, and beneath us stars no longer placidly dance their ancient dances- now, a battle rages, a howling bloodstained war of Void and Stars, screaming, screaming. Mortars explode from the depths and scream high into the air, blood splattering down like rain, shards of bone clattering hailstones of flesh; the sea is red, red and stinking of iron and snow, and the stars are white teeth bobbing in the lumpy dreck the boat now slogs through. The roar of a battlefield is the frenzied wind, hot and swearing and thick, rank breath on my skin; the sea tries to tear the oar from my hands.

It’s a struggle with weary limbs to row, now, and Thrax watches me struggle for quite some time before noticing an oar at his side, patiently waiting for him to take it in hand and put it to use; after the longest hesitation I’ve ever sweated through, he does, and eventually we both struggle the boat through that bloody patch of Sea. Thrax is not a weak man, by any stretch, and though the oar is no friend in his hand, he applies himself to the task with admirable determination. We scud through much quieter waves, the water turning from the blood of battle to the dull red of clay, iron still present but the welcome smell of spring and dirt and the chance of new things to grow gently pulling us along.

“We’ll be able to take a rest soon- watch for trees for me, okay?”

“Okay.”

Eventually, we pass fully into a different part of the Sea, a shallow place with far fewer stars- mottled spars of living wood jut out of the murky waves, slowly growing into wide trunked trees laden with gnarled, leafless branches. Long streamers of stunningly green leaves gently weave into wide banks of floating islands of foliage, on which frogs and gembright insects flicker and leap, only slightly less real than anything else here. I stop, pull my oar from the water and stretch- a gentle rain begins, soft splotches of bright sunsets and lingering goodbyes flicker over the waves, splatter against the leaf-mold thin frog and insect memories dancing over floating leaves. Water catches on the gnarled roots over our heads, pools in the upper rim of knot holes, and then drips away into the endless abyss of endless darkness above us. The light- for there is light- comes from beneath the boat, an ever changing magnificence of sunlight streaming upwards like tears in reverse and regret; Thrax’ eyes are so bright and wide with wonder, I almost wonder if they’re going to fall out. They don’t.

We lazily drift through this place of remembering and tears, of sunsets and goodbyes and strange, flickering moments, half-real and half-gone in the simple sideways gaze of an eye. Butterflies- or possibly just the idea of butterflies- flit over us both, dance and caper and whirl in lively dances, so unlike the stately slow things the stars do. Thrax falls asleep in the warm hollow in the center of the boat, and I cover him with a pale golden blanket- a thing of summer warm sunlight and the striking dance of lazy days, of sunlight flickering golden and pure over lush green grass and the frank, unadorned pleasure of lying back in it and watching white cloud-mountains drift by in an endless haze of blue. He sighs and smiles, nestles into the warmth of days remembered; I take up the pole again, and weave a drunkard’s path through gangling, gnarly branches bare of all but the faint dusting of multicolored dirt and the silvered backwards-dripping of time.

The sea-forest gives way to slow-quickening runnels of murky brownred water, which gives way to howling rapids of growling earth colored water, churning white clouds of mist that curls underneath the boat and buoys us up into a shimmering wash of blue-green wetness and glimmering stars. The
howling maelstrom pulls us down then out onto thick fluffy clouds of mist; flower petals in thick drifts buoy and rustle underneath us.

We’re getting closer.

Thrax wakes up when we’re floating through the shoals of neon fish. They whisper and slither over each other, a blinding writhing of violently bright scales and vicious teeth spitting lies and giggling snarls. Thrax is tense and draws the golden blanket close to him, curve of spine and hunches down tighter, eyes round and flickering with the strange lights of the whisper-fish.

We come to the island that floats among the whisper-fish, settling the boat in long waving reeds of slender black.

“That blanket- keep it with you. The fruit here is not for us to eat, but we aren’t here for that so…”

“What are we here for?”

“I’m here for a cloak- as for you? I haven’t the slightest idea. Maybe just to see something you’ve never seen before. That simple thing is enough, sometimes.”

“…Alright.”

And then we step out of the boat, and onto the Island in Hell called Shiva.

There are trees here, trees as they should be- or as I know them to be, and leaves that rustle in a wind I cannot feel. Thrax’ steps are careful and discreet on the loamy ground, and he follows me into the depths of the green forest. Green mosses and yellow stripes of bark, red dribbles of baby leaves and thin dusting of bright pink pollen that sticks to my sleeves.

And then- a cage of thin thorny vines woven finely over a long wide branching lattice, and on the lattice, her. Well, one her- Madame White. An enormous white serpent with enormous sleek eyes tipped with black and dotted with red.

“Oh. It’s you.”

“You didn’t honestly think you’d seen the last of me?”

“Well, you did break all of my teeth and kill me.”

“You tried to get out of paying me. And you’d been alive for much, much too long.”

“Hmmph. Well, if you’re here, you must want something-”

“Oh, just one. Where’s the Crown of Storms?”

“Th-the what? Ha! I don’t-”
“I think we’re quite past the point where any sort of denial will send me away.”

“Hsst! Fine. Fine. If you must know, child, I… I lost it.”

“You lost it.”

“Yes— in a game of s-sp-Sparrow.”

“To whom?”

“…The Boneclaw Mother.”

“Ah. A small matter. I’ll be going, now.”

“W-wait! She— not Her, but— you know they’re going to kill you, right?”

“Yes.”

“But… I don’t understand. To die— you will lose… you will lose the might-have-beens, the should-be’s; doesn’t that. Why doesn’t that frighten you?”

“I suppose… I suppose it’s because I already have. There are worse things to lose.”

And then I walk away, towards a different place on the Island. Thrax follows silent and wide eyed— wonder and confusion warring silently inside of him, eyes unclouded by hate and fear.

We come, after a silent leaf-rustle time, to a barren stretch of rocks, a pit with black water in it’s center and filled with the bones of dead creatures, their flesh winnowed and gone and the soft stink of dead things and old anger bubbling somewhere. Somewhere near here.

In my pocket there is a bottle of ink from Poseidonis that has a demon inside of it— I pull it out, carefully break the seal; pour the ink-bound demon into the Court of Shiva, one of the twelve courts of Hell. This court is meant for demons, specifically; and though I am no Judge, no Jury, I can Prosecute. And I shall.

The Boneclaw Mother rises from the depths of the black bone pool; her ragged frame and protruding bones hiss under the touch of the black water. Her miniscule eyes glint and flash with hate; her black teeth sneer.

“And what do you want, ungreatful whelp?”

“The Crown of Storms.”

“Hnf. That worthless thing? Fine.”

And she throws a bundle of sky-colored fabric at my feet. Too easy.
“You don’t actually think I’m that stupid, do you?”

“Well, if the shoe fits—”

“What did you do to it?”

“Me? I haven’t done anything to it, other than maybe a little… modification.”

“What did you do?”

“Hmph. Fine.”

She takes a breath, and begins.

“Needle’s threaded, queen’s beheaded; Sword and Crown are worthless here. Though I be dreaded and unwedded, I invite everyone to dance. Children dead and once all’s been said, there will be nothing left to poor, ungentle Fear. My words are mainly rhyme, unimpeded by worthless reason; Laborers, Lawyers, Church, and Gown, All make their little prance. Men and Women, Young and Old, reject my prophet hand. I don't implore them, nor ignore them. I firmly take my stand. T’would be easiest, mayhap, to play another game- but this life is full of random death and heaps of grief and shame. So now I force myself to speak an ancient and unsurprising theorem: So few are soothed by "accident"- You want someone to blame. Fire, Plague, Strange Disease, Drowned, Murdered, or, if you please, a long fell drop off the high bridge, there- None are expected, and no one cares. I, myself, know the steps very well, and all must learn my little dance. Families may die and loved ones cry, but no one is left to chance. I often must work very hard, sweat running down my skin- but after the dance, I then must rest, and the eating can then begin.”

“Ah. A death curse? How disappointing. I expected something original.”

“Oh, what’s wrong with the classics? Hmm? So easy to make a curse that works on anyone- but one that works on only the Rightful Bearer of that Crown? Nothing could be more complicated- it’s woven and stitched with care into the very threads of that cloak, by the way. It cannot be removed.”

“Oh really? The ship of Theseus says otherwise.”
She looks at me, glares at me- and realizes that I’m right. I gather the cloak up in my arms, soft down feathers and sparkling gemstones on draping fabrics of every color the sky could ever be- and it is then that Thrax and I leave.

We’re in the boat again, drifting away from the island before Thrax gets up the nerve to ask me what the Ship of Theseus is.

“Ah. The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, in so much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well… it’s like this- if you have a knife, and replace both the handle and the blade many times, can you still say that it is the same knife?”

“Well… yes.”

“Why?”

“Because- because…”

It takes the entire journey back to the Gates of Hell for him to answer me to his satisfaction.

“It’s the same knife because I say it’s the same knife.”

“Ah. In that case, if I were to take all the important things off this cloak and put them onto another, it would still be the same cloak- I just had to do some repair work on it. Right?”

