

The air was thick with the stench of rot. Sour tones of meat gone bad and the tang of old blood that sat heavy in the back of the throat. The plumes of spores had settled, covering everything in a layer of sickly yellow. The color almost glowed in the low light the surviving mushrooms gave off.

Zeke coughed as she wandered through the mess, her body trying to hack out the putrid scent. Luckily, enough time had passed for the spores to stick fast to whatever they were sitting on. She really didn't want that shit floating around in her lungs. Choking on rapidly growing mushrooms didn't appeal to her.

She made her way farther into the open darkness, toward the center of the expanse. Her eyes adjusted easily enough, being much better suited for darker environments. Just up ahead were lumps under the blanket of spores. There was no scent of burnt flesh. The spores had already eaten through most of those layers. Small mushrooms were beginning to poke themselves out of the masses.

Great.

Huffing, Zeke pulled a respirator from her cargo shorts. She knew it would've been smarter to have put it on *before* arriving, but the goggles obscured her vision and her body could handle dispelling a small amount of spores without issue. More so, she didn't like things covering her face.

Respirator secure, she began freeing the lumps from their fungal prison. Her sharp nails easily tore through the gooey viscera, new spores puffing into the air as she dug. There were three bodies. Well, what was left of three bodies. Scraps of clothing had survived but were burnt too badly to make out. Surprisingly, their boots were the most intact.

A clinking sound caught her attention. Dogtags. Well preserved, somehow. There was a clear name. She pocketed them before continuing.

It wasn't until she was searching the areas around the bodies did she come across what she believed to be the source of the disaster. A metal lighter casing sat not too far, likely thrown. Spores didn't cling to it. The outer casing was scorched. The inside was completely blown out.

“Fucking morons.”

She pocketed the lighter. And then, having all she needed, simply left. Upon reaching the explosion's edge she removed the respirator. The farther she went, the bigger the mushrooms became. Before long the mushrooms were joined by gnarled, grey trees. Their branches twisted upward, sprouting wide lily pad-like leaves.

Zeke paused, taking in a deep breath. The smell of damp earth filled her. A smell she loved. Even if it was stale in the mushroom forest. She stood there for a moment, eyes closed, just being. She could feel everything around breathing with her. Everything was still in this place, yet life reverberated through all of it. The roots were all connected to one another. One giant organism constantly feeding, dying, and birthing from itself. Perfect harmony with itself. Shame it was so fragile.

Her head snapped toward a breathy hiss. Her ears stood straight, flicking here and there to pinpoint where it came from. She picked up movement around her. Coming closer. While the environment was fragile, its inhabitants certainly weren't.

She launched herself forward, just missing a tar-like substance splatting where she had stood. She leapt atop a mushroom, missing a snarl and clamping jaws. She didn't stop. Powerful legs and dexterous feet sending her higher and higher until she could reach a tree's thick, twisting branch.

Scrambling up the bark, she paused. Nothing was behind her. She could hear muffled scuffling and hisses. Looking over the edge she found several pudgy grey and brown bodies scurrying around far below. She huffed a laugh. Here she thought it was something more threatening. These creatures couldn't climb, they could barely jump, and they were essentially blind. The sticky gunk they spit was the most threatening thing about them. They mostly survived by eating each other.

She continued up the branches at a more leisurely pace. The higher she went the more difficulty she had with passing through the intertwining branches, squeezing through the ever-shrinking

gaps. This was why she preferred to come and go through the cave systems. It was a longer route, but she didn't have to expend as much effort.

Finally, she could see bits of light peeking through. Almost there. She pulled herself through, covered in scratches, to stand atop a squiggly mass of branches. Out of the fungal forest and into a forest of lily pads. The branches below created an uneven floor. Growing from them were tall, thick stalks that held massive overlapping lily pad leaves high above. The light coming through them gave it all a greenish hue. A few pure streams of light found their way through tiny gaps.

There was sudden static in her head. A garbled voice blipped in and out. *Almost.*

Hopping up onto the nearest stalk, she began climbing. While her feet had no claws to help with leverage, her three toes were long and gripped as easily as a hand. The setae coating her toes and fingers did most of the heavy lifting, though.

The leaves gave her trouble, being as stiff and large as they were. She managed to crawl and pull herself out of the mess, finally *-finally-* emerging into fresh air and unfiltered light. She flopped on her back, wanting nothing more than to just lay there for a while.

