

Emma and Akhila: Round 1

Line and veil.

I have the right
I have the means
It would be heartless } *to not intervene.*



"Where are you?!"

She gains no response. Emma is physically numb, uncomfortably raw and exposed. Her nascent gold eyes blur the new light with dim silhouettes, searching for her other half whilst discord spreads through the surviving exorcists. *"They're making too much noise."* She cranes a neck that seems far too frail to support her skull. Something is snatching folk into the air. Everything is too loud and too silent without his thoughts. How can she possibly choose what to pay attention to?

The lungs of this body are too weak. She finds she's experiencing a shortage of breath; her body cannot keep up with its beating heart. It all feels agoraphobic. It's too much. She's dissolving without someone else to contain her.

"Akhila? You can't be gone!" Emma thinks, with a renewed sense of panic. Her body checks its components and finds her resultant mass is smaller than Akhila's, but not small enough to give any comfort about his state. *"I would never do this to you! Answer me!"* She fears she just told a lie. Parts of her memory are returning in shards, mostly the fear and the immediate need to run away. *"I would never..."*

Emma manages to kneel. Familiar long hair falls over her breast, down to her waist, bothering her skin and forming an unwelcome curtain around her eyes. She turns her head, slowly scanning the room until she spots him. A chunk is torn from his hollow coat's torso, blood spreading out in a thinning pool. Akhila's face rests unmoving: his mouth gaping and his eyes tearful. He looks betrayed, confused, and dead.

Emma's scream raises the air pressure within the hall. It is louder than the winds of Mt. Panthea, and coarser than grating stone. She crawls over to his side, moaning a plea to her past self that she didn't leave him in any state of agony. All that is left behind is his head. That, and the sloughed skin and bone from her recreation.

"Akhila! I'm here! Brother, I'm here! You don't have to cry, you're not alone! You... You're not..." Looking into his clouded eyes, anguish takes control of her vocal cords. She wails madly. Her hands fumble whilst tenderly holding him tight, as if she were afraid to inflict more damage than she has already caused. It isn't enough to mourn him externally. By every right, her expressions belong to him. Her sniffs, her red cheeks, her shivers, her sounds, her actions in every form come from the hideous transaction she unwittingly made.

*"I'm **sorry**..."* Emma whines. *"I'm so sorry I wasn't there."*

Time passes for what may be hours. His warmth fades, and her body curls up inside the remnants of his coat to preserve it. The world falls to a lull about her as she becomes virtually unresponsive to any probing or sound. The outside presence of others eventually dims down to a faint muttering of shades and then silence. She has chosen to die alone. She deserves that much.



Emma permits herself only two comforts whilst she waits on the process of decomposition. She is allowed to comb back the hair on his head, and she may mutter about things they had shared as fleshmates. The topic she chooses is of their early days, as proof that she treasured even their very first interactions. She recounts how they went searching for food in the remains of his ruined home, and how he had come to trust her as she helped him to grieve his parents' loss. She had told him he still had family left; that she was his sister, that she was a part of him, and that she cared. Akhila did not know he was once a twin, yet he tearfully accepted the story and only wished he might give her a hug.

Together they figured out what they could and couldn't do, painfully, through trial and error. Emma's initial hurdle was not causing him grievous harm and remembering how to turn off their pain. Next, they learned how to harness her abilities to get strong, condensing muscle mass, conserving energy, and reducing the need to eat or sleep.

Mastering these advantages allowed them to survive being homeless for nearly three months, before Akhila found them a job testing medicine in an illegal underground lab. He did not complain - though she had plenty to say - even when they were risking their lives expelling doses of heart-stopping substances onto the laboratory floor. He was never worried about his death, just so long as he died with someone by his side. They eventually got fired from that job when their employers realised Akhila wasn't a normal test subject. That was the first time they'd felt seen together and it felt bad.

Her heart hurts. Emma finds this to be strange, because she has already made it stop. Her body is slowly rotting by her command. The systems that kept her functional have begun to break down, the varied mechanisms that made her cells have been forced to go on strike. She wants to disperse quickly, but not without saying the final things that he ought to hear. She lets him know his acceptance and cheer were infectious, and that is why she loved him as quickly as she did. She tells him they went from strangers, to siblings, to friends so fast that she never found the time to apologise. She admits to him that she's a coward. She could have left safely at any time, but she was selfish.

"You deserve to hear all those things..." Her corpse murmurs. "It's not fair... If only... I..." Her discolouring hands squeeze his skull, as the last life is drained from her vessel, and her final words are croaked out.



Her conscious remains in the flesh. Her body might be dead, but annoyingly her soul ceases to fade. This is how it was last time. She tries to go to sleep, but something nags at the boundaries of herself. Another lump of decaying matter is proving compatible for her essence to infest.

It's Akhila's head. Corpse to corpse their connection is thin but tangible. Was he holding out for her? No... He doesn't possess that staying power.

"Fleshmate?"

She ventures in hope, but finds only an empty shell... But it's hers now. She recalls him so vividly that she could almost fit the pieces back together.

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PART 1: The thinker.

"You're not alone."

The flower said to the boy, as the house fire encroached upon its field.

He had neither the words nor the strength to respond, so he smiled instead.

Thus started the second rebirth.

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Bartimus Punch is a troubled soul. He would rather his lung be cut out than live with the torture of uncertainty, and he cannot for the life of him figure out if he is dead. Since ghosts, for all their thinking, have fragmentary and pointless existences, it is important that he settles this matter fast.

It all started when he was released from prison. Bartimus had attempted to procure an ornate sculpture, one he had created, from a philistine who was abusing it. Day by day, month by month, he had driven past the house where it sat in his ex-friend's window. His temper was forced to endure the party hat affixed over his sculpture's head, and a pair of googly eyes marring its modest chest. He had decided enough was enough when they bluetacked sunglasses and earrings to its face.

He had approached in the dead of night, dressed in all black, with intention to climb through the lounge window that wouldn't lock and exit through the back door he could unlatch. Punch knew the layout of their home perfectly, yet he miscalculated one single thing. He'd forgotten they housed a large dog, that was still awake when he clambered

inside. It yelled at him frightfully, having never enjoyed his company when he was welcome, and soon his ex-friend was down yelling alongside it with equal force. The sculpture, by design, held a stone candle in its right hand. His ex-friend had unfortunately tripped during the altercation, and as a result, that pointed appendage had pierced right through their mortal heart. The stone candle had broken, and Bartimus was arrested upon returning to the crime scene to find a missing piece. He was imprisoned for eight years before getting parole and finding a job under T.I.T.A.N.'s Mega Corp. The Bifrost Terminal needed someone to run its lost and found, and his prison time showed him to be meticulous when it came to missing objects.

The workspace was fantastic. It felt like a guilty privilege, getting to walk through its majestic bright halls and impeccably clean architecture. The space filled him with a sense of hope for his future, and that of his planet Thraelos, as it was the first terminal on the planet's interworld travel frontier. It was remarkable, and he himself was remarkable by association. Bartimus knows that what is marvelous on construction is often destined to lose its lustre with time and traffic, hence he was grateful to have seen the terminal in its prime, polished, and full of futuristic warmth. Whilst he could.

The second week of the job changed his position entirely, as he woke up to an altered terminal, a different time, and a different place. A dramatic change in the environment had transformed the pristine lost and found to a bright lit yet musty labyrinth that stank of death. He was not awake in the same place he had fallen asleep. His onsite living quarters had been transferred to the centre of his lost and found and his belongings had vastly increased in number. The once empty shelves that used to dominate the expansive room had filled themselves up to the brim, and there was a small child asking him if he wanted anything to drink. They called him by his first name, and piece by piece fragments of their identity started coming back to him... or forwards to him. This was his apprentice, Sidney Fly, son of nobody important and here because...

"Why are you here?" Punch composed himself, about as well as he could on a mattress he didn't recognise as his own. "And it's 'Mr Punch', we're not pals."

