



The Necromancers

By C. Jade Wyton

A retelling from Jaisa Bavie, about the events that transpired during xer time in the Land of Night Magic after xie was kidnapped by a cult of necromancers. Set in 12,570 AE.

Contains detailed descriptions of violence and gore.

Part 1

Jaisa Bavie hadn't come out of xer room yet, but it wasn't anything unexpected. Xie'd not had the energy to leave xer bed for the past two weeks; missing and rescheduling xer appointments with the queen over and over.

But Distro didn't mind. The poor thing had been through so much. She was surprised Jaisa had wanted to meet with her so soon. Xie'd only just arrived in Canis, after only Scara-knows-how-long stuck on Night Magic. Xie'd been in a right state, too. Barely able to speak; xie'd only just gotten enough information out for Distro to know to send help to the farms.

She still wasn't sure *exactly* what had happened to the poor secas, or who exactly had held xer prisoner, but from what she understood it had been a powerful group with their eyes set on Ferraset. So, of course, she'd sent twice as much power to the Land of Night Magic's government to help find and thwart the threat.

And word to Setani. Setani had always been better at understanding incoherent babbling about "summoning rituals" than she'd ever been. Though Distro was only half-sure she'd left to go help figure out what was happening. It was impossible to tell what that girl was doing most of the time and there was a very real chance she'd just headed back to Heck'ne again.

At least Cran had listened and sent his valenor to help protect the waters.

'Do you want me to do the frown?'

Distro snorted with surprise and turned back to the young felinic. She'd forgotten she was having her portrait painted. 'If you like, Penel. As long as I look gay.'

'You always look gay, your majesty,' said Penel. 'You *exude* it like an aura. I admit I'm jealous. How do you do it?'

'Years of practice,' Distro felt herself grinning. 'But perhaps I can give you some pointers?'

'Perhaps,' Penel's eyes flashed impishly as she washed the paint from her brush. 'Anyway, seeing as you've moved around, now seems like a good time to take a break with this. I'll go get some food and then we can continue?'

'No. I think I've had enough for today,' Distro replied. 'I've got a few things I need to do.'

'Serious things that make you frown?' Penel asked, giving a playful shake of her head and click of her tongue. 'Tsk, tsk. That's not very swag of you.'

'Don't tell me what's swag!' Distro retorted. 'I've been swag for over two thousand years!'

'You've been a lot of things for over two thousand years,' the girl teased as she scooped her things into her bag. 'But swag is *not* one of them! Should I come back tomorrow, or...'

The queen twitched an ear as Penel's gaze shifted and she fell silent. There was a raspy whimper and Distro turned to see a wide-eyed secas shivering in the doorway.

'Good evening, Jaisa,' Distro greeted gently. 'I'm glad you're awake. Are you alright? Do you want to sit down?'

Jaisa's eyes followed Distro's hand as she motioned to the armchair beside her own, but the seces just stood in place.

Penel shifted from foot-to-foot for a moment, biting her bottom lip, before letting out a breath and holding out her own hand. 'It's alright, Distro's cool. You can relax.'

'No,' Jaisa finally whispered. 'No, I can't relax. They're still out there.'

'You're safe here, Jaisa,' said Distro. 'I promise. Come sit down.... Penel, could you please get Coi'Lili?'

'Oh, yeah, sure,' Penel adjusted her heavy bag on her shoulder and slipped out of the room past Jaisa.

Distro figured it wouldn't take long for the scribe to show up. He was as quick on his feet as he was with his hands. It would be good to have him in the room, and not just to write down anything important Jaisa said— He was a comforting force. Avio always were.

'Jaisa, come sit down,' Distro repeated.

Jaisa's gills lifted and xie let out a cry as xer freckles flashed brightly with distress. 'No— No I can't!'

'Why not?'

'I have to— They're out there! I have to stop them and— And I—'

'—You've done enough,' Distro interrupted. 'You don't need to worry anymore. I've sent my guards to Night Magic to stop whatever's going on.'

'It would take a thousand guards to stop them!'

'Well, good thing I sent two thousand, then,' Distro stated, patting the chair next to her. 'Two thousand and fifty-three, to be exact. Plus, I told a few friends who are sending their own support. Have you heard of Cran?'

'The— The valenor king?' Jaisa blinked, xer shoulders dropping as xie finally gave in and stepped towards Distro. 'Yeah. He— He helps fund the farm.'

'Does he?'

'Yes. He.... He buys a lot of medicine. Healing weeds, mostly. For infection.'

'I see. He would, wouldn't he? With all the tussles his people seem to get in. I'm not surprised,' Distro helped Jaisa into xer seat as the door opened again. 'Ah, Coi'Lili, perfect timing.'

'Distro, it is good to see you once again,' the avio grinned. 'And hello to you, dear blue one. Have you eaten today, Q?'

Jaisa shook xer head, then blinked as xie was presented with a container of yellow mush. 'What— What is that? Is that some sort of fish?'

'It is scrambled egg,' Coi'Lili responded. 'Not my own I promise. But from a chikchik! My own chikchik. Her name is Dancing'Puddle and she is very healthy.'

'I've never seen egg like this before,' Jaisa admitted.

'Ah! Yes. You would not have because you are an ocean-dweller,' Coi'Lili confirmed. 'Well. It is a very tasty meal. Full of many nutrients. It will make you feel stronger very quickly. Eat it.'

'Th-Thank you,' Jaisa took the food and slowly picked at it. Xie looked unsure about xer feelings for it, and after xie was about halfway done xie pulled a face so bewildered that Distro couldn't help but chuckle.

‘It’s a strange taste after a life of seafood, I’m sure,’ she said. ‘When we’re done here I’ll have Coi’Lili take you to the kitchen for something more familiar, how’s that sound?’

The corners of Jaisa’s mouth twitched in a weak smile, and xie nodded and put the eggs down. ‘Thank you.’

‘Do you feel better, after food?’ Distro asked. And, when Jasia nodded, she let herself smile. ‘Good. Very good. Do you think you’re ready to tell us about what happened?’

‘I.... I guess,’ the smile fell from Jaisa’s face and xie gripped xer shirt. Xie worked xer fingers over the worn fabric and swallowed before glancing up at the queen. ‘People need to know, I know. But I— So many people were asking questions, and I don’t know if I’m going to be able to tell all of them, over and over. I don’t know if I’m strong enough.’

‘That is why I am here,’ Coi’Lili took the secas’ hand in his and gave it a squeeze. ‘When you are ready to say it once, whether that is today or tomorrow or next month, I will write it down for you and make copies for everyone who needs to know. And then you will not have to say it again unless you want to. Does that sound good, Q?’

Jaisa let out a breath, which squeaked through xer gills. ‘Yes. Yes, that would be good. Thank you.’

‘Do you think you can tell us, now?’ Distro asked. ‘If not it’s okay. We understand.’

‘I...’ Jaisa took a deep breath, xer eyes trailing the floor. ‘I think I’ll feel better, getting it out.’

‘Okay. When you’re ready, then.’

Another deep breath, which was let out with a loud sigh. ‘I was working on Ferraset loading crates into to ships for export. It wasn’t my usual work I— I usually work in the harvest, but Gial was sick and the boss needed someone to replace xer....’

