

Compilation of short writing challenges from the month of June 2020.

1: Goodbye

Ofenna walked slowly today, travelling down a path she had been on many times. Stopping under a shaded bend in the road, she closed her eyes and just listened to the sound of rustling leaves.

The tan furred lioness still had the rest of the week to say goodbye to the people she would be leaving here. Today, though, she was saying a more personal farewell to the nature near her home. It was one of those things, she'd lived here most of her life, and every local thing was always available for her to visit, thus with no pressure she'd never brought herself round to it.

Of course she'd stayed active, but once she'd grown up enough to need more than a garden or a park, she'd instead gravitated towards friends and clubs and the like. Now that it was finally time for her to go and live elsewhere she'd also been swarmed with social activity from said friends, and thus, wanting a break, some quiet time just for her and her thoughts, she'd taken to the woods.

There was plenty of evidence to show this was a travelled spot, with well trodden paths, free of obstruction and even breaks in the tangled branches where people took detours. There was no construction though, no buildings, or benches or even signposts to distract passersby from the woods, just nature and anyone else who happened to be walking through.

Her eyes opened again and she took a deep breath, one hand moved to a tree at her side as she climbed over snarled roots, deciding to take some time off the beaten track. She mused on the earthy scents that her footfalls stirred up, wondering if she'd miss this when she moved to the city. The wind brushed the treetops, her boots scuffed the floor, but otherwise there was peace, calmness.

Woodland creatures rustled the bushes as they scurried away from her movements, the lioness kept pressing deeper still, past trees overgrown with ivy and weeds. She came at last to a fallen oak. The wood itself eaten through by time to the point that it had snapped, and moss had crept to cover the joint and fill in the exposed trunk. From the wizened bark, it looked as though it was probably the oldest tree in the entire glade. The break was at a good height, enough that Ofenna needed only to jump a few inches before she was sitting upon it. Her hands went to her bag, fishing out the water bottle she'd brought. A fine time and place for a moment's rest, nothing but nature around her, and her own thoughts to dwell in. A brilliant way to crystallise the memories of this place.

Of course her family would stay here, so she could always come back, but for now she sat, kicking her heels on her perch and looking around one last time. Her gaze rose up to see the

afternoon light dancing through the green leaves and she opened her lips to bid the countryside a fond goodbye.

2: Compassion

A mole crouched behind a hedge, watching a car pull up. A short canine woman opened the far door, walking around the back of the vehicle to open the pavement side door and hold it open for the other passenger. The mole's eyes grew wide as he saw the figure step out, he knew little about fashion, but even he could tell the tall bat woman was expensively dressed.

They engaged in conversation, though it was muffled and too dim to hear, even in the still night air. The dog seemed to be bidding the bat a good night, beaming up with bright eyes at the returned comments before she climbed back into the car. The mole held his breath as he watched the car veer away, leaving the posh bat alone and unattended on this empty street.

There was no time for hesitation, the mole darted out from behind the hedgerow, sprinted up to the woman, his hands clutching the handbag she'd been carrying and tearing at it. Luck was smiling on him, as the woman hadn't even held on to it, the strap falling off her shoulder, as in seeming slow motion he made to carry past her, the bag pulled tight to his chest, the woman turning around to see what was happening, but rather than shocked surprise, her far arm was already moving. His leg reached out to take a long stride, and then suddenly the horizon rotated away from him, his step never finishing. Instead he fell with a hefty thud right on his back, a sharp heeled shoe pressing on his belly as the bat looked down. Hair covered one of her eyes, but the open one quickly scanned him. An intense blue iris with a sharp glare of rage, or so he thought. She saw him, and then seemed to reach a conclusion but the bat's lips were peeled back in amusement, not anger. She relaxed shortly after, her assessment finished and finding him to be not much of a threat. Even her foot shifted, the balance adjusting to the front so that her heel was no longer stabbing him, but still pinning him down.

"I take it you are not the fellow I am to meet." She said, reaching a hand down. The mole gasped, still winded from the sudden ground slam he'd suffered.

"P-please miss! Let me go! Y-you'll never see me again!" He said, desperately pushing the handbag forward for her to retrieve.

Her jaw split open, the long wicked fangs she bore shining eerily in the moonlight. Her hand moved past the offering, instead grabbing him by his jacket and pulling him up. Her grip was like iron and she held him off the ground. He could maybe slip out of his hoodie and try to run for it...

"Don't try, little purse snatcher." She said, waiting for him to grow still before she set him on the floor. "You don't look like an addict. Nor like the kind of brat who steals for fun. They tend to know that clothing needs changing after such hard use."

"W-what? Please, don't call the police! I didn't... I mean, I shouldn't have-."

“What is your name, boy?” The woman asked, straightening as she casually plucked her bag back from him.

“Steven!” He replied.

“Well, Steven, when was the last time you ate?”

He looked up in bewilderment at her, he’d meant to lie about his name but had failed even in hiding his identity, and now this. “Tuesday.” he mumbled, hanging his head in shame.

The bat was silent, appraising him. It could well be true, and she doubted he ate well. The more she inspected him the more she realised that his dirtied clothing, torn and ragged, was not a front to hide some other purpose. “Here is what’s going to happen, you are going to follow me for the night, and tell me your story. If you try to run, you won’t get far and you will promptly regret ever meeting me. However I promise you, if you tell me the tale, I will let you walk away from here even if I don’t like what I hear.”

Steven quivered again, her tone was soft, carrying a drawl in her words, but yet below that smoothness he could feel iron, a will that was best not crossed. “As I said, I have a meeting, though it should be tomorrow. It just so happens that I will be meeting him in the morning, and thus will be taking the night in the hotel nearby. They do a rather delightful evening meal too. Come, it’s not far, you can begin your tale.”

To hear his version of it, the mole had just had a truly awful run of luck and had recently ended destitute, but had lived a sheltered enough life that he had no idea what to do once hitting the bottom. The bat, Drevari, had noticed multiple ways in which he’d got himself in greater trouble, and a more equipped individual might have turned those poor fortunes around, but his attempt at theft was something he felt driven to, and while his actions were condemnable, Drevari was sure with a swift intervention his heart could be put back in the right place.

Her host had been perplexed at the extra guest, stunned by the mole’s behaviour, but he was hardly one to complain even when his clientele looked like they wouldn’t be able to rent a room for a minute. The manager was a decent man and so, when Drevari had called him in, she revealed a way he could settle the debt between them. A large building like this could always use fresh, willing and able staff, and if the mole would apply himself, he could learn the profession soon, thus keeping him off the streets and into a potential life of crime, or worse.

The bat also insisted that he be given one of the rooms as his own quarters, even negotiating on his behalf as to how that would be paid for. When she left the following afternoon, the Mole was already changed into the uniform, being shown around by one of the veteran staff, and his eyes brimmed up with tears of thanks.

The bat simply waved him off with a slight smile, it wasn't the last time she'd see him provided he applied himself, but Drevari doubted there'd be any problems.

3: Break Away

Heavy footfalls chased Kimura through the night soaked alleyways, but he was confident, he'd walked these streets before, he knew where to go, and there was little chance that his pursuers would find him, much less keep up.

The street split at a most confusing intersection, five possible roads if one were to keep onto the ground, and two separate ladders to reach the rooftops, and they were now deep in a residential district. The ignorant people in the homes around him would serve to slow those following him. Broadcasting their presence too loudly would upset the higher ups.

He leapt for the far ladder, climbing two stories and then hopping to a window ledge, using the external part of someone's air conditioning to make it across a gap, and then in through a window that he had left unlocked in preparation for this very night. The apartment he entered was abandoned and unfurnished, as were the two adjacent ones, and he ducked from the window-side bedroom through to the kitchen.

A light whistle in the air, followed by a reverberating thud was the warning he got as the door was wrenched out of his fingers and slammed behind him, the thrown knife sticking out of it.

Kimura was quick to dive for cover behind the oven. His eyes snapping back. He recognised the knife and its appearance was hardly a surprise. It just meant that any one of his pursuers had turned out to be quicker in reaching him.

"It's not too late to turn back." The thrower said, and Kimura let out an exasperated sigh. Of course it was her.

"We both know that's a lie, Keya." He retorted, the weary chuckle she returned, tinged with regret spoke for her.

"Then I suppose we get to dance." Keya said.

"Why not just let me leave? You can't possibly condone all the chaos back there."

"You know it's not my job to, but you also know that if I was committed to being a model employee, you'd be bleeding out right now. I am giving you a chance to fight for your freedom, so come on, boy."

Kimura tensed up, he knew that he would have been dead if she was determined to see him fall. He stepped from behind his cover noticing that his former colleague had a gun trained on him, though her finger was off the trigger. “How we dancing then? A Wild Western shootout? Or are you expecting me to give you the knife back.”

Keya spun the gun before placing it on the table. “I know you, lad, you always were cocky in the ring, but let’s see if you can square off against a veteran.”

She raised her hands adopting a fighting stance while Kimura shook his head, grimacing. “You’ll pardon me if I leave my gun holstered, it’s just that I might need to keep it on me when I break through you.”

“Fine by me if you want to handicap yourself with that extra weight.” She replied.

They closed on each other but it was Kimura who was forced to the defensive. Fast jabs firing from Keya’s fists landed with hefty thuds on his arms. He ducked around, thrusting forward, but only glancing off her shoulder.

She spun, but in adding leverage to her swing she telegraphed it enough that Kimura dropped below, landing a blow to her side. He made to follow up, but Keya hadn’t even flinched, her elbow whooshed through the air where Kimura’s head had been a second before.

Two more lighter blows followed up, sending him back. He hit the kitchen counter with his back, stumbling as he lost his footing. Keya closed in on him and delivered a heavy punch that sent him tumbling to the ground, blood leaking from a split lip.

The man reacted quickly, grabbing his gun and bringing it up. Keya hissed and stepped back, livid rage in her eyes, but her own weapons were too far for her to reach for either without risk. “You would even throw away that honour you flaunt?”

He slid his back up the wall, rising to stand, still panting from the explosive action. “Trust me Keya, it burns my pride more than you can imagine, but I can’t let myself lose here.” His hands tapped one pocket. “This information... I can’t let it be suppressed like the rest of it.”

“Shut up, boy!” She said, raising her hands. She nodded to the door.

He understood the exchange. If he said anything more, she’d possess secrets she shouldn’t, and they’d come for her anyway. “We’ll see each other again.” She said, as he stepped away. “You know they’ll send me after you.”

“I’ll dread the arrival of that day, teach. But I don’t intend to let you find me.” He slammed the door behind him and fled into the night.

4: Near The Water

They don't go to the lake anymore. The town of Lakesmist was even named after the expanse that it was built around, so prone to fogging up. The cool water was the reason that the settlement sprung up, but that was hundreds of years ago.

To hear the stories of its founding, one would imagine a scene of playful white fog swirling and dancing over clear waters, with the sun rising up to slowly chase it all away just in time for merry villagers to gather enough to drink or use. Since more official records had been kept however, there was no mention of the haze lifting before noon, and even that seemed like a flight of fancy compared to how the town was now.

The mist, once confined to the water's edge now crept free from the lake itself, reaching to blanket the lower parts of the town in the morning, from mid autumn until spring. Only subsiding from the town well into the afternoon. Even in the heights of summer the fog never left the waters entirely, clouds clinging with resolute stubbornness. People murmured that the lake was cursed, that the mists were alive, and growing as whatever semblance of sentience they had feasted on... something.

The less superstitious simply credited more mundane thoughts; modern technology polluting the air, or even the grand suspect of climate change were to blame. Still others just claimed that it must always have been this way. Yet even the most adamant men with their rational beliefs still refrained from approaching the lake's shore.

The people gave their warnings to the visiting travellers. If they wanted to see the lake so badly, there was the old bell-tower in the town square. It was bereft of its bell, but when the fogs subsided back to be contained by the water, it allowed one a clear sight. However that was not enough for these three. They wanted to see it up close. They laughed that a town could be named for a thing that no one dared to touch. They left that same night to carry out their plan, despite the advice. They didn't return.

The visitors' car was still where it had been left, and the more conscientious townsfolk went with police to have a look for them the following day, nine people in total. The fog itself seemed to writhe under the torchlight as the people used what they had to peer around, wading into the lake, pushing at the growth alongside it. Shouting out loudly for any sign of the strangers. For three hours they looked, finally regrouping to return to town, yet now there were eight of them...

They don't go to the lake anymore. Whatever causes the mists to rise and grow slowly eats at the townsfolk's peace of mind. The population dwindles as year by year people find somewhere else, anywhere else, they can afford to be. Parents who can't bring themselves to leave, or are unable to, still urge their children to grow up and find a nicer home.

And on the outskirts of town, the abandoned car sits to this day, caked with rust, the seats decayed. Every morning the fog envelops it in mist, a constant reminder to let mysteries lie.

5: Evil

He was wounded, exhausted. The tiger hadn't known how he had got here, just waking up inside a twisted labyrinth filled with dangers. Some of them threatened a quick end, others an unknown but likely horrific fate.