"Mr Punch." They stood straighter. "I am here because you're allowing me to search for my lost watch. My parents consented to let me stay, for as long as it takes, you said you would take me under your wing."

"That doesn't sound like me..."

"Earl Grey?"

"Yes, thank you." Getting to his feet was an easy task, which bought attention to how his body was not aching in any manner. "Why would I want you around?"

"Because I do the less important stuff, and allow you to categorise the items, and... other such things, like pest control?"

"Pest control?" His eyes canvased the room and found bug lamps attached to near every corner. A dead rat lay as a warning to its peers, in front of a pink suitcase that may or may not have contained something they'd want to eat. He approved of the measures he had supposedly put in place, that was good evidence he in fact did them.

"Is there anything else you would like to task me with today, or might I continue to search?"

"No, no, just get that tea." The boy scampered off into the overflowing stacks of luggage that weren't there when he last went to sleep. Holding his head, Bartimus sat at his now cluttered desk and took note of a large green book. It was titled with bold golden letters, **'To cure migraines for Bendict Punch'** by Bendict Punch. Hoping to find release from his coming headache he read it and instead found himself tricked by the past writings of his own hand.

The very well-written book was a diary, designed to attract his attention for if he ever found himself in this state of distress. It explained that he had awoken previously to much of the same confusion, and cited past logs of lost items that Bartimus had written without recollection. Besides this, the book explained the presence of Sidney Fly: A young boy who was now a fixture of Punch's daily life that could not and would not be dismissed.

The revelations were alarming, speaking of theories about time loops, an inability to recall leaving, and gaps in logs where his own notes would cease then resume with a lack of

knowledge of what had happened. He praised himself for the forethought of leaving this where he could access the information and read onwards to where he was sure his thoughts would be concluded. Except what he found was some talk of defeatism. His past selves, following the original, had added their own accounts of attempts to break the cycle they had identified. All of them resulted in despondency and upset at a failed avenue, as each of them had thought they would be the ones to crack it. The back of the book told him about three important things: there was a list, in his right-hand drawer, that kept track of how many times he had woken up in this state. There was a stamp, in the welcome desk, that ensured no one would touch his possessions. Finally, there was a watch in his coat pocket, that allowed him to summon any object that he could want out of the terminal's 'portal magic'. He has it written in bold **not to give over to Fly**.

Needless to say: Bartimus was scrambled. His migraine had only increased from the influx of upsetting knowledge, and his directives were blurry and unclear. He supposed he should log himself in, as the twenty-third instance of 'Punch waking confused', and then resume with his situation where he last left off. Only, his past selves had stagnated in their endeavours. Clone and external loop theory were proven false, and simulation theory turned out to be unprovable. He felt a twinge of disgust for his past iterations, reading through every journal and item log, watching himself lose the spark of pursuit every time. He grew tired of learning about how he made friends, or how he improved on his sculpting craft, and became angry that none of his selves realised how pointless their meanderings were. Some of them even wrote about their fears of 'being reset', as if such a rebooting was not exactly what they needed. ***This*** Bartimus Punch was going to shoot himself if that ever happened to him, marking his words that if he didn't find his position in this world, he would simply cut himself out. Another thing that annoyed him: the wide changes in the lost and found. He preferred the clean emptiness that it had before, and he would do what he could to start tidying the place up. He decided to do a check of the facilities, as his first step on the path of besting himself, and with that his last venture as janitor would fatefully commence.

The next week and a half showed him that many of the aspects he found distasteful were really the best ways things could have been. The rotting rats were consistent reminders that time passed, and the stacked shelves provided him with something to do whilst he thought. The halls of the terminal were darker, emptier, and now laced with an eerie cyan

glow, but at least they were still pristine and commanding of respect. Bartimus would meet other people upon his walks, and they too appeared worried, trapped, and confused. Other staff members, and people who claimed to be visiting, held disjointed conversations or stared at him as if something were wrong. These interactions were fuel for his theorizing: they proved that the terminal wasn't closed, so much as he *couldn't leave it*. They proved that whatever his problem was, it was analogous to their own. The only drawback of this line of thinking was that some of them, clearly, were ghosts.

"Boy. Do not be alarmed at what I'm about to say. If this conversation proves too much for you, you have permission to leave." Fly was, as children go, an adept listener and competent thinker. To test out the abhorrent notion of his existence, Punch decided to call them into his study area. "Do you know how a ghost operates?"

"No, sir."

"I will tell you." Standing and pacing, he explained. "A ghost never wants to admit to itself that it's dead. Very rarely will you find this. That is because death is intolerable."

"Why is it intolerable?"

"Some say trauma. If a ghost is reminded of what killed them, they tend to become upset or 'feral'. They do things to get away from the situation and make themselves forget. A ghost's reason is limited to the parts of reality they cling to."

"You know a lot about ghosts." Fly adjusted themselves in their seat in an attentive manner. Bartimus smirked, knowing full well that he had only read one book on the subject.

"Yes. My point being, Fly, a ghost's mind is its worst enemy. A ghost's mind will never, save for some rare circumstances, allow itself to be led to conclude that it's dead."

"That sounds stressful."

"It-" He was about to say 'is', but that would be jumping to conclusions. "*It would be...* Fly, why do you not breathe?"

"I... Ah-. Pardon?"

"It's cold in the terminal, your breath should cloud when we're searching for lost property, why do you not breathe?"

“Oh, my body is just naturally cold, or... hot? That’s why my breath doesn’t come up.”

“The blue magic clings to you, and sometimes you float when you trip.”

“I think the terminal light likes me, and maybe I’m telekinetic? Do you think I’m a ghost?”

“... Do you think I am a ghost?”

“Heavens no! You don’t float, or glow, and I see you breathing all the time.”

“Hm...” Bartimus fingered the snub-nosed revolver he had generated, within his pocket. “That will be all. Come tomorrow I am going to do one last sweep of the main hall. You’re to see me for further instructions once I return, and then not to bother me for the rest of the day.” His mind wandered towards the bullet chamber, and eye fixed upon Fly.

“One ‘last’ sweep? You won’t be patrolling for property anymore?”

“I might... I will tell you more when I’ve made up my mind.”

The lost and found, as his workplace and living quarters, serves also as Punch’s purgatory. After that conversation he knew that for all his possessed knowledge, he might never learn what his true nature is without completing a drastic test: A test that his progenitor selves ruled out... A test that, after nights of deliberation, he cannot but see as his last true recourse. The test of death stands as a line that man cannot recross once he steps over it. It is a definitive yes or no answer that Punch intends to deliver himself today.

He is fully aware that he may not be around to learn the result, but he cannot stand the uncertain alternative of not knowing.

Now that he has found and sorted the new influx of lost property from the foyer, Punch sits at his desk thinking over his last and greatest responsibility. It is an important task to ensure his legacy. He must guarantee someone remains to reset the rat traps, re-order the itinerary, look after his logs and crafts, and greet visitors should he depart. Punch has only one candidate for that job, and thus, one more affair for him to set in order.

“Fly!”

He must hide the watch somewhere they will never find

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PART 2: First Impressions

Akhila wakes, sensing nearly one hundred minor changes across his form. His eyes flicker open and see the terminal's shadowed ceiling. It gapes darker than a starless night, and feels just as daunting to stare into.

"What happened?" He asks the anxiously silent Emma. She startles and scrambles between a dozen responses, feeling as if she's forgotten how to communicate in the span of a few hours. "Were we attacked? How did I lose consciousness?" He smells the blood on his clothes and questions the outward tear in his coat. The honest question causes Emma to freeze in her thoughts.

"Akhila. I...-"

Her truth is abruptly interrupted by the growling of a large Bullmastiff hound. It sounds about fifteen feet away and rumbles aggressively enough for Akhila to be concerned about his positioning on the floor. He cautiously sits up, and looks back, seeing the dog has thin shadows curling about its paws and tail. It fixes Akhila with green intelligent eyes, barking another warning to stay back from the girl observing them. "*A church grim.*" The duo recognise it at once.