The static came in again. Her tail and ears flicked in annoyance. Of course, she couldn't take a moment.

She brought her hand to her throat, giving a random tap to the small black panels that were form-fitted around her neck. "Yeah?"

*"Boss! Thought I heard you coming back online! You weren't down there as long as I thought you'd be."*

"Yeah, they hacked a path through so they were pretty easy to find." She rolled to stand, taking in the expansive plane of lily pads. She could see the jungle line off in the distance and started toward it. "Got jumped by some pudgies so I went straight up."

There was a snicker. *"A pack of pudgies was too much for you?"*

“Rack off, man. There’s too many things down there that sound the same to not be cautious.”

*“Right, right... Wait, did those guys follow you up? That’s not a climb humans can make on their own.”*

“They’re dead. Had a lighter on’em.” There was an uneasy silence that stretched for a little too long. A sigh. A swear. “Hey, we knew they’d been gone too long to be alive-”

*“I know, I know. I was just hoping they’d been eaten. I owe Grant money now...”*

Zeke barked a laugh. “Ya’ll didn’t! Brandon- What the hell, man?”

*“Hey, there was no way they were coming back alive and it was their own damn fault!”*

“I don’t disagree, but that’s kinda fucked!”

*“Well, it’s done! So! You want me to wait for you? Or are you going to run back?”*

Her laughter died to a groan of displeasure. “Hnng- no. No, come to me. Riding with you will be faster. Dick’s gonna get an earful from me about this and I just really wanna get it out of the way.”

*“Zeke Ili not procrastinating?”* She could hear soft clicking underneath his jesting. *“What would cause you to make such a drastic change?”*

“I’ve got shit to do that I want to get done today. This little expedition has already wasted enough of my time,” her voice dropped in irritation. She hated how she was usually strong armed into cleaning up the base’s messes.

*“Hey, look on the bright side,”* she could see him. A shape rising out of the tree line. *“It got you out for a few hours.”*

She broke out into a sprint toward the helicopter making its way to her. She jumped before it passed, easily grabbing one of its front wheels, her sudden weight pulling it off kilter slightly. That was the signal for Brandon to lift and head home.

Zeke pulled herself up the hull, crawling her way to the open side door. She didn't bother closing it or sitting, instead taking hold of one of the ceiling straps to watch the world below blur by. She supposed having access to military-grade vehicles was a perk to living beneath an airforce base. Now, if only the brass weren't such cunts.

The expansive jungle eventually changed to a woodland, then to crop fields. She could see the bulky, ten-foot frames of a group of fauns uprooting trees, mixing the soil, and planting new saplings. Trucks loaded with tree logs made their way down gravel roads.

Zeke's gaze followed their path to the gargantuan tree ahead. It was the center of the equally gargantuan cavern that housed it. It probably couldn't hold a city's worth of people, but it came close. No, the near thousand occupants lived comfortably with plenty of room to spare. It was her magnum opus. She grew the tree with living inside the trunk and in the branches in mind. Nothing had to be carved out. She simply had to move things around for more space. And it only took her forty years to create.

They flew high into the canopy, landing on a marked area of a branch. Zeke didn't bother waiting, hopping off and quickly making her way inside. She didn't have far to go before reaching her personal corridor, most offices being near the top. Bark was replaced with large windows that she often hurled herself from if she was feeling dramatic.

Her hand was on the handle to her more personal chambers when a voice called out. An annoyingly charming baritone that came from an extremely punchable face.

"Ah! Miss. Ili!"

She gasped loudly, whipping around with a bright smile. "Yes, Satan? Oh-!" Her smile dropped to mock sincerity, placing a hand over her heart. "Richard! My most sincerest apologies," she couldn't help the little grin that pulled at her lips. "I mistook you for pleasurable company."

Richard gave his own tight grin. His expensive suit was immaculate, as always, but his hair was a bit ruffled. Like he ran his hand through it one too many times. He was frazzled. His bosses had to be on his ass.

“Quite alright, Miss. Ili,” the grit of his teeth said otherwise. “I won’t take up much of your time. I heard the missing soldiers didn’t survive and I just need to know where you offloaded their remains.” His air of haughtiness had returned quick enough, looking over his planner like she was inconveniencing him. Adjusting his stupid round glasses on the tip of his stupid pointed nose, smack in the middle of his stupid angular face. Spirits, she just wanted to break his stupid fucking jaw.

