

# Content Warning

This story contains horror themes, including:

Body Horror

Child Abuse and Endangerment

Religious Indoctrination and Violence

Manipulation

Insects

Blood

Parasites

Psychological Horror

Possession/Mimics

Discussions of Mortality and Murder

Severe Emotional Trauma

General Violence

Firearms

Unsettling Themes Including Death

## The Third Hawthorne: Paladin

I'm led into the mobile chapel by Sister Indumathi. The sacrificial altar at the center is decorated today. The tapestry that hangs off its top has been replaced for the first time in a very long time, and not with another burlap banner, but rather a golden silk one. But there are other more practical alterations. Decorated blood tanks, made of artisanal wrought iron and medical-grade plastics, have been attached at the sides, even if only partially filled, a sign of a blood letting or animal sacrifice.

Blood was a common sight in the room. It was the most efficient means of storing divine favor. And as in all things, Aodanr is not picky. The blood circulating through the altar is likely raided or purchased from a meat packing plant. If anything the familiar sanguine sight puts me a bit at ease. The way Sister Indumathi practically dragged me out of the nearly abandoned mess hall — and of course now I see where everyone has gone — I thought something terrible must have happened. But it seems mostly business as usual putting on airs.

But it wasn't a celebration. People look stoic and miserable. Like this is a funeral. For a brief moment I worry it could be mine. Perhaps I would be the sacrifice.

No, I'm reading too much into this. The weekly sacrifice to fuel our holy weapons was always a hard time. And I am their Angel of the Inferno. I find a confident smile to reassure them.

I sit next to Brother Sigurd. I eye his long golden hair with a mix of admiration and jealousy. I miss my bright red hair. I had burnt it all to silver for Aodanr. I miss it; it was a reminder of my father.

I lace my fingers with his and I can stop acting; I smile for real. Perhaps some day I'd have a son with bright red hair. Or maybe he would be blonde. With any luck.

He looks at me. He's been crying. He holds my hand tighter. "Little lamb's big day."

I frown with confusion. "Little lamb" was our pet name for Leanne. We took her in after her village was burned down. Burned down by me. It was a heavy guilt in my gut. But she was a reminder of what it was all for. Her family refused to flee or surrender. It was too late for them. But Leanne could be saved. The next generation could join The Glorious Symphony. Burn the world and let the True Phoenix rise from its ashes.

Then I remember I once had a ceremony like this; when I was anointed as a paladin. Leanne was... very young, but Father Jeroche had once confided in me that he wanted to create new roles, not just paladins and priests. Much to my shame, I haven't been keeping up with the newsletters. I have been busy training, fighting, and recovering.

That must be what is happening. I smile back to Brother Sigurd to reassure him. "This isn't the end. Leanne—"

"Don't... there's something I was supposed to tell you..." He looks away from me, and doesn't explain. Something is very wrong. The way he squeezes my hand—

I don't want to think about what it means. I like what I believe is happening. And... I'm starting to think I don't want to know the truth.

Father Mulstian steps up to the altar and the room stands in salute, until he gives us the order, "Please, take your seats." And we sit down at once,

creating a rumble of groaning sweatshop-cheap chairs. “We are gathered today for our weekly sacrifice, and to show specific honors.” He searches the room. “Abigail, please stand and receive recognition.”

This is... new. Given I was an apprentice to Father Jeroche himself, I had never been formally recognized like this. My superior officers were worried about envy in the ranks. It seems to have worked; my compatriots, most of whom have seniority, look up to me. I don’t care; I could be despised and it wouldn’t change me. I’m here to make a better world for everyone.

I stand and bow, staying humble as I tower over my peers. Father Mulstain’s voice is warm and sad. “As difficult as today is, it brings us one massive step closer to unifying the world. After today we’ll be able to add the Principality of Lebohn to the Orchestra. And it is thanks to your unwavering faith. Every other instance of Project Barbed-Seed failed. Only this company has yielded a sufficient sacrifice. And it is thanks to you.” The room applauds. “Your bottomless love for our guest has been an inspiration to all of us.”

Project Barbed-Seed? I have heard the name around. When I brought Leanne back, scared, hurt, hungry, desperate... They said that they could let her in under Project Barbed-Seed. I didn’t know what that was. It started before I joined. I feel a pit in my stomach.

“Please be seated.” He instructs me. But I linger. My body wants to do... something. It doesn’t want to be seated. “Sister Hawthorne?” Father Mulstain stares at me.

“Yes, apologies. Just... lost in thought.” I sit back down.

And he chuckles a warm laugh. “I understand. This won’t be easy for any of us. But if it was, it wouldn’t be a sacrifice. I have given up much in my time,

yet will need time to grieve after this too. It's okay to be conflicted. Just remember why we're here. The Grand Symphony awaits."

He is so gentle... surely I must be misunderstanding what's going on. I grip Sigurd's hand now for my own comfort. It is going to be fine.

I isn't going to be fine. My hand turns into a vice as three paladins step forward, carrying Leanne. She is sleeping peacefully. Good—

No, she should run: wake up and run away. I call out—

I don't call out. My throat catches the words before they can escape me.

This is a joke. A prank gone too far. I was one of the younger paladins here. Some kind of late stage hazing ritual.

They lay her on the mechanized ritual altar, and Father Mulstain draws a combat knife. "Aodanr, we sacrifice to you one innocent child, loved by us all. She held great potential to be our sister. To grow up and become a warrior, a mother, an artist, or anything. But our passions are greater than our love. We consign her soul to you—"

People don't joke with the Altar. They don't pray fake prayers. This is real. I can practically see the threads of misfortune—

No, I've left that life behind. I don't deal in misfortune! I make miracles now. If a better world costs Leanne's life...

This is absurd! She's one of the reasons I have done everything I have! To make a better world for her!

"Sister Hawthorne?" Father Mulstain has paused. I'm standing again. I didn't mean to stand again.

I should keep my mouth closed and sit back down. But no... I feel this bubbling hatred building up inside. It's magma that burns at my throat.

“Stop this!” I shout. “I wouldn’t have... I didn’t know you’d kill her! I promised I’d protect her! That she’d have a happy life!”

Brother Sigurd tries to pull me back down into my seat, but I slap away his hand. I made a promise. I have already broken too many promises. Not this one, too.

Father Mulstain looks at me, puzzled. “Brother Sigurd was supposed to explain the program to you last week.”

The beautiful blonde paladin behind me looks down in shame. “I am sorry Father. I meant to tell her when she returned from the breaking of Lindora. But she was so... distressed.”

“You are forgiven, Brother Sigurd. That explains a great deal.” He takes a deep breath. “Sister Hawthorne, you can leave the room if you wish.”

Leave the room? Like I’m a child that just needs to cover her eyes and I can pretend like the world isn’t falling apart outside!?

“I’m not letting this happen!” I growl.

Father Mulstain’s irritation finds its way to the surface, “Please, Sister Hawthorne, this isn’t easy for any of us, but we’re committed to a very tight schedule, and we need the weapon this sacrifice will fuel. I’m very sorry but you will heal in time. Let’s not have this all be in vain.”

“Then find another way!” My voice echoes around the room.

“For the Phoenix...” He looks to the others around me. “Restrain Sister Hawthorne.”

Brother Sigurd and Sister Annalise grab my arms and drag me back into my chair. My heart hammers. I was strong, but I wasn’t that strong, surely. My anger breaks into panic.

“Father! Please!” I desperately bargain, “Put... Put me on the altar! I am Jeroche’s hand picked apprentice. His successor. That has to be worth—!”

Mulstain, who had just restarted his prayer, shouts over me. “If you do not close your mouth, you will be gagged. Do you understand?!”

It was... hopeless. I failed another sister who loved me. I thought I was helping, but I should’ve known better. All I’m good at is hurting people.

I close my eyes. This is my lot in life, isn’t it. To hurt those I love. I’m a weapon. That’s all I’ll ever be. Jeroche’s weapon. If I had accepted it sooner, Leanne wouldn’t be sacrificed. I shouldn’t have cared.

“A...bi...gail?” The little voice echoes around the silent room. Leanne struggles on the altar.

At first I thought it was my guilty conscience. But then I see Father Mulstain, tears in his eyes, hesitate. His hand shakes.

“Wh-Where is... Abby?”

Mulstain looks away. “I can’t do this.”

Relief from this madness; a thread of vindication that I can use to stitch this wound in my soul closed. Everything would be alright.

“Get more sedative,” he commands.

And I feel it snap. My soul aches, stomach burns, vision clouds with tears. I had killed for everyone here. I was ready to die for everyone here. But I just... couldn’t. I couldn’t lose another sister.

My voice is low, broken by tears, but I speak with razor sharp intent. “Aodanr... I will sacrifice everyone here. I will destroy my new life and everyone in it... Just give me the power to save Leanne.”

And to my horror, my prayer is granted.

### *Adoption 3:1 Tomorrow*

*My eyes open to visions of the silver haired priestess. Her arms hold me tight as she dreams, as though I might slip through her fingers like water. Right now, I'm alone. The hive, Rosemary, slumbers. They slept through the date to give us privacy, briefly waking up in the middle of the night, but ultimately deciding to have more dreams of their own. And Abby snoozes as well. But I don't. It's not that I'm anxious, for a change. I just feel... rested. Alive and awake for the first time in a very long time.*

*I pull her a bit closer and put my forehead to hers, giggling as she grumbles in her sleep. Right now, without any eyes on me, riding high, I feel brave enough to plant a kiss on her forehead. I flush with embarrassment: I'm too old for the honeymoon phase, right?*

*And the redness in my cheeks doubles as I realize I forgot to clean my lipstick off last night after having a bit more wine than I usually would. A nearly perfect red imprint of my lips is now proudly displayed on her forehead.*

*"Crap." I mutter under my breath as I try to wriggle an arm out of the vice grip and wipe off the accidental mark of affection.*

*No dice, she is surprisingly strong. Not brawny, not by a long shot, but I'm not exactly a body builder myself. Maybe if I could—*

*"I'm sorry to interrupt but—"*

*"Ah!" I squeak as I suddenly realize I'm not alone. Abby suddenly bolts up and holds me tighter, a protective instinct.*

*I turn to find the ghost of Jessica. I had met her last night, and borrowed one of the dresses from her luggage.*

*The ghost adjusts her soda-bottle glasses and holds up her hands. "Sorry! I just really need my dress back. I need to depart soon. Remember, my honeymoon?"*

*Abby slowly lets me go, realizing there's no danger. She fumbles for a pair of reading glasses and a journal from the bedside table while I take care of the ghost.*

*I slide out of bed to go get the dress, and the cold air hits my body. I immediately flush. I remembered taking off the dress for the night, vaguely, but I didn't really internalize what that meant. I get back under the covers in a hurry.*

*I nod towards the dress draped over the side of a chair. "It's right there. I took the pins out of it. Back to your size. Thank you for letting me borrow it."*

*The spirit fumbles with the dress with a general clumsiness. "How'd the date go?"*

*Bashfully I just... gesture towards the woman in bed with me.*

*"Eh? Oh, I see! Yes! Uh..." She clears her throat. "I should get going."*

*"Good luck, Jessica!" I call out after her. She floats through the door, and fumbles the dress through the crack at the bottom after it fails to follow her. I let out a sigh. "Poor woman."*

*"Think the husband got trapped here too?" Abby asks as she writes in her journal.*

*“No idea…” I sigh, and wistfully stare towards the door. “I haven’t run into him yet if that’s the case.”*

*“Further in?” Abby suggests.*

*“It would be too sad, otherwise.” I clear my throat. “Uh… when you are done, with your… um…”*

*“Dream Journal. It’s an old habit I picked back up,” she explains. “Dreams are precious things to me. And on a practical level, Aodanr sometimes demands precious things from me.”*

*“Right.” I clear my throat again, and whisper. “Can… you get my clothes from… over there?”*

*Abby stops halfway through the next sentence to look at me, with a giddy smile. “Gods, you are so cute.” She finishes writing the sentence and gets up, with a confidence in her body that I envy. “Alright, bishop to E4.”*

*She glides across the room in her state of undress… and I notice scars I hadn’t before. Her abdomen is practically tiger striped. I wince in sympathetic pain.*

*My pants are tossed across the room. I catch them with my face. The bombardment doesn’t stop there, and I scramble to get dressed under the covers. Abigail dresses herself in front of me while I fumble awkwardly, trying to preserve the modesty that both of us seemed to lose last night with a bottle of wine.*

*Well, that's not really fair to either of us. It was more that we couldn't find our pajamas after a bottle of wine. Half a bottle of wine, really. She—*

*I'm getting worked up over nothing. We had a good time. That's what matters. We made art, drank wine, curled up, and talked until we passed out.*

*"I don't remember that part..." Abby mutters as she looks in the mirror, getting ready for her day, seeing my lipstick on her forehead. I had completely forgotten. "Tempted to keep it right where it is. I can wash it off later." She smiles, and takes it in stride, brushing out her hair for now.*

*And with myself finally decent, I walk over and join her, struggling to tame my hair for the day, washing off yesterday's makeup before reapplying. We brush our teeth together. For a few moments we are just... pleasantly domestic. A glimpse into what life could be like now. Hopefully.*

*I am about to complain about trying to get my makeup right in a faint blue emergency glow, when the lights flicker to a warm full-toned light. The whole facility seems to wake up from its slumber as we feel the quiet thrum of power. The lights pulse with an unsteady rhythm, in ways I've become quite familiar with, living at the whims of a struggling local powerstation. Except, judging by the aggressive and unstable buzzing, this is probably a lot more power moving through these walls. I certainly wouldn't touch any lightswitches right now.*

*And with the lights on, I see Abby's adventurous grin. She wants to explore. She wants to know why the power's back. She wants to look for anything that might have changed. I see that wanderlust mixed with the repressed energy of an*

*excited puppy, barely held behind her refined mask. Another reminder that she's not some perfect saint; just a different kind of strange from me.*

*How can I say no. "Should we wake Rosemary before we start exploring?"*

*She is caught off guard, but starts laughing. "Refreshing to get read for a change." Abby thinks it over. "Let our guests sleep a bit longer, they do like their dreams. They can always catch up when they wake up."*

*Now that I'm awake, and fully dressed, and with a little confidence boost, I feel a bit bolder. I take her hand and suggest, "How about a little stroll, Abby? With the power back on, we might find something new." And I lean against Abby's shoulder. "And if we don't... it's a pleasant way to start the day anyway."*

*"Took the words right out of my mouth, Hana."*

### ADOPTION 3:2 EXPEDITION

OUR MIND WANDERS AS WE CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN. THIS HIGH UP, WE DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT MAINTAINING THE FACADE. WE INHABIT A HANDFUL OF HUSKS MAKING THE JOURNEY. TAKING POINT IS THE HUNTER, AND WE USE THEIR MUSCLE MEMORY TO SCOUT. FOLLOWING THEM IS THE TOWN FOOL, MY MOST EXPENDABLE BODY, TO ACT AS A BUFFER. THE SHAMAN FOLLOWS ALONG, READY TO PROBE FOR SPIRITS AND CARRY MEDICINE SHOULD THESE BODIES NEED IT. AND BEHIND THE SHAMAN, IS MY FAVORITE; A GRUMPY LITTLE ARTISAN. HER SKILL SET WASN'T VERY USEFUL FOR THIS DANGEROUS TRIP, BUT I ENJOY SEEING THINGS THROUGH HER EYES.

