

*Shingggg!*

The quick, clear sound of metal on metal. Damp, novaculite brick against blade in repeating, soothing motions. Rather ironic, how comforting it could be to maintain one's weapons. A little annoying though, for the feeling of gritty, wet whetstone against her palms wasn't the most enjoyable. She chuckled to herself at the realization.

"Well, what's got you in such a good mood?" Came the voice of her friend from across the firepit. It was unsurprising that Alistair had noticed. He was, after all, their knight.

"Nah, nothing much. Just thinking about my wet whetstone." She smiled, taking pains to hold back her snicker at how his face instantly dropped into an exasperated frown. He groaned, pressing his face into his hands.

"Do you really have to always torment us with your awful jokes?" He pleaded.

"I dunno," Suddenly, hands on her shoulders, resting there like they owned the place. And while normally she would have tensed up instantly at anyone touching her like that, these hands were familiar. Calluses from the grip of a dagger adorning his palms, with thin scratches circling his fingers from digging up medicinal herbs. Taking a moment to smile up at her companion, she allowed Caspian to playfully prop his arms up on her head, looking over the fire at Alistair like a noble might. Not that a noble would ever be out in this backwater forest. He scoffed, tilting his nose up to gaze in faux disdain at the knight.

"I think Juno's jokes are lovely, thank you very much." His tone was pompous, a perfect impression of a stuffy aristocrat, betrayed only by the eager smile he never quite managed to stifle. He and the knight lingered there for a moment, facing each other in a strange, albeit

amusing duel of wits. Such was their preferred way of bantering when words wouldn't come; Whoever broke eye contact first would be the loser. They stared, stared, stared, sta-

"You actually gonna sharpen your blades, or am I gonna have to do it while you two have your lover's spat?" Deadpanned their fourth member. Cloaked in silky black fabric and armed with a white wooden staff, Hyacinth made an imposing figure as she lounged upon a nearby log. The two sprang apart.

"Sorry, 'Cinthy! I was gettin' to it-"

"-but this brutish armor stand-"

"That scraggly brat-"

"Interrupted me!"

The mage sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose before leveling the two with The Look. Instantly, both boys scrambled to their respective weapons, taking up their whetstones and beginning to polish them furiously, as though if they focused hard enough they could escape her wrath. While Juno knew Hyacinth would never use magic on them without their explicit say, she had no such qualms about giving them a good whack over the head. Twirling a strand of hair around her finger, Hyacinth turned to her.

"Those boys," she joked. "How do they expect to fight off any Imps with a blade duller than a brick?" Juno snickered.

"Maybe they plan on trying to slice 'em using Mordshlag. After all, everyone knows the best way to cut things is with the pommel,"

Hyacinth laughed, a delicate, tinkling sound, one entirely at odds with her dirtied fighting robes.

“Speaking of Imps, those two have been much too distracted with their mating rituals to think about where we’re going next. I was thinking Tissandia, or maybe Manir,” Head tilted slightly to one side, she began to sand down the wood of her weapon as she spoke. “Any thoughts?”

Pausing, Juno contemplated the question. Tissandia and Manir *were* both nice around this time, but there were few creatures in the area, which while good, meant there would be little money for their ragtag band of hunters. Perhaps Niflkhun would be better. Cold though it was, there were always plenty of contracts to go around. She said as much, and Caspian perked up.

“Ooh, yes! Niflkhun is so pretty, and they’ve always got-”

The world wavered.

*“Juno...”*

She flinched, glancing around, and it suddenly seemed much harder to focus on what her friends were saying.

“...and such pretty wildlife, and oh, the birds there! You have to see them, they’re just-”

*“Juno, it’s time to stop now, dear...”*

Had it always been this foggy? She could have sworn it had been clear just a moment ago, but now mist was swirling around her like snakes, stealing her sight and muting her hearing.

“...such soft feathers... gotta ... to believe it...”

*“Juno...”*

“Juno!” Rang the voice of her mother, and she jumped.

“There you are! Good, good. It's time to start work now, alright? You still have the history project to work on, so there's no time to zone out now! I know how much you love your little daydreams, but it's time to get started, sweetie.” She chided, and Juno resisted the urge to bury herself in her blankets. As it was, she still slunk down into them slightly, as though if she hid well enough she could escape the tribulations of being a functional member of society. Her mom frowned.

“I know, but it's not that hard, right? Surely you want to get an A this quarter! Just make sure you follow the instructions *exactly*, alright? We don't want a repeat of last time in physics, when you-” Juno cut her off with a groan.

“I know, I know, please don't remind me. I know what I have to do, mom, and believe me, I know perfectly well what I've been *failing* to do.”

Her mother sighed.

“You haven't been failing sweetie, you just need to try a little harder next time!” She chastised, and Juno bit down on a retort. She *hated* how patronizing her mother was, and yet she couldn't even get mad at her, because she never realized it. It was always, ‘Do you want me to stay so you can focus?’ like Juno wanted her hovering right over her shoulder to correct her every mistake. Always ‘I'm not trying to stress you out!’ instead of actually *doing* anything to calm Juno down when she made her cry. Always-

“I'm only trying to help you. Do you want to go for a walk to wake yourself up, maybe?” Her mother crooned at her, and Juno stifled a bitter snort. Yup, right on the money. Pushing herself up on her arms, she sighed.

