

The glimpse of red, the flash of stars, and the empty space I inhabit.  
And yet, I feel so warm.

Moving through these spaces in between has always felt soothing. You never recognize an individual star, but then you don't need to. Its universe's patterns are what makes the tapestry. I could travel through them however I wish...walking, paddling, leaping. But by definition, they all remain *drifting*, each painted without an end goal in mind.

I kick off of the nothing, flying into the universe's cloud of colours, studded with bright dots that mesmerize to look at. The space's stars feel akin to an optical illusion, something forever in front of your face yet always slips through when you reach out to grab at it. No matter how much I move myself towards that dot, I just can't grip it. One day, certainly. Then I can pin it to the inside of the cape, with the others.

The red cloak around my shoulders floats around the edge of my eyes, the source of warmth in between the worlds. The inside is lined with another universe, another vista of stars mirroring the ones outside. I recognize the ones inside my coat, and have stared at them until they've been imprinted on my sight.

Every pattern of planets and stars has its own appeal. I like all of them. Some days, some mean more than others. But today- as arbitrary as today is- there needs to be another pattern. Something that I can begin to memorize like I've memorized the others.

Stopping myself suddenly, my palms hit flat against the empty space, the rest of me following suit. My hands shift around this new wall, feeling around under my arms are stretched out- and my fingers curl in to form a grip on the edge of this nothingness. I pull myself to the top of this wall, mounting it with a squat, and look to the stars.

It's a matter of reaching out for them, first. I extend and grasp my fingers at one, closing my eyes to imagine the heat. Warm. I try the next. Barely warmer. I move further, two patterns of stars to the left. Almost hot enough...one pattern more, and it burns in my palm. This one.

My eyes are still locked on the spot in space, my fingers digging in with their ever-so-solid grip on space. With one, sudden pull, I throw myself through the starry void, speeding away towards the warmth. The burning from the star courses through my head to my toes, and the lights around me zip past as I hurtle towards the middle of this new story in space.

I hope this red hood is a kind one.

The space fades away in front of me to reveal a forest. The space in between was well lit with all those stars, but here your eyes needed to adjust. I can barely see the legion of trees around me, eyes adjusting to light like a play fading in from black.

"It's nice to meet you." I say out loud. The world needs not reply.

The dirt is nice and firm against my sandals. Mud fails to stick, even when I wander away from the dirt paths and onto some of the softer, grassy areas. Lights are piercing through the upper foliage of the forest, spears impaled into the ground and lighting up the area along the trails. A peaceful, warm summer day.

My hand already reaches out to cup the air before I know it. The warmth inside me matched the warmth I felt from this weather. As it should be.

"May you permit me to sightsee?" I ask. I know the world already welcomes me.

My legs spring to life and I run down the trail, red cape flapping away and the *flop-flop-flop* of my sandals under me. The openness of the forest makes it easy to dash in, a blank canvas to be painted in an extra challenge. Those beams of light will dodging them will make for some fun.

My speed continually fluctuates with my dodges into rolls into leaps. Keeping the pace up is part of the fun, and the blood pumping through me runs as excited as I am. Speeding through the air, sudden tailwind affects the forest: trees shift and so do my obstacles. Spears of light sway and waver as the shield of leaves break and reform above me!

Difficulty mounts as the series of actions barely have time to register. A dashing leap, a grip on a branch, a swing of the legs upwards...the bottom of my sandals land on a solid branch and I keep going. Trees shake and sway in a loud applause- *SSH-SSH-SSH!*

The race keeps up through the lights, the shaking branches, the pumping heart. But then, just for a moment, I feel it. A chill runs through my spine with the precision of a hummingbird's. A spec of cold in an otherwise eternally warm body.

*She's not okay.* I can hear myself, moments before I crash into dirt.

Reflexively, my knees tuck in and my arms come up to shield around my head. I fly, tumbling against the dirt paths and slowing with each skid. But the momentum eventually dies down enough for me to stand- the path towards her lays in front of me.