Part 2

I was working for Ferraset loading crates into to ships for export. It wasn't my usual work I— I usually work in the harvest, but Gial was sick and the boss needed someone to replace xer, and I thought I could do it. Double pay seemed really good, and I was looking at moving to a better room in the port so I thought if I did a good job maybe they'd keep me on permanently. I liked working above water. You meet more— More people, you know? And, well...

Well. We thought they were just thieves, at first. Just one or two. Crates of medicine went missing and I— Miina told me that they'd dealt with thieves before. Usually you just spook them and they back off. So we thought we'd be able to handle it. We thought— We thought it was just thieves. We had *no* idea— We didn't know— We didn't know— We— We— We didn't—

It's alright, Jaisa. Take a deep breath.

I— I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

That is okay, lovely one. You are okay. That is it. Deep breaths, now.

Yes. Breathe....

Okay. Okay. I— I'm okay. Uh....

We— We uh....

It happened overnight. We were running behind on loading some ships but my— My g— My—

Breathe.

My genitor. The dock manager. My genitor was the dock manager. They got me my job at the farms and recommended me to replace Gial and— And I thought I was lucky for that. But I.... I wish I hadn't taken the work.

I wish I hadn't because... my genitor... they....

They what, Jaisa?

They.... They had us clock off even though there was still a lot of stock left. They said that we could catch up in the morning, and to just leave everything in the warehouse. A- At the docking bay. It wasn't anything the crew hadn't done before so they— We thought it would be fine. But when we came back in the morning the lock had been opened, n-not broken, and half the stock was gone.

That's when we should have known something was off. Usually it's just— One or two crates that go missing, at most. This was close to a hundred. I guess we panicked a little bit. I know I did. Everyone— Everyone started asking questions. They tried to find my genitor to ask what to do but— But he hadn't come in yet. Which was weird. But we were all so distracted by the missing stock nobody even really thought about how strange it was and—

And I told everyone. Over and over. I knew I locked the door. I was sure of it. I know I— I knew I did. But nobody— Nobody believed me.

I wish I hadn't been the one to lock up. I wish it had been someone more experienced. They might have believed the door had been locked if it was Miina, and realised something was wrong. But they— They thought it was just because I forgot to

lock the door. And someone had gotten in and taken advantage of that but— But I— I—

Breathe, Jaisa.

Yes. Okay. Breathe.

Breathe....

I....

Yulpa was furious with me.

‘You should have stayed on the farms,’ xie’d told me. ‘When the boss finds out they’ll throw a fit and both you and that genitor of yours will be thrown out, and I won’t be defending your stupidity!’

Gods, I wish stupidity was all it had been. I wish— But— But they.... It was a lot.

Miina was nicer.

‘Get the tracker,’ they’d said. ‘Get the tracker and we’ll get everything back and the boss won’t even have to know it was gone.’

I still remember their tail wrapping over mine as they stood between me and the others. They argued for a bit, but Miina was— They’d worked on the loading bays since they’d come of age, almost fifty years ago. Nobody had worked there longer, so we all listened to Miina about most things. And— And I wish we hadn’t. I wish they’d told Miina no, and just reported me, and I wish I’d quit instead of— Instead of agreeing to go after the thieves.

But again we just thought— We thought they were just petty thieves. We had no idea what we were getting into when we went into the woods.

The tracker was a human, and she was good at her job. I wish she wasn’t. Maybe it wouldn’t have ended so badly if she’d not been....

We left in the early morning, and it was almost noon when we decided to take a break. We hadn’t expected the thieves to have gone so far but the tracker said the trail was clear. They’d not bothered to even *try* and hide themselves.... Again, that should have been a red flag.

We rested by a river. It.... It tasted bad. Nobody was sure why, at the time. We considered refilling our bottles but we didn’t really want to drink the water. Which it was good we didn’t because— I found out what was wrong with it and it— It was contaminated.

Contaminated? With what?

W— With.... With.... Lots of things. They used the river to dispose of everything. Mould and chemicals and clothes and— And— Everything....

I see....

Keito, a freshwater, got really sick after rubbing it into xer gills and had to go back. I — I’m glad xie went home. Miina sent Naikio with xer, which was good. I hope— I hope they got back to the farms alright....

Would you like us to send word to them and make sure?

That— That would be nice. Would you let them know I’m alive? Naikio was a friend and they— They’re probably worried.

We’ll make sure they know. Now, what happened next?

We— We took our break. We talked for a while. Everyone— Everyone was pretty mad at me. Even Miina seemed frustrated by how long we’d been gone but they— They

tried to reassure me that we'd get everything back.

We should have just gone home after the break. But we were just— We would have lost our jobs. And none of us could afford that.

So the tracker kept us going, and it was starting to get dark by the time we got to the base of the mountain. The sun was only just setting but the mountain cast a— A shadow. That made it seem later than it was. It was creepy. And I wanted to go home. But I didn't say anything. I— I was too scared of being yelled at.

But now I wish I had said something because— Because— If I had maybe everyone would have turned around and left and forgotten about it.

But I didn't. And we pushed on.

It wasn't long after that we could hear voices and see a light. We went quiet and tried to listen in. There wasn't many of them that we heard, so Miina had us approach.

There was a camp with about three naga. They were talking over a fire, and the crates were there.

Three of them, eight of us, we figured it was fine.

We approached, called out, and the naga turned to us. They didn't look surprised. They looked... happy, to see us. Like it was some sort of sick game. Which it was, to them.

And I guess was stupid of us to have not realised there was more of them, really. There was a hundred crates, and to move them this far overnight with only three naga? It wasn't possible.

One of the thieves let out a shout and then more— Seces and naga and foxens and nurlak— They came from all sides and— And they— It— They t— There was— So many and I— We—

Take a breath, Jaisa. It's alright.

I can't— I'm sorry! I can't!

That's okay.

Maybe we should stop, Q? Have a break.

Part 3

‘I can’t— I’m sorry! I can’t!’ Jaisa was on xer feet, now, pacing the room. Xer tail almost hit the queen as xie passed her, and Distro had to duck to avoid it.

‘That’s okay,’ Distro comforted, barely avoiding Jaisa’s tail the second time.

‘Maybe we should stop, Q?’ Coi’Lili put down his notes and joined Jaisa, holding up a wing to stop xer from turning again. ‘Have a break. Take a breath and I can take you to the gardens and you can look at the flowers until you are feeling better and then you can go to bed. We can continue this tomorrow.’

‘And only if you’re up for it,’ Distro added, leaning over onto the over-sized chair’s arm and scratching the scales along her neck. ‘You don’t have to continue if you’re still feeling anxious in the morning.’

Jaisa trembled for a moment before nodding. ‘Y-Yes. I— Thank you, your majesty.’

‘Come now sweet blue one,’ Coi’Lili’s wing lay on Jaisa’s back as the avio guided xer to the door. ‘We will walk and you can tell me about something else. Something that makes you smile. Does that sound nice, Q?’

‘Y-Yes, it does,’ Jaisa admitted as xie was guided into the hall. ‘Though I— I don’t think I can remember anything that makes me happy.’

‘Hmm. That is something bad,’ said Coi’Lili. ‘Maybe you can think of your home. What did you keep in your room, Q? Those things must be things you enjoyed. Think about that, dear lovely.’

Jaisa thought for a long while, flicking xer tail back and forth as xie walked. The pair made their way outside as xie did and by the time Jaisa spoke they were out in the garden, leaning on the fence around a small pond.

