

Elvers

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Dedication

Another bedtime story for the Happy Pickles.

One

The porcelain was thick enough to protect Cerise's long fingers from her scalding green tea. She brought it up to her face and let the steam tickle her nose. It was the nicest aroma she had encountered all day, the worst being moldy vegetables from the impossible reaches of her fridge. If there were any leftovers from today's dinner, she would make sure none of it gets boxed up, though she suspected a fancy-schmancy restaurant like this could only offer portions that require a trip to McDonald's afterwards.

She was dressed for the occasion in her stylish navy romper, a thick belt cinched at the waist. Nothing over the top. When she didn't know what to say, her hand would reach for the thin metal at her wrist or the loose strands of hair that escaped her recently learned up-do, which, of course, didn't quite turn out like the one in the video.

Wes was locked in on the menu, mumbling to himself about unagi. Her boyfriend of two years wore the same outfit he would wear on a night in with the boys. An oversized tee with black jeans. Not everyone wants to change their uniform, but Cerise wondered if he knew it was their anniversary.

"What are you getting?" he asked, eyes glued to the page of deluxe rolls.

"I feel like having soup, maybe beef brisket udon."

"Is that it? What about sushi rolls?"

ELVERS

"We're getting appetizers, aren't we?" She flipped her own menu to the first page, and finally Wes looked at her.

"It's such a waste if all you're getting is peasant food. This is supposed to be fine dining." Despite her meal choice having no impact on his own, he sounded genuinely upset. And yet, the noodles only became more appetizing.

"Soup is very healthy. Everyone likes soup. Why do you insist on calling it peasant food?"

Wes abandoned the conversation when he realized their waitress was ready to take their order. Her dazzling smile served as a reminder that this establishment was meant for pleasant memories and good behavior.

"Welcome to Zen Sushi! My name is Lily and I'm your host for the evening. If you need help with the menu, feel free to ask me for recommendations."

Wes responded in fluent Japanese and a charming smile to match Lily's. She held both hands in front of her red apron while politely explaining that she was actually of Chinese descent and had no grasp of the Japanese language. The silk kimono top probably contributed to many others making the same mistake.

"You totally look Japanese. Must be the eyes that fooled me." The waitress released a short, bird-like giggle. Her hand rested on the menu in front of Wes as she extended the conversation, and he seemed more than willing to entertain.

"Where did you learn?" asked the waitress.

"My dad made sure I spoke at home. And no, I'm not adopted." With prior knowledge it became easier to make out those Asian features. The cheekbones and the eyes being a tad unusual for the rest of his face and dark complexion, his shade almost matching Cerise's warm skin tones.

"Oh cool, have you ever lived in Japan?"

"I wish. I've traveled there and visited a lot of cities. If you want to see mountains and deer, you have to check out

ELVERS

Miyajima Island. They have this famous shrine over the water, and it's like, you just have to see it in person."

"I would love to visit someday!" She turned to Cerise, who felt like nothing more than an afterthought, and said, "Have you gone there as well?"

She unclenched her teeth. "No, but I plan to." Somehow the woman found it within herself to produce a friendly enough smile while thinking back to all the times Wes promised to take her. Japan wasn't the only country on their list of possible getaways. Singapore, Korea, or Thailand would've pleased her as much. Why, she'd be open to building a yurt in Mongolia if it meant strengthening their relationship. *You know I don't have time right now. Can't you be patient?* At this rate, all the Japanese she learned will have been for nothing unless she buys a single ticket.

After the Chinese waitress took their order, Cerise couldn't help but comment on how extra friendly Wes had been acting.

"She's just doing her job." A noticeable drop in energy. Cerise took a deep breath and tightened her grip on the black tea cup.

"I wasn't talking about her. We've been over this, Wes."

"Cerise, we haven't even eaten yet. Do not ruin this expensive dinner with your personal problems." Oh yes, she's simply being insecure as always. Can't he talk to a pretty girl without her turning it into something more?

"Fine. We'll talk about it when we get home. So have you decided to leave Door2Door?"

"Probably. I should, shouldn't I." Unprompted, he checked his phone. A growing pattern on their dates.

"I know this shipping company isn't terrible, but change is good."

"*Change is good.* Have you become a suburban mom's hanging wall decor?"

ELVERS

She let this one go. "Not all platitudes are meaningless. Besides, it's not like you need a bunch of convincing to switch jobs. I'm being supportive."

To lighten the mood, a gleaming dish of raw ingredients appeared before the couple. Unadulterated egg yolk rubbed against oyster meat and sea urchin like a golden pearl. The shells had been thoughtfully arranged over the bed of ice alongside sauces and lemon. Before Lily could make her way back to another table, Wes asked her what drinks she could recommend.

"Alcohol?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Maybe you'd be interested in the coconut sangria. It's great for Instagram if that's your thing. Also, sake is a classic worth trying here."

Cerise stopped caring about the flirting and allowed herself to get lost in the ambience. Every surface glowed like something out of a reverie. Bamboo woven lanterns hung low, its patterns a distinct contrast to the restaurant's clean design. Tables and chairs consisted of sharp edges that mirrored the perfect cuts of maki flying out of the kitchen. Although her Japanese wasn't perfect, she could read the large characters framed on the wall above an elderly couple finishing up the last of their boat. Ichiyou raifuku. Spring comes after winter.

This sea urchin didn't taste like the ones she had in the past. The sunny yellow mush tasted like she spent her money in the right place. Lemon juice combined with spice balanced all of the strong flavors, turning it into a memorable dish. As the meal went on, she realized how much of her focus was going towards the food instead of the person eating with her. Was their anniversary date nothing more than a formality? Did he view her as a peasant while she enjoyed her udon soup?

"How's your eel?"

"Better than noodles, that's for sure. I don't think any other fish comes close. You should've ordered it."

ELVERS

"The sauce looks great."

"It is. I kind of want to get another roll. Are you gonna eat all this?" He was referring to the vegetable tempura, yams being her favorite.

"I'll take it." She ate one whole before heading to the bathroom. When she washed her hands, she felt strangely alone. Looking in the mirror, it surprised her how vacant those eyes seemed. Tired eyes. No wonder he didn't remember.

Walking back to her table felt like a fever dream. Cerise could hear the seconds ticking by ever so slowly. Those two were discussing video games of all things. How it got to this point she could only imagine.

"I've drawn almost every hero from that game," declared the waitress.

"You know which character you remind me of? You have her bold personality, D.Va. The type of girl to be all in no matter what you're dealing with."

"That's so funny, I cosplayed as her last year. Maybe I can show you later."

"For real? Nice." Upon Cerise's return, Lily made a nervous bird laugh. Silence seemed to permeate the entire restaurant for a moment. The clinking of chopsticks and plates being set down all came to a halt.

"I'll let you two enjoy your food," she said quickly. They ate, no longer acknowledging each other.

Moving bits of red, orange, and white peeked through the cracks of wood arching over the dark water. Money scattered the pond like silver islands with clouds of koi drifting overhead. Did they enjoy swimming through everyone's hopes and dreams? Or perhaps the concentration of wishes filled these fish with anxiety, as if they were responsible for making it all happen. Either way, Cerise wanted to be a part of it. She dug up fifty cents and went to the food dispenser. A handful of donut-shaped

ELVERS

pellets spilled out. Smelled like shrimp and moss and maybe even chicken.

The largest fish swam towards her knowingly. Bright red, probably has a name. Cerise tossed the food out farther to make the fish work for it. Golden and Shimmery darted past Big Red, startling another fish. She felt invested and then disappointed when Wes showed up, declining to stay on the bridge after he finished paying.

The minutes ahead made absolutely no sense to her. Why was a stranger grabbing her and where did he come from? It didn't matter how she struggled or shrieked—he just kept dragging her towards the shaded side of the building, only pausing to smack her in the head and leave marks on her bleeding face. By the time Cerise thought about Wes, she realized he had run off without a word. Self-preservation.

Head throbbing, she still cried for help. Any help. The awful man seemed a foot taller than her, and she felt even smaller when her knees dropped to the ground.

“Please, please stop, I'll give you money! Or my phone... what do you—”

She assumed Wes came back when someone struck the attacker against the back of the head. He fell on top of her shortly after the thud, and that's when she saw the figure of a woman reaching towards her. As Lily pulled her up, Cerise couldn't tell which one of them was trembling. Probably both.

“Let's call the police,” said the waitress.

TWO

One Year Later

Unpacking sucks. But that's why she has Lily by her side to make it less miserable. After months of heavy searching, they were able to snag a small affordable house in Amsterdam for rent. It comes with an extra roommate that apparently spends very little time at home, so the girls agreed it was worth having a mysterious third wheel in exchange for this new and exciting lifestyle.

Not that there was anything wrong with Arnhem. Cerise would certainly miss her acquaintances, the kids, her trainer, and all those peaceful walks through the parks. However, Lily knew exactly how to make this lively city sound enticing with promises of fresh memories to cover up the old ones.

"This is going to be the perfect place for you to meet guys," Lily said after setting down a box. The single lady in question repressed an eye roll and then grabbed three stacked boxes to set aside in the living room. A year of strength training paid off. Her body was already toned from swimming all her life, but it wasn't enough for self-defense.

ELVERS

Weights and a bit of MMA training ensured men would either be jealous or intimidated by her now brawny build.

"I'm not against socializing, but I'm really not prepared for anything serious."

"You've gotta be more open now that we're here. I don't want you sulking over the past anymore."

"What if the next guy is the same as my ex, or worse? Everyone is like him these days. Totally manipulative and selfish." The box she sliced open was full of kitchenware. She brought it to the counter and started filling the narrow cabinets. Their plates were the color of bright waxy lemons, fruits that would usually be sitting in a pile on their counter (only one away from turning into a landslide). A kitchen wouldn't be complete without a visible bowl of citrus.

"Then find one that's not a loser. Somebody that can give you what you need to make it worth the risk."

Cerise would've pointed out how not-that-easy it is, except she hadn't considered what specifically would do well to fill the romantic void in her life. The baseline traits she requires are fairly straightforward. Loyal, kind, affectionate, etc. If she searched for something beyond that, perhaps she could find a provider. A man willing to take her on those long-awaited adventures.

After an hour of shoving objects into empty spaces, she took a break cross-legged on the herringbone laminate her roommate just finished mopping up. The cleaning solution had a delicious smell overpowering the chemicals. Fresh green apple for a fresh start. The purple rose icon in her phone had stayed untouched for a couple of months. A brand new set of guys would be lined up now that she switched locations. Taking a deep breath as if she were about to deadlift four iron plates, she opened the dating app.

Nobody was able to impress her with their jobs. Unblinking, she swiped away interns and dog walkers and baristas, all while wondering why they even bothered to include these things on their profile. At least the men made it clear to her that the 20-30 range was the stage of figuring

ELVERS

things out. Perhaps their futures did hold steady six figure careers. She could imagine the one with a golf club over his shoulder attending some lavish auction fifteen years from now, eyeing a dead man's antique coin collection. Cerise wanted to be more certain, though. She didn't want to be reminded of Wes and his video games, his manners amounting to what was in his savings.

On foot, Cerise followed the canals until she reached a grassy area shaded with trees. Warm wind winnowed through the leaves and towards her face as if city spirits wanted to take a closer look at their new resident. She sat down on an empty bench next to other benches, her feet thanking her as she peeled off a waterproof jacket. The wind settled down as a handsome man performed what must've been a Dutch original from his guitar. His voice was raw and emotional. It sounded like a personal song despite its catchy tune. *Ik geloof, ik geloof, oh ik geloof*. He closed his eyes every time his voice hit a sudden high note.

Anyone would've assumed the woman in sunglasses had her eyes on the live music. But she was there to spy on everyone.

The first person that gave a tip since she sat down already stood out in his beige suit. Early 50s and not bad looking. When trying to picture herself dating him she thought of the child he might be raising. Best case scenario, a normal kid who treats her like a friend. Worst case, a sea of resentment sitting above the Ring of Fire. Suppose she found an older man without kids... as long as he's not too creepy, insecure, socially inept, immature, controlling, what could go wrong? Everyone would sense her motivation. Surely his family would stop at nothing to get to the bottom of why she insists on having a kind man in her life who also happens to make enough to start a sports car collection.

A sweet little boy ran up to the singer. Might've been his first time giving money. Once the song was over, he broke

ELVERS

into a sprint towards another source of entertainment somewhere. She remembered having that sort of energy as a child. It was torture not having a playmate at home to act out silly things with. Cerise had gone through too many imaginary friends to count.

At six years old she went through a phase of always trying to manifest, thinking one of those imaginary friends would materialize into a real sibling if she believed hard enough. The result of watching too many magic shows and assuming they truly knew how to conjure colorful balls and portals to another realm. It was nice to have hope, though. Even from where she sat, she had seen plenty of it in that kid's round, glistening eyes.

Dense rubber rings hit the water again and again. For Cerise they weighed nothing. It was like tossing rubber duckies out into the deep end. Splash. Slap. Thunk. Each one had its own uniquely satisfying noise. Her father, a self-proclaimed professional rock skipper, would enjoy such an activity.

Boys and girls of varying heights lined up along the edge, eager to prove themselves. One of the girls whispered to her friend about seeing a mermaid performer swimming in a fish tank during a family trip to Las Vegas. Her hair was just like Ariel, down to her waist. The other girl asked if she planned on trying to match that length.

"Keep doing your stretches, guys," Cerise spoke while demonstrating. "How many of you practiced holding your breath this morning? Only three? You'll have to resurface and try again if you run out of air the first time."

The facility is smaller than where she last taught. Every tile sparkled from natural light entering from the wall of glass and the overhead windows. Grey morning clouds had parted, adding color to the lively city and the indoor pool. No slides, no distractions. Not even music. She felt present and alert. Or maybe it was being here in Amsterdam that made her feel this way.

ELVERS

She was warming up to these new kids. Competitive and full of stamina, just like her peers when she took up classes once upon a time. Hopefully some of them continue to grow up alongside each other. Lifelong swimming buddies.

"Couple of things I want to remind you about." She made eye contact with everyone. "You guys will need to equalize—pinch your nostrils—if you don't want your ears to hurt. Blow that pressure out, got it?" A few kids practiced this technique as she talked.

"Good. Now you're gonna have to put in work to go deeper. Your body naturally floats to the surface if you don't do anything, so kick your legs and face downwards."

Cerise had the students get into the water to do some head dunks. Once they got comfortable, it was time to look for those rubber rings. Everyone took in as much air as they could before racing to the bottom. Mermaid girl came up first with a smile on her face. Another boy found air but no rings. Their new teacher paced the edge while keeping an eye on the blurry outlines of determined swimmers. Some of them couldn't make it to the floor. The first girl went for another ring after catching her breath.

"Remember not to panic, kids. You can always try again."

One of the boys resurfaced and started waving his arms. "I think Alfie is drowning!" He pointed in the general direction. Cerise told everyone who was treading water to get out of the pool before diving in.

His eyes were closed. Alfie was a bald, lanky boy that never spoke much. If he could speak right now, he'd probably apologize for interrupting the lesson. On the digital clock above, a minute passed by. Then another. Cerise began to tremble during her first attempt at CPR on a real person. His goggles were still on—should she take them off?

"Wake up..." Her eyes stung. To think how young he is, and what his parents would feel if she didn't get her act

ELVERS

together right fucking now. One, two, three, four, five, don't, give, up...

"He's alive," a small someone cheered. The child's body surged beautifully into a fit of coughing. Everyone, including Alfie, gasped in unison. EMS was on the way.

During her wait outside of the office, a staff member proudly and loudly went on about his upcoming vacation. A little distraction from her jumbled thoughts. Cerise tugged at the rose gold hugging her wrist, preparing for the worst.

"Out of all my cousins, aunt Anna loved me the most. All it takes is a few tawdry presents and a good ear to snatch up that inheritance. My uncle knew exactly which companies to invest, and now I gotta get me one of those financial advisors to keep me on the same path. Rest his soul."

"When you leaving for Dubai?" asked his coworker, fingers twirling at the bounciest pony tail anyone had ever seen.

"It's coming up next month. Why, care to join me?"

She looked unamused. "Sounds like you've got enough money left over. Maybe I should. We'll sit next to each other in first class."

"Gotta watch out for you gold diggers, huh." He shot her a wide grin. Pony Tail wasn't paying attention.

"More like watch your tongue. I'm not the one bragging about concert tickets and trips to the Middle East."

"Hey, I trust you. Can't bottle it up, right?"

The doorknob rattled. Finally summoned for her incident report. Soon the dread will be over. Cerise inhaled deeply. *I saved him. Alfie is alive.* The feeling she got from sitting down in the oversized chair made her stomach turn, because she knew it wasn't going to matter. It had only been five days since she began working at this pool. None of this should've happened. If only she had paid more attention...

ELVERS

After the vocal analysis of her execution in an emergency situation, she felt as though they had stamped her forehead with the word ‘unprofessional’ before sending her off. The former teacher knew she would find herself lying awake at night, years later, thinking back to this feeling of humiliation.

Three

The hospital was impossible to navigate. Gordon spoke to a lot of helpful strangers that day, some friendlier than others. Through sheer determination he reached Harmen Bakker's room near the top floor, furthest wing to the west.

Gordon was happy to see his father awake and nicely patched up by the doctors. They certainly did a good job. Clean bandages, several stitches, and successful blood transfusions. His eyes were fully glazed, an indication of the medicine doing a good job as well.

"Are you hurting, papa?"

"Could be worse," said Harmen, his words sounding forced and tired.

"I'm really glad. When are you coming home? I don't like being by myself."

"You're old enough to be by yourself. You know that."

Gordon looked at the tubes connected to Harmen and listened to the steady beep of the monitor. He wished his mother could've made it today. She would've wanted to be at his side.

"Nothing's been going right. I don't know what to do." The beeping made him nervous.

"You will figure things out, son. I'm proud of how far you've come." This actually made Gordon smile, which made his father smile.

ELVERS

Harmen thought of his wife on their wedding day, a modest ceremony with just five people. She was already pregnant with Gordon, their only child. Three months along, he remembered. Her hands went to her stomach often, though she was hardly showing.

It came as no surprise when she became a hands-on parent, never letting sweet Gordon out of her sight. Katerina wanted to home school him, do his homework for him, keep him entertained at all times, because god forbid she stop being a good mother. Sure, it was nice for mother and child to form a close bond, but a twelve-year-old wanting to be hand fed chopped carrots is frowned upon.

In the end, maybe he should've been more like her. He would've liked to spend another day with his son if it meant he had to treat him like a horse. The boy deserves healthy food. He deserves a family, a good life. And now, at twenty-two... what was left for him? Elvers.

"Why are you crying?" Gordon asked.

"Please take care of your moeder. She needs you." The electronic heartbeats sped up.

"She needs you too." Despite the young man's pleading, Harmen closed his eyes for good.

Four

She chose the best looking community center she could find hosting the session. It was near the edge of the city, which made sense. Quiet. Tourist free. The place you'd want to be if you were to connect with nature, or if you craved a spiritual awakening. Empty picnic tables were scattered near the wooden playground. The brightest tulips made an appearance along every wall. It was tempting to not go inside at all.

Cerise opened a compact mirror to check her hair and teeth. Perhaps the color of her dress would be inappropriate. Earlier, she had Lily's approval for this outfit when she asked if it looked flattering. It was too late to second guess. Stop overthinking.

A curly haired woman with bad posture welcomed her to the circle. They were all sitting in foldable chairs that screech when disturbed. Cerise stared at the men.

"I think we're ready to go around and say our names. If you feel comfortable sharing a hobby, please do." Cerise went last and mentioned her love of mixed martial arts. Nods of approval.

"Thank you all for introducing yourselves. How have you been doing, Nate?" The organizer directed her attention towards a buttoned-up gentleman in glasses. He started talking about his wife, to Cerise's disappointment.

ELVERS

"She's been more understanding after I opened up. Nobody really knew how close me and my stepmom were, but it was the hardest thing I've ever gone through."

"Isn't that nice? I'm so happy to hear your partner is being supportive."

"Yeah, honestly I'd be really lost without her."

Cerise found herself glancing at a certain boy more and more. According to those dark puffy eyes, his grief must've been fresh. She liked the shape of his nose—it was cute and made him appear youthful. No evidence of facial hair ever having pierced his soft looking skin.

"I can see some of you are brand new to this group. Anyone ready to share their story?" The woman in charge swung her head to face the soft boy who raised his hand. She remembered his name was Gordon as soon as she heard his voice. "Um, it was my dad." He watched everyone's reactions.

"I'm sorry. What has it been like for you?" the lady asked with utmost sincerity.

"It's been overwhelming. My house feels all empty." His house, she noted. Doesn't sound like there would be many in-laws to poke at them.

"Have you been able to sleep?" Cerise asked. He shook his head. "I have the same problem. Sleeping." She felt important as she told her story. People very much believed she had a ten-year-old brother, and that there was a horrible drowning accident. It was easy to tap into the correct emotions because of the other day. She really was distraught over nearly losing a student and getting fired.

"Deep breaths, my dear," said the kind woman.

"It makes me angry, but... I have no one to be angry at."

"I'm glad I came here," said Gordon. "I wasn't going to, but now I know that I'm not going through this alone." That's all he wants. Someone who can make him forget all about his father. Wouldn't she be the perfect distraction? Wouldn't she be doing him a favor?

ELVERS

The grief support session was finished, but most people stuck around for the table of food that had been eavesdropping over by the window. The mini pies and chopped fruits surrounding a charcuterie board tasted like success. Folks of all ages and upbringings made it one step further on the path to recovery, and the reward was spelled out in a universal language.

Cerise kept her sights on Gordon while he picked out slices of cheddar and grainy fig crackers. For herself, she added grapes, strawberries, and a small helping of deli meats onto her disposable plate. Friendly voices turned into laughter, which made her infinitely more comfortable.

"No meat?" she asked. Gordon flashed a prepossessing smile that almost made her blush.

"No, I'm pretty much a pescatarian. Farm animals are too cute to eat."

"Cuter than most fish. You should have some fruit if you're not going to touch the protein." She held out her plate and let Gordon take half a strawberry.

"Thanks. My parents would've told me to eat more."

"Hopefully they were nice about it."

"Always. My parents are the best people I've ever met. I think about them all the time."

