**Amnyria**

“The Old Man teaches nothing.” The voice was raspy, yet warm. The words fell from a mouth wrinkled with age, the woman’s thin lips had all but disappeared into the folds of her skin. Her face wore the many years she’d seen with dignity, and shining out amongst it all were her eyes, still bright and clear. If you could only see her eyes you might guess that she was far younger than the rest of her body portrayed. This was a common feature for the Hour Hands of the Old Man. They say the Old Man’s eyes feel the same, vibrant orbs of curiosity and youth in the face of a man in his sunset years

 The old woman sat on a large, ornately etched metal chair with plush purple pillows for comfort. She was seated at a massive wooden desk with several drawers on her side. Its surface was clean of any papers, holding only a large, black feather quill, largely out of place amongst the scenery of the room. Though it was sparse of furniture, save the desk itself, and the two chairs on either side, a variety of clocks lined its walls. Every open inch had been filled with a different style. There were standing grandfather clocks, chirping cuckoos, clocks that swirled with magic, even a sundial sat in the center of the sole window in the room.

 “The Old Man teaches nothing.” The elderly Hour Hand repeated herself as she stared down the smaller figure sitting across from her, waiting for a response. Her words lilted ever so slightly at the ends as one might do when talking to a child, she was prompting for the figure to complete the thought.

 “But leaves us with our lesson.” The small figure’s voice was far softer than the Hour Hand’s, almost musical in tone and cadence. The completion of the call and response brought a physical ease to the elderly woman. She sat back a bit, settling into the cushions of her chair. She wore the standard black robes of the Hour Hands. The material shimmered slightly, creating a star like effect, a large purple stripe of fabric wove through the ensemble breaking up the inky blackness of the outfit.

Her long white hair was a great source of pride for this particular Hour Hand. She had it elaborately plaited on the top as the rest flowed loosely down to her hips. In her youth it’d been designated as a sign that the Old Man had chosen her, that she’d one day sit exactly where she sat now. She stroked it absentmindedly, her eyes glassing for a moment as she allowed her mind to wander briefly to younger days.

As quickly as she was gone, she was back again, her gaze fixating on the small figure once more. “What seems to be troubling you, Minute Hand?”

“Hour Zendria[[1]](#footnote-0)….” The figure shifted slightly, she was obviously uncomfortable. She fidgeted with her own hair, though not the shock white of Hour Zendria’s it was a brilliant silver, the sort of tone that shimmered in lilacs when the light hit it just right. She too wore it long, though it stopped just below her shoulder blades. The thick curls splayed out from a piece of leather tied loosely at the base of her neck, with a few ringlets refusing to be tamed framing her face. Her skin was light, almost grey-ish in hue. She had the pallor of one recently turned, it wasn’t sickly but it wasn’t quite natural. Zendria wondered briefly if a vampire was sat before her.

“Go on or back, no timeline is so boring as to only move forward, but to see it come to a stop tells no story.” Hour Zendria leaned forward a bit, cradling her hands in front of her, her eyes glimmering once more.

The younger woman blushed slightly, “my apologies Hour. I…I’m not sure how to say this, but I’ve…well I awoke several mornings ago like…*this*.” She gestured quickly to her face, looking up at the Hour for a mere moment, for the first time showing the tell-tale red eyes of vampirism, confirming Zendria’s earlier suspicion.

 Immediately the Hour Hand’s demeanor shifted, the curiosity in her eyes vanished, replaced with a more complex emotion, something far more akin to rage than wonder. “You…*woke* up like this?” the woman’s voice was tinged with almost maternal concern.

 “I’m sorry Hour, I did not mean to upset you. I am not here today to accuse anyone of Infliction.” Zendria flinched initially at the word “infliction”, but as the sentence sunk in her demeanor softened ever so slightly once more.