AND THE LAST ONE IS A WARRIOR, A RELATIVELY NEW INVENTION FROM WHEN THE TRIBES SPLIT AND MULTIPLIED. THEY SQUABBLE WITH EACH OTHER. IT WAS THE REAL DOWNSIDE OF THE FRACTURING WE ARE PARTIALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR. THESE BIPEDS ARE ABSOLUTELY WILLING TO KILL EACH OTHER OVER RESOURCES, OPINIONS, AND SUSPICIONS. WAR IS THEIR ULTIMATE FORM OF ARGUMENT. WE LOSE SO MANY BODIES TO MURDER AND WAR, IT OUTPACES THE BODIES WE LOSE TO BEING CAUGHT FOR WHAT WE REALLY ARE.

THE WARRIOR BRINGS UP THE REAR, IN CASE OF AN AMBUSH, FROM OTHER TRIBES, OR FROM WILD ANIMALS, THEIR SHARPENED STONE AXE WEIGHING HEAVY ON THEIR SHOULDER. SHE WOULD COMPLAIN— SHE IS TRYING TO COMPLAIN— BUT WE ARE IN CONTROL.

ALL OF THEM WANT TO COMPLAIN. WE WANT TO COMPLAIN. IT WOULD DO US NO GOOD. STORIES OF A STRANGE MONSTER IN THE WHITE FOREST MOUNTAIN INTRIGUED US. AND SO WE ASCEND THE MOUNTAIN ANYWAY. WE ARE STILL QUITE LOW, BUT WE HAVE FOUND THE FOREST THE SCOUT HAD TALKED ABOUT. IT HADN'T SNOWED IN WEEKS: THOUGH THE WEATHER WAS COLD, THERE JUST WASN'T ENOUGH MOISTURE IN THE AIR. YET THIS FOREST HAS A THICK COAT OF WHITE FLUFF. I ADJUST FORMATION, BRINGING THE MARCHING LINE INTO MORE OF A NEBULOUS BLOB, KEEPING THE MOST MARTIALLY CAPABLE AT THE PERIMETER, READY TO RESPOND.

AND OUR INVESTIGATION STALLS. THE PLACE HOLDS A STRANGE ENERGY, OR LACK THEREOF; AN UNNATURAL COLDNESS ALMOST LOST BENEATH THE PURELY NATURAL COLDNESS. BUT WE FIND NO TRACKS, THE ONLY ANIMALS WE SEE ARE THE USUAL SUSPECTS, AND THERE IS NO SIGN OF ANYTHING STRANGE OUTSIDE OF THE SNOW. THE TALES OF A SPIRIT WOLF WERE CLEARLY THE EXAGGERATED HALLUCINATIONS OF A DYING MIND.

THE DAY PROVES UNSUCCESSFUL, AND OUR HUSKS GROW TIRED. WE MAKE CAMP FOR THE NIGHT, GIVING THE SHAMAN THE FIRST WATCH. THE SHAMAN WAS BRAVE, AND THE LEAST EXHAUSTED. WE HAVE FAITH THAT HE CAN OPERATE AS FIRST WATCH.

AND FOR A TIME, WE TURN OUR ATTENTION TO OTHER HUSKS IN OTHER PLACES, BUT THEY AREN'T RIGHT. INSTEAD OF JUST SEEING THROUGH OTHER EYES, OUR VISIONS ARE OUT OF TIME. SEARCHING FOR BERRIES AT DAWN, FIGHTING A

WAR IN THE AFTERNOON, RULING OVER LOYAL FOLLOWERS IN A MIDNIGHT RITUAL. WE HAVE FORGOTTEN UNTIL NOW THAT WE ARE DREAMING. WE SWIFTLY FORGET AGAIN AS WE GET LOST IN THIS ALMOST-MEMORY. WE FEEL THE TOWN FOOL IS RESTED ENOUGH TO GET UP. LIKE CLOCKWORK, WE CHANGE THE GUARD.

"CAREFUL, SOMETHING FEELS OFF," THE SHAMAN WHISPERS.

"I DIDN'T KNOW YOU CARED LIKE THAT," THE FOOL TEASES BACK

WHY DO WE BANTER WITH THEM? WE DON'T REMEMBER THEM BANTERING.

BEFORE WE CAN INTERROGATE THE THOUGHT, THE SHAMAN SEES GLOWING BLUE EYES IN THE SNOW. WE HEAR GROWLS. WE MOVE THE FOOL IN THE WAY UNTIL WE CAN WAKE THE OTHERS. BUT ONLY THE SHAMAN'S EYES CAN SEE IT. AND EVEN THEN, IT IS LESS REAL THAN THE SNOW AROUND IT. IT SLOWLY APPROACHES, GROWLING ANGRILY, EYES LOCKED ON THE FIRE. FINALLY, WE SEE THE CREATURE: A WHITE WOLF PUP.

THOUGH THE FOOL CAN'T SEE IT, WE CAN FEEL HOW MUCH SHE WANTS TO HUG IT. A CUTE LITTLE BALL OF BLIZZARD-WHITE FLUFF. WE ARE HERE TO LEARN, SO, AS WE FEEL THE REST OF THE BODIES WAKE UP, WE DECIDE TO GRANT HER THE ILL ADVISED WISH.

"N-NO! DON'T!" THE SHAMAN KNOWS WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN. DID HE ALWAYS KNOW, OR IS IT BECAUSE WE REMEMBER?

"IT'S JUST A LITTLE GUY. ARE YOU LOST, BUDDY?" THE FOOL KNEELS.

AND THE LITTLE WOLF HOWLS. A FROZEN WIND BLOWS THROUGH THE FOREST, SUDDEN AND FEROCIOUS. THE FIRE GOES OUT, AND THE FULL MOON LIGHTS THE FOREST WITH ITS EMERGENCY BLUE GLOW. WE HATE THAT GLOW; THAT HORRIBLE LIGHT. WE ARE TRAPPED! WE ARE TRAPPED AND WE CAN'T GET OUT, ALL WE HAVE ARE THESE FEW HUSKS. WE ARE ALONE.

WE FEEL TEETH SINK INTO THE FOOL, THE COLD CREEPING ACROSS TO HER NECK. HER BLOOD FREEZES, AND IN THAT PALE LIGHT HER SKIN BLACKENS. WE CAN NO LONGER SEE THROUGH HER EYES AS THEY FREEZE OVER. SHE IS A FROST BITTEN CORPSE AS THE REST OF MY HUSKS ABANDON THEIR TENT.

OUR BELOVED HUSKS ARE NOT AWAKE, LIKE THE WOMAN WE HAVE YET TO MEET. THEY SLUMBER IN A NIGHTMARE. WE PUT THE WARRIOR BETWEEN THE WOLF AND THE OTHERS. THE WARRIOR WOULD PRETEND TO BE BRAVE. THE WARRIOR IS TERRIFIED. WE ARE TERRIFIED. BUT WE NEED TO BE BRAVE FOR ALL OF THEM.

BUT WE ALSO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS. THE WARRIOR CANNOT SEE THE WOLF PUP, BUT SHE CAN WATCH AS THE FOOL'S BLACKENED CORPSE STANDS, ITS TEETH NOW FROZEN NEEDLES. WE ARE STILL IN THE HUSK AND WE STRUGGLE TO KEEP IT AWAY, BUT IT IS SO COLD. WE ARE SO COLD. THE WARRIOR IS SO WARM. THE FROSTBITTEN CORPSE OVERPOWERS US AND LASHES OUT TOWARDS THE WARM BODY. WE FEEL THE FROSTBITE SPREAD AS THE FOOL BITES DOWN. WE TELL THE WARRIOR TO DESTROY HER BUT SHE CANNOT. WE DON'T REMEMBER IF SHE DISOBEYED US, OR IF SHE WASN'T STRONG ENOUGH, BUT WE DREAM IT WAS OUT OF

LOVE THAT SHE COULD NOT BRING HER AXE DOWN. THE THREE SURVIVORS RUN AWAY AS FAST AS THEY CAN, STUMBLING BLIND THROUGH THE BLIZZARD.

"STOP!" THE SHAMAN CALLS OUT. THEY SEE THE SPIRIT OF THE FROZEN WOLF BLOCK THEIR PATH. IT GROWLS AT THE TORCH THE HUNTER HAS LIT.

AND WE...

WE DON'T WANT TO LOSE THE ARTISAN. SHE'S OUR FAVORITE! THE TOWN NEEDS HER. WE SEARCH EVERYONE'S MIND FOR A SOLUTION.

"SPIRITS DEMAND A SACRIFICE," THE SHAMAN SAYS.

"IT IS YOUNG AND HUNGRY. A GROWING WOLF NEEDS ITS FOOD," THE HUNTER REMARKS.

"IT IS CLEARLY INTELLIGENT. WE COULD REASON WITH IT," THE ARTISAN SUGGESTS.

THE THREE OF THEM ARGUE ABOUT WHAT THIS MEANS, BUT WE HAVE MADE OUR DECISION. THE HUNTER NOBLY STEPS FORWARD. "THERE ARE MANY LIKE ME BACK IN THE VILLAGE, BUT YOU TWO... CANNOT BE REPLACED. I'M SORRY THAT I TRICKED YOU INTO THIS, TEPI. I JUST... WANTED TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH YOU."

AND THE ARTISAN TEARS UP. "YOU DIDN'T TRICK ME, MIDNIGHT! I... I KNOW. DUMBASS... LET... THE WOLF TAKE ME INSTEAD. YOU'LL BE MISSED."

NO! WE WON'T ALLOW IT. "YOU KNOW THAT WAS NEVER AN OPTION.  
PLEASE BE MORE PATIENT WITH THE OTHERS. WE ALL LOVE YOU DEARLY, EVEN IF  
YOU DON'T ALWAYS SEE IT."

SO, THE HUNTER MARCHES UP TO THE WOLF, AND BOWS LOW, EXTENDING AN  
ARM. "I AM YOUR WILLING SACRIFICE."

THIS IS WHEN THE WOLF KILLED OUR HUNTER. BUT... THE WOLF DOES NOT.  
IT TILTS ITS HEAD BEFORE LOOKING AT US. SOMEHOW, PAST THE HUSKS WE'RE  
PUPPETTING AND DIRECTLY INTO OUR SOUL, AND NODS. IT HAS LET US OFF EASY,  
EVEN THOUGH WE WERE SNARED IN ITS ICY TRAP.

WE WISH THIS DREAM WAS AN ACCURATE MEMORY.

### Adoption 3:3 Foundling

We slowly awaken, feeling our husks exploring. The first light we process is warm and bright, filling us with excitement. Are we finally free?

Sadly, no. Good morning.

And we feel... strangely soothed. The nightmare was intense. Our first nightmare. We are happy to be free of it.

Now with the lights on, the whole character of this place has changed. We walk down a hall we scarcely recognize, even with its ample dark stone and gold trim. Now under warm full light the gold-shot marble floors and various posters and advertisements that were previously lost in the dark malaise are front and center. What was once an ominous cave is now the ruins of a great temple in the brightness of the day. No less haunting. The advertisements break up the hall like windows into idyllic scenes, some literally advertisements for strange and new worlds. We salivate; how wonderful it will be to travel to other worlds and sample the local population.

*"Please stop threatening to eat people."*

We threaten nothing, we only desire. We were under the impression that we liked desire here.

I chime in, "We do, and I'm not opposed to your passions for knowledge. They are pure as iron." But before they get the idea that I approve, I add, "But ironclad passions will never be as strong as steel. Learning to temper your passions is important."

Sage advice that means nothing to us. Anyone can invent a metaphor that sounds good.

But we pause our complaining as Abigail notices a trail of blood. Sticky and dark, it's not quite dried, but no longer fresh. A faint low groan echoes around the corner.

Someone is hurt! I take point, charging towards the—

*I feel something wrap around my body. I barely look down in time to see the shadows. "Abby!" Umbral claws drag me into the floor.*

I stop, immediately turning back, hand outstretched, but I'm too late.

We watch from Snezhana's eyes as she is dragged deeper into the facility. We watch from Abigail's eyes as her lover is swallowed by a sudden, unnatural darkness. By the time her hand makes contact she feels nothing but the stone floor. Snezhana is gone.

I am tired of the world wrenching the things that make me happy away from me the moment I let down my guard. I grab a metal waste bin and, with a brief moment of hysterical strength, I bring it down on the marble floor as the shadows disappear. It rings, hurting my arms, and stinging my ears. Not even a chip.

*Abby! Stay calm. I'm okay.*

We are still connected. She has been pulled much deeper into the facility by The Entity.

I gasp, my aching arms still wanting to smash my way to Hana.

*I promise I'll stay safe, but I'm not alone, and they need my help. I'm always with you. But I need to focus on what's happening here. And you were about to go save someone else.*

I move to take another stubborn swing.

*Abby! Stop!*

I take a deep breath, and compose myself. She's right, I'm being selfish. I rush down the trail of blood to make up for these moments of lost time. I just hope wherever Hana is, and whatever she's doing, she stays safe.

As we round the corner, we see a crumpled figure. Grey fur and torn robes are stained red with blood. Their body wheezes for air.

And if I'm saving her, I'll need your assistance, Rosemary. I'll provide a wave of healing for you to swarm from. I need you to make sure the wounds are clear of any debris. Don't infest this body.

Why not? I have been denied many meals.

She's a worgen. They are very tall. She's a child; you don't like eating children.

True... but pickings are slim right now, and being so few... We don't like feeling this vulnerable. With so few options.

I inspect the collar around her neck. It confirms my suspicions. I promise there will be future opportunities soon. Spare her. And don't touch the collar, it will explode if tampered with. She's from The Foundry of Marshal.

We decide to trust Abigail. We have probed many memories, and though she has misled us, she does avoid lying. And when she says future opportunities, she is thinking in terms of new bodies for us. We lay eggs and, and as she prays for healing, they hatch. We swarm over the body of the worgen, cleaning the wounds of fur, cloth, and shards of metal. Some wounds go very deep. If we are saving this child, we shouldn't hesitate.

Thank you. Now it's my turn. As Rosemary makes themselves scarce, I take out my dream journal. I have wasted too much time. I pluck five random pages from it, with the painful weight of not knowing which dreams I am about to sacrifice. Each of them is precious, some more than others. The only one I know to be spared is the one with the red tab. Still, it is five painful sacrifices for Aodir.

I rely on a canned prayer, only taking time to modify a few words. The pages burn up in my hands, and only now do I look to see what I've given up. Three nightmares, an unremarkable dream of getting lost in a labyrinthine coffee shop... and one of me sledding with my sister Cordelia. That last one stings quite a bit. It was a complete fabrication, the child in the dream didn't really look like the sister I knew. But it was a lovely little fiction that I liked to re-read. No more.

It's worth it. The Worgen's wounds stitch together, as though by unseen threads. Color returns to the skin beneath the layers of fur that have been torn away, and then the fur grows back. There is a crunching and popping as bones begin to mend themselves, and I guide them by hand to make sure they don't

re-grow wrong. Only the clothing and personal effects betray the state she was in.

The child opens her eyes and looks around. She rubs her nose, but, after sniffing the air, looks relieved. She turns to me and asks. "*You'd tell me if I was dead, right?*"

My attention immediately goes to her collar, making sure the sensation of stitching and repairing flesh didn't set it off. "I certainly hope so, I haven't done necromancy since I was your age."

