

ASHEN SNOW

Crossroads

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Prologue

Grey skies; Ashen snowfall.

A glimmering snowfall.

A snowfall that grows brighter yet brighter.

From glimmer to spark to lightning.

And soon, the snowfall coalesces into the dense blizzard.

A violent, illuminated blizzard that blankets the horizon.

A blizzard that spits forth death and decay. An unforgiving blizzard.

A blizzard that screams through its cutting wind:

No life shall survive; Everlasting life shall live.

No soul shall be heard; Everlasting souls will listen.

No pity for the lost; We have so much more to gain.

Oh, so much more to gain!

And through the blizzard, lightning illuminates and shines upon crystalline mountains.

Mountains filled with perfect, everlasting life.

Filled with those who obey, who listen!

And one day, just one day. . .

Every snowflake will be the same.

Insertion

Above the fogged blizzard, a giant, moth-shaped object cast in shadow can be seen skimming through its hazed surface. The shadowed object's wings reach for the skies, yet they don't flap. Its legs, crooked and knotted, carry something against its underside.

An electric hum surrounds the object. Not a crackle from the thunder under it, but a steady, groaning hum.

A surge of lightning tears the cast of shadow away from the moth, revealing it to be not covered with chitin, but of steel. Frosted steel, coated in both blackened paint and blackened snow. Large words are etched onto its right mid-side:

STRM-BRNGR

Suddenly, the carrier descends into the blizzard, unfettered by its cutting winds and thunderous fog; A fog, where once enveloped within, clearly illuminated the carrier rather than obscure it, including its destination: A ruined structure that stood before the blizzard came. The fate of this structure had been met, buried under hills of snow and soot, lost to time.

The carrier lands, resting its payload close to the structure before letting go of it, flying upwards toward the blizzards surface, out of sight.

The payload's hatch slams down onto the snow with a loud thump. Voices from within can barely be heard from the outside. Seconds later, the payload's passengers begin rushing out of the open hatch in a single file line. They're soldiers. All of whom are wearing black armor while carrying something. Most of them are holding rifles. Only two are carrying hefty two-handed hammers. The sheer size of the hammers reflect their wielder's own stature, their armor as wide as their massive height.

The soldiers continue to move forward. Their collective movement is awkward and laborious as they tread through knee-deep ashen snow. Covering the front of their helmets from the weather, they rush into the ruined building and into its lower floors. The blizzard still roars above them as they all crowd together beside a closed mechanical door.

Relatively sheltered from the blizzard, all the soldiers stop covering the fronts of their helmets. An opening exposes a large mechanical glass eye, grooving inwards within the center of their foreheads. Their glass eye doesn't move, nor does it blink, not even once, constantly emitting a dim, blue light.

One of the two massive soldiers carrying a hammer speaks up. Their voice is noticeably and artificially pitched down, just barely sounding human. "Headman unit, entrance is locked. Requesting remote access, over."

Following their request, a garbled voice is emitted from all the soldiers helmets at the same time, "Negative. Windraiser units, breach the entrance with force. Out."

Having already prepared themselves, both of the hammer wielding soldiers, the windraisers, quickly line up to the door. It's a reinforced, steel door. They swing their hammers over their heads from side to side. With each swing, both of their hammers screech and whirl as their internals absorb the force of their movements before bringing them down upon their target.

It *was* a reinforced, steel door; It's now completely disconnected from its frame, a dented mess as it falls down a staircase that it was protecting. An excellent display of what a windraiser can bring down in mere seconds.

"Push forward," one of the windraisers order before entering the staircase. The smaller soldiers stare at the moving windraiser before following them.

The second windraiser follows afterward as the last one in.

The soldiers begin descending the staircase. The deeper they tread, the weaker the blizzards influence becomes, and the darker it gets. Those with flashlights attached to their rifles don't hesitate to switch them on.

The walls aren't coated in blackened snow. They're concrete walls, aged but still holding strong.