“I didn’t bring them back,” she dug in her pocket, pulling out the dog tags and lighter. Her voice was even, making an effort to be diplomatic at the very least. “There wasn’t enough of ‘em to warrant bringing back.” She handed him the dog tags. “This was the only thing I could find intact that had any identification.”

He took the chain, not sparing it a glance before putting it in his pocket. “Then you’ll need to return and bring them back, then.”

“Yeah, I’m not doin’ that,” she could feel the sneer pulling her lip up to expose sharp teeth. A warning.

“Miss. Ili, as one of the heads of this facility you have an obligation to those under you.”

A growl vibrated in her chest. “Yer right, I do. Good thing those soldiers were never under my jurisdiction. They’re under the military’s.”

“They died in your-”

“No one had any idea they were here, let alone delving into the fungal forest- which they had no business being in to begin with!” Her pupils were so thin they were almost lost in the blue that encompassed the whole of her eyes. “Why the *fuck* were they down there, Dick? No one topside is permitted to just wander ‘round as they please! Not without the go ahead from us!

“Had we been informed, they’d probably still be alive!” She flung the blown lighter casing at him, and he fumbled to catch it. “I found *that* a few feet from their bodies. There are warnings posted everywhere that things that create sparks or fire ain’t allowed! The spores are insanely flammable! Their fuckin’ idiocy could’ve set off a chain reaction and set the whole place ablaze! You think a fire that big would be contained? Fuck no! It would spread! We’d all be fucked then, wouldn’t we?!”

Richard blinked rapidly. She couldn’t tell if he hadn’t known about the dangers or just didn’t think about the consequences. Frankly, she didn’t much care at this point. “... In that instance, your sister would be able to-”

She grabbed his tie, yanking him down to her level. “Foye’s pyrokinetics wouldn’t be needed at all if y’all didn’t make stupid-ass decisions,” she hissed. “Now, why were soldiers running around, unknown to us and unsupervised?”

“Zeke.”

Their heads snapped around. Speak of the devil. Her twin stood there, as poised as ever. Identical eyes half-lidded and a small knowing smile. Between the two, Foye looked more human. Her reptilian eyes, sharp teeth, and slightly curved horns protruding from her forehead were the only physical indications that she wasn’t.

“Dear, you’re sprouting.” Zeke glanced down. Sure enough, a second set of forearms had grown from her elbows, gripping Richard’s shirt tight enough to rip. She could feel bony ridges jutting out of her spine now that she was focusing.

She shoved him away as she took a moment to calm down. Her forearms merged back together and the ridges sank back into her spine. She slumped. Rubbed at her face. Fuck, she was tired.

Foye soothed the back of Zeke’s neck, making sure to heat her hands. She regarded the human grumbling about his shirt. “Richard, I believe it best if you leave.”

He was about to protest, but quickly thought better of it. Zeke would get loud and physically violent when angry, then it’d be over and everyone would move on. Foye, however, he knew she

would make the rest of his professional life hell. Possibly his personal life too, if the look she was giving him was anything to go by. No. Better to not speak with the more cunning sister present.

“You’ve been given everything you’re going to receive. The remains stay where they are,” she pulled Zeke’s attention. “We don’t need to worry about why they were down there. Not until dad's finished looking into it.”

Richard went pale. Zeke snickered. If their father was personally seeing to this, heads were going to roll. Figuratively and literally.

Richard left quickly, muttering out some half-assed farewell. Zeke sagged even farther under her sister’s menstruation, groaning as her heated hands dug into a particularly large knot.

“You need a break, I think.”

“Pft, yeah? And who's gonna take over for me? You?”

“While I might not have your physical prowess, there are others who do. We both know Nessa would jump at the challenge.”

Zeke gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Of course, she would- the fauns as a species see everything as a challenge.” She sighed, straightening. “I’m wound too tight with all this shit. I’ll just blow off some steam in the Pit.”

“The Pit won’t be enough. It hasn’t been,” Foye gently ran her fingers through Zeke's short crop of hair, letting her nails run along her scalp. “It's too familiar, too easy for you. I'm not sure you're finding much joy in your daily runs anymore, either. Might be partially why your temper has been so short lately.”

“Hmm... wha’ you suggest?” A soft, pleasant rumble sounded from her chest.



Foye ran her hands down her sister's face to her chin, holding her head's full weight. Zeke continued to rumble, eyes nearly closed. She wasn't as tense as she had been. It was amazing what a little physical touch could do to such a volatile creature.