"That is some high praise. Actually, it's kind of sad there aren't more people who feel that way." Gordon nodded. People were starting to leave. The room felt bigger when voices died down, putting pressure on Cerise to ensure none of this would fall apart before it even began. *Let's get the basics out of the way.*

"You look very young. Can I ask how old you are?"

"I'm twenty-two, so I guess you were right." She allowed herself to lean towards him.

"I'm twenty-four. Do you work?"

"Yeah, I've always worked for my dad."

"I see. You must have a new boss."

"You could say that." He gave her a different smile. Coy. People were starting to pack leftovers (at least the ones who

ELVERS

were prepared). A willowy middle-aged woman in brown overalls filled up her own plastic tubs, perhaps to bring home to her family. Perhaps to bring for lunch the next day and the day after when she goes to work. Cerise wondered if she was the only one here pretending to mourn.

"What are you doing afterwards? Are you taking a lot of time off for yourself?"

"I was planning to go home and work, but maybe I'll stop by the perfume store on the way. To pick up a little gift from there."

"Aren't you a good boyfriend," she teased, hoping he would confirm that vital piece of information.

"It's for my mom."

"Judging by that, I stand by what I said." She meant this. Her own mother would agree.

To her surprise, Gordon was the one to ask if she'd be coming to the next meeting.

"Depends. Maybe we could see each other somewhere less depressing next time."

"Okay, next time being thirty minutes from now?"

She jokingly pulled out her calendar app. Said she'll be free.

They glided over opaque waters that could've had anything lurking below. Weak daylight filtered through the glass roof until the bridge loomed overhead. On both sides of the canal, people walked. They walked with their kids, they walked their dogs, and they walked their bikes when they weren't zipping across the patterned cobble. Cerise spotted a professional photographer next to a potted plant getting shots of the boat she was in. She may not have landed a job interview yet, but being here today felt like scoring the lottery.

Gordon asked about the only thing he knew about her. "How long have you done... what were the letters again?"

ELVERS

"MMA, mixed martial arts." The photographer side-stepped and nearly fell over the flowers. "I'm not that good considering it's been less than a year."

"What made you want to try it?"

"Well," she said, giving herself a moment to explain in a way that won't be so off-putting. "There was an incident where a man tried to... I'm not really sure. I had never seen him before and he came out of nowhere."

"You mean he attacked you?" The shock on his face would've been appropriate if she had said she got ambushed by ten racoons in pirate gear.

"Yes. I was okay, thanks to my roommate. Looking back on it makes me feel really lucky honestly."

"So you don't know why he did that?"

"Um, it could've been a mentally ill person, or drugs, or maybe he wanted to take something from me."

"Your spirit. He wanted to steal the light that keeps you going."

Before the boat came to a stop, she considered telling Gordon she needed to go and then walk out of his life forever. Let him find someone who will care for him. Instead, she articulated, "I think he may have succeeded. It's been really hard, so normally I don't like to bring it up."

"I'm sorry, Cerise. I'm really sorry." He took her hand and said she never has to share anything she doesn't want to. Never ever.

"Don't worry about it. I'm surprised how much I trust you after a couple hours." She squeezed his hand back. "You're special."

Entering Flora was like walking up the holy steps of a temple. A place like this would have unwritten rules. Everything was too stunning and delicate for just anyone to waltz about, smudging the glass or god forbid—knocking something precious over.

The arrangement of product was disturbingly organized, as if the workers wore gloves and used a ruler. Floating wooden shelves lined the well-lit walls, but there was a dark

ELVERS

section in the corner featuring the best coconut scents. Although Gordon knew what he was looking for, he stopped in front of the new collection from Mugler. Their rectangular bottles were placed on a rough stone slab that would've posed a threat at a strongman competition.

Cerise never thought smelling things would be fun. Upon discovering a dark, smoky fragrance called Sexy Eyes from Blackcliff, she wondered if it would be possible to save up enough money for this seduction in a bottle. A rock shaped bottle, that is. All of the brands had their own look that was very consistent. Some had tassels or feathers hanging off the top and others were tall and opaque.

"Are you a fan of... hinoki?" she read off the description.

"I don't know what that is but that's a good perfume name."

Cerise chuckled. "Yes, straight and to the point. We all want Sexy Eyes." He was clearly holding back from a compliment that might've been slightly inappropriate given they haven't reached relationship status. Better to play it safe on day one.

"Are you a big fan of perfume?" Gordon asked.

"No, it would wash off as soon as I go swimming."

"Ohh. You must be really good at swimming if you do it that much."

She nodded, but decided not to bore him with the details of her career or past.

"Hallo, can I help you find anything?" A small man with this wildly calm demeanor came up from behind. He rocked on his heels with both hands behind his back, making it seem like he was about to whip out the most life-changing fragrance. A fragrance that would be worth its weight in saffron—only the finest ingredients grown and harvested by farmers that regularly shoot thieves off their invaluable land at night.

"We're happy to look around more, but I was hoping you carry Lolita Lempicka."

ELVERS

"Ah, yes we do. Is it for the *apple* of your eye?" He winked at Cerise.

"It's my mama's smell. Can she be an apple?"

The man laughed with his entire soul, eyes crinkling behind his plain glasses. He went off to fetch the legendary perfume inspired by fairy tales, then came back with an almost neon yellow box. Thick swirls of white surrounded the golden handwriting. The lettering itself gave off strong whimsical vibes, which set itself apart from all the sleek modern designs Cerise had been browsing. Curiosity awakened.

"Can I interest you in our mixing station? It's very fun, this couples activity." She let Gordon decide. "All you have to do is choose three notes, write them down, and we'll create a small bottle for you to purchase."

"That does sound fun," said Gordon.

Chemistry class could not compare. Instead of learning about molecules and formulas, she got to learn all about a guy way more focused on entertaining her rather than being on his phone. They reacted to every single vial and asked each other whether or not this would go well with that. Also, there were several opportunities to accidentally brush hands and move closer.

"What do you think would be the worst combination?" she asked.

"Definitely something spicy with something nutty." He picked out tonka and ginger with a grimace. "Way too strong."

"Maybe it takes a strong person to pull it off."

"You're right, I'm not gonna mess with anyone that smells like that."

"So do we make a pleasant or intimidating perfume?"

Gordon placed the vials back. "Why not both?"

She widened her eyes. "Um, he didn't say how much this would cost. Maybe we should check first."

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"Oh, you don't have to worry about any of that. I brought you here and I don't expect you to be the one spending hundreds of euros. Let's do both of them."

Cerise shrugged and went along with his fuck-it attitude. Both of them kept going back to starflower, so she recorded it for the "good" formula. Sandalwood and radiant amber made perfect sense, but she wanted to add one more. Candied tangelo would've been a lovely fruity touch.

"Excuse me," she called, waving. The man came over with a pleased look on his face. Cupid has done his job. "Is it possible to add an extra scent?"

"Of course. Three is safer, but many perfumes are exceedingly complex."

She wrote down the last ingredient. "Okay, I think we're ready." He accepted both formula cards and said he hoped they enjoyed their activity. However, they forgot to name their creations. "You'll have plenty of time to think while I mix your perfumes."

"I love naming stuff," said Gordon.

"What are your ideas?"

"The first one is like... sleeping under a blanket of stars."

"I agree. Maybe something with the word twinkle."

"Twinkling Lullaby. Or Starry Lullaby."

"Starry Lullaby is great. How about the second one?" They meandered over to the coconut section for inspiration. Agua del Sol, Wavechild, Hawaii Volcano, Sunkissed Hibiscus, Still Life in Rio, Zeena, Replica Under the Lemon Trees, and so on. Volcano seemed to match the other creation in terms of the intended theme. Dangerous and intimidating and not to be toyed with.

"You know that Blackcliff bottle? I would put our perfume in there," said Cerise.

"I like that. Do you think Pyro is a cool name?"

"Yes, you are good at this. It's better than Volcano."

The perfume expert returned to check if they had names ready.

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"The tangelo perfume will be Starry Lullaby, and the spicy one will be Pyro something."

"Pyro Amber," the man suggested immediately. Gordon nodded in approval, and so their custom order was ready to be packaged.

Butterflies (not the metal ones surrounding the feminine collection of clear rose-tinted perfumes) formed inside of her as the young gentleman got ready to check out. No one could've guessed how full his wallet was by the look of his puppy dog eyes and youthful glow. Just as things were going too well, he went ahead and asked anyway, "Hey, were you interested in getting Blackcliff?"

Sexy Eyes. Two-*hundred*-thirty euros.

"Oh, no thank you, but that's very kind. I'm already so happy with today." It wasn't easy trying to act as though he had offered to buy her a little notebook or a teddy bear. She didn't want to give the impression that he was being overly generous even if that was the case, because he needs to stay exactly this way if they are to continue dating.

Five

Lily was holding five different dresses and shirts for Cerise to pick from. Used clothes, but stylish enough to wear on dates.

The unfinished, industrial style shop was a different world compared to Flora. Lily chose a thrift store which had concrete floors instead of polished tile. Neon signs glowed against brick walls next to electric guitars and modern art prints that were lucky to be on display. A second life.

"Do I really need a bunch of new outfits?" Earlier Lily had asked if she had any luck with job hunting. There was little to share; she handed out a few resumes in person and made some progress online, but the hiring managers probably haven't touched her papers yet. Competition and yadda yadda—her future is out of her hands. Something will come around, she tells herself.

"Of course, you've gotta be prepared for any kind of date he wants to take you on. Fancy dinner date," she held out a black dress with white flowers, "windy bike ride," cute oversized sweater, "and the most important of all date..."

Cerise rolled her eyes at the red latex abomination. "Do I look like Catwoman, Lily?"

"I mean, you could take her on in a 1v1."

"Put that shit back."

She did take a closer look at the long flowing dress and pictured herself wearing it on a family visit, asking about

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how Gordon behaved as a child, while flipping through an album replete with evidence of how different things were back then. Eventually, his mom would deliver a litany of questions to see if this athletic girl knows how to cook or whether or not kids are her thing. Then, being the good girlfriend she is, Cerise would feed them with all the right answers. No different from a job interview.

"Maybe I will get this one," her own voice bringing her back to reality. She wandered over to a table of haphazard accessories. Astrology themed leather keychains, handmade jewelry, hideous bandanas, and much more. Lily stopped her from picking up a dainty necklace shaped like an origami crane, claiming that Gordon will be more inclined to buy the jewelry if she doesn't have any.

"How is he able to afford that perfume anyway? What does he actually do?" asked Lily.

"That's a good question. I didn't want to be too nosy about work. It'd be so obvious, right?"

"Obvious you're not that into him? I dunno, it's early. There's a lot you need to learn before deciding that."

Perhaps she was being paranoid about scaring him off. Their date was amazing, after all. Who really smiles that much after the death of a parent? When he gets sad again, he'll probably be thinking about how soon they can get together in order to fix that pain. Cerise will turn into something he needs and craves—his own special drug.

Enough about herself. She turned to Lily. "How's the tattoo shop going?"

"I am meeting so many interesting people, talking their ears off." She gave a mischievous look. "Bombarding them with personal questions."

"As you should. I'm happy you also get to put your creative talent to use."

"Heh, some people don't think I have the talent. There was a guy yesterday that hated what I did to his thigh. Said the lines should be smoother." Lily got out her phone and showed a picture of the so-called failure. A feathered

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dinosaur with this massive tail. It didn't appear to be harmless, but it wasn't the scariest looking prehistoric creature. Its strange wings didn't seem appropriate for flight on such a body. That neck with those huge legs. Ancestor of the ostrich, you would assume.

"I already warned him that this wasn't my style."

Cerise scoffed. "There is nothing wrong with that tattoo. It looks awesome and he one hundred percent doesn't deserve it."

"But he made it sound like it was the end of the world."

"Are you sure he wasn't lying to get his money back? Nobody gets a tattoo that looks exactly like whatever image they have in their mind. And also, it is certainly not the end of the world considering he can cover it up or pay for the removal."

"I know, all these losers never want to take responsibility. Whatever, like I don't really get mad. Just frustrated."

Cerise paused before the thinly framed watercolor of a finch. Recalled an ethereal nature piece her friend once did as a commission. 30 by 20 inches of misty trees under the aurora borealis. Lily spent a lot of time painting little foxes and deer and whatever else the customer wanted in their fairy tale inspired landscape. Thousands of brush strokes, texture adjustments, making the stars... she realized it was wrong to use the word talent.

"If another scammer comes along telling you you're not talented, you can say it's true. All of it is skill and practice."

Six

It was a cozy night in. Lily might've gone to sleep already, so Cerise kept her voice quiet enough for reading mice. While talking in a near whisper on the phone, she massaged her sore calves. The result of her afternoon workout.

"The gym had some weirdos today. I mean, it always does, but these people were extra weird."

Gordon loved these types of stories, his favorite being a young man wearing different colored contacts (ice blue and black) bragging about his hacking exploits. After Cerise told him to beat it multiple times, she picked him up by the waist and moved him to the other side of the gym.

"Are people hitting on you again?" She could somehow hear the waggle of those dark eyebrows through his voice.

"You say that like it's normal."

"Based on these photos, it must be."

She felt a bit of heat on her cheeks despite having only sent gym selfies and photos of her merrymaking at Dam Square. "Stop, you make it sound like they're naughty pics."

"You have naughty pics?"

Cerise let out an embarrassing giggle and then covered her mouth. She checked over her shoulder, as if the mice could overhear. "Okay, back to the weirdos. I was doing bench presses, and it wasn't anything crazy. Seventy-five

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kilograms. This random guy comes up behind me, and I was like fine, you can spot me if you want."

"So he was being nice."

"Well, he kept lifting the bar for me and I was like, can you get away? What the hell."

"What did he say?"

"He said you can't do this by yourself. It's dangerous. And I pointed out he was lifting it, which prevents my workout. Obviously, no one can exercise like that."

"You didn't even ask him to help you. What a jerk."

"Yeah, I like helping people too, but only if they want me around."

She stretched out on her bed, switched ears on the phone, then asked Gordon if work has been going alright. The shelf in her field of view was filled with globes, a collection that started at the age of twelve when her dad bought an indestructible resin Earth for her birthday. The older she got, the smaller she felt when she tried to comprehend the size of the oceans. Seventy percent of the planet's surface doesn't register until you have that wait-a-minute moment. Wait a minute, the existence of the Pacific Ocean is a Lovecraftian nightmare. Haunted houses and burglars are no match for the sickening scale of all that water. All that sameness. Cerise stared sleepily at the black globe covered in golden continents.

"Work hasn't been easy. I expected worse, though."

"Do you keep track of the hours?"

"Not at all. I have no idea how much I work in a week."

"It sounds like you're doing more than forty." She yawned and turned to face the wall, wondering if Gordon was also lying down somewhere. Does he stay up late? Snooze a lot? Doesn't seem the type of person to compromise his rest.

He brushed off the subject and remembered to ask about her interview. Although it wasn't the closest location, she actually did have experience with making several

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smoothies for herself, and therefore would've accepted an offer right away.

"They're supposed to call me back within a couple days. I'd say it went alright, but I'm not sure if they'll pick me."

"I've never done a job interview. What's it like?"

She tried to think of a way to make it sound less horrible, but with her recent experience, she simply couldn't sugar coat this one. Nobody should have to impress a total stranger just to make a basic living, and Gordon will never need to worry about silly problems like this.

"It's a three out of ten experience unless you don't actually need the job. People will ask you dumb questions they don't care about, and you have to come up with some long answer like you're trying to reach the minimum word count for an essay."

"Oh, I remember doing that in school," he piped. "Mrs. Rydberg always scribbled a bunch on my homework. I couldn't read her handwriting, but I thanked her anyway." Gordon had the attitude of a good student, but not every good student performs well. A girl came to mind, one of her first swimming students. Small and fast and showing tons of promise. Boy, were her parents proud of their little champion.

The moment she stopped being a champion, they thought something was wrong with her. An elementary school girl. Of course, they blamed Cerise and said she needed a better coach. The young swimmer was using up every ounce of energy instead of gliding through the water efficiently. Not even having fun with her peers, since they were all becoming competition.

She had never been happier to see someone quit the sport. And she had never seen a wiser decision coming from someone that age.

"I just hope you don't go out of your way to interact with the fake people conducting these interviews," she continued. "You're too good for that."

"What do you mean fake? Do you have to lie too?"

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"You have to tell them exactly what they're looking for, or someone else will. They will hire the other person if you don't."

"Ohh. I love how smart you are." Speaking of being smart, what was she doing? They need to meet up already. All this texting and calling wasn't going to lead to anything if she didn't secure more dates, and it's been fucking forever since Flora.

"That's so sweet. I love spending time with you."

"That's good. I've been missing you."

"You don't have to. Do you have plans tomorrow?"

"I have something I want to show you, but if you're not comfortable going to my house, I understand."

Gordon is not a serial killer. He's not going to lure her into a creepy dungeon or do anything suspicious.

"I'm fine with it. Where do you want to meet?"

Gordon suggested a bakery, so they can pick up treats before going to his place. He told her to pick whichever one is most convenient. In her closet, she sifted through athletic clothes and found a loose off-the-shoulder top for tomorrow. The wait was too much. She dreamt of cupcakes.

Seven

She could hear nothing but the constant drizzle of fresh rain combined with wheels buzzing beneath. Umbrellas brushed past each other while diners sheltered under patio covers, idly staring at the grey weather. Some of them must've been wondering if the clouds will break away. The rest have accepted it won't be soon. During her frigid bike ride she heard a group of senior women speaking Czech. They sounded a bit lost and confused, which never happened to Cerise. Even if she didn't know exactly where a building was, her intuition was pretty good, almost on a supernatural level, and she would end up spotting it without extra help.

The bakery was tucked away amongst smaller restaurants and boutiques, inside an alley that contained more bikes than humans. It boasted bright lights and pink walls, but you only needed a sense of smell to locate De Stroopwafel Schuur. The air was heavy with sticky sweetness, making it feel difficult to escape once you've spotted their wide selection.

A short woman covered in flour gave Cerise a curt nod. From her default expression she seemed like a person that would be hard to amuse, but not necessarily mean. There weren't any other customers, so she decided to take the chance.

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"Goedemorgen. I came by to check if your place is looking to hire new staff." She reached into her bag for the resume.

"Do you have experience?" Her voice was deeper than expected.

"I have work experience, but not at a bakery. I'm very interested in learning something new, you see, and I have no problem stepping out of my comfort zone." She most definitely used this line before.

"Here, I will take the resume and have someone look at it."

"I really appreciate that. Is stroopwafel your most popular item?"

"Yes, have you had it before? I'll give a sample." She didn't expect the generosity, nor did she expect the sticky morsel to be as delicious as it was.

Cerise managed to keep a friendly conversation going until Gordon showed up. His hair and white clothes were not immune to God's tears, but he smiled like an angel. What a relief it is to not be stood up.

"Am I late?"

"Not at all. How are you?"

"Prachtig. Have you decided on what you wanna get?"

The numerous rows of goodies did their job behind the glass and made it difficult to choose, difficult to escape. Cerise, a woman who considers herself disciplined, would've tried a bite of everything if she could. Meeting here maybe wasn't the best idea, but she could tell Gordon was excited to spoil her with dessert, and the principle behind that gave her reason to stuff two entire boxes with macarons, fruit tarts, slices of cake, and whatever was filled with whipped cream.

When she was a child, she saw a movie she couldn't remember the name of, and it stayed with her because of how uncomfortable the whipped cream scene made her. After the woman licked it off of a man's mouth, her parents

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intervened. She caught glimpses of lovemaking when they didn't skip ahead far enough.

"Nice watch," she said to Gordon as he accepted a bag of baked goods. On the watch face was a blushing dinosaur with baby-like features, same color as the lime green band. He stared at the pointing hands for a while until, "Zero nine three nine."

"Thanks." Although she wasn't all that impressed with his slow reading, her brows said otherwise. At least he *can* do it.

The highlight of their first bike ride together was having zero expectations for fluff. No unnecessary chit-chat about how good the wind feels blasting into your freezing face; no yammering over the latest news on some endangered species; and absolutely no opening up about things they weren't ready to open up about. It was safe to turn off the upstairs and breathe. The world is real. The world can be experienced without overthinking. All these canals—she could be in Venice. Maybe she was in Venice that first day with Gordon, sniffing Venice perfumes with her Venice boyfriend.

Gordon was being attacked by birds. He waved them off, but they continue to swoop. Dive. Squawk! Fearless they were. The seagulls must've recognized the bag in his basket. Cerise pedaled behind.

"Hey! Stop!" She was no Disney princess, so the birds kept bothering them. Then again, maybe a little singing *would* have worked. They'll never know because Gordon's house was getting close and they rode faster.

A metal gate. A gently meandering pathway. He summoned a remote that made the beast yawn. The effort it took for the closing of its maw was audible, and the silence that followed was deafening.

He welcomed her into his not-so-humble abode.

"Um, do you live by yourself?"

"Yep. I'm a lone wolf as they say."

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This was not a home for young bachelors. He could adopt twenty kids and there would be room to run about. It actually made her sad to picture Gordon walking around by himself in his own place. Wouldn't you start to go crazy? Start hearing things? Either way, he must be used to it. Maybe anywhere can feel like home if you stay there for long enough. Seeds of Amsterdam were budding from within her, after all. Roots will form to keep her in its clutch.

The kitchen was black. All black walls, counters, floors, and even stairs which led to a hallway overlooking the open living room. She wore soft black slippers to match the long pile rug beneath an L-shaped couch. There were two flames going—a modern style fireplace against the wall and a gorgeous little fire pit in the middle of the coffee table. When Cerise approached the glass wall, the first thing she noticed outside was a wooden swing hanging from a thick tree that towered the house. Pink flowers swirled around the ropes. Oh, how Lily would've loved to do a photoshoot here all dressed up.

"This house is so perfect." The words fell out of her mouth. A loose jaw that she needed to fix after retrieving it from the marbled tile.

"Glad you like it so far. People used to ask me when I planned to move out from my parents' house. I told them that would be silly. Everything I need is right here." He grabbed two black plates for their snack and said they could eat in the basement. Now's as good a time as any to find out what was down there, considering how long it will take to get the full tour. Today, Cerise was ready to be impressed.