‘Fish,’ xie said. ‘I like fish. When I was a kid I used to sneak out and chase them through the kelp forest behind my surrogate’s cave with my sibling. Things were easier then. The most I had to worry about was my sib sneaking crabs into my bed or stealing my toothbrush.’

‘You are smiling now.’ Coi’Lili pressed heavier against the fence, leaning forward so he could look Jaisa in the eye. ‘You must love them a lot. What was their name, Q?’

‘Its name is Batni.’

‘Its, Q?’

‘Yes, that’s its pronouns,’ Jaisa responded, a humoured snort escaping through xer gills. ‘We don’t all use xie and them, you know. The whole point is we’re not some sort of binary. He, she, fae, hir, sie, ve, it.... There’s hundreds of options. Xie and them are just common and easy to use in front of land-dwellers, that’s all.’

‘I see,’ Coi’Lili gave a nod and ruffled his feathers. ‘And xie is what you prefer, Q? There is nothing else, Q? Because if there is something else I am more than happy to use it for you.’

‘Yeah, no,’ Jaisa shrugged. ‘Xie is fine. I don’t think you could pronounce my pronouns in Seces.’

‘I am part avio my sweet lovely one,’ Coi’Lili responded. ‘And I have my speaker. I would be able to pronounce anything. Maybe perhaps even better than you are able.’

Jaisa let out another gill-snort before turning to Coi'Lili. 'Alright,' xie said. 'Try this one, then.'

A short whistle came from xer gills, echoing like it was being whistled by two people as xie opened and closed xer mouth. Then xie clamped xer gills down with a wet slapping noise and grinned.

'That is your pronoun, Q?' Coi'Lili opened his mouth and the noise echoed out of him, perfectly mimicked. 'That is not too hard to say, my dear.'

'Works as both personal and possessive,' xie said. 'But I doubt the wolvens around here could pronounce it without bordering on offensive, so I prefer to just use xie and xer on land.'

'If that is your wish I will respect it,' Coi'Lili gave xer a gentle nod. 'But if you change your mind please do not hesitate to let me know. It is nothing hard for me and I am more than happy to do it.'

'Thanks,' Jaisa replied, resting xer chin on the fence and staring into the pond longingly. After a moment xie eyed Coi'Lili. 'Do you think I would get in trouble?'

'For your pronouns, Q?' he gasped. 'Oh no no no! Queen Distro would never allow that!'

'I meant if I jumped into the pond,' Jaisa clarified. 'Do you think I would get into trouble if I went for a swim?'

'No. I do not think you would. If you do not hurt Distro's fish I doubt that she would mind. Would it be okay if I was to join you, Q? Or would you rather be alone, Q?'

'Your pick,' said Jaisa. 'I don't mind either way.'

Then xie nodded and, after bracing xerself and taking a deep breath, pulled xerself over the decorated metal bar and into the garden. Xie landed with a thump as Coi'Lili followed, his feet hitting the ground lightly as he flapped his wings to slow himself.

He took Jaisa's clothes before sitting on a decorative rock and watching xer slide into the water with a sigh.

'So, I don't want to be rude or anything, but I have a question that might not be polite. I don't— I'm not quite sure if it's rude or not. My head's a bit... everywhere, at the moment.'

'It is no good to have an everywhere head,' Coi'Lili reached out and put his hand on the secas' shoulder. 'You are welcome to ask it and if I think it is rude I will tell you!'

'What are you?' Jaisa asked. 'Avio, that's obvious. But you don't look full avio. At least I think? I'm not sure. Something seems... off.'

'I do not look fully avio because I am not fully avio!' Coi'Lili laughed. 'It is easy to tell if you know what to look for. I do not have a mane if you look on my neck! And no feathers on my ankles or my wrists. I am almost bald you see! Bald! Though only half as bald as you are my sweet blue one.'

'So if you're not full avio, what are you?'

'Ah, ah,' Coi'Lili grinned widely. 'Is it not obvious?'

'Not really, no,' said Jaisa. 'I'm not very good with land-dwellers, and worse with Rendi people. I can't tell a gural from an anvora, half the time!'

'Well they can sometimes look very similar,' Coi'Lili raised a wing and cast a shadow over Jaisa. 'I do not think they would mind if you were to mistake them. As long as you

were not rude about it.’

Jaisa let out a gill-popped laugh and wiped xer nose. ‘Are you being avoidant?’

‘Yes,’ was the simple answer.

‘Why?’

‘Because it is funny to see you ask again and again!’

‘Oh, I see, you’re a *mean avio*,’ Jaisa mock-gasped. Then xie smiled, and sunk into the pond up to xer gills. ‘Thank you. I’m feeling better. More than I have in days.’

‘Well if you are feeling better than I think it is okay to tell you my not-very-secret identity,’ Coi’Lili moved his wing away and let the sun dapple Jaisa’s face. ‘I am half alk.’

‘Alk? Really?’ Jaisa let a breath out through xer gills and let it bubble to the pond’s surface. ‘I never would have guessed that.’

‘No, Q?’

‘No.’

Coi’Lili laughed. ‘Well then. Perhaps it is not so obvious like I thought.’

Jaisa let out xer own laugh, in the form of another stream of bubbles, then lay on xer back and floated in the water. ‘Nahrow would have loved this...’

‘Nahrow, Q?’

‘He... he didn’t make it out,’ Jaisa managed. ‘Without him I don’t think I would have, either.’

‘Distro has sent her army. He will be rescued. Yes, Q?’

‘No,’ Jaisa replied, firmly. ‘No it’s— It’s too late. He’s gone. They killed him.’

‘*Oh, lovely one*,’ Coi’Lili breathed. ‘I did not know. That is a terrible thing. I am so very sorry. Who was he, Q?’

‘He was...’ Jaisa cut off with a sigh, and rolled to look at Coi’Lili. ‘I loved him.’

‘Do you want to tell me about him, Q?’

‘I guess,’ Jaisa said. ‘When we get to it.’

Coi’Lili nodded. ‘It is hard. I understand. I am very sorry that you have been through this.’

‘Yeah I...’ Jaisa hesitated again. ‘Do you think the queen would mind if I slept here?’

‘In the pond, Q? I do not think she would mind as long as you were comfortable.’

‘Cool, cool,’ Jaisa sunk deeper, until the water rippled over xer face. ‘I might sleep...’

‘Yes. You do seem like you need it,’ Coi’Lili agreed. ‘I will go tell Distro. You can tell us more of what you have seen tomorrow if you wish to.’

Jaisa didn’t respond. Instead xie turned over and disappeared into the pond’s murky water, and didn’t resurface.

Part 4

I wasn't sure, at first, why they didn't just kill me. They killed everyone else. Slaughtered them.... Left them half-dead on the ground and watched them bleed out.

They thought it was fun.

Yulpa was the last they killed.... Xie tried to save me. Got between me and some foxens, and told me to run but— But I was paralysed. I couldn't move. They cut xer head off, right there in front of me. It was.... It was horrible.

Then, when I was all that was left, I was dragged away from the camp and into a cave at the base of the mountain. My hands were bound and they wrapped a cloth around my gills to stop me from screaming. It was so tight that I thought I was suffocating. I swear I can still feel it, sometimes. The suffocating pressure that made my vision blur and my head spin....