Abigail was right, deep as it was, that was the voice of a child. She wouldn't be well seasoned with the interesting memories we crave. Also, that recurring concern about her head exploding is an additional deterrent. What is that about?

There is a backwards little kingdom called Faedire. Child labor laws there have been... *lax*. But The Foundry is a real shitting example. They capture children under a disgustingly loose legal framework, and put them to work in brutal conditions. The best among them become mercenaries. During that time before adulthood: before they join to perpetuate the cycle or get sent to die at a work house, they are fitted with collars to keep them... *motivated*.

Most species of bipeds value their offspring. This 'Foundry' is... quite strange.

Abhorrent is the word. Since the crusades ended, I've been trying to lean on the government of Faedire, but they have been resistant.

I must have been staring at her collar, as her look of gratitude begins to fade into a scowl. “Ah, sorry, lost in thought.” I smile. “Your name was—” I leaf through the information Rosemary gathered during the lobby cookout while I was suppressed.

We don’t like that sensation.

No one likes a hypocrite. “—Lyra, right? You had a friend with you, Moss? Would you like me to help you find him?”

*“Yes...”* She regards me with suspicion, *“Thank you... but now that I can smell again, I can probably handle the rest of this on my own.”*

“Of course, but surely you wouldn’t mind some company. And I’d like to learn what happened.” I decide not to bring up the elephant in the room.

Those glimmers of gratitude slowly work their way back to the surface. *“Well... I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. There are these... stupid spider robot things around. I could have taken them on if it weren’t for my nose being messed up.”*

Doubt crosses both our minds.

But I humor her, “And they clearly teamed up on you. Hardly sporting. I’ll just be here to help you even the odds.” As I watch her smile, I decide it’s finally time to lance the topic. “Also, I’m curious. I’ve done a lot of research, but I want to know your story. While we’re here, cut off from the world... What is your opinion on your employer?”

Why would that be a question? Any creature with a modicum of self preservation would-

*“Don’t let people mislead you. They are tough, but they are family. They reward good behavior and strength! If I were out on my own, I’d be miserable, and lonely. But in The Foundry, me and my best friend have a purpose!”* She speaks with genuine passion... but there is something at the edges of her tone. A little edge of doubt.

So there is still hope for her.

Surprising. We suppose we could always... *change her mind.*

Don’t. I want her to be free, not in new chains. That being said, I could use some help setting her free. Those Titan-made collars are going to be a problem.

Meanwhile, I maintain the conversation. “What a refreshing perspective.”

We have learned to dread when you start feeling this excited.

No, you’ll like this. You have a spare swarm right now... how do you feel about getting a bite to eat?

Are... you serious?

## Adoption 3:4 Asterisks

I don't think about karma, but sometimes life beats me over the head with it. I kept doublebacking to check on Val's condition while searching helplessly for Lyra. Not that I care what happened to him. He is clearly a fraud that led us into a trap. Not on purpose; he wasn't malicious... but he was a big enough idiot it didn't matter, and he got what he deserved.

This room seemed safe from the crazed ghosts that wandered these halls. So yesterday night, between my expeditions, I tended to the wound I caused, and checked to make sure he was still kicking because it was something I could do. It was something I had an ounce of control over.

But as I wake up, I see his body is gone, the pool of his own blood lying stagnant on the floor where he once was. With Val gone there was no more reason to keep returning here. I want to wish him well. Well, I want to wish him well. But he was a condescending prick, and clearly he was well enough to get out of here, leaving me trapped. Or maybe one of the berserk spirits got him. Or a security robot picked him up. Probably left me, mistaking me for a pile of trash. I stumble onto my prosthetic leg, feeling like trash. Between the cold and getting roughed up by the broken robot, the fit is wrong.

I do my best to get to my feet and strike out, leaving this bubble of safety. I fumble for my bag. Having left most of my effects in the terminal lobby, my stomach is unpleasantly unsurprised when I realize I'm out of rations. I couldn't stay if I wanted to.

Instead, I take out a crude map I've been making, and furrow my brows. It looks different than what I remember. Everything looks different. Why? Oh... only now I realize the main lights are on. I must be really out of it. These spaces deeper in the facility are a humbling mess. Dawnbreaker's bullets seemed capable of doing little more to the ghosts than give away my position. And where the ghosts we had bumped into higher up seemed content to go through the motions benignly, I wasn't so lucky down here.

I dive behind a chunk of wall that had been torn off by some terror that lies this deep, as a fully functional titanic spider robot thunders by with the grace of a loaded locomotive. I hold my breath until it passes. If I could find an angle to get a bullet beneath that armor, I'd feel a lot safer.

If I wasn't alone I'd feel a lot safer. I haven't been this alone since I managed to slip away from The Foundry. I idly rub at where my leg used to be, feeling that dread echo.

I worry for Lyra. She's no better off in a place like this, and the last time I saw her, she was picking a fight with two spiderbots.

And it was my fault.

"I told you, Gerald! Stay away!" A burly spirit suddenly lunges at me.

Crap, I had gotten lost in thought. I knew about this one too, from last night. I manage to dodge the big hunter's ghost. I struggle to my feet and run from the hunter, losing my way through the twisting halls for a moment, briefly recognizing one of the breakrooms I explored yesterday, and bringing myself to a sudden stop.

More accurately, my prosthetic loses grip as I try to stop, and I fall on my ass as it slides out from under me. But it's better than running into the psychotic blonde ghost that I bumped into last night. Escaping her had left me drained.

I crawl past the break room and into a janitor's closet. Thankfully I am alone with my thoughts again. I use the shelves of doubtlessly hazardous cleaning chemicals to help me to my feet. My stomach aches, and for a few moments I think I could sneak into that breakroom next door and see if there is anything I can eat that isn't moldy...

Or if there is anything I can eat that *is* moldy.

I update my map with the janitor's closet before setting back out. I can't give up, and I can't take any risks. I need to get to Lyra.

And then what? Maybe I could drag her back to the lobby, and steal a healing tonic from someone's pack. My body aches at the thought; hauling a three-hundred pound Worgen all the way back up the stairs and to the entrance. I tell my body to fuck off. If anything happened to Lyra because of me, it was going to need to put up with whatever it takes to fix it.

I carefully breach every door, taking my time, even though I want to scramble. If I die, I'm not useful to anyone. I map each room and hall. I think I'm starting to understand the architect's logic. Or my exhaustion has tipped over the edge into delusions.

And finally I open a door to a familiar sight. I see the mesh that blocked off the blast doors to the portal room, but now from the other side. It takes an embarrassingly long time for my brain to kick into gear, as

I finally take in the room around me. It's a titanic hall full of archways. I was on the staff side of the portal room.

Metal and stone form each gate, and velvet queue ropes form a messy web. There brass tipped stanchions were in disarray; shuffled, half tipped over, and some frozen in half-falling through some strange game of tension. Details are hazy, as long curtains of fuzzy grey lines crisscross the room, like overachieving spiderwebs. I'm not sure what's causing it. It's likely that I've begun to hallucinate.

There is an angry, sputtering growl, as one of the gates roars to life, electricity arcing off in a horrible storm of a display. I knew that safety regulations were lax here, but that is way too dangerous to be normal operation. I'm thankful it's a distant portal that's sputtered to life instead of the one next to me. But in the blinding blue of the portal light, I see something shift at the center of the room. I'm not alone. I begin to make my way quietly towards the other side. The ground rumbles as I see the heavy metal emergency doors begin to shudder down in a stuttering violent motion. I pick up my pace and immediately hit my head on—.

Well, seemingly nothing. When my head struck one of those dusty lines cutting across the room, a flash of a magic barrier met me. I'm sent to the ground, scrambling.

The portal's light goes out and my eyes struggle to readjust. The doors ratchet back up just as falteringly as they tried to come down, as though they may give up the ghost any moment. I take a moment to try to struggle through what's happening. The dusty planes seem to come from the askew velvet queue ropes. Magical barriers invisibly enforcing would have

been an elegant line. It's an absurd security measure. On brand; wasteful and excessive.

But it means I have a solution. I crawl and approach each length of velvet rope between me and the door, and unhook it from its brass stanchion. Each time, the attached barrier fades, and the grey curtain of dust that settled on it falls in one disgusting sheet. Slow, nauseating progress.

There is another rumbling as a portal near the center of the room roars to life. I pull my hands away from any metal as lightning fills the room, and a new cacophony of noise pummels my ears. I am so close to the exit! The blast door shudders, threatening to seal me in here, but I would rather not be electrocuted.

And all while I try to stay calm, The thing in the middle of the room stirs. "IS... IT TIME ALREADY? I... WANT TO SLEEP... I WANT OUT." The voice is a murmur, yet it rattles my chest. I try and get a better look at the thing in the room.

Silhouetted in the light of the portal I see something massive and coiled. I try to place it. A giant talking snake? But then, unfurling, as though trying to blot out the horrible blue sun behind it, I see two titanic leathery wings stretch out. A dragon. Not just any dragon, it's one of the few varieties I recognize: a northern new-world serpent. I killed one once before, but not without a lot of luck, a massive distraction, and an enchanted bullet. And I don't have the good fortune to be facing a living dragon this time, even if I had luck or magic rounds to spare.

Storm be damned, I'm not going to be in this room when it wakes up. I scramble towards the closing door. It seems my luck is almost already out as my fingers scramble over the next rope's clasp, fumbling the latch between my missing digits before I finally snap it open.

"ENOUGH. ONCE AGAIN..." The dragon goes mercifully quiet for a second as the portal closes. Perhaps— ***"ONCE AGAIN, TERRIE THE TERRIBLE AWAKENS! QUAKE WITH FEAR AT MY AWESOME MIGHT!"*** Of course I could never be that lucky.

I stay low and quiet hoping to go unnoticed. The spectral dragon takes off behind me, its powerful wings blasting the dust off of the barriers. It is a maelstrom of grey, suddenly turned blue as another portal screams to life. Barrier walls flash and wobble as the tremendous weight of the ghostly dragon crashes into them.

The world seems to warp as I feel the fabric of reality shudder under the will of the massive dragon, forcibly wrenching the very bonds that make up the world into its maw as it inhales. Low and slow is not an option anymore. I scramble, trying to squeeze in and around each barrier to put as much distance, and as many barriers, between me and 'Terrie the Terrible' as possible, even as I feel myself getting pulled backwards.

The dragon exhales a blinding violet beam. It strikes the barrier and doesn't slow down; pure, hazardous light. I'm fortunate to still be low enough to the ground to avoid it. It slips through each layer of transparent barrier as easily as the glow of the main lights, and punches through the mesh gate I'm trying to reach. When I can see again, a five foot section of the mesh is nowhere to be seen, and molten metal glows from the floor around it.

“FUCK!” The swear escapes my mouth before I even think about it. I can feel the dragon now looking at me. If I was unnoticed before, I am no longer so lucky.

“**Moss?!**” My jaw drops as I try to navigate the invisible maze with new haste. Lyra? Or have I gone insane. A stress induced hallucination.

But behind the grate, running on all fours, I see my worgen friend. Lyra skitters to a stop as she rounds the corner at the freshly punched hole. It’s a miracle! It’s a tragedy; I feel the strings of the universe around me get tugged into another sharp inhale from the dragon. Maybe it is still a hallucination; imagining my friend one last time before the end.

But then another woman saunters into view, the holy symbol around her neck glowing, as she drives a pin into her fingers. She calls out some strange incantation, and a magical muzzle clamps down on the dragon’s maw. It howls in pain as the blast backfires. Screeching, the dragon flails against the barrier walls around it, stressing them until the velvet ropes snap, sending it rampaging deeper into the facility.

And just like that, the nightmare is over. There is no way I would have imagined some old woman coming to my rescue, not even in my most delusional fantasies. She steps forward, and I see that she is bleeding from her hand. The pin jabbed in her right hand is still held by her left. A self inflicted wound. She wears a relieved smile. Something about it is... practiced. It sets me on edge even as she clears a path to me and extends a hand to help me up.

Her old scratchy voice greets me. “Hello, Moss. Lyra’s told me a lot about you.”

### Adoption 3:5 Haze

It feels rare for our focus to be squarely outside one of our host bodies. A swarm of us buzzes across the vaulted roofs. We are not blind, but each individual set of eyes we have are ill-formed. We rely mostly on memory and scent to navigate, as we hunt the strange smelling biped. Simon, the Titan executive, could not hide from us.

We find ourselves longing for all the intricate details. Instead we see splotches of color and vague outlines of the architecture; it's now all an impressionist painting.

*I find it inspiring, as my mind briefly wanders over to the noisy thoughts of Rosemary. It has a wonderful, dream-like quality.*

We do occasionally forget we have an audience.

*Apologies, I really should be focusing elsewhere.*

It isn't upsetting. Company is a novel thing. If anything, we are more upset at how quickly others are to label anything fuzzy as 'dream-like.' It undersells the sensation.

The irony is we have spent what could be a geologic age without any husks. But that was half dormant, buried below these mountains. In a dark, strange haze. We would refuse to call it dream-like. It was just uncomfortable, disorienting... fuzzy. Time blended together into a scramble of nothing. No thoughts, only maintenance. No rest, only silence.

Only a few weeks of being active again, and the thought of being deprived of a host for any amount of time is unbearable.

There is solace in being able to glance out of Abigail's and Snezhana's eyes, reminding us what the world actually looks like.

We are spurred on by a fluttering excitement. Being encouraged to feast is something we have never felt before. It's... validating? Is that the sensation?

We think it is, but it goes deeper, doesn't it. We have been trusted. We have been trusted, not due to deception, nor in spite of what we are, but for what we are. This... is a feeling we would call dream-like. It's bizarre and wonderful.

Our trail draws to a close. Descending deeper into the facility, we now cling to the ceiling, finding our prey with a gaggle of others.

We pick out his scent from the metallic tones of the... brothers? One young adult, one child, definitely related. What an odd odor. And our antennae ache as they drift over the two of them. Powerful magic, the true scale of which we were unable to parse through Abigail's flesh during our meeting over burgers in the lobby. The older of the two might actually prove a suitable meal later, assuming their metallic scent isn't the sign of something... unpalatable.

With them, smelling mostly of panic, sweat, and fading cheap cologne, is the charlatan psychic. Profoundly ungifted, our antennae find the respite they need after feeling out the brothers. It must be miserable to be such a poor mimic.

Finally my target... Hm? Without the distractions of trying to pin down Snezhana, and the interference of Abigail... Something is strange about Simon. The energy from him feels... nostalgic. The

scent draws me back into faint shreds of memory. Perhaps he is the descendant of one of my previous husks.

For now, we wait. They chatter; too far away to decipher with these pitiful bodies. They are specialized for swift infestation, not espionage. We wait for Simon to split off alone, watching with our crude vision.

For a moment... we could swear Simon looked directly at us. But he doesn't seem to panic or react. Perhaps we look like an odd pattern on the ceiling. Not much time to consider this; he has broken away to explore a supply closet alone. Couldn't ask for a more ideal situation. We skitter after him, quickly slipping through the crack under the door.

Our bodies pour in. We spend very little time, immediately making a beeline for Simon's skin. Our mandibles slice and we burrow—

Something is wrong. Something profoundly wrong. This flesh is cold. Bordering on frozen. Our bodies begin to freeze mid-bite. They were never designed to handle the chill of a blizzard. The ones along Simon's body begin to die off, and we begin our retreat.