"Hi..." Akhila limply attempts to disarm the tension, eying the hound more than the girl it protects. He is aware that it gives a poor first impression to be stained with blood, and a worse one to make an enemy of a dog. He himself wouldn't trust a person who dogs take

immediate disliking towards, despite this reaction being common towards him and Emma. “Is there something that I can do?” The girl’s white-coloured eyes narrow, as she makes a hand gesture that Emma understands.

“I’m looking for my notebook.”

The sign language is translated from Emma’s perception into his mind.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t seen it.” He responds honestly, and checks with her to be certain she didn’t see it whilst he was out. “I’ve been asleep.”

“You are fluent in sign?” She is wearing a white jacket, a pocketed olive-green skirt, boots, and a green scarf that covers over her pale peach skin. She has lilac hair, bordering on grey, and possesses a watchful aspect in her physiognomy which Akhila is curious to try out. Her response is made with a widening of her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m sorry if I startled your dog. Are you a ghost?”

The girl scowls. **“No. Only him.”** The Grim seems to scowl at them too. **“He is not from the terminal.”**

The dog barks as if to punctuate her claim. In the light of the entities’ demands, Akhila supposes such clarification is warranted. “I must have missed you at the camp, sorry. Can I ask you what happened to everyone else?”

She considers him and his question with an openly mistrustful eye. It’s the first time in a long while that he’s felt self-conscious about his presentation; her evaluative gaze seems to review far more than he’d thought there would be to think on. A stiff nod follows more sign language, and an exit towards one of the terminal doors. **“If you translate for me.”**

“Sure! Where are we going?” He follows her, but the girl does not respond. Akhila considers that to be rude, until he sees the sign marking ‘Lost and found’.

“That’s still rude...” Emma returns grumbling. Akhila questions her ‘distant feeling’ towards him, but she excuses it as her focusing on reparations. The discolouration on his back has only just begun to clear. It’s a relief that only the dog could smell the rot.



Bright advertisements mark out the shape of the halls under a dim, chilling, cyan glow. Grinning faces and mouth-watering goods fit together and smother what vacancies the walls used to have. It's incredible that the terminal has kept even its posters in perfect condition. Not a colour is faded, nor an edge peeled, or brand defaced or overlapped. The portal systems have long since been shuttered, yet this glow shows that their magic has yet to die.

"It's like the terminal is begging to be opened up." Akhila gives voice to Emma's observation, on her request. The girl walking before them nods her agreement. "I'm Akhila Argo, just so you know. You didn't tell me your name."

"**Doe.**" And then pointing at the Grim. "**Mr Beans.**" The hound glares at him. Beans has not stepped far from Doe's side for the three minutes they have been navigating the halls. He puts himself between Akhila and Doe as if he's expecting a fight.

"He seems more like a chaperone than a trained animal." Emma comments.
"Remember, in some cultures, a dog is buried alive under a church's foundation to make a Grim? I wouldn't be very loyal if that happened to me..."

"Agreed." Akhila scowls at the smell of blood hanging over him, blaming that for the dog's mistrust. *"What happened when I was out?"*

"You got injured, I told you. I wasn't focusing on anything else."

"Alright. How did I get injured?"

"A bolt of magic, or some invisible force. It happened so fast I didn't see." Akhila notices she is making him sweat. Emma notices Akhila's noticing, and that makes them sweat more profusely. *"You don't believe me."*

"I've never lost consciousness in such a way. There was no interim or sense of being 'shut down'. There was just us in front of the creature, and then I was on the floor." Akhila picks up on the pointed stillness within her thoughts. *"There's something you're not saying."*

"I know! I know you know that!" She causes her fleshmate to flinch. *"It's just not for now, OK? There's a time and place and I'll say it all-."*

“Why does your body change?” Doe signs abruptly, with a glance back at Akhila’s eyes. She’s just in time for Emma to stumble in her translation and Akhila to catch a flash of their inner thoughts. **“You’re acting like you’re in a conversation with someone, your posture flickers between anxious and hurt.”**

Perhaps his last convo with Ron set the foundations, or Doe’s clear acceptance of certain undead put him at ease, or maybe the sting of his fleshmate’s half-truths pushed him to be honest out of spite. Whatever the reasons, Akhila decides to respond with transparency for the first time this year. “I’m a Rebis; there are two souls inside this body, one is my sister and one is me.”

“Akhila!” The shock is derailed by his sudden prompt to introduce herself. Emma hesitates. **“How?”** Yet she nervously signs **‘Hello’**, with a set of hands grown through the coat’s rip.

“We’re both conscious and share nearly everything together.” He continues pointedly. “Emma is translating your sign language for me, because she learned it whilst I was asleep.”

“To communicate with privacy.” Emma elaborates, to Doe’s wide-eyed surprise. **“Though I’m not normally revealed to people, let alone those who can sign.”** Akhila smiles on the behalf of her getting a real interaction. He hasn’t forgotten their previous conversation, but he trusts that her ‘time and place’ will arrive.

“Signing is rare.” Doe’s expression becomes set by strong curiosity, going so far as to make a faint smile as opposed to complete disgust. Mr Beans, on the other hand, looks like he’ll need more convincing than strained honesty. **“Can you speak?”**

“Through his mouth.” Emma signs back.

“Or if she makes another head.” Akila clarifies as Emma cringes.

“What sort of magic created you?” Doe’s eyes are caught by the terminal’s bluish light. Akhila grins.

“I’m glad you asked. We have no idea, but we’re searching. That’s why I took this job.”

“You came here for information?” Her head tilts by twenty degrees to the increase of her attention.

“We came here to be rich.” Emma explains. **“My brother wants to afford an analyst.”**

“The *best* magical analyst, and a psychic, and a religious scholar. At least one of each.” They pass by a poster for ‘karmic analysis’, run by a stereotypical-looking witch.

“Why?” Doe interrogates, causing Emma to make Akhila shrug with exaggeration.

“Because I owe Emma my life. Wouldn’t you do the same if somebody saved yours?”

Doe puts down her hands contemplatively, whilst Mr Beans makes a gruff noise of approval. Doe eventually offers **“That would depend.”** as they arrive at the wide double doors of the lost and found.

“Depend on what?” Emma’s question comes with investment. However, before Doe can think to respond the doors are opened by a small child in a large sports cap.

“Wa-!?” The child surprises them by acting surprised. Emma hides her arms nearly instantly, Mr Beans stands on alert, and Doe and Akhila snap their heads to the youngling. The boy stares at them under his cap, with a disbelieving eye and a panting chest. He makes no breath when his mouth moves, and the spectral glow of the terminal hovers over his body. “I’m so sorry to startle you!” He amends, readjusting his posture to stand straight. “It’s been a while since we’ve had visitors.”

“They’re dead.” Emma signs with Akhila’s hands, to which Doe nods her agreement. **“Should we exercise them?”** Doe shakes her head. The boy looks at their signs with a lack of comprehension.

“Not yet.” Doe clarifies, to which Akhila translates aloud as per their agreement, before he realizes the comment was meant for Emma.

“Oh?” The boy tilts his head, masking disappointment. The tag on his holiday overalls reads ‘Fly’, which seems a little derogatory to the group. “So, you didn’t want to visit the lost and found?”

“No. I mean- Yes!” Akhila stumbles. “Yes, sorry, we would like to come in. My bad, I was just translating-”

The ghost child, who looks around fourteen, gives the adults a large side eye. “Please step inside then. I’m only the temporary janitorial assistant and clerk, but I know how to find most objects on our shelves. (Most...)”

The group’s eyes are drawn to a tall wall of shelves, overlooking a single unmanned desk before them. The roof of the room is two stories high, and the lighting is solely facilitated by bright bug traps hung over every corner. The air smells like rat poison and earl grey tea, with the latter brewing within a self-powered kettle sat upon the desk. Behind the kettle, an opening in the wall shows a veritable maze of cabinets and filing systems.