But I.... In the moment I had no idea why they hadn't killed me like the others. I was confused, and scared, when they covered my eyes I thought that was it. I was waiting for them to kill me, but they didn't. Instead they kept dragging me through the caves. I could hear them stumbling on the rocks and standing in puddles. They dropped me, at one point. And I felt gravel stick into my back. They didn't even brush me down when they pulled me back up....

And they kept yelling at each other. Shouting and fighting.

It was like I was being carried by evil spirits right through the Dark Sky.

Then, the next thing I knew, I was thrown into a chair and they pulled the cloth from around my eyes and gills. And I remember the noise I made— I didn't mean to make it but as soon as I could breathe again I just let out this high-pitch squeal as I tried to take a breath. I didn't realise I made it at first, and it terrified me.... I thought they had an animal in the room or something. But, then the way they looked at me I realised I'd been the one to make the sound and... I....

It's okay, Jaisa. Take a breath.

I still feel like I can't breathe.

You can. Open your gills and take a deep breath in. Is that better?

I.... Yes. Sorry.

It's okay.

I just— I can't—

Do you need to take a break?

No. No, I've barely said anything and— I just....

I just... need to breathe. I just need to....

...

....

I'm okay.

Are you sure?

Y-Yeah. I think so.

Uh....

Well.... Finding out why they kept me alive was worse than being killed, I think. I

honestly think I would have rathered they just kill me.... But I.... They....

I was in the chair. And I was trying to catch my breath. And I heard this voice say my name. And... it was my genitor.

Your genitor, the dock manager?

Yes. Yes. Exactly! And they— I didn't realise, at first, but they told me. I hadn't been wrong. I'd locked the doors. I'd done everything right. And the reason that they'd had us finish work so early was because they'd planned it! To steal our stock and lead us out! I couldn't believe it when they told me. I didn't want to believe it. It felt like a dream.

A horrible, horrible dream.

My genitor told me that they were a part of a new religion. They didn't say "cult" but... that's what it was. A cult of— Of necromancy. That's why they'd led us out. They needed more.... More....

More people?

More corpses.

Fresh corpses. To reanimate and experiment on.

My genitor said they hadn't expected me to have gone with the others. That they thought I wouldn't have been brave enough. I mean, I guess they were right. I'd only gone because I'd been forced to, and if I had the choice I....

I would have....

Hm....

My genitor gave me two options. Join them or die.

I.... They.... I didn't understand why they would do this. To me, or to anyone else. My genitor had always been a good person. I thought so, at least. I'd never known them to do anything wrong and....

I passed out.

I couldn't handle it and I just... passed out.

It wasn't for long, but I remember everything felt like it was pressing down on me, and then I woke up in a heap on the floor.

My head was pounding and my gills were dry and I felt like the whole world was rocking under my feet like a ship in a storm. And I remember asking my genitor, 'Why would you do this? What could possibly be worth something like this!'

And then they— They grabbed me by my arm and dragged me out of the room. To another part of the cave. It was a bedroom, but I didn't notice at first because of the smell. It smelt like rot and damp and mould.

And they held out an arm proudly and motioned to the bed. And there was this— This corpse. Sitting on the bed. Staring at me. I was so surprised I screamed. It barely reacted. Just sort of, tilted its head at me.

I had no idea who it was until my genitor told me.

My surrogate.

Your surrogate?

Yes. She died. Five years ago.

And she looked it, too, when I saw her. Half her face was gone, and her fins were just....

I can't even begin to describe it.

It wasn't her. It was something else entirely. And it definitely didn't remember me. I don't think it was sapient. It just... did what it was told.

My genitor seemed proud of it. But it— It wasn't anything to be proud of. It was a rotting abomination whose skin clung too tight around sunken eye-sockets and missing teeth.

'Immortality,' they called it.

'Revolting,' is what I said.

They accused me of not truly loving my surrogate— Can you believe that? No— I loved her too much to believe that— That that thing used to be her!

Then my genitor told me I'd come around. I'd get used to her new look and realise I was wrong.

They— They said it like she'd pierced her fins or gotten a tattoo! Not like her entire chest had sunken in and her brain was falling out!

But... I was in too much shock to argue. I couldn't bring myself to fight. I just felt empty, then. Like all the feeling had been sucked out of my body and left me numb.

'Think about it,' they said. Then they dragged me off into another bedroom and left me alone.

I'm not actually sure how long I was in there. It felt like days that I sat on the bed, just trying to process what I'd seen. But it can't have been more than half a day, because my genitor brought me food.

I didn't eat any of the meat on the plate. I didn't dare. Who knows what it was....
Who it was.

They told me it was fish, but it definitely wasn't.

Then they took me through the caves and showed me around. Sort of. I wasn't allowed most places. They kept trying to convince me to join and I—

I said yes.

I didn't want to join. I swear— But I was too scared to say no!

We understand. We do.

I was just scared! I swear, I didn't want to be a part of it!

We know.

I didn't want to die!

No, no. Of course you didn't. Nobody can blame you for doing what you had to do to survive. We understand.

I— I just— I— Can't breathe!

Part 5

‘I was just scared!’ Jaisa exclaimed, knocking over xer chair as xie leapt up. ‘I swear, I didn’t want to be a part of it!’

‘We know,’ Distro comforted.

‘I didn’t want to die!’

‘No, no,’ Distro rose to her feet and took the secas’ hands in her own. ‘Of course you didn’t. Nobody can blame you for doing what you had to do to survive. We understand.’

‘I— I just—’ a choking sound escaped Jaisa’s gills, and xie stumbled sideways into Coi’Lili’s arms. ‘I— Can’t breathe!’

‘Yes you can,’ Coi’Lili said gently. ‘Open your gills and take one deep and slow breath.’

‘I can’t!’ Jaisa cried, tears welling in xer eyes. ‘I can’t breathe!’

‘Shh,’ Coi’Lili wrapped his wings over xer and gave xer a tight squeeze. ‘You are okay now. One deep breath, now. One breath. Deep and slow.’

Jaisa tried— Once.

Twice.

Three times.

It took three times to take the breath.

But xie managed it. And then xie took another. And the next one was easier.

‘There. You are breathing now my sweet one,’ Coi’Lili rubbed Jaisa’s shoulder, and his lips met the fin on top of xer head. ‘You are breathing.’

‘How about we get you something to eat?’ Distro asked, finally letting go of Jaisa’s hand and making her way to the door. She poked her head out and motioned something to the guard outside before turning back to Jaisa. ‘Harka will take you to the kitchens, now. He’s one of my best guards. You’ll be safe with him.’

‘O-Okay,’ Jaisa let out a long sigh, and let Coi’Lili walk xer to the door. Xie couldn’t meet the guard’s eye, but let xerself take his hand when it was offered. ‘Thank you. I.... I’ll tell you more later.’

‘In your own time,’ Distro said softly.

Jaisa gave the queen a nod before Harka shut the door and put an arm around xer. He made to lead xer away, but his hand slipped from xer back as Jaisa couldn’t bring xerself to move.

Xer legs felt as weak as jelly now that xie was alone with this... stranger.

And as he stared back at xer, his arm still raised mid-air, xie felt small, and frail, and venerable. And even though his eyes were soft and sympathetic and his step towards xer was slow and calm, Jaisa felt xer breath catch in xer gills again and xie flinched away from him.