But before we slip out of range, we feel Simon say something to us. We do not know what it is, but we feel the deep bass rumble of the voice. That is not Simon's voice. We have never heard this voice before, but we recognize this presence.

It's a painful reunion. The wolf-pup of the white forest. The spirit of frostbite. All grown up, and in my way. Though we could not hear him, we could feel he wasn't happy to see us.

We leave the freezing closet, scrambling and dispersing, our swarm having lost about a third of its bodies. We would require cold resistant drones-

No, that isn't enough, we remember experimenting with drones. This is a spirit of frostbite made manifest. Frostbite wasn't some specific temperature we could overcome. It was as cold as it needed to be to cause tissues to fail.

We could ask Abigail for a blessing... but what would it cost? She was so ready to burn pages of that dream journal. Sacred things. Also, the math doesn't add up. The spirit can always get colder. At some point the prayer will fail, or it will cost our most valuable host far too much.

So, the first time we have been genuinely trusted, it ends in failure and disappointment. We don't like that story. Surely there is another way.

As we crawl about the ceiling, scattered in every direction, searching for answers, we find one. One grossly incompetent, distinctly not psychic, smelling of anxiety, and yet still oddly charming answer.

## Adoption 3:6 Scars

I stare at the bowl of soup I've been served. This feels all too familiar. I'm sore, and tired, and injured, and so hungry, and some kindly adult has given me a bowl of home-made soup. I can't believe it is out of the goodness of her heart. Not this time. I don't plan to lose another leg. And so I glare at her as I raise the spoon.

She had led us out of the lower floors of the Bifrost, back to the now nearly abandoned upper floor cafe. It was nice. Ritzzy. She seems right at home here as she pours tea for each of us, muttering her prayers.

Lyra's tail swishes as she looks at the priestess. She was far more impressive than the last adult we got stuck with. Bold, and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals. Generous with food, and having restored her sense of smell. And unlike most outsiders, didn't challenge her when she talked about the benefits of The Foundry. She politely smiles and nods along, making her feel heard.

My friend is too easily won over. No one is this kind without wanting something in return. But my hunger wins out against my trauma. Hot, spiced, if a bit salty, soup restores me. I feel a few of my more recent cuts and bruises heal. She hadn't even mentioned the soup was blessed. She isn't even smirking as I take a sip. What is her game? What is she after?

Lyra notices my wounds stitching, but frowns. ***"Wait, why aren't his scars healing?"***

Ms. Hawthorne wears a sad smile. “The longer a wound sits, the more time we come to accept it as part of ourselves. And the more we accept it, the harder it is to heal. Our bodies have given up on getting better, and feel it’s time to move on. I could heal scars... I could heal a lot of things. But the cost would be astronomical.”

I can’t help it. My fingers rub over the missing digits of my hands. Her generosity has limits.

**“So you can’t heal scars?”** Lyra asks. Her eyes look at me with something like guilt.

Ms. Hawthorne takes off her jacket and rolls up the sleeves of her robes, revealing deep gouges and scars. “I could heal these. But the price would be high. My god is very transactional, and I’d rather save my good sacrifices for those who really need them.” She sighs as she twirls a lock of her silver hair, looking at it with a sad longing. “My advice to you both is to really think about the prices you pay, and what you’re getting for them. I can live with my scars. They are...” The old woman trails off, and I see an expression similar to the one Lyra was just wearing. Her practiced mask slides back on. “— a reminder that when I put my mind to it, I can do what must be done, no matter the pain.”

Lyra watches the woman with renewed admiration. **“You must be really tough.”**

Ms. Hawthorne sighs and shakes her head. Before she can respond, a bearded ghost steps into the cafe. “Ah! Max! Wonderful to see you again.

What did you find?" She talked to him on the way here. When pressed she made some excuse as to why she couldn't exorcize him.

The bearded ghost winces. "It was a bit of a pain, but I managed to wrestle this one out of Mr. Punch's collection." He produces a poster like the ones we found plastered all over the halls. "Just... don't ask what it cost me. I don't want to think about it."

Ms. Hawthorne looks it over and raises an eyebrow, before either something clicks, or she acts like she understands. "So, Max... if you don't mind me asking, have you been deeper in the facility?"

"Can't say I have," the ghost responds. "I've had plenty to keep me busy up here. Not to mention most of the spirits that go deeper... well... they don't come back. And when they do, they don't remember what happened... but they seem disturbed."

The old lady frowns and taps her fingers, chewing on her lip as she thinks. Lyra's ears perk up and she tilts her head, confused about something going on with our new 'chaperone.' My curiosity gets the better of me, and I look at the poster as I savor another spoonful of soup.

It's an advertisement for a traveling circus; 'Kirk and Kelly's Spectacular.' Listed in the busy blurbs advertising their acts is mention of 'a genuine dragon of the west, Terrie the Terrible,' and how you could watch the dragon be slain by the hero 'David Deblin' live. No doubt it was all stage pageantry; the thought of them actually killing a dragon every night is... absurd. And pretty fucked up that it seems to be their main draw. At least when we kill someone, it's not some big event to take your

kids to. The outside world is pretty fucked up. No wonder that it could make something like The Foundry.

“Hana... would suggest there may be something going on to aggravate the spirits on the lower floors.” Who is Hana and why bring her up? It’s as though she hears my thoughts. “Snezhana Isakov. If she were here. Her and I are very close, and she is the best exorcist I’ve ever met. I know that’s what she would say. Either way... it would be best to test this.” She rips out a blank page from her journal and begins to write. So we are supposed to accept some woman we haven’t met and her authority second hand?

Lyra seems on board though, and she has proven herself capable in dangerous situations. I’m not dumb enough to trust Hawthorne, but I can play along.

With another hearty spoonful of soup I decide to engage. “We’re here to provide security and get paid. If you got a plan, we’re in.”

Once she hears my voice, Ms. Hawthorne’s smile shifts into something soft and fuzzy. It looked genuine, but I know better. “I was worried you were upset. Good to see it was just that you're hungry.”

“I am fucking upset.” Now that I’ve started talking, it's hard to go back to silence. The stress and lack of rest has taken its toll. “I don’t know who you are, or why we should trust you. I’m just here to... get an opportunity.” Shit, I almost said too much.

But luckily, Lyra hears what she wants to hear. ***“He really needs something extra to get back into the boss’s good graces.”***

And then she finally does it. She looks at my eyepatch. She looks at my leg. She looks at my missing fingers. She looks at my broken ass state. And I brace; I'm so tired of hearing 'you poor thing.'

"Something extra? Looks more like he needs divine intervention." A wry little smile plays out on the old woman's face. Teasing instead of pity. It's... a relief, but I'm not sure how I feel about it. "No matter how you slice it, I have a bit of sway. I'm certain I could help you out of the pickle with your boss."

She looks directly at me and scratches at her neck. Not the most subtle cue... I just don't know if I trust it.

Thankfully, Lyra doesn't pick up on what she's really saying; "***You have connections to The Foundry? Do you know Dawson?***" I reflexively flinch at the name.

She wears a smug smirk. "Just last month I had tea with both him and the head of Faedire's department of labor. I can absolutely make something happen."

Lyra looks at me excitedly. If she weren't already sold on Ms. Hawthorne, she was in her pocket now. "Let's just focus on here and now. What's the plan, Ms. Hawthorne?"

"Please, call me Abby, or Abigail. 'Ms. Hawthorne' is my sister," the old woman insists. "First things first, I'm going to get help from a new... acquaintance, Crystal. We're going to test if something is corrupting the ghosts deeper down, and how it works. If it works how we think it does, then we stand a chance."

“Stand a chance against what? That dragon on a rampage?”

And then I see a truly dangerous smile. “A chance to save Terrie the Terrible.”

## Adoption 3:7 Stress

I thought I'd feel better after Simon got the power relay working. Then I thought I'd feel better when the lights actually came back on, after someone fixed the generator. Now I'm trying to convince myself I'll feel better when the power stabilizes and the lights stop warbling.

But I've been doing a very poor job lying as of late, and I see right through my own bullshit. I run my fingers through my hair. I'm still sweating. I swear the young man I cut my deal with, Delim Arescotti, is sizing me up out of the corner of his eyes.

I smile. "We get the lights back on, but here we are, in a dark hallway anyway. Funny how things happen."

Miranda hadn't come back. The two of them were alone for a time and now she's gone. A real psychic. I am praying to just about every god I can think of that this is all some misunderstanding. But the one person that could actually know what the Arescotti brothers are planning is gone.

"Yeah? What of it?" Delim asks.

I should have known better than to make a deal with him. Who am I kidding, I knew I was making a mistake. But I was so... desperate, ready to take any escape. I am pretty certain I need an escape from my escape.

This is torture, every moment is an eternity for my racing mind.. I think I'm already unraveling. "Nothing. Nothing at all, really. Just... funny."

Now I feel the younger brother's gaze on me. Kailios certainly played the part of harmless incorrigible brat. But the more time I spend with him, the more I understand neither of the brothers are safe.

Miranda is okay. I keep telling myself that. I need to believe it, otherwise I'm going to fall apart.

Thankfully, Simon validates me. **"I suppose it kinda is."**

The Arescotti brothers are not so amused. Kailios rolls his eyes. Delim shoots me a look. It's ponderous at first, but it starts to shift into a frown. I vividly imagine my corpse next to Miranda, wherever he hid her.

I need to find another bathroom to have a breakdown in.

Mercifully, a spirit rustles by and the others turn to face it. I don't run, obviously not. But I duck into a shadowy corner, out of view. My legs give out from under me. All the dirt on my hands, all trying to dig my way out of a hole. And all I've done is dig it deeper and deeper. It's a good thing I'm on top of the world, because if I started digging this at sea level, I'd probably be in hell already.

I feel something creeping over me. A prickling of my nerves. I'm about to dismiss it as a tactile hallucination until my fingers brush over a chitinous mass.

"Eyugh!"

I immediately bat at it, and to my horror I feel more of them. So many more of them, scuttling beneath my clothes.

And then a mix of pain, and numbness. I struggle to get up. I try to shout. A vague gurgle of pain escapes as my throat goes numb. There is a horrible sensation of them moving beneath my— I must be losing my mind. The alternative is so much more unthinkable. The stings are now pinpricks running through me and I find it hard to keep my eyes open.

This is a nightmare — I know that's bullshit. But as I feel myself fade away, I find it in myself to believe one last lie.

We are now Cain. A delicious rush of new experiences slips through our mind, though they are sour with almost constant anxiety. Family, school, crushes, theater. A book on palm reading that changes our life. The side hustle. Building the persona we'd be imprisoned in. The cons, small and big. The cons going wrong. Finally going straight. Opening the Hourglass. The mountains of debt. The life changing offer. And we're caught up with now.

It doesn't go unnoticed.

*Rosemary! What was that!?*

Did you just eat Cain?

Calm down both of you! We require Cain. There have been... complications.

I'm juggling two traumatized orphans with bombs around their necks. I can't spare the attention.

*Same, currently helping a ghost with stabilizing the power. I really don't need the distraction right now!*

Another entity has taken up residence inside of Simon. The last time we met it, it was but a mere pup. It was not to be trifled with.

"Cain!?" Delim is searching for us.

A glance through our new memories and we understand Cain's panic attack. We dig out one of his healing potions. He had a small emergency stock. We feel an almost instinctive urge to save it, so it can be sold later.

Take your potion fast, before you bleed too much on the clothes. Cain probably doesn't have many nice suits.

We overcome the frugal instincts and taste the overly sweet healing nectar. Flesh stitches quickly, as we slip into character.

"Sorry, I just got scared by a bug." Not quite right, he would still try to save face. "A very big bug."

Delim rounds the corner, and we see him in the darkness. At least, we can clearly imagine where the rest of him goes from the glowing green pupils. Our magical senses shudder, but we stay in character.

"Need a moment?" he asks. "We can take a breather."

Too soon to break away with Simon. It would be suspicious.

"I'm fine. If anything I'm better. It really helped break the tension. A bit of perspective, if that makes sense." This is a tricky role to play. A liar inside a liar, faced with someone that has seen behind the mask.

*Okay, but why Cain?*

Abigail needs Simon to get Titan blueprints, and I need Cain to get Simon.

Delim is nodding. "I think it does, in a strange way."

*Abby...*

I'm still listening. And it's fine. I trust your judgement on this one. But I want you to wake Cain as soon as we get Simon's information.

We have never wanted to let out a gasp of relief more. We suspect Cain may want to stay asleep. He seems to have gotten himself into quite the mess. But we do agree to Abigail's terms.

Then good luck, and happy hunting.

Relieved to have navigated this mess of a situation, we are feeling a bit better. We are pleased to be brave for Cain for a little while. Though we dread what is to come.

*Adoption 3:8 Crosses*

*Abigail leads the way, and my mind wanders. Who would know Mr. Dawson so closely? I didn't even know that Mr. Dawson drank tea. She's so lively for such a geezer. Imagining her and the sour old boss in the same room together, it feels almost right. Big fun loving girl, paired up with a grumpy partner. I start wondering if Ms. Hawthorne is to Mr. Dawson, what I am to Moss. It makes sense.*

*We descend down the stairwell, and I'm tempted to race again, but Moss is holding back. He seems off, so I walk with him. I hadn't had a chance to speak to him alone. "Moss... You okay? Did Val—"*

*"Val's fine. I don't care." He practically snaps at me. "I just want to get out of here. I don't want to go on a dragon hunt, I don't want to pal around with Hawthorne, I don't want to be here anymore. I just want to get paid and get out."*

*"And... get back to The Foundry... right? Together." I try not to sound desperate. But I remember Dawson's mission for me. I just... need to get through to him.*

*His silence is deafening. Barely audible, he croaks out, "Sure."*

*It's because he's tired. And moody... and... He'll come around. He has to.*

*“What’s wrong with Abigail? She seems really cool. She’s kinda like me. Do you think the boss ever had a partner?” I share my thoughts. Maybe... I just had to make him see the boss’s good side. If he had a cool friend like Abigail, then... maybe—*

“I don’t trust her. Something about her feels off... No one is this nice for no reason.” **Moss frowns.** “Something isn’t right... You gotta be picking up on it too, right?”

*I want to tell him that he’s being paranoid. That she didn’t come off as strange. That the odd sounds I heard from her, or the strange odor, wasn’t off-putting. But... he’s right. There is something unnatural about her. “I mean... if she is a friend of Dawson, she’s gonna be a bit weird. And it means she has a reason to be extra generous.”*

“Sure, to us. But to a dragon?! A dragon that came inches from lasering us to death, needs to be saved?” **His voice cracks.** “I don’t trust her. It makes more sense she’s a liar and is playing us for... some reason. I don’t know—”

“It’s rude to talk about people behind their back,” **Abigail says without turning around.** “Listen to your friend. He’s only half wrong. It *is* suspicious that I’m so generous. You *should* question my motivations, even though they are benign. And though I’m not a liar, I am not above manipulation. You’d be surprised at what one is willing to believe if given the opportunity.”