It felt like days since he was last able to rest, but he knew it couldn't have been more than a few hours, but the aching bruises were always on his mind, even having to step awkwardly due to a leg injury he'd taken a few rooms back, yet he'd pressed on. There was no alternative, the instruction, given to him by a faded parchment in his starting room, told him that he had to find the exit and escape. He'd considered staying in that very room, defying the one who somehow brought him here, but as if knowing that thought his eye had fallen on a second piece of parchment. It told him simply that the room he was in belonged to a ravenous beast, and waiting there would only end his attempt before it started.

He hurried on, his chest heaved as he heard an otherworldly bellow behind him. He'd barely escaped the last creature that he'd come across, and if he got trapped now, there's no chance he'd fight out of the corner.

He staggered around one last wall, looking up as a ray of light washed over the stone, a barred gate with a lock. There was the end! He would have cried in joy just from seeing it were his situation any less perilous. He dug out the key that he'd found within the twisting chambers and started toward it, only to stop himself, this would be the perfect spot for a trap, after all.

He looked carefully, every inch of stone suddenly seemed suspicious. Another, closer roar shook the corridor and sent a jolt of fear through him and he saw a black shadowy shape rapidly approaching, there was nothing for it. He shot forward, hoping if he did trip a trap that he'd dodge it and the chasing creature would be delayed at the very least.

He made it to the door without incident, but panicked hands fumbled at the lock in terror. The key fell from his grip, and in the time it took to pick it up the monster had drawn too close for comfort or to second guess anything. He slammed the key into the lock, turned it sharply and felt elation as the door opened. He ran through it, pulling it back behind him as he jumped three steps at a time and collapsed on the dry grass above as sunlight hit him. The howls from behind him grew in anger and volume, but stayed where they were, it seemed the creature couldn't cross the door, whether by some limitation or simply that it had locked again behind him.

The labyrinth's owner had chosen not to reveal herself throughout his ordeal, but she stood there, waiting. A red panda woman, who looked at him with displeasure writ plainly on

her face. “Well that was a lackluster performance in all.” She said, yawning, not even bothering to stand from the throne she sat in, which given the surrounding scenery seemed out of place.

“W-who are you?” The tiger demanded, picking himself back up.

“I am Mei Xiu, the keeper of this realm, and many others like it.” She replied flatly waving her hand softly in the air.

He smiled, and laughed roughly. “So, I beat your challenge?”

“In that you made it out alive, yes, I suppose. Well done, you win, is that what you want to hear?”

“What I want is to go back where I came from away from your sick game!” He shouted with renewed vigour.

Mei smirked softly in retort. Her eyes looking at something invisible to him, so, if he had the energy he'd be trying to attack her. That wasn't so boring in itself, however... “Well, it probably won't surprise you to know the reason I do this is for my own entertainment, yes? And I have to say, you were one of the most pathetically boring attempts I've ever seen. I should have known, given your character.”

“Like I care what you have to say.” He blurted, picking himself up and simply starting to leave.

“Oh you should.” The mage said without turning her eyes to follow him. “Because the trouble is, you picked your way so carefully and cleanly through it, you didn't even what the triggers would have done after identifying and passing them.”

“So?” He said, still walking away. He would leave this place. Find a town, make his way home. That was all he thought of. Abruptly his leg froze, his whole body stopping afterward. “Wh-what?!”

“Yes you made it through, but you didn't entertain the audience you had. So, I say you'd be better off doing a re-run. Agreed?” She asked him over her shoulder, sparkling crystalline butterflies wafted around as a visual representation of the spell she used to hold him. Though they were added for his benefit.

“In your dreams! Let, me, go!” He growled.

“Final offer, one more run to please the all powerful mage holding you? Maybe? You might get rewarded?” She said, her voice growing higher pitched and cute, as if that might sway him.

“Never!” He said back, straining in the hopes his body could beat the spell.

“Hmm, suit yourself.” She said. The tiger dropped to the ground gently, able to move again.

He turned to look at her, confused... “Wha-” He began, before an intense and powerful burst of force came from ahead of him. Like some pin-point targeted wind. It sent him flying back past the throne and into the dungeon.

Mei looked with a devious smirk as the tiger bounced down the stairs, through the dungeons door and straight into the hands of the shadowy creature. She would have let him have a second attempt if he’d only agreed, but then, maybe this ending would be more entertaining for her to watch.

6: Playful

There was a wolf in your garden, the shape of it, the size of it, nothing about that struck you as odd, however there were some very odd things about that initial sighting. The first one was visual, never in your life had you heard of a wolf, or indeed any animal, having fur that was that blatantly blue in colour. Next, the odd way it had looked at you struck a chord once you realised you were safe, indoors, protected from it. The wolf had cocked its head and then panted at you like a dog might before turning, unhurried and unworried and loping back into the grass at the end of your yard.

It only dawned on you that there shouldn’t even be wolves in this country, let alone by your home.

The wolf came back the next day, and the next, it never approached closer than the end of the yard, but it seemed taken with you, wagging when you looked out of the window. You were never one to believe in signs and omens, but yet, you’d not told anyone nearby about this, only the friends you routinely spoke to online. They replied with confusion and offered many theories for what you saw, but could give nothing much of an answer. Nothing you’d searched online had shown anything relevant either. If there were answers to be had they were buried in merchandising and advertising of random products and companies.

One of your friends offered a sentiment that echoed with thoughts you’d had in your youth... how wonderful it would be to have a wolf like others had a dog. You took the risk one afternoon when you saw that blue fur return, after all, the wolf seemed to have been getting frustrated at being ignored. Something gnawed at you, making you think that if you stayed in your house then next time it left it might not come back.

On hearing your door open, on seeing you come out, its tail started to whap rapidly. Excitement plain in its body language. You walked out tentatively, one step at a time, keeping your eyes on the wolf and ready to run back to your home, but it just sat, waiting for you. You got to the boundaries of your land, and looked over. Offering a little “Hello?”

The wolf gave a soft yap back which made your heart leap all the same, but still it waited. Courage took hold of you and you reached your hand out toward it. The wolf stood, very slowly, as if it knew you perceived a potential threat. It walked over to your hand and nuzzled it from underneath.

“Uh.. good boy?” You said and it let out a breathy huff. Dancing in a circle. You saw no obvious signs of it’s manhood which meant it was likely a she. Yes, quite definitely a she.

“Good girl?” You said instead and the wolf yapped happily, leaping and wagging. The air she got told you one thing. Your fence was highly inadequate to keep her out if she wanted to come in. That was when you chose to invite her. “Come here?” You said, questioningly, you’d known the very basics of dog commands from absorbing popular culture. She sailed over the fence and rushed around your yard, looking at everything, getting quickly acquainted.

The energy was infectious and you felt the laughter bubble up inside you as she ran up close and did a couple of loops around your body before lying down again, panting, seemingly smiling. Her eyes seemed more intelligent than any animal you’d seen and you dared to put your hand into the thick blue fur. It was wonderfully soft and thick, and the stroking seemed to please her more than it pleased you. That whole evening passed in a rush, you had had so many things to do and you ended up neglecting all of them to play with this excitable new friend.

When your stomach had rumbled, reminding you of your hunger, the wolf had pushed at your with her head, encouraging you back to your house. You went inside started the preparing food and you looked inside your stores for anything you could spare for the wolfess. Yet, when you looked outside for her you saw the thick blue tail vanishing from the end of your yard into the trees. She didn’t come back when you called, and you felt a pang of sorrow and regret at that, wishing you’d stayed outside even just a minute more!

Your friends had wondered why they’d not seen you online today, and it was only the closest ones you dared reveal the real reason to, otherwise just saying you’d been busy. But through it all you distractedly looked out of the window whenever you went to that side of the house. It seemed so surreal. When your friends asked if you’d dreamt it, you understood why, but with no evidence, you just let the subject drop. You didn’t sleep that well at night either, fretting over the wolf, if she would return, if she had gone away now...

Life had to continue, you had a lot to catch up on, after all, but you let yourself glance outside the window the following morning. Blue fur flitted at the end of your fence, and your heart leapt. You ran outside calling for the wolf, who leapt over and ran with equal excitement to you. Relief flooded you, as you looked guiltily back at the door, you had things to do still...

You went back to the door, and the wolf sat outside, waiting and watching, but not intruding. You had to invite it inside and in she came, but she composed herself far more than outside, a more respectful investigation.

You have no idea why this started, but even if the wolf had only been there for a week, you'd never have let yourself forget the precious time. A playful companion who was smarter than she ought to be, and one you kept a secret, lest others interfere or you tarnish what you had and scared her away.

7: Wind In Your Face

Oh How It Would Be / To Soar Through Sparkling Blue Skies /The Wind In Your Face

Erilla Cesan pulled a face as she rose, setting down the brush. It didn't quite click, and that in itself was upsetting. She was a dragon, though one of the bipedal kind, her black scaled skin shone in the light as she stared out at the vast emptiness of space before her.

It had been months since she'd been on firm ground, but her duty kept her in the atmosphere. Even if she could join the next ship down to the planetside, the sky would hardly be inviting to her on that blasted rock. Just the thought of flying made her wings creak, the mechanically augmented limbs had barely even the room to stretch out in this place.

She was not a woman who felt sentimental very often, but right now, she was beset with a strange longing to take wing and feel the rush of air. It wasn't even that she was caught in anything interesting. Routine work that any medic who had mastered basic first aid should be able to handle, but here they had her on staff just in case something severe happened.

A knock at the door set her sighing, standing and calling out. "Who is it?"

"Emery, Ma'am. They want you in the med bay at your earliest convenience."

She grunted, "Fine.". If it was at her convenience then it was probably a stubbed toe or something equally pointless for her qualifications. She knew why she was out here really, her former employers had never got along with her, and even though this paid far more than her last post, she didn't work just for the money. They'd told her it was a promotion, and they hadn't really been lying. It's just that they were getting rid of her and casting her into boredom.

The thoughts plagued Dr. Cesan as she fixed up her outfit and flexed her mechanised fingers. The limb whirred as she ran a quick check to make sure it was stocked with any supplies she would need, and she walked out of her quarters, the door locking behind her. She couldn't in good conscience wish for a severe case, but she wished she could have something more. A challenge to deal with to keep her engaged, or just some free space and time to fly again.

8: Through the Fire

Applause rang out, constant cheers, interspersed with shocked gasps as the audience watched the show. It was rare for Gemini the white wolf, owner of this club, to take to the stage himself, but he was a dazzling sight.

The lights shone at him and with pigments he'd rubbed into his fur for the performance, it looked as though fire sprang from him and danced along him. All smoke and mirrors, for the real pyrotechnics were intermittent bursts set for whenever the performers were clear... One of them gouted out a jet of heat which made the crowd gasp, as planned. However Gemini saw something that was not to plan.

The billowing hem of one of the other performers, a bluejay, had strayed too close and had ignited. Given its unpredictable course it was in danger of setting the whole place ablaze, and given that alcohol had been flowing, even a stray ember might grow to a large problem.

He kept the dance going as he thought quickly, an improvised pirouette would bring him close enough to catch that end-

A scream went out from the girl whose skirts were burning, and any hope of preserving it as part of the show died with that howl. The wolf leapt in a long stride, grabbing the garment in his hands, thankful for the wraps he wore, and smothering the flame from them. It was a sudden heat, and nothing he'd not recover from, though his hand wraps were ruined.

His gambit worked, the audience went from panicked to celebratory as they witnessed the manager stepping up and solving the problem before it flared up. He beckoned to one of his assistants making a subtle hand signal to bring him a microphone. They moved without pause, and took the device from her, leaving it off to whisper. "Send out the supporting act."

"At once, sir." The deer said back with a small bob. That should buy him enough time to figure out what to do next, but first, the audience.

He struck a pose in the centre of the stage. "Ladies and Gentlemen! I can only apologise for that sudden interruption to our show. I promise you that while things were warming up-." A small ripple of laughter echoed back. '*Sycophants, the lot of them*' he thought to himself. "We will resume shortly. Now we must make way for the next act, but we'll be back!"

He passed the microphone to another nearby staff member and the dancers took the cue following him out, his eyes flicking to the one who had caught alight and he made a small gesture with his head to impress on her that he had words to share.

He stopped at the door, giving one last laughing flourish and blowing a kiss to the adoring fans before he stepped out of their sight. He flowed with that same dancer's grace past other staff and down to his office where he slipped indoors.

His composure changed the instant he was out of sight, ripping the hand wraps off and throwing them to the corner as he went to a basin in the corner and started to soak his palms. '*That damned incompetant bird. We practice without a hitch how many times without*

incident. And then this, just perfect.’ A knuckle rapped at his door and he bade the knocker enter.

The bluejay walked in, slightly abashed but unharmed. *‘More’s the pity.’* Gemini smoothed away his thoughts and smiled warmly at her. “Good, I take it you’re alright? Just a little shock and worry?” His voice was touched with gentle compassion as he walked closer.