It’s a sight that reminds Akhila of the size and scope of an interworld travel terminal. A vault that is fit to retain the lost riches of many universes lays guarded by a singular undead child.

“No pets in the Lost and Found, I’m afraid.” They speak up, as Mr Beans follows warily through the closing doors.

“He’s not a pet.” Doe scowls as she observes the piles of dead bugs around each lighting fixture. Akhila translates with more attention this time.

“He’s lost property then?” Fly jogs to their desk.

“No. He’s sapient, like us.”

“Yes.” Mr Beans barks concurrently, in a manner that startles everyone but Doe.

“Ah! Well, my apologies, I did warn you that it’s been a while since we had visitors. I’ve never met a sa ...‘say’...? A talking dog before.”

Mr Beans ruffs begrudgingly, forgivingly. *“Why is he only starting to speak now?”* Emma complains irksomely.

“What can I get for you?” Fly smiles at them graciously, whilst setting a silver laptop upon their desk. The device stalls whilst he turns on the kettle, the whistling steam adds to the rooms’ buzzing ambience fittingly. “Earl grey?”

“No, thank you. My notebook was left in the main hall. It’s brown, leatherbound, and big.” The laptop screen shows a low power warning and blinks out before Fly can check it. He tuts and rejiggles the power cord, then realises it’s still plugged in.

“I was just wondering why that hallway was so dark... The terminal is out of power, I’m sorry. Our bug lights and most appliances have separate sources of electricity, but...” He chuckles, “not the thing that connects to our system.” The kettle’s safety latch triggers.

“Have you seen it yourself?” Doe signs with a flare of irritation. **“It would have arrived today.”**

“I actually think I did, yes. Bartimus brought back a bunch of things from the main hall, like clothes and backpacks and books. It’s an uncommon event for the terminal, having so many things lost at once.”

“Like the initial incident...” Emma’s thoughts travel to the event that reportedly got the terminal shut down, just over one hundred years ago, a malfunction in the portal’s systems. *“...that too had a staggering amount of loss.”* Fly wouldn’t have been ‘alive’ to remember it, judging by how holiday-ready they’re dressed. Most ghosts react badly to being reminded of their deaths. “Can we find the book ourselves?”

“Sure thing.” Fly opens the desk’s drawer and produces a single jade hilted stamp. The gadget is shiny and gold, the size of their palm, and gives off the unnerving impression of an object that isn’t meant to be touched. The engraving recalls a whisper of old knowledge within Emma and Mr Beans grows low. “Since I can’t find it on our system, I’ll give you permission to search inside. Though, I’ll need you to stamp your skin with this, just for safety. If that’s ok?”

Akhila side eyes the mechanism with intense suspicion. Even Doe appears to show caution at the symbol of a great snake with a man’s dark scowling face. “What does that do?”

“Nothing really.” The ghost raises their arm to show off an ink mark of the serpent’s scowl. “It’s just a precaution to stop vandals. It hurts you in proportion to how you hurt material things.”

“How long does that curse last?” Doe looks taken aback.

“Until the stamp touches you again. *Boy*, it would be pretty bad to have it *permanently*.” Fly pours out a cup of tea.

Doe and Akhila give him a long and considering stare, which he returns without even a hint of concealed malice or deceit. Mr Beans whines. Emma thinks to the open entrance and weighs out the pros and cons of a bolting manoeuvre. “*Doe doesn’t look very athletic.*” Akhila reminds her. “*She’s thin and still has frostbite on her fingers.*”

“I know that.”

“It would be difficult to find her notebook without Fly’s help.”

“I know that too. For another idea, maybe there are other things we can do to find out what happened whilst you were asleep?”

“Emma!”

“I just don’t want us to get cursed! Look at it!” The squat stamp broods, like a sinister hourglass. It reminds her of the ancient God ‘Amrak’: responsible for judging a person’s sin. *“It looks evil. It is evil.”*

“I made a promise.” In the time they took to deliberate, Doe had already stamped her hand. Mr Beans has a mark on his back which he looks very unhappy about, and Fly waits expectantly for Akhila’s palm... Emma folds their arms.

“Sure.” Akhila’s assent comes out hostile. *“I’d love to continue helping, that’s what we agreed on.”*

“If she even knows...” Emma adds, sulking whilst giving up control.

Fly stamps the seal over their wrist, whilst Doe quirks a brow at Akhila’s change in tone. **“Are you okay?”**

Emma shakes their head. She feels the curse entering into every cell of their flesh, like a snake strangling its prey, affecting her down to the atomic level. She now understands how this curse operates in respect to her own being: the magic thrives off each thing it destroys, administering punishment by dissolving what it harms as tribute. Unlike herself, who lives symbiotically with the material she inhabits, this thing only exists to bring down its host.

"It's harmless, really." Fly puts the stamp back in its drawer and finishes his black cup of tea. "I've never known anyone to be seriously hurt by it."



The holding area twists deeper than what is practical, stuffed with well over one thousand items of lost property. The journey baffles Akhila, with shelves, cabinets, and files, that intersperse suitcases, racks, clothing bins, strongboxes, crates, and more. Everything is labelled. The luggage piles high enough that sliding ladders have been deployed, and shelves create shortcuts to crawl through to the other sides. Any gap in the labyrinth shows only more acres of the same sights. The area reads like an overgrown greenhouse: once orderly and slim, never designed to have nothing collected. Something about that disturbs his fleshmate, but it doesn't dawn on her why until they're deep in the maze's maw.

"The terminal was only opened for seven days." Emma signs with Akhila's arms. Mr Beans tilts his head curiously, though he remains on guard between the two. **"Where did this all come from?"**

Doe thinks on it with a slow nod. **"Maybe they're from other worlds... If the portals are active, some luggage might slip in from other terminals. I'm not an expert."** She shrugs. **"Maybe the items here are illusionary."**

"That would be a scary illusion." Emma almost dares to touch one of the bags, but the ink sigil makes her think twice. Doe seems to share in her curiosity, but also sheepishly holds back from testing the theory.

"What happened to the terminal?" The mute asks with a more personable demeanour.

"There was a malfunction," Akhila prompts Emma's response to be unbiased, **"Or a terrorist attack, or both? Something led to the portals disappearing everyone inside."**

Doe nods contemplatively, then looks back at her rucksack as if something has been recalled. This prompts Emma to ask a counter question, **"How did you lose your book?"**, gaining a scowl from the girl as she checks her zips.

"I was knocked to the ground in the second panic. My notebook fell out of my coat, and wasn't there when I returned."

"Can you tell us about what happened in that panic?" Akhila prompts Emma to ask delicately. Doe concedes faster than they expected.

"The entity returned to tell everyone it had changed its mind. It said there were too many of us assigned to be an 'efficient use of resources'. Then people were snatched into the roof."

"Shit! Is Cain ok?" Akhila exclaims. Emma reactively sows her friend's mouth shut from the inside, preserving the secrecy ensured by sign, as Akhila objects and Fly looks backwards.

"Cain survived. He's distraught, and the others are mad at him." Doe assuages.

"Did he know what he was signing us up for?" Emma's interest peaks.

"Yes." Doe's eyes contain certainty though she casts them aside. **"I believe so. His eyes overflowed with guilt."**

Emma knew it. She knew it before they had even arrived. *"That's not concrete."* Akhila objects.

"It's good enough." She responds tersely and sets their mouth to appear concurrent. **"I never liked him."** Akhila rolls his eyes.

Doe shakes her head impartially. **"I didn't know him. I'm here representing the witch Cordielia Hawthorn."**

"The witch of Katra?" Akhila both muffles and exclaims in his mind, to which Emma conveys his surprise.

Doe eyes them, incredulous and pleased, signing back. **"You've heard of Katra?"**

"Yes, we have! We read how her magic might interact with the dead, mostly by studying Cordelia's funeral practice. Are you her apprentice?"

Doe nods curtly and doesn't hide her pride.