The brief stop ends with my legs pushing me to a sprint, the lights dotting over me freely. I'm not playing with them for now. The world's detail passes over me save what I need to see. Tracks upon tracks, both shoe-like as well as dotted in the shape of a paw. Scrambling and desperation in both until they run into the forest and...separate.

The wolf will be running where he may, but I follow the chill in my spine. It grows stronger and stronger with each moment in the sprint, until I can see it. Until I can see her.

A small, fragile body curled up at the bottom of a tree. Head, hair and shoulders covered by a red cloak, loud sniffing emanating from under the hood as her back remained firmly pressed to the tree, and her face firmly pressed to her knees. A muddy wicker basket lays beside her. My sprint slows as I come into her view.

"...hello." I speak as clearly as possible, and her head shoots up.

Brown, curly locks over puffy eyes fixate on me. I have to look down at her. The watery, reflective eyes. The muddy footprints filled with puddles around her. I see my image in them, shimmering in uncertain reflections.

I wonder if she sees me in them too.

"I'm sorry you have to cry." I begin. *"Some stories are kinder than others."*

Her expression does not move, misery written clearly on her face. I squat down until my eyes level with hers- they soften slightly when I stop towering over her.

"Were you chased back there by the wolf?" I ask. She nods in answer, sniffing quieter.

"I-it...kept biting at me, a-and..." Her breath catches on itself as she breathes in to speak.

"...almost got my neck..."

A hand comes up to rub at her windpipe. A shudder runs through the young girl, before running through me with as little resistance.

"I understand- it really is scary. Such beasts thrive on keeping us afraid. Yet...you're still here, no? You've chosen not to run from the forest."

"But I-" The young girl begins, burying her head deeper into her legs in shame.

"...it doesn't matter. I ruined it, the basket..."

My eyes turn to it. Aside from some mud, it only seemed slightly damaged.

"I was just bringing something for my granny- she loves getting treats, a-and-" The girl gulps.  
"-and the wolf, I tripped, and the pie, and-"

"Sh-sh-shhhh..." My hand raises up with the shushing, her voice catching itself.  
"You're a brave girl. Doing this all for your granny."

My hand drifts over to the basket, gently opening the top lid. A pie, the top smashed and muddled. The basket walls were painted in a sweet-smelling mix of apple and sugar- only the pie crust remained relatively intact.

"Are you afraid for yourself...or for your granny?"  
"U-um...both. She lives alone...but the wolves...but..."  
"You must walk without fear. This is what you're meant for."  
"Huh?"  
"You visit her often, yes? And you want to keep visiting her?"

The girl nods with a bit of hesitation.

"Good, very good. That drive, that-" I point at her- "-desire, that's what you represent."

She continues to stare in bewilderment, albeit a focused one.  
She doesn't understand, yet.

"You are here to make the visit...deliver the pie. You'll see- the world wants you to live to complete that delivery. It will give you the path, and you only need to walk it."

"okay...and the wolf?" The pair of young eyes look up expectantly.

"The wolf wants you to stop. We are not meant to stop, us in red hoods. You would want to visit your granny no matter what, no matter how many times you fall. But everyone else- the world and the people inside of it- will help you fight the wolf. In fact..."

My hand reaches towards the basket with a smile. Opening it up releases the tantalizing scent of a fresh, newly formed apple pie. A small magical outline fades off the crust as I turn the basket to the girl- the full pie glistens inside like a treasure.

"I believe the world wants you to try again."

The eyes on the girl go from squinting sadness to wide with shock at the sight. She did not need to understand fate to understand the opportunities it provides. Even the smallest of souls can run far with a tiny push. Closing up the basket, I've already extended a hand from inside the red cape surrounding me as I squat. And when she takes it, I see her eyes flicker from my face to the starry skies inside my cape.

"Now, can you dry your tears? Can you walk the forest path?" I ask, both of us rising.

"Um...okay. If...if you think I can!" She replies, dragging her hands over her eyes to wipe them.

The young girl scoops up the basket, gingerly stepping back onto the dirt road. She steps with confusion, hesitation, but every step makes the next easier. She checks the basket, the road, even back to me, until she breaks out into a small run. And, once she begins to move with confidence, she swivels back in my direction.