"You need something new."

Zeke clicked her tongue, pulling away. "Right. 'New'." Her tone was bitter. "As if they'd let any of us waltz out- you know how tight security's been up there since my last attempt?"

"I know. But, I do think I have a way for you to not just see sunlight, but stand in it."

"What?"

"Well, I don't think it would be our reality's sun but, it would be a sun."

"... Foye, the hell are you on about? Are you talking about hijacking the transporter? Not even I wanna go near the transporter. The engineers don't even know what kinda reality it would spit us out in. Last thing I need is to end up someplace without oxygen..."

"Hm, I think this might be something better." Foye stepped aside, gesturing to her feet. There a little white fox politely sat. Its eyes were squinted closed as if smiling. There was a red circle marking on its forehead and a red envelope in its mouth. It had a large magenta and peach-colored bow wrapped around the poofiest tail Zeke had ever seen. She could practically feel her pupils dilate.

"Oh, no... it's cute."

"It's apparently been wandering around for a while trying to give that letter to someone. 'Course, everyone here knows to take caution with any unknown creature, even the cute ones, so it was brought to me when you couldn't be found." She easily took the envelope and handed it to Zeke.

"I've already read it over and it seems to be your forte."

“And not your piano-” The envelope was snatched from her before she could take it and waped against her forehead. Zeke couldn't help but cackle.

“Honestly, between you and dad...” she allowed her to take it.

The contents was a single letter written in rather immaculate handwriting. “A fighting tournament? Hold on, this is interdimensional?! Fuck yeah, we should go! A vacation! Always wanted to try one out!”

“It would just be you.”

Zeke's enthusiasm dropped immediately. “What? No! Family outing-”

“Dad and I aren't the ones ready to implode,” Zeke sucked her teeth. “I don't do physical altercations, and while dad enjoys brawling, we know he prefers swinging his weight in a boardroom. These military trespassers need to be looked into and dealt with, but even more importantly,” she moved her head to catch her sister's eye. “Of the three of us, you're the one less likely to be missed by our leash holders.

“It's normal for you to run off to avoid dealing with their agents. It's *expected* of you to disappear for long periods simply because you feel like it. One of the first things agents are taught about you is that you're difficult to get a hold of.” Foye eyed her knowingly. “You're also the one most desperate to see what's beyond this haven we've built.”

They held one another's gaze. Foye pleading for her to go. Zeke trying to not give in. She did finally break, blinking and looking away.

“Fi-ine. I'll go have fun...” She couldn't play dejected for too long, smiling wide at the prospect of slipping right out from under those bastard's noses. It was quickly replaced with confusion.

“Wait, How am I going anywhere? And what about dad? Does he know about this?”

Foye nodded. “No one's ever seen this animal before today and we've not heard anything from up top, so it had its own means of getting here. Which means it has its own means of getting

out. As for dad, he and I discussed it before this whole solder thing. He agrees with me. We've not told anyone else yet, but we've figured out who to delegate your responsibilities to."

"Spirits, y'all gangin' up on me- Fine!" She looked to the fox who was still sitting so patiently.

"Ight then, when do I need to leave?"

Its ear flicked. It hopped up to its feet with quiet grace. Giving a little shake of its tail it made a quick circle before looking up at Zeke. And just... stood there.

"That... meant nothing to me, but fuck me, yer cute!"

"I can only assume you leave as soon as you're ready?"

"Hm'kay, how about now?"

"What? Now? You're serious?"

"Why not? You and dad already said I should go. Why prolong it?"

Foye gestured to Zeke's body. "You don't think you should put on something more appropriate than cargo shorts and a sports bra? Pack essentials?"

"Pfft, please! I get the best movement in this! And I've already got essentials packed on me!" She pulled out a small opened bag of beef jerky from a pocket. "See? Snacks! I'm good to go!"

Foye gave an incredulous laugh. "You're impossible!" She gave a warm smile, moving in to give a tight hug. "I don't know why I expected any different of you."

"Yeah, well," Zeke squeezed back just as hard. "If I don't go now I'm gonna overthink it and second guess, and think about how much I'm gonna miss you and dad, and-"

“Alright! Alright! I get it,” Foye laughed, pushing her back. She became contemplative when noticing the ever-present black panels around Zeke's neck. She swiped her finger down the middle, ignoring her sister's protests as they split apart from her neck and reformed in her hand.