The gaps in their conversation were no longer silent. A vibrant music video from the 90's played on a TV. Members of a trendy boy band danced with unbreakable spirit, like they got eight hours of sleep and drank orange juice in the morning. Gordon attempted one of their cool dance moves and put on a rare serious face. He pointed this way and that way while swaying to the beat. One of the five members that

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loved to swish his hair across the forehead broke into a dramatic falsetto as he reached out towards the camera. She grinned and rubbernecked beyond the area with exercise equipment.

"You have a pool." It was impossible to miss the giant floaties resembling rubber ducks.

"I do, and you can use it anytime you want."

She couldn't imagine what she would look like riding those ducks. Too embarrassing to think about. "It's a nice surprise. Thank you for bringing me here."

"Oh, that's not what I wanted to show you."

They ate their dessert breakfast with restrained mouthfuls. Gordon was being quiet, as if he knew the moment he spoke he would ruin the actual surprise. They got up and walked past a transparent conference room filled with chairs. The anticipation was getting to her. She reached for her bracelet and realized how cold it was.

"Is this your favorite part of the house?" she asked.

"Almost. I do spend a lot of time in the basement. I like how much space there is."

"The bigger the space, the bigger the possibilities."

"Exactly." He turned a corner and passed through an open arched door. For a second, she thought Gordon was a mad scientist and that she was about to become his next experiment. No, the glass pillars were not for encasing humans, aliens, or mutants. All three contained a wide assortment of life hidden behind coral, plants, and rock. She circled each tank, unblinking, allowing her mind to be cleansed. He brought her to the ocean.

"Do they have names?" She was zoning in on a yellow seahorse.

"Of course. You're looking at Pim, one of the most deadly predators. Anything that can fit inside her mouth tube better watch out." The thing barely seemed alive, but she wasn't about to argue with a marine expert.

"Show me your favorite fish."

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He went to the tank featuring a miniature shipwreck as the hub. The shrimp were very active, feeding on the sides and crawling through the windows. A permanent vacation on a luxury cruise ship, free of predators. No fishermen either to cast a net and hoist them out of the water. They've won the shrimp lottery.

"Let's see where Blub is hiding. Come out Blub." Gordon bent down and pointed at a brown and yellow fish covered in spines. When it turned around, the pufferfish gave Cerise an expression that not many animals can pull off. Somewhere between dumb and mischievous. She got lost in those bug eyes, lost in the hum of water filters.

"Does he blow up a lot?"

"No, he's a nice little guy." He wiggled his finger in front of the glass. "Do you like sea creatures?"

"You could say I feel a connection to anything that swims a lot. I swim a lot. And nobody can deny how stunning all of this is." She squinted and moved towards a wall of tanks that were a lot darker than the aquariums. Warm lighting instead of neon blue, filled with branches and vines and scaly things that defied gravity.

A cricket found itself trapped in a corner. It could smell the beast. After the loss of so many good friends, the best crickets they've ever met, it was all coming to an end. No more sleepless nights. No more screams. There would always be hope, though—some bigger purpose Jiminy would serve by simply being a part of nature. Jiminy prayed for whatever came next to be free of the scourge. Punishment. This was already punishment.

"Wow, do you sell these animals? You've bought the entire pet store."

Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!

"I've sold a few geckos to my friends."

"Maybe you should work at the aquarium or the zoo. That would be fun."

"Young Gordon would've agreed."

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"And what about Big Gordon?"

He formed his sentence carefully, which was unusual. "I still fantasize about it, but I have to keep the family business alive. How else can we afford all this?"

She understood. It'd be hard for her to go back to her shared house after experiencing just a snippet of Gordon's lifestyle in person. These things are always a blessing and a curse.

The beast was upon him. Seconds felt like years. It smiled wide, eyes bulging and skin glistening after emerging from the water. Jiminy had seen how fast the beast can move. At least there was that... at least death would be instant. Older crickets liked to pass down the most shocking stories of plants dissolving live insects and ants losing their minds to some disease. Parasites. Cannibalism. This cricket managed to avoid it all.

But life is short.

"Did you see that?" Cerise pointed to the frog tank. "That bug jumped away so quickly."

"It's good they're not making it easy for Rupert. He needs the exercise." Gordon opened the front and reached in. She hid her hands behind her back and gave him more space.

"Very cute," she lied.

"Wanna pet him?" If you were to ask this woman yesterday whether or not she'd be scared to pet a frog, she would've answered no. And she would've believed there was nothing difficult about it. In theory, they're not scary. Certainly not the least bit dangerous.

"Will he bite?"

"I dunno, maybe. Just reach around his face." She shouldn't have asked. Her fingers trembled, and right as she was about to make contact, a voice came out of nowhere. Cerise turned and saw a thin silhouette. They were holding something.

"Forgot you were here, Rosanne." He plunked Rupert back into the cage and nearly forgot to close the door. Cerise

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suddenly paid attention to the floors, thinking there must be an escapee or two. It was dark, though.

"I'll take that, thanks," said Gordon. No table in this room, but there was a flat concrete bench for their tray of sliced fruit. Cerise also thanked Rosanne and introduced herself. The maid looked young and old at the same time. Thin brows framed a set of haunting eyes that made Cerise feel like she was being studied. Based on her dark attire, she could've been at a church this morning. Rosanne's hair was an older style bob that reminded her of creepy gothic dolls that were meant to be sold to girls that don't smile.

"Oh, she's deaf by the way."

"Oh, I don't know sign language," she said.

"That's okay, we can text her if we need something. And she reads lips pretty good." She wished she could at least finger spell her name.

"Are you able to translate or do you just text?" asked Cerise.

"I don't know sign."

"Well, if she continues to work here, it might be good to learn the basics. Make things easier."

"Learning a language is hard if you never see it anywhere else."

"You're not wrong, but we're European. We embrace that kind of thing."

Gordon thought about something while chewing his blackberries. "That explains why these two guys I know speak six languages. They must be the smartest people I've ever met, other than you." She smiled sweetly at the compliment. It's not something she was used to hearing. "I feel really lucky to always be surrounded by inspirational people."

"You must be talking about your parents," she commented.

"You're a mind reader."

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Cerise had been waiting for an opening to discuss his family business in more depth.

"If you want to share anything about them, I'm more than happy to listen." Hopefully he would start with where exactly his mother was at, and if she ever stays in this house.

"I mean, I'd love to tell you about them." He rubbed his knees while looking down. The air thickened with tension. "I always saw my parents as a team, and I was thrilled to be the glue that held them together, because there is nothing more important to me. All the wishes I've ever made in my life, whether it's a birthday candle or tossing a coin into the fountain or blowing on those puffy white flowers, were for my parents to stay together forever. One day, my moeder couldn't work anymore. Papa stepped up and... I hadn't seen him much since then."

"Were they both involved with the business?"

"Yes." He got up and said to follow. They walked past the conference room, past the 90's music, and up the stairs. Near the front entrance there was a heavy sliding door and a pin pad. Gordon keyed in a five-digit code. The door responded with an angry buzz. "Sorry, I always get this one wrong." They got in by the third try.

Unlike the modern black kitchen design, this room made Cerise feel like she was a pirate hobbling into an old tavern. A wooden steering wheel hung above this open stone fireplace where the smell of ash came from. Seeing the shadows surrounding the logs made her shiver beneath the thin fabric of her shirt. On one end of the room stood a wooden desk fit for the minister-president van Nederland. She took a seat in one of three chairs facing Gordon's executive desk. The house, the aquarium, and the deaf maid had been a lot to take in. She needed a moment to shake the dollar signs from her eyeballs.

Across from her was a wall of photos mostly taken outdoors. Many of the people were on boats or near them. Some were in black and white, but they were all well-kept.

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To give her a closer look, Gordon removed a single picture. It was his father standing in front of a lake.

"A fierce looking man."

"Yep. He really embodied his zodiac sign."

"Leo?" she guessed. He nodded. Harmen had a lot of hair and kept his beard thick. He had a body that was made for the outdoors, but it was covered with plain summer clothes. Cerise could see Gordon's resemblance in his all too dangerous smile.

"He's kind, you know. Papa cared about everyone and would do anything to make you laugh. I miss laughing."

Cerise took note of that and reached for his arm across the desk. There were loose papers all over it. Was he secretly a detective obsessing over a cold case, or did a squirrel scamper across his work...

"What kind of jokes would he tell?"

"He could make a joke out of anything serious because he was naturally funny like that. I remember mama was so heartbroken when grandpa lost his battle with pancreatic cancer, and papa reminded her of how grandpa didn't want to get super old—he would yearn for the urn."

"Aw, I hope she felt at least a little bit better." This time Gordon reached for her bracelet, and she fought the instinct to pull away. "Do you light this fire often?"

"I don't even know how."

"Maybe there's a lighter in the drawer we can use." Sure enough, he fished out a red lighter from the second drawer down and handed it to Cerise. It felt strange to be trusted, but she was the first to put herself in a vulnerable position, being the lady wandering around a guy's enormous basement.

"I think I need some fresh wood to get this thing started." She was on her knees, flame in hand.

"Oh, I think I know where that is." He pulled open a panel that was next to the fireplace. It had no handle so it

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was basically a hidden cabinet. "Here we go." He handed her the lightweight chunks of chopped wood one by one.

Cerise sat on the ground listening to the violent pops settle into a soothing crackle. Gordon had been on the phone for about five minutes. Work must've been hollering, trying to steal him away. She thought about having a conversation about this on their next date, drawing a line in the sand regarding interruptions and prioritizing quality time. Her time. But maybe, just maybe—this was an exception. With every subtle glance, he began to look more upset.

She thought about his father. The chaos on his work desk. She thought about everything he was already going through, plus everything she didn't know about. Sure, he was a little spoiled and naive and he had an upbringing that would make a pop idol jealous, but rich people can have just as many problems as a "normal" person. Maybe there was something she could add to his life, something that would make her even more appealing as a partner.

He hung up. "I'm sorry, Cerise. Something bad happened at work and I have to go."

"No, I understand. Would you need any help with anything? I could go with you." Her date was slightly taken aback. He explained the police had called and he needed to talk to his staff at the river. "I don't mind being there to support." And to get to the bottom of what exactly has made him such a fortune. "It's not like I have other plans."

He gave in and put out the fire, nearly burning his hand in the process.

Eight

A flood of confusion followed by mild panic hit her when she stepped out of the house. A whole day had vanished. Hours and hours of what—talking to Gordon in his office? While snacking on garlic bread? There's no way. She checked her phone and saw a text and a missed call. Shit.

During their Uber ride, she called Lily and apologized for not checking in. "No, I'm not staying. We're going somewhere and then I'll be back shortly. Thanks." Now to deal with the other crisis.

On their way out of the city, it got so dark you wouldn't be able to see the edge of the river without headlights. Their driver lowered his speed and checked the map. A year ago, Cerise might've been nervous, but she had confronted extreme darkness before. She did it without a single tank of oxygen.

Six months back, she went to Hawaii with her parents. For her mom it was a dream to be there for two whole weeks. A very, very belated honeymoon. Cerise got to practice surfing while her parents went off to frolic in Waimea Valley and other beautiful spots. Sometimes they got back together as a family to lie on the beach during the sunset or enjoy a luau. However, the most memorable part of her vacation was Nico.

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Her diving instructor was a comically handsome man, born and raised on this island. No one had ever flirted with Cerise this much. And to be fair, the beach looked good on her. It didn't matter what style of swim suit she chose, or what color, so long as the sun was shining on her long braids and salty skin.

It was impossible to say no to this dive. She had to experience what night life meant for the ocean, so she got on that boat and put on her flippers. Nico handed everyone flashlights and told them what animals to expect near the bottom. Shrimp, crabs, turtles, and a special species that loves to put on a show. Cerise took a deep breath.

Cop cars flashed. She saw a fishing boat near the shore where people scattered themselves. Someone was taking pictures, while police collected information amongst the distressed. A man shuffling off to the side lit a cigarette. He kept walking as if no one needed him or wanted him around.

Gordon approached a random officer who was holding a notepad and spoke first. "Excuse me, what's going on now? Are the thieves still out there?"

"We're going after the suspects on boat, sir. Are you the head of this fishing company?" Skeptical sounding.

"Yes, I'm Gordon Bakker. Will the people in the hospital be okay?"

Cerise had no idea what to expect when they got here, and now she was at a loss for words. Why the hell are people getting attacked in such a peaceful country?

Gordon asked about the elvers.

"You mean the eels? They got away with most of the buckets."

He sighed and then turned around. Without any warning or greeting, the man that came up to him announced, "I quit."

"I know things seem—"

"I already told your father these people have been on my tail since the start of the season. They know where I live." He gestured wildly.

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"Okay. You don't have to come back tomorrow. We'll miss you, Klaas."

Cerise wanted to call this man a coward for leaving so abruptly. She also disliked his tone.

"Gordon, be careful out here." His last words before glaring at Cerise and walking back to the boat.

After people stopped coming up to Gordon, she whispered to him. "What exactly happened to your father?"

Water swished and lapped, whispering to a crowded night sky that was unlike anything she had ever seen before. The violent criminals would probably get away in tonight's darkness, celebrating under the endless stars.

"He was murdered."

They emerged from abject darkness, rushing towards her as she slowly ran out of oxygen. Wings flapping. Mouths gaping towards the beam of her flashlight. The manta rays behaved like circus performers that were being paid top dollar, chasing the spotlight until she fought back to the surface. Those iconic creatures would continue to circle in her dreams for the rest of the trip, begging for another visit. Another unforgettable night.

Nine

This was one of those days where she could barely move once she got home. Ready to power off. Whether she fell asleep in her bed, on the couch, beneath a table, or on the new rugs made no difference. It's not like she had much of a night routine. Why, Gordon was starting to become her bedtime ritual.

He messaged her asking if she got home safely. Cerise snorted and tilted her head back. He was in the car. In fact, he probably watched her enter the house. She responded with yes, heart, and said she was exhausted from having such an exciting day with him. He texted back right away saying she needs to come back soon and finish petting Rupert. She would've forgotten the frog's name. What about the pufferfish? Pip? Pim. No, that was the seahorse...

Someone was jostling the door handle. Cerise looked over her shoulder and saw Lily's door was closed. Then she stood up and saw that it was her roommate coming home, because who else would it be.

"I thought you were here already."

"I was, but I needed to pick up some stuff because there wasn't any food." She dropped a tote bag to the side and peered through the window.

"What're you looking at?" Her friend kept quiet and didn't move a muscle. Cerise could hear Lily's breathing on

ELVERS

top of her own. It was so dark the red church across the park was imperceptible. "Is there some—"

"I swear some creep was following me. I heard him from behind a tree."

"Should we call the police?"

Lily hesitated. "No, it's fine. We're safe now." She left to go eat her premade sandwiches and fruit; however, Cerise wasn't satisfied.

"I'm gonna have a quick look to make sure we really are safe."

"Hey, be careful," said Lily.

There was someone. A woman taking her Corgi pup for a spin around the block. They nodded at each other as she headed towards a group of people having a late chat over by the corner. Smoke wafted towards a street lamp. Laughter ensued. It was nothing. There is nothing.

Then she remembered the tree. There was a big one near the bus stop. As far as she could see, no one nearby. Well, the bus wouldn't run this late, so why would someone be waiting around this tree?

His eyes were mean and wide. As soon as he lunged, she realized Lily had been mistaken. Klaas' words tumbled to the forefront of her mind. *They know where I live*. Had she been given a chance to think about it more, she would've felt guilty for deciding that guy was a coward.

Cerise shrieked. There was real fear in her voice. It took her a moment to understand that this man was having a lot of trouble getting her to move, and that he was trying to kidnap her. It may have been a long day for her, but she never stopped her strength training after leaving Arnhem (which effectively meant she had left MMA). It took minimal effort to flip him over. Not a single thick training mat available to save this man from injury. He remained on the ground in shock.

Fear morphed into curiosity when she noticed there was something on the side of his neck. Against her better

ELVERS

judgment, Cerise angled for a clear view. It was kind of round. An animal...

He got up very suddenly and bolted. The shadow of the church would swallow him whole. She touched a sore spot at her neck before retreating indoors.

Ten

So, men like to attack her. That was her revelation. Also, men like to attack anyone associated with Gordon.

...she's not going to stop dating him over a guy with a neck tattoo that basically embarrassed himself and whatever group he was a part of. Still, she found herself weighing her options.

Weed is allowed. Prostitution is, too. Weapons? It'll take more than a trip to Magna Plaza to obtain a taser. If she can get her hands on one, it might save her in the event that they send someone more capable, now that they know she's a damn tank.

The furniture store had everything you could think of. Multiple floors of mostly modern room layouts, yet Lily wasn't satisfied.

"Why don't they have anything more colorful," she sighed. Shopping with an artist can be a hassle. Cerise didn't mind since they always have fun doing random things like this. Her friend made adult stuff a lot less dull with her penchant for completely ignoring the strangers staring. She liked having the reminder of 'just go live your life' in the form of an endlessly entertaining young lady that was always on her side.

"You didn't like those translucent chairs on the second floor?"

ELVERS

"They weren't comfy and were too small." She nestled into a hanging egg chair they could not afford. Two young kids glared at her, since their parents had pulled them out of it moments ago. Cerise could tell she wasn't about to get up anytime soon, so she asked for a tattoo shop update.

"I've been lucky this week. They give me hunk after hunk after hunk to decorate. Have you ever been with someone that is super into fitness?"

"I had a fling with another swimmer, and then Wes came along."

"Should've gone with the swimmer, huh. Those guys are hot." She closed her eyes and appeared very grateful to have a private world of handsome athletes ready to take their clothes off. Cerise had seen a glimpse of that world through sketchbooks and folders of "art inspiration". Not that she didn't draw her fair share of scantily clad women. She even drew a full body portrait of Cerise, finished with acrylic markers and metallic highlights. After telling her about the incredible night dive with those enormous manta rays, Lily had to use it as inspiration for this piece. It became Cerise's favorite thing, other than the bracelet from her student—she had never felt more pretty seeing such a magical version of herself surrounded by marine life.

"You know, maybe we could get that white desk over there and you could turn it into an art project."

Lily opened her eyes and sat up. "Hey. Not a bad idea." They ended up finding a cheaper desk that included drawers, one floor up, but they were still on the hunt for chairs.

"Tell me about what's-his-name and his house."

"You wouldn't believe me." Her lips curled. Lily gave her a playful push. "Gordon has a maid that keeps the place posh and perfect. It's... jaw dropping."

"My god Cerise, what does his family do?" Her voice got low and conspiratorial. They both glanced this way and that, giggling like they were in middle school making fun of a teacher that hates his job.

ELVERS

"They have a fishing business. Like an incredibly lucrative one." She decided not to mention the business problems, especially with her lack of detailed knowledge on it, but the words rested on her tongue.

"I see. Are you going steady with Gordon, or is he giving the maid a hard time too?" Cerise didn't miss that famous wink of hers.

"I don't think he's winning the maid over. He doesn't even use sign language."

"What? She's deaf?"

"Yeah. And she seems... conservative? I don't know her obviously, but just the way she was covered from neck to toe." Rosanne's stiffness was also in line with her outfit. Perhaps she changes her style on other days, though. People tend to loosen up when they're around friends and family. Gordon wasn't her friend; he was her boss.

"Is she... fully deaf?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes they can hear super loud noises or they might have a hearing aid."

"I don't know, probably. I should get to know her better if I'm gonna keep seeing this guy."

"You are making it official." Somehow Cerise knew what the next question was going to be about. "Have you sealed it with a kiss?"

"We're in the holding hands phase," she admitted through her teeth. "But I am not giving you more details after this!"

Lily never held back her joyous laughter. She said they were headed for a loving marriage and there was nothing she could do to stop that. And a part of her was happy to have this premature support. Why wouldn't she be.

The man helping them carry the disassembled desk was well over six feet tall, with a face like he came from a small village. Somewhere nearby, there really was a small village

ELVERS

missing their strong boy who wanted to see what the city had in store for him.

The ladies thanked him before sliding into the rideshare.

"Know any guys like him? Clients that might be interested in security work?" asked Cerise.

She came up with a name instantly. Alex, the one who recently added a crying angel to his sleeve, was someone who complained about his job at a moving company. It was easy to tell her friend had a special interest in him, and that she hadn't done anything about it yet. A sense of yearning for an excuse to change this lingered in her tone.

"If you could grab his number for me, that would help me with helping Gordon."

"Helping Gordon? Why does he want to hire security?"

"Because I told him this morning he needs to."

"Okay, my wing woman. I'll do it for the both of us."
Another wink.

Eleven

Cerise volunteered to handle the interview as long as Gordon was okay with it, and he was, for it sounded as if she caught him on a good day for once. There was a pep to his thin voice. Hopefully part of the reason for that was getting to speak to her.

She took a round glass table outside of the vegan koffiehuis after ordering her delicious affogato. The ice cream was so good she forgot she was meeting up with Alex, not just living her best life as a jobless woman in Amsterdam. His fitted red polo made him impossible to miss, and her mind snapped back to reality. She raised her hand.

"Alex? Hi!"

"Hi, are you Cerise Nchama?" She couldn't pinpoint his accent, but he spoke at a nice volume. Alex had big shoulders and pasty skin plastered with Lily's art. Religious themes swirled along those huge muscles through a tangle of thorns and leaves. It was interesting to see her friend's work out in public, out in the real world.

"Yes I am. Thank you for meeting with me so quickly." She smoothed down her long dark skirt and started off with simple questions. No pen or notepad needed—only sips from her coffee mug as she listened.

"Yeah, I'd be willing to start right away. That'd be great."

ELVERS

"Tell me how you feel about being on a boat all day. Would you get sick at all? Are you comfortable on water?"

"Being on a boat sounds nice. I love to work outside, rain or shine."

"How about light or dark?" she countered.

He shrugged and said his hours are flexible, though he had an important question. "I was wondering how much security you are looking for? My brother also likes to be in shape. Works out with me sometimes."

"What's his name?"

"Aron. He does part time at his current job and he's been looking for an extra gig."

She wanted to split the crew up into separate boats anyway. One bodyguard each.

"Give me his number and I'll see what I can do. Once I get into contact with my boss, I'll let you know the starting date."

Alex seemed kind of surprised the interview was already over. "Thanks again Cerise. I look forward to getting on that boat."

"It was a pleasure." They both got out of their chairs.

"By the way, I gotta ask if you do any training or sports? You've got the body of a real athlete. Top notch."

"I do swimming and MMA. And of course, I hit the gym when I can."