As they descend, the garbled voice begins emitting from all their helmets again, giving them more orders.

“All ground units, secure and contain reality distortion.

Eliminate the amputated.

Do not become separated.

Mission failure will not be tolerated. Out.”

The soldiers don't respond. They're steadfast and already moving with intent to kill and contain.

As soon as they reach the bottom of the staircase, they step forward until light fixtures surrounding them flicker to life in response to their presence. Metallic groaning noises echo across the room. Upon hearing the noise, a few of the soldiers visibly jump a little.

Darkness still covers most of the area in the room, but some sections of it are still visible. Monitors are drilled onto the floor and walls, inactive and useless. The sprawling, towering silver walls shine and glimmer from the light, at least the ones that aren't dirtied up by soot and burns from the loose wiring that plagues the room. In front of the walls are giant furnace-shaped tanks that shoot up from the floor, all the way to the ceiling. Pipes are exposed above, the panels protecting them laying on the ground. Debris litters the room, enough to make walking a slight hassle. However, the soldiers still press forward rather easily, barely hampered by the terrain. They make their way to a hallway with unusual twists and turns, the path occasionally forking in unclear directions.

Moments pass as they press forward. The metal groans haven't stopped yet, still echoing across the room, as if it can't sit in one spot. They come across another room. Darkness covers the area. Lots of monitors. Towering walls. Furnace-shaped tank. Exposed pipes. . .

Stepping into the room, the lead windraiser turns their head toward their squad before speaking to them, “All fogpiercer units, report status.”

The smaller soldier with equipment on their belt speaks up, “Fogpiercer Four ready,” they start, their altered voice not as deep as the windraiser's, “No signs of hostiles. Cognisance

stable.”

“Fogpiercer Three ready, No signs of hostiles. Cognisance stable.”

“Fogpiercer Two, wait...” the soldier stops, “No... Uh, One?”

The lead windraiser stops moving, forcing everyone behind them to halt. They turn around completely. “You want an amputative discharge?” they flatly but firmly threaten, tightening their grip on their hammer, “Your relative unit number, repeat it immediately.”

No response for several seconds. The rest of the squad stares at both the confused fogpiercer and the angry windraiser like they’ve just been lit on fire.

The leading windraiser stares at the rest of the squad before facing forward once more. Right before they take the first step, the garbled voice blares from everyone’s helmets without warning, its volume much louder than before, “Disobedient communication intercepted. All ground units, further failure to comply will result in service reassignment.”

Feedback from their helmets screeches after the voice stops, followed by a deafening silence. The soldiers in the back stare at each other for a while before they move forward.

They push into another split hallway. They pick a different direction, entering another room. The groaning has become louder, yet the same tanks stand, the same walls tower. The same pipes and wires splay across the room, not having changed, not even once.

The windraiser in the back of the group stops for a second, looking around the room. They then face the rest of the squad, who are still moving without them. “Fall in,” they order, “Code One-Twenty O’ Four, possible recursion anomaly may have manifested.”

Suddenly, as the windraiser finishes speaking, the metal groans cease, its echos still lingering before they quickly decay into silence. The soldiers, who were moving towards the windraiser they left behind, have frozen in place as they aim their weapons toward random directions in the room.

And then, like water, a swift yet smudged movement appears in the corner of their eyes, drawing everyone’s attention towards a single direction: Toward the ceiling.

...

The ceiling’s pipes have ruptured.

Suddenly, the lone windraiser raises their voice, readying their hammer. “Five o’clock, move out! Move out,” they sternly yell, pointing their hammer’s shaft toward the direction of the staircase they came from. “Regroup and reassess!”

“Negative,” the other windraiser responds before directing their gaze towards the rest of the squad, “All units, contain potential hostile. Compliance with mission directive is mandatory,” they remind. With that order, they remain where they are, still fixated in the direction they saw movement towards.