*The way she rats herself out so openly... She's gotta be principled. I follow her, re-entering the portal room. She carefully saunters between the invisible barriers.*

*All the while, she backs up Moss. "Your friend is quite smart, and very cautious. He wouldn't see what he wants to see in my words even if they were backed by The Leviathan himself. It will serve him well, so long as he can distinguish a good opportunity from a trap."*

*She sighs and leans against one of the barriers, and leafs through her journal. It must be full of stories. Perhaps I should write a book full of all the adventures Moss and I have been on. Once we graduate, it would be a wonderful way to celebrate.*

*I look back to Moss. If... we graduate. Why did his collar's automatic trigger have to break? If he runs away now... I would... have to be the one to do it. I hope I don't need to.*

*No. I won't have to. If she's so experienced... surely Abigail can get through to Moss. If she's friends with Dawson, she might as well be Foundry. Heck, maybe she is Foundry. Her earlier questions were probably a test. Now I just needed to get a moment alone with her.*

*"Moss, I forgot my jerky back upstairs."*

*"Well, go get it."*

*Crap. "But... I... uh..."*

*He sighs and relents, whispering to me, “Fine. It’s a lot of stairs, but fine. just... don’t trust a gods damned thing she says. No matter who she swears it on.”*

*He’s being very paranoid. Or... maybe he agrees with me. That she must be Foundry. If he’s planning to run...*

*It doesn’t matter. “Thank you. Hurry back.”*

*“Yeah, yeah. Just know I’m turning around at the first sight of trouble. No way I’m dying for a jerky run.”*

*As he hobbles away, I know that I’m making the right choice. It’s so sad to see him leave, even if only for a moment. I’ll convince him, and though I don’t know how, perhaps the wise Abigail has some ideas.*

*The moment he’s out of earshot I turn to Abigail. “So you know Dawson, for real? You’re close?”*

*“I’ve spent a great deal more time in his company than most women, I’d wager.” She smirks. “Yeah, I know him. I won’t soon forget him.”*

*“So... if you were part of The Foundry... you’d tell me, right?” I ask, bordering on pleading.*

*Abigail takes a deep breath, as though upset by the answer she's about to give.*

"I... would not." *Seeing how disappointed I am, she bends,* "Okay, let me... put it this way. Dawson wouldn't want me to say yes."

*So she's not perfect. I've outsmarted her! "I see..." I tap the side of my muzzle and wink. "Don't worry, I'm a team player."*

"You remind me too much of myself when I was younger." *She says it like it's a bad thing.* "Alright, Lyra, is there something you wanted to talk about?"

*"I just... with my mission... You know..." I don't want to say it out loud. It's a terrible thing to talk about.*

"You are going to need to be more specific." *She should know— Oooh, this is a test. My mission is secret, after all.*

*I avoid the trap. "Right, not one to talk about."*

*But she looks a little frustrated. Was that not the test?* "If you plan to make it far after graduation in a place like The Foundry, you're going to need to be a bit more clever. Plausible deniability is a powerful tool."

*I get it. She wants me to get the mission across without saying it. I think long and hard about this. "Right... the mission... to prepare for Moss's graduation soon. Or his..." Gods above, it's worse to think of a euphemism for it. "Potential... early... permanent... retirement..."*

*She raises an eyebrow, and for a moment she looks at me with a profound concern. But also with a strange... familiarity?*

*“I thought Dawson might have this on his itinerary... but so soon...” **The** muttered words aren’t meant for me. Perhaps she thinks I’m not ready if the worst is to happen.*

*I nod. “I... am really looking forward to his graduation. I really want to make sure that happens... because I don’t want to...” My voice trembles and catches. She’s right to be concerned. I don’t want to be ready for that. “You are really good at talking... and I need your help. To either make sure he makes it to graduation on time... or... to help me be ready.”*

*She looks at me so sadly. She puts a hand on my shoulder and for a moment it’s like I’m talking to someone new. Someone more... real. “I promise I will help both of you.”*

*I let out a huge sigh of relief. “Thank you, Abigail. I can see why Dawson likes you.”*

*“Likes? That doesn’t even begin to describe our relationship,” **she says,** with a snarky smirk, back to her normal self.*

*Before I can bring anything else up there is a metallic scrambling noise. Crawling out of one of the service doors on the far end of the portal room, familiar metallic legs pull a spherical body though. Silver and cyan and gold, another security spider stumbles out, and scans the room.*

“Hey, when I found you messed up after your fight. Was this ‘the other guy?’” *Abigail asks me.*

*“Yeah, or one of its brothers,” I say as I see it bump into one of the barriers.*

*“They are... tougher than they look.”*

*Then the drone’s head snaps and looks directly towards me. This one’s voice is deeper, distorted and garbled beyond comprehension, and something about it seems... more aggressive. It deploys its coiled arms. The metal tendrils strike one of the many barriers between it and us.*

*Moss rushes back.* “Crystal got the letter, she’s almost here to give it to you.” *He smirks at the spider.* “Not so tough behind the barrier.”

*Abigail frowns, clearly not at ease in the slightest.* “Got a weapon, kid?”

*Moss nods as he takes out Dawnbreaker in its dagger mode.* “Of course.”

“Be ready, it looks like our timing is miserable.”

*The spider drone grumbles as it extends one of its legs into a socket along the wall. The faint ghost of dust that had started to resettle on the barriers falls free one plane at a time. We are ready, as Moss changes Dawnbreaker to rifle mode, and I growl, getting ready to charge in. One of the broken portals flares to life, filling the room with a violent roar and unbearable light. We would struggle through it.*

*But Abigail, seeing the bullet that Moss is about to load, shakes her head.*

“That’s not going to be enough to pierce its armor. Let me help. A bullet, please, Mr Moss.”

*He hesitates, but he swallows his pride long enough to hand Abigail a bullet. She pricks her finger and bleeds onto it as she mutters another chant, and tosses it back. As Moss chambers it, the spider drone scuttles across the room. The rifle fires, sounding more like artillery. The bullet whistles as it zips through the air, leaving behind a blazing corona in its wake. It cleaves through the orb that makes up the core of the spider. The menacing machine falls over, the blazing shred of lead in its body causing a catastrophic failure.*

*Dawnbreaker thrums with a strange light as Moss looks at the metal husk left in the blessed bullet's wake.* “Which god lets you do that again?”

“I take that to mean you’d like more.” *Abigail chuckles as she rips a page she picked out of her journal. She reads it over with a sad sigh.* “I can oblige...”

*As the portal dies down, I turn to see the ghost of a middle-aged mailwoman approach. She holds the letter Abigail just wrote in her hand. Before she crosses the threshold into the portal room she groans. "Oh, no, not you again."*

*Abigail chuckles, same sassy tone as usual. "Regretably, indeed, it is me. I'm very sorry Crystal. But your timing is impeccable." I'd probably be smirking too, if it wasn't for the loud noises, flashing lights, and the smell of burning oil.*

*Crystal sighs and trudges across the broken mesh gate and... she pauses. A shudder runs through her as her cyan body ripples with a strange glow. As she looks at us, hate fills her eyes. She crumples the letter in her hand.*

*"I'm not about to forgive you. For ruining my post room and... For... passing me over. I was better than Mathew Belam, and you know it!" Her frustration with Abigail takes a sharp turn. It doesn't even sound like she's talking to Abigail anymore.*

*Before Abigail can respond, the metal husk in the middle of the room unleashes a screech of noise. A loud warning woop. We feel the rumble of more approaching machines.*

*Abigail swears under her breath, and looks to Moss. "Let me see your ammo. You're going to need a lot more." She rips out another two pages from her journal.*

*The moment she turns her back on Crystal, the ghost lunges with a murderous frenzy. I throw myself between the ghost and Abigail, and lock my fingers with hers. I... didn't know I could grab a ghost. And Crystal reminds me why, as her hands go from something physical, to slipping through my grasp. She tries to reposition. I lash out, but my claws phase right through her.*

*As Moss digs out his boxes of ammo, Abigail looks back to me. "Stay calm, focus, and think."*

*I snarl. There is too much happening and I want to bite something. But I try to focus. I could touch Crystal before, but I can't now. Why? I keep myself between the ghost and Abigail.*

*She looks at me, but she definitely doesn't see me. "Thomas! I don't know why you side with Nathan. Let me strangle him! He's holding us back!"*

*Abigail mutters a prayer as the pages of her journal disappear and Moss's ammo boxes glow with a dangerous light. I try to buy a bit of time while I think. "Crystal, you're not acting like..." I actually don't know how Crystal normally acts. I look back and see Abigail is done praying, so I ask. "Wait, how normal is this for her?"*

*"Not far off actually, but she's definitely disassociating." Then more drones pour through the service doors, and her focus turns to helping Moss, leaving me to hold Crystal a bit longer.*

*She lunges past me. My claws do connect this time. Perhaps—*

*The crack of the rifle, and the roar of the portals re-opening overwhelm me.*

*Crystal recovers quickly and her hands are around my throat now, and I feel my collar pressing into my neck. A spark of terror turns my blood cold. She has no right to be this strong! I wheeze, but I don't give up. My own hands wrap around the ghost's neck in return.*

*A glowing brass stanchion clubs Crystal in the head, forcing her to let go. Abigail holds it aloft for another swing. I'm saved from having to find out whether I need air more than a dead woman.*

*“You okay Lyra?” She asks.*

*I rub my collar, making sure it's not damaged. Luckily it's sturdy, and it seems like the latch wasn't disturbed. My head won't be exploding today. “Yeah, collar's fine.”*

*Abigail lets out a sigh of relief. “Good! Now, have you figured it out?”*

*I furrow my brow and think. “Crystal... can't attack us without becoming physical. So when she attacks us, we can attack back.”*

*“Very good!” She smiles as she twirls her improvised club. “Aodinr, I must confess, I have missed this.”*

*Our conversation is punctuated by Mass's gunfire. I can hear him chuckle beneath the deafening cracks. That's what he needs. A bit of catharsis.*

*Crystal is slowly recovering, her legs phasing through fallen stanchions. We can't attack anyway. "So... how do we kill her if she's already dead?"*

*She sighs and shakes her head. "We aren't killing her. On the Glas peninsula there is a popular sport called Cleindal-Reis. Translates literally to 'Ring-Out.' Basically, there is a goal line, and the game is about getting your opponent into your goal. There are official rules, but traditionally it's by any means. When I was on my walk-about, I got quite good at it. Kinda surprising, given I was constantly plastered..."*

*"What does that have to do with anything?" I snarl as I notice Crystal shift.*

*"She's going to attack."*

*Abigail points to the broken grate she came in through. "That's our goal. Let's play a bit of Cleindal-Reis with Crystal."*

*As Crystal regains her bearings, she lunges at me. Abigail delivers a mean swing to her gut, causing her to stumble back. But she's recovering faster now.*

*There's the keening of another emergency signal from the last drone to fall behind us. More reinforcements scuttle in, and Abigail looks back to check on Moss.*

*Crystal pounces on the opportunity, but I see it coming. I lock arms with her and twirl her around, throwing her closer to the melted hole in the mesh fence. I have no clue how a ghost can be so heavy!*

*Abigail takes stock of the situation.* “Nice throw! Not to mention fully legal—could go pro. I’m gonna finish up with Crystal; go help Moss figure out how to end the waves of reinforcements.”

*I leave Abigail to wrap things up as I turn to Moss. The first of the next wave of spider drones scrambles into the room, crawling effortlessly over the bodies of its fallen comrades.*

*His hiss punctuates a bolt of sun hot flames ripping clean through another machine with a sound like a god snapping.* “How many of these fucking robots do you think this place has?!”

*“It’s really big, so probably more than you have bullets,” I say, feeling a bit helpless. But Abigail thinks I can help. ‘Find the pattern.’ That’s what she’s been trying to teach me. “It’s just the last one that sends out the distress call?”*

“Yeah, and there is a bit of a delay. I’m trying to figure out where in the body the siren is, or... whatever it is that makes that horrible sound.” *A portal shudders to life, filling the room with a cacophony of noise and electricity.* “But for some reason it’s really hard to focus!”

*I snarl as I cover my ears and Moss picks them off one by one. As the portal shuts down, I can feel myself think again. And I get an idea.*

*As Moss lines up a shot on the last one I shout, "Wait! Can you shoot off its limbs? I have a plan!"*

*"I don't think it's in the limbs. But I can try. Are you sure? It's a lot of ammo and a much smaller target." He glances at me, and I show him complete confidence in return.*

*"I'm sure you can pull it off," I say as I slowly approach, remembering the exact range of the spring-loaded arms. I don't need another broken rib reminder.*

*Moss takes the first shot. It's clean as it cleaves through the front left leg, biting through the joint at the thickest part. And the drone scrambles to adjust. This is my opportunity. I rush in and run under its spherical body, where its striking limbs can't reach.*

*He shouts, "This is the plan?! You're getting really fucking close to the holyfire bullets!"*

*"I trust you!" I shout back as I brace under the spider robot.*

*It struggles to try and get to me, giving Moss another shot. This time the bullet hits the middle right leg. Blazing hot metal shards singe my fur. I don't like this plan anymore, but it's too late to turn back*

*Another thunderous crack of the gun, and it nicks the middle left leg, missing, but luckily has enough force behind it to sever the back left leg instead. The heat is unbearable.*

*And then I get lucky. A portal opens. Five meters away. I stand to my full height and grip onto the holes where the body met the legs, and I drag it towards the portal, one heavy step at a time.*

*Its legs stab the ground, trying to resist, but with each gunshot it gets a bit easier. Moss, realizing what I'm doing, gives me his opinion. "I don't like this plan!"*

*"Just keep shooting, it's almost done!" Even as I'm shouting it over the roar of the portal, I feel another shot. Moss is committed, even if he doesn't like it. It fills me with a surge of hope I desperately need.*

*Finally, within centimeters of the portal, I shove the robot forward. It doesn't feel like it's passing harmlessly through a doorway. Rather, I feel metal catch and grind. It's a very good thing that I'm not following it. One last shove and I toss the mechanical spider through the inter-dimensional wood chipper, just in time for the gate to close once more.*

*In the suddenly silent room, I fall over. My body is not happy with me, gasping for air. But we won!*

*“The others back at The Foundry will never believe this. That was amazing!” I shout as I look back.*

*And my heart stops. I see the grin on Moss’s face shift into a bitter scowl. He tries to hide it from me. “Yeah, I’m sure.”*

*I close my eyes. From triumph to not wanting to get up. How can I get through to him? We just did one of the coolest things we’ve ever done, together. If he doesn’t want to keep the band together after that, what hope do I even have?*

*“The nerve! Leading me into a room that would make me go mad! Mark my words, when I explain this to my superiors, I’ll have you banned from this facility! Banned!” The screeching voice of Crystal pierces my misery.*

*Abigail follows it up, as she heads back into the portal room. “Crystal’s back to normal. Only a bit of disorientation.—”*

*“Are you ignoring me?!”*

*“—So it seems like as long as we can get Terrie past that mesh barrier, we’ll be able to get through to her,” Abigail explains, ignoring Crystal. “The madness seems to exacerbate the ghosts’ disassociation from reality. Terrie will likely see us as people she hates.*

“Though given how she was probably treated in the circus... that’s probably everyone. It was common practice to keep dragons bound in magical contracts for ‘security.’ Really it’s just exploitation. Bordering on slavery.” ***And for the first time since I’ve met her, I see a bit of doubt creep across her face.*** “On... second thought... Perhaps... I should actually handle this alone. We had a lot of close calls and I did make a promise that I can’t exactly keep if you guys get caught in the crossfire.”