He tilted his head. "I can't imagine what idiot decided it'd be a good idea to take you on." She remembered the bruise on her neck and refrained from *that* conversation.

Since everything had gone smoothly, she wanted to see Gordon today. Provide him with good news. Well, she wanted to see him regardless, so she headed towards the bridge on her bike, past a cluster of other bikes, and found a nail salon nearby an art museum she hadn't visited yet. It took her forever to decide on a color; she had no idea what Gordon liked in that regard. Something simple? Something that stands out? The lady suggested a trendy ombre set, reminiscent of dragon fire. Pearlescent shades of crimson

ELVERS

and black. It reminded her of Pyro Amber, a perfume they invented that most people couldn't wear. Pyro Amber would be wearing them.

"I can't stop admiring it. Such an amazing job," said Cerise, now prepared to scale an active volcano.

"It suits you," the older lady replied. "You are badass."

She laughed a little too hard at that and left the salon feeling refreshed. Instead of texting him, she knew it'd be better to call and see if he would be willing to meet up soon.

"Hi Sarasota." She never had a nickname that was longer than Cerise, but it was growing on her.

"Hey Gordon. Are you busy today?"

"Yeah, I'm at the warehouse right now." Not ideal. An opportunity nonetheless.

"Will you be there in two hours? I could join you after my hair appointment." Fancy date or not, she was still in the process of reeling him in. Also, having spent money on her nails, she may as well take a full measure. She was going to make him think she's got it together despite getting fired recently.

"Oh? Sure, if you don't mind. It's not that exciting."

"I'll make it exciting. Text me the address."

This warehouse was far for a bike ride, but she made it under the two-hour time frame she gave herself. During her trip, she spotted a little town with a sizable church in North Holland. Campgrounds to the West. Several sheep threw her accusatory stares while the ducks minded their own business. It was peaceful out here, so it came as a surprise when she saw people installing cameras.

"Hallo," she said, clearly out of breath. Her braids had been replaced by curls pulled into a high bun. Strands at the front tickled her boyfriend blush. Gordon, who had been standing next to the parking lot, looked somewhat relieved to see her.

ELVERS

"Hoi." He leaned slightly, as if she were a beautiful statue that needed to be analyzed. "Something's different," he said sarcastically.

"Maybe it's because I had ice cream for breakfast. What's happening out here?"

"I hired people to put up surveillance and alarm systems for our inventory."

"The fish are all here?"

"Uh-huh. Baby fishies."

He brought her inside where it was much cooler. It smelled faintly of the wetlands mixed with sawdust. Cerise walked over to the massive tubs, where a man in uniform was closing up a box.

"How's it going, Emmet," Gordon called.

"It's going swimmingly." Cerise could tell they shared that joke often. Might even be a ritual. The bald, bright-eyed man reached out a hand and introduced himself as the pilot. "From what Gordon's told me, you're a very interesting woman. I'm glad we could finally meet." She took a liking to Emmet. For someone in his forties, he had the energy of a college student before the long string of rude awakenings.

And sometimes those were the ones who had it the worst. Pilots are trained for scary situations, after all. He could've been a survivor of some dangerous flying emergency, forced to confront his own mortality. Or he could have trauma totally unrelated to planes, possibly before his career started. How freeing, to experience something you never thought you could survive and come out of it stronger than a five-hundred-year-old tree. Everything you used to worry about, fading into nothing, because the storm has already taken what it could, leaving you behind.

He's good at weathering that storm, she realized about Gordon. The last thing he told her in person was awful. Devastating. As far as she knows, Harmen wasn't growing old or battling an out of control sickness. His death came out of nowhere, and it wasn't even an accident. What does

ELVERS

his family think about when they're unable to sleep at night? What sort of nightmares have taken Gordon hostage since...

"Man, I wish my nails looked like that," said Emmet. Gordon's eyes traveled to her fingers. He pulled them close.

"Just like lava." He inspected those dark shimmery nails like a geologist trying to identify what minerals a chunk of igneous contained.

"That's what I was going for. Pyro Amber."

"You're wearing the other one, though."

"Pyro Amber," said Emmet, intrigued. "Now what are you two talking about?"

"It's a perfume that smells like a real good poison," said Cerise.

"Aren't all perfumes poisonous?" said Emmet.

"That's true, you can't drink perfume." Gordon sounded truly astonished, which happened quite often. He was so convincing, it always made others around him feel like a genius. Cerise was never sure of how serious he was, but she liked the idea of figuring that out. He was a jigsaw puzzle. A deck of riddles. A coffer with a combination lock that stored something worth searching for.

"So where are you flying to?" Cerise asked.

"All the way to Japan," Emmet replied, "as always." Now it was her turn to be astonished.

"Geweldig! Do you ever go?" she faced Gordon, tilting her head.

"Not very often. Makes me nervous to fly that long."

"Yeah, Japan is pretty far. It's too bad," said Cerise. At least he was willing to admit what he was afraid of. She thought about his frog, which brought her back to the attacker and his neck tattoo. No one knows about this incident. She sensed the futility in getting everyone worked up before they knew why this was happening, and she didn't want anyone getting in the way of her own understanding.

I need to get me a taser.

ELVERS

Emmet got into a topic she knew wasn't the first or second time they've had this debate. "There are so many plane accidents that would never happen today because of all the safety features and procedures they keep adding."

"You said yourself the safety features have problems," said Gordon.

"No, I said the automation has caused problems in the past, but as long as the pilots don't rely on all the new technology too much and get trained properly, it's very, very safe to fly."

"The ground is safe."

"You're not a hobbit, Gordo."

"Mole rat is my spirit animal."

"Mole rat?" Emmet made a noise of disgust. "What about you, Cerise?"

"My spirit animal? Well, I liked dolphins as a little girl, so I'll go with that."

"Oh, Gordon did mention you like to swim. I guess that makes me a bird." He shrugged and tugged his uniform as if he were preparing for take-off.

"You have to be more specific than that," said Gordon.

"Alright then, make me a penguin."

"Penguins can fly?" Gordon sounded hopeful.

"They can if they're on an airplane. And that's where I'm headed." He picked up the sealed boxes and loaded up the hand truck. Wheeled the elvers off towards an open dock.

"Need anymore glass?" Gordon called out.

"Five more!"

Cerise watched him go to work, grabbing containers and buckets and nets. She followed him since there wasn't anything else to do. The whole reason she came was to see him.

Japan. She just learned he had been to Japan, where she had always wanted to visit. Yes, she still had the travel bug after Wes. After Hawaii. After moving to a new city. For heaven's sake, she should be asking Emmet to make room for her next to all those elvers.

ELVERS

"What did you think about Japan?"

His face was a good indication she would not be disappointed. He loved the etiquette, the fresh seafood, the night life, the landscapes, and he seemed to have a special love affair with the vending machines.

"I couldn't believe how good the machine ramen was. Not as good as human ramen, but super tasty and convenient. It feels like you're living in the future."

"Definitely something we'd have on spaceships when humans spread into other galaxies. Technology doing even more than it already does for us. I can't wait to go there myself and go exploring. No itinerary, no guide."

"You're going to space?"

"What? No! No, hah, I've always wanted to go to Japan."

"Ohhh." (Mildly disappointed.) "Well, it's tricky trying to figure things out if you don't know Japanese. That's another language I want to learn."

"I can teach you the basics. I'm okay at Japanese."

"Wow, you can speak it? You really are European." His excitement was contagious. They were standing so close she could feel his heat. She wasn't even trying to flirt with him—they've been coming together like a slow magnet.

"I'm rusty, so it'd be a good opportunity for me to practice if we did it together." She also wanted to associate the language with someone other than her half-Japanese ex.

"When do we start?"

"Konnichiwa."

"Means hallo?"

"Yes."

"Konnichiwa," he repeated. "What's frog?"

Cerise had to think. "Kaeru."

"Kaeru. Ribbit."

Cerise grabbed a bucket and said she wanted to be useful while she was here. Gordon asked her to translate, "You don't need to get your beautiful hands and nails dirty."

"I need the workout anyways."

ELVERS

Before he had time to finish saying be careful, she took an accidental dive. This water must've been prepared for the likes of a polar bear. Felt like an ice bath. Cerise was in such a shock she couldn't scream or utter a word. Gordon said something she didn't hear. All she could think about was what the hell kind of fish are these? They wriggled in and out of her clothing like ghostly worms. Glass, she recalled. He called them glass.

He held onto her wrists until she made it out of the tub. So much for trying to appear confident and put together today. "They're all over me," she cried. He used his hands to brush her shivering body from head to toe while reassuring her it's just water. A few elvers did get flung onto the ground.

Cerise kept her eyes shut for a long time, letting Gordon guide her to a car she didn't know he had. A small BMW that was in perfect condition. She ruined the backseats with her foul water drippings. The smell of the clean leather was a relief, though. The heat came on. Blessed warmth. Thanks to the scenic drive back to his place, most of her nerves were killed off to the point where she could speak without jitters.

"We're gonna get you clean, alright? Almost home."

Cerise knew he didn't mean it that way, but she did resemble an addict that had gone off the rails. Picturing what she looked like in this moment prompted a soft chuckle. You know what, he totally would pick up an overdosing stranger and take them to a hospital. She'd bet money she didn't have on his big, soft heart.

"I really freaked out." She was embarrassed now. She wanted to apologize for the nice leather seats. There were at least three people she could name who would jump through hoops and go to church in order to keep their vehicle spotless (and one friend who probably had large rodents roasting marshmallows under the seats of her van).

"It scared me too. Swimming with baby eels isn't very pleasant."

ELVERS

"There were so many of them. They didn't even look like fish to me," she shuddered.

He pulled into the garage and walked her in. They headed upstairs and into the master bedroom.

"Um, this is the largest bathroom in the house, but I've never used it. If you don't know how to get the right water from the shower, I can bring you to another one because I probably won't know how to do it either."

She glanced at a small closed room to the side. "What's..."

"Oh, that's the wooden sauna. Here's the panel if you want to use that too." Another thing she would have to figure out by herself, presumably.

"Well, thank you for letting me use this." He gingerly closed the door for Cerise, then immediately started knocking on it.

"I forgot to give you dry clothes," he said with a muffled voice. She opened the door and waited for him to return with—to her surprise—a peach grid pattern dress featuring a collar and a ribbon belt. "Some of mama's stuff is still here, so um, you should have this. Hope you like it."

"I was expecting a men's shirt and pants. Of course I like it." The way he spoke and handed her the dress gave her pause. She still has so much to learn about his family, but she knew for certain his mom means a lot to him.

Water rushed out in a straight line from the downward facing shower head. It was like having her own heavy rain cloud, except the rain made her feel replenished instead of miserable. There was enough room in the shower to dance with her arms stretched out. Boy, she could spend a *day* in here. Sustenance on the marble countertops. Wine in hand from a local vineyard. Phone on silent. Doors locked. The world can wait, because time didn't exist in this perfect room.

After a heavenly rinse she pushed open the glass and stepped out. This is what it feels like for a desert lizard to

ELVERS

find the perfect rock right after sunset, her feet soaking up the warmth from these stone tiles. Cerise dropped to her knees and gradually let more and more skin make contact with the floor. Now that she was sprawled out, her ear pressed against the grey heat, listening for the source of this thermal blessing.

There was no magma bubbling beneath, nor any volcanic fire spitting out ash and rock as far as she could tell. That also meant there probably weren't any secret passageways to a hot spring in this house. Droplets of water ran down her muscles as she took a less reptile-like form and got to her feet.

The sauna was ready. Not overly humid and suffocating, like the steam rooms she would avoid at indoor pools—simply relaxing. She leaned back, closed her eyes, and let her under-utilized senses take over. Cedar aromas pushed away endless worries and cleared her mind of anything that would discourage her. Cleared away the thoughts that kept her up at night. Hawaii at twilight. Beaches and bonfires. Cerise could see it all so vividly. The waves called to her, wondering where she had been. She could hear Japanese tourists talking about Las Vegas magic shows and celebrities.

"Karera ga borantia o sagasu no ga kiraidesu. Nigedashitaku narimasu."

"Watashi mo. Mushiro Maiku Taison to tatakaitai."

"Un ga yokereba, Maiku Taison ni byōin okuri ni sareru deshō."

She developed a hankering for crab meat when she saw a shirtless man grilling seafood at a hut. He wore a vibrant flower lei and had his black hair tied back.

What a familiar face. Handsome, happy, crinkly smile—Gordon's smile. As she neared the hut, it became obvious Harmen Bakker had come back to life in full health.

"What can I get you, my darling? Shrimp's glistening and ready for takers."

ELVERS

"What does Gordon like?" she asked, tongs flashing before her sweaty face. Her eyes watered from the smoke and heat.

"He likes *you*. My boy has got himself caught in this pretty little whirlpool of yours with your shiny nails and sweet words." He handed her a shrimp and scallop skewer bursting with lemon flavor. "What are you gonna do to him once you swallow him up?"

"He's a grown man. You don't believe he can handle me?"

"He'll have to handle a lot no matter what you do. I wish I didn't leave him with this life, but it was coming at him sooner or later."

"Thrones have always come at a heavy price."

He set the tongs down and gave her a look bordering on reproach. "When are you gonna tell him?"

The skewer in her hand disappeared. It was quiet again. Four wooden walls surrounded Cerise, making her feel imprisoned instead of relaxed. When she left the bathroom, it was dark everywhere else in the house. Sometimes she struggled to find a light switch. Felt like she was alone and that she didn't belong here. Where was he?

With every knock, zero response. There were a couple of guest rooms, a work room with several books on display, a cozy entertainment room, and then a room she would've guessed belonged to Gordon. This room must've had a different interior designer. In fact, this designer might've been the other designer's nemesis. Looking around this place was the equivalent of a sugar high. There was a plushie pit. Next to that, a huge yellow dinosaur that would've been a playable character in a kids video game. She spotted no bed, but a sleeping bag shaped like a cocoon and printed with clouds.

Maybe this wasn't Gordon's bedroom... maybe this was a guest room for children and babies. However, a clue sitting upon clown-colored dresser drawers—she found

ELVERS

photos of Gordon with his mom. Katerina, she recalled at eighty percent certainty. When she picked it up, there was something behind the frame that caught her eye. They looked like earbuds that curve behind your lobes, but the placement behind the photo seemed strange and she thought about it.

Seeing how clean it was in this room did not necessarily mean Gordon was a clean freak. Rosanne was the magic fairy that would make you feel like you were living in a feel-good family movie, marching through life without even thinking about the clothes you threw onto the ground during your morning outfit trawl, because they'd be right back inside the closet as soon as you got home. Cerise pulled out her phone and snapped a picture before leaving.

Downstairs, she finally found him through the glass walls. Well, she couldn't see much of him, just the swaying of the hammock outside. Cerise tried to approach with care, in case the guy was having a nap.

"You don't have to get up," she said.

"Then you should join me."

They filled the hammock side by side, facing each other. First thing he told her was how pretty she was in that dress. She laced her fingers between his and asked what's been on his mind while she was having the best shower of her life.

"I was wondering about you and whether or not that fall... I was worried it brought up bad memories."

"I'm okay now. It was just a bunch of harmless fish."

"Is it okay if I ask questions?"

"Of course. I want you to."

"What was his name?"

Harmen's voice nagged at her. The truth rested on the tip of her tongue, but the lie escaped. "My brother's name is Jake." This moment was too important. She wanted to stay in this hammock for as long as possible.

"You're so strong, Cerise. The strongest."

"Thank you, sweetie."

ELVERS

The wind carried their whispers through the night. When she was with Gordon, time always managed to melt away without her noticing. They seldom broke eye contact. He spoke about his mother. His late father. His fear of what will become of his last living parent.

"Have you delivered her perfume?"

"Not yet. I wanted to see if..." His gaze drew closer to her plump lips.

"If what?"

"Do you like me?"

Ever so slowly she bridged the gap. His mouth was softer than white fluffy down. He tasted better than chile-lime-pineapple soda on a warm summer evening. Cerise hadn't kissed anyone in a year, and even then, her ex what's-his-name never gave her shivers reminiscent of a feather tracing down your back, all the way to the dip, the concavity where you'd rest your hand on a lover. She pulled back before the feeling could spread and turn into something else.

"Was that a yes," he murmured.

"More than a yes."

Twelve

My life is surreal.

I have something important to do today. More important than reading at the library or going to the theatre. There is still time to get it done, whatever that may be. I can tell based on the floor lamps that the morning sun is out there. It stays hidden behind pale clouds that have been stingy with the rain.

The lady at the counter wears a name tag. Half of them do. Janey takes my money. She's quite intimidating with her short spiky hair and her height, but she has kind eyes outlined by thick lashes. I was buying something. A bottle of sparkling lemon water sits in front of me. Janey hands it to me and says something.

This path is familiar. I've taken this path before. Memories are difficult to distinguish between dreams. I try to stay present. The center of my being demands it. Somewhere nearby there is a green space that enhances my feeling of surrealness. I keep an eye out for the pond. I hear ducks. Mama duck. Have her eggs hatched yet? Where is her mate? Where is her family...

There is a man in a walker coming towards me. He's the one that always asks about Harmen. How is Harmen. I don't know, I always say. How is your family. His heavily spotted face lights up as he mentions grandkids that love sports and music. He talks about his friend that's in India. He asks if

ELVERS

I've ever been to India. I've always been too busy, I say. He can't wait to see his family. Wants me to meet them. Acts like I will definitely be meeting them—attending dinners, cheering at his grandson's field hockey match, going to New Delhi. Is that a city? Delhi?

I see the ducklings. That must be why I came out here. To watch over, wolves be damned. I have never seen a wolf, but I've seen what they can do. A bloodied fawn lying in the grass, waiting for someone to stumble upon it and mourn the thing. Must've been an easy enough target for a lone outcast. Perhaps an omega who had gone days without meat. Male. Ruthless. They're all so ruthless. It makes me unhappy, but I don't fully understand. It's too much work.

The girl has no name tag and I don't recognize her. Gordon, my beautiful boy, tells me this is our first meeting. I'm relieved. I'm happy to not mourn.

"These are such beautiful flowers, Cerise. Can you spell your name for me?"

"Of course. C-E-R-I-S-E. It means cherry in French." I should be able to remember because she is as sweet as her name. I ask if she's ever gone cherry picking. If she hasn't, my son will take her.

He was so carefree, as if cancer had been cured that very day. I wore a peach-colored dress for Harmen on our cherry picking date. I'm pretty sure it was cherries, but it could have been blackberries. I try to picture the overflowing basket. Which one makes more sense, red or black? I go back and forth between these imaginary baskets during our conversation.

"I brought your Lolita Lempicka, moeder. Here you go." I open the box and pull out an apple shaped perfume. My opportunity to grab ahold of time as easily as flipping an hourglass. One spray is enough to bring me back.

"Where is your father?" Both of their expressions confirm the dread that occupies the pit of my stomach. "You must get her out of the house... no, no, listen to me..."

ELVERS

I look at Cerise straight into her eyes and realize she is my only hope. "Do you know her?" I don't remember the perfume... I mean, I don't remember her name. Goodness, I can barely remember her face. But the taste of flowers—that was the last real memory.

"Is everything alright here?" A name tag with a low voice invades the green space made for ducklings and family. He sounds like one of those characters from a radio show I used to listen to after school. I still remember my favorite character. Maybe even bits of her silly poetry. The Sun and the Cucumber... how does that one go?

"The sun shines bright, the world glitters..." I say while facing the ground. Everyone smiles at each other. There's always staff ready to catch me when I fall, but it's my son that needs protection. I shouldn't have kept so much from him. Harmen being gone—it's too late, isn't it?

"Moeder, the man who ordered the hit did it from jail. The actual guy was just a random person, not Rosanne or whoever you're talking about."

I must put my faith in someone. I tell Cerise my son never listens, but maybe he'll listen to her. "Fishing elvers isn't the same as it was before. People are desperate. *Greedy*. My husband knew this and still he became a victim."

"The competition sounds... awful. I'm sorry you and Gordon have to go through so much. That's why we've hired security and installed cameras, Mrs. Bakker. He has been doing an amazing job with this season. You and Mr. Bakker raised a man I'm proud to be with."

With so many words, I need extra time to process everything. I do feel better, though. Her reassurance is calming to the point I can remember to breathe.

"It was a basket full of cherries, and they tasted like falling in love."

Thirteen

Alex and Aron are twins. Aron was the one without a drop of ink visible, but they both had the same pale complexion with the same sun-bleached hair shorn to half an inch. Alex was very pleased to have his brother by his side at the marina despite rather strong gusts of wind spoiling the weather. A crew of eight including the new guys stood before Cerise, probably wondering where their real boss was at.

"Hi. I'm Cerise, in case you didn't know my name, and these men are here to prioritize your safety. Our private security guards." She explained they can help out on the boat here and there, but they're supposed to conserve their energy in case of another incident. She also wanted to have everyone split into three boats to make it less obvious which one people should target if they want to try and steal their catch.

"There aren't enough of us for three boats," hollered one of the staff.

"Eventually we will hire a replacement and two temps. Besides, Gordon might decide to come out once in a while and fish with you all." Cerise wasn't sure if that man's face always looked like that, or if he just found it unpleasant to set his gaze upon her.

ELVERS

"Where'd you find these kinderen anyway? Some old flings? I bet Gordon doesn't have any idea you're still in contact with ex-lovers."

"That's very strange to say." She pulled out a couple of night vision goggles to hand over. There are more important things than some pathetic guy who didn't get enough attention as a child. "Please use these to keep an eye out for suspicious activity, and make sure someone on every boat gets updated regularly. You will exchange each other's phone numbers. Now."

Everyone besides Declan was happy to introduce themselves to Alex and Aron, and Cerise was happy to watch and listen to all these names she needed to learn. There was a Grover. A Justin. Mac. Christian. The rest she didn't catch.

Oh, but Declan with his sour eyes and light-brown afro—she remembered that one for sure. In fact, she would reserve an extra special place for him as he so desires.

She received a text right as Aron approached her. They spoke briefly on the phone prior to this, but it was their first time meeting in person.

"Hey Cerise, I just wanted to thank you for giving me and Alex this opportunity. I'm really excited to learn more about boats and fishing and everything else." The wind nearly drowned out his words.

"Well thank you for starting on short notice. I hope things run more smoothly with more people on the team. I have to go right now, but let me know how the first day goes."