“That’s so impressive. I heard about the exorcisms she’s performed; in the light of our research she must put a lot of trust in you. Nobody seems to talk about how hard it is for a witch to...”

Doe’s enthusiasm appears to wane, the longer Emma allows Akhila to talk on. A sullen look shades over the brow of the witch’s aid, to which a frown welcomes itself home. Her patience thins to a straw before it snaps. **“Stop talking.”**

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Rude.” Mr Beans ruffs in Doe’s direction. She scowls aside but looks chastened and then remorseful.

“How do you perform exorcisms?” Doe tries to change the subject, with a glance towards Fly.

“We don’t.” Akhila shares the same glance and narrows his eyes. **“We know of many ways, but we can only do the brute force methods. We can touch ghosts.”**

Doe nods, though she does not look relieved. **“You’ll know my main methods are violent too. I don’t want to do those with to him.”**

“You’re being awfully quiet back there. Sorry, don’t let me interrupt.” Fly passes comment, whilst Akhila sympathises with Doe. He’s glad nobody present wants to harm a kid, even if said kid is technically dead already.

“So how are we going to deal with him?” Emma starts up the conversation that no one addressed directly.

“By finding a better way. Some ghosts have unfinished business. It’s a cliché but the rule generally applies.”

“Business unfinished for one hundred years sounds hard to address.” Emma responds. To that, Doe stubbornly turns her head once again. Emma realises her thoughts were obvious, and Doe was just trying to be kind. **“Sorry.”** Their acquaintance doesn’t see her sign.

Akhila asks Emma to unseal his mouth, at the threat of making a fuss in front of Doe, to which Emma complies with the condition he stays silent so they can think. It is agreed and

he takes a breath of relief, inhaling and choking upon the stench of rat poison and cleaning product in the air.

They've passed by a massacre of rats by now, dead at the bottom of shelves or fallen prone in the isles. Poisoned food often rots nearby, and many of the zapped bugs smell like they've been doused with it. "*It's tragic.*" Emma mirrors the words of Ron, when he had first visited the colosseum. Her affinity and compassion for animals is what helped her to bond with the noble so fast. It's something she doesn't share with Akhila. He grew up fighting his rats for food. "*It's disgusting.*"

He disagrees with the sight for a separate reason. The smell of poison does not obfuscate the smell of death as they get further within the lost and found. The two share solidarity in breaking the silence to talk to Fly. "Who's responsible for killing pests?"

"Oh? It's Bartimus, he doesn't like rodents, or bugs... or animals of any kind. Sorry." They think to look back on Mr Beans, who doesn't seem to accept the apology on Bartimus's behalf.

"Why hasn't he picked them up?"

"He has a lot to do. I would pick them up myself, but I'm not allowed to touch any that he has poisoned. I'm sorry if they smell."

Akhila supposes a ghost doesn't have to worry about disease. "Do you eat?"

"Of course I eat. Do I look like I don't?"

"Um... No? How long have you been working here?" They come up to a break in the shelves and turn left, towards the sounds of somebody scribbling furiously.

"A few months, but I'll be leaving soon when I find my timepiece."

Doe snaps her attention at last, and signs for her words not to be translated.

"Unfinished business???"

Akhila's heart bumps with a hope that Emma struggles not to share. "Who holds you to that?"

"Bartimus!" Fly responds, introducing the very center of the maze whilst they speak.

This cuboid area houses a singular strong wooden desk, surrounded by miscellaneous exorcist-owned items and flanked by a simple bed. At the head of the wooden centerpiece, a stout man of imposing stature hunches over a large red-covered book. He scrawls madly, appearing to have a body unhealthily adapted to constant neurotic stress. His head is balding in a spiral formation, his hair is white, and his skin is coloured like paper stained by strawberry milk. A revolver sits to his side, close at hand. Akhila has never encountered such a highly-strung looking individual; the sort of person who makes you feel unwelcome by mere sight.

“FLY!” That hostile energy is flung full force at them, slamming his fist into the wood, the man’s manner flares like an angry security system. “Who are these people!? WHY HAVE THEY BROUGHT A DOG!?”

“I-I’m sorry, B- Mr Punch! These are just-“

“GET IT *OUT*!” He stands up and throws his hand back, pointing it swiftly towards the exit’s direction.

“But the dog is sapient! His name is, er...?”

“Beans.” Mr Beans glowers and lowers his head. Punch’s thin eyebrows flee up to his high hairline, locking eyes with the Grim. If Emma had thought Beans was unfriendly to them, this impression blows any pervious animosity out of the terminal.

“These folk are here for their misplaced book, and our system is down. I’m sorry, it just felt important.” Fly tries to appease in a tentative manner.

The man mutters and spits in response. Now Emma understands why a fourteen-year-old was positioned at the front desk: neither her nor Akhila have ever met a worse-tempered human being. “Where did you lose it, and when?” Bartimus scorns.

Doe answers him, with Akhila’s help, and then points out a book laying under the snub-nosed gun. Fly’s eyes widen, as if they are only just seeing the weapon now. “I-Is that property too?” He asks.

“No! That’s-... Yes! Yes, it’s a part of the haul.” Without switching the safety off, Punch jams the revolver into his belt. He then begins callously searching through Doe’s

book, thumbing open the pages and arching his brow. "Can you tell me the contents of these notes?"

"They're not yours to read!" Emma filters the more aggressive reactive language from Doe's actual signs, though she does nothing for her glare.

"Everything here is mine till I say otherwise, now tell me what it's about."

"It's for communicating with those who can't sign."

"That makes sense..." The man nods disparagingly. Doe balls her fists with restrained furiousness, whilst Punch continues to read her intimate conversations. Those have to include talk of her mentor, and mention of exorcising this terminal of ghosts. To that, Punch raises his brow and looks at her with a sneer. "You're young to be undergoing such tasks."

"And you're wide to be working here." Her hand gestures come out as fast cutting jabs, which Akhila delivers before registering with aghast at what he just said. "U-Um-!" The translator flails for something to amend their speech, but the janitor's brow is already creasing.

"So that may be." He acerbically states, snapping the book closed as his eyes lock with hers. "Can you credibly prove that you can't speak?" Doe blinks incredulously.

"What the fuck?!" Emma remarks.

The dour man looks on sceptically. "I can't just give anyone using 'sign language' this important piece of property. You might be a crafty thief, for all I know."

Doe's eyebrows knit. Her frostbitten hand raises reluctantly to her scarf, fingering the firm knot, waiting to test if he really will make her do it. Bartimus waits. He is taking his time to assess every part of her group, building a wall of nitpicks and dislikes that they can see in his bloodshot eyes. The mute gently unties the scarf's fabric, revealing a raw scar around her neck spanning its entire circumference with surgical precision. Fly raises his hands to his mouth in shock. Emma feels Akhila's heart twinge. Punch's eye twitches. "... Fine." She takes her book ungratefully, with an unflinching and hostile scowl. Fly looks mortified for the group and his boss. "If that's all-"

“No, actually. We have another property to find.” Akhila interrupts, causing the janitor’s hands to twitch dangerously close to his belt. “Fly’s timepiece.”

“What?” Punch becomes still, hardly hiding a look of horror, his face turning the very colour of frozen milk. “No. No, that is his to find. You’re not allowed.”

“Mr Beans could sniff it out.” Doe objects defiantly. **“He’s a good dog and can track things well.”**

“Yes.” Beans affirms. Meanwhile, Fly squeals like a firework.

“Oh, can they? Please?! Just a day wouldn’t hurt, I could look after them! It would finally get me out of your hair if they found it! Mr Punch? Mr Punch?? Please?” It’s hard to tell if Fly’s words even register in their boss’s mind. Bartimus Punch stares unblinkingly at the dog. “Can I go with them??”

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PART 3: Manslaughter.

“No...” Bartimus would have left it there, were it not for the look on Fly’s face. He cannot tolerate the feeling of being judged, especially by his virtual apprentice. “That is, ‘no’, it’s my duty to go with them.”