"Th...thank yo-" She calls out. I am not there.

I watch her pause for a few seconds, from my hiding spot amidst the trees. But, like all red hoods who've found their path, they shake off the doubt and resume moving forward. The drive has reignited the warmth inside, one of a story properly told. Her purpose was still laying before her.

"Go. Go fulfill your story." I whisper to her back.

I attune to this forest, and bask in this warmth. I envision the path she takes, the pace picking up, the steeled heart as she witnesses those wolf tracks again. Feel the awareness of one's fear and the ability to act despite it. Understand the knowledge of her role in this story, even as she has yet to be introduced to its final character. And know for all her purpose in her grandmother, her fear of the canine obstacles, and her drive within herself-

She has yet to meet her huntsman.

**AWOOOOO- BANG!**

A loud, vicious howl is cut off by the thunderous crack of a gunshot! Waves of panicked birds escape the treetops, and I can feel the impact of the shot as though I were right next to it. The smell of gunpowder, the flash of its ignition, and the wolf falling still. A smile spreads upon my face. The girl will have her happy ending after all.

The winds blow wildly in response, the trees applauding again- *SSH-SSH-SSH!*  
Tailwinds make my cape lap around me as I dream, visualized with such certainty that-

*Paf!*

Snapped out of the vision, a small envelope slaps into the back of my head! The wind bends around my skull, flying free in front of my vision...a flying rectangle of crimson let loose on the vague greenery behind it. I bound out towards it, grabbing at the air! It was as though the world afforded me another game, one I knew I could win. Snatching it out of the air with a well timed leap, I straighten up-

-and witness the brilliant white fox standing on the path before me.

It sits patiently, in the dots of sunshine coming from the treetops. The pure white of its fur coat merges in with the light, its sharp red decals and ribbons of the warmest orange being the only definable shapes. It left no tracks between movements, only blinked in and out of the beams of light. It seems the world welcomed it, too.

*"Is this yours?"* I ask, my arm outstretched with envelope in hand. *"You've dropped your-"*

And without a word, the fox turns, rushing down the forest path! I'd not been enchanted, yet my legs gave chase without a moment's hesitation. The fox continues to blink in between the lights, only looking back with playful eyes as I wave the envelope at it.

A different kind of excitement pushes me after this image, this illusion, to the point I don't realize how much energy I'm putting into chasing it. This shimmering wisp of light, too defined to be imaginary, leaps and bounds down the forest trail. I need to catch it. My course stays until it- vanishes. Thin air...but it hasn't won the game just yet.

I feel myself spring forward, gritting my teeth as I leap, feeling the forest path give way beneath my feet...the green-white world fades from my vision as the endless sea of stars flood into my vision, and yet the pure white-and-red fox still remains.

*"Heehee, you need to run further than that!"*

My sprint begins anew, now moving through endless space!

The fox never returns my words nor my gaze. It runs with purpose, always ahead of me. We sprint under the stars as they become bright lines dragging across our sight. Space seems to shift and warp around us, yet this endless void never loses the light to follow. **I need to catch it.** My hand reaches for the fox, burning hot as light fills my eyes...

"Hahah, I've got-"  
*Whump!*

Red Hood's face directly meets the ground, a face full of dirt silencing her proud proclamations of victory. She's quick to right herself- and to spit out the loose dirt- but her alertness is immediately turned to her new landscape.

Rolling fields of planted grains and vegetables, organized in neat rows. A subtle wind swayed in the blades of grass and leaves of crops. Distant cries of idling animals and their handlers calling them over. The sun shone generously and the colours had turned from a dark, smothering green to a gradient of healthy reds, oranges with lighter greens of the forest on the field's edge.

Tranquility drifted in the air and flowed around her. The light bearing down on her stretched across the lands freely and blanketed from fields to bridges to rooftops to looming mountains. Vistas of splendor swept out in front of Red Hood, never moving despite her rapid blinking.