 The Old Man was the God of a number of things, vampires being one. It is commonly held that he himself was the first vampire of Zyrehm[[2]](#footnote-1). To be a vampire is to be one of The Old Man’s children, whether you followed in your lifetime or not. However it is heresy to perform Infliction, the act of turning a mortal without their consent. Vampires who commit Infliction are hunted by the Clock and Zendria would have had to speak to the Gearwork to coordinate a party to find this filth if the woman had been here to accuse. Not to say that Zendria wouldn’t have done so. To keep the people of Zyrehm and the Clock safe, the discomfort of dealing with the Gearwork would have been worth it, but she was hardly upset to hear she wouldn’t need to.

 “What are you here for?” All pretense had been dropped. The whimsy had gone, as though even Zendria had tired of the act. She didn’t seem aggressive, but fear had crept into the edges of Zendria’s voice.

 “I awoke like this, but I bare no wounds, and no runes. Nothing on my body indicates I should be one of the turned.” Zendria’s brows furrowed at the woman’s words. Despite its origins, modern vampirism was more akin to a curse than a disease, and in such it always left some physical traces of its origin. Though it changes the skin leaving the unnatural hues Zendria had noted of the woman earlier, it didn’t remove wounds, scarring, or tattoos from your mortal life. It just hardens your skin from acquiring new ones. If the woman had been bitten in the tradition of old the wound would have healed into a final scar. If she’d been changed through magic, the runes of the ritual would have etched themselves into her body as well. What she was saying simply flew in the face of what was known.

The woman, sensing Zendria’s hesitance, stood up, pushing her chair out behind her and holding a finger up on her right hand, as if asking for a moment. With her left hand she pulled her hair forward over her shoulder, and plucked at a small bow tied neatly around her neck. As she pulled on the ribbon, her dress dropped to her feet, exposing her body to the elder woman. She turned slowly, now holding her arms out, awaiting the scrutiny of the Hour Hand.

 Zendria began her inspection, floating with speed forward, and waving a hand in front of her face. A delicate pair of half moon styled glasses appeared on the tip of her nose, as she peered down it, flitting around the young woman like a hummingbird, searching for any mark, no matter how small. After a minute, Zendria let out a small gasp at the realization that the woman’s words were true. There was nothing.

The woman who stood in front of her was undeniably a vampire, with her greyed skin and red eyes, Zendria could see now, up close, that small fangs poked out from the bottom of the woman’s upper lips. Absolutely everything screamed *vampire* but there seemed to be no explanation as to how she’d become one. Once again the curiosity glimmered into Zendria’s eyes, she felt alive in a way she hadn’t in years. “How very interesting…tell me Minute Hand, what is your name?”

The woman leaned down, grabbing the dress from about her feet and pulling it back up, once more tying it off to cover herself. “I am Amnyria [[3]](#footnote-2)Fallfought, I have been a Minute Hand on the Clock of the Old Man for more than 3 million minutes. My parents before me, my children to come. I seek only questions in the chaos that unfolds.”

Zendria’s expression changed, she’d not been addressed this formally in quite some time, “To meet a seeker of questions is quite rare these days.”

Amnyria raised her eyes to meet Zendria’s, this time boldly and without the timid essence the interaction had been colored by thus far, “I am in search of a question whose answer has been passed down the generations of my family, a lure bobbing through the waves of time.”

Zendria smiled as she settled herself back into her chair. “Well, Amnyria Fallfought, I am Zendria Nestin, I have been an Hour Hand on the Clock of the Old Man for more than 4.3 million hours. My parents before me, my children to come. I seek only the chaos that unfolds. I expect we could be quite useful to one another, given the right circumstance.”

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**Tenacity**

The air was stale in the back of the temple. It had always felt eerily still, it was a little damp and it’s easily Tenacity’s least favorite area of the compound. Not that they’d had much reason to venture to the back as it was mostly used for storage. On the few occasions that Tenacity had actually found themselves in the back of the temple they’d hurried in and out, gathering what they needed with speed so as to spend as little time in the room as they could. The Horned Wind is an agitator, the God of chaos, fear, tieflings, and wonder, there wasn’t a single ritual that called for stillness, the area felt devoid of the divine in an unnerving way.