“*Oh!* For a moment, I thought you weren’t going to let them search.” Fly’s energy restores with predicable enviable vigour.

“Of course not, it’s my job to oversee and it’s your job to sit front of house. Go, leave, prepare a cup of tea.” Bartimus smiles as convincingly as he can, thinning his lips and showing many white teeth.

“Ok!” The ghost hugs him abruptly. Punch feels an emotional dagger pierce his stomach as his hypocritical heart aches. “I’ll make the best cup! Thank you, thank you!”

The boy scampers back through the maze and leaves him alone with the day-wreckers. Punch tries to ignore a piercing feeling of regret, knowing that this could be the last time he sees Fly. His eyes linger and his mind hangs until somebody coughs. *"The nerve of them..."* He'd prefer they were thieves rather than exorcists, staring at him as if they've got him pegged. "What are you all looking at? Lead the way, if you can really sniff it out!"



Of course, Bartimus would be so unlucky for them to have a ghost dog to track down the ghost child's scent. Of course, this would occur on the day he hid it. Bartimus follows behind the group, frowning like charred toast, brooding and stewing in his own juice. *"How do I stop them...?"*

"Do you think he's a ghost?" The tan-skinned one asks their friend.

"I wouldn't mind exorcising with force, if he is." The female responds in kind. Neither of them are aware he can speak sign language semi-fluently; he knew learning it so deaf people can't make him feel dumb would pay off with enough time.

"They're plotting my death already!" Bartimus sweats. In prison, his floor would be drenched in sweat; so much that he had to be placed in solitary to get him to stop worrying about being shanked. *"Contemptuous busy bodies - how will I protect myself?"*

"He's a ghost." Tan skin continues with different mannerisms. **"This place has been closed for ages, what would he eat? How would he get paid?"**

"If there are rats here, there could be food." The space-eyed girl gives his exact objection. He imports his own food using Fly's watch, and his money goes to a bank account he can't access from here. **"He's incredibly suspicious, but we'll need more evidence than just a hunch."**

"Then let's ask him about the incident. If he doesn't remember, then we can press him for details about his life. Ghosts frequently forget." The trio nod and look over their shoulders like vultures. Punch pales, knowing full well that he's ignorant of the 'incident' they're referring too. They'll flay him alive! "Hey, Mr Punch?"

“Fuck off!” He barks reactively. “We’re here to search, not to talk.” His hostile instinct begets pure genius by accident. They can’t conclude a thing if he gives them nothing to work with, which means they can’t kill him before he removes them from the picture.

“But how?” Punch frustrates. The group has him outnumbered but not outthought. They have a ghost dog, at least one exorcist, and a physically strong looking androgenous man, vs his loaded gun, vast amounts of distrust, and the knowledge of the stamps on their hands. It’s an uneven match no matter what way he spins it.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how does luck magic work in practice?” Tan-skin asks scar-neck with a relaxed change of demeanour and topic.

“Katara’s strings bind things together, like ‘breaking a mirror ’and ‘getting trapped in a haunted terminal’. It’s not just luck, Katara influences fate.” Fate?! How is a man like him meant to defy fate?! The girl showcases two faint tracings of signs upon her sleeves, ones Bartimus had dismissed as queer stitching patterns before. **“These guide my hands to the most fortunate outcomes. They’re woven from fortunate strings.”** Punch knew she would be trouble. He has never heard of it before, but now he’s convinced that ‘luck magic’ cheating at life.

‘Mr Beans’ leads them through a large section of small porcelain figurines, painted like devils, all eerily reminiscent of his old girlfriend Matilda. These were stocked at a time Bartimus no longer remembers and serve mostly to remind him of why he stopped trusting his friends. He prefaces the act of taking a handful and hiding them about his shirt by telling himself, *“It’s a necessary precaution to stay safe.”*

The dog barks and starts picking up its pace, stalking the shelves with its tail horridly cleaving the air in excitement. *“How does it seem that whenever I need to think quickly, I cannot gather my thoughts in one place?!”* His mind flutters between cowardice, violence, and diplomacy, like a rat in a factory of cheese and meats. *“I must pick something and chew it through!”*

He lands on diplomacy, influenced by his taint of cowardice and reluctance to suffer pain. *“What if I talked with them?”* It would seem suspicious considering he told them to fuck off, yet he could still try to explain what they are doing is bad for him. *“They won’t*

care." Maybe he could offer them the watch to use for themselves, if they were greedy and self-serving that would certainly solve his problems. *"But what if they don't want it?"*

What if they're 'good people' who do 'good things' by their own idiotic ideas of the word? They would detest him and keep him at arm's length if they disagreed with his selfish reasons. *"Worse yet, what if they're simply cold blooded?"* After all, what is an exorcist but a contract killer for the dead? These are people with a mission, licence, and incentive to end Fly by any means they can find. He has no idea what would happen if Fly were given that watch, but he cannot allow even the possibility of the boy 'passing on'. No. Attempting diplomacy with these people is too unpredictable. The moment they know his intentions, all other means of achieving his goals become unattainable!

The dog growls triumphantly, sitting and looking up at a tall shelf of glass vases and ceramic crafts.

Bartimus understands now.

After damp-headed yet contemplative thought, he regrettably comprehends that approaching with violence is his surest option. So long as he does it by surprise... "It's up there?" He asks innocently, gaining a glare from the hound. "You'll need a ladder then! Stay here."

'Beans' barks a yes, as Bartimus excuses himself to the other side of the standing shelves. *"That dog stared with accusation."* It knows... it must have smelt his recent presence alongside the watch: any moment now his cover might be blown. *"I'll have to act quickly..."* He finds the ladder he used to hide the valuable, not expecting that Fly would ever search here for fear of breaking a vase. He extends it before returning but purposefully removes the securing pin.

Punch sets the ladder in front of them and wipes his brow. Everyone is standing around and looking at him as if he's a ghost. "Well?" He stares back.

"Isn't it your job to get it?" Shit.

"Yes! But I can't, I'm too... Large." He makes a grimace. "Fly does the ladders, that's why I keep him around."

“If that’s so, why did you not bring him?”

“Because I... Because I didn’t think it would be high. Sorry, I’m under a lot of stress.” The apology tastes worse than the lie or his own murderous intent. “I can hold this, whilst one of you climbs.” He offers obsequiously, whilst taking the legs of the ladder in both hands. The girl nods to her friend and puts her hand on a rung. Part of him feels sickly satisfied that it’s her... *“Good riddance.”*

There are sixteen rungs on the ladder, and he only needs her to reach the top four to start a collapse. Once she falls, the ladder will tilt forwards or backwards and promptly cause some of these glass fixtures to break. It will be her ‘fault’. The curse on her right hand will ensure that the damage is paid back in full.

“Hold on to my bag.” She instructs her friend and begins climbing the rungs. One at a time his excitement grows, not that he’s feeling bloodthirsty. His tension rises until she hesitates, agonizingly, on rung eleven.

Her scarf has been caught by a slat, tangled by misfortune within a thin gap in the metal. She tries to tug it and rattles the contraption dangerously. “Don’t-!” Bartimus raises his arm to prevent the ladder from folding early, his thumb makes for an impromptu and painful securing pin. “Don’t worry!” He volunteers to unhook the scarf, painstakingly trying to look like he’s not in pain. “You’re safe!”

The next rung brings her weight crushing onto his poor hand. Rung fourteen and fifteen increase it fourfold. His grip on the metal becomes slick, he trembles. “What’s wrong?” Her friend bothers him.

“Oh, nothing.” He lies through gritted teeth, just as Doe shakes out her hand and frowns. She must be feeling the same pain as him! He feels like he’s about to snap!

Rung sixteen.

His thumb crunches. Punch makes an ungodly howl and retracts his hand from the ladder’s mouth. Flashing agony makes him feel alive, at the same time as she’s sent into freefall. The ladder folds. Doe’s thumb is crushed by an invisible force, her breath catches as she rockets backwards and brings the metal towards an opposite set of shelves.