Before the lone windraiser could respond, one of fogpiercers, standing in the middle of the room, swiftly points their rifle right above them before yelling, “Hostile sighted! On my positio—”

Dripping, white melting limbs; Wrapped. Ascension into darkness. Out of sight. The shouting soldier yells no more.

A horrible screech of rust and frost follows.

Without warning, the lone windraiser rushes to the group. They shove aside those in their way before pulling the trigger on their hammer. “Back!” they yell, waiting for those around them to back away as their hammer’s internals thump and grind increasingly. After a few seconds, they swing their hammer in the direction of the screech, a massive projectile of white hail following the back of the hammer’s head.

The hail crashes into the ceiling as both frozen shrapnel and dust blankets the entire room. Leaving behind a frosted crater, the impact causes the entire ceiling to flex as if it was shuddering. Grinding and screeching of metal surrounds the room. The light fixtures blow out, engulfing the room in a darkness, the only light from flying sparks as the exposed wires are severed.

No orders are given. Everyone clears out immediately as they run towards the closest exit from the room. All the soldiers, except the windraiser who attacked the ceiling, enter a hallway together. Watching the ceiling, the windraiser makes a quick judgement and stops in their tracks, narrowly avoiding falling debris that surely would’ve crushed them.

Before the entire room collapses on itself, the lone windraiser rushes to a separate hallway, just barely escaping the same fate this structure had met long ago.

Lost Heart

“All ground units, respond, over.” the lone windraiser intones, their hand pressing against the side of their head. Their glass eye is the only source of light, a negligible one at that.

“Rep-a-. Tra-nsmis-ion un—. C—.—a—. —ov—” the helmet cuts out before all that’s left is noise, followed by a loud beep, then silence.

The windraiser falls onto one knee, repeatedly knocking on the side of their helmet like one would with a broken radio.

...

Dead silence.

It takes a moment before they stand up again, gripping their hammer with both hands.

The cacophony of destruction behind them begins to die down. Looking behind them, they only see rubble block the path from where they came. The light fixtures flicker back on as the shaking stops, illuminating where they were facing before.

Although risky, they could have easily tried destroying the rubble in order to reach their team again.

Instead, they take a moment to turn around, facing the lit path. As they do, they notice something in the other end of the hallway.

“Is that...”

A white tail, poking at the other end of a corner.

The lost windraiser wipes their forehead, cleaning dust from their glass eye. As they do, they see the tail pull away, whatever’s attached to it moving away from them. “O-Oh...Huh...” they mutter to themselves.

They don't hesitate to move toward where the tail had disappeared. They take their first step forward; A steady step, with many more to follow.

The path they tread is glaringly different from the previous one. Metal grating coating in a golden hue covers the floor, showing more rooms blanketed in darkness underneath. After turning the corner, they come across an incredibly spacious area, with tiled floors and ornate walls. Silver pillars rise from the floor to the roof; An arched roof. Balconies are supported by smaller pillars as well.

Most importantly, the sound of cutting winds from the blizzard above is completely unheard.

"Code One-Twenty Forty-Five, Possible depth displacement may have occurred..." the lost windraiser mutters under their breath before adding, "...I'm incredibly far down."

Standing out, enormous stone statues of people litter the room, being about ten times as tall compared the windraiser. Their figures depict both men and women from a time long gone. Some take the place of the pillars, appearing to strain themselves as they carry the weight of the structure in their shoulders. Some are standing and sitting in various dramatic poses. All of them stand above platforms with smudged, bronze plates with engravings covered by a years worth of dust and grime.

The lost windraiser stares at them for a couple of seconds before marching onward as they always have, their attention fixed on what's in front of them. They turn a corner, and right as they're about to leave the room, something manages to catch their gaze. They turn their head toward it before their stance visibly softens.

It's two statues alongside each other, a man in combat armor, and a woman in a gown. Their steel frames are exposed by glaring cracks and openings from where their joints would lie, appearing as if they'll crumble after a couple more years. The armored man kneels, holding something towards the gowned woman. The gowned woman stands, covering where their mouth would be with both hands.

