

Audition: Never Alone.

*Have you the right
to do more than counsel
a soul on the brink
of self-destruction?*



A tan-skinned and chestnut-haired child cries in a field of dandelion clocks. He is eleven years old, and his parents have just been murdered to pay a debt. His farmhouse is burning down behind him, the fire roars louder than the wind. The men, whom his mother tried to sell him to, load up their looted goods in a wagon that's manned by dark eyed dray horses. He is malnourished, and ill with the effects of Protozoa. These deficits have made him worthless to those wanting to sell him for parts or use him for labor.

Akhila is by himself.

"Please..." His tears are sparse to conserve what water he has left. "Don't let me die." Despite the hoarseness in his throat, he speaks to the gods without any particular deity in mind. He doesn't know which can help him. He doesn't know if any would. But speaking to them is the last thing he has strength to do.

"At least, don't let me die alone?" His tear lands on a dandelion clock, and it reverts into a yellow flower.

•
•
•

Eight and a half years later.

The face of Ron Howler laughs back at her in the night. His baritone voice ripples across the dark edge of a sheer mountain's bluff. It creates a mood warm enough to ignore the blizzard, emitting comfort that could sustain someone for days. Even if that person were watching from behind another's eyes, as she does presently on their walk.

It has been eight and a half years since Emma became one with Akhila's anatomy. Her thoughts can be audible to her fleshmate, her body is manifest when she builds one from his own. She is a conscious whole, a soul in atoms, his constant companion and closest friend. This only sometimes leads them to complications, as has been the case on their journey to the Birost Terminal...

On the steep snow slathered slopes of Mount Panthea, only the most hardened or desperate of travelers attempt to trek past this point. The pathways are perforated with white powdered deathtraps and rock studded sinks. Very little is spared from the wind, and most caves house ill-tempered and starving beasts. It's a wonder that even trees can survive on the edge, where only corpses of the unfortunate give them strength. The remains of a dead man, covered in holes, serves as a reminder of the risks. Both Akhila and Emma feel acutely guilty for accepting Ron's invitation to walk them this far, especially when she planned to create wings.

Though Ron does not realize that she can see him, or know that she is there, his laugh triggers a flight of feeling within their co-operated heart. Akhila is resentful of this. Emma shamefully enjoys believing that it is her influence and demeanor which Ron has desperately fallen in love with, despite being aware of the social pain it inflicts on her friend. Akhila believes this as well, given she has admitted it once or thrice with the most sheepish of love drunk internal grins.

"Please, calm down. I felt that." Akhila chides her, inside their mind, with a red haze now flushing his tan cheeks. He could blame it on the cold weather, but that excuse would just draw more attention to how it looks.

Ron, the dark-skinned man with long braided hair and warm colored clothes, has been kind enough not to openly confront Akhila about his feelings. This is a mercy that is about to end.

“Well... Bad wind aside, this is my final chance to convince you not to go.” His kind eyes hold an uncertain angst. The way that he keeps delaying the insistent question behind his lips gives Emma the most pressing urge to reach out and-

“Wait.” Akhila tightens his fists. “You don’t need to say that.” He responds with cheer. “Whatever happens to me, I won’t have regretted my decisions.”

“I know that.” Ron gives him a nod with a knowing smile. “I know, you’re amazing, and competent, and strong...”

“*Here it comes...*” Her partner forecasts with dread, whilst the ranger prefaces a speech. Emma tunes out and laments that she only sees Akhila’s brown hair, and faux oblivious uncomfortable expression, reflected in Ron’s capturing dark hazel gaze. Akhila’s unorthodox bun style makes the view slightly better, if she zones out, she can picture him as her silhouette.

“...but, if you don’t come back, I have to say this or I couldn’t live with myself.”

“**FUCK!**” She lets out an internal *squeal*, followed by a deep cringing apology on her behalf.

“I love you.”

“**YES!**”

“But I think of you more as a friend.”

“**NO!**”

Hysteric relief and shock horror sadness compete to become the dominant emotion upon his face. Emma’s fantasy disintegrates before her mind and Akhila’s dignity takes a slap. In the transparent silence, his conflicting reactive expressions are so bizarre that Ron has to pause and assess he’s not having a stroke.

“Are you ok?”

"I'm ok!" A short sharp response, delivered with the tone of a wincing bee. "Thank you for telling me, but I'm not into men."