CRASH

The girl hangs on the ladder, her eyes fearful, the stamp glowing. Her friend has managed to grab the tool too late to stop her momentum transferring. They hear an object dislodged from its place, beginning to roll, teetering on the edge of obliteration. They know there's no time to get round and stop it, their eyes beseech him to do something before it's too late... Then, the crystalline ornament reaches the edge and drops.

"NO!" The dog unbelievably leaps and bounds through a gap in the lower shelf! Its uncanny inhuman voice echoes into his ears, as it breaks onto the other side just in time to intercept the falling vase and- ***Smash!*** All the damage is suffered upon the martyred hound. Doe rasps a distressing exclamation, as her dog's body is ruptured with fissured wounds ripping its hide apart.

His headache splits. "DAMN IT!" His plans are ruined again, by a meddling Bullmastiff hound. There's no space for diplomacy, no lie to retell, no way to retreat, and no ground to concede. Punch draws his revolver and shoots.



BANG.

Akhila has never stared down the barrel of a gun. He has never witnessed a bullet flying in slow motion, whilst the shot roars in his ears. Guns were not something allowed in the gladiatorials where he fought, and thus his reaction time is a little off to avoid his skull caving.

It turns out that losing half of their head is enough to stun Emma into disfunction too. Their arm falters in grabbing Punch, and their legs trip on themselves as they attempt the reach. Doe shouts in a barely audible rasp, leaping at Punch from the tilting ladder. She drags a spaghetti mess of strings out of the air in a vengeful show of raw magic strength. He fires at her, and misses. Doe's palm connects with his heart, and the strings attach, followed by a sudden 'clink' and the girl's 'roar' being cut short.

Her eyes lock with the janitor's, uncertain and full of question and fury. The scarf hiding her scar starts to bleed dark red from its inner side, as Punch's injured hand produces

a small porcelain doll from his chest space. Almost apologetically, he reveals that its head has been severed at the neck. Her body fails to take a breath, making one unfortunate step that sends her head loose from its shoulders. Doe's skull lands next to a rat trap, and her body falls nearby.

White noise takes over Akhila's remaining ear. Emma's thinking is muddled by his half mind's attempt to stay alive. She tries making them get up and then tries to repair the damage, yet she finds herself looking into the muzzle of Punch's gun. "*Akhila-*" He shoots them three more times in the face, blasting her fleshmate into grey matter.

Her situational awareness is plunged into the dark. With no brain remaining Akhila is gone, her touch and motor skills are the only things that remain for her to use. To fight properly, Emma creates an organ that lets her perceive: An eye mixed with an ear. She makes it grow on her back, forming some rudimentary connections to her nervous system. Parts of his skull are reabsorbed stealthily whilst she spies on Akhila's second murderer.

"Eugh." Bartimus Punch is reloading his gun. "I didn't expect to enjoy that." Elsewhere she can hear Mr Beans whining in pain. Punch registers him and scowls deeply. "That's your fault... Now my final moments will be spent burning your hide and cleaning up, you dumb animal."

His gun is cocked but not aimed where he presently intended. The buzzing light catches a string threaded into his hands and fingers, it connects beneath his clothes, binding his body like a puppet's reins. These golden webs are as thin as silk, nearly impossible to perceive or feel, each connected to Doe's still twitching hand. "Wait-" Punch understands implicitly what has happened, even before he registers where exactly he's pointing the gun.

B A N G.

The murderer shoots himself in the head, or rather, his fate is twisted towards that end. Emma would gasp if she wasn't currently rebuilding Akhila's teeth. Punch drops to the ground with his eyes rolling up to the roof. His body knocks against a shelf and tips over Fly's precious watch onto his chest. Doe's body gets unsteadily to its feet, alarming Emma as it collects its head. Their friend ties her two pieces back together with the scarf, before stumbling over to Mr Beans and producing a red thread to treat his injuries. Her eyes move

as if still alive; shocked and breathless, her face is just as one might expect on discovering they're an undead.

"Emma..." Speaking of undead, Akhila's head is now complete. His flesh has turned into brain, and his life has been jumpstarted from whence she recalls it last. For the second time today, Emma has crossed a boundary with herself, breaching a line to create her own veil over reality. It thinks independently from her, feeling like he did and acting like he did... *"Are we ok?"* It even has part of her soul, remodelled to be exactly like his.

"No, we're not." Neither have time to think back and forth over things; Punch is getting to his feet in the same moment as Akhila stands. Emma can only fill him in on the notes, whilst he adopts a weary stance.

"So, I'm dead..." Punch addresses. *"I don't see a body, so I must have been dead for a long time..."* He drops his gun, much to the duo's relief. *"I suppose I should say I'm sorry, but... It doesn't seem like any harm was done."*

"Why did you do that?!" Akhila typically cannot keep Emma's rage out of his tone.

"Well don't hurry me! I just...! I suppose I just... didn't want it to be found." He opens his hand and looks at the tiny matt watch in his palm. Only now he considers the truthful answer to their question. *"It's a generator of lost property. It takes objects from other universes, and so..."*

"So you wanted it for yourself?"

"I think my past iterations did... Yes, but... I don't care about that anymore." The man speaks with a breaking clarity in his voice. *"I just don't want Fly to pass on..."*

"Why...?" Something within Emma coils. *"You treat him like shit."*

"That's not true! He's happiest how he is now! He enjoys being in this 'life'! I'm never happy, I-... I honestly hate thinking; it never does me any good. But he's different. I don't... I can't explain it, but I can't tolerate the idea of that light getting snuffed out. I would rather he stays ignorant forever."

"You coward..." Emma turns cold inside Akhila's core.

"Do you think he would want that?" Akhila attempts to hold back her disdain.

“B-but-”

“What sort of friend keeps that a secret for one hundred years?” Punch is silent, and Doe turns her face aside. Emma feels her scorn harshly reflected on herself. He stares at the man until their gaze lowers further. Punch mumbles.

“(I know it’s still selfish... But he’s my only friend...)” In his good hand, a smith’s hammer manifests from a grey glow within the watch. “(He’ll hate me if he learns the truth...)”

Raising the tool, Punch gives them an inclination of what he’s about to do to the magic artefact. The two lunge to stop it, and Punch reactively spawns a sharp candle-baring statue in their path. Their leg knocks it down, the point threatens to break, warning of sudden reciprocated debilitations. The ink serpent on Akhila’s hand glows and grins. “*No, you don’t!*” Emma deploys her arms and catches the statue as they trip. Akhila rolls, keeping it safe, followed by Emma throwing it after Punch.

“*Emma!*” The sculpture is launched as a javelin, intercepting him as he turns to flee. It hits the part where he removed the doll, skewering through his back. Punch drops the watch, falling with the statue still in his ribs... He scrambles to pick it up, but he finds it plucked out of his reach. “Stop trying.” Akhila warns, their wound healing on Emma’s watch.

“I can’t help it.” Punch chuckles a lightheaded laugh. It’s a disturbing sound without any hope. “I can’t ever stop... I can’t even give myself a break. Don’t show him the watch. Please?”

The ghost’s eyes are not going to cloud over; his body is not going to exorcise itself. Yet Akhila can’t bring himself to put the man out of his misery, even if they were confident that they could. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not...” Bartimus Punch sheds a translucent tear. Akhila wordlessly nods and turns his back on the scene. He only stops when he hears Punch for a final time. “Then, tell him how much he means to me...? Before he goes...?”

“Sure thing.”

Doe helps Mr Beans to his paws, and stares judgementally at the two. Akhila will not exorcise Mr Punch, but she is free to do as she pleases.

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PART 4: The Undead

"Are we ok?" With no one around, Emma can finally think with Akhila. She finds herself asking the same question he posed, under different circumstances, whilst they wait for Doe to be finished with Punch. *"I want to talk."*

"Thank you. So do I..." Akhila has been pensive since the altercation ended, his mind all but closed off from hers. *"My head hurts though."*

She works apologetically to numb that pain. *"What are you thinking about?"*

"Lots of things. It's hard to know which to prioritise."