The statue of the armored man, unlike the rest, is missing a platform underneath it.

The windraiser looks up and down at both of the statues before their gaze is directed at the gowned woman's platform, staring for several more seconds before slowly walking

towards it.

They rest their hammer on their shoulders, placing their palm on the statue's plate. Wiping away the dust from the panel, the lost windraiser exposes the previously hidden engravings into the air. . .

They're more than just engravings. Words are etched onto the panel:

VIOLET SHEPHERD

3402-3423

They stare at the panel before looking towards the other statues.

Their palm slides off the panel as they take a step back. They turn around before rushing towards the other statues with heavy steps, cleaning one plate after another.

KAMDEN PARKINSON

3394-3422

HONEY LANGFORD

3382-3423

NETTIE WHINERY

3391-3422

SOPHIE ELTON

3389-3423

The lost windraiser takes a step back from the last statue. They stare at the statue for a long moment before finally turning away. However, as they look up, they notice something: A head of a fox with fur as white as snow, peering at them from behind a statue. Its eyelids are barely open, appearing as if they're shut. Its forehead bearing a red, eye shaped mark on its forehead. When the windraiser makes eye contact with it, the fox slips its head back, hiding away.

Then, a hard clanging sound echos across the room. The lost windraiser's hammer had slipped from their grasp, falling to the tile floor.

"... A-A fox — I think? Yeah... Yeah, that's a fox!" they yell.

Although the helmet still alters and deepens the windraiser's voice, their tone of voice is audibly elated, rather than flat. Soon after, they cover the helmet's mouthpiece with both of their hands as if they said something terrible.

For the first time in countless years, they've actually expressed happiness out loud.

Then, they realize something. There's no squad to yell at them here, no headman listening to every word they say... It's just them, and the fox.

Picking their hammer back up, they rest it on their shoulder as they carefully approach where the fox was hiding. Although donning incredibly bulky armor, they manage to silently creep around the corner until...

"Ha," they blurt out in a monotone voice, prying towards the other side. The fox isn't there anymore.

"Hmm..."

The windraiser straightens themselves up before looking around the room. "Oh..." they whisper to themselves, "It's not... scared, is it?" Still next to the statue, they tilt their head sideways before looking upwards, straight into the statue's eyes. They appear as if staring back, its sculpted expression happening to be one of anger.

"What did I do wrong?" they suddenly blurt out loud before covering their mouth again.

"Not good. Shouldn't ask questions... Wait..."

... Why *shouldn't* I ask questions?"

Their gaze shoots downwards, toward the statue's platform once more. "And why don't I have a name of my own?!" the lost windraiser yells with audible, fiery emotion, which seeps through their helmet's voice modulation as it fails to contain it. Their fist bolts toward the platform's nameplate before piercing straight through it, effectively erasing the middle of it.

Then, the windraiser stares back up at the statue, its joints also cracked and decayed. Something odd is hugging its exposed steel mesh between the statue.

Something that soon begins to swell.

Something that unleashes a horrible, rusted, and muffled screech that erupts in pain and

fury.

And as the windraiser immediately reels backwards and holds their hammer with both hands, what was once unmoving now moves. What was once dead, now angered.

Yin and Yin, Ash and Snow

The windraiser doesn't hesitate to make distance from the animated statue. Their stance hardens alongside the statue's resolve; A resolve to dislodge itself to the platform it's bound to. Its steel mesh creaks and wails in a duet with the pained, muffled shrieking of something else inside it.

The first foot is dislodged, carrying itself in the air before stepping onto the tile floor, followed by the second.

The joints of the statue have completely broken apart. Only steel and swelling tissue keeps its limbs intact. The muffled shrieking gets louder and louder until, finally...

The statue's head is suddenly and violently ripped from its stiff neck as it shoots up into the air like a cannonball, replaced by a pulsating and swelling cartilage. A dripping, white sinew follows, tethered to the statue's head until it crashes and embeds itself into the ceiling.