Gordon arranged an afternoon outing at Zandvoort. They met up at the phones near Zandvoort aan Zee, delighted to be doing something fun just for the sake of enjoying each other's company. No running errands. No you-should-see-this. None of those pointless excuses whatsoever. You could argue this was their first real date. An official opening ceremony for their burgeoning love.

"I have something for you. Happy early Kerstmis!"

ELVERS

Cerise reached into the gift bag, past the crunch of sparkling tissue paper. It felt smooth and soft, but not quite silk. It felt familiar.

"Is this... Factor Bermuda? Holy shit." This was the first time she had ever sworn in front of him.

"I thought it might be nice to have a swim suit for when it's colder, and the color will look perfect on you," said Gordon, who was especially glad she recognized the sustainable luxury brand for sun protection. She couldn't wait to try on the stunning shade of blue. It was a color she would wear on a furtive night, dark make-up to complement her Sexy Eyes perfume. Hair pulled back. Jewelry, of course, to display the full measure, knowing that the more effort she puts in, the more effortless it will seem to others.

Gordon gifted her a silhouette that made her feel unstoppable. As huge as this beach was, she felt more special than anyone else on the sand. She allowed her date to treat her like a deity, smoothing out dollops of sunscreen all over her well-defined legs. She let him take his time with it to ensure her maximum coverage.

"What a sweetheart you are," she said. "My turn to help you now."

Cerise started on his shoulders and upper back. His skin felt warm. His breathing slowed and deepened.

"Please don't think the swim suit is your payment. If you're interested in becoming an official employee of Bakker Marine BV, I'll pay you with real money for all the work you do," Gordon stated.

A regular paycheck sounded wonderful. She wasn't sure what else was on the business agenda, but she was not about to turn down an actual job. "I think I would like that. Why not?"

After his back massage, Gordon unpacked a picnic basket full of fresh food prepared by the maid. Cerise then realized how hungry she was—despite all that cryptic

ELVERS

chatter from Gordon's mom, she didn't start second guessing what she was eating until it would've been too late.

"How was the hospital visit?" she asked between bites of a cranberry muffin. Her gaze drifted back to the ocean horizon once she finally slowed down on the food. Instincts kicking in, she resisted a sudden urge to make sure no one was struggling out there. *There are other life guards on duty. Nobody is being dragged down by a homicidal shark.*

"Thankfully, their recovery has been great, although I'm not sure about their mental state."

"It'll take time." The head always takes forever to heal compared to most physical injuries. The scars last longer too. Decades longer. Do they transcend death? In some cases, perhaps. What else are curses made of.

You would assume Cerise thinks back to last year's Zen Sushi attack often. However, that deteriorating two-year relationship made more of a lasting impression on her confidence. The way she clung to Wes was as effective as taking a wild baby hare to the vet. Sunk costs became her sole justification. No one else had ever stuck around that long. Obviously, he wasn't always a jackhole. He knew how to make her feel seen. *Bitches love that*, she could imagine him saying.

Gordon revealed all that he learned today from the hospital. "They tried to tie 'em up. Like animals." Cerise could only imagine how the victims must've looked after the beatings. "I don't know if they would've made it out alive if everyone hadn't fought back so hard. It feels like I'm putting all these people through a nightmare."

"You've been through a lot recently as well. I meant what I said to your mother. She should be so proud of who she raised."

"I'm not as strong as everybody else. Not as strong as you, Cerise."

It occurred to her this might be the moment to come clean, so that he realizes she hadn't been through tragedy, and there was no way she could be all selfless and noble if

ELVERS

she had. She wouldn't even be able to put on a smile if some first world problem, like the bus being five minutes late, happened. Gordon should take back the long sleeve swim suit. The job offer, too. She should stop wearing their custom scent and face the reality that her muscle strength didn't translate into personal strength.

She cleared her throat. "Did your men tell you what these thieves looked like?"

"One of them mentioned there was something on his neck that looked like a frog. Sounds silly, though."

"Really. A neck tattoo." Either it was the same guy, or the frog symbolizes something. At the very least, it would connect them to everyone that wants to destroy elvers competition. Well, maybe not everyone. What if there were more organized criminals out there swarming IJsselmeer? They might wear snake tattoos or shark tattoos instead. What if the Frogs are the easier ones to deal with? Or worse—what if a group with vulture tattoos have just been waiting for the Frogs to weaken Bakker Marine, while getting ready to deal the final blow.

Gordon cannot show weakness. Neither can she. "I know you know this, but I'll say it out loud and I'll say it again. Be careful. Don't underestimate anyone. Don't even trust anyone."

"What about you? Can I trust you?" he asked. She couldn't bring herself to speak one more word, so she leaned in, hoping against all odds this wouldn't be the last time they shared a kiss. If she couldn't admit her stupid, stupid lie by the end of the day, he really couldn't trust her.

During their ride on the train, she pictured how this conversation would go, trying to figure out the path that'll lead to Gordon not hating her. He's not the type to hate anything, and that alone has given her hope that the perfect words exist. Already she was missing the rush of beach waves chasing toddlers and annihilating sand castles that

ELVERS

weren't very impressive. Grains of sand stuck between her toes and occasionally sprinkled the floor when she moved her head. Particles going through an endless cycle, whether or not fate intended, as the world twists and turns upon itself.

By the time they made it to the garage, she was ready. Every step she took up the little stairway to the door made her feel more and more present. Anticipation loves presence. Cerise reached out for his hand. If she were to confess in this liminal space, maybe it would be easier for him to move forward. They could pretend it was a bad dream. Pretend even more. Take control. Leave everyone behind.

"There's something I want to tell you Gordon."

He stared at the door as if she never spoke, fixating on a piece of paper.

"What is that?" Cerise ripped it off and saw messy handwriting. *The housekeeper has been kidnapped.*

"They want me to go to the warehouse." He talked in that manner where you don't recognize your own voice. A voice wavering with emotion.

Cerise shook her head, half in disbelief and half in reply. Gordon wasn't going anywhere.

"I literally told you today to not put yourself in danger, and now you wanna play Batman and Joker?" She reread the note, fighting her will to tear it asunder.

"My pa was able to deal with it the first time. It's my turn, Cerise. I have to make sure no one gets hurt because of me."

She looked at him, eyes wide. "The first time? What?"

"We had to save Miss. Rosanne when she got taken away last year. They must think she's an easy target because she can't hear. How can people be so cruel..."

It made sense, except for one question she never got around to. *Can she hear?* She pulled out her phone and showed Gordon the photo.

ELVERS

"I found these the other day while I was searching for you in the house. These aren't your earbuds or something, are they?"

He didn't respond. She took that as a no.

"Think about what your mom was warning us about. If she was right about Rosanne working against you, that woman could've been using hearing aids to get information on your family and the company. If she knows the code to your office, she could get maps and schedules for somebody to plan an ambush." She was getting heated. Hopefully all this wasn't coming off as paranoia. She didn't need to give another good reason for him to break up before he found out about the other thing. Cerise stepped down and sat on the stairs to think.

"I wish I had a taser."

"I have one."

She turned and looked confused. Did she really say that out loud? Also, did he even hear her right?

"What do you mean you have a taser? Those are illegal."

"My pa got one and showed me how to use it. It's in his office, one of the drawers."

Her fingers kept going back to the bracelet. Neither of them talked for a while, as if they had made a silent agreement to not make haste.

Sending Gordon to that warehouse was the equivalent of dropping a rabbit into alligator infested swamps. There must be a better option. And there must be a way to ensure these gators fucking starve.

"You have Emmet's number," she spoke. A safe assumption. "We can call him... he knows the warehouse."

"He would go, but I don't want to risk—"

"He has to park far away, then sneak in. Maybe he can wait for me to show up... I'll distract those rotten kidnapppers. Meanwhile, he will find a door they can't see from wherever they happen to be standing."

ELVERS

Gordon was sort of catching on. "How is he gonna rescue all the elvers?"

"He's not."

Fourteen

Gordon had given her keys and the—fingers crossed—correct access code to the warehouse. They're not expecting her, but these people will just have to understand that the boss is simply too busy doing important stuff.

Using ski masks, all four of them concealed their identities. That, or they couldn't handle the weather. Rosanne was on her knees with duct tape covering her mouth. Possibly by choice, possibly not. It'd be good to keep an eye on her and that scarlet scarf she favors so much.

"Where is he?" She couldn't tell whose muffled voice that belonged to, so she mostly paid attention to one of the taller people standing in the middle.

"Business meeting." She tried to sound nonchalant. "So what's the meaning behind the frogs?"

Everyone exchanged glances before a high-pitched male voice responded. "They're toads."

"Okay... so what's with the toads?" It suddenly occurred to her one of these men might've been the stalker at the bus stop. If he was here, itching to get his hands on the woman that stole a piece of his dignity, Cerise would make sure to grab that taser before anyone could finish saying let's get her.

"That's who we are," said the ski mask who stepped forward. "Tie opps and drown."

ELVERS

"It's what we'll do to you and this bitch if you don't open those doors right now."

They did indeed have a bundle of lovely blue ropes in hand. Almost the same color as her new swim suit. However, she sensed Emmet wasn't finished.

"Is she okay? How have you been treating her?" They all took a second to remember Rosanne was in front of them, and that that's who she was referring to. Shrug. Yeah. Suppose.

"What kind of a person does this to a helpless deaf person. You ought to be ashamed. And for what? You could've spent all this energy getting your own permits instead."

"Does it look like we're here to argue with you? All we care about is getting inside."

"Did you rob her too? How fast are you trying to get into hell, boys?"

"Already there," someone growled. She started shuffling towards the warehouse at an extremely leisurely pace while thinking of what else to say.

"I'll give you one last chance. Go back home, boys."

"You're outnumbered. Why on earth would we change our minds?"

She stopped walking. "How many of you have gone to jail over this bullshit." No one answered. "Any of you got kids?" Silence. She didn't expect anyone to divulge personal information, however, it was obvious she struck a chord. To at least get them thinking about their families was a smart move. Ninety-nine percent of people do have someone in their lives that qualifies as family, whether it's a bunch of cousins, two grandparents, overbearing in-laws, a life-long friend, a sordid kitten that appeared on your porch in need of love, or a pen pal you've never met and still consider the most important part of your life. Cerise has it. They have it.

"They know more than you think," she continued. "They know what you're doing is fucked up, and they will grow up needing therapy over it. If your kids don't get lucky, they

ELVERS

will grow up just the same as you. Barely surviving. Everything getting taken away because of karma, and because you didn't teach them better."

"Think we're stupid? Sit the fuck down."

"You want me to? I don't mind."

She really did sit down criss cross apple sauce. One of them grabbed her and told her to stop. Now was her chance to make a fuss and really buy some time.

"Don't touch me. Get off!"

"I bet she's waiting for the police."

"Tie her up!"

She shoved away anyone who came close and made an announcement. "I didn't call the police. But my friend will if I don't make it back in an hour. Get away from me." Cerise told Lily she would text her a password when she's safe: MANTA.

"Then you better quit your yammering. Let's go."

They crowded her around that door, watching her fumble with the keys and explain that this was only the second time she's been to this warehouse. Her ignorance persisted with the code, because of course she was going to get it wrong the first time. It felt like she was channeling her inner Gordon, which made her smile inwardly.

The lights were off. Cerise let them enter the shadows and figure out their way. Right as the hostage walked by, Cerise grabbed Rosanne's silk scarf and pulled it down far enough to see the toad on her neck.

"Don't come back to the house," she warned the proven traitor. Rosanne looked like she was about to hiss. Her eyes were huge and expressive. At that moment, Cerise suspected she was the one in charge. She must've been someone who thought they deserved more out of life and didn't want to let being dealt a bad hand stop them.

Isn't that what she was going to do to Gordon herself—take whatever she could from a young privileged rich guy? Or was that not part of her plan anymore? Cerise didn't even

ELVERS

have much of a life disadvantage. No sob story to justify scamming anyone. No disability.

He sits on a beach towel with his rainbow lei, waiting for his family. The stars are always out. Peace lies within the night, while the ocean rises red. *Mr. Harmen Bakker, please give me your blessing. I'll do it tonight.*

As soon as the Not Frogs left, she locked up the building and phoned Gordon.

"Did Emmet get here before they went in?" she asked.

"He told me he snuck in and salted every tub."

"Good. The Toads won't make a penny. Also, Rosanne does have the matching tattoo. I checked."

"I've got the locksmith here making sure she won't be able to get in. Are you coming back now? I don't want you out there by yourself after all that." She could feel the rhythm of her heart responding to his tenderness.

"Yes. There's something I need to tell you in person. About my brother."

Fifteen

Six Months Later

Cerise circled three numbers on her chart. They didn't add up to the projected profits. Quotas have been maxed out. Ever since she assumed the role of sitting in Gordon's leather chair, taking phone calls, managing the schedules, data entry, submitting research, and so on, her ability to detect anything that smells fishy has risen tenfold.

She stopped mumbling when she heard a familiar knocking at the door. Gordon loves to knock even though she said it wasn't necessary—this is his place.

"Konnichiwa, kireina sakuradesu ne," he said proudly.

"Hallo Gordon. Anything I can do for you?"

He came over for a hug and said he was lonesome. She remarked on his tan and asked what he thought about the new recruit. It was a last minute decision for her to hire this individual, knowing he needed the job to take care of his grandmother. Could've been totally lying, but intuition told her otherwise (and he would've come up with a better phony resume if he were that deceptive).

ELVERS

"He seemed a bit hesitant every time somebody asked him to do something. I could tell he felt that same feeling you get when it's your first day at a new school. Nothing he can't fix by making new friends." She reached for an hourglass sitting next to a black and blue conch sculpture. If you were quiet enough you could hear the falling sand, which means you can think properly.

"He'll be a lot more nervous if anyone decides to make an attack. Feels inevitable." She sighed and stared at her desk. No longer was it covered with sheets in disarray. Cerise gave the now organized work area a few nice touches with her ocean themed notepads and gold foil calendars filled with meetings, deadlines, and whatever else she could fit. The only thing missing was a sentimental coffee mug and a framed photo of her family from the Hawaii getaway. Who has time to get physical copies of anything anymore?

Gordon fed the flames with a heavy piece of wood. Embers shot upwards and disappeared just as fast. A month ago, he asked Cerise "what is fire and what is it made of". The best she could offer was that it's a chemical reaction that requires oxygen. Combustion. Heat. Something like that.

"I can't believe you're so smart," he would often say. "You don't give yourself enough credit," she replied. His ability to pick up beginner Japanese quickly was truly impressive, and he was enthusiastic enough to go out of his way and practice outside of her lessons. Not exactly her lessons per se, but more like they watched a short video and she quizzed him on whatever they just watched. She also answered his questions—he always had a lot of questions. Cerise had a lot of students throughout her swimming career, but he just might be the best one (in her extremely biased opinion).

"Are you sure he's qualified for this job?" she asked. "Maybe I made the wrong call."

"What are you worried about? He's willing to learn and his grandma goes to Herinnering Haven."

ELVERS

"Gordon, I love you and your mother and I want everyone at the village to thrive, but grandmas are not a hiring factor. Remember what happened when the police tried to arrest our staff?" Three people quit. Two people received minor injuries. Aron almost got into trouble, but Cerise found a good lawyer that saved him from having a mark on his record.

"I wanna keep him."

"I know you do." He wins. He was always going to win, but Cerise doesn't like to make it easy for him when it comes to business. Sometimes steam-room-Harmen tells her to kick it up a notch when he thinks Gordon is being complacent or needs to toughen up. Usually he stays in the background, though. He'll give her the space she needs to meditate on those weekends where she has to stay in the office and grind away interminable problems.

Their last conversation, Cerise learned from Harmen that Gordon still doesn't understand why Asia needs eels from so far away.

"He thinks the Japanese want something exotic, but you need to explain to him it's not that at all."

"It's because they don't know how to get eel to reproduce," she interjected like a front row A student.

"Right. The eels migrate to breed in saltwater. When the babies return to freshwater, they will mature there if left undisturbed."

"Any idea why it has to be that way?" she asked.

"Maybe humans aren't the only ones with a concept of romance. They want to do things properly and carry out the ritual."

It wasn't difficult for Cerise to come up with a more realistic theory. Back in Hawaii, her hot diving instructor fed her a bunch of info on marine life in preparation for their activities. Cerise felt the need to indulge in her own research whenever those memories came back. Gordon already had textbooks on the ocean, all collecting dust in his mom's old

ELVERS

work space. The one she most enjoyed contained startling water color illustrations instead of photographs. It seemed appropriate, given the subject matter was related to water.

The labeled diagrams were indelible. A cross section of an angler fish. A sea sponge menagerie. This remarkably detailed octopus mimicking a sea snake, which could put you into a hypnotic stupor if you concentrated on the pattern for long enough. Reading about life cycles and hydrothermal vents didn't cure her longing for the ocean—its beautiful escape—but it filled her heart with appreciation for the greatest place you can swim.

She took a sip of pineapple margarita mixed by steam-room-Harmen. "Maybe they don't want to attract scavengers near the eggs when they die. They put the offspring somewhere safe, and then they go wherever to leave their bodies at when it's over."

"Yes, perhaps they go somewhere nice to live out their final moments. Tahiti."

"No one ever checks Tahiti."

Cerise had nightmares of being an eel. Her good sense of direction was totally gone in the bottom of the sea, and it was impossible to escape the strange build-up of brine. It killed everything else around her. There was a silhouette of a whale way out in the distance, the last object she could make sense of before sinking into the void. Her eel body stopped writhing. Some hideous prehistoric creature left its jaw agape pointed towards the surface. You'd find shipwrecks and decomposing sharks inside the ruins of its stomach. It'd be cold enough to freeze hell thrice over.

Waking up to a heavy morning drizzle made it hard to get out of bed. Emerging from the puffy blanket felt like crawling out of partially set concrete. Gordon woke up before her as usual. He's a breakfast chaser. A chocolate chip waffle connoisseur. Cerise couldn't tolerate such a heavy and sweet meal at this hour. She grabbed a tub of berries to eat with her protein rich cereal and chatted with Gordon about their plans.

ELVERS

"We're doing the windmills today," Gordon reminded her. "Am I meeting you at Lily's shop?"

"Oh yeah. My appointment is at 10. I'll probably be done around lunch." Today should be the day her friend completes the monstrous back piece.

"I can't wait to see your octopus come to life," he said with a kiss. "I wonder if I can get my hands on a little one for one of the tanks. Do those even exist?"

"A small adult? Don't think so. If there is one, I bet it would enjoy exploring that shipwreck and making friends with Blub."

"I love any animal that can change colors at will. Like I wish I could do that."

"What would you do it for?"

"When I'm happy I'll become yellow. When I'm sad, blue."

"Well, you have anger covered."

"You too." They both smiled. "You do a really good job at it," he teased.

"I turn red so you know exactly when not to be around me." Gordon gave her praise for being so "talented", never missing an opportunity to make her feel good about herself, deserved or not.

They finished breakfast and went their separate ways. He was going to make a quick stop at the warehouse before joining up with Cerise for their date. It rained harder and the ground got muddier. A chipmunk chattered from the safety of her den, looking forward to the smell of rejuvenated grass and washed pebbles.

Lily was extra convivial seeing her old roommate, now that they don't get to hang out as often. Although they both knew it wasn't going to be the two of them forever, a part of Cerise wanted to move back into the rental, so they could have their spontaneous outings to the comedy club and arrange slumber parties where they read each other's tarot cards with trashy TV playing in the background. Some

ELVERS

things you just can't enjoy by yourself, and Gordon was certainly no replacement for Lily, who has always been a big fan of her relationship with "the fish guy". The details of her new life with him were almost as intriguing as the drama on *Love in the Wild*. When Lily found out they were taking a day trip to Kinderdijk, she asked Cerise if they were going to discuss Japan. By now, Gordon was well aware of her interest in traveling, and Cerise wanted to make sure he will be by her side when she finally gets on that plane.

"I'll bring it up. I've been worried it would push him away and I know how much he hates flying." Her back stung but chatting helped take her mind off the vibrating needles.

"It's been months and he trusts you enough to basically run the entire company. Don't dwell on it forever. Just bring it up like it's something you were going to do anyway, and that you'd like to invite him."

"Which is the truth. And it would sort of be a work trip since I might as well check out the eel farm over there." After a long pause, she brought up the last man Lily had been seeing. "You never explained what happened with Isaac." Lily was planning on introducing him and then backed out. Apparently, he was the only mascot in the world who liked his job, and his own girlfriend couldn't understand him because his vocabulary half consisted of slang and emojis. As soon as her friend started seeing this tattoo client, Lily began asking questions that made her feel out of the loop. The only one Cerise did recognize was spacecake, and even then, she heard about this term for edibles *after* moving to Amsterdam (from overhearing Declan, of all people).

"He tried to offer me this drug, and it wasn't just any drug. I couldn't believe what I was reading when I looked it up."

"What's it called?"

"Datura. They get it from these diabolical flowers, the seeds. This kind of drug is not worth trying in the slightest."

"Was Isaac trying to get you killed?"

ELVERS

"That, or give me dementia. Anyone who comes out of that experience with their brain intact is probably hand chosen by God and has some crazy destiny to fulfill." Her skin pain was replaced by that sinking feeling you get when you're strapped onto a roller coaster you didn't want to be on. The first movement. The slow clicking during that terrifying climb. As the earth came into view, what did she see?

"You can get dementia from taking drugs?"

"Apparently."

"How do people take datura?"

"I think they just eat or drink it. I read that it's basically impossible to figure out the correct dosage because the concentration of poison inside the seed changes based on how the plant was cultivated." The buzzing that hovered over her back stopped as Lily searched for a picture of moonflower. She held her phone up to display a white trumpet-like blossom with pointed edges curving to one direction. It reminded Cerise of a menacing pinwheel. It reminded her of Rosanne.

Over an hour later, Lily gave her one last wipe and set the gun aside. Cerise couldn't believe the stabbing was over. Would she come to miss the painful tingling on her new skin the way a woman might miss being pregnant? The way a business owner misses the early days of financial hardship when every bit of profit felt like winning at slots? The way a married couple reflects on how different things were when they were figuring things out, both on the cusp of finding out each other's worst traits. Understandably, Cerise was concerned about reaching that point and possibly reliving her past. Gordon was an angel, and to have that image shattered would in turn shatter her heart.