"The most urgent?"

"I don't know if we should exorcise the ghosts." In his hand remains the peculiar magic watch. He feels irrationally afraid to pocket it, just in case it gets stolen or lost somehow. *"I hadn't thought about Fly in that way; as something that has a 'happy existence'. Isn't it hypocritical for us to decide to end that...?"*

"What do you mean?" She feels something of shame and angst catching her tone, they both know the answer. He knows she knows.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" She doesn't need to assent. Akhila can already feel the sting of guilt. "I didn't realise until after my thoughts jumped from 'getting shot' to 'being ok'... it was the same as in the foyer, but this time you couldn't hide it."

"I wanted to tell you..."

"I know. I'm not mad. You always get afraid that I'm going to be mad at you." She knows he's mad. She feels him containing it, as his love often persuades him to do for her. He always gives her the benefit of the doubt. "I'm just feeling lost. I don't know how to think of me. Like, am I still made of 'me'? Am I me? Am I you? Do I have a soul?"

"It has never mattered what we are, please don't start thinking that... I didn't want to live without you, so I refused. I don't know what to think about it, and I don't want us to think about it. I want nothing to do with this, past being sorry that it happened and grateful that I can make you again."

She thinks about holding her tongue, but a feeling of resonance with Punch's words makes their stomach turn. *"Emma-?"*

"I broke our promise." Their heart skips like an icicle drop, answering any of the further questions he could have asked. "You died alone, at the doors. I got terrified, and I left your body, you died without me and that was the one thing that you asked me not to do..."

"Why?" Akhila finally shows his anger. "Why would you do that? That's horrible!"

"I wish I knew - it just happened! I woke up outside and I couldn't feel you anymore, and I looked and I looked, but when I found you, it was already too late!" Her distress channels on a scale that he finds overwhelming, she cries openly though his eyes whilst she attempts to explain. Akhila starts tuning it out, as for the first time he feels true sorrow for his partner.

"Emma."

"I know that it's indefensible-"

"I don't care!" Emma holds back her thoughts, slapped by the realisation that he's being truthful. "I don't care, because I know that you didn't mean it and I don't want you to hurt yourself over it. I don't blame you, and I wouldn't have done back then. I promise... I... I

don't care." She finds Akhila is crying too. He is crying for his past self, and he is also crying for her. Their consolidation is done through an outwards silence, and an inwards blending of recognition and renewed love.

Doe's intrusive steps interrupt their mollification, though she hesitates and recognises it could be a bad time. Mr Beans limps by her heel, finally appearing comfortable with allowing the two to stand near to each other. It's Beans who asks if they're ok.

"Yeah." Emma signs with her own hands. **"Are you two?"**

"No. Beans is stabilised but hurt, I failed the exorcism, and I've discovered I'm undead. It's a lot." Doe's face betrays as much.

"I kinda get it..." Akhila replied, as Doe scowls at him. "I was reconstructed this morning, before we met. I'm undead too." He wipes off his tears and rectifies his smile for her, she sees the effort and returns his expression with something of weary comfort being shared.

"Was it Emma?" She asks, respectfully not assuming the absence of any other force.

"It was me." Emma admits with a bruised self-image. **"It's a sore subject..."**

"It should be. Mr Beans and Cordelia knew I've been undead for four years." The Grim hangs his head and whines, as Doe pauses to give him an exculpatory scratch behind the ears. **"I feel angry that she didn't tell me what I was, and more angry that I might not get the chance to berate her or thank her for doing it."**

"You'll have the chance when we get out."

"Not exactly... The magic that makes me 'alive' is unravelling fast. I wouldn't have run away, if I knew her barriers helped to keep me together." The last part is signed with diminished gestures. She drops her hands and Mr Beans noses her, as if that might give the life she needs. **"Dishonesty is dumb."**

"I'm so sorry." Emma signs and Akhila agrees. **"We'll work extra fast to do what the entity wants."**

"We can't even do that." Doe shakes her head self-assuredly. **"The exorcism only hurt him, I tried thrice and did everything right. I'm not sure if the entity's challenge can**

be achieved." Akhila nods, with his hold on the watch tightening, as they both realise that claim could be proven right if Fly fails to be exorcised.

"Then we'll investigate." Emma signs. **"If the entity sets us an impossible task, that's one less reason to worry about being the one to 'finish first'. Right?"**

"And if we're in a team, maybe we can finish first together." Akhila adds. "I'd forgotten about that part..." Doe concurs.



On the journey back, their group settles to more light-hearted conversation. Doe mentions her mentor's sister, Abigail Hawthorn, whom she had spied amongst Cain's surviving few. This brings them onto the topic of priests and pyromancy, where Akhila shares some of his encounters with Aodinn's zealots. They start talking about holy fires, and funeral rites. All manners of necromancy are discussed, as he can't help but bring up his encounters on the quest for his sister's maker. Meanwhile, Emma broods anti-socially, and hardly passes her usual comments.

They re-enter Punch's study to find three mugs and one troubled child waiting at the desk. Fly is reading the red book which Bartimus had been poring over, their face set in alarm. "Fly?"

His head jolts at the troop's arrival, not even clocking the watch. "Where is Bartimus? Did he leave already?!"

"What-?"

The boy jumps from the chair and runs to them with the red book in hand. He nearly bumps into Akhila with his blue aura hazing brilliantly in his trail. "I saw this book labelled for me!! It was written by Punch and says that he's not coming back! Where did he go? Why would he write this book and not tell me himself?!"

"Punch is still here." Doe assures him. **"He's not going anywhere."**

"Really?"

"Promise." She nods.

Their alarm calms to a mild incertitude. “Then... where is he? Why would he write the book?”

“Punch couldn’t bear to see you leave, so he didn’t want to give you the watch. Whatever that book was, I don’t think it means anything to him now.” Akhila makes Fly frown.

He hands over the watch, as the boy grows quiet. A holographic screen pops up and welcomes Fly, scanning his person and recognising ‘**Prince Sidney – Alive**’. “Queer... someone has made a second account. That can’t be right.”

“He said he’s sorry.” Akhila tries, but the boy will hear none of it.

“Who’s sorry?” Fly raises their head. “This wasn’t Punch. Neither of us have been alive for one hundred years, and both accounts are one hundred years old.” Doe flicks a look back to Akhila. “I forget how long I’ve been searching... but I would have noticed becoming and old man, don’t you think? It must be glitching.”

“Do you not feel different then? Lighter, now that you have your peace?”

“I feel confused and maybe a little hungry...” Precisely nothing. “I’ll reset the accounts and find Bart before I go.”

By touch alone, Fly requests every property to be returned to its respective world. The vast maze that encompasses them all but diminishes to a skeleton of the floor’s plan. All lights, save a single desk lamp, are extinguished until it’s only that and Punch’s security card on the desk. The ink marks on their hands disappear too, and the red book takes its leave from Fly’s arm.

“I’ll ask him what he thinks.” Fly speaks in a dispirited voice. “Maybe he’ll let me keep working here in the summer holidays.” Punch was right. No longer having their excuse to stick around dampens the boy’s spirit completely...

Fly uses his watch to summon a torch to shine round the shelves. “Well then, I better get to finding him! He’ll be so mad that the lost property didn’t even belong to people at the terminal. I hope he doesn’t feel like he wasted his time...”

Akhila shakes his head to confirm what Doe is thinking. There's no change in Fly after finding what they sought. Their unfinished business didn't count towards saving their soul. Yet more importantly, the watch didn't even register Fly as dead.

"What should we do now?" Ahkhila asks Doe, as she picks up Punch's card and holds it out to him. They see a spark rekindled in her bright colourless eyes, and a smile pointing towards what she has found.

"We can investigate."

The card gives them access to the staff areas of the terminal. They might have time to get out of here before Doe's resurrection wears off.

End.

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