***I glance at Moss. He wasn’t exactly enthused about it earlier. But something about him... seems different.*** “So you mean to say... Terrie was held against her will... forced to perform—”

***I see where Moss is going. “We don’t know that. Maybe she liked being part of the circus,” I blurt out. “We can’t assume they were the bad guys, after all. It could have been her home; her—.”***

“No, I heard her when she was waking up. She was tired and hurt, and she wanted out! Most people would want out of that!” ***Moss raises his voice, and I feel myself shrink back.*** “Sorry. Just... She went from being enslaved to living in hell for the last century... I think I gotta help with this one. She’s not some kind of prick. She’s just...” ***He trails off before finishing the thought.***

***Abigail sighs and gives me a scolding look. I should have kept my mouth closed. She could have handled it.***

*But even if this is going to give Moss... dangerous ideas, there is no way in hell I'm letting him jump into this alone. "Well, sign me up too, then."*

*Abigail steers it back towards the goal for me. "A very impressive story to share when you get home." She leans in closer to Moss, whispering, "I know it's hard when the world is so bleak. But learning to care anyway, as painful as it can be, is its own liberation."*

*Moss flattens his ears and glares. "Don't talk down to me."*

*"Just sharing a little something I learned when I was twice your age." She claps her hands, dragging the conversation along with her, deeper into the facility.*

*"Alright, onward. Let's make a plan. Moss? Any ideas?"*

*And I see my grumpy friend slowly smile. "Yeah... a few."*

## Adoption 3:9 Ancient

We pity Cain. It's exhausting to be a very good liar hiding as a... less proficient liar. But his people skills are strong, and he's intuitive and charming. Yet there's chaos behind his eyes.

Charisma and charm are the ultimate curse for an introvert like him. How he craves to be alone. How he excels at being around others. So lonely but so scared of being seen. Hiding behind masks for safety.

We pity Cain... but we think we also identify with Cain. Quite strongly. We are a creature that craves others, but we buckle under the spotlight without a persona to slip into.

If anything, he is more impressive; where we're the better liar, he invents his lies himself. We have a script to read off of, we only need to nail the delivery. But Cain is Cain's only writer.

We are trying to fill those shoes. It's truly exhausting. Exploring new places, meeting new people, dodging new ghosts. Juggling cowardice, confidence, and virtues he holds in between. It consumes our focus completely.

Finally, the brothers leave to investigate with the grouchy artificer, Zestel. Finally, I am alone with Simon. I guide our investigation into a break room, and, after confirming it is devoid of ghosts, we make our move.

As we rummage through a cabinet, we casually let slip, "We'd like to speak."

Simon arches an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"Not to you," We say with Cain's practiced confidence. "I want to speak to the dog that has you on its leash."

We look at Simon's face as it's slowly consumed by a cold, knowing, icy blue glare. A frosty rime coats the walls as the air dries out, and a chill strikes Cain's body. "I wouldn't do that. This body will be missed. Even if not by the average paranormal investigator, and the loan sharks probably wouldn't care too much, The Arascottis will notice the absence. Cain is a pawn in their game."

Simon's face snarls. **"Little bugs..."** The voice is heavy, and deep, and cold. The verbal equivalent of a roof-collapsing snowfall. **"I told you that I am stronger without you. Leave me and my new host alone."**

We frown. As powerful as this spirit was, he sounded... wounded. "What were we to you?" I ask, legitimately curious.

The frostbite wolf scoffs. **"What does it matter anymore? You left me alone on this mountain for countless years. You who cared for me when prey was sparse. You who kept me company for so long. You, the only creature that could understand me."**

I hadn't considered their perspective before. I assumed I was like a vassal, forced to give tribute. "I sincerely apologize. I did not realize that we were... important to you. I'm sorry, pup."

We feel the cold crawl up our neck as he growls. **"I am no pup anymore. I have grown, I've learned to adapt. I am on the verge of extinction. And here you**

**are, an age later, and haven't changed. Just seeing you now after all these years makes me... livid. Go away and let me find my end. Leaving this world, one way or another."**

"I'm sorry that you have fallen on hard times. Perhaps we can help make things right. And... perhaps in exchange you'll let us borrow your host. What do you say... uh..." We clear Cain's throat as we search him for any idea what the pup might be called. No dice. The spirit is far too local. "What... should we be calling you?"

Their scowl turns into a conflicted grimace. They want to trust us, against their better judgement.

Finally, the deep voice says, **"Kazimir is what I am called these days."**

What can we leverage? The pup we knew is in there. Kazimir had been softer, and more emotional than we had previously thought. Ironically they are now closer to the hungry monster we had initially pegged them as. Because of us? Unclear, but we didn't help. We thought them a self-sufficient creature at the time, but instead we simply abandoned a puppy. Who were we to Kazimir? A friend? Adopted family?

It's useless to ponder. We need information and we cannot take it as we usually do. Abigail is distracted, meaning we only have her memories, and Cain's instincts, and, in a pinch, Snezhana's advice, to fall back on.

We strike a concerned affect, "Kazimir, what do you mean by your end." Perhaps he would give away a weakness.

He seems hesitant to explain, but finally he tells us. **"This is my mountain. Where my range stops is where the snow melts. In the hot months I am driven further and further from my prey. In cold months, the people have new and inventive ways to keep me at bay. Or they move away. So few towns are in my range."** The trepidation slips away into anger. **"And the world grows warmer and warmer. Companies like Titan have been playing with magics they don't understand. Simon knows things about this company that would boil your blood, and that is only a fraction of their crimes against nature."**

We can certainly empathise with that. We remember how the ancient bipeds cut us off from what we craved most. We escaped underground, to slumber until we had been forgotten. But underground was warm. It was a death sentence for a spirit like Kazimir.

I can use heat as a weapon.

"It's so frustrating to share this world with such intelligent, inventive, and ambitious beings... Every little challenge they present us compounds." I nod with genuine sympathy.

But we still have a mission. We press on. "Still, it makes it all the more out of character for you to be passing up the chance to feast on Simon here. This whole expedition would have seemed like a golden opportunity to hunt if you didn't rush inside ahead of them."

Kazimir flashes me a toothy grin. **"I will have to admit... you were the inspiration. When this place first opened its doors a century ago, one of the many worlds they opened a gate to... I could feel it. It felt like home. I slipped in, despite the heat, I scrambled for the gates, and I saw it. Paradise. A vast frozen**

**world. A snowy ball of water-ice with a star so dim it has been plunged into an eternal peaceful freeze. And I was so close. The gate closed and I couldn't wait inside for it to reopen: I wouldn't survive that long without the cold. So I bided my time, learning the schedule."**

"And then the accident. The Bifrost Terminal closed its doors forever."

To travel to another world. To one so perfectly suited to him. His motivations are very understandable.

We know a lure for him.

**"Precisely..."** He seems to forget how angry he is with us while sharing his master plan. **"So when I found this foolish middle manager climbing the mountain in the grips of frostbite, in the grips of my domain, I thought, what would that curious hive do? They would see an opportunity."**

It's heartwarming to know we inspired the young pup. There's something like a pang of guilt, to be held in high regard after our disappearance.

He has dropped his guard.

"Take over the expert, puppet him into the terminal, and open the portal. Ta-dah, you're free in paradise. It's a good plan, Could've gotten away with it, If it wasn't for Cain, and his meddling exorcists."

We think about the state of Simon's body. It is too cold to save without Abigail. Though she's not as good as Hana, she can exorcise spirits too...

He falls into an abandoned chair. **"You make it sound like a nuisance. It's a nightmare. The only thing that keeps me in this world is this body. If I die, then Simon dies. A hostage against exorcism."**

That doesn't sound right. "Exorcism... shouldn't be lethal." We try to flag down Snezhana for an expert opinion.

Kazimir assaults us with a laugh loud enough to wake the dead. **"If we were a ghost, sure. But we are not a creature that was 'once alive.'"**

*It's true. The only place for a spirit to go is dissolution, rather than  
absolution.*

So destroy Kazimir, heal Simon. It's that easy. All we need to do is figure out—

We hesitate.

We have all the tools to take what we want. We want to have Simon's knowledge. We want to live up to expectations; to make the most of the first time we've been trusted.

No... it was the second time we've been trusted. We abandoned the first pup that trusted us.

We don't want to kill Kazimir.

Not after abandoning them. Not after knowing how important we are to them. This feeling we feel when we look at him. We recognize it from When Abigail thinks of her sister. We won't make the same mistakes.

"Okay, little pup. Okay." Cain's voice feels too smooth for what we feel right now. "Let me make up for letting you down. We can help. We have powerful, knowledgeable, resourceful bodies. We can convince them to help you escape this world and make it to paradise."

His ice blue eyes narrow. **"Too good to be true."**

"I didn't say it was free. As bad as we feel for you, we require what you require. In exchange for sending you on your way. We want Simon." We brace for the outrage.

**"Do not insult us! Simon is our only bargaining chip!"** Exactly as expected.

Start unreasonable, then reveal. Reframe the cost as a good deal. Lower the cost in the process. "We wouldn't ask you to give up your only bargaining chip. What we want from Simon is what you want from Simon. There is Titan tech that is giving our bodies a very hard time. We only need that information. We will not interfere with your possession of his body in any way."

Understandably Kazimir is suspicious. **"And why should I trust you? After you abandoned me?!"**

We expected as much. "Because what choice do I have? If I infest Simon's body, and you are caught, then I am caught. Our fates are bound together. You cannot call me out, or I will expose you. I cannot call you out, or you will expose me. We have leverage over each other."

**"Trust without trust."** Kazimir frowns, mulling it over. **"It would be... ideal to have a resourceful ally. But once you are within arms reach of an**

**exorcist, what keeps you from betraying me. Who's to say you don't already possess an exorcist?"**

We tut, wagging Cain's finger at him. "We're not one to waste food. Once you're done with Simon, we intend to keep him in our hive. Orchestrating that *and* betraying you would be a logistical nightmare. We have nothing to lose by letting you frolic on the ice world."

That isn't entirely true. We... don't want to say goodbye to Kazimir. Before, we had only known them as a dangerous spirit. But there are hints of someone rich with experience. Intelligent and... relatable. Someone like us...

We admit the truth. "And we... wish to join you. If we can find a way. Where you saw us as a caretaker... we saw you as a threat. But... we now see who you are. We do not think we can convince our husks to let you take Simon with you... but we would like to find a way to accompany you."

Kazimir's eyes drift around the room, trying to square what I had to say. The corners of his mouth curl up slowly. **"Really... you feared me? I was tiny!"**

"Tease us all you like, but we are being painfully genuine. Do we have a deal?" We extend a hand.

**"Deal. But I am a secret. No one is to know of me unless strictly necessary."**

Fortunate the only hosts that have been able to listen in are those we have already deemed necessary. While Cain sleeps we distort these memories as much as we can manage.

"Consider it done. We've prepared our most cold resistant drone recipe. Just don't.. attack me, and we should be fine. They can only get so cold before they too will die.."

**"Everything does."** He sighs and tilts his neck to expose the underside of Simon's jawline. **"Thank you, old hive."**

"Kazimir, please call us Rosemary."

## Adoption 3:10 Chances

I might need to apologize to Lyra. Her plan for the robots looks pretty genius in comparison to my plan for Terrie. After fleshing out the rest of my map, marking the territories of the ghosts along the way, we started to plan out the routes. Fortunately, when we wound up backtracking through the room where I spent last night, Ms. Hawthorne didn't pry about the blood stain where Val once was... even when I started to stare.

Turns out, finding a crazed dragon in corridors she can barely squeeze through is pretty easy. Hammering out the best route to get her out of the "berserk" zone is trickier. We thinned out a lot of the mechanical guard. Whatever system controls them doesn't seem to understand which machines are missing and where, so there are huge exploitable gaps in security between us and the portal room. Its broken mesh gate is the only opening large enough to fit a dragon through that connects to the "non-berserk" zone.

The real hazard is the other mad ghosts. Most of our time is spent carefully mapping out their territories to figure out exactly what we're dealing with. Hawthorne seems confident that she can stun them with her prayers, and give my bullets the same properties. She took her time picking out which pages of her book she wanted to sacrifice for it. Why are they so important to her? The burned page yielded seven bullets; exactly as many as I'll need for the plan.

Lyra is the fastest of us. Big shocker, the kid that can run on all fours outpaces a kid with one leg and an old woman. Her part is simple; piss off

the dragon, and lead it through the gate. Ms.Hawthorne and I provide support and run interference.

And being the slowest, with limited ammo, I need to deal with the last pocket of spirits we can't go around. Seven bullets, seven spirits. Abigail says the prayer will only hold them for a short while, so I'm stuck waiting for the ideal time.

Alone, but not in silence. I feel the metaphysical tug of Terrie's beam breath. Every time my heart sinks and I worry for Lyra. But I feel the rumble of the chase, and it draws closer. My ears twitch as I hear the sharp ring of the bell I rigged down the hall. Thirty seconds.

I kick the door open, and just as I suspected, target one is ready for me. The ghost doctor, eyes flashing with malice. *"You! How dare you show your face! You should have kept your mouth-"*

I've heard the story before, and I don't care that he's mistaken me for someone who called him out for malpractice. Dawnbreaker is ready. Crack! The round glows as it slips through the ghost and pings off the wall down the hall.

A holy shield wraps around the ghost, and the bubble is anchored in place. The bad doctor screams impotently, pounding on the sphere. Bending a protective blessing into a restraint; Abigail can be pretty creative.

My smirk doesn't last long. Hawthorne still isn't to be trusted. She's still playing Lyra. I just have to figure out to what end.

I hear another blast of deadly light around the corner. I don't have time to muse. I hobble down the hall as fast as I can and slide prone. The last six targets were still locked in what is probably a century old shouting match. I take a deep breath and focus. I mustn't miss. This is the only path that Lyra and Terrie can take; the other options are too narrow. And whereas Terrie could easily push past, slowing down for a moment could cost Lyra her life.

Shot one and two hit, and the ghosts are confused. Shot three and four hit, and they have turned to see me, the last pair headed my way. Shot five... misses. The bald ghost I'm aiming at moves erratically.

I fucked up, but I'm not about to give up. I roll and get a new angle. I fire my last bullet as the two ghosts line up. The bullet phases through both of them and they are both locked down by a barrier bubble. Crisis averted.

Lyra zips past me, looking as stressed as I feel. I scramble back just in time to avoid being trampled by Terrie the Terrible. She's moving a lot faster than I thought she would, but Lyra is doing well.

As they pass, I hear an angry crowd behind them. Abigail dashes past, followed by a plume of pitch black acrid smoke, and the sound of angry and confused ghosts somewhere in the smokescreen.

"Cover your mouth and nose and run!" She shouts as she covers her face with her jacket.

I'll take her advice. "What happened?!"

“I am a woman of many talents. Including being too frugal with load bearing prayers at times.” She cackles nervously, checking over her shoulder to see if the smokescreen is working. “May have pissed off all the ghosts on my route, but I did find out that when the cleaning chemicals in the blue bottles burn they make a monstrous amount of smoke. Remember, kid. Always pay your gods properly.”

I roll my eyes as we set out on a shortcut through narrow halls. I mutter, “Dumb as hell.”

“If it’s dumb but it works...” Her hearing is better than I thought.