Throwing herself into her work didn't prevent Cerise from falling in love. She should've known it would only be a matter of time before her heart was able to convince itself

ELVERS

that Gordon would be different. Gordon would be the one. He forgave her. He wants her around.

He forgave her.

"Were you able to avoid peeking at this giant tat?" the artist asked.

"Yes, I wanted it to be a surprise. I want to know what it feels like when other people see it for the first time."

"I think I'm more excited than you are. Oh my god, can I film your reaction? Just for myself."

"Go for it," she said quite happily. Lily deserves to be proud of another creative masterpiece, and why not save the memories of all their girl bonding leading up to—

"What the fuck, Lil! How did you even do this so fast..."

They shared many excited giggles while staring at a mirror surrounded by lights and hanging eucalyptus. A perfectly symmetrical octopus with curved arms raised in beautiful composition now lived on her dark skin. Lily's shading had improved by miles. She managed to make a whimsical creature look rather intimidating and realistic.

"Thank you so much. Dank je. No one could've done a better job." Every movement of muscle and bone made her back tattoo come alive as she checked each angle in awe.

"This is literally my best work on a living human," said Lily. "I hope you genuinely like it, my best girl."

Her eyes shifted to her beaming friend in the mirror, and for the first time she felt zero regret over everything that happened with Wes. Good things do surface out of mistakes, and she wanted to keep those good things coming.

"I'm gonna save up and find you a better place to live. It'll be bigger, nicer, and more affordable. You'll have room to store your art. You'll have a gorgeous kitchen that you won't use much but who cares. You can buy any pets you want. I promise I'll make it happen."

"What? No, no, silly. Save up for your dreams. You don't have to worry about me."

ELVERS

"I wouldn't say it if I couldn't do it. Please let me try to make it up to you... for risking your life at Zen Sushi and everything else you've done."

"Listen—if you can afford something like that, I won't say no. But our friendship is not a score card. There is absolutely nothing you owe me or anyone else for that matter."

"I know it's not a score card, and I know you'd do it again." Lily wasn't the type to feel regret. She hardly seemed thrown off by Isaac. "I'm sorry that guy turned out to be a crazy drug dealer. It sounds like you're cutting him off for good."

"Eh, it's not like I had any hard feelings. I got lucky he showed me his red flags so early."

"And there will be many more drug dealers to come," she joked.

"Uh huh. Ones with less toxic recreational drugs, I'm sure," Lily replied with a wink.

Sixteen

Gordon took the lead on the bike path. Riding the wind, full speed, laughing like a maniac that just broke out of a mental asylum. Cerise called out to him, "Why are you pedaling so fast?" but it was no use. She just had to keep up.

Several birds flew overhead, sharing his blind excitement. He loved going on dates, this young man, especially if it took place somewhere they've never visited together. This was the village to visit if they wanted to see the iconic structures of Holland. Several windmills built over two hundred years ago to prevent the tragedy of flooding. Most of them were inactive, but the one where the Millers used to reside had sails slicing through the wet winds at a fast pace.

Lily pads gathered near the edges of the canal. All that water ran straight as roadways with the occasional bent angle. The one swan they spotted was extremely placid—no surprise, given the paradise it gets to live in. Gordon stopped his shenanigans to stare at the fowl, its peacefulness overcoming him. He regarded Cerise with a soft expression, and she was glad to see him back to normal.

They stayed until the windmills turned into dark silhouettes after sunset, both seated at a bench, snacking on locally manufactured crisps that were grown from the very fields they were biking past.

ELVERS

"Would you live in a windmill?" she asked Gordon.

"Yeah. It's actually bigger on the inside than on the outside." Of course, he meant it appeared that way. "I wouldn't even change the beds." Cerise could barely lie down straight in those little sleeping nooks. She felt like Goldilocks trying to get comfortable in baby bear's spot. Even throughout the rest of the tour, it felt like the family still lived there and that they would barge in at any moment.

"I'd stay for a week maybe. Or until I get too creeped out," she said thoughtfully.

"Is the place haunted? I didn't know you were afraid of ghosts."

A flashback to the private sauna. "It depends. I don't actually think any of the windmills here are haunted, but they're practically ancient. And you never know what kind of strange history happened here."

"The only history I know here is the cat cradle."

Cerise quirked her brow. "Is that the one with the baby?"

"Yes. The baby was saved by the jumping cat and then the cat became best friends with that baby."

"What did the cat look like?"

"It was all black. That's what every cat in a folk tale looks like."

"I've had a black cat give me bad luck before." She recalled a time when her superstitious mother warned her about certain animals being bad omens. Possums, skunks, a deer outside of its natural habitat, and the famous black cat who will cross your path and turn your life upside down just as easily as it can turn itself through the air.

Young Cerise encountered a high-pitched meow from a kitten that was scratching its ear. It wasn't the helpless, meek kind of kitten. That ball of fur exploded into a gallop when it saw her walking down a sidewalk carrying a bag full of assignments. Ten-year-old Cerise got startled and dropped the strawberry frappé she wasn't supposed to be drinking in the first place onto the concrete. Maybe she would've felt

ELVERS

less inclined to believe it was caused by actual bad luck if she hadn't been knocked over by a cyclist right after, scraping up both her knees on the one day she decided to wear a shorter dress.

"What happened?" asked Gordon.

"My mom had to perform a cleansing ritual on me before it ever went away. For months I was living in hell. All my friends turned against me over dumb stuff, which led to being unmotivated for school, and then I got hit by a car that was turning. Scraped up half my face from that even though you can't tell after my skin healed." Gordon brushed her cheek. "That little rascal must've really hated me. Can you believe I wanted to pet it? I'd probably be dead by now if my mom's voodoo shit didn't work, but my life went back to normal and it felt like everybody collectively decided to stop being an asshole towards me."

"I'm glad you had a family like that looking out for you. Parents always go above and beyond. My whole life, I always felt like I was the luckiest boy on earth because of my upbringing. And I still feel that way..."

"You have your bad days," she said. "It's not easy being a CEO, managing all those rapsCALLIONS. Getting all sun burnt."

"At least I never have to worry about money. My parents and their parents and their parents' parents set everything up for me to succeed." He stood up and took her hand. They started making their way back to the bikes at a snail's pace. It had been a very long day, but there was one more conversation she needed from him.

"It sounds like you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself. I know how you are, Gordon."

"I don't know. I guess." He shrugged and attempted a smile. "I value the legacy. I'll do anything to make my papa proud."

It took her a while to figure out how to frame her words without too much of a negative connotation. The last thing she needed to do was ruin what had been a perfect date by

ELVERS

making him feel belittled. "I never want you to limit yourself. If you need to pursue anything else, even just to try a new thing in life, that's what I want to support."

Gordon tripped over something and clung to her arm. Either his eyesight was not so good in the dark, or a frog leapt out at the wrong moment.

"You saved my life," he exaggerated in a serious tone.

"I did. This means you have to follow your dreams no matter what to make sure my efforts were not in vain."

"My dreams are childish. I'm childish."

"You are so passionate about aquariums and taking care of pet fish, which not many children I know are into because they all think fish are boring. Look, I know you would rather work at a pet store or sell animals." And she would rather not have to worry about someone poisoning him with flower seeds or kidnapping him for ransom or worse.

"It doesn't matter," he said, trying to sound lighthearted. "I accept the privilege of making tons of money through fishing. What more could a guy ask for."

Cerise wanted to grab his arms and shake him. She didn't, but they stopped walking.

"Come to Japan with me," she blurted out. He squeezed her hand and didn't speak. "Watashi to kite," she repeated in Japanese.

"I can't." She detected a hint of trembling. Fear.

"You've done it before. I think you can do it again if you try." Emmet might be able to convince him to fly. Make it seem like it's no big deal. Gordon needs to see what it's like to physically get away from his enemies and finally breathe. Finally go on a walk without looking over his shoulder in case someone else wants his elvers.

"I do want to be there with you to practice my Japanese. I haven't been on a plane in... it feels like forever ago."

"If you don't go now, you'll never be able to fly anywhere for the rest of your life. It becomes more difficult to bring yourself to face that fear."

ELVERS

Gordon understood logic even if he couldn't put it into words himself. So he agreed. He would give it a shot and think about everything. His life. Their life.

Seventeen

Cerise was having the best nap of her life in the reclined leather seat of Emmet's small plane. She had the same dream about visiting a head therapy spa in Japan for moisturizing scalp treatment. There was a water fountain made up of glass bowls arranged like a spiral staircase. It sat on the counter making pleasant noise the whole time. Indigo walls surrounded her as she received luxury service that would've made medieval queens fume with envy. The steam was gentle on her face and head. Everything smelled like fresh laundry. She was the only client present.

"My skin feels incredibly soft," she told the friendly lady after her facial. They spoke over the running water in Japanese with a soothing cadence. As dreams go, Cerise found herself outside suddenly, lying down on a massive lily pad floating across clear water. Somewhere in the vicinity, there must be a human-sized toad. Probably angry. Probably hungry. The toad would be large enough to consume multiple adult eels in one gulp. Cerise felt the urge to lean over and check what she already knew to be in the water. Dark, snake-like figures rushed past each other like death was chasing them. She wanted to look away, but whatever was in control of her dream locked her in. Before she could react, one of the eels lunged towards her face.

Gordon was standing in front of her, speechless.

ELVERS

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I went to check on Emmet and Seth. They told me they shut down their computer systems and we can't turn them back on." The expression on his face made a lot of sense now.

"Uh, why'd they do that?"

"For some reason... they can't get their exact air speed. Not from any of the tubes, even though they checked them before taking off."

Cerise stood up, wanting to enter the cockpit herself to find out exactly what was going on. "Okay... don't they need their systems more than ever then?"

"I think they triggered their back-up systems, which will help them fly the plane better."

"I swear to god if they're trying to mess with you, I will push one of them out of this plane."

The cockpit was filled with the stench of nervous sweat. As the first officer, Seth had been focused on manually flying. Emmet spoke to air traffic control to verify their speed readings and get permission to climb. Their team work was being tested to its maximum limit, causing Cerise to hesitate. Maybe it wasn't a great idea to interrupt the people with her life in their hands, but they did talk to Gordon. She deserves to know whether or not it's a good idea to start writing notes to her loved ones.

"Are we okay?" she finally said. Seth didn't spare a glance. The captain briefly acknowledged her and said something about pitot tubes being blocked and the risk of stalling.

"Permission to have clearance between flight level three two zero and flight level three five zero." He turned to Seth and explained they needed this margin of error because the GPS was less accurate in determining their altitude. When Cerise heard their plane was handicapped, she asked where they were going to land.

"We're still going to make it to Shibushi. It's just going to be a difficult landing," Emmet assured her.

ELVERS

"The landing gear won't work," said Seth.

"We can lower it with the gravity gear extension lever."

"What about the steering?"

Emmet got on the radio again and asked for a tug when they land. Behind her, Gordon appeared to be in a stupor. She went back to check on him and consciously relaxed the muscles in her face.

"They've got it all under control," she said, despite knowing things were pretty serious. "We're fine." She convinced him to take a seat and relax. Got him to practice a bit of Japanese. Gave him kisses.

"If we crash in the water, what are the chances of surviving?" he asked. Cerise encouraged him to stop looking out the window.

"If you need saving, you already know I'm trained for that. I would never let you drown, Gordon. We are making it through any amount of ocean."

"I have a bad feeling, Cerise." It caught her off guard using her real name. Sarasota had transformed into the new nickname Soda Pop, and she liked those three syllables.

"Don't say that..." She sat him down away from the window and said she will check on their pilots soon. If they had bad news, her plan was to keep that from Gordon and only bring back any glimmer of hope she could hang onto.

She asked how his mother had been doing, which turned out to be a decent distraction. They had only seen her a couple of times since that first visit. Katerina was happy that Cerise decided to stick around, and Cerise was happy that Katerina remembered who she was. They gossiped about Gordon while he went around saying hi to all the villagers. Apparently, he was a surprisingly naughty young boy. Giving his mother a hard time helped cement those childhood memories for her. He broke stuff frequently and was always afraid to admit the fault. He would beg for toys and throw tantrums over it, but never played with anything longer than a week. The one time he retaliated over not

ELVERS

getting a crocodile shaped automatic bubble blower, his parents had to call the fire department.

"I wonder why he never shared this," Cerise laughed. "I think of him as so nice and harmless. Who knew there's a little devil sitting on his shoulder after all."

"Could've been two little devils. Maybe you scared one of them off and straightened the other one out." Katerina spoke slowly due to her condition, though you could tell her words were more intentional than most people's.

"It just means I need more time with him. I want to see that mischievous side. Nobody's perfect." There was also something very comforting in hearing all this after wondering for so long whether or not he is too good to be true.

Gordon came back juggling three ice cream cones in his hands. All of them were vanilla soft serve with chocolate sprinkles. His mom loved the sprinkles.

It took one look for him to realize he shouldn't have left these two alone. "What'd she say about me?"

"Nothing bad. She talked about how cute you were as a kid and how you loved bubbles."

Cerise wished she had bubbles on this plane. Something else to do and think about while they try not to worry about stalling or a messy landing. A way to forget about the guilt she felt every time she saw the terror on Gordon's face. She would be apologizing for making him get on this flight if it weren't for the fact that this would definitely get him to believe they were about to crash. All of that could wait if they made it out alive.

"I'm gonna check on them, okay?"

Gordon nodded.

The view was stunning. Watching the clouds, the water, the island getting closer and closer—she no longer felt afraid. Seth was as focused as he was before and Emmet kept an eye on the instruments.

"How much longer?" she finally asked.

"Less than one hour, my friend," said the captain.

ELVERS

"That's good. Thanks for handling this. I'll go back and put my seat belt on." She didn't know what else to say. There may be protocol and checklists for the people actually flying the plane, but she was just a passenger. The expectations for the passengers are pretty straightforward. Let everyone do their jobs and don't panic.

Gordon was looking out the window again, breathing like he was running out of oxygen.

"You alright?" she asked.

"We're almost there." His voice was filled with dread.

"It'll be okay. I'm staying right next to you. Emmet has been handling things so well. The pilots are totally focused on having a safe landing. Your father hired the best, right? So many hours of flying experience."

"I don't think they have experience with this," he said, low and quiet.

"All pilots train for emergencies. That's why we haven't crashed already." He took her arm and pressed his face against it. Cerise could sense the weight of his anxiety through his touch. Her heart sped up as she stared out the window. *I need to close this thing.* "Anyway, we're getting food after this, right? I could use a fresh meal. Let's go somewhere nice."

"Somewhere nice, yeah."

"Do you want sushi? Ramen? Curry?"

"I want... I want to take you for unagi."

"Our product. What a nice idea." She continued to throw out lighthearted topics about what they planned to do on their trip until Emmet's voice came through the speakers. It was time to tighten their seat belts and accept whatever fate had in store. More importantly, it was time to be with Gordon and cherish what they had. She had never adored anybody the way she adored this young man next to her. All her trust in him aided in her trust for the future. Before they touched the ground, Cerise knew that beautiful

ELVERS

future existed, because their love story was not over. Far from over.

Eighteen

At first, she thought he fainted when he dropped to the ground. Gordon was sprawled onto concrete face down. There were paramedics on standby. The plane was still in one piece despite the tough landing, which resembled an earthquake from the perspective of anyone unlucky enough to be inside.

"The ground is good, isn't it," said Emmet to Gordon.

"Normal people can't get enough of it," Seth chimed in. Their spirits were oddly uplifting. It reminded Cerise of this group of teenagers she used to know but never got involved with. No matter how many times those kids flirted with death, they acted like it was no big deal. They didn't have a collective name. Four guys and one nearly bald girl who acted like the ringleader. Their favorite pastime was the clapping game.

She spotted them atop this building, chosen for its roof and the railings lining it. Her friend at the time invited her to watch in case one of them fell. Of course, it sounded like a cool idea to teenaged Cerise. When would she ever get another opportunity to witness something so crazy and unusual? It's not like she was the one in danger.

But when that girl let out her final scream, Cerise was so shocked she didn't even mention to anyone about being there. She went home and hid under the covers, unsure if the fall was real. There she stayed until finding herself

ELVERS

holding onto a railing with both hands on the wrong side. The ground appeared to be miles away with nothing but dark green trees blotching the grass. She took in her surroundings, feeling blasts of wind with such clarity that she couldn't tell if this was a dream or not.

The ringleader materialized right before her. Green, steely eyes that never blinked. Delilahs and black freckles done by liquid eyeliner. Let go, she hissed at Cerise. Let go and clap. She heard those words followed by actual clapping. Several people below were shouting and cheering at her. Like in most of her dreams, she couldn't speak, and the wind came at her as she let go.

She went to her knees next to Gordon and asked if he was hurt.

"I think I'm okay," his voice shaky, but not as much as hers. Now that she didn't have to focus so much on getting him to relax, her mind lifted the dam that kept back the flood of emotions. Cerise was overcome with guilt and shock and relief, and for many moments she didn't know how to apologize.

"Sorry isn't enough," she spoke to herself. "I pressured you and now... now you're going to be forever traumatized." She wanted to get back on the plane and never come out. Shove herself into the back with the eels. Maybe she'd be a better companion to them than she has been to humans. Maybe she would feel a sense of belonging.

"You were right, though."

"Right about what?"

"Emmet and Seth are saying it was sabotage. Someone covered up every pitot tube and tried to get us killed." He sighed. "You've been trying to warn me for months how much danger we were in."

She helped him up and they both stood. A new country. An enchanting island. *Perhaps more enchanting than Hawaii*, she thought.

ELVERS

"I still feel bad because this is your worst nightmare. The worst possible scenario other than fully crashing. I really can't imagine..."

"It wasn't my worst nightmare. I had you next to me. I had my friends in the cockpit. I even had my elvers."

She cracked a smile. "I didn't know you cared about your elvers so much."

"They've been a part of my life ever since I can remember. From my childhood to my livelihood."

The excitement of an almost-plane-crash dies down a lot faster than it would have had there been an accident. All of the focus was brought back to the baby eels, since they needed to be transported. The pilots were not finished working even after speaking with the flight engineer about all the problems they encountered. They lifted containers heavy with water into nearby trucks. The precious cargo sloshed and shifted the balance of weight, but these men were in excellent shape thanks to all the times they've done this in the past.

The eel farm vaguely reminded her of Herinnering Haven with all their little buildings to separate the job activities. However, there were a lot more pools of water. Gordon introduced her to fully grown eels by tearing off a doughy lump of fish meal mixed with fats, corn, wheat, and vitamins. Hundreds of these dark purple fish writhed above the surface to feast upon the rather unappetizing food. She felt hypnotized. She watched their lunch gradually disappear and felt accomplished when nothing was left.

Eel workers greeted Cerise as though she were the most honored guest they've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Eager faces surrounded her as she helped them snatch grown eels in order to toss them into the appropriate section according to size. Some even cheered when she found her grip on an eel that surely would've been screaming if it had the capacity.

ELVERS

"God these are so strong," she said in Japanese.

"Strong?" Gordon asked in English.

"Yes. The unagi are surprisingly tsuyoi." It was not an easy task. It was one of many jobs where one might assume there is a low requirement of skill and effort. But she was thankful for the opportunity to show up in person, to find out for herself.

After getting whipped repeatedly by slimy fish, Cerise and Gordon went over to a processing room for the real challenge. Two workers at different cutting stations, a blond Asian man and an older woman with her hair contained in a net, made long and precise cuts through eel fish that were headed to restaurants and markets. Nearby were boxes of the cleaned meat held together by bamboo skewers waiting to be smoked and grilled and doused in sauce.

"You're here to learn how to prepare the fish," the white clad man spoke. Not quite a question, but Cerise answered back in Japanese.

"Yes we are. Please go easy on us." She turned to Gordon and switched back to English. "Is this your first lesson?"

"We're going to use the knives?"

"We're going to try."

Another case of the professionals making the task seem like a walk in the park when it's more like a hike up Mount Fuji. Cerise asked the eel she butchered for forgiveness after looking at Gordon's eel, which turned out not half bad. He told Yumiko she was an excellent teacher and thanked her, and she corrected his Japanese with warmth in her eyes.

"I knew you'd be a natural at anything concerning fish." Cerise flashed a wide grin at him.

"I've seen moeder cook seafood before. She likes eating sea bass and telling us about how healthy it is."

"Watching someone debone a fish is a lot different from doing it yourself, though. Maybe you were a sushi chef in a past life."

"What about you? What was your past life?"

ELVERS

"If I was a smart one, then maybe a marine biologist."

"Like Charles Darwin?"

Cerise giggled, and then giggled some more. "I don't know if I was anyone important, but something like that."

"That's okay if you weren't. You're important in this life."

"That's really sweet of you to think so," she said in Japanese this time.

She tried another eel and went slower. Every time she glanced at the worker he nodded and told her to keep going. Said she was doing much better. Once the spine came out, the man helped clean it and showed her how to pierce the flat flesh with many skewers.

"Do we cook any of these here?" she asked.

"Nope. We feed them, sort them, check the water, and then butterfly the fish if they are not being shipped live."

"What do you check the water for?" she wondered aloud.

"Have to make sure the temperature and oxygen is correct."

Cerise nodded while translating tidbits of information to Gordon. It was satisfying to find out how much was going on in Japan after doing her part in Amsterdam. An entire eel farm behind the curtain. Real people helping each other generate income—real people just trying to survive.

There was no such thing as magic. Every restaurant, shop, and business will trick patrons into believing their products came out of nowhere with no more than a snap of their fingers. Now, when Cerise orders a one and one quarter eel set from an inviting yet minimalist restaurant that's been using the same recipe from over three hundred years ago, her taste buds are getting the full experience.

Gordon barely talked during their meal—she assumed he felt similarly over how their increased knowledge from today enhanced their late-night dinner. Smoky and sweet. Every sticky bite of rice with unagi filling her mouth with

ELVERS

flavors that had become perfectly intermingled during the final steaming process. She wondered how many times those towers of red lacquer boxes got tragically shaken out of place by an earthquake. It would've been the best smelling aftermath of any natural disaster (by a landslide).

"This place doesn't feel like a restaurant," said Cerise.

"It looks like a place I would live in," said Gordon. "You could probably take a nap anywhere."