Harka stepped back, raising his hands submissively and shaking his head.

‘I’m s-sorry,’ Jaisa stammered. ‘I-I just— It’s really hard to—’

His hand raised to quiet xer, before he pointed to his ear. Then he signed, ‘*Deaf. Only sign. WSL main. ISL second.*’

‘O-Oh,’ Jaisa let out xer breath. ‘Deaf. Deaf.... Uh.... *I also sign.*’

'I thought could,' Harka gave a chuckle. 'Being secas.'

'Yes, I learnt from birth,' Jaisa replied. 'Before I learnt to lung-breathe. ISL, SSL.'

'SSL much different?' Harka asked. 'WSL very different ISL.'

'SSL is not very different from ISL,' Jaisa signed, feeling xerself start to relax. The familiar language was helping ground xer, and xie could easily guess why Distro had left xer with Harka. 'Many signs are the same. Easy to learn both.'

'Hard both WSL and ISL,' Harka shrugged. 'Maybe not best with ISL. But good enough.'

'Very good,' Jaisa complimented, feeling xerself give a grin. 'You are very clear.'

'Good, good,' Harka returned Jaisa's grin. Then motioned down the hall. 'Come kitchens? Distro said you need eat.'

'Yes, okay,' Jaisa replied, and found xie was finally able to take a step forward. 'Are the kitchens far?'

'Just few hallways,' Harka explained, starting to lead xer. 'Not far. Not with wovlen legs. Secas legs, maybe longer.'

Jaisa felt a laugh escape xer, and quickly smothered it. 'Yes. Things feel bigger here. Chair is like couch. Bed here is same size as whole bedroom back home.'

'Imagine poor Queen,' Harka's grin grew wider. 'Toilets. Queen so small. Sometimes fall in!'

Another laugh escaped Jaisa, and xie didn't bother to smother it this time. 'Fall in?! She falls in toilets?! Why not have small ones made? She is the queen!'

'She much too proud for that,' Harka replied. 'She insists on using all wovlen things, no help. Can be funny. Sometimes take ten minutes for get in cart out of city. Sometimes knock shelf over climbing top to get books. But she always okay.'

'Always?'

'Always always,' Harka replied. 'She just stubborn.... What about you? You stubborn?'

'No,' Jaisa signed. 'I am a pushover. And a coward.'

'Oh well,' Harka gave a shrug and grinned before shoving open a heavy-looking door to reveal the kitchens. 'Nobody perfect.'

Again, Jaisa laughed. And then watched as Harka turned to a nearby cook.

'Hello Pink' Ribbon,' he signed.

'Hello hello!' the avio signed back. 'Welcome welcome! To you and to your blue one! What is it you have come for, Q?'

'Food,' Harka responded. Then put his hands in his pockets and grinned.

When he did, Pink' Ribbon let out a loud laugh and smacked him playfully with her wing. 'Cheeky cheeky! Tell me what food you have come for, Harka! Or I will give you nothing!'

'Food for xer,' he told her, before pointing to Jaisa.

'Food for you, Q?' Pink' Ribbon asked.

'Food for me,' Jaisa confirmed.

'You are Distro guest, yes, Q?' she signed. 'Who has eaten fish for many days now, Q?'

Jaisa nodded, and Pink' Ribbon beamed.

'Easy easy! Sit and wait! I will make you food now!'

'Thank you,' Jaisa offered the avio a grin and watched as she began going through a fridge.

It was interesting, Jaisa thought, to watch her work. Xie'd never been much into cooking, and as xie watched Pink' Ribbon chop seaweed and trout into perfectly even cubes, xie recalled xer own cooking methods; taking a fish, sticking it in a frypan, and peeling off the burnt bits.... Though, more often than cooking xerself, xie just headed to the port's market and got something there.

Jaisa wondered if xer frypan was still in xer room— If xie still had xer room at all, and it hadn't been given to someone else in xer absence.

Not that it mattered, much, Jaisa figured. Xie didn't own all that much— Though, xie would have liked xer figurine collection back. Maybe the port had held onto it for xer?

Maybe.

Xie hoped so.

Harka gave xer a nudge.

'What thinking about?' he asked.

'Hoping I was not reported dead,' Jaisa admitted. *'I want all my shit back.'*

Harka let out a loud laugh and shook his head. *'Strange struggle.'*

'Very,' Jaisa replied, giving the wolvern a half-smile back. Though, as xie did, xie felt xer heart sink and anxiety rise to replace it in xer chest, and xie turned to continue watching Pink' Ribbon cook.

Things would never be the same, would they?

Part 6

Are you sure you're ready to continue?

Yes, I'm sure.

Okay, Jaisa. But if you need a break, please say so. You've been through so much....

I want to get it out. I want to finish. I....

I need to finish, sooner than later. Then I can just forget about it and be done. I want to be able to move on.

Okay. I understand. Go on.

Mm.... Well.... I was saying... I think I was saying that my genitor....

Oh. Yeah, m-my genitor. My genitor pressured me to join them. And I did. I was too scared not to. Which— I feel.... I feel bad. About not speaking up. Not saying no. But....

You didn't want to die.

I didn't want to die.

That is more than reasonable, sweet blue one.

Nobody is judging you, Jaisa.

I... I know.

It's just hard.

My genitor was a high-ranking member of the cult. Apparently they... they funded a lot of it.

Some through their pocket, but mostly through stealing from work.

But... that's not really.... Well, I guess it is the point. Kind of.

Kind of.

It's the only reason I'm still alive, so.... I don't know.

They knew I didn't want to be there. And I knew they knew. I could feel the people they sent to keep an eye on me watching me at every turn. Like prison guards.

They didn't make me do anything... death related. Thank the gods. I don't think I could have handled it, that soon after everything. Though— Though they didn't let me be useless.

I think I've learnt how to wash blood out of just about any fabric.

And I learnt more about their sick magic than I ever wanted to learn, just by being there. And I don't think I'm going to be able to forget it anytime soon.... I wish I could. I wish I could flip a switch in my brain, and just forget the past... I think it's been a year? Oh, gods. It must have been, at least....

Oh, fuck me.

Take a breath, Jaisa. That's it. Breathe.

Hmm....

Deep breath.

Hm. I'm okay.

I think....

Yeah.

I-I'm alright.

I, uh....

I guess some good came out of it, though. I know what they're doing.

I know what they want.

What do they want?

They want to take over. Night Magic. The farms. More, if they can. Probably— They'll probably go for the Nurlak Islands. They're small. And if they get New Fallen Cloud... well....

Hm.

Yeah. Hm.

Well. I suppose... I should tell you... about Nahrow.

Nahrow?

Yeah. Nahrow. He—

I'm not sure where to start, with him.

He was a little like me. His sib dragged him into things. He wasn't really interested in what the necromancers were doing. He didn't practice their magic. Though, he wasn't really opposed to it, either.

He was....

He was green.

A dark, dark deep-dweller green. With a face almost like an incarrah— And he'd wag his tail like one, too, if you got him excited.

He thought I was cute, with my no-glow freckles.... He.... He used to.... He used to put his spots out to match mine, then make me giggle. And then when I lit up, he'd light up too and match me.

I think he kept me sane, through all of it. I don't know how I would have survived if he hadn't been there.