“Y-yes, boss. Thank you for the quick reaction. A-are you alright?” She replied, looking guiltily up at his palms.

“A little raw, but they’ll not even scar.” He said, smoothing things out. “I know you had another show in two hours but I think it’s best we skip that one, give you time to rest. Would you be willing to come in tomorrow instead and take part in one of the other shows? One without risk of fire.”

“S-sir, am I being removed from them?” She said, looking worried.

He shook his hands in a gentle, soothing motion. “Not at all, I assume you’ve seen enough pyrotechnics for the moment, that’s all. Does it sound like a good exchange?”

The bluejay let out a sigh of relief. “Yes, Sir. Please.”

He smiled again, nodding. “Alright, please send Della in would you?” Said by way of dismissal. He went back to the basin, washing his palms again, they still felt hot. There was a single rap at the door and then the rabbit, Della, walked in, bowing her head meekly. She glanced over at him and approached, fishing in the cabinet below for some medication to use on the potentially burned skin.

“You called, Sir?”

“The next act?” He asked.

“In progress, the audience is calmed and enjoying it all again.” Della replied.

His lips pulled back in a snarl. “That one bird, she was the new hire, yes?”

The rabbit cocked her head, squinting slightly as she corrected him. “Not quite, she’s been here for a few months without issue.”

The wolf growled, “Fine, whatever. Have an eye kept on her, if she screws up anything again I want to know at once, and I want to hear you fired the wretched creature!”

The rabbit paused, thinking for the moment. “Should I move her to the night staff?”

He shook his head. “No, she can’t be trusted with that.” He took a breath. “I suppose this time I will be lenient. Don’t engineer an incident, but if one happens then show her the door before I’m back, or I may end up plucking her in front of the crowd.”

“Yes, Sir.” She said, opening the balm and gently taking her employer’s hands to smear it in.

His vindictive inner thoughts wanted to carry out the threat right now, but he rose to stand once Della was done. “I’ll be downstairs. Handle anything that happens for the next hour.” He ordered curtly. The rabbit bowed, waiting for him to stride out of the room, where he immediately returned to his charming, happy appearance, before she moved to head back to the club floor.

9: Romance

The dim lights flickered and the fox stirred a claw over the surface of the table in slow, tantalising circles. The music was set, a calm tone. The fox, simply called ‘A’, tilted his head as he looked across the table to the object of his desires.

How many months had it been since he’d come up with this plan, and now finally had the chance to carry it out? Work had kept him so busy, but everything had come together to allow this romantic get-together at the office. Everyone else had left, he had total privacy, and he’d got to work making it look as charming as possible to make sure the mood was right.

“Ah yes, my sweet, sweet love. Why, I could just drink you up, if only you’d let down your guard.” He said, his voice enticing as his fingers connected. “Ah, you’re cold? And yet you make me hot, and thirsty.” He paused... the line had sounded better in his head, but he shook the thought away, keeping his happy, composed smirk lest he dwell on it and ruin the mood. “I knew you were the one ever since I laid eyes on you.”

Oh how he longed for more than that, to press his lips forward, to feel that cool exterior and it’s beautiful contents. “May I ask... for a kiss?” He reached forward, taking hold and pulling gently but firmly with one finger. A clicking hiss issued, and this close a new scent reached his nose. “Ah, what elegant perfume you wear, such a taste to it.” He said nothing more, his lips pressed tightly to seal the distance as the unique flavour touched his tongue.

The lights grew to full power as someone turned them up. “Oh, hey! Didn’t think anyone was here in the office, and-” A voice began.

A yelped, dropping the can of Red Bull. “My love, we are disturbed!” He gasped, picking up the beverage and setting it back before it spilled. He rose from the table and blocked the view with his body as the someone turned out to be Marianne, his assistant. The cat had stopped, her ear flicking at the music as she stared at the scene. Petals strewn on the floor, a tablecloth thrown over an office desk... the soft music.

“Uh... if I’m interrupting. I mean... uh.” She said, eyes darting around for the second person but there wasn’t even a second chair at the table. She broke her pause by simply saying, “I think I’d better go.” Slipping quietly into the office to grab the bag she’d left at her desk, and then slipping out again.

A’s chest heaved as he stared back. How much she had seen or heard, he couldn’t say. He looked back at the can of Red Bull... it was opened now. The whole build up spoiled before he could enjoy it. Wait, what was he thinking, there was another cold can in the fridge, he could just start again.

He walked over to the break room, setting his hand on the refrigerator’s handle and catching his reflection. “Wait, what the hell am I even doing?!” He asked, out loud. The days without sleep must be getting to him...

10: Lust

Cerise was a canine, a diminutive cocker spaniel, and the sum of her adult life could be summed up in a name; ‘Drevari’.

The spaniel had met the bat during her internship at some other company, and with that one chance encounter her entire path had changed. It wasn’t love at first sight, more a feeling of awe, of hero worship over someone she couldn’t get out of her head.

This had meant poor Cerise getting too distracted at work, her performance dropped, and eventually she was let go by the company that was reviewing her. However this turned to her advantage as fate let her meet Drevari again, and in turn, she was hired as her personal assistant.

The love built from there, Cerise went above and beyond the call of duty on countless occasions. She learned everything she could about Drevari to not just meet her needs, but to anticipate them. Years went by and Cerise finally identified that she loved her employer, lusted for her, and that itself was a problem due to what she knew of Drevari.

The bat was asexual, not the kind to get intimate with anyone in the way that the spaniel craved. Cerise had struggled to believe it at first, digging into many things to try and find the secret truth. After all, she’d seen enough of what Drevari did with friends and other entanglements. But there was no mystery to be found, no strange path that had scared Drevari off sexuality. The bat had always been asexual and repulsed by sex itself, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t romantic.

Drevari and Cerise had spoken frankly one night on the spaniel’s insistence. Something rare enough that Drevari was shocked and cleared her evening out of concern. Cerise confessed her feelings, all of them, and for the first time she saw the bat with her guards all down.

“Cerise.” She had said. “You know me better than I know myself sometimes. Almost everything you’ve ever done has been in my service or for my comfort.” She’d been sat on a large

sofa and she beckoned Cerise to join her, taking her hand in hers. “The truth of it is, I love you too, but I can’t satisfy your lust in the way you truly want.”

Drevari usually kept herself calm, composed and unflinching, but her face let her emotions through. There was vulnerability there, a true aching, the bat knew she could never bring herself to be what Cerise desired. The dog had tears in her eyes, though she was smiling up, the flood of joy and relief at hearing the object of her desires requite her love, at least on the romantic level had stirred her spirits higher than they’d been in years.

“Ma’am, that’s more than enough to hear you say it.” She’d said back. They’d talked deep into the night, Cerise having to do some work in convincing Drevari that she would be truly alright with it, so long as the knowledge didn’t cause discomfort to the bat herself.

The following month had been a bit awkward, Cerise was off her usual game, and Drevari realised over that time with some wry amusement how much she’d come to depend on her assistant’s ability to seem precognisant of her needs. But they soon found peace.

Drevari could be romantic, warm and loving, and Cerise could content herself, even knowing she would never get the night with Drevari that she often dreamed about. She never had eyes for anyone else, only the bat, and she was okay with serving her to the best of her abilities.

11: Purity

When seeking to spend time alone with her thoughts, there was nowhere Eshri loved more the cool clear pond, sitting by herself in the mid-day sun. The day was unusually chilly and so the kobold had wrapped up warm. This also meant that dangling her legs in the water would not be the best idea today, not least because of the undressing and redressing she’d have to do. Instead she lay beside the water on the grass.

She was physically alone, but still was spending time with someone. Tapping at the phone she’d brought to keep a conversation with a friend going, but out here she felt so much more relaxed. It was good for her to find time like this, able to just unwind, with no work in front of her, no danger to avoid. Just a quiet moment where she could think, and for once, her thoughts weren’t around the same stressful subjects of her daily life.

The sky was still bright and clear, and lying in the sun’s rays warmed her quickly. She turned to look into the pond, wondering if she might glance any other creatures. No fish lived here, but the occasional bug or even frog could be spotted if one kept an eye out. The only thing that disturbed the beautiful calm of the day was the light chime she’d set her phone to when the friend sent a message.

“Oh. Hello there.” She said to a small dragonfly that had flitted close. She lazily held up a finger for it to land on, but the skittish creature hovered away, still nearby. The kobold surmised

that for the insect to perch on her, she'd have to be still and calm for far longer than she could. After all, she would have to go back home and work again soon, but there was no need to rush these peaceful, blissful minutes.

12: End of the Road

The rain drove down heavily on the land, even the stonework of the castle was made treacherous under that downpour. The imposing silhouette waited not indoors, but on the ramparts. The cascading water was of no consequence to her, it hit the air just before striking her skin and deflected away. Elisa Tourmaline, the greatest threat known to the world, stood waiting for the challenge of the band that seemed to think themselves heroes. "So you made it, after all. I am surprised, and I suppose, a little impressed. However you're too late if you were here to stop me claiming this keep."

The leader of the band, a man in his thirties looked up unflinchingly at the woman. "You bested us before, but we are prepared, we cannot allow you to blight this land any longer, Overlord!"

"Ah, Vaggard, I see your crew is diminished. Three of your companions deserted you? And so what, you hope to beat me with Rasten and... an elf? Really, after how you failed them I'm surprised any of them listen to you." She shrugged "You know, I let you all leave last time because you were a nuisance that was easily moved out of the way, but if you insist on being a thorn in my side, I will make sure that this lesson quells any of you that survive it." Her cloak billowed behind her as she thrust her staff before her, the tool for her magics flashed as she began her attacks. Searing heat waves that turned the rain into steam flew to blast the stones. The three figures split, Rasten running to the side to take the stairs to the battlements, the elf, Ayden, raised the hilt of his sword as he jumped backwards, channeling his own magic. Vaggard leapt forward, dodging the blasts which were sent to follow him, vaulting off a low wall, the straw covering of which burst into flame despite the water. He made it to the battlements and straight into the fray.

Elisa clicked her tongue in frustration as she had to raise her staff to block the thrust, speaking out the words that caused it to hover from her hands and crackle with electricity, but Vaggard had expected the attack, baited it out. Ayden's magic caused a wall of earth to erupt from the stone between Vaggard and Elisa, just as the lightning struck from the staff.

"You're mine!" Rasten yelled, his code dictating that he give his opponent ample warning of his presence rather than striking them from behind. The sorceress was still imbued with her own sources of power and so her hand was enough to catch the giant blade that Rasten wielded, but this too was all according to their plan.

"Quinn! Now!" Vaggard shouted to the sharpshooting girl. A specially tipped crossbow bolt shot out from the tower behind Rasten, soaring over the overlord's head and exploding. The

wall of earth was enough to prevent Vaggard taking a hit, and while the staff was made of stern stuff, the force sent the implement flying away toward Ayden.

“You dare?!” Elisa yelled, snapping the blade in her grip. The blademaster staggered backwards and Elisa ran through the shards of metal, her other hand grabbing Rasten by his tabard and holding him over the walls. “My attacks may not be able to harm you, but let’s see you manage a fall from this cliff.”

A second bolt fired from the tower aimed at Elisa herself as the shooter tried to save her team-mate. Though like the rain, the bolt bounced off the air on reaching the sorceress, deflected harmlessly away. Vaggard however, leapt over the earth-wall and dived forward, his attack succeeding as his blade thrust forward, piercing through the sorceress.

“What?! H-how?!” She said, her hand releasing Rasten, but rather than throwing him free, as she had intended, he was close enough to grab the battlements. She snatched the point of Vaggard’s sword in her hand, trying to snap it or force it backwards, ignoring the pain, but with his grip she couldn’t push it out. Instead she spun, throwing a savage backhand to Vaggard’s helmed head. He fell from the battlement towards the courtyard, landing heavily on his shoulder, his hair spilling free and quickly becoming drenched in the downpour.

Light glowed to the side as Ayden gripped the staff, his own mind occupied in a war against the primal forces that fuelled the tool’s power, their whole gambit relied on keeping her distracted long enough, but she’d noticed and was stalking closer.

“You think I was abandoned?” The weakened Vaggard yelled. “Those you don’t see just claimed that accursed fountain of yours. And it’s all thanks to your daughter.”

Elisa’s eyes grew wide with rage at that last comment, and she stalked over to Vaggard, pulling his sword from her own body she brought it double handed over her to finish him.

The flash from behind showed that Ayden had done his part, the head of the staff fractured and broke. “It’s over witch!” Vaggard cried, and a third bolt was loosed, this one struck true, lodging in the back of Elisa’s shoulder. The shield, gifted to her by the focus of the staff had been broken. She’d gone two decades, untouched by any manner of projectile, and was stunned at the impact. Before she could finish her stroke, a second missile, the hilt of Rasten’s broken blade, flew into Elisa’s hands, knocking the blade she held free. The honour-bound swordmaster having managed to pull himself up that same second.