“Right. Just because your sock is more patch than sock doesn’t mean it’s not the same sock.”

“Exactly. Before I forget-” I take a thick disc of pewter from a pocket I don’t look in all that often- a catchall pocket of things to be given away- and gently rearrange the blanket still on his shoulders into a graceful cloak of his own, pin it to his shoulder fast with a brooch that holds the dreamy eyed face of a ram head on; the cloak hangs on him neatly and when we reach the shore, it hangs to his mid calf like a good cloak should. “My gift to you. May it serve well, on all your journeys.”

“Thank you.”

It suits him- more than it should, by rights.

Leaving Hell is as simple as walking towards the light- the true Light of day, that is. And once
outside I am struck by a strange luminescence- a radiance coming from Thrax that is soon hiding under his skin again. His cloak is no longer gold, but the color of earth and stone, of undyed wool and hardy mountainside flowers; it’s not every day you see a man with a mountain for a cloak.

I’m glad to say that he wears it well.

The Harpy Queen by Claw does not wear disappointment well- when I tell her what has happened to the Crown of Storms, her reaction is a combination of childish rage and intense sadness. And then… she asked me to… to repair the Crown, if I could.

I think I can- or I’ll be able to. In a few years, at the very least.

The thread alone will take a good year to make enough of- the moon doesn’t cast suitable light all month, afterall.

There’s a story about the Queen of Foxes, and the King of Mountains, and the Keeper of Winds- but there’s only part of it that’s ever really stayed in my mind for any reason. That part has to do with a specific song that can only ever be sung by the Queen of Foxes- a red song, a War song, the Song of Soldiers.

It is said that if this song were ever sung by the true Queen of Foxes, most powerful guardian of the Gates of Hell itself, it would only be in most dire need; and with her song would rise a great susurrus of roaring dead, outflowing from Hell. On bridges finer than a spider’s thread- of finest moonlight- shall the Dead come forth, their teeming multitude invincible in death, ere they failed in life. They shall rise from the depths and come to the Call of the Queen of Foxes, and they shall do their bidding on that Day of Fate; they shall go forth-

My apprentices are mine for one, single, stupid reason. If anyone ever asks me right out, I’ll give them some silly lie- ‘They asked’ or ‘Why not?’- but that’s not the truth. The truth is that there is a small dark space inside of me- a place I have never, ever been. It is on the exact opposite side of myself as my Shop; in my Shop… my Mind Palace, if we’re being technical, I am the most in control of myself, the most… involved. There, I am not.

It’s strange- but that place, that single dark place inside of my soul that boils with rage and stills with the silent intimate knowing of how best to kill every single person I’ve ever met- that place… it sends out a sort of ~*ping*-~. Raven and Jinx… went ~*ping*-~ back. That was what convinced me to take them on- not pity, not some remnant of a life I never- no.

I took them in because, though I’ve never been inside… inside the Cage- I have one. I’ve seen the door of it. That day… that day so many years ago- when I fell off the bridge, and thought that I would end there, surely… before I fell, I was quivering and ready to step over the edge of that door.
If I had, that road— that bridge— would have been splattered with those little soldier’s life’s blood; I would have become a sword, instead of… whatever I am.

It would break Raven to go inside her Cage.

And Jinx… Jinx would break her Cage- and then she wouldn’t have an Inside or an Outside anymore.

So. There’s very little actual **skill** I can legally, or morally, teach my apprentices- but that’s not why I took them on. I didn’t teach them how to use weapons- I’m pretty reliably awful with anything blunter than a steak-knife, and have piss-poor long range skills; I didn’t teach them how to be respectable young women, seeing as I’m emphatically **not** a respectable young woman, and it would be both hypocritical and stupid of me to try and teach them to be something I don’t know how to be and don’t see the point of being. I didn’t teach them how to use magic- I’m not entirely sure that I can. I don’t actually use magic, per say. I was never formally **taught** magic- oh, sure, I’ve got the Cards and my Words, and all the intuition a Lucky Break with the genetics could give me but… I think…

I think because it all came so easily to me, I’ve never- I didn’t have to learn the complicated parts in smaller chunks, I could just grab the whole thing and squeeze it’s throat until I got that hot sweet rush of delicious knowing down my throat- but. Not everyone can do that.

Not everyone can do what I do. I am not entirely sure I can **teach** anyone to do what I do- guide, certainly, but not actually teach.

Raven and Jinx didn’t learn anything tangibly useful from me- it’s hard to explain what exactly they **did** learn from me.

**Discipline, for one thing.**

**What?**

Your beserkapprentices learned Discipline and Patience at your side; Raven would not be able to care for the sick, the weak, the dying, without your help. They would overwhelm the little fledgling she was, but she is not a little barely-feathered girl anymore; her wings will grow in soon. Did you not notice that?

I- oh. Oh. I guess… I’ll have to get her some nail polish- er, claw polish. Don’t the tools for caring for them come in a kit?

Yes; you’re lucky her favorite color is blue. As for Jinx— you know and I know that **no** palace raised girl, no matter how ill-kempt, is going to smoothly adjust to the life of a mountaintop aesthetic and near-nun. Furthermore, even if she’s not in the Line, she’s a princess— and she’s a public defender now, did you notice? Or did that slip your mind?

I noticed, Strike. I just-

She would have never been able to become a defender of the weak without your teachings. The tinysassins— while you may not have taught them directly, you **did** teach their xifu, Dan.

**What!?**

Yes. You taught Dan to keep going— to try, and try again. Even when you beat her bloody into the cobbled stone of the grime caked streets, she rose and fought you again. Even when your bones
cracked against hers, and hers were the ones to break, she rose again. Is this not so?

I- yes, yes it is. You’re right, Strike. Thank you.

All it would take for me to Sing and open the Gates of Hell- all it would take is a single step into the threshold of that dark place in me. And after I Fell, there wasn’t, isn’t, a gate. Anymore.

Just a cage- just a box, I guess. With a line on the floor, in the ground, burnt on, metal and glass and screaming silenced, the dripping of blood and the crack of bones and here, here is the place where those drawers in my Shop lead, here where those memories wait patiently, sticky and dark and festering, rot under enamel and the stink of blood and the knowing the knowing the- NO.

I’m not going to think about that. I’m not going to remember that.

…Dammit. I have to stop eating bacon again.

Grandma’s tenants are gone through in a matter of days, and it’s been a while since I’ve slept outdoors in a city; it brings up strange memories, blood on dusty asphalt and the taste of what I won’t let be anything other than pig- it’s pig. It has to be pig that I remember tasting, nothing else- no. It’s definitely pig.

It’s definitely pig I remember eating with my father that strange day when I was six- AND I’M GOING TO STOP REMEMBERING THIS NOW.

So yeah.

Definitely an easy job from Grandma- why the goods always have to be in a woven rope-basket is beyond me though. Still, it’s easy enough to tie over a shoulder; I get back home eventually, a few hours ahead of a pretty nasty rainstorm- just in time to sense my teammates flying off in the Bioship for reasons I am not privy to.

Oh, there’s the Captain and Wolf- playing, I thi- dive forwards out of the underbrush, roll again. Stand, forward step left, back step one, two, elbow to solar plexus and throw into secondary attacker.

I draw my sword and stare at the Wolves. They’re ugly, mangy men, twelve- fourteen of them. That’s not enough to even slow me down- a few steps one way and three men fall with their life’s blood wasting from their throats; two steps another way and five men lose their heads to fall softly thumping to the ground, dead, seven dead and that’s half of them gone in less than ten steps total. The living seven move warily now, faltering step, feint and strike- spray of arterial blood against my face, stupid, blood sticks stupid stupid- duck and tuck and roll forwards and that bastard just tried to use my Blades against me.

Oh fuck no.

Darting flash of gold on the left and low shoulder tuck because even out of my hands they hunger for blood in battle and I’m just weak enough to be to their taste; fingertips with claws reaching for the basket and no not happening, a hand is followed by a head, blood fountainspray and silence at the
edge of the forest. Two dead men on the ground.

I’m wearing a sleeveless jacket, thin green-grey fabric without sleeves and slim black toggles, plain white tank-top and the suggestion of leaf-shapes on my baggy canvas pants; no shoes, because I get tired of them after a few wee-months. Months of wearing them every day. Ugh.

Three left, and my hands are sticky slick with sweat and blood and it’s only three because one is vomiting blood from the Sword-hole in his chest, gushing and dripping and sticky thick over my face and my arms and my jacket is stuck fast to my skin, sweat and blood on my neck sticking into my hair and stinking offal and the interior leavings of bowels, urine and stomach bile gurgling-dripping onto the dirt-leaf dead ground, shrubs and grasses and ferns and the limp bloody shapes of twelve starving wolves, dead on the ground and already rotting into bones.

The last two are the most deadly- and they’re smart enough to come at me together, each one with one of my bronze Blades in hand. A single strike from me decides it- shatters the bronze teeth and embeds them deep into the smooth wood of my cursed sword, splinters of bronze bone piercing into my left arm, my muscle, my bone, biting and tearing and shattered; dishonored forever. The wolves die- all of them, sprays of blood and vomit dripping from rents and tears in their guts, the stink of shit from dead bodies newly ended.