We enter the portal room together from a side door. We’ve prepared two paths free of disabled barriers and robot corpses. Bolting from the service double doors on the far side, Lyra joins us, followed by a beam of pure deadly light, and Terrie the Terrible.

All of us rush for the hole in the grate. Lyra slips through.

The portals kick on, and the emergency shutter finally delivers on its threat. There is a sharp ‘ping’ as something in the blast door’s mechanism catastrophically fails. It falls with the cacophonous sound of thunder. Terrie the Terrible crashes face first into the metal, and Ms. Hawthorne and I skitter to a halt behind the dragon.

We’re way too close! I turn to find cover, to flee, to go anywhere but inches from the berserk dragon. And I feel my prosthetic slip, its faulty fit sending me to the ground. I struggle back to my feet as I see Terrie’s claws swipe. Something blunt hits me; not the dragon. Abigail has shoved me out

of the way. Terrie hits her and she's launched into the air, with a sickening wet crunch.

Why would she do that!? If that claw hit me, I'd be missing a head. Miraculously, she doesn't seem dead. I watch her, doubled over on the floor as the shreds of her clothes soak wet, a pool forming around her. Terrie's attention turns towards her.

I scramble for the other grated gates. I could cut through. I'm not dying here. It serves her right. She shouldn't have stuck her nose in our business. She shouldn't have tried to help. She shouldn't have touched me—

I feel that pit in my stomach. Dawnbreaker still clutched in my hand, I feel my fingers loading one of my leftover holyfire rounds. What am I doing? I brace myself against the blast door and take aim.

I see the dragon wind up to crush Abigail. My hands shake. I feel my finger hesitate. For all the bluster, Terrie was like me. What would holyfire do to a ghost? But Abigail will die if I don't—

No time to think it through, my aim flicks off the dragon and I fire. The blazing round whizzes inches from the dragon's head.

I have Terrie the Terrible's attention. The dragon turns to face me, and inhales. The lights of the portals wink out, and I watch my end approach. Abigail is struggling to get up. Her eyes are locked on me, and she struggles to speak. Still trying to save me? We're both idiots.

A little mote of something zips from Abigail's wound. Barely visible; I almost think it's a hallucination. But the little bug zips to Terrie's eyes, and

suddenly the dragon howls in pain. Terrie flails and swipes at the bug, the beam blitzing off target ripping through the other grates beside me.

A miracle! Did Abigail manage a prayer even while bleeding out?! My legs fall out from under me, between exhaustion, and pain, and the weight of more brushes with death today than I've had in a year.

Lyra finishes the plan. She pokes her head out from the recently cleared grates and shouts, "**Booo! REFUND!**"

The berserk dragon ghost hears her and gives chase, ripping through the damaged gates to give chase. I hope we are right about Terrie coming to her senses out there. My legs won't stand.

Abigail slowly crawls her way over to me. She shouldn't, but she does, and lays against the blast door beside me. She wheezes, "You... hanging in there?"

I want to tell her that she's an idiot. She should be taking care of herself. She shouldn't try to save me. I just... can't. "It was a dumb plan," I mutter as I lean over to try and look at her wounds.

She lets me, as she examines them herself. She peels off the shredded coat, and opens the ripped robes for a moment, muttering an apology that she frankly doesn't need to. The wound looks shockingly minor except for strange shards of metal in her. She digs out her matching tea thermos... to see it's been cleaved in half.

"Crap... they don't make this thermos anymore." She sounds like she'd rather have taken the fatal hit.

There are two other alarming things. Her wounds are teeming with... bees? They seem to be holding the worst of the lacerations together, and digging out more shrapnel. Am I hallucinating? But the other thing that catches my eyes are the scars. They are far worse than the ones on her arms. I try to think of what could have caused the stripes of thick scar tissue. All I can think of, given their strange parallel ridges, is torture.

“What... happened?”

Abigail offers the wrong answer. “Oh, these?” she asks, gesturing to the bugs. “They are my new friends. They tried to take over my body, it’s a long story. Their name is Rosemary, and we’ve made something of a symbiotic pact.”

So I’m not hallucinating. That raises a lot more questions, but first things first; “I mean... the scars.”

She looks more uneasy about them. “Oh, self inflicted I’m afraid. It was before your time, but Aodir was once a feared god. I was... a very bad person.” She sighs as she rubs the scars. “Aodanr doesn’t do anything without a sacrifice... and I sacrificed a lot in the name of a cruel crusade. I’m sure I could have found some price I could pay to get rid of the scars. But that wouldn’t be fair. Your wounds are inflicted by cruelty done to you. Mine were inflicted by the cruelty I did to others.”

That explains a lot, she has some kind of self-destructive martyrdom complex. “While Lyra is gone... No double speak or bullshit. Are you part of The Foundry?”

“No.” She chuckles. “Quite the opposite really. My ‘tea with Dawson’ was a meeting with the Head of Labor to break The Foundry. I don’t lie, but I can deceive. Stitched together from truths. Sadly I have to give Lyra the wrong idea.”

I frown. “Why?”

“I sent Rosemary on a mission to get the blueprints to your collars. I want to set you free. But... Lyra is a lot like me when I was younger.” She runs a hand over her scars. She had said it before, but for the first time it feels... darkly prophetic. “I need to save her. I think I can save her.”

And I think... I finally believe her. “How? I want out... but not without her.”

She takes out her journal and flips through the pages, finding a blank one. “My symbiotic hive has gotten the info I need. Rosemary has exceeded expectations. I’m very proud of them. The next part will be... hard. It’s going to hurt Lyra... a lot.” Without the social mask on, I see how much she is already regretting it.

“If it works... I’ll help.”

“I know. I just... need you to put it in writing... That you want to leave The Foundry, and make it as earnest as possible. But... do mention how badly you want her to leave with you.” She hands me her journal.

She immediately tenses up as I start to flip through it, my curiosity getting the better of me. What is she burning to fuel her spells? She doesn’t stop me. I ask, “Will... she read it?” I feel an odd flutter of anxiety.

“Sorry, but yes. She is caught between two versions of who she is, and you... are the cleavage point between them.”

“What if she hates me?” I feel so small all of a sudden. Lyra, and a dream of being free, is all I have.

She doesn't meet my gaze. “I don't know... but Lyra, friend to Moss, and Lyra, loyal to Dawson, can't co-exist. It's rough, but I need to force this issue.”

I think about it long and hard as I look through the journal. These are stories. Stories of Abigail, and those she loves, and those she loathes. Strange, surreal, impossible. The last entry describes Snezhana back home with her, detailing them as teenagers, gathered around a campfire for a holiday, with her little sister, her friends, and her parents. Each of them are described in detail... including discrepancies with reality.

These are her dreams. Lovingly captured in ways I envy. Lyra would love to read these little dream stories... She's been burning her dreams to protect us.

I feel a little tab, red in color. One of these dreams is picked out from the rest. I turn to it, but Abigail finally stops me, instinctively grabbing my hand, as swift as drawing a knife.

She looks bashful at her outburst, but struggles to let go. I resist the urge to hit back. “Sorry.”

She lets go, but not without one last warning, “Please be... very careful with that page. It's more valuable to me than the whole rest of the journal. I have

never made a copy. I keep it that way to make sure if I ever need a real miracle... I have it. The world would need to be ending for me to part with it.”

She trusts me, letting me look. What I read feels mundane at first. Hardly worth the secrecy. But then... I understand. I leave that sacred page alone. “Alright. I’ll do it. But we shouldn’t keep Terrie and Lyra waiting.”

Abigail furrows her brow before suddenly looking quite worried. “Right! Terrie! I forgot! Do forgive me, but I did think I was dying!” She struggles to her feet.

“And Lyra!?” I press.

She laughs. “Oh, please. I keep saying it. She reminds me a lot of myself when I was younger. Lyra’s fine!”

I find myself laughing too. She offers me a hand up.

I take it.

### *Adoption 3:11 Collars*

*Terrie doesn't fit into the cafe, but after all the hell I went through to get her back to her senses, I'm sure as shit not leaving her out. It took her a lot longer to snap out of it than Abigail predicted, leaving me sprinting down corridors alone without help or a plan. I've removed the doors from the cafe entrance so Terrie can snake her long neck into the room. We sit around, Abigail having rehydrated another chunk of soup, and steeping her usual tea in whatever cups she could manage to find, Moss and Terrie talking as my friend writes things into Abigail's journal. I'm left to stare at the bug in front of me.*

*One of many bugs, according to Abigail. Moss and her had their own adventures while I was running for my life. Moss seems to like her a lot more now. The strange striped creature wiggles around, barely seeming aware, let alone 'intelligent.'*

*"Rosemary has requested you stop staring at them. They feel like you're planning to eat them," Abigail calls out from the counter.*

*"The thought hadn't crossed my mind. Not remotely curious about that," I lie.*

*"You said there are a bunch of them, right?"*

*Moss sighs and shakes his head, pulling out of the pleasant talk with the dragon.*

*"Lupa..." But a guilty look sweeps over him.*

*"I'm not going to!" I sound a bit more desperate than I'd like. I change the topic.*

*"So what was the circus like, Terrie?" Why did I ask that?*

*The great dragon's booming voice whispers, "IT WASN'T THAT BAD AT FIRST." Oh? Maybe it will help change Moss's mind.*

*The dragon slips back into a memory. "THINGS WERE GOOD. WHEN I SIGNED MY SERVICE TO MR. AND MRS. LAUTERDENCE, IT WAS SALVATION. I WAS STARVING ON THE STREETS. IT TAKES A LOT OF FOOD TO KEEP ME ALIVE. EFFECTIVELY MY CHOICES WERE TO ENLIST IN THE WAR, OR TO BECOME A PERFORMER."*

*"Seems like it worked out then." I hope it's the end of the story.*

*But it isn't. "THE THING IS, I MADE A MISTAKE. MY DEAL WAS TO THE CIRCUS AS LONG AS IT LIVED... AND NOT TO THE MANAGERS. SO WHEN THEY DIED AND PASSED IT DOWN..." She sighs, nearly knocking the journal out of Moss's hands. "I HAD PASSED THE POINT OF NO RETURN. I WAS STUCK SERVING THE CIRCUS. GENERATION AFTER GENERATION."*

*Moss shudders and nods. I wish I had thought this through a bit more. I just keep pushing him away. The Foundry was nothing like that, but...*

*It didn't look good, and I can't seem to make it look better. I just hope Abigail can get through to him. I just keep making it worse.*

*"So... I guess that means you're the oldest one here, Terrie?" I ask. "What was the world like when you were young?"*

*The bug 'Rosemary' suddenly crawls on my hand and I swat it instinctively.*

*Abigail winces. "Rosemary was just trying to say that they are older." Bashfully I pull my hand away, and the little bug twitches, still alive but mangled.*

*"Sorry... Rosemary."*

*Moss closes the book. "Alright... I'm done, Ms. Hawthorne."*

*I shouldn't ask. "So, what were you writing?" My dumb mouth opens anyway.*

*"I..." He looks away.*

*Abigail glides over and picks up the book, passing out cups of tea. Rosemary's little broken body is given a tiny little shot glass, barely filled, and as Abigail mutters a prayer, she helps the little bug in. Its broken body is repaired as it drinks. She takes a seat and, I see more bugs wander out from her scarred clothes. Abigail softly pets one of the little bugs and it makes a happy chittering noise. Maybe they can be kinda cute? In a gross sort of way.*

*Abigail sips at her glass of tea, and opens her journal to read Moss's addition.*

*"Forgive my friend here. They've been a secret for a very long time, and are basking in the sensations of being out in the open in a social situation. They are quite amusing." The bugs flutter with annoyance and she laughs, "That's a complement. You've done very well today."*

*Moss squirms uncomfortably, Terrie goes quiet, sensing the tension in the room. Abigail reads the page with a tremendous focus as she slowly sips at her tea. For a moment, the world stops, and awaits her reaction.*

“Penmanship is a bit sloppy, but you aren’t too bad. I think you’ve written something quite compelling.” *Abigail speaks to me*, “A moment of your time in the kitchen. I’d like a word. I think we should work on your account next.”

*I see Moss tense, and I begin to really worry about what he might have written.*  
“Are you going to—”

*She tries to put him at ease*, “It’s okay Moss, I’ll only let her see the pages she has to.” *It doesn’t work. He looks even more tense now.* “We won’t be gone very long at all. In the meantime, Rosemary’s in charge. Do what they say, and if you need anything, they will help. I’m trusting you.” *It seems like she said it more to the bugs than to Moss.*

*She leads me to the kitchen. I find myself more tense than ever. That polite blanket she wrapped everything in made it so much easier to pretend everything was fine. But her face shifts into a solemn and melancholy look. She taps the journal in her hands.*

“So... my turn to write down my adventure? It was... quite a lot of... uh... cool stuff. Just... be patient, it’s hard for me to hold a pen—”

*She opens the book to the page Moss wrote. His handwriting is messy, his spelling atrocious, and his grammar... Is mostly fine. But the message is clear.*

*My ears flatten, and I find myself growling under my breath. No. Not like this. Abigail was supposed to stop this. Ms. Hawthorne promised me that she would help us both.*

*My face snarling must give it away. "It seems the only way to help your friend... is to bring an end to this little game." Her body language becomes muted, her voice becomes harder to place. She's closing down to get ready to do what must be done.*

*I... can't do that. Not with Moss. "Just... give it more time..."*

"The Foundry doesn't have enough time. There is a reason we are forcing the issue now."

*I tremble. "I... can't. Give me one night. I'll..." I whimper, desperately trying to find something to bargain with.*

"This isn't negotiable. You have a mission. Now are you Foundry or not?"

*That strikes something in me. Like the words were a match and my blood was kerosene. "Moss is Foundry too! He's good! He's damn good! You're going to throw him away for nothing!"*

*And finally, I get a response back. Abigail's temper flairs.* "No one likes this, but your friend has been given so many opportunities to learn. How many more limbs would you rather Dawson chop off for him to get the memo? It is cruelty to force him on like this. Escape is his only option."

*She takes out a little cylinder, and pulls off a metal cap, to reveal a small brass button below. She moves to hand it to me. "I... I can't." After this last adventure. It was so grand... I don't want it to be over. "Can... I say goodbye, at least? He's my best friend."*

*She gives me a solemn shake of her head. I feel my heart breaking as... I'm faced with reality.* "All you need to do is push that button. Moss won't suffer. The bomb will explode, and he won't even know it was you. He will be free. This is the only way I can help you both."