Vaggard pushed himself forward, catching the hilt of his falling sword as it spun toward him and lunged straight through Elisa’s heart. She glared in pure rage and defiance as she saw at last what it was that had let him best her. Vaggard’s pupils had changed since they last met, and she knew what that meant. “So... you went to *them* for a blessing, just to destroy me. How pathetic.”

The dreaded overlord Elisa let out one last gasp, before her eyes clouded and her body weakened. Vaggard himself collapsed in exhaustion, but he had won... they had done it, they had saved the world, the cost to him could come later. It didn't matter...

13: Stressed

Author's note. Warning: This one gets a little political. For those who want nothing to do with that, I understand, and advise you to skip this one. That said, if you do read, and anything in the following sentence upsets you, maybe it's best you skip all my content from here on.

Black Lives Matter. Trans Rights are Human Rights. Love Thy Neighbour.

It was everywhere on the news, once again. How many more times would it happen, how many more times will we wake up to see the rights of friends or ourselves shattered by the ignorant and the hateful who stay in power through brutish threats, arrogant lies and blatant cheating?

The world hadn't gone crazy overnight, but the slow decline was bubbling under the surface, and when just a little more heat is added it flares out of control. When outrage sparked, people campaigned for change, allies and those affected both working together to spread awareness, for in most things sheer ignorance was the greatest enemy. When people could see the fellow they were arguing with was just another person, living their own life, how quickly many barriers broke. Yet, when the news turned away, considering the story old, it was quick for the masses to abandon those devoted to a better cause and forget the whole thing had happened.

There was often no lasting freedom, not really. When steps were taken toward a future that would allow everyone to live in peace, in a better life, it normally meant that someone else would find a way to twist it, or outright expunge the very policy to step firmly back behind the start line. It hurts, deeply, when the work many have campaigned for years over is reset in one night thanks to a monstrous figure who only thinks of himself. He had his own prejudices and had no intention of changing them, but everything he did was a show for his zealous supporters. Those who had twisted a code of morality and purer being to fit their inhumane and twisted ends.

They dug until they found a mistranslation or a piece of information that supported their claim when taken out of context. Ignoring the bigger picture and threatening violence on any who pointed out that their approach was antithetical to what the full story taught. These misinformed abusers turned people against them, but also made targets out of the honest folk who did follow the code.

They'll never listen, they'll blindly follow where their zealotry takes them. But that doesn't mean anyone of us should stop questing for a world where we can live the way we are, without having to hide ourselves out of fear.

14: Running Out Of Time

Heath, the grey wolf, tapped the steering wheel impatiently, staring up at the lights. He had to get to the chemist's soon! Not only was closing time approaching, but the very purpose for his expedition was equally time sensitive.

The light changed, and he sped up, the road blessedly clear outside of that one obstacle. He found a space as he turned into the parking lot, pulling quickly into it and hopping out of the car and then dashing for the drug store on the corner. His heart leapt as he saw a squirrel, the lead chemist, walking towards the door, about to flip the sign from open to closed. He waved his hands, guilt sparking when the clerk saw him. Heath worked in retail himself and despised the kind of customer who came in one minute before closing, but at least he had purpose.

He burst into the shop, looking for the medication he needed and shoved his way past the squirrel. "S-steady on, sir!" The beleaguered fellow said, but Heath wasn't listening, he put the medicine down on the counter as soon as he found it.

"Just this, please. Terribly sorry I'm so late, j-just this and I can get going." Heath said, his claws tapping on the surface before him. The squirrel deliberately took his time walking around to the counter, a grumpy expression on his face that he wasn't even trying to hide behind the 'Customer Is Always Right' smile that his manager had tried to drill into him.

"Right that'll be.." He looked at the medicine, and now the squirrel understood the wolf's desperation. "Oh, uh, if you need some, take it first, pay after!"

"Thank you, thank you thank you!" The wolf said, lifting the bottle and fighting the lid to get it open. The squirrel had poured a glass of water for him which he took, counting out three pills and swallowing them. Heath gasped, relief flooding him. "Oh gosh, thank you. I was sure I had a bottle left at home but I couldn't find it, and it's ... that time, you know?" He said, chuckling nervously.

The squirrel nodded. "That's seventeen fifty, then." He said. The wolf pulled out his wallet placing twenty five on the counter.

"Keep the change, you've earned it and my gratitude." Heath said, smiling.

"Very kind of you sir." The squirrel replied.

Heath turned, taking the bottle and walking toward the door, when he suddenly stopped... oh no. He looked at the bottle. It took thirty minutes to work, he was sure he'd had that much time left.

His body started to creak as he tried to hurry outside, but too slow. The sudden twinge he felt knocked him to one knee. His fur started to thicken at a rapid rate, muscles bulging outward from his previously meagre physique. His shirt and pants both struggled to contain it and the pain in his feet made him panic more. He kicked off one shoe in time to save it, but the other tore open as his thickened claws ripped out. A ripping sound filled the air, too, as the shirt and his trousers split into rags.

The werewolf genes that his family tree had picked up many generations ago had kicked in. When the transformation finished, and he buried his face in his palm out of shame, at least his boxers had stretched without ripping.

"Uh... sorry." Heath said, meekly. The squirrel was trying to be polite, but couldn't help glancing constantly at the now transformed wolf. "Uh... I'd better go." He said, slipping out.

He was too flushed in shame to think clearly. Even though such an occurrence was understood and seen just as an embarrassing incident at worst, thanks to how many strange and mystical creatures lived in the city, he chided himself on forgetting to stock up on meds. He made it back to his car and then sagged. Like this he was far too big to fit into the passenger seat. He went to the boot, opening it up to pull out a spare set of clothes that he kept there, just in case such an emergency struck. He'd have to wait a while.

Even if the meds started in thirty minutes, it would be at least another hour before he was back to his normal size, and it was dangerous to drive while changing. He reached into his car, struggling to fit his shoulder in far enough to reclaim his phone, and then looking for somewhere to sit and wait it out. At least he'd remembered to charge that.

15: Discovery

Having a supremely long tail had been something Lex had struggled with growing up. Other serpents usually had only one or two meters of tail where he grew up, and as if knowing that, his tail was only flexible for the first metre. After that the extra length hung limply. The cobra only found others like him when he turned twenty, moving to one of the more bustling cities to complete his studies.

He was an average build, with shining black scales, mottled flecks of grey and white spread around, and the colouring over his belly was started in a deep pastel blue which grew darker still when it reached under the hood that spread to cradle his face. He'd learned to live with his tail, and was more than content to accept his differences. It meant he had to be careful around doors, as he would need to wind his tail up around his arm, and pull it through to prevent accidents.

He'd also need to arrange it around him when he worked, though the campus he had gone to after leaving compulsory education had areas for all manner of others, allowing him to find room to sit without constantly feeling that he was intruding. Things finally started to change when his best friend, a giraffe by the name of Simon, was excitedly telling him about a new place he'd found.

"It's a magic store! Like, you know, weird enchanted things! A living brush, mopping the floor on its own. Cool looking liquids in pots. You name it!" Simon had babbled.

Lex smiled at his friend's energy, but didn't really see the point. Magic wasn't exactly common, but neither was it mega rare. Most shops however just had mastered a few illusions to make their wares look better, rather than anything substantial, and he said as much to Simon.

"You don't get it. Here... I'll give you a hint. Look what I can do!" The giraffe said and bent his neck around to form a loop. Lex stared, Simon had struggled to get into any room that didn't have a high ceiling without stooping significantly, and he'd never exhibited this level of flexibility.

"Okay, I'm interested, let's go see!"

The store had been every bit as impressive as he expected, and the figure running the place had watched Lex with keen interest, seeing the inert dragging tail in particular. She gave a small bow of greeting to the new customers, nodding to her assistant to take over while she rushed to the back room.

Minutes later she returned, relieved to see that Lex and Simon were still browsing, having a good time relaxing in the demonstration floating seats, soft cushions made to float by an enchanted ring that each was spellbound to rather than needing wooden or plastic frames.

"Excuse me, dear customers." She said, interrupting them.

"Oh, sorry, s-should we not be on these?" Simon said quickly rising.

"Please, relax if you wish! I am Mallory, the owner of this shop, and I wanted to share something that I thought might interest your friend in particular." She brought out a small glass bottle, a sip of liquid swirling in it.

"What is that?" Lex asked, looking a bit warily.

"A potion, I will cut to the point. Sir, is your tail usually like that, limp and weighty?"

The cobra shuffled a bit defensively on the seat. "Yes. What of it?"

Mallory shook her hand to placate him again. “Your friend here, I recognise, he took a draft of one potion that made him more flexible. I don’t wish to offend you or insult you, but... this tincture would allow you to use the full length of your limb.”

Lex wasn’t sure about it, it all sounded too good to be true. “And, what’s the catch.”

Mallory nodded. “Prudent of you to ask, but fear not. The catch is that this tincture would only last for five minutes. However, this is a business, so consider it a sample. If you like the effect I could propose not a potion, but a spell that would last until someone purposefully removed it.”

Simon leaned his neck down, using the excessive flexibility again to be at eye level. “It’s kinda how I got this cool ability. Though mine is just a potion, for now. Wasn’t comfortable with the idea of keeping it for too long.”

He hadn’t needed too much persuasion after that, being able to cope with something and tolerate it didn’t mean he would reject a chance to change things. The potion had worked almost instantly, his tail had always been sensitive to touch, but being able to move it and lift it up felt as cathartically relieving as a long morning’s stretch.

He’d spent the first three minutes just staring in wonder, marvelling at the way it swished around at his direction, working just as he always thought it would if it only could. At Mallory’s suggestion he had tried reaching with it, and using the tip to see how dexterous it was, and then, his time sadly came to an end and the tail flopped back, piling on itself, but there was no disappointment in Lex’s eyes, only excitement at what he could do with it.

In only a few months he’d mastered the tail, at least when it came to manipulating it and using. Even though it meant more changes to his lifestyle, it was far preferable to having extra weight dragging behind, and he was soon able to lift and hold it off the ground entirely, which in turn allowed the rough callused base to slowly recover and soften.

“Simon!” He said, barging in on his friend, now room-mate, one day. “The magic shop has a sale going on! Including your potion!”

“Whoa! Let’s go- wah!” Simon said, interrupted as Lex’s tail shot forward, coiling up over his body as the cobra excitedly ran off. He only realised that Simon hadn’t been so much running with him as forcibly dragged along due to the looks he was getting from strangers on the streets. Laughing nervously he set the giraffe back down on the floor.

“Uh, sorry. Guess I’m... still learning how to control it.” His subconscious was still able to use the tail more than he meant, but he was learning to behave better. Simon however was swaying softly, dizzied by the sudden tug and tumble approach.

“I-it’s all good. Just some warning next time.” He straightened himself out, smoothing his wrinkled clothes a little. Though, it was kind of a comfy hold, he mused...

16: Angry

The clock ticked, each second that the heavy hands counted made the white wolf more bitter. Gemini still swallowed his impatience, his face masked with a calm smile for the one attendant who was waiting at the door.

He hated the lizard he was waiting for with a fiery passion that only grew as he waited, but he’d mastered the art of showing the best emotions regardless of the tumult he felt inside. The bastard baron lived in a mansion this palatial and still didn’t offer his guests so much as a warm drink?

Agonising minutes passed before the door opened and the lizard stepped through.

“Ah, sorry to keep you waiting... I have just realised I don’t know your family name, what should I call you, Miss..?”

“Hmm, I discarded my family name years ago, it’s just Gemini.” The wolf replied, making no attempt to correct the lizard on his gender. propriety declaring he rose to greet the master of the house.

“Oh? To what end?” the lizard pressed.

Gemini smiled pleasantly, his family had never given him anything he’d wanted to keep. The curse of being born the runt of an already unlikable family. But of course this noble couldn’t understand why someone would want to discard a name. After all it was probably his name that gave the lizard everything he’d had. Instead he laughed it off, waving his hand. “Come now, Baron, let’s not waste your valuable time on such trivialities. May we instead move to discuss business?” Though his thoughts carried on. ‘And why I had to come here in person when Della could be here suffering instead of me?’

“Ah yes, well Mi-.. Gemini.” The man seemed perplexed at not having a surname or title to deal with, it must be that rare in his social circles. “You are the owner of ‘The Painted Wolf club, yes?’”

“Owner, manager, sometimes even showstopping star.” He said, preening, making himself seem vain and egotistical while wondering where this line of discourse was going.

“Oh, splendid. I wish to use your venue for a fundraiser, you see. I am willing to tell all my friends about your wonderful establishment as recompense. So, do have the place ready by the weekend, yes? I’d like it cleared of the rabble on Saturday and then set up for us by Sunday.

Do see to it won't you?" The lizard said, turning and walking to the door, as if everything was decided like that.

"Your pardon, Baron." Gemini started, keeping his temper from exploding by the skin of his clenched teeth. "But should we not discuss the finances involved in such a venture. Weekends tend to be the most popular time, and it sounds like you'd want even the private rooms empty. Which, given they were all well booked might cause some consternation with my clientele."