My Bronze Blades- a pair of daggers inscribed with the history of my First teacher, the history of my First battle, the the first weapon I ever owned and was taught to use as a weapon, not just for show. They’re. Broken now, digging and tearing and broken, broken, blood down my arm and it hurts and they’re broken it’s broken, I’m broken. Dishonored- can’t make them into blades again, they’re broken and dishonored, they fell in battle and I can’t make them into blades again, not ever, can’t be legal marks of my honor ever, I don’t have any now, dishonored. Can’t buy property, can’t sell property, can’t make or take loans, can’t be a notary- can’t can’t can’t a list of can’ts to add to the already long list of things I cannot do because it’s not allowed and I can’t fix it I can never be- I can’t.

I still have Grandma’s books in the basket of rope, and I’m still alive, even if it hurts and I’ll never be able to- still alive. It’s raining, water running red and dripping down my body, sticky hot rain on my face, can’t smell anything through all the blood on my body, through all the shit on my feet; trudge and drudge through puddles growing from the sky’s tears. No wind. Just rain and rain and wolf-Wolf? His blue eyes are startled and then concerned- I guess he cares about me? Why should he though- I’ve never been kind or affectionate to him, so why- is he licking my hand? My face, now-how is he reaching my face…

Oh. I’m not standing up anymore.

Wolf is actually a wolf- and a healthy one, even though he has open wounds all over his body- they aren’t bleeding, but they’re open to the muscle, there’s a name for it, it’s- it’s- thin layer of belly, of perimysium, exposed to the open air, and a thin layer of epimysium over that keeping what little contaminants it can out of Wolf’s body and- and I can fix that. I know how to fix that.

“What are you going to fix, X?”
“W-wolf. Him. His skin- it is having the very deep rips that cannot heal b-because there is no enough for it to- to close up. So I fix for him.”

“Oh. And… the blood?”

“Is okay, Captain. Is no mine.”

“Ah. You- you do have some, er, shards of-”

“They be gone soon. Is not for being worried against, okay?”

“I-if you’re sure…”

“Yes. Am sure. Help me up, please.”

“Of course.”

Captain Marvel wraps an arm around my chest, and another goes under my knees- I let him carry me inside, both of us dripping and wet, Wolf shakes himself off water spraying everywhere and drip drip goes the blood on me thin and wet and I’m- cold?

I guess I’m cold. Can’t think of another reason to be shaking like this.

White room, smells like- like, antiseptic? Sanitarium, I think. Not wearing anything except my pants and my bra, and someone’s rebandaged my arm- it looks like my Cursemark expanded, somewhat. Somehow.

It hurts.

Twin stands up, and I walk out of the sanitarium, down through the winding halls and into my room, pull a petri dish and a beaker up onto the desk, gather ingredients and measure out the beginnings of a new batch of Sim-fluid-

I walk into the kitchen and then into the lounge and then into the library. There are books here I’ve never had the pleasure of reading.

Where to start?

Wolf pads into my room- my workroom, actually- right around when I would have gone searching for him on my own. Gentle palpitation of his open skin, and the Sim is somewhere between a paste and a gel; pack it into the flesh of his leg and flicker-buzz of Thunder through- blood pinks the flesh, and it twitches and flexes under my hand, jitter of leg and flex of his leg, twitch twitch twitch.

Wolf licks my hand, stretches his legs, nudges me into the hallway leading from the old archives to the Cave, quietly walk listless serene into the lounge and sit in an armchair. Drop twin and there’s an antiseptic loosely wrapped around my shoulders, aching left arm and warm wet wolf head on my lap, tongue rasp on my fingers. A whine.
I can’t bring myself to read it.

I can’t bring myself to do much more than sit and stare.

Another whine.

Time passes. Wolf climbs into the squishy chair with me. I shift and flop into his side, long limbs twitching, tails fluffly and long and twelve of them total, when did I get twelve? Ears twitch, and spine curves and a soft sigh escapes me, somehow. Wolf licks my ears, gently, licks my mouth- the kindness of a friend.

It feels like a hug.

It hurts, but I can’t make myself move away.

An ache starts in the bones of my wrist, buzzes under my fur and shoots thin, burning tendrils of ice into my muscles and an itch like- like when I first used my sketchbook, Create, I remember my backaching and my fingers itching and twitching, an itch like cold heating, like the edge of frostbitten skin warming through again and itching itching- something is happening. A feeling like burning, on my left arm; the quiet worry of Wolf at my side, and the warm heaving of his side against mine.

The itch of fur being pressed the wrong way, and the odd, wavering sting of magic, far more than I’m used to, gnawing through my body; chipping at some frozen hulk deep inside me. Itching.

Everything is itching and discomfort.

About the only thing I can think of to ignore this unrelenting burning is to remember fables, which aren’t even stories, not really- just. Bits of advice in a short little story, all winnowed and boiled down to the meanest piece and left to be chewed on by those too poor in memory for a whole story.

A Wolf had been gorging on an animal he had killed, when suddenly a small bone in the meat stuck in his throat and he could not swallow it. He soon felt terrible pain in his throat, and ran all about moaning and groaning and seeking for something to relieve the pain. He tried to induce every one he met to remove the bone. “I would give anything,” said he, “if you would take it out.” At last, the Crane agreed to try, and told the Wolf to lie on his side and open his jaws as wide as he could. Then the Crane put its long neck down the Wolf’s throat, and with it’s beak loosened the bone, till at last it got it out. “Will you kindly give me the reward you promised?” said the Crane.

The Wolf grinned and showed his teeth and said: “Be content. You have put your head inside a Wolf’s mouth and taken it out again in safety; that ought to be reward enough for you.”
A Kid was perched up on the top of a house, and looking down saw a Wolf passing under him. Immediately he began to revile and attack his enemy. “Murderer and thief,” he cried, “why be you here near honest folks’ houses? How dare you make an appearance where your vile deeds are known?”

“No, no, my young friend,” said the Wolf. “It is easy to be brave from a safe distance.”

A Fox had by some means got into the storeroom of a theatre. Suddenly she observed a face glaring down on her and began to be very frightened; but looking more closely she found it was only a Mask such as actors use to put over their face. “Ah,” said the Fox, “you look very fine indeed; it is a pity you have not got any brains.”

A great conflict was about to come to pass between the Birds and the Beasts. When the two armies were collected together the Bat hesitated in choosing which to join. The Birds that passed his perch said: “Come with us”; but he said: “I am a Beast.” Later on, some Beasts who were passing underneath him looked up and said: “Come with us”; but he said: “I am a Bird.” Luckily, at the last moment, peace was made and no battle took place. The Bat came to the Birds and wished to join in the rejoicings, but they all turned against him and he had to fly away. He then went to the Beasts, but soon had to flee lest they tear him to pieces. “Ah,” said the Bat, “I see now; he that is neither one thing nor the other has no friends.”

An old labourer, bent double with age and toil, was gathering sticks in a forest. At last he grew so tired and hopeless that he threw down he bundle of sticks, and cried out: “I cannot bear this life any longer. Ah, I wish Death would only come and take me!”

As he spoke, Death, a dark pale vision, appeared and said to him: “What wouldst thou, Mortal? I heard thee call me.”

“Please, friend,” replied the woodcutter, “would you kindly help me to lift this bundle of sticks onto my shoulder?”

“I can’t help you there, chief. I’m too busy with other matters,” Death replied.

“Hey- hey, are you alright?”

I slowly sit up, left arm twinging and head spinning; Captain Marvel is- “You’re dripping onto the floor there, chief.”

“Yeah- but are you okay?”

“Prossibly not. M’hungry though…”

“I’ll get you something- peanutbutter and jelly?”
“O-okay. Um… can I has apple juice too?”

“Sure!”

Captain Marvel walks into the kitchen; the clatter and clink of dishes. I sit very carefully still and wait patiently- he comes back with a sandwich cut neatly in half and a tall cold glass of amber apple juice. I take them from him, thank him, and neatly devour the food, drain the glass and sigh with happiness. Apples might be a thing for me; with every swallow I feel a thrum of magic settling inside of me, delicate threads winding around my limbs. Oh dear.

My eyes ache and sting from the fumes of long dissipated mystic smoke; my nose burns and itches. I sneeze explosively, and wince away from the throbbing in my head.

“So… what happened?”

“Well, stupid as it might sound, I got attacked by Wolves while carrying a basket of my grandmother’s goodies back to her.”

“Goodies? Really?”

“I know- but, well… yes, really.”

“What kind of goodies?”

“A stupidly large amount of gold, gems, silver, shells, and other sundry goods and valuables. My grandma’s a landlady, you see, and, well- this is the month she collects rent for the year.”

“Ah. And she sent you because…?”

“It’s a- it’s a combination of my reputation with a sword, her great and venerable age, and the sheer amount of goodies that needed collection, I’m guessing. My grandma’s old, Cap, she doesn’t have the constitution to go all over town in all conditions to collect several kilos of money from people. I do, and she’s paying me to do it, so…”

“So… you had to take the job because…?”