“There. You won't set off any alarms when you leave.”

Zeke rubbed at her neck. “Ugh, I feel naked now, though.”

“That's never stopped you before. Now, go! Before someone else comes looking for you.”

Heaving a heavy breath, she stepped before the fox. “Alright. I accept this invite and am ready to get goin'... Now.” There was a slight tremor in her voice toward the end. She suddenly felt nervous. Unsure.

The fox bounced in place a couple of times. The envelope still in her hand glowed with a light. She felt its form change to something small and round. A gold bell. Hanging from a crimson ribbon. Confused, her eyes flicked to the fox. It simply nodded its head. Not really understanding, but rolling with it, she tied it around her neck. It hung loose, bell sitting just above her collarbone.

Once tied, a small chirp came from the fox. A light engulfed the bell, quickly encompassing Zeke. Surprised, she stepped back, tripping on her own feet and tumbling backward. She didn't hit the floor. Not right away. Her back hit what felt like a woodboard. It gave way under her weight, her head hitting a wall as glass broke around her. Something sharp jabbed into her leg. Her tail became trapped under something heavy. She thrashed it to free it, knocking other items over. Her hands reached blindly, grabbing anything that could stop her fall only to pull more items on top of her. She cried out when her hip banged hard on a corner. She rolled to get away from it, right onto glass shards. She continued fumbling in the dark, finally landing with her upper back and neck painfully angled, and feet in the air.

She groaned, afraid to move lest something else fall on her. She heard rolling above her. Silence. Then a hard *thunk* to her forehead.

“FUCK!”

There was a muffled scrambling, followed by a door opening. Light flooded the room Zeke had rather ungracefully fallen in. A storage room by the looks of it. Maybe. Things were kind of everywhere... Where the hell was she?

“What the f—! What happened?! Who... Who are you?! Are you alright?! Here, let me help you!”

That was another person, wasn't it? Yeah, that was a person above her. Who was he? Fuck, she was dizzy.

Items were quickly moved away from her, allowing the rest of her body to flop to the floor. The stranger helped sit her up. He might have been speaking. His mouth was moving. Her ears were all fuzzy. He was gesturing to her leg. There was a line of thick blood already coagulating over a cut on her calf. He seemed to be panicking over it. Or maybe it was over the shards of glass sticking out of her knee.

Those needed to come out.

The man had disappeared somewhere, she wasn't paying too much attention to care where. Her hearing was starting to come back. There was clinking happening beyond the open door. She was more concerned with pulling the glass out. Luckily they were all decently sized so she could grip them easily.

“Hey!” She looked up. The man appeared at the door. His arms were full of various bottles. He kneeled beside her, bapping her hands away. “H-hold on, I've got something for your wounds—also, drink this.”

He shoved an open bottle into her hand. It smelled like dirt with an odd hint of sweetness. Red with a thick consistency. Yeah. No. She set it to the side.

She squealed, kicking her leg out when something cold and wet suddenly touched her knee. Her tail whacked the man onto his back. The bottles rolled away, luckily none broke.

“Dude! Could you not?” Her legs were shaky as she pulled herself up. The dizziness was subsiding enough for her to start picking up what was around her.

There was an array of... stuff that was packed along the walls. Knick-knacks and dust collectors by the looks of them. Crystals, small geodes, weird shaped coins, feathers, containers of questionable liquids, a glass ball she swore was looking at her... sticks? Her instincts admired his collection even if she couldn't pinpoint a theme.

Oh. *Oh!* She broke a good chunk of his stuff!

“Shit!” She reached down to help him off the floor. Well, more like she picked him up and set him on his feet. He was concerningly light. “I'm so sorry! I don't know how I got here! Well, I do, I think- but this isn't where I thought I'd end up! I didn't hurt you, did I? Fuck, I'm sorry!”

She started picking things up, moving them out of the way since the shelves they sat on were gone. She paused in thought for a split second before jolting up and away from the wall. “Sorry! I probably shouldn't be touching anything! I know I get pretty snippy when people mess with my hoard.”

The man simply stood there for a moment. He seemed to be rebooting. He blinked and waved his hands. “N-no! It's fine! I'll just write it off later. I'm honestly more worried about your injuries! You have a pretty nasty cut on your leg!”