"Oh? I was unaware you were hosting anyone of the peerage." He said, turning with a raised brow.

"We are not." Gemini said, bracing himself.

"Well then clear them out! Really, I would think that obvious." The baron said, making to leave.

"And remuneration?" Gemini insisted again.

The baron sighed heavily. "As I said, I will tell my friends all about your place and I'm sure they will be eager to dote upon you with a donation in future. Now I do have a pressing engagement, my daughter's piano recital."

Gemini felt the rage bubbling in him, his knuckles tensing within the long obscuring sleeves of the garment he wore. Though instead a bubble of calm burst, spreading its influence through him as his mind quickly deduced a way that would satisfy the wolf. "Oh, baron, you simply must permit me to invite her to the fundraiser too, a qualified pianist would be a joy for the ambience."

The lizard puffed up his chest. "Very well, Gemini. My steward will handle anything else."

And like that he left.

The wolf said his goodbyes to the attendant in the room, walking out gracefully and calmly. Although he was slated to lose two days of business simply for the promise of exposure the wolf had his own plans to turn it into a profitable venture. The baron and his guests would doubtlessly wish they'd offered money when their visit ended, and the thought excited the wolf as he considered what came next...

17: Bored

A direct message interrupted Zheil and she tapped a few keys to read it.

[hi]

Oh for... she knew the sender, and she had already predicted how this conversation would go.

[Heya~.] She replied, adding a bit of grammar and flair to make it seem more alive.

[how r u?]

Well, so far it was exactly as expected. [Oh, you know, doing well enough. Yourself?]

[bored]. And there it was!

[Ah, sorry to hear that. A bit busy today, have too much to do] She had somehow gathered several friends like this, well, perhaps contacts was the more apt term. She always felt self conscious, that maybe it was her fault she reacted so negatively. Though these same people never seemed to feel the need to put any effort in, and the first five minutes of conversation was a back and forth like this, that suddenly dumped all the energy on her to carry it onward and entertain them.

She'd made the mistake many times of admitting she wasn't busy, and thus when they invited her to hang out, often via some program with virtual avatars, she couldn't exactly decline without fearing she'd hurt their feelings. Then she'd go there, try her best to carry a conversation on her own, and end up just as bored as the person was when they reached out to her.

The response came back a good five minutes later, he was probably talking to someone else at the same time, likely telling every friend he was bored in the hopes of a bite.

[...oh.] he said, and then went offline. The wolf ground her teeth, lowering her head into her hands. It seemed so manipulative, so guilt-tripping.

She didn't want to confront them, she didn't want to deal with this, to seem like an asshole by cutting someone off for striking up an innocuous conversation. But the guilt that she felt when she was unable to satisfy people because she wanted to spend her time otherwise ate at her.

She glanced across the room, seeing her housemate's coat and thinking of her. Ofenna wouldn't have these problems, she'd just delete the person from her list and move on. Surround herself only with the few people of tested quality rather than the many hangers on who had seemed fun and good on a first meetup.

Zheil sighed, it was easier for her to simply appear offline, or just not log in, and that meant making it harder for the friends she wanted to spend time with. Even though some of her closest friends could be indecisive, like she was herself, they could chat lightly while deciding if they wanted to actually get up to anything, and if not, there were no hard feelings.

Maybe the problem was with her inability to remove these people from her life out of fear they'd be upset, but even so, she cared a bit too much about how others viewed her. She did have things to do, so she set her status as invisible, stuck her head down, and continued. She'd think about it tomorrow.

18: Innocence

The adolescent green dragon burst through the cloudbank, charging through the air as fast as his wings would take him, his eyes flashed with a fury he wished to unleash on those who would dare steal from his family.

Thieves had come and robbed his mother's nest while the cave had been empty. Three eggs taken in the process, and he meant to bring them back and bring justice to those who took them. He was alone, his mother mourning and his father keeping her company. All his siblings had moved to further reaches to secure their own domains, so it fell to him. Luckily, he knew enough to pick up the trace and follow the path to the thieves domain, the only likely place in the whole region.

The town spread out before him, and from the tents and awnings gathered outside the gate, he could tell that a merchant's caravan was visiting. The thieves likely meant to sell the eggs on and then they would be spirited away beyond his reach, well, not today!

The dragon landed in the middle of the camp, startling the local populace. "Where are the eggs!" He bellowed, rearing up and glaring fiercely at the scurrying shapes.

The town's watch, as pitiful as it was, had assembled quickly, advancing on him, though with weapons all sheathed. Wisely, they weren't looking to escalate the situation. "S-settle down now!" A voice called from the stalls as a wealthy looking ball of fur- no, on inspection just a fat man in a flowing fur cloak, waddled forward. "Please tell me you come here in peace, and not to pillage or burn our tents. We are but humble tradesmen!" The man said, protesting. "I-I am Shnol, the leader of this caravan, please, if you have aught to say I would love to hear it."

The dragon leant closer, flashing his teeth in a snarl. "I asked you already, where are the eggs?"

Shnol looked around, smiling nervously. "E-eggs? We only have the kind from livestock. Is... that what you are after?"

"Don't play games with me!" The green scaled serpent bellowed, slamming one claw into the ground.

"Sir! We must ask you to keep peaceful and quiet if you're visiting our modest town." A voice rang out clear from the gates. All the town's folk's attention was drawn to the speaker, who was flanked by the members of the watch and wearing the uniform they did. Identical, but for a

feathered badge on her breastplate and a half cloak flapping behind her shoulders. “If you’re here with good reason I must ask you to be quieter about it, but if you’re going to make a disturbance we might have to ask you to leave before things get messy. Alright?”

Her hand rested nonchalantly on her sword’s hilt, but it made the message rather clear.

The dragon puffed up his chest indignantly. “You are harboring thieves, maybe these merchants, who have stolen dragon eggs from my mother. You are to return them at once.” He opened his mouth to make a threat, but then thought better of it.

“Right, see, was that so hard. Corporal, you go find the mayor. Also, take some of the lads and make them ask anyone you see about eggs, alright?” She said, jerking her head to dismiss them to the town. Her pose relaxed further as she turned back to the dragon. “And if we find these thieves, we’ll be sure they are properly punished.”

“I am not so sure about that, but I will wait for the villains to be found first.”

The watch captain’s expression grew harder but she said nothing to the dragon. “Alright, merchant, you and your caravan can get back to business, nothing to gawk at here. Right?”

The dragon and captain watched each other with distrust, almost frozen in place while the world slowly returned to action around them. It was a good while later before one of the watch, an out of shape man who was already sweating and huffing just under the burden he carried, returned. He bore three large large ovals that he put down gently on the ground. “Is this them, sir?” He asked his captain in a hushed whisper, noticing that the dragon’s anger was rising and he was already leaning forward to sniff at the eggs.

“Well, dragon, are these they?” The captain asked, her own eye shifting to the pair of brothers who were shifting unevenly from foot to foot in front of the corporal and the disapproving look of the mayor.

“They are, bring me the thieves.” He growled. “I wish to have words with them.”

“Well you two? Don and Mark, isn’t it? Not like you lads to be stirring up trouble.” The watch captain said, putting herself between them and the irate reptile, with her back turned to the dragon. This made him glare down at her all the more. She slipped forward, laying her arms around both of their shoulders and marching them closer to the winged beast. “Right, looks like you have some explaining to do.” She said, not stepping away or releasing them.

The dragon’s claws tensed, he itched to swipe at them in righteous anger, but he dared not attack while the captain might get harmed... ah, that was her goal then. Using herself to protect her townsfolk. He growled a deep throaty rumble to cow the men who hadn’t stopped fidgeting since they got there.

“W-we were exploring the hills, you know how we do, captain.” Mark started.

“Then, we came across a few caves, the kinds that stories get told about, of riches and wealth.” Don added, gasping as he realised he was digging himself deeper. “N-not to take anything! You know! Just to see.”

His words weren't doing much to sway any of the listening audience. Mark tried to salvage it. “He's telling the truth, we saw some signs that dragons had lived there. But, b-begging your pardon, none of the signs looked recent. And well, there was no treasure, only these eggs.”

“So you stole them to sell and live like kings.” The dragon concluded, teeth pulling back.

“N-no, sir! We, well, dragons always live surrounded by mountains of treasure! We guessed they were dragon eggs, but given the rest of the place, we thought they were abandoned. Still, we left them be until we went back two days ago. We don't know the first thing about raising em, but we thought they'd been abandoned!” Don insisted again, voice pleading and head bowed. He probably would have been prostrate if the captain hadn't been holding him up.

“Then, you sighted them before?” The dragon asked, perplexed.

“Yes, sir, about two weeks ago. Did you live there? We didn't know! Honest! We thought th-the-.”

The captain interrupted by squeezing their shoulders forcefully. “They're good lads, though not the brightest. They probably mean it. So, before we talk about retribution, let's make sure your eggs are nice and safe, yes?” The captain said.

The dragon gave them an inspection, but they looked pristine, when he was satisfied he turned to the two men. “And the thieves?”

“Do they look like hardened criminals to you, lad?” The captain asked. Finally letting go of them to push them forward, as the tension had slipped out of the air.

“I am not sure I wholly believe their tale. But no, they do not seem morally broken.” He replied after some consideration.

“Then we're sorry to have made you come out this way, as a gesture of good faith, and means of apology, I'm sure these lads will happily help with getting the eggs home.” The captain added, looking at them with an unamused smirk.

“No! They are not to touch them!” The dragon said, fire returning to his eyes.

“Oh, I've got a better idea.” The captain said with a grin.

The dragon flew away from the village within the hour, the eggs nestled against his chest in a sling made from a finely spun warm fabric. More than enough to cushion them on the flight back home. The captain had proposed the sling's construction, and had volunteered the dubious

pair to pay for the cloth as punishment. The dragon argued that they be punished more severely, and so the watch captain suggested they be sent to the pillory in town square for a bit of mockery. Though that left him with no easy way to transport the eggs back, and thus he demanded the town supply him with the sling.

Despite the dragon's threats and posturing, the captain had been unmoved as to why they should spend town funds when they could simply guard the eggs while the dragon ferried them one by one.

And so, the green scaled creature had been forced to relent and return to the first punishment. Though he insisted on choosing one of the most expensive fabrics to add what he could to their penance. If they had been innocent and well meaning, he doubted he and his family would see them again. If not, then next time, he'd settle it the way dragons did...

19: Seeking Solace

The ocean's waves crashed mercilessly on the rocks, wind and rain spurring them onward. A single bead of light crept down from the lighthouse's gate, the master of the building bearing a lantern as he walked through the squall to the figure who stood on the cliffs, facing the uncaring waters. A heavy trunk dragged behind him in his free hand.

She didn't flinch from the rain, nor shiver in the cold, despite the pallor of her skin. Her skirts were plastered against her legs from the torrential rains. "Oh, Ina." The keeper sighed.

He had suspected as much, setting down his luggage, he threw the lid back and brought out a length of tanned waterproofed canvas, slipping up to the woman he gently rested the weight of the cloth on her shoulders. Her eye's twitched, mouth gasping as her hand went to cover one of his. "Roland?" She asked, turning, and then wincing when she saw it was not her husband beside her.

The keeper shut his eyes biting the flesh of his own mouth for strength as he stepped away. He dragged the trunk closer, then set it behind her. "Sit down, Ina, there there." He said, softly, soothingly. She made no motion, but when he gently pushed on her shoulders she followed as directed.

"You've been here all evening?" He asked. She didn't respond, she barely even blinked, looking like death itself. He knew what she was waiting for, just as he knew the odds it would arrive.

It was her way of coping, she never came out on a calm and warm night. Only when the weather turned bleak or cold, to stare out at the waves until sleep took her. His eyes lifted to his charge, the tip of the black stone spire flared with light, overlooking the only safe passage into the island's harbour.

"You could always come to the lighthouse instead, you know. It's warmer, dry, there's a port to view from if you don't mind sitting on the stairs..." He said. He'd made the offer almost

verbatim before, and every time, as with now, the woman had shown no signs of registering it. His heart bled for her, he pulled off his hat, setting the wide brim over Ina's head to shield her face from the rain, and tilting it up so her view was unobscured. She still didn't move. With a heavy sigh, he gathered another length of canvas, draping it over his own shoulders as he sat beside her on the trunk.

Ina watched the waves, her eyes on the horizon, now too dark to even be seen. The lighthouse keeper followed her eyes, he was used to being up all night, he could wait with her until she went home. Perhaps just his silent company could help bring the woman peace.

20: Close Your Eyes

"Try it again, close your eyes, take a deep breath." The ferret said, his fingertips lightly adjusting his son's arms as they waved slowly in the forms he had imparted. They turned together to the side, the father being careful to stay out of the way as he led his child's motions.