“I-it’s not like I have parents I can rely on, not anymore… and I can’t put a burden on my grandmother, she works too hard as it is. I- I’m fine, really. I am.”

“Right.”

“What were you doing out there, if it’s alright to ask?”

“Playing with Wolf- I was waiting for the Team but, uh…”

“I think they ditched you, Cap.”

“Yeah…”

I give him a gentle smile, and he nods in thanks- but his sadness takes more than just a gentle smile to
ease. Ah well. I’ll give him a hug later.

My eyes water with exhaustion, rolling through me and driving needles of jagged jigsaw pain into every part of my body. Have you ever been so tired that you can’t, for the life of you, relax enough to sleep? I’m there, right now. It’s like someone took all my body’s innards and sucked them out, replaced them with crushed rocks and bits of glass, my head too heavy to lift but my neck too stiff to relax. Eyes like cooked eggs, iris and pupil cooked solid, can’t run down the sclera onto the plate like runny wonderful taste of golden fat.

So. Tired.

I think I’m recording this, all this; useless knowledge and unmarked conversations and intimate details and scraps of drobbed eaves and tiny glittering details of an unseen world- I think the reason I’m doing all of this is because I know where and how I’m going to die. I know who’s going to kill me. I’ve known since I was five.

I don’t know when- the gods are not so kind, not so cruel, as that. Not usually. But- I know where it’s going to be, and I know how it’s going to happen, and I know who’s going to do the bloody deed. I know a few things- cherry blossoms and rain, an uncounted year, a prophecy, my broken heart pumping the last of it’s blood out onto the muddy dirt. Me, twitching and then still, my eyes turned to glass and a pool of my life’s blood darkening my shadow, wisping away in the rain.

It gets fuzzy after that. Not surprising.

I suppose that the actual reading of these journals of mine is a dull undertaking- translating them was probably more fun, new discoveries cropping up with every word found. Exciting, in that dry, lingual way. As for the reason for all this, all these bits of life scraped onto pages of carefully stitched books; I just wanted… proof.

Proof that I’m alive. That I was alive.

Ah, I’m sorry- I made a promise to myself that I would stop contemplating the cessation of my existence after severe bloodloss. But… I can’t. Stop, that is.

When I… when I died before- I’ve checked, you see. I’m allowed. To check. And me- my soul, my name, whatever you’d like to call the marker of my being that assures me a place in the world yet to come; I don’t have one. Everyone who’s ever lived- every**thing** that’s ever lived- has a spot on a sort of… ledger, is the closest noun I’ve ever managed to find. That spot is there to register the existence of every living being in existence.

And believe me- everything that can be said to be alive has a place in that book.

Except for me.

As far as I can figure- as best I can tell- when I die, I will just… cease. I won’t be reincarnated, or journey through the underworld for four years. No séance to confer with my soul- no receipt that I have a soul. Maybe that’s why I’ve never been afraid of demons- I’ve got nothing they want.
Warm thump of a heart against my ear; the smell of dog and leaves and dirt and blood, faintly. But warm, and soft breath, the feeling of being held safe against the side of a father- but how can that be? My father is dead. When I open my eyes I realize that my relaxation is more than just cuddling with Wolf- I’m all the way out. Tails, claws, fur, markings- the works. My makeup rubbed into Wolf’s fur- and… and my Team is going to come in in a few minutes.

I could face them. I should face them.

I press my face back into Wolf’s fur and try to go back to sleep.

I can’t face them.

“-and you are grounded for life young lady!”

“Da-aaad.”

“So, Rob, you and Zatanna-”

“Dude, shut up her dad’s literally right there.”

“I still do not know where Red X is, Miss Martain-”

“I’m just saying it’s a good thing we had Zatanna instead of her or else Red Volcano would’ve known to-”

“I doubt that Red X has shown her entire repertoire of spells and enchantments, Miss Martain-”

“And another thing- where even was she? I mean, Robin and Wally have just as many responsibilities as she does so why-”

“Megan, that’s not really fair. Robin and Wally have mentors, but X doesn’t-”

“-could have been killed or injured or-”

“Da-aaaaaaaaad-”

“Guys, Red X was hurt-”

“What? Captain-”

“Calm down Kaldur, it’s not a serious injury- she’s in the Lounge, I think-”

“Please excuse me-”

“Aqualad, I’m not done talking with you-”

“Megan, leave it.”

“But- Conner-”
“Megan. Leave it alone.”

“Aw, jeeze, what could’ve hurt X?”

“I don’t know, Artemis- I do know that you showed some masterful archery skills back there-”

“Thanks Robin- still, I think I’ll give Kaldur a minute with Terry before I check on her too.”

“Hmph. Well- I mean, um. Thank you for, uh, listening to me. You know. About where to, ah, shoot.”

“Oh- Um. You’re welcome, Wally.”

“Ah- do you mind if I, um, join you to check on Terry?”

“Erm- sure, that’s… fine.”

Kaldur’s energy- I can feel it and it feels- like a thunderstorm, but wet. A hurricane? Agitated- and then he stops and gasps, and touches me so gently, his fingers soft on my jaw, tracing up into my hair; why that little thing should bring me to tears- that little, simple, stupid thing- I open my eyes and weep.

His hand on my cheek draws me up, away from my warm spot with Wolf- he slides off the chair and a half, stretches, and saunters out- Kaldur takes his place, runs his fingers through my hair. I’m still weeping, but I don’t feel sad- I just feel tired and happy.

I smile at him, hopefully, and he lets out a huff of laughter- his forehead presses against mine, the cool smoothness of his skin against mine, his nose rubbing next to mine, the warm puffs of his breath against my skin. He smells of volcanic ash and sulfur and the sea, always the sea, and his own distinctive male musk, not unlike an ermine or a wolf. It’s a strange, heady combination, seawater and male- and it is intoxicating to me, all bright tones and stormwarnings and the rot-smell of good, lively waters.

We sit there together for a time measured in nuzzles and sighs, and the inquiry of our Teammates does not part us.

I like cuddling with my boyfriend. I like having a Team that cares about my well being. I like having a boyfriend that cares about me.

I feel like I might be beating a dead horse at this point when I say it, but- I love Kaldur. I do.

I asked him, later, what I smelled like to him- or perhaps I asked him what he liked about me most. I forgot what I asked him, but not what he said-
“I like the way you smile with your eyes and nose, and the way your blushes curl around the back of your ears and down your chest to your navel; I like the colors of your eyes, how your right eye is so bright and sparkles like a gemstone in the light and how your left eye is so dark and secretive, and gleams like scales on a tuna.”

“A tuna?”

“Yes- and you smell like… like flowers, and dirt, and sunlight in dried leaves. I think that my favorite thing is how you taste-”

“Eh?!?”

“Hmm, yes- you taste sweet, Theresa, like a candy or a fruit- your skin, your lips, your cla-”

“Kaldur!”

“You did ask, Terry, I thought you wanted me to be honest…”

“Not that honest, Kaldur-”

And then he smiled and kissed me soundly, the jerk. That kiss led us to clothing carelessly strewn to the side of his bed and sighs quickly stifled against sweating skin, to fingers entwined and hot humid air between what little of us isn’t touching. His eyes go dark and almost jade with pleasure when I touch him, run my fingers along the dips of his abdomen and down; a secretive blush and a teasing glint in my eye when he bucks into my delicate grip. A near growl, and he reaches for me, turnabout- but I ease away, almost laughing, no no, my love- today I shall pleasure you.

His gasp is like music to me, when my kisses lap at the sweat pooling on his chest, on his stomach, the flick of my tongue over his bellybutton. My teeth nip, and he shivers, gasps, and squeaks as my mouth finds his hip. He tries to sit up, scoot away- I stop. Look at him.

“Kaldur?”

“I- ah. I- apologies, I was just-”

“It’s alright, Kaldur. I don’t want to do anything to you that you don’t want me to do-”

“N-no I was just- surprised- I- p-please, continue.”

“You want me to, ah, continue?”

“Yes.”

“L- lie back, my love.”

He does, and my fingers trace where my lips touch down on- he shivers at my kiss, but remains supine. My teeth make little mark on his skin, and his shudders become more pronounced and jumpy when I move from his hip to his lower belly, the tip of him jumping with the beat of his heart. It’s a sort of awe inducing hideous, like a lurid pink banna slug, or possibly a slime-eel; I blow on the tip
and the whimper that comes out of him is positively intoxicating.

The night ends with me in his arms, my hips a pleasant ache and his throat a steady pounding against my jaw.

The world ends six days later.
The King was in his counting house, counting all his money

Chapter Summary

Sorry I'm late. The struggle is real and art school only makes it realer. however, now that i'm in college, i've got name brand shennanigans to ply you masses with, instead of bargain bin shennanigans. We're moving up in the world, peeps!

A fail-safe or fail-secure device is one that, in the event of failure, responds in a way that will cause no harm, or at least a minimum of harm, to other devices or danger to personnel.