*"Yes, I **am**! I am into men!"*

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Can you stop making me cry?!" Akhila beseeches her with a needle-sharp internal prompt. The strength of his gritted teeth, on a taut elastic grin, fails to restrain her mourning tears from ripening upon his face. Ron notices, before the wind can snatch them away. Their friend adopts a pronounced look of pity, tenderness, and guilt, inclining his head with a pained sympathy that cuts deeper than hottest hate.

"You don't have to lie, I've noticed how you look at me. I've seen how you blush, and, sigh, how you... er... 'whisper'. You defend me when I'm wrong, and you even lose to me on purpose." All of this is true, none of it is Akhila's doing. "You put your arm around me in almost every interaction, and you're crying--"

"It's just the wind." He shakes his head, whilst withholding a barrage of audible sobs and gasps. "It's just the wind. It makes me cry(?) It's unbelievable, I'm sorry, you have never seen this before, but, *I'm* not crying because of you. Really. That's not me."

"Ok..." Ron side eyes him. "Do you need a moment?"

"Nope." His face is the epitome of upset. "I just feel so awful for making you think that I wanted you in that way. You must feel *so* embarrassed."

"A little bit." Ron nods, and the three of them shiver. Despite how warmly they've dressed themselves up, the death sighs of Mount Panthea are unbeatable bullying bodies of force. For Ron's sake, and his own discomfort, Akhila worries about standing for too long. "I wanted to tell you because you know I don't plan on marrying an unwealthy man."

The importance Ron gave to this intervention suddenly makes sense. If their motive for taking the mountain job was to become his husband, then he could be saving their lives were they fated to die on Panthea's peak. "I'm not making this climb just to marry you, Ron. I promise. If I wanted to, I would be upfront."

"Oh, how ironic..." If she were not attached, Emma would be taking this job to do exactly that.

"Then I'm sorry I brought it up. If I had known, that could have saved me a lot of discomfort walking you here... Set aside thinking about how to say this for three months."

"Three months!?" After the shoulder arm incident!?

"That's ok." It's anything but.

"Time I bid you good luck then, and good skill." Ron poses a tentative hug, and Akhila accepts with overt and awkward detachment. The 'straight man's hug' is no surer a sign of one's insecurity, designed to try showing you don't want to be intimate whilst delivering intimacy in a self-conscious manner. In this context he doesn't see how he might deliver it in any other way. Emma's typical hug lust has been tempered cold by the revelation, and her mortified reactive retraction affects him to be as distant as possible.

"No harm done. Our friendship has gone through a lot more than an awkward conversation. Keep your luck for yourself, and I'll see you after the station has been exorcised." It's so hard to speak with a straight face, when your audience is convinced that you're hiding a truth.

"Don't get eaten by ghosts."

"You too!" As Ron departs, Akhila's blush remains outside of Emma's influence.

The two agree, for the fifth time, to never ever entertain the idea of falling in love again.

.

.

.

The silhouette of their friend becomes a shimmer, and then a sliver, and then it's gone under the blizzard's gauze. The only person that grounded them in this harsh environment has now left them beneath an unwelcoming cyan tinted sky. Finally, he can use his mouth to communicate to her. The aching exertion of his inner monologue is relieved.

"The next time we see Ron, I'm telling him everything he deserves to know." Akhila righteously, woundedly, decides.

"Are you sure...?"

"It's only fair to explain my actions. That was embarrassing, and ridiculous, and it isn't right that you don't get to interact when you like him much more than I do. I'm so tired of hiding you." Emma echoes the contrite exhaustion within his mind.

Certainly, keeping her existence as a hidden facet has taken its toll on them both. Near a third of her life has been spent seeing with someone else's eyes, and nearly half of his teenage years were spent searching for how that came to be. Akhila's questing, within the temple districts, has only helped him to affirm his reasons for keeping her in the dark. People burn the undead. They do not want to fight their way out of a city, again.

"I agree." Despite that, she wants to believe Ron would accept her for what she is. Feeling invisible is another form of suffocation, even when being exposed causes problems. Every relationship they have formed, since her awakening inside Akhila's body, has been founded upon false presentations. Her inhabitation, no matter how much he calls her a blessing, has been the single most devastating thing for his social flourishing to the date.

"Alright, sis. Give me wings." Not that he often seems to mind. She may now reorient herself to traversing the eerie snow-strangled sky above.