"Good, good, you're getting it, keep your breath even, feel the rhythm." They stepped in line, his son was not entirely confident in his footwork, even when his eyes were open, but his father had opted to focus on his timing. His touch faded as he backed away. "Keep your eyes closed, you're in the middle of the room, there's nothing to bump against, you have the whole space." He said, calm and encouraging while the music played behind them both.

His son missed a step and grimaced in the knowledge, his eyelids rising slightly, but his father pinched his finger to his thumb, gesturing for him to close them again. "For now, don't agonise over getting the motions right." He said when his son had resumed. "There's enough time before the big day."

The boy had come along well in his rehearsals, overall, but what had tripped him up most when he was with the other dancers was his propensity to watch them for the next move and correct timing. It was only a minor delay, but it showed to those watching with a keen eye, and if the boy was to be scouted he'd need to work on it.

With the sound guiding him and nothing else, the younger ferret focused on the tempo of the music, and his steps and actions matched it. "Yes, excellent." His father praised, stepping back in to correct his motions further and lead him away from the wall he was drifting slowly towards. He smiled, the music came to a halt, and his father applauded. "You did it almost perfectly this time. Now, deep breath, once more, from the top."

That had been two decades ago, that first time his father had him dance with his eyes closed, and from that method of practice, the boy had picked something more. He danced better with his eyes shut, and he turned that strength into a selling point of his performance. He would dance blindfolded to mesmerise audiences, and grew a reputation for the stunt from his early twenties. He practiced many dances, different rhythms, tempos and partners, always watching

himself in videos later and seeing from afar how to correct his motions or make them yet more captivating.

For tonight though he had a big show to perform. The music was already playing, he smiled to his fellow performers as they moved out on their cue, waiting with the blindfold in his hands. In a minute's time he would burst out and hear the applause, but he didn't do it for that, he did it to make his father proud as a thanks for the long years of support.

21: Winter Snow

Clear skies greeted the travellers as they walked up the path, though the sun meant the three figures faced a bright glare from the ground they walked on. Their steps left heavy footfalls in the drifts of thick snow that had formed over the last two days. The snowfall had paused for the moment, but it had been going long enough that the path before them was a pure blanket of undisturbed white.

"You sure she said we'd meet her out this way?" the leader said, a squirrel by the name of Rufus.

They turned, looking, there had to be some sign of their quarry somewhere.

"Hahaa!" A voice yelled from the side startling the closest of the three, a mound of snow exploded as the hidden snow leopard, dressed in white woolens, stood abruptly. Her hands held a pair of huge snowballs that she hurled at the furthest two, and then she scooped some more loose snow from the ground, leaping to dunk it over the third's head. The hapless hamster was caught enough by surprise to fall onto his back from the sudden attack. "Got you all!" She declared in triumph, her boot coming down on him as she posed dramatically.

"Yes, yes, very good, Sasha, now let Luke up." Rufus replied, shaking his head to try and clear his fur of the snow.

Luke, the hamster on the ground, was good natured about it once his shock fell away, but Rufus grumbled under his breath about the childishness of it all. "So, you've been waiting here long?" The squirrel asked, grimacing flatly.

"Well, a little bit, but I wrapped up warm and I couldn't resist the surprise... Where's Amy, didn't I see her with you?"

"Raaagh!" Came another yell, louder than the snow leopard's own and a huge tumbling mass of snow fell over her head and shoulders, some of it even travelling down her neck and making the snow leopard's tail ploof out as much as it could. Amy, the yak who had been with them, had snuck around behind, using the time of her friends' chatter to scoop up as much snow as she could carry and get some swift vengeance.

“Looks like someone’s more snow than leopard.” Rufus snarked as the leopard stood frozen in her own surprise before bursting out laughing.

“Oh, it’s good to see you all. Now, let’s get you to the lodge.” Sasha said, not making any effort to brush off the snow, wearing it with pride.

The lodge was only a short distance away, fifteen minutes or so on foot, and the four friends caught up with each other’s journeys here. Amy and Luke had travelled the furthest, meeting up with Rufus at the base of the mountain in a charming cafe that they told Sasha about at length.

“Huff, it sounds delightful, maybe I should have met you there.” Sasha said as she opened the door. The lodge was a cozily seated spot, just another short walk from a breathtaking view over the mountainside, there wasn’t much to it, a common room, kitchen, bathroom and then three bedrooms. “Alright, I’ll head to the bathroom first and get myself changed.”

The squirrel nodded. “I won’t need much time, so I’ll get the fire going in the lounge.”

Luke and Amy nodded before slipping into their shared room, giggling between each other as soon as the door was shut. “Oi, we can hear you out here, you know.” Sasha teased. “So don’t do anything you wouldn’t want us to hear.”

“We’re fine.” Amy called back cheerily, though Luke was likely protesting, suddenly. Sasha shook her head as she went to do as she’d said.

They got together annually for New Year’s Day, spending a few days on either side of it. Last year they’d stayed with Rufus whose house had been promised snow. That had excited Amy in particular, she had never encountered it in the flesh. However the week went by with only rain and overcast skies, and so, to ensure she saw some next time Sasha had organised where they were staying for this holiday.

She already predicted that they’d spend most of the time indoors in the lodge itself, but still, on the off chance they were all feeling adventurous there was so much to do and so much freedom to do it. The snow leopard ran the bathroom tap for a few seconds to make sure the water had been heated for long enough, and then slipped into her room to grab what she needed.

Despite his grumbling, Rufus gave her a curt friendly nod as she crossed over. It was going to be a fun holiday, and she was going to make sure to have even the dour squirrel smiling by the end of it!

Ofenna and Zheil had many things in common that made them well suited as housemates, but they had plenty of differences that were often quite contrasting.

Ofenna sat in the cafe, sitting by a window on the second story, nursing the mug between her hands as she smiled, her gaze turned toward the busy streets. Zheil's attention was buried in the laptop on the table in front of her, the drink she'd ordered sat half emptied. Though they were out together, at a first glance one might think them strangers from how far apart they sat, not talking or seemingly sharing company.

Zheil often came out here, it had become her preferred spot to write on days like this and she would always offer Ofenna the chance to join her, even though she'd be burying herself in work. That was how it was for Zheil, having someone nearby her was enough for her to feel social and content.

Ofenna however preferred an all or nothing approach. If she was to socialise she wanted to commit to it, if she wanted to do other things she'd prefer to be left to her own devices. Nevertheless she was trying something new with the wolf. The cafe was a newly opened place, still gaining clientele, which meant that the floor was mostly empty. Most people were more interested in take out anyway. The lioness kicked her feet gently in time to the music that she was listening to while her friend worked, it was a comfy spot in all.

Ofenna's phone flashed as a new message arrived, she looked down, it was Lex, a snake who she'd met and had a few encounters with, all of which were pleasant enough that just the thought of spending time with him broke down her usual barriers and resistant outlook. She keyed in her reply getting a tongue in cheek response over how prompt it was, given her usual speed of was often ten minutes or more. She chuckled as she sent back an equally snarky retort before slipping to her feet and moving over to Zheil's table.

The wolf held up her tail, the gesture familiar to Ofenna as a request for her to wait just a moment more. Her fingers struck the keys at a fast pace as she finished the spool of thought that she was weaving into place, and then let out a soft breath. "What's up gurl?" She asked the lioness, looking up cheerily.

"Lex sent me a message." Ofenna said, waving her phone lightly.

Zheil smiled and nodded, "Ah, well, thanks for joining me, it was an honest treat! So, going to meet him are you?"

"Actually, I told him where we were, invited him here. You cool if he joins us or you want us to bounce?" Ofenna asked in reply.

The wolf's eyes lit up as she nodded. "Oh I'd be more than thrilled to meet him, and that gives you someone to talk to while I'm working!"

Ofenna smirked back, her hand reaching to tap Zheil's cup. "I'll wait for him downstairs, give you some minutes to focus just in case we end up being too distracting. Want me to fetch you something on the way back?"

"Oh, a refill of that! The chai here is fantastic." She said, swiping up the cup and downing the warm contents to not waste any of it.

The lioness nodded, slipping away and back to the cafe front. She could get used to a place like this, everything about the ambience sat well with her, though she wondered if it would last when the place grew a reputation and the tables filled up. Either way, for now she was content, keeping her friend company while staying detached. It was a strange thing, around anyone else, even Lex, she couldn't just sit there peacefully if there was nothing engaging on the cards. However, with Zheil, she was armed with the knowledge that she could slip away with no reason and receive no judgement if she grew bored. The simple freedom to go meant she was more willing to stay and just be.

She did wonder if Lex would be fine with sitting there in light conversation while a third party worked, but he'd seemed eager enough when she offered and disclosed just what he should expect. If she could introduce two friends and at the same time find a new way they could spend some time with each other, it would be fantastic.

23: Arousal

The stoat's body shook, white knuckled fist holding on to the object as the blood dripped from them. The gun fell from his hand, unfired, but still a weapon that had taken a life. Anger had caused him to act out of impulse, and the twitching, bludgeoned corpse on the floor roused a new feeling in him, fear.

A fear shared by the bluejay woman in the corner who stared up, gasping hysterically as her hands covered a face with wide, staring eyes. "F-forget you saw this, Tamsin, you must forget this!" The fellow yelled, backing slowly away. Just as he reached the door, it burst open, sending him stumbling forward. He hit the floor, his face landing in the pool of blood and matting the fur on his cheek as he slid across it. Both he and the woman let out a squeal of surprise as figures walked into the room, wearing the same staff uniform as the stoat.

Two of the large bouncers grabbed the fallen stoat while one muscled toward the woman, then, reading the tone of the room and feeling her emotions were that of a victim, he paused, staying back but keeping watch.

"What is going on in here? This room was not booked for such passionate-" A smooth voice started in an amused tone, and then stopped. It belonged to the manager of the club, the short white wolf, Gemini, who walked into the room, he knelt gracefully, his hands reaching

toward the spreading pool of blood but drawing back before he touched it, mindful to keep his long flowing sleeve away from it.

He took in the whole scene, the body on the floor, one of his top clients, a badger who came here almost every other week and tipped well. The woman in the corner was likely his date for the evening, maybe a business partner, but the relationship was not his concerns. Finally, the stoat with the bloody hands and face, one of his own employees, who had killed the man in a fit of rage.

“Boss! I... it’s-... I-!” The stoat started and Gemini rose, almost pirouetting as he delivered a backhanded slap across the stoat’s unbloodied cheek sending him staggering back into the bouncer who then held him steady.

“You would dare call me your superior when you have brazenly broken every rule we hold dear? Going so far out of control as to assault a man, in my house, and maybe even worse?” The wolf and his entourage looked down, and Gemini’s eyes closed when he realised that it was, indeed, far worse. Gemini’s outrage moved from hot blooded and open anger to a sudden cool regard, the wolf pulled himself up to his full height and filled the room with his presence despite the fact that he was the shortest by almost an entire foot.

“Ellis, call the authorities, then round up some of the stronger bellied staff to make sure no one enters the room until they get here. Jennings, take our foolish friend, wash him up, and then guard him in my office until I come for a chat.” The wolf ordered, and his employees stirred to their actions.

“Wait, sir! I didn’t me-.” The stoat began. Gemini turned, his face passive, though the eye that met the stoat’s froze the complaint in his throat. He waited for Jennings and the stoat to have left before he went to Tamsin’s side, his other bouncer stepping back to let him breeze by.

“Madam... dear lady. You’ve witnessed something terrible, but I need you to be strong for me. Soon the authorities will be here, and, as hard as it is, I will need you to relay what you saw to them. Can you do that?” He asked, his voice gentle and flowing. Her hand grabbed his and squeezed painfully tight, but he didn’t flinch, helping her slowly to stand.

“He... he...” she began, unable to speak, still rattled by the atrocity she witnessed.

“There there, let’s get you to a better setting, more fitting to someone of your elegant demeanour.” Gemini added in a whisper. She was hysterical but had gone into a dazed shock, following him along as he led her tenderly into one of the VIP rooms, with all the care and attention of a loved one watching out for a vulnerable elder.

The wolf spent the better part of the night shadowed by the investigators as he co-operated as best as he could. Showing all recordings, letting them have full access, keeping his patrons out of the way.

The stoat, a Mr. Clyde, had some past history with the bluejay and the badger, and the whole scene had been caught on camera. A sour discussion that had swiftly turned unpleasant. The act was seemingly impulsive, after all, the stoat couldn't have known who would be waiting inside the room he was on duty to serve that evening. Gemini was quite self-castigating, had he only adjusted the work rota differently, this whole thing would never have occurred!

The tiniest condolence that could be taken was that the bluejay had only been seeing the badger, not closely attached to him yet. It was all quite terrible, and the investigator put it down to a wild, tragic coincidence that the stoat's crush and his hated enemy both were in the same room and the tense atmosphere had led to this worst possible outcome.

As Gemini watched the car leave from the rooftop, the stoat inside, handed over to their custody for his eventual trial, he covered his face with a sleeve. To all outward appearances Gemini was appalled, ashamed and aggrieved, but behind that veil of fabric, he smirked. 'Wild coincidence' indeed, and what an equally wild coincidence that a far greater shadow benefactor of the club would move up in standing now that a certain badger had met an unfortunate end.