Fail-safe and fail-secure are similar but distinct concepts. Fail-safe means that a device will not endanger lives or properties when it fails. Fail-secure means that access or data will not fall into the wrong hands in a failure. Sometimes the approaches suggest opposite solutions. For example, if a building catches fire, fail-safe systems would unlock doors to ensure quick escape and allow firefighters inside, while fail-secure would lock doors to prevent unauthorized access to the building.

Significantly, despite popular belief to the contrary, a system's being "fail-safe" means not that failure is impossible or improbable, but rather that the system's design prevents or mitigates unsafe consequences of the system's failure. That is, if and when a "fail-safe" system "fails", it is "safe" or at least no less safe than when it is operating correctly.

It doesn’t take much to end a world. Parents die; a lie is revealed; a truth is told. Still, nothing ends a world quite like a fight- or a death. For such an all-encompassing thing, worlds end almost every day.

A life gets shattered every time someone dies.

Or lies.

Or tells the truth.

I don’t think I’ll ever forgive Megan for ending mine.

It’s strange- of that terrible excersize, I only remember fragments- flickering moments painted against the back of my skull; flames and fumes dancing together on painted walls of a cave long empty. Madness.
I remember- sixteenth of October, that’s when the world decided to end. Strangers from the Void, starwalkers all and they came with fire raining down, raining down

but it’s only a dream

And we- We, the few, we the proud, we the brave, we fought and we fought and when Artemis-bright and practical and my favorite for reasons of snark and deadliness, Artemis Artemis caught in a beam of fire and vanished like she never was

only a dream I know this but it feels so real but I know that it can’t be it isn’t this isn’t real

Aqualad pulls us together and we run, we run- flying never felt so good, leaving behind that cold ice floe world where Artemis Fell (but she has not fallen!) and we go to the Hall where Heroes are praised and we fight again, canon stolen from an alien ship and firing hell back to it’s makers and then- andthenandthenandthen we find Martian Manhunter

this world is no more than sugar and bootblack so why should he be here? unless... there is a tip of wood iron strong under that nothing and seeming and I remember something about this why can’t I remember

dreaming
dead dead Kaldur’s dead
dreaming
everyone’s dead Artemis is dead and Kaldur’s dead

dreaming

Robin took command at the cave and we went out to kill the leaders, cut the head off and the body soon follows

dreaming dreaming nothing is real

Robin told us all that maybe our people were only taken, not destroyed, energy like Zeta Tubes. (LIAR!) Kid Flash and Robin sneak in, Miss Martian and Martian Manhunter leading them into the aliens ship- and Superboy held out as the distraction and

only dreaming

only Miss Martian comes back, I was at a fallback point, best as support couldn’t help them-

dreaming

and then it was all for naught, cut off one head and two more shall appear like a hydra, two more deathships in the sky raining fire down and a fissure in the earth takes Martian Manhunter in a flash of heat and screaming and then

it was only me

and Miss Martian.
“M’gann. Get out of my head.”

“No.”

We fought.

I won.

I always win.

I just… wish I could be happier about it.

The fairies, as we know, are greatly attracted by the beauty of mortal women, and Finvarra, their king employs his numerous sprites to find out and carry off- when possible- the prettiest girls and brides in the country. These are spirited away by enchantment to his fairy palace at Knockma in Tuam, where they remain under a fairy spell, forgetting all about the earthly life and soothed to passive enjoyment, as in a sweet dream, by the soft low melody of the fairy music, which has the power to lull the hearer into a trance of ecstasy. There was once a great lord in that part of the country who had a beautiful wife called Ethna, the loveliest bride in all the land. And her husband was so proud of her that day after day he had festivals in her honour; and from morning till night his castle was filled with lords and ladies, and nothing but music and dancing and feasting and hunting and pleasure was thought of.

One evening while the feast was merriest, and Ethna floated through the dance in her robe of silver gossamer clasped with jewels, more bright and beautiful than the stars in heaven, she suddenly let go the hand of her partner and sank to the floor in a faint. They carried her to her room, where she lay long quite insensible; but towards the morning she woke up and declared that she had passed the night in a beautiful palace, and was so happy that she longed to sleep again and go there in her dreams. And they watched by her all day, but when the shades of evening fell dark on the castle, low music was heard at her window, and Ethna again fell into a deep trance from which nothing could rouse her.

Then her old nurse was set to watch her; but the woman grew weary in the silence and fell asleep, and never awoke till the sun had risen. And when she looked towards the bed, she saw to her horror that the young bride had disappeared. The whole household was roused up at once, and search made everywhere, but no trace of her could be found in all the castle, nor in the gardens, nor in the park. Her husband sent messengers in every direction, but to no purpose -- no one had seen her; no sign of her could be found, living or dead.

Then the young lord mounted his swiftest steed and galloped right off to Knockma, to question Finvarra, the fairy king, if he could give any tidings of the bride, or direct him where to search for her; for he and Finvarra were friends, and many a good keg of Spanish wine had been left outside the window of the castle at night for the fairies to carry away, by order of the young lord. But he little dreamed now that Finvarra himself was the traitor; so he galloped on like mad till he reached Knockma, the hill of the fairies.

And as he stopped to rest his horse by the fairy rath, he heard voices in the air above him, and one
said, "Right glad is Finvarra now, for he has the beautiful bride in his palace at last; and never more will she see her husband's face."

"Yet," answered another, "if he dig down through the hill to the centre of the earth, he would find his bride; but the work is hard and the way is difficult, and Finvarra has more power than any mortal man."

"That is yet to be seen," exclaimed the young lord. "Neither fairy, nor devil, nor Finvarra himself shall stand between me and my fair young wife;" and on the instant he sent word by his servants to gather together all the workmen and labourers of the country round with their spades and pickaxes, to dig through the hill till they came to the fairy palace.

And the workmen came, a great crowd of them, and they dug through the hill all that day till a great deep trench was made down to the very centre. Then at sunset they left off for the night; but next morning when they assembled again to continue their work, behold, all the clay was put back again into the trench, and the hill looked as if never a spade had touched it -- for so Finvarra had ordered; and he was powerful over earth and air and sea.

But the young lord had a brave heart, and he made the men go on with the work; and the trench was dug again, wide and deep into the centre of the hill. And this went on for three days, but always with the same result, for the clay was put back again each night and the hill looked the same as before, and they were no nearer to the fairy palace.

Then the young lord was ready to die for rage and grief, but suddenly he heard a voice near him like a whisper in the air, and the words it said were these: "Sprinkle the earth you have dug up with salt, and your work will be safe."

On this new life came into his heart, and he sent word through all the country to gather salt from the people; and the clay was sprinkled with it that night, when the men had left off their work at the hill.

Next morning they all rose up early in great anxiety to see what had happened, and there to their great joy was the trench all safe, just as they had left it, and all the earth round it was untouched.

Then the young lord knew he had power over Finvarra, and he bade the men work on with a good heart, for they would soon reach the fairy palace now in the centre of the hill. So by the next day a great glen was cut right through deep down to the middle of the earth, and they could hear the fairy music if they put their ear close to the ground, and voices were heard round them in the air.

"See now," said one, "Finvarra is sad, for if one of those mortal men strike a blow on the fairy palace with their spades, it will crumble to dust, and fade away like the mist."

"Then let Finvarra give up the bride," said another, "and we shall be safe."

On which the voice of Finvarra himself was heard, clear like the note of a silver bugle through the hill. "Stop your work," he said. "Oh, men of earth, lay down your spades, and at sunset the bride shall be given back to her husband. I, Finvarra, have spoken."

Then the young lord bade them stop the work, and lay down their spades till the sun went down. And at sunset he mounted his great chestnut steed and rode to the head of the glen, and watched and waited; and just as the red light flushed all the sky, he saw his wife coming along the path in her robe of silver gossamer, more beautiful than ever; and he sprang from the saddle and lifted her up before him, and rode away like the storm wind back to the castle. And there they laid Ethna on her bed; but she closed her eyes and spake no word. So day after day passed, and still she never spake or smiled, but seemed like one in a trance.
And great sorrow fell upon every one, for they feared she had eaten of the fairy food, and that the enchantment would never be broken. So her husband was very miserable. But one evening as he was riding home late, he heard voices in the air, and one of them said, "It is now a year and a day since the young lord brought home his beautiful wife from Finvarra; but what good is she to him? She is speechless and like one dead; for her spirit is with the fairies though her form is there beside him."

Then another voice answered, "And so she will remain unless the spell is broken. He must unloose the girdle from her waist that is fastened with an enchanted pin, and burn the girdle with fire, and throw the ashes before the door, and bury the enchanted pin in the earth; then will her spirit come back from Fairyland, and she will once more speak and have true life."