We met in the washroom. He helped me clean.

I don't know how, but... I loved him.

I really, really loved him. Like I hadn't loved anyone before.

Even though— Even though we disagreed.

Disagreed on what, Q?

Uh....

Most things, I guess?

He thought the necromancers were noble.

Thought that they were bringing people back who didn't deserve to die.

And I'd argue; if they were doing that, why'd they kill people?

And he'd pause. And he'd look away. And he'd sigh. And then he'd say he didn't know.

At least he agreed that part wasn't good.

Though, I don't think I ever changed his mind much. He still thought the necromancers were doing more good than harm. But he never pushed me to think the same. Not like everyone else was trying to.

I guess that's part of what made me feel safe. I could disagree with him, even on big things, and he didn't get angry or upset.

I know it's not much of a bar to step over, but....

But....

But it was what you needed from him.

Yeah. Exactly.

That's exactly it.

And... I got the impression....

I think he felt as stuck as I did. And I think that's why he argued.

He didn't want to believe he was stuck. So he tried, desperately, to make it a good thing. Something that he chose.

You know?

Yes, I know.

Yeah.

I don't know.

He was good to me. And... he'd take me aside, to his room, where nobody would follow. And I'd feel safe, and soft. And he'd be kind. And....

And I loved him.

We'd spend the nights together.

Talking.

Laughing.

Making love.

Feeling just... just a little bit more like people, then we did during the day.

I wanted him to run away with me. I tried to convince him to try and escape. But he.... I think he was scared.

I think.

I might be wrong.

He might have just... actually wanted to be there.

I hope that wasn't it.

I really hope that I'm right.

And that he really was good, on the inside.

But... either way, I didn't want to leave him behind. Especially not....

I.... I thought....

I thought if I left they might blame him. And hurt him. And I got even more scared. And it got even harder to try and get away.

Is that stupid?

Was I stupid to stay?

No.

No, Jaisa.

No.

It's not stupid. You're not stupid.

You were scared.

And hurt.

And in love.

And nobody could ever fault you for that.

I.... I....
Thank you....
Thank you for....
Do not cry, sweet one.
Take my hand, honey.
I'm sorry.
I'm sorry.
I just—
I just need—
Deep breaths.
Deep.... Deep breaths. Right.
We were.... We were coping. We were coping with everything.
But then.... Then.... The worst. The worst thing happened.
I got pregnant. And then— It went wrong.
It went so, so wrong....
There was blood, and— And I got horrible cramps. And it was too soon. Far, far too soon.
And they died.... Our baby died.
Oh, blue one.
Jaisa....
Nahrow didn't deal with it well. He—
I....
I'm sorry.
No, no Jaisa. Don't be sorry.
You have done no wrong.
Don't be sorry.
Take a breath.
Squeeze my hand.

Part 7

'I'm sorry,' Jaisa sniffed, putting a hand to xer face as xie let out a low, mournful sound from xer gills.

'No, no Jaisa,' Distro pulled xer close. 'Don't be sorry.'

Coi'Lili's wing hovered over the secas gently. 'You have done no wrong.'

'Don't be sorry,' Distro repeated, her hand running down Jaisa's back.

'Take a breath,' Coi'Lili reminded.

'Squeeze my hand,' Distro instructed.

Jaisa tried. And managed half a breath. And half a squeeze.

'*You are okay, now,*' whispered Coi'Lili. '*You are okay.*'

'I don't feel okay,' xie admitted. 'I don't think I'll ever feel okay again.'

'I promise you will,' Distro's lips met the secas' cheek, and she gave xer a tight squeeze. 'I promise. It gets easier in time. It does.'

Jaisa's gills let out another mournful squeal. 'I... I....'

And then xie trailed off, xer eyes focusing on something far away, and neither Distro nor Coi'Lili said anything else. Instead, Distro rested a hand on Jaisa's knee, and Coi'Lili collected his things and quietly made his way inside.

They sat for a long while in the quiet garden. Well past midday, until the air grew chill and the sun began to set orange and pink behind the palace wall.

And then the garden gate gave a creak, and Distro turned to meet eyes with Penel. The felinic was carrying her canvas and brushes slung over her shoulder with a thick leather strap, though when she saw Distro and Jaisa sitting together on the bench she abandoned her things at the gate before making her way over.

She watched Jaisa carefully with each step; though xer vacant expression didn't change.

Xie didn't respond to Penel's greeting. And xie barely blinked when the girl sat beside xer. The secas just stared ahead at nothing, worrying the hem of xer fraying shirt to tatters.

Penel's brow furrowed as she craned her gaze over Jaisa to speak to Distro. 'What's wrong?'

'Xie lost xer baby.'

'Oh...' Penel sunk into her seat, her eyes trailing to Jaisa's hands as xie continued tearing at the cotton seam. 'Oh. I'm so sorry. That's terrible.'

'No,' Jaisa finally spoke. 'That's not.... That's not even the terrible part.'

'Later, honey,' Distro comforted, moving her hand to Jaisa's shoulder. 'You don't have to tell us a thing until you're ready.'

Jaisa nodded, taking a deep breath and turning back to the garden. Xie muttered something as xie continued to tear at xer shirt. And then repeated it. Again, and again.

And the fifth time, Penel finally heard what xie was saying.

'*Forgive him,*' Jaisa breathed. '*Please, Scara, forgive him.*'

Before Penel realised it, she had taken Jaisa's hand and squeezed it. And Jaisa's vacant gaze turned to her, though it was obvious xie barely saw her.

So she let go, and let Jaisa's gaze turn back to the garden, and the three sat in quiet again. The sky grew dark and the dim light of the gentle blue soulstone lamps illuminated the garden, reflecting on the pond's surface and casting long shadows between trees.

And then, as the stars slowly came into view, Jaisa's head met Penel's shoulder and xie let out a sigh.

'I used to want to learn the star-charts,' Jaisa muttered. 'When I was first learning to lung-breathe, I met a dassen. Blue as the sky, he was. Bluer than me. He showed me some of the constellations. That one's Nuwl's wing. That one's Soro's tail.... I can't.... I can't quite remember his name.... The dassen, I mean. I think it was Tali... Tali-something.... He said he was descended from some Har'py hero. Sca.... Scaymie?'

'Scaychie,' Distro corrected. 'I remember Scaychie. Brave woman. Good mother. Married the Heck'ne's mala'kala.'

'Mala'kala?' Penel frowned. 'What's that?'

'The Prophet,' said Distro. 'The mala'kala's the Prophet. The ruler of Heck'ne. Tuwa'ell's the current one, I believe.... Or was he the last one? Hm. Pretty sure he's still alive. Maybe I should double-check. Don't want any nasty surprises next time we have a meeting.'

Jaisa gave a half-gill chuckle and buried xer face into Penel's arm. 'I worked with a Tuwa'taya, once.... Half-harpy. Never needed the crowbars to get the crates open, she just used her talons. It was sort of scary. Though she was nice. She brought me lunch, once.... I think she was flirting with me, but she was reassigned only a few weeks after we met, and we sort of... lost contact.... I wonder if she still remembers me....'

'She might,' Penel's hand took Jaisa's again. 'You remember her, after all.'

'Mm.... I guess that's true,' Jaisa felt Penel's fingers press against xer delicate webbing. 'It'd be nice if she did. Maybe we could be friends again.... I think I need some more friends... I don't.... I don't have many left....'