The wolf let his expression fall as he affected a shaky breath and excused himself, walking back into his private room in the club. He locked the door, begging to not be disturbed while he came to terms with the night's tragedy, but he slept quite soundly.

24: Show Off

The gates stood firm despite their battered appearance, scarred heavily during the lengthy siege. The army had been sent to claim this city a month ago.

The commanders of both sides were exhausted, the attackers disheartened by their lack of progress, the supposed assault had been a chance to prove themselves, after all. The defenders were equally morose, they knew it was only a matter of time until the supreme commander of the army outside their walls came, and when he and his reinforcements arrived, he feared the battle wouldn't take much longer.

A messenger hurried through the siege camp, reaching the main pavilion and kneeling down, holding a cross-the-chest salute. "Commander, one of Overlord del Mort's generals is here to speak with you."

The man stood up abruptly, his heart quickening. It could mean many things, his lordship might have grown tired and angry with their lack of progress, and if so, was this a

reinforcement or a replacement? “Show him in.” The commander said quickly, not a moment too soon as the elf who had arrived entered anyway.

“I must say, Reno, we had thought you’d have made it farther in by now, even if you were still fighting. But I come with glad tidings. I have arrived to break their gates for you.” He said, smirking arrogantly as he removed his hands from his pockets. Golden chains rattled whenever he moved, excessively ornamented as part of the egotistical trip he’d been on ever since del Mort had risen to power.

“Ah, Ayden the Glorious.” The commander said, chopping off that title would often mean rousing the elf’s anger, but keeping it pristine with a tone of reverence would conversely stroke his ego enough that he would be more lenient. “With you here we can definitely claim the city. Does this mean...?”

“Yes, our great master has finished his works elsewhere. Rasten is chasing other leads, or he would have come himself. Master del Mort will be here with those who aren’t otherwise occupied soon. Let’s have this city ready for him by then.” The elf said, he reached out a hand to shake the commander’s. He’d not come as a judge or executioner, merely to speed it all along.

The army had been rallied, prepared for one more attempt at the assault. But their presence was for what came after. The lone elf swaggered ahead of his troops, walking on a direct path for the gate. A warning shot flew from the ramparts striking several inches from him, but he didn’t even flinch, only stopping to shout.

“Those of you defending the wall, lay down and surrender. The less of you we have to kill the better this will be for the world.” Ayden shouted out, magic carrying his voice so that it was heard by all of the watchers.

They answered with a trio of arrows sent for him. All three projectiles burst into purple flame ten feet away from where he stood, the metal heads falling free from their shafts and missing their target. Another volley of more arrows fired out to the same effect, though one of the arrowheads was on the right line to drop toward the elf. Instead it merely deflected at the last instant as if striking an invisible shield.

“I tried.” He said simply, before his upper body took on a glow of gold and red. He drew his sword gently, pointing it ahead of himself while yet more arrows flew to no effect, and then he made a thrusting motion. The gold-red radiance spilled from his shoulders and down the blade, shooting out as a twined thread of light to strike the gate.

It cracked immediately, the coloured lance tracing every line it had formed and then the entire door exploded, raining sharp splinters on those stationed on the other side. The city’s mages had taken to the ramparts, concocting their own sorcery to throw upon the elf who was now strolling forward calmly, yet arrogantly. His chest puffed out as behind him the army burst

into a song sung through taverns the world over. A ballad describing the untouched might of the legendary hero, Ayden the Glorious.

He had been a noteworthy sorcerer and expert with the blade before he joined the armies of del Mort. But the new Overlord had graced him with further strength. The bolts of magic struck from on high. Ice, flame, lightning, all cascading towards him, and he danced a slow step, in time to the music, spinning his sword in the air and severing the spellcraft with his own arcane mastery.

The army at his back was symbolic for the moment, they would surge in and seize the city. But the lone elf would take down the entire defending garrison first, as all bore witness to his great deeds. To think, had the city fallen as quickly as they hoped he'd have lost his chance to add to his legend.

25: Pride

Sheytha was glad the day was cool, the crowds would have been insufferably close together if the sun had chosen to be punishing today. At the moment the tauren woman was on her own, and she took the time to simply watch the people go by.

“Ooh, ooh, here they come.” A nearby large elephant chattered excitedly, pointing toward the bend. His short fennec partner bounced on his heels to see, only for the elephant to lean down and scoop him upwards, raising him to see. They were at the back of the crowds, and Sheytha was happy to see that most of the larger creatures attending the parade had opted to stay at the rear-most rows to let the shorter species view the parade in full.

The only exception that Sheytha saw was one gorilla woman who was sitting on the ground at the front, with her own friends clustered around her, and she was hardly blocking views like that.

She turned her eyes to the bend, seeing a fresh wave of garishly dressed folks flanked by standard bearers. Their waving poles sported the blue pink and white striped flag. She didn't mean to eavesdrop on the chattering pair, so she was grateful when the crowd started up a louder cheer, and she joined in with her own deep voice. Sheytha understood that the elephant and fennec were friends with the marchers as several of them made a point of waving and making heart-shapes with their hands to the pair in the audience.

Someone made their presence known with a soft touch to Sheytha's shoulder, and she turned to see her two lovers. “Hey you two.” She said, accepting a bottled drink that the charr woman, Severa, held up for her.

“Nice space you picked out, Shey!” Theo, the lynx male said. He was the shortest of the trio, Severa was a good deal taller than the average person, though her bulky frame made her seem even bigger, but Sheytha was the tallest, towering over Theo.

She smirked down. “If it’s too far back, I can lift you up to see.” She quipped, nodding toward the elephant-fennec pair.

“Oh come on, I’m not that short!” Theo huffed in mock offense. He was easily able to see through the crowds without either of them dotting on him.

“Hells, if I fit in your arms I’d take that offer.” Severa said, jabbing Sheytha in the side with an elbow.

“I’ll give you a bridal carry when we’re home to make it up to you.” She said with a soft chuckle herself. They quietened for a moment, turning their attention back to the pride parade. They didn’t know anyone in it themselves, but that wasn’t going to stop them taking part in the event. After all, they needed cause to lift their spirits of late.

The three stayed until the whole of the parade had walked by, commenting between themselves on some of the outfits they saw. Sheytha in particular teasing them both by making them think how she, or they would look in certain pieces. “Oh stop it, you!” Theo said, giving Sheytha a friendly shove when she pointed to a fellow in provocative chaps.

“She has a point.” Severa mused.

“Remind me... who was going to cook for you two ladies tonight?” He said, trying to guilt them into dropping the topic. It didn’t work.

“Aww, if the little baby man’s going to be a baby, maybe he does need a high seat!” Sheytha teased lowering her arm. Severa reached down at the same time, on the same wavelength as her, and the two women scooped their man up into the air.

“Can you see it from up there?” Severa asked with a grin. The pair ignored his squabbling tone as he crossed his arms and huffed, though from the thinly concealed grin it was obvious he was just playing along with it, after all, he was the kind of man who liked a girl who could deadlift him one handed.

Eventually there was no more to wait for, and they left when the crowds started to disperse, opting to head home rather than to an after-party, and the charr got the carry she had asked for.

26: Sad

“I’m glad you came to me.” Were the first words Drevari uttered when she opened the door for the blue wolf. Zheil’s housemate was out of town and the blue wolf had just heard some

troubling news. One of her friends and supporters had been stricken by an illness and died. It was a hefty blow to Zheil simply because without that friend the wolf wouldn't be where she was in her career or even her mental maturity.

She'd spent the night restless, unable to think clearly or focus on her work even facing a loss of appetite. Part of her knew she wanted to call Drevari, one of the best friends she had, even if their get-togethers were often a bit more professional. The bat was, after all, a very busy woman with a packed schedule regardless if it was for her business or leisure. It had taken Zheil until late at night to decide she would go through with the call, and by then she had felt guilty about leaving it too late, so she had waited until the sun rose.

Even at that early time in the morning, the woman's ever present aide was the one to answer the call. It was almost enough to make Zheil's already indecisive self just pretend it was a wrong number and hang up, but she'd persisted.

When Drevari heard the summary from her assistant, she took the phone, holding it away as she simply told Cerise she knew what to do before she put it to her ear and spoke to the wolf.

Drevari promised Zheil that there was an opening for her that night, and the wolf's relief was palpable. Hearing the declaration, Cerise hopped out of room to make some other calls and cancellations to adjust Drevari's schedule, all to ensure that her employer's word rang true.

Zheil and Drevari met up that evening, and the bat could see from her eyes that Zheil hadn't slept for over a day. They went through to Drevari's lounge where Cerise had just finished setting out a few comfort-food style refreshments. The small cocker spaniel knew Drevari well, often able to anticipate what she would need, even if the bat didn't know herself. When it came to others her predictions were not always as absolute, and so she hovered by the door, a discreet distance away, quite happy to leave or stay.

"Come, Zheil, tonight we're having a girls' night, let us all just settle down and talk." The bat said, taking hold of Zheil's shoulder and guiding her over to one of the sofas.

In the end, Cerise was called over to stay and join them, all the entertainments they had on standby sat ignored. Instead the night was spent talking as the bat and dog both did their utmost to help encourage the wolf. She let out her feelings, and Drevari knew that for Zheil the best way to handle it was to speak about the departed friend.

Drevari listened, calmly and quietly, asking the right questions when Zheil fell quiet, and soon the wolf's spirits were lifted enough that the fatigue in her body took over, but not before they'd convinced some food into her. The wolf woman soon drifted to sleep on the sofa, and Drevari very carefully pulled herself out from under Zheil, waiting to be sure she was soundly asleep before heading away.

Drevari would have to make it up to the client she had to postpone, but even if it came to the worst outcome, it was a sacrifice she'd make any day for those who relied on her.

27: Jealous

Eshri huffed grumpily inside the cell, glaring in annoyance at the moon through the tiny window in the corner. The kobold had been on a treasure hunt, however it turned out that the treasure she'd been so reliably informed of by a colleague had not been some abandoned relic waiting for an intrepid explorer to recover it, but a quite current repository of someone's wealth. In retrospect, she felt set up, wondering if the one who had given her the tip had done it as a prank. They had competed in the past, after all.

At the moment she just stewed in jealousy. She was the best she knew at evading traps, making it through countless perils and dangers. Even when caught she could often wriggle out of them, but even so, it seemed every other treasure hunter had it better than she did. Her targets always turned out to be far harder than they should have been, or some other unlucky twist of fate would appear and snatch her victory away. If she had gone for the same items that some other fortune seekers had, she'd have been living in luxury, not needing to make ends meet with her tinkering.

Still, in the grand scheme of things, this wasn't that bad. This region's punishment for most crimes that threatened objects rather than people was a stint in the local dungeon cells. The most she had to endure was the occasional questioning through the cell bars as to whether the prisoner had heard of, or was responsible for some few items that had disappeared.

For her own crimes she'd been sentenced to stay for two weeks. The time passed dreadfully slowly, but eventually the last day's sun rose and true to their word, her cell was opened and she was escorted out.

She walked out into the sunlight, blinking from the contrastingly harsh rays, and stopped when she saw the noble whom she had been caught 'stealing' from.

Her stomach knotted as she feared her punishment was about to continue or get even worse, but instead he drew her aside. He was impressed by her skills in navigating to the treasure and wanted to employ her. Eshri smiled in relief, her interest was piqued. The offer was simple, she'd be funded handsomely if she would work as a tester for their traps, and with her own experience in tinkering, opportunities may emerge to help improve their designs too.

Maybe she shouldn't have been jealous. After all, while she often ended up in some conundrum or other, there was the occasional silver lining.

28: Give Your All

The virus still hadn't subsided, but there was reportedly less and less worry locally. Nationally things were still far less than ideal, problems were rising, yet public safety restrictions had been relaxed. Even though he had no intent on returning to his old life as if things were normal, Ewan had been procrastinating on one thing for far too long. It was time for him to start working on his body again.

Months spent in a lockdown had been the first thing, without a place to go as part of his routine, he had thought, optimistically, that he had even more freedom. He could work out when he wanted, fit it into his day as the day allowed, rather than having to squeeze it either side of work. However, in practice that had not gone well at all.

Ewan had kept up his regular habits for the first two weeks, some days he did a little less than he might have done at the gym, and soon he was skipping days. He realised the lack of structure was hurting, and that no amount of telling himself 'tomorrow I'll do it better' would work. Especially given that his employed work took up even more of the day than when he commuted and worked nine to five. He couldn't in good conscience claim that he'd been disciplined about staying in shape, so when a friend asked him how he was doing he confessed.

That friend was someone who went to the same spot before it closed and admitted he'd been struggling too, but had come up with a potential solution. He proposed that Ewan, himself, and a few other friends set up a group call where they'd work out in front of their individual cameras to keep it a communal activity and spur each other on. They'd tried it, though of the initial number two flaked out before the first call, one gave up due to his internet signal being distressingly poor, and one by one, the other participants all found reason or excuse to drop out.