*And Ms. Hawthorne does something horrible. She opens my hand and wraps the heavy metal cylinder in my paw, making the button so easy for me to press.*

*It's heavy.*

*I choke out, "I... I don't want to."*

"Would you be putting up this much of a fight against Dawson? The Foundry is your home. The Foundry gave you purpose. The Foundry has decided that you are to do this." *She says, her voice rising in intensity.*

*I need to push the button. I need to push the button. I need to... I need to kill Moss. The Foundry needs me to do it, and I am loyal to my pack.*

*Moss is part of my pack. My favorite person in the world is Moss. He's suffered so much, and this betrayal would be too much.*

*This isn't a betrayal, it's a mercy. There is no hope of him living a normal or healthy life. The Foundry is all we could ever be. He did this to himself. All I need to do is push the button!*

*I'm blinded by tears and my hand shakes. The button is an eternity away as my thumb stops, never feeling the glossy metal surface. I thrust the cylinder back into Abigail's hand.*

*"I can't! I can't do it! I can't do it! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm a failure!"*

*She holds it in her hand, and slowly her arms wrap around me. "It's okay... it's okay... Dawson asked too much of you. It's alright. You don't need to do it."*

*I fall into her arms. I take comfort in her soft, maternal voice. "Do... y-you mean it?" I whimper, clinging onto the shred of hope. "Will I get another chance?"*

*She sighs, and I feel a sudden dread. "No... But if Dawson asks, I'll let him believe you completed your mission."*

*I hear the metal button depress. Click. The soft, gentle sound of my world breaking. A muffled thump of explosives from the other room. My imagination tortures me with visions of the act.*

*Then the horrible knowing that I'll have to walk through that room. That room was painted red with my best friend. All the while Abigail holds me close, muttering some soft musings about it all being okay.*

*But I'm not listening to her anymore. I'm not feeling Abigail's motherly soothing. Her hug is a world away. All I can feel is... my everything crumbling. So overwhelming. So empty. I notice I'm growling first. Some hesitation between then and now, one last chance for it to be a joke.*

*But no. I'm not in the hands of Abigail, the woman just like me when she was younger. I'm not in the hands of Ms. Hawthorne, Dawson's friend. I'm in the hands of the bitch that murdered Moss.*

*I throw the old woman against the counter and strangle her. I struggle to find the neck through my tears, but I manage two hands pressed to her throat. This woman killed Moss. Through my tears I see that she's smiling about it. My arms tremble in horror as to the monster I let walk into my heart because it was dressed like The Foundry.*

*No! I have to let go! This is what Dawson wanted. Moss's death is what Dawson wanted. Now that I don't have Moss, The Foundry is all I have left.*

*But my arms won't obey. Because I don't care about The Foundry. I'd burn the whole place down if it got me Moss back.*

*I'm shoved back, freeing the murderer's neck, and I don't know by who, but my mouth snaps at them, sharp teeth gnashing, missing all together, the target is shorter than I thought they would be. I look down to find out who would dare.*

*And I go pale. Moss stares back at me. Missing leg and missing eye, everything accounted for except for his collar.*

*My legs give up. As I stare, the old woman sits up, rubbing her throat. She explains with a horace voice, "She didn't do it. Not even when I pressed my hardest. I think... She understands the choice she had to make now. Sorry for hurting her to teach her the lesson I had to learn the hard way."*

*And it all comes unraveling. Moss... knew. Had she told him? Oh god, Moss knew. Moss knew that I had been weighing it. "I'm... going to be sick."*

*And Moss puts his arms around me. Everything is quiet. "It's okay, I'm here." That's his voice. That's his scent. I begin to bawl, as my senses dull again. "I'm sorry. I didn't... We'll be okay. Rosemary got the collar off me before tripping the explosives. I wasn't in any danger."*

*I feel my whole body tense. "What now... what do we do now... Where do we go after this? What happens to The Foundry..." I know. I feel it... this was going to happen. I had to choose and I chose Moss.*

*"Abigail can put us up for a while. We can figure it out—" He keeps talking but it is all drowned out as I look at her. I look at Ms. Hawthorne.*

*And I feel nothing but hate.*

*I interrupt wherever Moss is in his explanation. "No."*

*"No to—"*

*And the anger spills out of my mouth. "Just no! I can't trust her! Not after that! Not after... Not after she killed you. Even just pretend. She lied to me! She— I... I don't. I can't."*

*Moss struggles to figure out what to say. He thought he had this all figured out.*

*"But... I'm still alive."*

*And much to my hatred, Ms. Hawthorne gets it. "I hurt you a lot just now. I cut you in half... just not physically. What can I do to help you heal?"*

*I want to tell her to strap my collar to her neck and detonate it. I want to tell her to join the rest of the ghosts of the Bifrost. I want her to suffer. I want her to hurt.*

*And I remember how her prayers work.*

*"I want you to heal Moss."*

Adoption 3:12 Penance

Of course I had to say yes. I promised her anything. I did intend to heal Moss. But here inside the walls of the Bifrost I have so little I can sacrifice. Outside I would have had so many other options.

Please stay calm. We have a lot of new voices we are trying to manage and we are relying on you to be something of an anchor.

I second that notion. We didn't exactly sign up to be full of bugs.

*Please be nice to Rosemary. They have been very good today.*

Was that before or after I got forcibly added to the psychic bug filled group call? I have several objections.

This is what we are talking about. As Kade would say, there are too many cooks in the kitchen—

Who's Kade?

*We'll explain later.*

And we need a manager to keep this all straight. But please think in nicer tones to Cain. We like Cain.

Why?

Please stay calm. I've bought time to think of a sacrifice by saying it would take time to prepare the ritual. It's true; this is the preparation. Since the room is full we are going to take suggestions.

While they think we haul Abigail's body to its feet and pace back and forth through the kitchen.

*Perhaps some more pages of the dream journal?*

There is only one of them that could possibly be worth that much, and I don't touch the red tab page unless someone is about to die, and I don't have another option.

It took five mystery pages to heal severe recent wounds, but we're dealing with wounds far older than that. The value needed goes up exponentially with acceptance. Moss may want to be healed, but his body has moved on.

*Well, forgive me for being a bit macabre.*

Think about what hive mind you're in, none of us are going to be upset at you being macabre.

*Don't actually want reminders about the hive mind! Anyway, what if you were to remove your own leg and eye. That's pretty one to one.*

The math is wrong on that. Abigail has somewhere between ten to, if we're lucky, forty years left in her lifespan, given we have yet to parse the effects of chronic divine healing, and how they interact with the frankly terrible condition you've kept yourself in. A fully restored Moss however is likely to live another fifty years at a minimum. Abigail missing a limb for the rest of her life is simply less impactful than Moss gaining a limb for the rest of his life. That's pure utility before considering psychological value. It would need to be something as impactful to her as the limb is to Moss.

Not to mention my opinion of myself is probably a lot lower than you think. We are looking at something less physical but more resonant. I once gave up drinking for the foreseeable future to save someone. But I only recently squirmed out of it. It was different circumstances though: I was addicted. At that time being drunk was about half of my personality.

Really? I find it hard to believe. Holy Mother Hawthorne having a drinking problem.

A drinking problem kept company by a lot of other problems.

*Let's read through the journal again, surely there is some combination of dreams that add up.*

Please don't. It won't be enough. There is only one dream that is unlikely to re-occur in that whole journal. Where each of them is unique, they are abundant and easily replaced with similar dreams. It's unfortunate but we are pleased to say that the disturbing obsession with burning dreams will not work here.

Okay, if we can't give up dreams, what can we give up?

And we feel a glimmer of a thought that Abigail immediately hides from us. We have a very bad feeling about this.

We can do that? Hide things from the bugs?

*It's actually pretty easy to do while awake. This is the first week Rosemary has had to deal with active minds.*

And it gets easier the noisier the mind is. I don't need to stay cooped up back here anymore. I have my solution.

Oh! Alright! What is it?

I'm not going to share. Because I don't want anyone to try to talk me out of it. Just something you said, Cain, helped me stitch together this riddle.

We don't like this at all.

*Abby, please don't do anything rash.*

I step out of the kitchen and find the kids talking. Terrie has drank her tea and left. Understandable given the drama. I dish up the soup like nothing is wrong. Moss and Lyra have had time to talk, and to cool down... and Lyra is not looking quite as furious. But she refuses to look me in the eyes. I don't blame her. Even after I heal Moss, she'll still be mad at me. It may not be enough even with time. But I need to prove that I'm a woman of my word if I'm ever going to regain her trust.

It will be worth it to save these kids.

The other minds in Rosemary have gone quiet. Perhaps they have gotten distracted, or they watch with baited breath. I sit down and join the kids, taking a much needed sip of soup.

Moss breaks the silence, "You don't... have to do this. It's a lot. And..." His eyes glance to my torn robe, and to my own scars with sympathy. Beneath all the jaded layers, he's a good kid.

"I did this to myself. And healing you will also be something I do to myself. Lyra can't force me to do it. I just need to adjust my timeline a bit." I sigh, and hold my poker face, forcing it into a gentle smile. "Trust me, the cost won't

harm me even a little bit. I can make up for what I lose with restoration prayers.”

Abigail, what are you planning? We don't want you to hurt yourself.

It comes with the territory, Rosemary. Nothing comes for free. If it's any consolation, trying to figure out the word sequence without you seeing is a lot of extra effort. It should make the prayer just a little bit stronger.

Scarce comfort. You are valuable to us.

Then it is fortunate that you are not an Aodanr worshiper.

Moss looks away, and his guilt weighs on Lyra as well. I try to patch up the mood. “So, it's getting late. I claimed a room in the hotel, but I won't need it tonight. I say we enjoy our dinner, perform the ritual in the comfort of the hotel room, and head out in the morning here,” I say, unfolding Moss's hand drawn map. I point to one of the edges. A big metal high-security door.

Lyra clearly considers speaking... but decides not to. Letting Moss take the lead. “There was no way through. I tried but... with the power out of wack it went into some kind of lock down mode.”

I gesture to one of the external bodies of Rosemary. “Of course, but getting Titan Blueprints for your collars was also a chance to grab a lot more. Rosemary has learned of a manual emergency override. It's going to take a bit of effort, but we can get it open.”

We appreciate the accolades. Though it was really just in our best interests. The sooner we solve the mystery of this place, the sooner we can get back to feasting.

Don't worry, big scary hive, I'm sure you experienced no intrinsic reward for being helpful.

No need for sarcasm.

Lyra finally speaks, her voice raspy from crying, but still pointed squarely at my throat. *"Then there's nothing more to discuss. You're stalling. Heal Moss."*

Moss doesn't look particularly comfortable to be in this position. The sooner it's done, the sooner they can get back to finding their new normal. I grab the bowl and drink the soup swiftly. No point in putting it off.

The others follow suit. Things are quiet. Quiet enough for me to reconsider, as my finger thumbs the red tabbed page of my journal. I start to consider every sacrifice I'll have to make to make up for what I'm going to give up. The pain it's going to cause me. But I glance over my shoulder as we finally reach my room, where I see a couple of good kids dealt a horrible hand. And I know that their happiness is worth the price.

I open the door and gesture for Moss to get onto the bed. "Alright, get comfortable, because I have never done a healing quite like this before. I have offered it once, to restore an arm that I... removed. But she refused, so we are in new territory, even for me. I'd remove any foreign objects from the wounds I'm healing. Mostly talking about your leg, but if you have anything under the

eyepatch, like a glass eye, we definitely don't want that there when the real eye comes back."

Moss shuffles off his leg, and the outer layers of pants, until the stump is exposed, and rolls over as he removes his eyepatch and carefully removes his conformer, leaving the socket completely exposed.

Lyra squirms, so I comfort her. "He'll be better very soon. After that, we can talk about your collar."

Her hands drift to her neck with a sudden dread. She clearly hasn't thought about it until now. Just like my old armor, it once gave me comfort, but after I stopped believing in the crusade's cause, it became suffocating. I'm all too familiar with what it feels like to be strangled by what was once your security blanket.

"I'm ready." Moss says, pulling me back to the task at hand.

I don't keep him waiting. I close my eyes and breathe, reaching out to the Phoenix of Passion. *"Aodanr! Ecaep em erofeb dlihc eht gnirb ot naht erom gnihton erised I. Nam leure a yb delgnam saw ydob sih. Ylesnemmi erac I taht erac uoy taht wonk I, si thgilp siht eniuneg woh ron, si dlihc eht tneconni woh erac ton od uoy wonk I hguoht dna. Efil ym fo tser eht rof peels ot ytiliba ym pu evig lliw I dna em erofeb dlihc siht laeh. Ecirp eht yap ot gnilliw ma I dna."*

And the room fills with an intense heat, and light. Lyra growls and covers her eyes, I feel the blazing power of The Divine Phoenix course through me. I feel like my fingers will ignite, that my skull will explode, that my eyes will melt.

Healing was always more intense than destruction, but the last time I felt this much power running through me was my desperate attempt to save Leanne. It's strangely fitting.

Yet for all its intensity, though the entire process, Moss doesn't scream, or yell, or complain. And as the lights fall, the scarred boy is no longer scarred. His new leg is slightly discolored, but otherwise looks healthy. He blinks and closes the eye he never lost and looks around with the reborn one instead. He slides onto his legs and stumbles for a moment. His muscle memory would come back eventually.

Tears stream from his face as he looks at his fingers, all fully restored. He looks at me, and his arms twitch, as though he might try to pull me into a hug. But that's just not who he is.

Abigail, what did you just give up?!

How are the others?

Fine. Don't change the subject.

I face Lyra, "As for your collar, since we have the blueprints, we could simply take it off, or I could remove the explosives. Either way... it's absolutely not safe for you to wear it as it currently is anymore."

But Lyra doesn't respond. She's transfixed, looking at Moss made whole. One last night with it on wouldn't hurt, but it's coming off first thing in the morning.

But she eventually asks the question. *"What... did that cost you?"*

I'm honest... but I do try to downplay it. "I can't sleep anymore. Don't worry."

So I did hear that right!

Wait, what did I miss!?

*Abby! Can you fix it? Can you undo it later?*

***"Really. You can't sleep anymore?"***

But most painful of all was Moss, who now looks at his leg with guilt and loathing. "I'm... sorry."

Which is what I wanted to avoid, all of you. "It's okay. Your leg is worth it." How long can you go without sleep? "With my prayers I can restore the body." *But every prayer has a price! You're going to need to give up something every morning.* "A little wound is all it will take to cover that cost." Everyday for the rest of your life. That is a lot of little wounds! "And there is nothing I'd rather spend a sacrifice like this on."

Moss cuts right to the heart of it again. "What about your dreams?"

The voices of the others go silent as I do my best to hold myself together. Either Rosemary has shut them out, or they realize how distressing they have been.

I get on one knee, and look Moss dead in his eyes. "Don't be sorry about this. I love my dreams... but my ultimate dream is to help people. This is what I desire most. For everyone to be happy and free. And I don't need sleep for that."

Moss's guilt seems to be put to rest, and the exhaustion of the day seems to win out. "Thank you, Abigail." He sits back on the bed. "It... feels wrong. Going to bed now."

I sigh, and nod. "Well, you better. Look at it this way. Every page in my book just got a lot more potent."

Please don't burn any more of them. We are already... We have had a very hard day.

Then get some rest, Rosemary. Send my love on to Hana.

We will stay up with you a bit longer.

Lyra stays up with me as well for a while, in silence, slowly coming to terms with the day. I give her space, but I make myself available to talk if she needs it. The long, hard day catches up with her too, and she falls asleep with her friend. I busy myself, nicking my fingers for a quick prayer to overcome the exhaustion. And I prepare for the following days, using my blood to bless more bullets for Moss, stitching up the damaged parts of Lyra's armor, poring over the map, and writing down all the information Rosemary has on the doors just in case. After all, I now have a journal with plenty of empty pages. And as I flip through, re-reading some of my favorites, and mourning the ones I've lost, I find Moss's heartfelt plea for freedom. I take out a red tag and firmly press it into the page. This one... is also precious.

And, try as we might... sleep calls us. And though we want to stay awake in solidarity, we know that Abigail would not want that of us. And so, everyone sleeps. Except for Mother Hawthorne, watching over the foundlings.