'You have us,' offered Penel. 'It's probably not the same as you're used to — Distro can be kind of annoying— but we're here for you.'

Jaisa let out another chuckle as Distro huffed and rolled her eyes in mock-offence.

'Annoying, am I?' Distro teased, reaching over the secas to poke Penel's cheek. 'You haven't *seen* how annoying I can be, girl!'

Penel tried to lean away from the queen, but was met by the arm of the bench as her face was assaulted in playful jabs.

'Hey, no!' she giggled, trying to block her face with a hand. 'Stop it— Distro— No! Face-poking isn't hip and happening!'

'*You're* not hip and happening!' Distro retorted, giving Penel a final poke before settling back down. 'You bloody dorago.'

'*Dorago?!*' Penel gave an over-dramatic gasp and mock-swooned. 'Uh! UH! Never have I been so insulted!'

'It's not an insult if it's true,' Jaisa joked, earning xer own jab from Distro.

'Shush, you,' Distro snorted, grinning wide enough to show off her fangs. 'I should bite you. How would you like that, you little cretin?'

Jaisa gave xer own happy snort before pushing xerself up and sitting straight. Then,

xie sighed. Though xer smile didn't fade— At least not completely. 'Thank you. Both of you. For caring about me, even if you don't.... Even if you don't know me....'

'Oh, please,' Distro gave a scoff. 'What's the point of living without compassion?'

'Yeah,' this time, it was Penel who rested her head on Jaisa's shoulder. 'It'd be a pretty sucky world if nobody cared about anyone.'

'But I'm... I'm basically a stranger to you both,' Jaisa looked to xer feet. 'Isn't it odd, to care so much about someone you barely know?'

'Nah! It's like my daughter used to say,' Distro pulled her feet up onto the bench and stood proudly over her companions. 'A stranger's just a friend you haven't gotten to know yet!'

Jaisa found xerself giggling again as the queen's foot met xer cheek, and xie batted her away and wiped xer nose. Then xer face fell and xie looked back at xer feet. 'Heh.... Hm....'

'*Hmm?*' Distro echoed, leaning forward. 'Hmm, what?'

'I...' taking a deep breath, Jaisa took Penel's hand again and squeezed it. 'Has Coi'Lili gone? I think I'm ready to tell you the rest of what happened.'

'I'm not sure—' Distro frowned and leapt onto the back of the seat, cupping her hands around her mouth and shouting towards a nearby window. 'OI! HEY— YEAH! YOU! HEY! WHERE'S COI'LILI?! IS HE STILL HERE?! YEAH?! COOL! GO GET HIM!'

Part 8

Everything went by in a haze after I miscarried. I'm not sure how long passed, but it couldn't have been more than two months. Maybe three, if I'm generous.... But I'm sure it was closer to two.

It wasn't.... It didn't happen that long ago.

How long have I been here?

Two weeks.

Two weeks.... And it took me about a week to swim here....

So this....

This would have only happened three weeks ago.

Just three weeks....

Gods, I still see it like it was yesterday. It was— It was awful.

Take a breath, Jaisa. What was awful?

Um....

It was Nahrow. Nahrow and my genitor.

It was only about two months after I miscarried. They came into my room, and they... told me to go with them. They took me through several of the caverns, into parts of the cult I'd never been allowed to go to before.

Though, if I'd been allowed I doubt I'd have gone. It smelt like a dump. Rotting and moist. And... the deeper we went the more— The more corpses I saw. Just... everywhere. Thrown into piles like worthless garbage....

I wanted to turn around and leave, but Nahrow seemed... excited. For the first time since my miscarriage. And I wanted to know what had happened to make him so happy. So I let him and my genitor lead me. Even though it made me feel cold, and scared, and sick. I let them take me deeper into the caves.

That was a mistake.

A horrible, horrible mistake.

They pushed me into a small room, set up for their rituals.

And I saw it.

On the table.

At the back of the room....

It....

I won't call that thing my baby.

I won't.

I refuse to.

It wasn't them!

It was a thing— A disgusting thing, made from my child's flesh.

The most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life.

Worse than what they did to my surrogate's corpse.

Worse than—

Worse than—

Than—

Anything!

Worse than anything I could have imagined!

Its head was only half-formed, with eyes that never would have been able to see and holes where its nose should have been.

And it's body... was.... It was barely seces.

And it— It—

It had been two months since I miscarried!

The thing was rotting! Its stomach was caving in! Its skin was taut and hideous and pink!

It made me sick.

And I said so.

Nahrow looked hurt. My genitor laughed.

And I felt... angry.

So, so angry, that they would do this to my child.

And I didn't think, and took the closest candlestick, and before they could stop me I hit it.

It was a horrible noise. And blood spattered everywhere. But it didn't stop moving— So I hit it again, and again.

It hurt.

Each strike I felt like I was ripping out a piece of my own heart.

But— But I couldn't let that thing exist. I couldn't.

It was an insult to my child's soul.

So I beat it until it stopped moving, and then I turned back to Nahrow and my genitor and told them they were disgusting. And wrong. And evil.

I can't remember what my genitor said. But it made me feel so angry I saw red, and I threw the candlestick at them.

And then my genitor let out a hiss from their gills, and grabbed me, and threw me down. I didn't even hear what they yelled at me, I was so scared and angry. But they took out a knife and called me a traitor and— And then Nahrow grabbed them and pulled them off me.

They fought. And....

My genitor stabbed him. Though I think he was too furious to notice.

He strangled them to death. And all I could do was watch, paralysed, as he choked the life out of my genitor.

He tried to stand, after that. But he couldn't. He slumped against the wall and I saw how bad the wound was, and my heart felt like it was breaking over and over as I tried to stop the bleeding.

But... it was too late. He was dying. And I couldn't help him.

And....

And....

And he....

He took my hand.

And he told me he was sorry.

And I told him I was, too.

I think he understood.

I think he did.

He smiled at me.

And told me he loved me.

And I told him I loved him, too.

And he....

I....

I kissed him. And I could taste the blood on his lips as he stopped breathing.

Then... I realised I was alone.

Completely alone.

I'd lost... everybody.

My friends. My family. My baby.

Nahrow.

All of them were gone....

It....

I felt so small and scared, in that moment. I wasn't sure I was going to survive. I thought the throbbing pain in my chest was my heart about to burst from the grief.

I wanted to curl up and go numb.

But I couldn't.

I heard yelling.

The fight hadn't been quiet, and the others were coming.

And I quickly left the room, to try and get away. But....

I was cornered. And I knew it. Down one end of the cave I could see the flickers of torches, and down the other I could hear shouting and swearing.

So I.... I did the only thing I could think of. I threw myself onto the nearest pile of corpses, burying my face down so they wouldn't see it.

I knew my lights were flickering— I was more scared than I'd ever been... how could they not be? So I tried to calm down. I forced myself to even my breathing.

I'm not sure how. But I managed to slow my heart, and as my body calmed down I knew my freckles were dimming.

I heard the yelling getting louder, and could see the eerie red light of the fire-torches out of the corner of my eye, and as the two groups met in the hall I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed to all the gods I could name that they wouldn't notice I wasn't rotting.