Hearing this the young lord at once set spurs to his horse, and on reaching the castle hastened to the room where Ethna lay on her couch silent and beautiful like a waxen figure. Then, being determined to test the truth of the spirit voices, he untied the girdle, and after much difficulty extracted the enchanted pin from the folds. But still Ethna spoke no word; then he took the girdle and burned it with fire, and strewed the ashes before the door, and he buried the enchanted pin in a deep hole in the earth, under a fairy thorn, that no hand might disturb the spot. After which he returned to his young wife, who smiled as she looked at him, and held forth her hand. Great was his joy to see the soul coming back to the beautiful form, and he raised her up and kissed her; and speech and memory came back to her at that moment, and all her former life, just as if it had never been broken or interrupted; but the year that her spirit had passed in Fairyland seemed to her but as a dream of the night, from which she had just awoke.

After this Finvarra made no further efforts to carry her off; but the deep cut in the hill remains to this day, and is called "The Fairy's Glen." So no one can doubt the truth of the story as here narrated.

Introducing my apprentices to the Team is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. Not the hardest. But one of them.

And I’d write more about it, except, well. After the World Ended, everything gets jumbled in both directions for about two weeks.

Twenty days, both ways.

For the sake of posterity, I’ll let Raven or Jinx tell it. I’ll also refrain from trying to write about anything after that night I spent with Kaldur.

Well. Anything more I mean.

so i guess that i should say that i’m not a heavy combat anything. i’m support- that’s my purpose in any team situation. i don’t like fighting, or anything like that. it’s the feelings involved, i guess. oh, i didn’t say- i’m an empath; i can feel other peoples emotions like they’re my own.

i’m no combatant. i hate crowds.

but Terry saved me. so, since she asked me so nicely, what the hell else could i do but say “yeah, sure” and meet her merry band of assholes intent on saving every day that could be saved?
it wasn’t a really memorable day- not hot, not windy, not bright or overcast; no sales or parties to
patch people up after, no more than the usual crowd what comes in the morning after the previous
night’s bartime fun. i’d finished making a new batch of vitasticks, and Thrax was handling a
pneumonic harpy chick; he’s good with his hands, Thrax, soft spoken. he looks better with his hair
short; it’s odd, how approachable and, dare i say, handsome he became with a simple application of
shears.

Jinx’s words, not mine.

not Important though.

Important was what i felt off of Terry’s teammate, Megan. i’d felt that before- not off someone else,
but myself. i knew what i was refeeling. but at the time, i didn’t know why. it’s interference- Terry’s
great, probably the best, but, well, she can’t help how she wasn’t made. what she wasn’t made with.
i am a half demon- no bones to make about it, no real reason to conceal something so ultimately
trivial.

as such, i am in a position to know about these sort of things. Souls, i mean to say. Terry doesn’t
have one. which makes her all the more amazing- she has no soul, and yet she feels, and feels
deeply. Loudly. it’s like having an electrical storm inside of you being silenced by a thunderstorm
overhead; it’s like white noise and near-to darkness, swamped over like fleece on the soul. silence,
where noise and shattering reigned.

i don’t think i’d have ever learned to meditate without her.

empty spaces are attractive for all sorts of things, and Terry’s particular lack has let quite a few things
inside of her that normally couldn’t exist at such close quarters. not without burning the house down.
no body should be able to remember the future and speak with the past; no body should be
changeable yet still. and nobody should be able to go where they please, and speak to all kindly and
without fear.

but she- Terry, i mean- she doesn’t have a soul. so, all the pesky bits of Self that should get in the
way, or tint the Powers within her one way or another, set her House ablaze in a conflagration of
confliction and interest, make her… human, mortal, something she isn’t- they aren’t there. it could be
said that the only thing that Terry really is- is a mind.

her soul is her memory.

i think that’s why she writes everything down the way she does- i doubt she even notices herself
doing it; quiet moments stolen out of her day, to quickly note down the happenings of her life in stark
black graphite and muddled paper with ripped edges and bound in thread and leather- the curling,
straight lined, perfected evidence of a soul that never was. she draws perfect circles out of practice,
not necessity; she says she used a compass for it, before, but got bored of it and just… used her
hands and arms and eyes instead.

i’m supposed to be writing about the day i and Jinx and Thrax got added to the Team as support. not
a really interesting day, really. not then. in hindsight- but that’s always perfect vision, hindsight, and
can’t really be counted. Terry will be… disappointed if i don’t at least try to relate the events in as
direct a fashion as possible, and for her that usually means in an “as it happens” style. present, not
past.

i don’t do that. so, you’ll have to make due with a jumble. maybe Jinx will write something better.

doubt it though, Jinx writes almost all day for her job- she’s Jinx Diamante, Attorney at Law(ge). it’s
all words and writs with the Lawer crowd.

Terry thinks we’re fucking. we’re not, though. we’re very intimate, Jinx and i, but we aren’t…
physically intimate. Terry’s empty place, it gnaws on her- like she knows she’s missing a soul, which
is… not that far off. but knowing and feeling are different things, and she acts- sometimes she acts
like she remembers having one. you can’t get souls after you’re born. a soul, i mean. either you have
one at the start, or you don’t, and that’s that. it’d take more than a mere miracle, an act of the gods, to
change that- it would take the Changing of Destiny’s book.

the chances of that happening are far, far below astronomical. small. not worth thinking off, even,
extcept- she acts like she remembers what it’s like to have a soul.

i have a soul.

most thinking things do.

Jinx does. she actually has two.

funny, that. one of my best friends doesn’t have a soul, and does everything she can to hide that fact
from the world and pretend- to make herself feel like she does have a soul; my other best friend has
two souls but would rather have none at all. it’d be easier for her if she didn’t have a soul; dragons
and golems and princesses shouldn’t have them. it’s enough that they have to be what they are, why
go adding the weight of a soul into that bargain?

Thrax is strange. it’s not that he’s afraid of women in general, although that is odd- it’s the way he
talks, sometimes. like he’s seeing the world through his tongue and ears, not his eyes. anyway, Thrax
was the one who alerted me to the fact that Terry was actually using one of her Doors this time,
instead of walking through the front door like she normally does. of course, her Doors aren’t as…
well, for one thing they’re made out of chalk, charcoal, or graphite. she draws funky circles, loops,
and spiraling shapes dotted with flowers and stars around a doorframe she scratches onto the wall
with her claws. she’s got claws, big red suckers that are sharper than any blade excepting the one she
herself wields, that wooden affair she got slapped on her arm by some relation now long gone. it’s
got nine rings on the spine, and they jingle and clink whenever she uses it. yeah, she scratched the
fuck out of one of my walls, the west one, sunk her fingertips into the granite and scraped a
doorframe into the stone; drew her swirling circles and straight lines and flowerstars, glinting in a
light that isn’t ever seen.

seeing one of the unreal fuckers sliding open in a blaze of light is unnerving at the best of times.

feeling Thrax, who’s normally a steady and level headed guy- if he wasn’t i couldn’t let him stay in
my second guest bedroom- startle with terror, shock, and awe? not the best part of my day.
Terry’s beautiful. she can’t see it- a soul is generally needed to appreciate true beauty. Terry’s fallen in love, which isn’t impossible without a soul- look at the poor Little Mermaid. Terry is truly beautiful. she won’t ever admit to it. she’s got eyes that sparkle and lovely lips and a body that is really lovely.

I am not good with words.

dhe potion mills stink worst around that time of day, wind off the river bringing gurgling stings of half-dead hexes; and people, new people, just add to my general distaste for that time of day. a miasma of feelings swamping over me- and Terry, the thunderstorm herself.

and she would find her own lightning.

that’s a joke about Kaldur, although it is in him to strike, relentless…

Robin is weird. i’d met Aqualad- Kaldur- before, when he fell into my pond from somewhere else. but Robin, he's weird. he's like- he's like two people, two different young men wiggling and twisting around inside of him, or he’s been stretched and frozen into two different directions, like a rubberband. he’s sharp under the sneer, a watchful center with steel and diamonds in his spine; he’s never had to test it though. charming, though he pretends or doesn’t pretend to know it.

Kid Flash- Wally, i suppose, is friendly. but stubborn and ignorant, and too busy thinking with his loins and his rumbling stomach to realize when his advances are not welcome. he’s rude, and a little crueler than i’d imagine Terry putting up with for long. in fact, as far as i can tell, she’s not- i know the signs of a subtle de-education better than most. she did it to me, once. loyal under that sneer, and brave- but it’s hard to see. it’s like he hides the better parts of himself, won’t let himself think things through- does he fear what he might become? ah, no- he doesn’t think about it at all. won’t think about it at all. for all that, he’s not a coward. strange. ah, not so strange- Alchemhy is at work here, Alchemical equation not yet balanced- sometimes the reagents in an alchemical movement need to be aged a few years before they get to full potency. and age is not just a number.

Artemis has secrets. she’s also pretty angry and closed off. but there’s a sweetness to her center, a strange likeablility that shines out of her no matter what she does. a sting to her sugar, if you will.

i like her- Jinx does too, but Jinx actually likes most people. odd for a comedienne, but that’s Jinx. of all of them, Terry favors Artemis- and she’s very… confused, angry- upset? about Megan.