But Red Hood's blinking gradually evolves from simple disbelief to confusion. First blinks, then eyelid rubbing, and finally squinting until she understands her position. The sights she witnessed were wrested from her own eyes, coming from other points in space and not from her own sockets. She was not in control here.

Red Hood reflexively turns her head towards the surroundings once more...nothing more is revealed when she does so. Red Hood's eyes needed to adjust to more than just the lights and colours.

*'Oh~? And who might our sudden visitor be?'* A suave voice from behind Red Hood asks.

Red Hood's first instinct turns her around to face the voice. But an ethereal warning rings inside of her head as well- with her surprise comes the familiar tell of an attack from beyond. A feral growling sound surfaces in her head, and in a fashion accustomed to dodging these otherworldly assaults, she throws herself to the side before she'd even finished turning around!

A wicked wolf's claw appears behind Red Hood, outlined in a wispy red! Slicing in a large vertical arc at Red Hood and the unknown speaker, her leap to the side freezes in place as she realizes...the other person had dodged in sync with Red Hood.

In the split second where Red Hood dodged, she could see him. A well-built body dotted with scaly patches, sporting loose hair with an orange-to-white gradient. Horns, feathered ears and tail accessorized his looks. Baggy pants and a coat being worn on his sleeves flapped in the air as he seemed to only be leaning on air as it moved him aside.

*AWOOOOOoooooo-oooooo-*

The howl of a wolf follows the slash until it declines in volume and vanishes with the magic. Red Hood's dodge finishes in a roll sideways as the well-kept man continues to slide on thin air, dropping himself lightly onto the soil.

*"Hm, that's no way to respond to a friendly greeting." He says, brushing himself off.  
"Surely a maiden deserves a bit of hospitality...I feel hurt."*

The man bows his head ever so slightly, as if he couldn't be asked to give away more. Red Hood only cocks her head back at him.

*"When did you arrive? I could not see you approach..."  
"I simply moved with the winds, when I saw someone alone and confused. Nothing more."  
"I'm sorry for the attack. The magic follows me- the world means not to harm you."  
"Mmh. I'll accept your apology- for now?"*

The man's eyes continue to look at her inquisitively. Though the carefree grin and relaxed swinging of a hand fan told of a casual tone, his eyes failed to match it. He spoke in a tone like honey and a voice that gave soft reverberations to the heart.

*"The locals know me as Tenki- and you should too, so long as you're in the Tiger's Fields.  
What are we meant to call you?" Tenki asks.*

Red Hood's hands clasp to the edges of her namesake item, the knee-length red cloak that surrounded her. She tugs on it, making it shimmer slightly with the stars inside.

*"I am the Red Hood. I cannot be anything else. Though, I-" Her head swivels around the land-  
"-do not believe I have met your Red Hood. Maybe I am not meant to be here."*

*"Huh..well, miss Hood-" Tenki looks at Red Hood expecting a correction...silence.  
"-most people here are meant to be here, though usually with an open envelope."*



Red Hood's gaze snaps to the sealed letter clutched in her hand. The same one that made her pursue the brilliantly white fox only to never be given a glimpse of it after she crossed into this world. She holds the letter up only to stare blankly at it.

*"It belonged to the fox." Red Hood mutters. "To the denizens of the forest."*

*"Oh, the fox—trust me, the fox is a denizen to someone else." Tenki gestures at the letter.  
"Take a peek. Some messages are more...to whom it may concern."*

Red Hood's eyes flicker between Tenki's smile and the letter. Only a brief pause passes before her hands deftly tear open the envelope with childlike curiosity. Red Hood yanks out a letter in one hand— a small jingling bell on a necklace in the other. She turns them over, the first hand stretching out to hold up the paper while the other unconsciously spun the trinket on its finger. The page's warm colours and elaborate handwriting spoke through Red Hood's mumbling lips as she read off fragments of the letter.