They no longer need the warmer clothing of their hike, but it does keep an appearance of normality that they may wish to preserve later. Emma produces a set of hands from the flesh of Akhila's waist. They seamlessly travel to his coat, undoing the buttons to put it under his arm. She must remove it, so that the bone of his shoulders does not make a rip when she shapes his wings.

"Do you reckon we have the motor skills to brave this wind unscathed?" Sinews to joints, and bones hollowed out, shifting and kneading behind malleable trusting skin. Emma

works upon crafting a masterpiece of dynamic flight, out of the ample resources of Akhila's self. She numbs him to what should be unfathomable pain, never wanting a repeat of what happened the first time. He waits patiently.

"I don't think it hurts to aim for a perfect clear up to the peak. If we struggle, there's always climbing and hiking."

"And thinking ourselves losers for trying to fly."

"Yeah, and that." He grins, feeling his agency start to return to the new flexing limbs and sensing the warmth of her work bleed a revitalizing pulse from his core. "But how hard can it be if a flying dragon does it?"

"Ah! You're right! Who can't match a natural flyer in aerodynamics?"

The two of them blast off, using a singularly powerful beat from his repurposed extended shoulder blades. They're met swiftly by forces angrier than a naked paper salesman in a pool of ink. The snow blinds them, the winds hurl them towards the side of a rocky face, and the mountain does nothing to get out of the way. Emma can spot the flat impact first, taking the reigns to avoid needing to reform his ribs. That sends them careening upwards and to the left, with narrow brushes against various jagged outcrops at once threatening their strong forwards momentum and nearly cutting their skin. The air current changes its course and expels them into a second vortex of grabbing discordant vectors. It feels not dissimilar to getting thrashed around in the jaws of a long necked beast. Akhila curses and tries to orient himself, losing track of their Zenith and Nadir whilst they are carried upon the back of the winds of fate.

"This is bad!" He shouts the obvious. Wherever the ground is, at their current moment, it is sure to welcome their fall with cold open arms. Emma dreads having to piece them together, and fears faster when she glimpses a solitary shack on a dark horizon.

"UP! THAT WAY IS UP!"

At the same time, her fleshmate is able to catch the glow of the Bifrost Terminal at the peak. Their lighthouse protects the shack from a devastatingly heavy landing and lets him regain his bearings of where exactly they're meant to fly. A dark blip in the blizzard wind once again flits across the stars. This time they know slightly better than to wing near to the

mountain as they ascend. Akhila gets distance and further height, whilst retaining the cyan light in his view.

"It's nearly entrancing..." She shares his observation. The mystery of how such a structure could remain operational rallies between their puzzled minds.

"I can't tell if it's luring us in or warding us away... It was a portal-hub once. Do you think the entities are something that came through?"

"After all these years? I wonder if they're the terminal's power source... That would explain why the beacon is still operational, and why they're strong enough to require people like us for help. Why else would a hostile group of ghosts keep the lights on, if they weren't either inviting trouble or connected to the terminal's mains in some way?"

"That's a theory that would have been better answered by the locals... We should have talked with them, more than just asking how we could get up." The wind picks at them once again, but this time they have more acute intuitions for how to navigate through the thick of it.

"They seemed tired with answering questions. I doubt we're the only folks to respond to the job."

"Yeah, most likely we're not. Nor are we the best suited for supernatural occurrences, but, if Cain thinks that we're worth something..."

"More than a body shield?"

"You have too little faith in him."

"I don't doubt his psychic abilities."

"Then what don't you trust?" It's impossible for him not to pick up on her bias dislike for the man. No matter how much she attempts to keep those bad feelings subdued.

"I don't know... I've got a feeling that something's too good to be cut and dry. Like, where did he get the prize money? Why is this place an interest to him or whoever's paying him to clean it out?"

"I feel you... But we know Cain is a good guy. Even if the job is suspicious, he won't be leading us into a trap." Emma concedes that to him. She has a firsthand account of Cain's charitable nature, even if it might be one she'd rather forget.

Almost on cue, the gargantuan building makes itself known in the dark. Their attention is caught by the Leviathan statue that holds the Terminal's brightest light in its jaws. The building is far larger than what they'd thought from afar, larger even than what they assumed Panthea's summit could hold.

"I don't want you to drop our guard."

"Consider that a deal." With his reassurance, they fly onwards against the winds, now under the watch of stone gods and the titanic power that lays waiting within.