Tenacity had lived their entire life in this temple and the two small buildings that accompanied it, as had the life before them, and the one before that and so on and so forth. Tenacity knew that the reincarnation cycle was important, but the young person once again felt trapped by a tradition they’d had no say in.

They’d spent their childhood chasing the Brothers and Sisters of the temple, an ever changing cast of faces showcasing the great diversity that was out there. Tenacity had been fascinated by the many people of Zyrehm, and had longed to see the lands that birthed them for as long as they could remember. When they were small they would pester the siblings of their faith with a barrage of questions about their homelands, and customs. Any piece of information, no matter how small, simply fascinated them.

These days fewer enter the Ellipse, not that Tenacity had much time for chasing anymore. Instead their days were filled with long hours of studies at the feet of the Bhikku Naday, the leader of the Ellipse of the Horned Wind. As the current reincarnate, Tenacity would serve as conduit should the Horned Wind choose to walk amongst the members of the Ellipse once again. They believed, like the siblings of their faith, that should that happen it would be an act of service to the Horned Wind to have their memories intact in their new host body. These memories are guarded by the Bhikku, and so Tenacity had spent more time with Bhikku Naday than any other member of the Ellipse.

Tenacity wanted to perform their duty, they didn’t mind the studies, and found the mortal life of the Horned Wind quite interesting. Like Tenacity, the Horned Wind, lived as a tiefling. Where Tenacity’s skin was a bright yellow, the Wind’s had been red. Tenacity had a wide based tail that tapered down to a curved point like that of a lizard, the Wind’s tail was slender and flared out like a barb at the end. They both had dark black hair, but where the Wind’s horns arched up and back nestling back into the hair, Tenacity’s were short nubs, barely visible through their hair, and soft to the touch. Both the Wind and Tenacity had lean bodies, though Tenacity was significantly shorter than the Wind was typically described as being.

Tenacity had felt a kinship with the Wind their whole life, they’d often attributed it to their role as the reincarnate, but the truth was Tenacity saw much of themselves in the Wind. Tenacity had never fallen in love, but had devoured every scrap of historical writings on the love held between the Wind and the Violaceous Flame. Tenacity wanted to find that sort of love for themselves. But that was the sum up of nearly all of Tenacity’s problems. Serving the Wind was never the issue, sacrificing their own experiences however was eating at their soul and Tenacity found little comfort in the Ellipse regarding this.

So here they were, in their least favorite area of the compound, searching for an exit that might not even be real. A few nights ago Tenacity had been in the library reshelving some materials they had been reviewing in tandem with their studies, when they’d knocked a scroll off a nearby shelf. When they bent down to pick it up they noticed that it was a schematic, far older than this lifetime and detailing the original plans for the compound. They showed the door that Tenacity searched for now, and just as the plan had detailed, on the south wall, behind a large covered painting they found a long forgotten doorway.

Tenacity felt their heart hasten, they’d never been this close to leaving before. They were sure they were making the right decision, even if they were also sure that many within the Ellipse would not agree. They understood that what they were doing would likely mean living on the run for a while, if not forever, but they wanted more than a life tucked away in a temple would ever offer them. It didn’t change how terrifying this moment was.

They reached their hand out, gripping the door by its slotted inlaid handle and pulled. It was heavy, and Tenacity groaned quietly as the door finally gave and scooted a few inches, just barely enough for Tenacity to slip through. They turned around, silently taking one last look at the temple, at least the part of it they could see from where they were. These were uncharted waters, brave first steps, the confident beginning of something new. They gulped down the fear that was welling up in their throat. It was now or never.

They slipped through the passageway, and groaned once more as they used every last bit of their strength to close the door back behind them. They had no way to replace the painting, so they knew they wouldn’t have much of a headstart once someone realized they were missing, they had to maximize the time now, and that started with navigating the old tunnels leading out of the temple. They looked out down the tunnel in front of them, their bright blue eyes glowed faintly in the dark as their vision adjusted to the dim lighting from the faint glow stones embedded in the walls of the tunnel.