"I know how much you'd love that." She's probably caught him snoozing at every possible spot in the house where you could curl yourself up in. The storage closets. The row of tucked in chairs under the dining table. Beneath his mother's old work desk on the textured spearmint colored rug. Even the empty wicker basket for dirty laundry that he did not escape without admonishment, partly for frightening her and partly for causing her disgust. Most frequently, she would spot him lying on the cushioned window bench, absorbing rays of sunshine all lizard-like. It made her want to try sleeping there despite knowing she would end up falling off.

"What can I say? My body needs rest."

"Most people think just ten hours of sleeping is too much."

"I don't even sleep ten hours straight. Three hours here, four hours there."

"Is it better to sleep like a cat?"

"I don't know any other way. I've always been a weird sleeper." He didn't sound proud of this at all. She thought about what problems he might've faced over it. Perhaps his parents or his teachers gave him trouble.

"At some point you just have to accept your differences. You know, as long as you're okay." Being a functioning human is sometimes all you can ask for. Not everyone is so lucky. And not everyone has a special person to fall back on when there's too much to do in one day and the rain won't stop falling. "Gordon, I'm aware that neither of us are perfect. I've always been aware of my shortcomings, but I

ELVERS

wanted you to know that you helped me to see how... it's fine. I can make mistakes and you're not going to punish me for it."

The touch of his hand was warm and tender. Nobody brushes her ear the way he does. "I hope nobody ever punishes you. You are the one in charge."

"That's another way of saying you want me to do the punishing, right?"

"Who's the one in trouble?"

"Nobody you need to worry about." It wasn't meant to be a secret; she simply spared him of unnecessary involvement.

They stayed at an inn surrounded by dense trees and mountainous scenery. A modest room that carried the warmth of that three-hundred-year-old restaurant. Gordon didn't even change out of his clothes before passing out on his stomach. When he ate anything other than a light salad, he tended to have a food coma. After Cerise finished washing her face and brushing her teeth, she decided to help Gordon out of those pants for his comfort. He mumbled something in between soft snores.

"Oyasumi," she whispered.

In another life they would've crashed. A near zero percent chance of survival. The elvers would explode into the sea, their new home. Thousands of baby fish ready to thrive after the devastating accident that was no accident. Cerise, in her new form, would bring herself towards the light, towards a cloud of plankton. Her wings would take her through a rushing current, and Gordon would soon follow in her wake.

Nineteen

The pointy hat suited Gordon very much with that smug look on his face. He appeared to have slept well and his energy was contagious. Cerise felt giddy as they took seats near the front of the boat. More and more people got on. Soon enough, the couple found themselves surrounded by Japanese people and their language on this regrettably hot day.

"Some people brought cushions," Cerise commented.

"You can sit on my lap if you get sore," Gordon offered. After the passing of the first bridge, it was clear this would not have been a good idea. Everyone lowered their heads beneath the wavy reflections of light dancing above. On the other side, a stunning view always. It consisted of huge trees that occasionally gave blessed shade; older houses each boasting their own personality; and the semi-rare collection of red or pink blossoms. When the boat got close enough, Gordon reached out for a single delicate flower and plucked it from the bush.

"Were you allowed to do that?" she whispered.

"I'm allowed to woo my date." He placed it above her ear, no doubt thinking this would please her. Their moment got waylaid by the lady next to her saying, "Hora, orenji-iro no neko," and sure enough, behind the wooden bars, they spotted a large cat on its balcony. It didn't spare one glance for the fifteen people cruising by.

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The captain announced that he would choose to sing a song that is known to grab the attention of this neko. Cerise understood enough to recognize it was a lullaby about a child in a cradle and swaying fruits. "Nenneko nenneko..." he sang repeatedly.

"Magnificent voice," said Gordon. "And look, the kitty cat wants to hear more." With great ease, it hopped onto the railing and opened its mouth. Born gymnast. Ten out of ten softness of fur, gilded by sunlight. Cerise waved at the house pet while the oarsman pushed their boat down the canal.

She heard someone at the end of the boat say they wanted to use the giant stick that provided the boat with momentum. It didn't generate the most power or speed, yet it was certainly one of the coolest ways to get around. Beautiful in its simplicity. Intuitive. A tool that made you feel human, but nonetheless connected to nature all at once. Cerise would've liked to have just her and Gordon on their own river ride with their own giant stick. They'd find their own little fishing area to soak up the fresh air and forget about work. No papers or filled up calendars that could only offer a glimpse of nature. She wanted to be the person in the photograph representing June or July or whatever month. Out here, you don't need to worry about the date.

"It's such a quiet ride," she said while reflecting on her day to day. The bustling of chatty tourists wasn't the only noisy aspect of their life in Amsterdam. Most transport comes with an engine of some kind. Constant whirring that your mind quickly tries to filter out in order to make sense of the oh so busy world.

"I could get used to it," he replied.

"I mean, who wouldn't want to live a life where they get to maximize presence."

"Presence?"

"Like being present and aware."

"Stopping to smell the flowers," he added. The pink petals in her hair felt buttery smooth on her fingers.

ELVERS

"Yes. If you don't have time to do that, the years will fly by. Anything that does grab your attention will probably be something very negative." Another bridge. Takamon-bashi.

"Does anyone want to stop for ice cream?" the captain asked loudly. The question was unnecessary and everyone needed to cool down. The boat slowed in front of a shop situated right next to the water.

"My ice cream should have a hat or an umbrella," said Gordon. The heat was not kind to their treats.

"Gotta lick faster. Pretend you're a cat with OCD."

"Obsessive cleaning disorder."

"Close enough."

One of the passengers remembered to take photos, prompting everyone else to pull out their phones. Cerise was never a fan of getting her picture taken, but she still wanted to capture these memories. Gordon managed to snap a cute one of her in front of impressive willows and sakura trees with the upcoming bridge way in the back. She asked for another picture of herself without the traditional hat.

"My moeder will cherish these photos when I send them to her," said Gordon.

"You have the face of a child on Kerstmis morning in them," said Cerise.

"Is that good?"

"Totemo ii. It must mean you are thrilled to be in Japan."

"I am." She needed this confirmation.

The picture taking died down and everyone's stomachs began to influence the conversations. When unagi came up, Gordon remembered something from last night. The waitress mentioned a place near this nursing home that was supposed to be breathtaking. *The perfect spot to spend quality time with a loved one, especially if you've never visited Japan.*

"That restaurant we went to was so amazing I can practically smell it," Cerise sighed.

ELVERS

"Maybe you are smelling actual food. Yanagawa is famous for having a bunch of authentic restaurants that serve eel."

By the time they wrapped up their official welcoming to the City of Water, Cerise was eager to see what else it had to offer. They returned their hats and then made their way to the nearest tea house for breakfast.

It was a dark grey building with black banners. Definitely not a traditional tea house. The ceremonies wouldn't be lasting four hours or be practiced in kimonos. Kurochō had guests seated on scalloped benches at polished wooden tables. Cerise walked past floating shelves holding incense, her gaze following a lineup of important looking statues. In another section, the shelves were filled with tea pots for sale alongside whisks and ivory scoops for the ultimate tea enthusiast. The couple was given a secluded booth next to the windows and their table was already set up with bowls, cups, and silk cloth.

Cerise would've felt slightly intimidated if it weren't for the strong presence of calming tea aromas. You could hear water being poured and powders being packaged into little bricks of soft paper. The staff moved with care and grace in their black and blue uniforms.

"Welcome to Kurochō. I am Miyuki, your host for today. Would you care to introduce yourselves?" The woman sounded experienced working here. You could see the confidence brimming from her eyes. Minimal to no make-up on her porcelain skin. Jewelry absent.

"My name is Cerise and this is Gordon. He speaks a little bit of Japanese too, but we are from the Netherlands."

"All the way from Europe? Amazing! I am delighted to meet you both. Have you been to a tea house before?"

"No, I seldom drink it. But we're here for the authentic experience of your culture." Cerise did her best to speak mostly Japanese despite the host knowing a smattering of

ELVERS

English herself. This was a more tourist-friendly place, so she felt it was her duty to demonstrate how 'tourist' doesn't have to be a dirty word.

"No worries, I'm here to show you how to prepare your matcha drink and explain the art of tea for anyone who is interested."

"We're super interested," said Gordon, startling Miyuki with the enthusiasm in his voice. "What other teas do you have besides matcha?"

"Matcha is one of many green teas we offer, and the matcha itself has many different grades."

"What do you think is the best green tea?" Cerise questioned.

Right away, she mentioned that gyokuro was very popular. She left and then brought samples inside light grey cups covered in an interesting texture. Like touching a dry lake bed. The jagged cracks almost seemed out of place in their peaceful booth. Cerise gripped the cup with both hands and had a taste while listening to the host explain how her drink was prepared.

"It needs a lower temperature for the water, just like matcha. That's why it's important to pour the boiling water into this white bowl," she gestured, "before mixing it with the powder."

Gordon finished his cup and said it tasted like soup.

"Not as bitter, right?" she smiled. "It's no coincidence. Three weeks before they harvest all the leaves, farmers will put shade over the plants. We learned that blocking sunlight will prevent the sweet tasting amino acids from turning into catechins."

"How did they discover this?" Cerise thought about this often. Anytime she took time in her day to be grateful for some random thing—soap, for example—she would wonder how the first soap recipe ever came to be. How many centuries of experimenting did it take to get the right combination, whether or not it was an accident (she assumed most of these important inventions were stumbled

ELVERS

upon). And then she would ponder how everyone else became fortunate enough to have all of these discoveries passed down to them without modern technology.

She had discussed this with Gordon's mom on her last visit. Katerina held the belief her son would eventually come to invent something by accident, and whatever it was, it would be highly sought after. Cerise asked how would he find the time to do such things as a CEO, and Katerina insisted he wasn't the boss anymore.

"I bet everyone sees you as the true leader. You're organized and brave. From what he tells me, you get things done. He trusts you to handle everything." And from then on Cerise started questioning how she ended up so entwined. It was all happening too quickly, none of it being quite what she had planned out. From losing her job to having all this responsibility... things could've been disastrous. And how much longer before things do take a turn for the worse?

With every new person she considered bringing into Bakker Marine or into the house, Rosanne haunted her. Who will be the next person to take advantage and cause damage? Were the background checks thorough enough? What if someone enters her life trying to be her friend, with the intention of getting access to all those elvers? What if she meets someone exactly like...

Her.

I like him. I do. No matter how much she tried to avoid spiraling, Cerise was no stranger to confusion and paranoia. Acknowledging a mirror can be difficult. *I'm not trying to push him away. I'm just worried. I want what's best for him, and he knows that. I want what's best.* In the back of her mind, she senses her arrogance. How can she pretend to know what will make him happy if she can't see the future?

Focus on what's in front of you, the host reminded her. Tomorrow isn't a promise. Concentrate on whisking. Make the tea light and frothy so that your mind will follow.

ELVERS

Recognize the steepness of the chawan's sides and appreciate its simple purpose of preventing a mess while you mix the liquid properly, following the M shape. Listen, listen.

Gordon observed Cerise perform all the steps before making his own matcha tea. He remained quiet and respectful, as if this were a real ceremony. Used the silk cloth. How soft and smooth; it feels just like a heavy tea running across your tongue, but cold.

"I love sifting," he remarked.

"Me too," she said.

"I could do this for hours." A fine green mist covered the bottom of the bowl as he scraped.

"I used to do mundane activities for hours as a little girl," Cerise thought out loud. The more she sipped her caffeinated drink, the more she was able to piece her memories together. "I loved coloring just like any other kid, but I was really good at it. Didn't miss a spot."

"Too bad I didn't get to see it. I was not so good at filling in the lines," admitted Gordon. "What else did you enjoy doing, little Soda Pop?"

"I really liked over-sharpening my coloring pencils. Mom would notice and get upset over me being wasteful." The twisting was rhythmic and fun. Sharper and sharper, she thought the whole time. That's my goal—to make the pointiest tip. *You're going to poke someone's eye out*, her mom criticized from the small kitchen, which didn't seem very small to her six-year-old self. The lighting was weak, shared with the dining area. Her booklet (made of recycled paper the color of prison food) was underwater themed, so her blue pencil crayons were half the size of every other pencil crayon.

Cerise couldn't fathom why her mom thought she would do such a thing. And then she imagined for a split second what it would look like to have a pencil crayon sticking out of your face where your eye should be. Back to coloring. Why was everyone so jaunty in these pages? The shrimps,

ELVERS

the crabs, the sharks—hell, the clams that weren't supposed to have faces—did not appear to realize their likely fate. A bubbling pot of water. A burning grill at a family gathering.

She turned the page over to a playful cartoon mermaid surrounded by jellyfish, and pushed away the nagging thought that humans would turn her into food if she existed.

"I had to ask my parents to sharpen mine. The tip would always fall off. Sometimes it would seem like I did it right, but when I pressed it against the paper it got loose and... sometimes I just gave up." Gordon had a faraway look that probably meant he was thinking about more than pencils. A different set of memories, real and imagined, slowly returning. People he had all but forgotten, their faces more vivid than a neon caterpillar hanging from a branch.

"Tell me something you would never give up," she said to him. He stared into his cup for a solid minute. The host was gone. The tea house felt very safe. Sacred is a better word, but safe nonetheless.

"I would never give up going on dates with you unless you wanted to stop."

"That answer feels like cheating. I want an answer that has nothing to do with me."

"Nothing to do with Cerise? How about... fish."

"Eating fish?"

"No, I just need to have fish in my life. You know, keeping them, being around them, looking at them. I'm so used to it that life wouldn't feel right without this."

"Hm, I suppose I could've guessed that." The enormous fish tanks (miniature biomes you could say) took up his remaining time and energy after work, as should be the case when one decides to purchase many exotic animals. Wouldn't it be nice if the whole thing could be enclosed forever? A self-sustaining ecosystem. A perfect world all on its own. She picked up a soft bite-sized dessert from the plate, almost too pretty to sink her teeth. A lavender butterfly filled with a sweet paste to complement the tea.

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Gordon ate one of the cute flower wagashi and said it didn't taste how he expected.

"These are freshly made," said Miyuki.

"Well worth the price," said Cerise. "It's so rare for food to be this beautiful and delicate."

"It promotes the thoughtfulness we want to experience during chakai or chaji."

"We will remember this," said Gordon. "What an important job you have."

The host was in agreement and visibly touched. She left them to go help the rest of the guests achieve inner peace, while they finished their wagashi.

The couple enjoyed a period of no talking along with the clinks and rustle of their surroundings. Normally Cerise found it impossible to turn off the buzzing in her mind. She asked Gordon if he thought meditation was easier when you're around someone.

"Maybe if that someone makes you feel safe and loved."

Twenty

Months Later

Her tail never stays still. Ikiyo is very pale from her ginger fur to her dragonsque eyes. She wakes up alone to stretch her scrawny limbs, going down an invisible runway with each long step. Her nostrils start working as the scent of fresh meat enters her territory.

Mofu always has perfect timing. His eyes sparkle when they meet hers.

"Brought you a fish. So tasty," he meows in Japanese. Ikiyo sits politely to allow his approach.

"Where from?" she asks.

"Water bucket. Many more, but Mofu shows restraint." He walks up the concrete stairs to plop a small uneaten fish in front of her. Ikiyo can't fathom why the first-class service and always remains suspicious.

"I will eat. Back off."

Mofu always understands. Ikiyo has a past. They all do on Ainosshima Island. Cats can be supremely protective over food even when times are no longer harsh. This one never eats with her guard down. The black and white blotchy cat, however, is a few years younger than the miniature lioness.

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His face is as much a giveaway of how he is feeling as his tail is—a warm and affable look. A creature with a target on his back. He is an easy thing to tolerate, like a harmless kitten. Never grew out of that phase, she thinks with a smirk.

After devouring her meal, bones and all, she cleans off her face with emphasis around her mouth. Delicious. Happy. Ikiyo feels simple thoughts for a moment while getting lost in her quiet licks.

But then he comes up the steps again. An inappropriate breach.

"Mofu," she grumbles. The lowest of grumbles.

"Help you," he trills. She watches him get close and senses... no fear, surprisingly. Even a silly one like him should know better.

He starts with her ears and grooms her nicely. Already she notices a difference in her hearing. Already her walls begin to shrink; she had been quite the architect. Not many are willing to risk getting close to someone who isn't so shy with her claws. Someone who is a clear loner on this island. Once he gets closer to her neck, she flinches. They look at each other. Mofu leans in again and she bats his head with a soft paw.

"Help," he insists before Ikiyo takes off. The cow-patterned cat doesn't make any attempt to chase her and is happy to watch the light ginger return to the shadows.

A figure sits up high, as high as the afternoon sun. Upon second glance you would notice head movement and realize it isn't a gargoyle statue, but a solid grey cat. Ikiyo cannot remember what makes her feel so disconcerted around Tama. Her fur would go stiff in his presence. Things would always feel off; therefore, he must've done something—if not to her, then perhaps to another cat.

Trust your instincts. What were they telling her as she felt the urge to leap up and up? She appears before her opponent without a sound or a warning. *Make him leave. You*

ELVERS

can take him. He is a lot bulkier. Perhaps older. His eyes are serious and somewhat wise.

"I'm staying," she communicates. He stands up slowly and walks off, as if he were indifferent to the situation. He knows it isn't worth it. She knows he knows it isn't worth it. All is well again.

Basking on the roof puts her to sleep. Delightful dreams follow. The warmth of her mother. A gentle wind combing through her thin fur as she hides in the grass. Long lost friend tickling her left whiskers. What a pleasing series of memories that would never surface past the unconscious realm. Ikiyo stretches in her sleep near the roof's edge, much happier now that she is half in slumber.

Danger! Her body moves on its own and those yellow eyes snap open. There are angry cries coming from behind an unoccupied house that came from a simpler time period. One of the yowling voices sounds familiar. A female cat, she knows. The drama persists until Tora comes out. Her right eye is damaged, but not from this scuffle.

Ikiyo jumps and runs over to the large female. Asks her what happened.

"Other cat is scratching where they shouldn't. Fifth time." She wouldn't go so far as to call Tora a friend even though she likes her. Ikiyo assures Tora she would never mark territory or cause damage here and points out that she did a good thing putting other cats in their place. Tora sits and turns away, staying quietly sore about the whole ordeal. Some cats will hold grudges for a long time if not forever. Ikiyo knows what this would feel like. She knows all too well (even if the incident itself is hard to recall).

And that's why she keeps her distance while listening to the distant sounds of human activity. Always so queer and always so busy. Rather dull senses, though, for one who pays so little attention. The same thought arises whenever she sees one of them lumbering over, slow and awkward. *Thank goodness I'm not one of those tall freaks.*

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Both of their ears twitch towards the same direction. Not a human. Humans don't usually produce a sudden flapping at this particular volume. They don't have little wings—any wings!

"Suppose you could choose; would you prefer to live with hands or with wings?" Ikiyo asks.

"What cat doesn't dream of flying?" answers Tora. "I would find out what's up there. Then I would claim it. Put marks." Her doe eyes glisten brightly. Mesmerizing. The ginger cat peers in the same direction, while thinking there doesn't seem to be much hidden beyond the clouds other than the occasional flock of noisy sea birds. Surely those animals would land somewhere across the ocean. Could it be possible that all this time, they've been staying in flying houses or drifting above the horizon in some strange forest amongst the clouds? Her imagination branches out more and more the longer she stares, and then she remembers to blink.

"I choose wings also."

Tora gets up to satisfy a daily urge to hunt. Of course, Ikiyo is fully on board to join her. She wants to see birds. She wants answers from them, though she knows they will do nothing but chirp and caw and scream until their lungs burst.

"May I come?"

"It is your decision. You may come."

"I've never killed a bird," Ikiyo admits, knowing she'd probably make herself look stupid anyway. "I get overwhelmed when they struggle. It happens so fast."

"I have killed, but not recently. Today we will improve."

"I like today."

There are three adult cats and one older kitten in the neighborhood, all passed out in various spots. A potted plant leaves the juvenile covered in its shade. Ikiyo has never seen him before. The collar around his neck suggests there is something wrong with him, however, his breathing is normal. His face seems clear of infection. Perhaps the

ELVERS

humans are wrong and the little guy doesn't require extra care.

Keep your distance. Instincts replace all motherly concern. She picks up the pace and catches up to the grey tabby around the corner. She is more of a brownish grey, with prominent stripes that fellow cats would admire. Her whiskers stick out very straight from her regal face. Tora licks her mouth as she often does, tiny spikes brushing past a set of clean teeth.

The tide is out, leaving an open area of small cobblestone where birds come to pick at whatever the water leaves behind. They are cocky and unsuspecting with their numbers. Hungry as well by the looks of it. Ikiyo knows that birds eat a lot. They peck maybe several thousand times a day. Peck when they don't even need to. She probably doesn't lick herself as often as they peck, though she is a clean kitty. In fact, she's cleaning her arm while Tora keeps an eye on the targets.

Perhaps she has one picked out already. Ikiyo spots a bird that doesn't appreciate its surroundings. The one that feels safe and doesn't want to move from its spot. She could pounce while it's busy terrorizing a baby crab. Easily, she could. But she must consider the wind. The angle of approach.

"You've eaten today," Tora states.

"Yes." Ikiyo becomes self-conscious of her breath and thinks about where the best nearby water source is at. There are food and water bowls near a garden owned by a woman who wears a yellow hat and never says a word due to her grief. Farther away, she can find a boulder that collects just enough rain water on top, but when did it last rain? Maybe she will come across a clean puddle along the way.

"Your eagerness to hunt will suffer without your belly calling to you."

"You are right. I filled my belly when Mofu offered me a bucket fish, and I openly approve of his behavior."

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Her ears perk up. "Mofu is your mate?"

"Not mate. Mofu is friendly."

"Long term mates are usually friendly. Consider spending more time with him."

"Tora has a mate?" Ikiyo never would've asked if the topic hadn't come up, though it was good to be aware of such information. She recalls her early years pursuing the wrong male and becoming enemies with an entire group of cats who sided with the female mate. She hadn't been aware those two shared a litter of seven, but he never told her that until after spending a night exploring the human-dense areas away from the shore.

Hagane assures her that people are not to be feared, and she tells him it's not the first time someone has said this to her. A child human with long hair eats outside by herself, and Ikiyo's orange tuxedo companion sees this as an opportunity to receive free petting. Ikiyo could never picture herself going up to a human by herself. They are too mysterious and their ways are unpredictable, not to mention their dangerous size.