.
.br/.

"A near perfect clear!" An imperfect and sprawling landing is accompanied by weary and clouding breaths. Akhila, focusing on the good, waits for his webbed extensions to rejoin with the rest of his humanoid shape. The dark stone of the terminal's roof makes the thin air appear warm. Her heating mechanisms struggle to counterbalance the bitter sting. "I knew it wouldn't be that difficult..."

It was frigid, tumultuous, hell. That's what she would say, if they weren't trying to remain areligious in their vocabulary.

"Frigid, tumultuous, anarchy." Not as thorough a thought as she wanted to convey, but it does get him to let them rest. Akhila clears out the stress in his head, whilst Emma focuses on knitting together the tiny wares and tears in his skin. Her regenerative form of meditation is akin to grooming. Like making crochet or doodling on a page, it's a habit she found after practicing too much. The effects of it make him look uncannily pampered and spoiled. This does not aid them in finding physical work, but it does let them blend in with

high society. “Good job.” Akhila cheers up and smiles, psychically radiating a pride that’s infectious to her mood. This is the reason she has to anchor his good feelings with a dose of toxicity every now and then. Nothing safe ever comes from expecting the best, as Ron more than helped to reaffirm.

“I’m sorry, again, for what happened back there. I feel really bad.”

“It’s not your fault, more than it is mine for not making my feelings clear. We’ve got equal blame, in so many things, don’t be too sad.”

“... If you were Ron, would you forgive us for lying about me for seven years?”

“Uhm... Well, it’s not a lie if you just don’t-...” His nervous laughter is cut off by the many examples of when he’s lied.

“It’s just you and me. I live alone. I’m just earning this money to be rich.”

“Oh. Um, I suppose... I think I would forgive us... As long as we didn’t do it again.”

“Would you trust us?”

“... No.”

As she feared. They lay in silence for a turn, mulling that over and coming to terms with it. Neither are above saying such a price would be deserved, but it’s a hard pill to swallow, imagining how that would change their relationship with Ron.

On the ground side of the terminal, they had spotted a large gathering of people.

“Is it bad that I’m hoping most of the folk won’t be taking a share?”

“Kind of.” She sheepishly shares in that selfish wish but makes sure to admonish him for the thought. Neither of them is afraid of socializing with strangers, they only worry about having to answer how he can fly. This problem dangles over their heads like a bladed string, despite being contingent on someone both spotting their soaring shadow and climbing onto the roof to check it out.

Emma’s mind drifts to more subtly brood over the impending meeting with their employer, Cain Salvatori, the watchful all-knowing psychic they met only a year prior.

“Are you anxious about something else?”

“Just what secrets might lie within...”

Beneath them the people begin to stir. Akhila raises his head and sighs, partly relieved that nobody will see him jump yet wishing the two had been granted a longer break and more time to know who they’re working with. They crawl towards the edge as a silhouette in the beacon’s light. What they are shown is an unorthodox looking crowd of dangerous and peculiar people, far more than they had expected to make the climb. Amongst them, he spots a man with claws and a very hostile demeanor, a hooded figure who moves unnaturally in the dark, and an old woman who looks just a little bit too confident for her age. There are plenty of dragons and agons, wearing colorful garbs, wielding assortments of weapons and spells. He tries to look out for a sign of the undead but simply cannot tell the most eccentric from those who are closer to the grave.

Akhila’s visual description would be that of a Rebis. His tanned masculine and feminine facial features are unembellished by the green puffy form of his mountain clothes. He pulls on his furred coat, and fastens his belt buckled with two penguins in embrace. He’s a bare-handed gladiator, with muscles denser than they are apparent and a body that never has to stay molded to one shape. For love, Akhila has allowed her to mix her traits in with his own. For love, Akhila restricts how he lives his life.

“Don’t forget to let them know that you’re here this time.” Thinking back to the year that he kindly asked for compensation, on stopping a village raid. He was called a liar and told never to show his face in that region again.

“Not funny in hindsight.”

“It was a little bit.”

“I spent an entire month foiling that plot...” He leaps down from the roof, breaking only his hip in the fall. Emma repairs the damage and lets him feel himself after all is done. “Do we look normal?”