The statue grabs a hold of the head's sinew like a rope before forcefully pulling it down, freeing the head from the ceiling. It then falls into their hands.

What follows is the loudest, hoarsest shriek that the lost windraiser has ever remembered hearing; A shriek that wakes the other statues from their stillness.

But the statues do not shriek as well. They merely turn their heads as their gazes follow both the headless statue and the windraiser.

The pair slowly close the distance between themselves, their steps heavy and steadfast. Neither the headless statue, nor the lost windraiser take their sight off each other.

...

The fox is back, watching alongside the other statues as it sits in the open. An elegant bow tie is wrapped around its tail, its ribbons splayed across the ground with a flamboyant red-to-orange fade. The windraiser catches it in the side of their vision before completely turning their head toward it.

“Oh, hey little frie—”

Before the windraiser could finish, they find themselves in a wall.

They find themselves *in* a wall. A crater in the wall. They’ve just been slapped like a mosquito across the room. They’re still moving, although it takes a moment for them to even show a reaction.

“... Huh. Sucks,” they intone before readjusting their helmet, dusting themselves off. They reach for their hammer, only to grasp nothing but air. Looking around, they still find the fox sitting idly by as it continues to watch, equally unfaltered.

“Oh. Oh, it’s not scared anymore? That’s nice.”

Then, they notice their hammer on the ground soon after... Right behind the headless statue that continues to approach them.

“... Less nice.”

Completely dislodging themselves from the crater, the lost windraiser falls to their feet before walking toward the headless statue once more.

“... Why don’t I have my own name?” the lost windraiser mutters to themselves.

In wordless response, the headless statue lets out another piercing screech. Still holding its own head in its hands, it reels its shoulders and holds its head above its neck. It continues, like one would right before throwing something, and keeps reeling and reeling, much, much farther than any normal human could.

“Wait... Did I even have one?”

The spectating statues slowly lean forward, directing their attention toward the headless statue’s torn head. They then look back at the windraiser... who’s about half the size of it.

“Why can’t I remember my own name?”

As the statue winds up its throw, the windraiser’s brisk walk slowly but steadily quickens into a run, and then a sprint towards the statue. They reel their own shoulder backwards as well, clenching their fist.

“... And why do I still know how to fight?” they continue, their voice increases in volume with every sentence, “Why can’t I remember? Why didn’t I ask this before?! Have I!?”

The headless statue lets out a grinding roar as its only warning, the tissue exposed within its joints swelling as it hurls its head toward the windraiser.

With little time to waste, the windraiser propels their fist towards the incoming statue head.

And as their fist meets stone, the force causes the windraiser’s feet to bore into the floor.

But the windraiser, expecting such force from the beast, had once again proven themselves worthy of their title. A sharp gust of wind rattles the room as once deadened dust is lifted in the air. The head is sent back, the attached sinew arching as its trajectory is changed.

The headless statue, quite literally, saw itself coming before its head carves a chunk of its torso off.

The headless statue suddenly returns to stillness once more, its limbs loosening around its joints as the mass inside squeals and melts away. It collapses toward the floor’s golden grating before its weight rips through it, falling into the darkened room below.

Once again, crashing begins to die down, and the raised dust starts to fall. The other statues become still once more, their gaze resting where their former peer had fallen.

As if nothing happened, the windraiser lazily uproots their legs from the floor before jogging toward to their hammer, resting it on their shoulder. They blankly look around the room until they spot the fox once more.

The windraiser’s stance softens once again, “Oh! Little friend! Stay— Wait right there,” they shout happily as they find their words, dashing straight toward the fox. Despite prior events, the fox flinches a little.

The windraiser stops in their tracks.

...

“Do... Do I still...?” they ask the fox.

Obviously, there is no response, but the fox still adopts a paranoid stature.

“Heeey...” the windraiser tries to singsong in a high-pitched, yet still altered voice, “It’s okay...”