“Yeah, I think so. I wanna get out of here for a while,” She muttered, and her face contorted with a smile more akin to a grimace.

*After all, didn't she always?*

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It had been a pretty decent stroll, all things considered. The weather was pleasant, a cool breeze tousling her hair playfully, and if it reminded her of Caspian's mischievous smile whenever he would intentionally muss it up, well, no one had to know that but her. Everything seemed to remind her of them, nowadays. With every plant came a mental note to research it for him to see if it had any medicinal properties. With every rock, a passing thought of if Alistair would be able to skip *this* one, every flower a distant wondering of if Hyacinth would like wearing it in her hair. She finally looked upwards as she approached her door once again. She had been focused on the ground most of the walk, so caught up in her thoughts that she had ended up running into multiple trees. There were definitely still a few leaves in her hair. A chuckle escaped her as she turned the key in the lock, placing her bags down and making her way up to her room once again. It was probably a bad idea to do all her work in the same room she did all her sleeping in, but she couldn't find it in herself to particularly care about that. It was comfortable, after all.

Lowering herself into the bliss of her blankets, she dramatically groaned as she pulled her computer up from off of the floor. It was time to act like a human being again, productivity and all. Sighing, she signed in and began to scroll through her emails.

*'New assignment, new assignment, assignment graded, new discussion, message from the hospital, text analysis due, deadline for-'* She stopped suddenly, rapidly returning to the

hospital's email. Her cursor hovered over it, and she could see her hand shaking to the beat of her rapidly rising heart rate. She had managed to finagle her way onto the email list for the hospital, wanting to have access to information herself instead of just reading over her mother's shoulder. She had sworn up and down she wouldn't stress about it, and she hadn't.

Until now, she supposed.

*'Please,'* She begged internally, *'Please be good news, please...'*

Steeling her courage, she clicked.

*'Dear Mrs. and Ms. Mullner,'* it read. *'Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the staff here at our institution, the condition of Mr. Mullner has continued to worsen. What with the slight shortage of available staff to care for patients in the regular ward, we have made the decision to transfer the patient to the intensive care unit. Please rest assured that while there, he will...'* She stopped reading.

The intensive care unit. The ICU. The thing always mentioned in movies or dramas, whenever a character got badly injured. The place where doctors were constantly on call to keep their patients from falling apart at the seams. The place where everything smelled of disinfectant, as though if enough was sprayed the workers would be able to stifle the scent of sickness and stale tears.

The place where her dad would be going.

It didn't feel real. It didn't feel real at all, not with the way the room was starting to blur, her sight becoming a blurry mirage of colors not unlike the sort of thing she imagined one would find in a modern art gallery. Her mind was starting to fog up, tendrils of mist reaching for her, and she let herself be dragged away with nary a protest.

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As Caspian gently stirred the pot the innkeeper had agreed to lend them, his thoughts drifted. He had been trying to focus on the stew, but it really wasn't easy. All the delicious fumes kept going to his head! Shaking himself out of his momentary reverie, he forced his mind to stay on the spices he needed to add. One dash of cumin, maybe some paprika, oh, and a bit of dried and powdered chamomile flowers, both for flavor and to reduce anxiety. The team had had a couple close calls recently, and everyone was still a bit on edge. That combined with how off Juno had been recently...

He sighed. He didn't know what to do, their captain had been acting so strange recently! Drifting off mid-conversation, and always with that weird, sad look in her eyes! She was always so reluctant to return to the cottage she came from too, to the point where even their resident idiot knight had noticed. With luck, the stew, as well as a bit of light conversation, would help her to shake whatever this funk was. He had picked these herbs himself, and he was fully prepared to brag about it, especially if it could cheer up Juno.

Adding a few sprigs of basil, he suddenly noticed the sound of approaching footsteps. The cadence was quiet and slow, tired almost, like the person making them was all but out of energy. He pushed the thought away, smiling to himself and turning to face the door as his companions glanced up themselves. Juno was here!

However, seeing the state his captain was in, he found his joy all but evaporating. She was *haggard*. Hair slightly disheveled, a wan look in her eyes, and her jacket hanging half off her body, she was practically the dictionary definition of bedraggled. Still tending the stew, he couldn't get up to examine her, but that role was quickly taken by Alistair. All but squishing her

face in his hands, he tilted her head this way and that, like he was trying to find the source of her state.

“Captain, the hell happened? You look like you’ve been being used as a dreameaters dog toy! Why’re you here?”

God, Caspian wished he could get up! Why’d the idiot have to say it like that? He should *bite* him, give him a good chomp for being so insensitive. Hyacinth seemed to be of a similar mind, albeit one far more dignified than he. With a quick whap to the head, Alistair was shoved aside so the mage could get a better look.