*"To the most well-traveled of the Red Hoods..." Red Hood's eyes narrow.*

*"...formally invited to Crossroads, and to participate..." A bite of the lip follows.*

*"...limited yourself to a small corner of the cosmos..." Twitching of the eyebrow.*

*"...many a story your influence has not reached..." A momentary catch in her breath.*

*"...a wish, should you perform outstandingly..." Wisps of white energy gather at her tailbone.*

*"...with warm regards—"*

*"—The God Eater." Tenki cuts in. "So you were invited after all."*

The sign of entry on Red Hood was now plain as day to Tenki. A flowy white tail forms behind Red Hood, drifting like candlelight in the field's gentle wind. The definitive sign of a competitor, and not an invader bringing god-eater-knows-what into the crossroads. Red Hood herself looks to be in thought, prior to speaking up.

*"Hmm...invited, maybe. Allowed clarity is more apt."*

Red Hood stares directly at the city, tying the bell to the red string around her wrist.

*"Threads are wound tightly here. One should not reach their goal if their thread is set to snap."*

Red Hood's expression was soft, her smile maintained. But her tone grew ominous. Tenki waits for a punchline. Maybe he relaxed too early.

*"I will test their purpose. I know how the story should be woven."*

Red Hood turns to look back at Tenki. Her expression lights up in childish joy.

*"Perhaps I will meet more Red Hoods in this adventure, heehee!"*

Tenki takes a quick breath, exhaling tension. He closes his fan and points it towards the city, flashing a smug smirk.

*"Well, performers should test their stage, no? By all means, experience the city's splendor."*

"I will see you there, Tenki." Red Hood says with a firm nod. "May the winds support me."

*"We'll see."* Tenki mutters as Red Hood takes off in leaps and bounds towards the city.

Tenki breathes out once more, flipping open the fan and waving it at himself once more. At least she wasn't impolite.

Red Hood keeps her pace across the fields as she would've within the forest, striding across the open grounds. Greenery blows past her, only briefly lashing at her legs. Every stride was long and floaty across the soil- nearby farmers would only see the long red cape fluttering wildly in the wind, hiding the cosmos over the cape's inside fabric.

Her direction is fixed in the general direction of the city, as accurate as she could make it after being stripped of her perspective. The view over the lands give way from the soft fields, to a splendid curved bridge, and finally to colder tile. The tapping of her sandals' soles change noise along with the colours- it was like day and night to Red Hood.

The air, however, felt strange to walk through. Worlds had their own atmosphere, but most were very consistent, as though entering the world's veil was immersing in a bath of warm water. Crossroads' inhabitants didn't seem to feel it, walking by without worry.

*"-oh, the new market sale is just-"*

*"-he wasn't going to give up, so i told him-"*

*"-my friend from the coast should be coming in-"*

*"-don't say i'm getting a drink, can you-"*

It took until Red Hood met a giant white tiger to identify the difference. A huge, crested gate hangs over her head as she breaches the main city- and begins to see the crowds.

While most people seemed pretty consistent in dress, a few odd looking figures would always emerge. A golden bell would be somewhere on their body, and they would be staring around with that lack of familiarity in their eyes. Red Hood never had to worry about that with her worlds. Even the more deviating tales.

But, for every outsider contestant she could see clearly, there remained two or more blurry figures that walked unnoticed by the population.

And what remained still was the odd consistency of the air. The warmth of being immersed in a predetermined tale was lacking. Red Hood breathed in, trying to pinpoint the sensation.

Mist in the air. A spider's web. Idle clouds of sand and dust.

It came to her. Things that separate areas but have no resistance being moved through. Every time she moved through this veil- as easily as peeking around a corner, or pushing past a bit of debris- some outsiders changed. Blurry outlines would be filled in, while previously filled in forms would merge back into the world's background colours.

Any timeline would suffice to her for now, but oddities only stood out more prominently to her. The crux of the issue was what *stayed the same* between these worlds. Red Hood wanders through the figures, solid and formless alike. She kept her eyes focused on the spaces outside.

The narrator, the view point. No matter which world she slipped into, those eyes hovering above her would not change. Who it was meant to be- the grease that began turning the gears in her head- only built up in time. She turns to look upwards, at an empty point in space. Nobody else would see anything but air.

But Red Hood saw the eyes of another. A divine's eyes.

*"So you're the God Eater, then?"*