Whatever Megan did- Terry probably made a shitty impression on her, but still…
I won't pretend to understand all her reasons, but the reason Terry gave as to why in the hell that day was the right one to introduce us all to each other was a pretty good one; her team does dangerous work, and it is an open secret in Kowloon that she does what she does. Therefore, the addition of dedicated medical personnel—her words, not mine—would be beneficial to the team. We—that is, me and Jinx and now Thrax—have been her medics for as long as she’s been doing her thing, so it stands to reason that, if it’s okay with them, her medics could become their medics—mine becomes ours.

I can’t fault her logic—but I have to wonder why she tries so hard to be trusted and accepted by groups of people when—no, no, she told me about this—thinking things are inevitable makes them so. So don’t think that way.

It was odd to have so many new people in my clinic—well, house, really. I, at the time, was discussing particulars of our inclusion with Aqualad—I was also horribly, burningly aware of where every single person was in my house, from where Terry and Robin were admiring the view of the pond from the side-porch to where Artemis was being drawn into the knitting corner; the one with the best light; Kid Flash was relaxing, and devouring my food, in my kitchen with Jinx; Miss Martian and Superboy are out back, together under a fruiting apple tree.

Aqualad and I eventually decide that we’ll move to the Cave, me and the other two—I really am only Terry’s medic, and everyone knows it. Jinx and Thrax are here for my protection and to help me during my work; Terry can get agitated during some medical treatments, and it helps to have a stronger pair of hands on hand. Or pairs, I guess.

Anyway, Aqualad is pretty cool with my stipulations about how the sanitarium is to be arranged; I’m quite alright with his requirements for how after-mission protocol should go; it kind of irks me that they didn’t have mandatory medical checks after missions already, but those are kind of hard to enforce without medically-focused teammates on hand.

Not much happened after that; we got looked over by the Mentors—got grumped at by Batman, got scrutinized by Batman, Martian Manhunter, and Black Canary, got tested by Wonder Woman… apparently Thrax and Wonder Woman know each other, or possibly are related?

Like, there was a great deal of surprise and joy from the both of them when they met in the Cave, and then quite a bit more surprise when Thrax fought Wonder Woman to a standstill. There was also a great deal of hugging, and I think he promised her a day of his time to enjoy each other’s company or something. Thrax has a really deep voice, but it’s also strangely hoarse—like he doesn’t talk enough to smooth it out, or it hasn’t finished cracking through.

The actual day of their mission, the one that went so horribly Wrong, dawnd bright and clear. There was chirping of birds and wind off the sea, and the pale light of stars faded into the bold light of day. Did I really just write that?

Well, that said—it was a nice morning. Batman and Martian Manhunter briefed us on what we’d be doing—us medics, that is. As head medic, er, the Chief Medical Officer, I was given the full rundown of what the entire “mission” they’d be on would be like. A kobiyashi maru type deal, where failure is the only option and last minute Hails to the Holy Mother burst into flames on the way down.
Control Theory in sociology is the idea that two control systems—inner controls and outer controls—work against our tendencies to deviate. Control Theory can either be classified as centralized or decentralized or neither. Decentralized control is considered market control. Centralized control is considered bureaucratic control. Some types of control such as clan control are considered to be a mixture of both decentralized and centralized control.

Decentralized control or market control is typically maintained through factors such as price, competition, or market share. Centralized control such as bureaucratic control is typically maintained through administrative or hierarchical techniques such as creating standards or policies. An example of mixed control is clan control which has characteristics of both centralized and decentralized control. Mixed control or clan control is typically maintained by keeping a set of values and beliefs or norms and traditions.

Control Theory, as developed by Walter Reckless in 1973, states that behavior is caused not by outside stimuli, but by what a person wants most at any given time. According to the control theory, weak containing social systems result in deviant behavior. Deviant behavior occurs when external controls on behavior are weak. According to control theory; people act rationally, but if someone was given the chance to act deviant they would. So, basically, if you have strong social bonds to positive influences, deviant behavior is less likely than someone who has no family or friends.

Control theory stresses how weak bonds between the individuals and society free people to deviate or go against the norms, or the people who have weak ties would engage in crimes so they could benefit, or gain something that is to their own interest. This is where strong bonds make deviance more costly. Deviant acts appear attractive to individuals but social bonds stop most people from committing the acts. Deviance is a result from extensive exposure to certain social situations where individuals develop behaviors that attract them to avoid conforming to social norms. Social bonds are used in control theory to help individuals from going after these attractive deviations.

According to Travis Hirschi, humans are selfish beings, we all make decisions based on which choice will give us the greatest benefit to our needs or wants. A good example of control theory would be that people go to work. Most people do not want to go to work, but they do, because they get paid money; money can be exchanged for food, water, shelter, and clothing. The people that do not have a job or income will commit deviant acts in order to get what they need to survive.

Hirschi (1969) identifies four elements of social bonds: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief.

While control theory gives an adequate explanation of non-serious forms of youthful delinquency, it fails to be effective in explaining adult criminal behavior and serious instances of youth crime. Moreover, control theory is met with some resistance for its compliance to a conservative view of the broader social order. From a control theory perspective, children who are properly bonded to their parents would be involved in less crime than children who have weaker parental bonds, and assumes that the family is a naturally law-abiding institution. Basically, the biggest weakness of the theory (and in some respects, its biggest strength) is that it places too much importance on the bonds relative to an individual and society, without looking at bigger concepts like autonomy and impulsiveness.
sorry about the interruption, Terry’s got this thing for putting in random patches of knowledge and ideas when they’re applicable. associative memories for the soul that isn’t there, i guess. Thrax looks like Wonder Woman. it’s not noticeable in their faces- but it’s in their ears, and their fingers, and the way they stand; the shape of their toes and the color of their eyes. eyebrows. they have the same shaped eyebrows.

Terry tried to kill Megan when she woke up. it’s something you’d have to have been an empath to catch on to. because, well, when Terry woke up- when all of them woke up- the only thing Terry did was get up off her slab and leave the Cave, sequester herself in the forest on the mountainside. if you were very observant, you’d have noticed a slight hitch when she passed the green skinned Megan, or even the minute flexing of her fingers.

but i am me. and i felt her. that day. i felt her murderous clarity, her utter confidence in how very quick and easy it would be to remove Megan’s head from her shoulders. so utterly simple and easy. The only thing that stopped her was the quiet certainty that her anger was irrational and unfounded, and that Megan hurt herself more than she hurt Terry.

Jinx can’t write in English, but she told me to write out that for anyone who knew how to look, it was very obvious that Terry was holding her human form with only the feeblest of grips. i couldn’t see that. i doubt anyone could.

Maybe Thrax.

Jinx says to write that she saw it the moment Terry opened her eyes, but I think she’s lying because she wasn’t there she was in the kitchen and- ugh. she pinched me.

anyway, now that Terry’s back i’m going to go back to my nice, quiet grotto in the Cave and rearrange and organize my medicinal candies.

Thank you, Raven. As always, your insight into emotions and personal problems is greatly appreciated.

Anyway. After I left the Cave, I ran onto the mountainside, running- my form shifted, and my skin bubbled and I couldn’t- hold it, anymore. I became what I had always feared and yearned to be.

I became… I became a monster.

A monster is any creature, usually found in legends or horror fiction, that is often hideous and may produce fear or physical harm by its appearance and/or its actions. The word "monster" derives from
Latin *monstrum*, an aberrant occurrence, usually biological, that was taken as a sign that something was wrong within the natural order.

The word usually connotes something wrong or evil; a monster is generally morally objectionable, physically or psychologically hideous, and/or a freak of nature. It can also be applied figuratively to a person with similar characteristics like a greedy person or a person who does horrible things.

The root of 'monstrum' is 'monere'—which does not only mean to warn, but also to instruct, and forms the basis of the modern English *demonstrate*. Thus, the monster is also a sign or instruction. This benign interpretation was proposed by Saint Augustine, who did not see the monster as inherently evil, but as part of the natural design of the world, a sort-of deliberate category error.

Fingertips to tails- my hands break and bend and bulge in the flesh between the bones, skin ripping open as muscles long ignored violently explode into existence. Fur prickles up and out, and I feel agony. Tearing, screaming agony- my entire body shatters apart and I scream and I scream and I scream and then blackness and sweet blessed nothingness.

Moonlight is what I awaken to.

Moonlight on my fur and the soft tense chirping of night-waking burds. The Wind is soft against my ears, cool, soothing fingers stroking my fur, my tails, my ears, cool and soft on my sweating skin. I ended up in an alcove behind the falls, on a rolling bench of knotted appletree roots.

I don’t know how long I stayed there, listening to the water, watching the sun and the moon dance around each other. Stars. There were stars.

Kaldur found me. He didn’t even say anything when he found me, he just touched me with such gentleness and he picked me up like I was his bride and he carried me through the forest- down the mountain and- I can’t face anyone looking like- like-

“Put m-me down.”

“Alright.”

I shift and my skin bubbles and my fur *burns* as it scuttles into the place it lives when it’s not showing, and my hands and feet rebreak into their normal shapes and it hurts oh gods it hurts and then- and then I am visibly human, if not in fact.

Also I’ve shredded my clothing. I’m not wearing rags, thankfully, but I’m definitely on the disheveled end of the dishallible spectrum of ruffian and ne’er-do-well. And I have claws.