“My- oh! Nah, I'm fine. See?” She twisted her leg around. The cut on her calf was nothing but an angry red line, the blood having already been pulled back into her body. Her knee looked as though it never had glass sticking out of it. “And I think- yep. That's almost gone, too.” She pulled her shorts down to expose the bruise on her hip. It was morphing through colors while visibly shrinking. He was a little taken aback by it all but seemed to accept it quickly enough, busying himself with picking up the dropped bottles.

“So, uhh... where am I, exactly?”

“Ah, right...” He straightened, glancing upward at the ceiling for a moment, seeming to come to some conclusion. Sweeping his free hand up in a dramatic arch, he responded as if this was the

norm. “You are in the Business District of the Crossroads! Currently standing in The Hourglass! My humble shop of mystic wares— well, the *storeroom* of The Hourglass, at least.”

Zeke hummed, finally taking the man in. *Fancy* was the word that came to mind. Fancy royal purple top with gold accents, dark pants with only one leg having some fancy gold designs. Even a gold piece keeping his long, dark hair up. The kind of get-up her dad would take for his hoard.

“Great! So, I’m here for some fighting tournament? Where do I need to go? That fox didn’t exactly give me any details.”

He nodded, “I figured as much. You must have been approached by one of the more... mischievous ones to have ended up here the way you did. I can speak with one of the Crossguards to get you signed in. This way,” he gestured toward the door he had come through while shrugging at the few unbroken bottles in his hands, “I’ll just need to put these away first.”

He led her into the main shop area. It was much larger but no less cluttered. It was the windows that were covered by curtains that caught her attention. She could hear people beyond them. Chatting and going about their day.

It was then that it hit her. She was in another reality. Not hers. The likelihood of this place being located beneath the earth like her home was low. The light filtering through the thin fabric appeared brighter than what she was accustomed to. Or was it because it was darker in the shop?

There was a sense of unease coiling in her stomach. The sun. The sky. It was right there. Just beyond the door. What if it wasn’t all she had thought *-hoped-* it would be? What if they were located in a land that was underground and just had a better light source than her radiating plants? What if it blinded her?

What if it was better than every image she had ever seen? Better than every description a new resident gave? Better than what she had ever imagined?

She had always thought she would leap at any opportunity to see the sky. She had been fighting for the freedom for her flight to venture to the surface for decades. Had attempted to force her way out herself. She never got close enough.

Now? Now there was nothing but a wooden door standing in her way. And she couldn't bring herself to move. She almost felt... afraid.

A hand at her elbow had her jumping. The man snatched his hand back when she tensed. He was concerned. She slumped, muttering an apology. The thought of the sky was too much suddenly. She needed a distraction. Just for a moment.

"I-uh... I don't think I ever caught your name?"

The man's pale complexion turned slightly pink. "I don't believe I gave it! How rude of me! Where have my manners gone?" He made a little bow, offering his hand. "I'm Cain, owner of The Hourglass and local psychic, at your service!"

She huffed a laugh, taking his hand. "Zeke. Local halfbreed and bane of my government's existence."

"Ha!" He straightened. "That's quite the title."

"Eh. I like to think I'm a massive thorn in their side."

Cain gave a little chuckle, leading her to the door. She hesitantly followed at a slower pace. She stopped entirely as he opened the door. It was blinding. She squeezed her eyes shut. A rectangle of light burned behind her eyelids.

She squinted her eyes open, keeping her gaze down. The light stopped just before her feet. The floorboards glowed. Was she shaking? She could only feel her slow heartbeat roughly picking up pace. Cain was waiting. Confused, she was sure. She needed to move. Why was this suddenly so hard?



She scolded herself for having such a hard time with this. She'd grown massive ecosystems where it shouldn't have been possible. She flung herself from the highest cave points just for fun. She swam with giant carnivorous fish. She routinely raised dangerous animals. She routinely *fought* dangerous animals! Why the *fuck* was she struggling with something as innocuous as taking a step forward?! She needed to tackle this the same way she did everything else: running headfirst without thinking about it.

Zeke grit her teeth, clenched her eyes, took a breath, and sprung through the doorway. There were a couple of exclamations of surprise. She paid them no mind. How could she when all she could think about was how warm her body was becoming? How red her eyelids turned in the harsh light? Her chest tightened. She hadn't even seen anything and she could already feel tears gathering.