The double doors are already opening, with no time to dwell on a response he hurries onwards to join the crowd at the sides. The job seekers push into the lobby, with some acting like gold panners during a rush. He has not walked within such an impressive

building in all his life. The ceiling is unseeable, and the walls feel as if they're alive with the beacon's pulse. The cool darkened colors help draw attention to the various torchlit doors, and a second statue, of what might be a woman, towers within the titanic foyer's center. The sound of boots, feet, and prosthetic legs, cause a disturbance that ripples freely into the dark. Akhila can hardly imagine how loud the Terminal must have been in its use.

A black flash of tied back hair and a glimpse of golden observant eyes have him backtracking through the crowd, towards the doors. Cain's impeccable choice of clothing stands out in its strong purple and gold styling. He looks ravished but undefeated by Mount Panthea's environment, and as expected the psychic has seen Akhila approaching him first.

"Cain! I'm here, I'm sorry for being late."

"Akhila, Emma." He addresses them warmly, as is polite for two people who have met only once. "Did you complete your quest?"

"No. Not yet. But getting the prize from this assignment should open more avenues. I could afford more scholars, and divination experts, and people of knowledge like you."

"I see... Good. Have you gotten the opportunity to look into the figure 'Fthuvuu'?" Cain asks deliberately.

Gratitude is a curse. Specifically, when you fear what you feel it for could be taken away in its absence. Before Akhila had paid this psychic to visit their home, such a worry was not deep in his mind. Their lives were not driven as they are now, by the search for her resurrectionist. Their quest did not take every second thought, make every end and means, or use all of the resources that they have. That is because someone had yet to counsel: *"The end is closer than you know."*

Though it may be her fault, Emma despises Cain.

"No, I haven't-

The doors shut abruptly.

.
. .
.

It happens without a sound, yet those who notice quickly discover the entrance cannot be pulled apart. The hall torches go dark. A din of alarm ripples through the hirelings, from back to front.

There is then an immense blast from the center of the room, with air currents appearing as if the blizzard decided to come inside. Bright cyan strands are lifted from the walls, illuminating the flock of fortune chasers. A darkened entity forms in the nucleus of the colorful storm, and their job handler looks all too familiar with the event. He seems terrified.

The entity speaks, and they hear it inside and out of their mortal frame. It holds a distorted and dictatorial tone. Not quite male or female. Not even something within that vocal range. The only clear part of its body is the eyes; the rest is obfuscated.

"The powers that be finally deigned to do something about us, huh? I should've figured when that idiot—" An arm-like wisp gestures in Cain's direction for emphasis, "—came in here whimpering about being here to help. Let me guess, they told you to get rid of us by any means necessary? That they would pay a king's ransom for your service. Hmph, typical. Now you're trapped in here with me. I'll tell you now: in the Bifrost Terminal, I am creator, judge, and jury. Nothing happens without me knowing."

"You are all still in one piece because I decided you should be. So, explore the terminal, ask questions. You are all here for a job, aren't you? Well then, allow me to assign you your work task: figure out how to free the souls trapped in this godsforsaken facility. And as incentive, the *first* among you to succeed in freeing all of the spirits here shall be allowed to leave The Bifrost Terminal. As for the rest of you... If you don't finish *first*? If you slack off or annoy me and your fellows instead of putting your nose to the grindstone? Well... I'll leave that to your imagination."

A violent cyclone of wind blasts and smites those who try to attack. People are thrown into the air like dolls. Those who once thought they could teleport to escape, find that their comfort trick has been rendered useless. The scale of panic is matched by Akhila's suffocating paralysis, the power exerted bestows terror like a supernatural weight. The

entity's blazing cyan eyes are amongst the last aspects to disappear, yet the winds and the magic force still remain.

Emma, for one of the only times in her life, feels an intense feeling of being vulnerable and being scared. The image of the entity returns her back to when she was small. When the hurricane came. The last time she-

"No!"

.

.

.

Her ears are ringing.

The room is confused. Pockets of people are dealing with injuries, or venting lamentations into the roof. A good number appear to be shouting at and/or questioning a guilt ridden and red cheeked Cain.

Her ears are ringing.

Emma has ears. Emma notices that her body is feminine. Her limbs are all here, she has hair, eyes, and a nose. She can smell the dirt brought in by people's shoes, see the dark as it closes about the contestants. She cannot see Akhila. She cannot hear her fleshmate's thoughts.

End -

Special thanks:

Sister of Munch! (For the editing).

Ms-Conductor and Mocksky for the review!