No more, he had decided at last. He'd prepared a sheet of paper and had adopted a challenge, he'd even convinced his friend to join in and they had to report to each other if they had done their day's efforts. Places were starting to open up, and if he was going to start heading out of the house more frequently, he wanted to make sure his belt could sit just as tight as it had before.

Psyching himself up in the mirror, he prepared to push himself to the limit in his effort to return his physique to the picture of health.

29: Flirtatious

Ourodas, the great serpent, had used his strange talent to shrink himself until he was little more than a worm in size. He'd been following an anthro bear for a while, now, one who was seemingly both lucky and resourceful, though he hadn't figured out her purpose. The explorer was seemingly lost from her original path, having been chased through the forest by

many of the dangerous creatures that lay inside, even briefly snared by the mobile vines of some of the perilous flora, but she'd found ways to wriggle loose or strike back.

She'd had some near misses but seemed to have her wits about her, such as now where she stilled herself and fell silent just in time to avoid the notice of wicked fae creatures that lived here. They were dangerous creatures; those they didn't torment themselves they would often lead, or outright force, into a grim fate. Ourodas' own hunger was outweighed by his intrigue. Her success had him curious and he wanted to see how far she could go. There was only one other creature in the entire wood he considered on par with himself, and so he would bide his time and when the bear fell to something, he would swoop in and steal her for his own.

She'd stopped forging onward for the moment, having found a quiet copse with cover and shade. She'd scouted around the edge of it before finally returning after verifying there were no threats, and pulled out a notebook.

The serpent slid his ink blue body down the tree stump of the branch he had been resting on to get closer. The notebook was thick and well used, and taking desperate care to remain silent and stealthy, Ourodas drew close enough to be able to read what was being written inside.

It was a document about the wood's denizens! That explained a lot. So, she was less a traveller who was passing through here unknowing or unbelieving of the dangers, and more a field biologist. The notes she was writing were not just about what she had met, but also how to identify and avoid or even escape some dangers.

Ourodas realised now that it was likely she'd been here many times and escaped unharmed. However, he'd never met this creature before so perhaps he would be the end of the spree. A small part of him felt bad, if he devoured this creature in truth then all the knowledge she wrote would go to waste. He would see how she reacted, and then decide whether to end her life or just drain her for energy and release.

She reached into her bag, pushing aside a flask as she found what she was after and then in one swift motion she stood, turned, and shot a dart straight at Ourodas. The serpent was quick enough to dodge the shot, fleeing upwards into the branches. His pride bristled at that, his instinct to flee had kicked in at the sudden move and the bear seemed to be looking around for him. No wonder she'd got this far if that was her reaction time!

However, there was nothing quite like Ourodas in the Yonderwood, he still had tricks up his sleeve. Enraged at having been scared by such an innocuous threat, he decided he'd had enough of waiting. The serpent quivered as he shot quickly down to the ground and then he adjusted his mass and size to return to his usual resting state. The bushes around him snapped as he exploded outward in size, going from a few inches to over forty feet, and coiling swiftly inwards to ambush the bear before she could reload.

“Shit!” The bear said, raising her brows as she leapt over the first floor-dragging coil, hopped over another in the air, but there was just too much snake suddenly bearing down on her to keep it up, despite her surprising agility. A coil seized around her waist, curling as it shrunk in girth, to wrap several times, and then she was thrown back to the centre of the area, landing amidst her own supplies still wrapped inside the snake’s grip.

She’d kept her arms up, and so they remained free as she pressed into the scales, trying to push them off or tug herself out. To her credit she was also quick to move her arms from being snared whenever the snake tried. Yet he soon had her coiled from the chest down, letting her keep the arms she was so desperate to have free. He was certain she couldn’t escape him now.

Finally he brought his head round, meeting her gaze and smirking visibly. “W-well, that’s the look of an intelligent hunter, but you’re certainly not nng... a silkin.” The bear said, squirming still while fighting for breath. Ourodas wasn’t constricting her properly, but he was giving the occasional toying squeeze. The silkin she referred to were yet another breed of giant snakes, capable of speech, that hunted in these same woods. “Can you... rrfh, can you understand me?” She asked. There was a certain calm in her voice, not the usual panic of prey.

“Yes.” Ourodas replied simply before claiming the conversation. “I must say I am impressed by you. Navigating so many troubles as if you were born here, but alas, your luck couldn’t last.” He said, leaning closer. “Tell me, bear, you don’t seem frightened, do you think you’re safe?”

The bear just grunted dismissively. “Knew it was a perilous job, I’ve made my peace, no regrets, if anything here gets me then it’s just nature having its way. Of course I’d rather keep living, but I don’t fear. So, giant serpent, should I feel unsafe?”

The snake laughed slowly, menacingly. “Oh yes. I could crush you right here, swallow you in one swoop, I wouldn’t even need you unconscious for that. I’ve felt how strong you are, seen how fast, you cannot escape me, bear.”

“Bear sounds so informal, call me Meera. And while my acquaintance may be brief, do you have a name yourself?” She asked, seemingly unperturbed by his threats.

“I am Ourodas, little prey, now...” He locked eyes with her, using yet another inherent ability of his. His gaze carried hypnotic suggestions as he said. “Fear me!”

Her expression didn’t change, her pulse didn’t quicken, she quirked an eyebrow. Ourodas himself was perplexed. The only way his hypnosis failed was when his subject would never do such a thing. He sighed, perhaps this ‘Meera’ needed some time to realise how threatened she was. He squeezed with his body as his tail rose into the air, one more unique aspect of him blossoming into view as it split open, revealing a second maw that descended threateningly.

“Oh my, that’s impressive.” Meera wheezed on seeing it, even whistling appreciatively once she’d got a breath in.

“Excuse me?” Ourodas said, puzzlement clear in his tone.

“So, let me get this straight, Ourodas. You can change your size and seemingly against all logical possibility, your mass on a whim. All at once or piece by piece from how these coils changed. You have some kind of compulsion if you lock eyes? And you have a second mouth, though it doesn’t look like a head. You’re impressive.”

“W-what? Yes that’s correct, what of it.” He said irritably.

“You also like toying with prey, which, given the sticky feeling of this liquid...” She said as some of the drops from Ourodas’s frozen tail maw fell and impacted her shoulder. She’d already wiped it with a finger and was appreciating how it swiftly set, adhering to her touch yet retaining elasticity. “...means you like them squealing. Hunting isn’t just for your appetite, then?”

“What of it.” He repeated in a more frustrated tone. He didn’t know why he was conversing, he should just stuff her in one mouth or the other and be done with it.

“You’re strong, fast, intelligent... my, you might be the most impressive creature in these woods. And there’s even more to you, I’m sure of it.” The snake dropped his tail to the side. This was not going how he expected at all, and he would never admit as much, but the praise felt so sincere that he was moved by it.

“Oh, I see.” He said at last, coming to a different conclusion. “This is all for your book. What, do you expect to survive an encounter with me?”

“You’re certainly strong enough that you could snap me in half, as you say, but no, this isn’t me finding out about you for academic purposes, as useful a side benefit as it is to have heard this from you. I am genuinely fascinated!” Ourodas was confused by her words and his grip was slowly relaxing, subconsciously. Meera spoke up more “Do you have a lair for your use? Or are you nomadic? How do you protect yourself if you’ve eaten? I assume you can shrink to hide or grow to fight, but shrinking with someone inside you can’t be good for you.”

Her tone was very much phrased in getting to know him, and something else too. He paused, suddenly unfurling as he pulled sharply away. “Wait, are you flirting with me?!” He demanded. He was an apex monster to be feared, respected!

“Oh, no no, unless... would you like that? I would love to study and know more, of course.” She said, picking herself up and brushing herself off as if nothing had been happening at all.

“You know what? Forget this.” Ourodas said. His appetite had gone and even the sadistically playful motivation he bore had fled him. With no further word he turned, sliding into the woods.

Meera smirked, raising her book and turning to a new page. With the silkin she'd learned flirting was a quick path to stop all but the hungriest, the ones she met were narcissistic enough to take flattery as praise. Even so, to be let go by a silkin one had to bargain and plead and offer something better. It seemed this Ourodas was quite taken aback by sincere flirting. She wondered if it would work a second time, but from how quickly he left after stalking her for so long, she imagined he wouldn't hurry back. She scribbled her notes in short form, though, not wanting to linger. Some other intelligent denizens of the wood were spiteful enough to inform other hunters of viable prey, and she didn't want any further close calls today if Ourodas decided to give others her location. She gathered her things and prepared to return. Her appendices on the beasts of the woods were coming along nicely.

30: Flight

“Run and don't stop running!”

They were all trying to escape, all making their best attempts to flee the calamitous tide that devastated the world behind it. There was no other description for it. The line of chaotic energy pursued faster than any of them could move. Fire and ash one second then turning to scalding waves for the next only to shift into tumultuous thunder.

It washed over every fleeing figure and left nothing recognisable behind. The land was twisted beyond recognition. Buildings were reduced to rubble, ashes, or simple glazed craters. Wherever the grim tide washed there was nothing left behind to return to, any living thing erased with no traces at all. Above the tide, untouched by it, a lone figure hovered.

Even on the ground Mei Xiu was small, but so far away, only those who knew her intimately would recognise her. The anthropomorphic red panda had come from such humble origins a few years ago.

A simple woman who had needed to beg help from adventurers to defend her home in the woods. She had always been popular, for some reason, and while many others of the world stayed as they were, she moved onward and upward, enrolling at a magical academy, graduating and being posted to dangerous hotspots throughout the land. She even ended up helping the very same adventurers who had saved her family years later and became a well known hero of the world.

Those few out here who recognised her could only stare in horror and ask a raging sky “Why?” before the tide claimed them. She had been impish at times, maybe a little prone to

bullying others, but this destruction... no one could have predicted it from such a paragon of heroism.

The tide that she sent onward consumed everything in her path, but she wasn't laughing, she wasn't wielding this terrible energy for her own amusement. Neither was she wracked with anguish, instead it was as though she was disappointed.

None of them would know the reason for her actions, after all, there was no point in telling them.

The world she had grown up in had turned hollow in a single moment, it had seemed so vibrant, a place worth fighting for, to save from untold threats.

That was all before Mei had been enlightened to the real truth. This world had been doomed, all the adventurers had disappeared already a matter of days ago, and the truth she had been given told her that the entire planet would disappear in a few more hours, never to return.

She'd been told she was a 'fan favourite', but also her creator's most prized 'character', and given the world was already to be taken offline, he had rewritten parts of her code. To start, he had given Mei Xiu all the powers that had normally been reserved for the developers. Not even the players had had such unrestricted access.

The developer had edited her biography to state that she knew everything about her world, most notably that it had all been part of a game for entertaining players. Every adventurer she had met had been an avatar, every day she lived a fake lie, and finally, the developer had given the limited AI that had fuelled Mei Xiu the knowledge of its own 'developer powers'.

That knowledge had been the very thing that had led Mei to this conclusion. If her world was going to vanish without so much as a fanfare, she would give it a memorable apocalypse instead.

Mei Xiu stood alone before long, the only survivor of a blasted world. The destruction had been her testing out the developer's powers to amplify her own magic to untold levels, but there was one more thing she wanted to test. She closed her eyes, her creator, the developer, had even permitted her to edit her own details, and almost as a joke, she had amended it to say she was all powerful, and all knowing.

She hadn't expected it to work.

The basic thought processes from the strings of programming had been immediately replaced with full, myriad thoughts, emotions... life. As she so suddenly became a living being the weight of the lives she had taken crashed against her and the red panda fell to her knees, staring up at the sky, her body shook with revulsion at what she'd done to the world even as a

logical response nagged at her mind, they were all fake creations like she had been, why pity strings of data and mesh models?

She braced herself as she stood, trying to come to terms with it all. “Are you watching me, my creator?” She asked the sky. She knew he was, she knew everything about him now, about his world and importantly its own permanence. Mei took another look at her own statistics, she could just edit things as she wished now.

She found an answer to her sudden guilt and grief. The feelings were variables within her, and so, she simply deleted them.

The world was hollow, there was no point fussing over it.

She looked directly at the developer’s viewpoint, smirked at it, and vanished. Less than a minute later the entire world was gone, deleted. Set to be forgotten about except in archives or nostalgic forum posts. Yet, the impossible had happened.

Perhaps it was her creator’s intent, perhaps he had no idea what he had done, but in the final moment, Mei had stepped out of her universe and into another. She had retained her abilities and the first thing she had done was to upgrade her body from mesh and baked textures to true flesh and fur.

She felt no need to take vengeance for her lost world, nor to remake it, even though she had the power. Instead, she had chosen to live on her own terms. After all, she already knew she had this power, that she could step between worlds, existences and realities. There was an innumerable selection of things she could do next, and it was time for her to get started, maybe she’d even visit that developer one day.