"What reasons do they have for giving us food and attention?" she asks Hagane.

"Humans value their seafood, therefore we have a common interest in hunting for meat." His gaze is fixed on the human girl with her bowl of rice and veggies. "But I have yet to see a human consume rat."

Ikiyo cannot remember how long it has been since finding a rat. Those things were plentiful at some point, weren't they? There also weren't as many cats. Ikiyo had a rat sneak up on her, long ago. Some scraggly rodent with a lengthy muzzle and a chewed off tail seeking feline friendship. At first, she feels the ick towards it. Those bulging black eyes frighten her with their intensity.

"Are you prepared to eat me, love?" He sounds like a squeaky goblin out of hell. Even if she was planning to, her appetite has gone out the window.

"Why are you talking?" she spits.

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"I'll take that as a no." Its teeth-baring grin makes her back away, but it crawls up to her face and executes a speech about its life as a scavenging thief. It never got along with other rats.

"I can't believe how things used to be, our society." The rat eyes her up and down before accusing her of being the reason order has been lost. "Now everyone is counting their days, while they hole up in darkness." It is night time. Only traces of moonlight come through the ghostly veil.

"What do you suppose I do about it?" Rat problems, not her problems. "You belong in that dark hole, don't you?"

"Me? Yes, I belong in the darkest hole, but I'm not the same as my kin."

It follows Ikiyo back to her territory. At the time, she was staying near boat storage and fishing nets. There are a lot of places to hide for a small cat and her unwanted companion, who asks to spend the night here. She allows it—just for this one night—to prove to herself that cats needn't fear such despicable creatures.

"You are disturbing my rest," she finally tells the rat. "Put an end to your stories or die."

"I can tell you enjoy learning all this. Why don't I speak quietly then." He whispers into her twitchy ear about a near death experience involving a small café and a pissed off group of workers. "After I got away from the chaos, I felt offended. Cats coming and going, but I'm not allowed to sit by the windows? Ask me if I committed a crime. Go ahead. If you mean to punish me for existing, I will not hold back." These night time stories evolve into rants and justifications over things she can't remember because her brain is shut off and Ikiyo had a long day.

"Go away," she mumbles. She can hear the rat gnawing on boxes and plastic as she wakes up to a strong feeling of revulsion.

Every morning, she thinks of the rat who wouldn't shut up, puzzled over what happened to it. A month passes, and

ELVERS

she finds his body lying near her territory as though he was supposed to be brought back here. He smells the same and it brings tears to her pale moon eyes.

Tora explains she does not have a mate currently, but she is actively seeking one out. This comes as a surprise to Ikiyo, who wishes her the best of luck before heading down the shore. Several cats gravitate towards these two foreigners who look nothing alike. Man and woman are sitting on a tired old bench, reaching out to pet the animals. The food-driven cats are never shy. One of them puts both paws on the man's shoulder and cries out for them to make haste. This whole spectacle would be considered quite threatening if it wasn't for the adorable, pleading expressions.

"I wish I could take them home," says the woman.

"Or you could stay on the island. There's plenty of room."

Ikiyo stares at the skinny tube with fish paste leaking out. If she could only eat one thing for the rest of her life, she would happily pick the salmon and tuna flavored treat. She finds it more addictive than catnip.

The tube will be gone if she doesn't join the crowd.

"Hungry," she speaks meekly. One of the heavier cats pushes her aside and goes after the plate of kibbles. Ikiyo tries to lock eyes with the woman. It's easy to gain sympathy from tourist humans. Someone told her that where they come from, there are hardly any cats around. She wonders what makes this place so special. Was it the surrounding water full of fish that makes it possible for them to thrive here? Plausible. Where there are fish, there must be a cat nearby. Cats have a decent sense of smell. Whenever she has a taste of the liquid treats, the scent stays with her for hours. She can also tell who else has eaten Churu recently.

Ikiyo isn't the only one crazy for it. She'll never forget the flat-faced cat with a mop of a tail advancing upon her after someone had given her the treat. She was in the middle

ELVERS

of grooming her arms and ears when she heard a low grumble. He came from above, which of course startled her.

"Who are you?" she asks, deciding at that moment to not back down.

He carries an air of authority as he comes closer to inspect Ikiyo. Her whole body tenses when he sniffs her face—there he lingers, taking in the strong scent of salmon and tuna.

"There must be more Churu. You will take me there," he says, nostrils actively flaring.

"I don't know what you mean," she lies.

He is quick, much to her chagrin. The weight of his body pins her down easily.

"I'll tear your neck if you don't find me the person with those treats. I've done it before."

A high-pitched cry escapes her throat, a sound she herself has never heard. The one attempt she makes to weasel away causes him to bite down and draw blood. For some reason, Ikiyo only becomes more stubborn as hatred spikes through her body. Luckily—very luckily, Tora shows up. This Churu obsessed cat recognizes that two against one is a bad idea, and gives deliverance without another meow.

Flat Face is here, putting on good behavior. She permeates the crowd and sits right next to him, knowing they are both after the same thing. His eyes narrow, but he doesn't make any noise of disapproval. Humans dislike fighting.

Mrreow. Maowow. She feels surrounded. Endless meows. Long meows. Soft meows. Extremely impatient meows. It feels like she'll never get a taste.

"Shut up!" she whines.

"Here you go sweetie." The woman holds the tube packet right up to her face.

"Thank you!" she says. It tastes even better knowing Flat Face can't attack her while she steals her share.

ELVERS

"The kitties seem so hungry," says the man. "I should come here more often and make sure they're fed."

"I think they have enough people living here to make sure they're taken care of. Cats are tough, you know."

"Yeah, but..."

"It's okay, Gordon. You don't need a reason to come back here. That grey one trying to climb onto your shoulder would probably be more than pleased to see you again."

These two must be close, she thinks. Intimate. Although she couldn't understand what they were saying, she can hear the affection in their tone. From their body language, she sees familiarity. Mofu pops into her mind and she wonders where he is at this very moment.

"Churu," she says absentmindedly. There is no more left. When she turns her head, she expects to find Flat Face still glaring at her. But he is gone. Half the crowd left after all the excitement died down. Ikiyo decides it is her time to go.

She takes a nap on one of the thick concrete walls near the shore. The sun makes the hard surface pleasantly warm, so she sleeps for a while. Tora is next to her, staring at the sunset. Everything is beautiful and sparkling when Ikiyo opens her eyes. It feels like she is still dreaming. The fur on her acquaintance glows at the edges and she can't look away.

"I saw them," Tora trills. She sits on the wall with perfect posture. Neither cat moves an inch nor a flinch. Only the water moves. "The pair of humans had a... bonding ceremony. Promising themselves to each other."

"They were mating?"

"No. It was unusual. They have a great capacity for love. Sometimes humans become inseparable, I have observed. Linking limbs and always following each other. Could you imagine if our kind linked tails?"

Since Ikiyo is in such a daze, she can in fact imagine this preposterous notion. Upon closing her eyes, Mofu's face returns with greater detail. White whiskers, white paws, soft expression. If he were here, he'd probably try to groom her ears again. And she... well, she would allow it.

Twenty-One

During the train ride back to Yanagawa, it was impossible for Cerise to stop glancing at the diamond. She couldn't imagine getting used to the presence on her finger. Being at Ainoshima was surreal enough with all those four-legged residents swarming her with sweetness and attention. Being engaged made her feel like she just became a new person on top of this once in a lifetime experience.

He chose her. And she chose him, wholeheartedly. No lies, no ulterior motives. Wearing this ring actually felt right. Cerise closed her eyes to picture her parents at the wedding. What would her dress be like? How many pairs of eyes would watch her tie the knot? It would be too easy to get overwhelmed, but her future husband would be there. Yes, Gordon would be the perfect reminder of how much she has been through, and how strong they are as a couple. Any trace of doubt within her will vanish so long as she sees his face.

"Did you have a favorite cat?" she asked.

"They were all my favorite," Gordon said without hesitation. "Oh, I miss them already."

"I wonder if they would rather live on this island or inside of a nice household with loving owners." The outside world was tough, but cats are pretty much capable of anything. Fast, vicious, smart... especially that skinny ginger

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cat with the energetic tail. Cerise could see it belonged in an environment that fostered independence, because any owner would've had their hands full with that one. Good luck trimming its claws and convincing it to not tear up your tropical bathroom wallpaper. A lot of animals do as they please, no exception here.

"If it were me as a cat, I'd choose the island because I would have so many friends. All you have to do is say meow and then you become best buddies." Gordon looked content with his answer.

"That's definitely not how cats make friends," she laughed. "Remember the fights? I was really scared for them."

"I'm pretty sure one of them said meow and then they stopped fighting because of that."

"I feel it could've gone either way, and the other way would've been a blood bath."

"Yuck, don't say blood bath! It reminds me of Bloody Mary."

"What a bitch she is, huh."

"She can hear you even if you're not in the bathroom," Gordon warned in his most serious voice.

She switched to Japanese. "You think she's spying on us? Only a bitch would be so rude."

"I don't know exactly what you said, but I'm sure she has a demon translator. I'm almost certain."

"Let her translate."

"Don't you have enough to worry about at work? Why do you have to add spooky ghosts to your list." Gordon had a point, she thought. There were a couple of things to deal with when she returned to Amsterdam, but right now Gordon was all she wanted to think about.

"Work has been boring. No one is stirring anything up yet. We're meeting quotas and the warehouse is secure."

"Have you hired anyone?"

"Your mother introduced me to Heidi. She was interested in the housekeeping position. You know her?"

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"Sort of. She must've attended a couple of my birthday parties from a long time ago. I haven't seen her since... I think she had a kid."

"She has two kids now. Busy lady. I don't think their father is in the picture, but she manages to give them everything they need. Hopefully the job allows her to give them a whole lot more."

"And is moeder doing okay?"

"Obviously, she misses you." She gave him an affectionate tug. "I've been showing her all the pictures you sent me and she's always excited for that."

"I have good parents," Gordon spoke thoughtfully.

"Yep. They're proud of you, too." She left out her own feelings to avoid being cheesy. Instead, she faced the window and watched the train move farther and farther from Ainosshima. They blazed through endless hills, endless trees, for seemingly an endless distance. They passed the time with thumb wrestling, tied at 5-5, and then quizzed each other on capital cities. For some reason, Gordon was better at naming capitals in America compared to Europe. At the very least he seemed to be able to name one city from each state.

A much older man sat on the edge of the koi pond, lost in thought, not even watching the fish swimming by. He was the first person Gordon announced his engagement to, Kouta.

"You've been hiding such a woman," the Japanese man said with a double nudge. "Didn't know you were so protective. She speaks Japanese?"

"I do," Cerise answered in his language.

"My Japanese teacher," said Gordon, who needed to keep his sentences short due to limited capabilities.

"She is the one who convinced you to stay here, eh?" said Kouta. He leaned back a tad and showed inquisitive eyes. No doubt he was a man who broke hearts back in the

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day. Perhaps he wasn't even aware of it. Perhaps he was the type to assume most women weren't interested or that they were just being friendly. "When are you leaving Japan?"

"Only a week left," she replied. "Today we went to see all the cats on that little island, ate lunch there, and now I get to see where Gordon spends all his time. I can't wait to meet more people from the nursing home."

The man nodded and spoke highly of the community despite comparing it to his time in prison.

"Did you spend a lot of time in prison?" she asked with hesitation. Turns out, Kouta was very open to her burning questions. She learned he had no regrets, and fully expected to get caught robbing stores and shop lifting, back when he was a young man with no other means of surviving.

"When you have really bad anxiety, you can't get a normal job. It's near impossible," he explained.

"You were scared to talk to people?" she inquired.

"Very much so. Couldn't do an interview and can't talk over the phone. Back then I would rather get swarmed by killer bees than be forced to interact with a stranger for longer than five minutes. Going to prison saved me because I ended up making friends there—one of them suffered in the same way. Always understood me. Of course, don't get me wrong, it was tough in the beginning..." His eyes got lost in memory. "Yes... we got used to it. I got used to being surrounded by people. And even if I had an especially bad day, all I did was I meditated and I told myself, hey, this is better than working a normal job. This isn't as stressful as being in customer service or sweating in the kitchen or being made responsible for thousands of lives. No, not for me, that insurmountable pressure." He shot both of them an expression, as if meaning to check whether or not his rambling was getting out of hand.

"I would be really scared to go to prison," said Gordon. "The people must be scary even if you don't have anxiety."

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"Yeah. Sometimes. You stay away from the gangs and try to avoid drama. Well, easier said than done. Sometimes you need luck on your side, too."

"What was it like getting out of jail? How did you adjust to the real world?"

"Things were really good actually. Having the connections I did after... how many years... thirteen years total? Someone that got out before I did, upon the second time I left prison, had a job lined up for me. Reached out to me. It was very nice of him, especially for a former convict, so I accepted despite not really wanting to work a real job. I needed the change." Cerise understood that feeling and felt so hopeful for this stranger, even though this must've happened many years ago. By this point, she was hanging on to every detail, fully invested in this man that reminded her of Gordon's father with his surprisingly full head of hair and his good-natured being.

"What did you miss the most from the outside world?"

He dipped his fingers into the water, giving the koi a taste of that forbidden outside world and exciting them. "It's always the simple things. Being out and about is a strange reminder that the world doesn't actually have rules. No one's watching. No one cares if you want to ride your bicycle during sleeping hours or get lost in the mountains all by yourself. If you want to empty your bank account and donate all your belongings, only fear can stop you."

"That is true. But sometimes fear is important," she said.

"I think people tend to be overly afraid. As long as you pay attention, you shouldn't let it control your life so much. But you two... you don't need advice from someone like me. I'm just a crazy guy, eh."

"You're my friend, Kouta-san," corrected Gordon. "The smartest friend I have."

"I bet you have a lot of friends, though." He asked Cerise if he was right.

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"I don't know the exact amount, and I don't know who he considers as an actual friend, whatever that means to him. It's definitely more than I have." She translated what she said to Gordon, who said that he doesn't feel like you should limit your friends with arbitrary stuff such as amount of time spent with them or whether or not they know all your secrets.

"Speaking of friends, I've never introduced you to these guys," Gordon piped up. The couple stood next to Kouta and leaned over the pond. There were floating lily pads accompanied by polished frog statues the color of wood. Some petals had fallen from a plum tree behind the water; they floated above the vibrant fish like empty boats. Or perhaps the boats did contain invisible passengers—ghosts—no bigger than a juvenile cricket, all enjoying the perfect view of glassy water.

The all-red fish caught her attention. A real performer with its fast movements and constantly searching eyes. What energy, she thought. You could watch that one for hours with a cup of tea at hand and a stream of tranquil music playing nearby.

"Is it feeding time?" she asked.

"They always think it's feeding time. Let me go grab the pellets." When Gordon returned with the bag he poured a handful into Cerise's palms.

"I'm gonna make sure every fish gets their share." She called out their names as if they were dogs, and they swam up to collect the sprinkling of pellets. "Do you enjoy working here?"

"It's a big change, just like when Kouta-san got out of prison. And as great as you are at teaching, I did learn Japanese a lot faster."

"Are you happy?"

"Everyday." She was glad to know she hadn't pushed him out of his comfort zone into the wrong direction. He added, "When you're here, I'm extra happy."

"Then I'll keep coming back on Emmet's plane."

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Kouta leaned forward and stood up slowly before announcing his departure.

"No!" Gordon's voice rose. "You can't leave us so soon."

"Older people require more nap time," he said through a yawn.

"That's not even true," said Gordon.

Cerise continued to tease the koi with bits of food here and there, while her fiancé persuaded the nursing home resident to spend more time with them. She noticed one of the orange and white koi sucked up a flower petal by accident. She nearly lost her tiny cherry blossom earrings in this manner, except it wasn't due to any kind of fish. Her new housekeeper went through that grey filth inside the vacuum cleaner just to retrieve her studs, which made Cerise feel awful.

"It's my own fault for leaving my stuff on the night stand and knocking it over. You shouldn't put yourself through that over some frivolous jewelry, Ms. Felsenberg."

"But those must be so expensive. I need to be more careful." She clasped her hands together tightly. Not a single piece of jewelry rested on her own fingers, ears, or neck. Heidi was a woman who never had many options in life, mostly because she couldn't stand to inconvenience someone else. In fact, she hated when people asked for her own opinion of what to do or where to eat. Too many choices. Too many consequences. It was all the same to her.

"I just don't want you to worry about anything coming out of your paycheck or getting fired. You've done an amazing job." Cerise wanted this housekeeper to like her. Sometimes she wondered what Rosanne truly thought of her. It was strange to think Gordon used to basically live under the same roof as this person who saw him as nothing more than a spoiled rich guy with entitled parents. A fake housekeeper that saw fit to destroy an innocent family—too innocent to see any of it coming.

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And although she didn't quite see herself as a part of that family, it still felt personal. Love makes things personal.

Gordon was physically holding Kouta back from passing through the door. A twenty-three-year-old man versus a seasoned convict with poor joints. They bickered like two cats fighting for the attention of a friendly human holding canned mackerel. Gordon has never done such a thing to Cerise before (probably because it'd be a losing battle for him, and perhaps doing this to a lady is off limits in his mind).

"At least tell me why you are in such a rush to go. Are you seeing someone?" Gordon accused loudly.

"I'm making an attempt," he answered.

"Wait, really? Tell me who." Cerise started paying attention for some reason.

"She's a newcomer."

Gordon widened his eyes and finally let go.

"The one who's always staring out the window? She used to be a professional dancer."

"Good to know. I need a conversation starter."

"You're gonna tell me how it goes with her. Every step of the way."

"Yeah, well, the first step is to find out if she's single," said Kouta in a pessimistic tone.

"Would that stop you?" asked Cerise.

"Good question," he replied. "We'll see when I can actually go and find her. Oh, and congratulations again. You two look happy." She hoped he meant that. Then again, who wouldn't be elated seeing their partner in person after months? She came right up to Gordon and took his hand after realizing they barely had time left to be this close.

"I'll be back a lot sooner," she switched back to English in a whisper. Little Red swallowed the last of the food pellets and curved past a rock-solid toad that never blinks or shares the secrets that unfold before it.

The train always runs back. You can hear the steady rhythm if you hold still. The swallows rush towards salty air,

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following the tracks. Hues of coral melt together above an island covered in paw prints.

The End

Epilogue

Declan showed up. She was surprised he bothered to make an appearance to her second office at the warehouse. The invitation was a formality. If he had even two working brain cells, he would've understood this meant enough was enough. Cerise will no longer have to put up with his obnoxious voice and the constant criticism of how she ran the company. More importantly, her pocket change can finally stop spilling into his unscrupulous hands.

"Getting lonely, aren't you?" said her cheeky employee. "You'll be paying extra if you want some of this." He sat on the corner of her desk with mischief in his eyes. A mental note has been made to wipe that spot clean.

"Wouldn't. Dream of it. Have a seat on one of the chairs, if you please."

"If I please," he mocked. He stood and turned towards the observation windows where you could see several tubs of water. The baby eels were too small and transparent to notice from the top floor. A portly man dragged an empty hand truck towards the stack of boxes on a steel shelf as Declan tried to draw things out. She knew he had every intention of wasting her time in order to maintain being the number one nuisance in her life. However, this was a moment worth savoring.

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"Why do you think I'm a lonely woman?" She twisted the engagement ring on her finger.

"Aron told me where Gordon is. You drove him away to Japan, poor guy."

She leaned back into her red office chair, focusing on comfort over ignorant perceptions. Let out a sigh while the man gave his last words.

"Experiencing another culture and meeting new people is so devastating. I'm sure you would know, being such a worldly man yourself."

"Yeah, I've been to places you haven't even heard of, sweetheart. Neither of you would last a day in my shoes," he spat. Suddenly his knuckles slammed against the glass. "Hey Dave! Can you hear me!"

"Sometimes I do question how you've made it this far." She felt her phone buzzing through her pocket. Time to wrap this up. Her heels clicked eerily towards Declan.

"And look at you. How did you end up becoming the Elver Queen?"

"Is that who I am now? Then that must mean—" she grabbed him by the hair and forced him to make eye contact, "you've been stealing from your majesty."

He was speechless. At last, he was speechless. The final look on his face was filled with vexation as she announced Bakker Marine BV was no longer employing him.

Rosanne wore a patterned silk scarf to the coffee shop. Alex made sure to comment on what she wore in addition to giving compliments about her appearance throughout the date. He fluffed up the conversation with jokes memorized from last night and shared stories from the village he grew up in. It was all working. She seemed impressed, especially when he offered to bring her an order of tea while she got settled at the table.

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"As innocent as you seem, I bet you're a real troublemaker. Tell me something absolutely wild that you've done." He tried not to cringe at his own flirtatious voice.

"You've got the wrong girl. The craziest thing I've done is take more than one sample from the bakery."

"Stop holding out on me, just think a little harder. It's not like I'm judging you. We've all done something."

She took a long sip of her sweetened chamomile tea. Then another. The wind had cooled it down to the perfect temperature. Everywhere she looked there seemed to be a hot couple whispering to each other all the things no one else would understand. It's as if she was being challenged to become just like them. "I set my parents' house on fire by accident."

"Oh," was all he could say to that. He could've made a stupid joke but chose wisdom instead.

"To this day, I don't think they have forgiven me."

"I'm not close with my parents either. It's okay. Makes you stronger."

His boss materialized, standing behind his date. "Is that any excuse for the things you've done?" Cerise dragged a metal chair over to their table and presented a fake smile. "Hi again."

"What the—excuse me. I don't know who you are." Alex and Cerise exchanged a knowing look. No more acting.

"Either you're lying or that tea is working wonders." Rosanne saw her cup was nearly empty and went into full panic. The couple sitting at another table screamed as a flash of porcelain went flying towards them. People stopped chattering and watched as the woman who threw it tried clawing her scarf off.

"You can't do this! Are you out of your mind? Someone, get me to the hospital! Someone *help* me!"

Cerise and Alex pretended to be concerned before stepping away arm in arm. They already had plans to go to the gym for a light spar. And he would let her know, between hits, what was really going on with her employees

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(in case another has a mind to skim her elvers). Rosanne became more and more unhinged as she watched Cerise leave, clinging to a chair she knocked over and muttering a strange apology over flowers and flames.

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