The fox visibly calms down, but begins to back away a little.

“No! No, no, no. Don’t go,” the windraiser pleads, laying their hammer on the floor.

...

“I’m not— I’m never going to hurt you,” they reassure. They clasp their hands together before leaning forward. “Is it my helmet...? Hold on, Ah—” they strain as they grasp at their helmet, struggling to pull it off. Their altered voice wavers and crackles as they use more and more force, “Come... on...”

With enough force, the windraiser rips the helmet off, sending sparks in the air. Its mouthpiece emits a faint buzz, then static, then nothing. They’ve just done what would normally be unthinkable. Returning to their squad is not an option anymore.

And all because of a fox, something the windraiser has not seen for a *very* long time.

And right as they’re about to drop the helmet, they take the moment to look inside it before finding something. Something engraved within the helmet itself. Two words, carved with hasty strokes, hidden away from the outside:

QUIN

REMEMBER

Severed Ouroboros

“...Quin,” the windraiser intones to herself, her voice coarse and hushed, her expression blank as if she’s asleep. Her face is an icy pale blue, her skin frozen and dulled in the light. A thin metal plate completely covers where her hair would be. Her eyes are completely shut; They do not blink nor open, yet they tighten slightly as Quin holds the helmet up to her forehead. She stares at it for a moment before it falls out of her hands, hitting the dusty tiled floor with an echoed clang.

She then looks back at the fox. It’s in the same spot, sitting down as it watches her.

An incredibly wide smile plays on Quin’s lips. It’s not the first time today. “Still scared, little buddy?” Quin asks the fox. Although an exhausted tone still seeps through her voice, it now carries a gentle, softened tone. With due caution, Quin begins to approach the fox once more. It does not back away this time.

“See?” Quin reassures, “It’s okay. . .”

A couple of seconds pass until Quin, finally, is now within arms length of the fox.

Righteous success.

Quin kneels on the floor in an attempt to level her gaze with the fox. Their stares meet as Quin rests her palms on her knees. “Are you lost like me?” Quin asks the fox in a tranquil whisper.

The fox shakes its head no.

“Oh,” Quin whispers, tilting their head, “What are you doing here then? It’s not safe here.”

The fox averts its gaze to nowhere in particular before pointing its paw behind Quin. She

turns her head back for a moment.

“Huh?”

She then turns her head back, only to find that the fox had disappeared once more. “Oh. . .” Quin sighs, her smile fading a little, at least until she feels something bump against her ankle. She turns to find the fox right beside her, along with something else.

A crimson-red envelope is caught between the fox’s jaw, held up towards Quin’s knee-pads.

“A message?” Quin asks, taking the envelope from the fox. She stares at it for a while before looking back at the fox.

“. . . For someone else?”

Again, the fox shakes its head no.

“Oh,” Quin confirms before staring at the envelope again, “Thanks you. . .” she trails. Rather than tear it open, she begins fumbling with its seal, her armor’s gloves struggling to slip under the envelope’s golden pin. After much effort, she finally opens the envelope, revealing a letter inside. Pulling it out, she begins to read it. The message itself is written with nothing but a *flamboyant elegance* and *utmost respect* towards its *dearest* reader:

Dear Interloper,

You’re bewilderingly nosey, and so are your friends. Please tell them to stop poking at the fabric of reality, it’s bad for their health.

However, unlike your friends, your grasp of basic manners and decency is appreciated. Furthermore, your affinity to seek something other than violence has made itself apparent.

As thanks to your display of good will, you, and you alone, are hereby invited to The Crossroads as an entrant for a tournament. You will be given hospitality for free. Remain undefeated, and you’ll be granted a wish of your choosing.

Pave your golden path, receive your wish.

Consider yourself scouted,

The God Eater

P.S. Don't pet the fox. Your hands are cold.

After reading the aforementioned letter, Quin looks back at the fox, who tilts its head in response.