“What he *means* to say is that you don’t look like you’ve been feeling so good. You certainly aren’t in any sort of beast-slaying shape, you’re terribly pale.” Flicking her wrist, she levitated the bowl of stew Caspian was currently ladling right out of his hands, maneuvering Juno onto the bed all the while. Gently curling the captain’s fingers around it, she entirely ignored his indignant gaping at her blatant theft. He grumbled to himself. Such disrespect!

Abandoning the now finished stew for the moment, he clambered off the floor and to his feet, wincing as his joints protested his unorthodox cooking location. Settling next to her on the bed, he gently placed the back of his hand upon her forehead.

“Are you sick? Headache, any pain anywhere? You don’t have a fever, which is good, but you look exhausted! Have you been drinking enough?” He fluttered.

Weakly pushing his hand to the side, she smiled up at him wearily.

“I’m fine, Cas. Just a little tired. So, what’s our next contract? You found any yet?”

The three of them collectively gaped at her.

“...Juno,” He started gently, “You know there’s no way we can let you fight like this. You pretty clearly aren’t feeling well, how are you planning to swing your sword with jelly arms? How did you even make it all the way out here like this? For that matter, why? You need rest, why force yourself to come out here when you’re obviously exhausted?”

Grimacing, she swatted at his hand again. “I told you, I’m fine. I just didn’t sleep well, alright? I’m not sick. Now, can we please just find a contract to take?” Spluttering at her apathy, he protested. “Captain, you need to rest-”

“Can we just take the damn contract already?!” She spat, and he could tell that while she instantly regretted it, she wouldn’t be taking it back. But Caspian wasn’t going to be beaten that easily. He was their *healer*, their defense against their own bodies, and no way in hell was he going to just let his patient- No, his *friend*, walk out into battle like this. His comrades only died when he said they could, thank you very much. Straightening up to his full, very terrifying 5’3, he leveled her with his patented doctor stare.

“Juno, you aren’t acting like yourself. You’re irritable, exhausted, and you look like a stray breeze could knock you over. You are *compromised*, Captain. I can’t let you lead us in the field if you aren’t well enough to direct us.” Softening, he patted her head comfortingly.

“You aren’t showing any of the symptoms of sickness aside from exhaustion. You aren’t feverish, sweaty, or any of the usual tells. C’mon, we’re your friends, yeah? You don’t have to be strong around us. So tell me, what’s wrong?”

A pause, silence stretching, fraying, and then-

“I’m s-sorry. I just- everything is so awful, and I don’t even wanna think about it... I don’t wanna go back if all I’m gonna see or hear about is my responsibilities and my- my dad!” She

began to wail. "I just wanna get away from it all! I want to be here, w-with you guys, where everything is fine! I don't want to just- just sit around and wait for my dad to die! I just- oomph!" She was quickly and effectively cut off by Caspian's leg jamming into her stomach, him having thrown himself onto her and wrapping her in a hug like a particularly stubborn octopus.

"C-cas?" She sputtered.

"I'm about to say something and I know you aren't going to like it but I need you to hear me out cause this is really important and you gotta listen to me!" He blurted out. She blinked.

"You won't want to hear this, but Juno, you gotta go back!" She flinched, opening her mouth to protest before being stopped by Hyacinth's gentle hand on her shoulder.

"He's right, darling. If things are truly as you say, then it is all the more important to be there. Time is fleeting, so it is all the more important to be there for what time you have. Should your father recover, he will appreciate your care, and should he not, then you will not want to miss your last chances to be with him."

Wiping her eyes, she miserably looked up at the two of them. Caspian's hug tightened, and he could feel the fabric of Juno's shirt pull as Hyacinth began to rub gentle circles on her shoulder, hear the creak of the floorboards as Alistair approached again to sit nearby.

"I don't... I don't always have the right words for what exactly I want to say, you know? But you should go. If things end up going to shit in the end, then you're gonna want to be there. Even if you're just sayin' goodbye, you want to be there to do that. You've gotta tell him you love him before he goes, yeah?" He murmured, starting unsteadily but slowly becoming more confident as he spoke.

"I guess..." She mumbled, and Caspian could feel her shaky breaths tickling his hair. "I just don't want to see him die..."

Pulling back for a moment, he looked her in the eyes, taking her hands gently in his own.

"I know, but if you don't go back, then for whatever time he has left, you won't be able to see him *live*."

The room was quiet for a couple of minutes, silent save for the breathing of his team and the rustling of their clothing as they did their best to comfort their captain.

"Okay," She spoke suddenly, voice quiet and shaking, but unfaltering nonetheless. "Okay. If you guys think so, then I-I'll do it." She began to rise to her feet, legs trembling, and Alistair quickly made to steady her.

"Careful there," he rumbled, smooth baritone a calming reminder of his presence. She smiled wearily as she made her way to the door of their room before turning to face the three of them.

"Thanks, you guys, really. You've all really helped." Returning her smile with one of his own, Caspian reached into his pocket, fumbling around for a moment before pulling out his spare dagger and extending it out to her.

"Here," He offered. "For the journey back, so you can keep yourself safe on the roads."

Despite the amiability he had been doing his best to channel, she gently pushed it back towards him, wrapping his fingers around the leather hilt.

"Thanks," She whispered, "But I won't be needing it."

"After all, I guess it's only home."