Right. All at once. Her head tilted up and slowly -so slowly- her eyes opened to a bright blue sky. Wisps of clouds leisurely floated along. She choked on a sob. It was so *big*. There were no stone walls that cut it off. It just kept going in every direction. She'd have to adjust the flowers on the cavern ceiling that mimicked the sky when she got home. They were nowhere close to the grandiosity of the real thing.

Tears were freely falling down her cheeks by the time she found the sun itself. It was so brilliant. It hurt to look at. But, she couldn't bring herself to look away. Not until it became too much. She wobbled on her feet, falling to her knees as she held her face in her hands. She didn't bother hiding her cries.

A hand squeezed her shoulder. Words were being said, but she couldn't quite make them out. She took deep breaths to calm herself. The warmth from the hand helped to ground her. She put her hand over it, squeezing back.

"Sorry," she sniffled. She used her other hand to wipe away her tears to see Cain more clearly. His features were scrunched in concern. "You say somethin'?"

"I asked if you're alright. Some don't respond to teleporting too well." He gave a little half smile. As though he had some experience with it.

“No... No, I’m fine. Physically anyway. I just... I’ve never seen the sky!” She laughed as fresh tears spilled. “The sun! Spirits! I’m going to be able to see the stars at nightfall! Fuck me, I didn’t think it would be so massive!”

He followed her gaze to the sky, confused. He lit up in understanding after a few seconds. “Oh! Is there no sky where you're from?”

Zeke barked a bitter laugh as she stood. She kept hold of his hand. “No, there’s a sky. It’s just...” She took in the people around her for the first time. There were an array of different beings going about their day, intermingling with one another without a second thought. A sight she was used to.

“There’s only humans in my world- well... supposed to be. Most of *us* are descendants of beings taken from other realities for study. There’s a good chunk of us that ain’t human. We’re not supposed to exist, so we’re kept underground to not freak everybody else out.”

Cain was quiet for a moment, just staring at her. He blinked. “Pardon me saying this but- that's awful, I'm sorry you were treated like that. Know that you don't have to worry about treatment like that here, at least.”

Zeke gave a small smile, studying his fingers. “Thanks. It’s not as bad now. They’re not allowed to cull us anymore!” She openly laughed at Cain’s mortified expression, dropping his hand.

“Is that why you’re here then?”

“Hm? I’m here for the tournament?”

“Yes. But, the grand prize. Are you wanting to use the Wish to help free your people?” A moment passed where Zeke merely blinked owlishly at him.

“... Wish?”

Now Cain appeared to be confused. “Yes, the Wish? The winner of the tournament is granted whatever wish they desire. It should’ve been outlined in your invitation.”

“...Oh,” her cheeks grew red. “I, uh... didn’t catch that. I just skimmed it. I was more excited about some good fights if I’m honest. But! That sounds like a great idea!”

There was a moment of awkward silence between the two. Then Cain laughed. Full-bodied. Zeke could feel her entire face grow hot. “Okay! Yeah! I know! Fuck off!”

“N-no! Don’t be angry! You misunderstand!” He took a breath to calm himself. His smile was still bright. “It’s just refreshing for someone to come looking for fun without any thought of the Wish. I can confidently say there haven’t been many of those.” Zeke’s flush didn’t completely disappear, now there from bashfulness.

“Though, I suppose you’ve already had one free wish granted, yeah?” He gestured to the sky.

She hummed. “Almost. Seeing the stars was always my biggest wish. My sister named me Zeke in hopes I would fulfill it.” Bittersweetness coated her smile. “I guess now I wish she was here to witness it with me.”

“Hm. Do names hold more meaning in your world?” He began leading her in a direction.

“In our dad’s world, names held power. He told us about it when we were little. We didn’t have names yet, so we decided to name each other. Dumb kids thinking names really did hold power in a place where magic doesn’t exist.

“My sister has a heart condition, so I named her Foye, after the oldest person I’d ever met at the time, in hopes she would live to see that age. She named me Zeke, an Aramaic name meaning ‘shooting star’ in hopes I’d one day see them.”

“Then you weren’t dumb kids, were you?” He smiled gently at her. “You’ll see our stars in a few hours. Perhaps your names hold more power than you believe.”

Zeke chuckled, bumping her shoulder into his. “Don’t add to my sap. I’ve already cried enough today.”

As they approached a Crossguard, Zeke couldn't help but feel hopeful. Just by being there she had already experienced more than she ever thought she would. And now with the knowledge of a Wish... Well, honestly, she wanted to be selfish and have a good time. Just for a little while.