I'm not sure who heard my prayer, but someone must have heard it. Because the necromancers checked the room and I heard them yell that I was gone. And then they went to look for me, and left me lying in the hall.

I was so, so incredibly lucky they didn't see me, then. If they had I don't know what they would have done to me.

As soon as I was sure they were gone I got up and started to run. I had no idea where the exit was. I just ran, and ran, and avoided lights and voices and—

And....

And....

And I was spotted. By a felinic man. I kept running. He chased me and I knew I couldn't stop. I don't know how far he followed me, but I was exhausted by the time I managed to shake him off.

Then I found a river.

It was fast-flowing. Faster than any water I'd ever been in. And the rocks around were... well, rocks.

I knew it wasn't safe. And that it might well kill me. But I didn't have a choice. It was jump in the river, or... face whatever the necromancers were planning to do with me.

I figured... if I died in the river... at least they wouldn't get my body.

So I leapt in. And felt it pull me under and away and beat me against the walls and floor of the cave so hard I couldn't take a breath.

It's what tore my fins, here. And here. And here.... And... everywhere.

But it saved me. I felt the water turn salty and I was spat out into empty ocean.

I struggled to catch my breath. And then I was sick. But I was okay.

I was alive.

And on the wrong side of the mountain.

I suppose that was lucky, really. I couldn't have gone back to Ferraset. That's the first place they would have looked for me....

So I....

I'd heard rumours and stories about... about you, Distro. And I hoped they were true.

So I came to Canis, and... well....

You know the rest.

Part 9

‘So I came to Canis, and... well...’ Jaisa let out one more long, hard breath as xer fins flicked back, and Distro noticed xer shoulders sink. ‘You know the rest.’

‘Yes,’ Distro gave a gentle nod. ‘Yes. I believe I do.’

Coi’Lili scribbled down the last of the conversation and then tapped his pen against his notes. ‘Is there anything else you would like me to add, Q?’

‘Uh... I’m not sure,’ Jaisa admitted. ‘I just feel... tired, I guess. I know there’s more to say, but I can’t think of it.’

‘I’m sure you’ll remember later,’ Distro waved a dismissive hand and shook her head. ‘But we’ll get to it when we get to it. For now, you take a break. I’ll have a few questions for you when you’re better.’

‘Questions?’

‘Just a few. Not too important, so don’t worry,’ Distro stood from her chair and stretched, feeling her numb legs start to get feeling back. ‘Simple things. Numbers, mostly. Like how many cultists you think there may have been, a guess at how much funding they have— But— No! *Nuh-uh!*’

Distro pressed a finger against Jaisa’s mouth as xie went to answer.

‘Later,’ Distro ordered. ‘Rest first. My questions can wait.’

‘I... suppose,’ Jaisa sighed. ‘If you’re sure.’

‘Of course I’m sure,’ Distro brushed back her hair and sniffed. ‘Now. You’ve had a hard time. I’m very proud of you and how brave you’ve been.’

‘Same,’ Penel’s hands met Jaisa’s back, and Distro saw the young felinic start to work out the tension in the secas’ shoulders. ‘You’ve done amazing.’

‘Thank you,’ Jaisa relaxed xer shoulders and sunk back into Penel. ‘I’m glad it’s over. Though I, uh... I don’t know where to go from here.’

‘Where do you want to go?’ Distro asked.

Jaisa shrugged.

‘How about my place?’ Penel suggested. ‘I live in Balannsuire, just a day’s train ride away. My girlfriend’s a bit of a sad-sack, but I can’t imagine she’d have a problem with you staying for a while.’

‘Oh, uh...’ Jaisa rubbed xer arm and looked to the floor. ‘I wouldn’t want to put you out.’

‘It wouldn’t be putting me out,’ Penel reassured. ‘It’d be my pleasure.’

‘Or if you would prefer to stay with a bachelor in the city my house has a very nice guest room,’ said Coi’Lili. ‘It has a very nice view of the ocean and Dancing’Puddle would not mind you one bit. She is very friendly. What do you think, Q? Would you like that, Q?’

‘I... I’m not sure,’ Jaisa admitted, rubbing xer arm.

‘You’re also welcome to stay in the palace as long as you need,’ Distro said, then raised a hand to quiet Coi’Lili and Penel. ‘You need time to rest, and to think about the future and where you want to go. If you want to stay in Canis I can get you housing and help you find a job. Or, if you would prefer another country, I can bully almost anyone

into taking you. You decide you want to live in Sapious? Konde? Kazzaquin? I'll get you there.'

'Thank you,' a weak smile formed at the corners of Jaisa's mouth, which xie offered to Distro. Then to Penel, and then to Coi'Lili. 'All three of you. Thank you.'

Penel returned Jaisa's smile as she leant over and kissed xer on the cheek. 'It's alright. We just want what's best for you.'

'Yes,' Coi'Lili agreed. 'What is best for you is what we are wanting.'

'Thank you,' Jaisa said again. 'I... I *do* think I want to stay here. At least for a while. You're all so friendly. And... I don't know. I know I want to work again. Labour but... not as a dockworker. I don't think I could do that again. Something similar, though. Farming, or crate-loading...'

'Well, Balannsuire's export season starts soon. You could help in the harvest and then load the trains in the station,' Penel suggested. 'They're always understaffed so it wouldn't be too hard to get a job with them, if you wanted it. And you can stay at my place until you can afford your own— Because I'm *assuming* you're not wanting hand-outs from Distro?'

Distro caught the felinic's cheeky grin and rolled her eyes.

'No, I don't want to be given anything,' Jaisa let out a long, heavy sigh. 'But, if you really wouldn't mind having me, at least for a while, I'd appreciate it.'

'As I said, it'd be my pleasure,' Penel gave Jaisa a friendly punch in the shoulder.

'O-Okay,' a weak laugh escaped Jaisa as Penel pulled a face, and xie rubbed xer hands together anxiously. 'Thank you. That'd be nice.'

'Well, it sounds like you're a little more sure about things than you first thought you were,' Distro gave a nod and pet Jaisa on the back, before helping the secas to xer feet. 'Though, before you make any promises, I think it would be best to sleep on it.... Coi'Lili? Would you take Jaisa back to xer room?'

'Of course, my wonderful friend,' Coi'Lili gave the queen a nod, then offered the secas his hand. 'Come along, lovely blue one. Let us get you into bed.'

'Thanks,' Jaisa replied, leaning into Coi'Lili as xie was lead to the door.

'Not a worry, my lovely!' Coi'Lili beamed. 'Come! Come now.'

'Goodnight, Jaisa,' Penel gave Jaisa a wave. 'I hope you sleep well.'

'Yes, goodnight,' Distro echoed. 'If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask for me. I'll be up all night and it won't be a bother.'

Jaisa simply nodded at that, and the two girls watched as xie and Coi'Lili disappeared into the hall. They sat in quiet for a moment before Distro gave a throaty snort and turned to the felinic.

'Well, Penel, I suppose we should finish that painting.'

'Oh, most definitely,' Penel responded, giving a flourish of her hand and taking on a playful, half-mocking tone as she rose to her feet. 'Though, I believe I have left my paints in the garden. Perhaps you would *honour* me with a walk? We could go the long way around.'

'Yeah, sure,' Distro felt herself grin as she was offered the felinic's hand. 'I could certainly bear to stretch my legs, after today....'

End.

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