They’re bright red, and could be mistaken for fancy fingernails, bright red- but. They’re sharp as knives, sharp as razors.
Kaldur takes my hand without fear, and leads me back inside the Mountain.

Once upon a time there lived a mother with three daughters, whose duty it was to guard the cabbage patch in front of the cottage in which they lived. One day they were all sitting in the sun, spinning, when they saw a bull in the cabbage-patch. "Take your distaff and run, child, run!" said the mother to the eldest daughter. So the girl took her distaff and ran. The bull ran and she ran, and she ran and the bull ran, until they came to a great house standing on the edge of a wood.

There the bull gave her a large bunch of keys, and told her that she could go anywhere in the house she liked except one room. He showed her the key to this room, and told her that she must not unlock the door to which it belonged. Then the bull went away and left her. The girl took the keys and roamed from one beautiful room to another, until she had seen all except the forbidden room. This she wanted to see more than she had any of the others. At last her curiosity became so great that she opened the door and went inside. What was her horror to discover that the room was full of headless bodies hung on all sides. Quickly she locked the door and ran downstairs. But she had some blood on the key, on her hand, and on her shoes.

As she was trying the best she knew how to get the blood off, along came a big black cat, which said to her, "Mew, mew, mew! Give me a dish of bread and milk, and I will tell you how to get the blood off your shoes."

"Go away, you old black thing! I am not going to bother with you."

So the cat went away, and pretty soon the bull came. "Let me see your keys!" said he. "How came the blood on this one?" Then he asked to see her hands and her shoes. When he saw blood on them too, he knew that she had disobeyed him; so, as he had done with all the others who had disobeyed him, he cut her head off and hung her body up with the others in the forbidden room.

The next day, when the mother and her two remaining daughters again sat spinning in the sun, they again saw the bull in the cabbage-patch. The mother sent the second daughter just as she had sent the first, and exactly the same things happened to her.

The third day the mother and the youngest daughter sat spinning in the sun, when the mother looked up and saw the bull a third time in the cabbage patch. "Take your distaff and run, child, run!" cried the mother.

So the youngest daughter ran, and the bull ran. The bull ran and she ran until they came to the great house on the edge of the wood. There the bull gave her a bunch of keys, and told her that she might open every door in the house except the one whose key he showed her. Then the bull went away. The youngest daughter did just as her sisters had done, and went into all the rooms except the forbidden one. She kept wondering what could be in there, until her curiosity became so great that she unlocked the door and went in. She, too, was so horrified that she quickly shut the door and ran downstairs, but with the tell-tale blood on the key, on her hand, and on her shoes.

To her came the big black cat, who said, "Mew, mew, mew! Give me a dish of bread and milk, and I will tell you how to get the blood off your shoes."

Instead of telling the cat to go away, as her sisters had done, she went and got some bread and milk for him. When the cat had finished eating, he said, "If you will go into the attic, you will find there a sickle. Take it, rub it on the key, on your hand, and on your shoes, while you say, 'Blood, be gone!'
Blood, be gone!"

The girl went to the attic, found the sickle, and did with it as the cat had told her to do, saying, "Blood, be gone! blood, be gone!" Even as she spoke the last word, the blood-stains disappeared.

Then the girl went downstairs, where she found the bull waiting for her. "Let me see your keys," he said, "and your hands and your shoes!"

When he saw that she had no blood-stains upon her, he suddenly changed from a bull into a beautiful prince. "I was bewitched," he said, "by a girl who loved me, but whom I wouldn't marry because I didn't love her. I killed many a girl when I was a bull; but now we will have the bodies taken care of, and then we will be married."

So they buried the bodies, and then were married and lived happily ever after.

It’s not actually that easy. But it would be nice if it was. I’m not some dainty thing stained with blood.

I was.

But not anymore.

The shower is nice- warm, the soap smells clean in that hard to define way and the vapors clear things out of my chest, my eyes, I’m sobbing in the shower and I don’t know why but it feels so very nice to be held by my boyfriend. He finishes washing me, combs my hair, dries me off- cares for me. I can put on my own pajamas though, I can walk- he carries me to bed anyway. He’s so very gentle with me, tender and sweet with his touch, his hands so warm and simply callused on my

feeEEAAAHH! MMMNHAAAAAAAGAA!

That’s new. Kaldur! GaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGAH stahp!

I thought you liked it when I made you feel good?

I do, just not when I’m trying to write out - nnnnghAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHAH!

I haven’t seen hide nor hair-

Fur-

-fur- of my girlfriend for more than a week. I’d like to spend some quality time with her. Off record.

But- Kaldur, you know I- ooooOOOH OH YES OOOH MY GODS AAAAAAAAAAAAAGckah ahhn gnnnnnnng- oohkay okay just let me finish this thought, alright?

Alright. Hmm… I wonder what will happen if I kiss your feet?
KALDUR! I'll make this as brief as possible. I left the mountain to keep from killing someone outright, and to keep my secrets, well, secret. I'm not certain why that's important anymore but that could just be Kaldur's ministrations at woooooooh yes, definitely Kaldur.

I'll write more later or somethiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiihahahahahaaaaa- okay, alright, Kaldur, let me at least put- aaaaah! Gentle, gentle! liiiiaaaaaAAAAAAA-

Kaldur's tongue is as raspy as ever. The sensitivity of my feet- especially the toes and the arch- is new.

I still want to kill Megan. But now… I think I know why. Black Canary helped with that.

“So, what happened?”

“Well… I’m not. Entirely human. I’m only about half human. So- Megan can’t go into my mind without my express permission.”

“You mean she won’t?”

“No, I mean she literally cannot. I have natural and self-created defenses in my mind that will severely injure Megan if she tries to go into my head without permission. It’s a product of our… evolution, I guess.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as far as I can tell, M’arzian people as they are now evolved from telepathic herbivorous herd animals. They never became omnivores like humans because Martian vegetation- of that age- was very high in protein, which provided the necessary building blocks to evolve higher and higher levels of intelligence. Even here on Earth, there’s budding evidence of herd animals sharing a low level psionic consciousness- it’s how they know to move in unison.”

“Alright, but how does that describe you?”

“Well, humans aren’t herbivores. Humans are omnivores from around the middle of the food chain- they aren’t particularly herd oriented, but they do create groups. There’s also a low level of psionic potential in a large portion of human populations; but I’m only half human. My not human half
translates to… Fox.”

“Fox?”

“Ye-es, although I could have translated it as “mountain lion” or “demon witch”. The important thing is that Foxes are genetically similar enough to humans to create viable, fertile offspring- however, whether it is cultural or genetic, Foxes are not human. Foxes… eat humans.”

“Hmm. You’ve never-”

“Have you ever seen me touch any of my teammates, besides Kaldur? Ever seen me get… close to one of them, besides Kaldur? Kaldur smells… good. Very very good. But too salty to eat. The thing is, Foxes are carnivores. Apex level predators. And… singular, barring things like, like mating or raising children. Young.”

“So you’re genetically predisposed to be a loner?”

“It’s… hard for me, sometimes, to even stay in the Cave. Some days are better than others.”

“I see. You still haven’t answered my question though- what happened during the simulation for you?”

“I… I am of two minds. One of them believed Megan’s ficticious series of events- one of them did not. Half of me was fully there, in the moment- and half of me remembered that the simulation was a mere simulation. So, when Megan took such firm hold, when she got so very… anxious, afraid, I… struggled. With being afraid and being… frustrated.”

“How do you mean?”

“My instinctual reaction to someone like Megan is to… well, kill her. At least, half of my instincts are- her… her presentation is such that I instinctively read her as a challenge to my territory. In me, this is a powerful drive- such that, well, if I were fully Fox, I could not be on the same team as her. Humans, however, have hierarchies a-and groups- bands. Teams. So… I try to challenge her… her place on the team, but… but I don’t think she understands my challenge for what it is. I’m also quite jealous of her.”

“Jealous?”

“Yes. Megan’s presence is accepted much more easily than mine will ever be. She’s… more acceptably human than I am, ever will be…”

“Why do you say that?”

“…my natural state of existence demands that I devour the flesh of humans. Or at least bite them. Also, I am not… cute. I think it is a… cultural misunderstanding.”

“Hmm- ah, that’s right, you’re from Kiao. Oh- Oh! Traditional Kiao culture equates what we call “overt sexuality” with “situational humor” and “Cuteness” with “sex appeal”- therefore, in your eyes, Megan is sexually attractive in ways that you aren’t.”

“Yes, exactly! I’ve never been- cute. I’ve always been too tall for the word “cute”- so I try to be funny. But…”

“Not everyone gets the joke?”
“No…”

I’m really glad that I was finally able to tell someone about this. It’s been bothering me for a while- I couldn’t figure it out, why I was so… infuriated, every time I was around Megan.

I think- I think I need to take some time for myself, now. I think it’s time I actually went shopping with Dan.

End Notes

“Is it bright where you are?
And have the people changed?
Does it make you happy you're so strange?”

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