“Well, uh. . .” Quin hesitates with a smile, “How do I put this?” she begins, looking back at her helmet. It’s still on the floor. “I don’t think I’m in a position to tell my ‘friends’ to stop what they’re doing. I don’t even know what they’re doing myself.”

Quin then looks back at the fox, widening her smile as she slides the invitation under her armor’s padding. “Still. . . I accept the invitation. Thank you, little friend,” she says before standing up and walking the other way, “Juuuust let me grab my hammer,” she lilt. While Quin’s preoccupied, the fox’s ribbons begin to sway as reality itself ripples between them.

Suddenly, the ribbons fall back down as the fox’s head darts towards one of the room’s balconies. When Quin picks up her hammer, she looks back at the fox before her smile immediately fades into a blank expression. “Something wrong?” she asks blankly before following the fox’s gaze.

Quin’s squad is back; Just the other windraiser, and only two of the fogpiercers. They quickly exchange glances before the other windraiser begins barking orders. “Code Ten O’ Seven, rampant windraiser unit. Secure the parameter. Preparing to administer amputative discharge.”

Meanwhile, the fox had already begun dashing to the room’s closest exit, the hole in the ground that the headless statue had made mere minutes ago. Quin was quick to follow, her grip around her hammer firm and steady. As they make their escape, the enemy windraiser vaults over the balconies railing before falling front of Quin, blocking her path and separating her from the fox. There’s still a fair bit of distance between them, and the enemy windraiser stands their ground.

Quin doesn't slow down, nor does she hesitate to pull the hammer's trigger as it thumps and grinds. As Quin rapidly approaches the enemy windraiser, they harden their stance as they simply hold their hammer over their shoulder, ready to swing it with unyielding force at any moment.

Unapologetically by the book, as expected.

"Goodbye," Quin flatly whispers to herself before swinging her own hammer, sending a flurry of hail. . . upwards, straight over the enemy's head.

Quin's hail hits its mark; The pillars underneath the balcony are cut through by frozen shrapnel, causing them to crumble. The balcony soon follows, crashing down upon the enemy windraiser as they attempt to run away. However, they fail to escape, and are soon buried under layers upon layers of crumbling concrete.

"Should keep them busy," Quin states, dust rising around her. She sprints around the absolute mess of debris, towards where the fox ran off to. Luckily for Quin, it was waiting for her. The fox's ribbons are raised once more, yet they hover over Quin's hand.

"You want me to hold onto these?" Quin quickly asks.

The fox nods.

Without hesitation, Quin rests her hammer on her shoulder with one hand, gripping onto the fox's ribbons with the other. When she does, the fox jumps into the darkness, with Quin following close by.

And they keep falling.

And falling.

Until. . .

Epilogue

Moonlight. Clear skies.

A glimmering sky... and nothing more.

A glimmering horizon, and nothing less.

A field of grass and flowers that hums through its gentle embrace:

“Heeeeey... Wake up, sleepy head...”

Quin is laying face-down on the grass, which, obviously, continues to blanket her vision in darkness. Her hammer lies beside her.

“Mph—Mmmph...?” Quin mutters into the dirt, right before inhaling it. She slowly pulls herself up before spitting the mud out like gum.

“Oh, I’m done falling?” Quin asks, still facing the ground. She then then looks up, and for the first time, she sees a world she’s never seen before: A vibrant meadow of flowers, surrounded by skyscrapers and mountains and moonlight.

“Hi!” A voice responds, one that Quin can hear right beside her; A soprano that practically bounces with energy and color. “Hi, Hi, Hello!”

Quin rolls onto her back, staring at the sky with a blank expression and shut eyes. She then lifts her head up; Her dull gaze is met with a very bright expression, one that’s hard to make out with moonlight being its only competition.

“Soooo...? What’s your naaaaame?”

“Quin.”

“Yeah?! Quin, huh?”

“Quin. Please don’t call me ‘Interloper.’”

“Oh, quick to talk about yourself already?”

“... You’re awfully bright,” Quin complains.

“Huh, a little rude. . . It wouldn’t hurt if *you* tried turned that frown upside down, wouldn’t it?”

“N—No. Sorry. No, you’re really, really bright. I can’t see.”

...

“... Ohhhhh!”

Retaining her color, the friendly ball of light in front of Quin begins to dim.

What’s left is a figure that stands out against the stars behind her, with more shades of color than the meadow of flowers behind her, “Hi, I’m Miss X by the way, Hi.”

“... Hello, Ms. X,” Quin responds.

“Hi!” Miss X responds yet again, “So what brings you here?”

“A fox.”

Miss X giggles, “Yeah...? A fox?”

“Yes. A white fox. It had a bow tie, and ribbons, and it was small,” Quin blurts quickly before stopping herself.

“... Is it still here?”

“Nope! Buuuuuut,” Miss X singsongs, “It left a present!”

Quin immediately sits up, squeezing her closed eyelids, “Where?!” she asks, beginning to wildly search her surroundings.

It takes her a second before realizing that something is already in her hand: A golden bell, attached to a red necklace.

“The fox had given me this?” Quin asks Miss X.

“Kinda, but nope! That’s courtesy of whoever sent you the invitation,” Miss X corrects.

Quin’s eyebrows raise, “... Invitation? How do you know I got an invitation?”

Miss X's smile, somehow, widens even more, "Surprisingly attentive! It's cause of your tail, silly!"

...

"I'd feel like I'd know that I have a tail," Quin intones.

...

"... Oh. Oh, yeah, you can't see it. Sorry, my bad!"

"Swell," Quin drones, "For a second, I almost got excited."

"Well...!" Miss X starts, leaning forward as she stands, "You should be excited..."

"Why?"

Miss X straightens herself before throwing her hands up in the air, "Cause it means... *formally speaking*... That you're officially a part of something great..." She twirls both of her wrists before pointing to the glimmering city in the distance.

Quin's expression softens, "Oh... The tournament," she states.

"Yeeeeup! Honestly though," Miss X calms down, "It's a good thing that you have one, or else you really would've been an 'Interloper.'"

Ignoring Miss X's last comment, Quin's head falls back onto the grass, resting both of her arms atop her armor as she stares at the night sky once more.

"... Ms. X?" Quin asks.

"Mhm?"

Quin then breathes in the heaviest breath she can manage, right before letting out a deep sigh.

"Thanks for talking to me."

"... No problem... Just trying to make sure you didn't die on the way down is all," Miss X, rather bluntly, says with the same cadence she's always had.

Quin doesn't respond, she just continues to stare at the night sky. With nothing but the rustling of grass to fill the silence, Miss X sits down beside Quin as they both stare at the

sky.

They then spend a fair bit of the night stargazing. Two completely different people had found happiness in each other's company:

A star and a snowflake together, an impossibility now possible.

Afterword

From the Author

This is an audition entry to a competition called the *Summer Leagues*, an OCT (Original Character Tournament).

I was told about it by a very good friend of mine who was also participating, Jenn (her pen-name is “Goat”). At the time, I was working on a very ambitious narrative game for my university’s capstone; By the time of writing this, I still am. I consider myself an experienced writer, but I’ve never written an actual, public story with confidence before. Thus, wanting more experience, I asked the friend for details about the OCT; She happily gave them to me. I’m thankful. (She’s also somewhat aware of my biases and idiosyncrasies, which are shamelessly reflected on this work. I can’t help myself, and I don’t apologize.)

I spent 15 days planning the direction for my character and the world surrounding them. The rest went into actually writing about it. I also got considerably better with my writing as it went on. It’s fun and I’d like to continue. (I also wanted to add illustrations within the actual material for the submission, but I got *way* too carried away with the conversation Quin has with Miss X.)

As for the presented material, I hope it speaks for itself. If you’re a participant and want to reach out to me for any reason, **please do**.



Cheers,

Alaa “Woodensponge” Ramzi