“Alright…here we go.” They stepped forward into the tunnel embarking on the adventure they’d always been waiting for.

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**Nymph**

“Who are you?” Nymphimae [[4]](#footnote-3)stared at the small woman with bright purple pigtails.

 “Offensive.” The woman’s tone was clipped, as if Nymph’s appearance in her own dream was somehow an indiscretion against the woman’s sensibilities. “I’ve been around far too long, and I chose you Nymph, surely you recognize me.” The woman was no longer facing Nymph, she thumbed through the void around her as though she could see filing boxes that Nymph could not. Nymph took a step closer to the woman, she was much shorter than Nymph. Even by Elven standards Nymph was tall, so most people were, but given just how short she was and the vibrancy of her hair and the light pale hue of her skin Nymph wagered she was speaking with a gnome. She thought for a moment, there was something familiar about the woman, though Nymph had known no gnomes personally. She wasn’t sure if she *did* know the woman, but she also wasn’t sure that she didn’t.

 “Are you from Kyosay[[5]](#footnote-4)?” Nymph knew the answer would be no as the words left her lips, and sure enough the gnomish woman shook her head heartily.

 “Is that what you’re calling it these days?” The gnome scoffed at the question, “Kyosay?” She paused for a moment as though mulling the thought over, “I suppose if I’d called it Sarvenkjo’s [[6]](#footnote-5)Bay 1600 years before me they’d have stared at me like I was mad…then again I guess they did.” She shook her head, “It’s weird to be on this side of the coin Nymph, I gotta say.” The woman had stopped rifling through the air. Now she was floating a good three or four feet off the ground, her legs crossed and tucked under her as she waited for Nymph to respond.

 “This has got to be the strangest dream I’ve had in some time.” Nymph pinched at the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyes shut and trying to make sense of what any of this could possibly mean. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself sitting on a bench in an open area where children ran and played, screaming giddily and laughing. The woman now sat next to her, eating an apple and watching the children play.

 “I won’t say it’s not a dream Nymphimae. If I were to, I’d be lying, and I won’t lie to you, but it’s not *just* a dream Nymph. Some people call it a vision, some prophecies, I like calling them links.” She smiled for a moment, though it faded as Nymph’s lack of recognition registered to her, “You don’t get that, no one left on the planet does, but a long, long time ago it was a lovely homage to a dear friend.” For the first time the woman’s voice was soft, it belied the stubbornness she’d all but oozed in her demeanor. Her gaze went off to the distance for a moment, but quicker still she was back, she turned slightly towards Nymph, “No, Nymph I’m not from Kyosay, in my day or yours, though I did spend some crucial time there. Maybe that’s what drew me to you, you remind me a bit of Roe…without the rougher edges.”

 A flash of recognition shot across Nymph’s face, her voice was tentative as she spoke next, “Roe…surely you don’t mean Roe of the Ancient Days?”

 The woman laughed at this, “Surely I do, though it’s nice to see that mortals haven’t lost their love of laying it on thick.” At this she laughed heartily, a boisterous sound even in the cacophony of the scene. “I knew Roe, better than anyone else in some ways, though in many others you might say we were complete strangers. It’s interesting that of all the names mortals could carry hers should be the only one to stand the test of time. She’d have hated that. There were better choices.”

 “Roe is a legend,” Nymph’s voice was firm as though she’d said *dirt is brown* or *you must eat to stay alive*, “you mean to say she was real?” Nymph did little to mask the surprise in her voice at this thought. She’d grown up hearing of Roe of the Ancient Days, most children of Kyosay had, she was a popular story. She was said to have stolen the attitude of a swashbuckler, the luck of a wanted man, the frenzy of a battleworn soldier, and the wit of a wizened wizard. Her adventures of ancient Kyosay vary based on who's telling the story but they all keep her strong and bold.

 “We’re all legends, Nymph. That’s how it works. Was Roe anything like the legend you know? Honestly? …no, she was scared, and she was a fool and she got people hurt.” The woman’s face darkened a bit at this, for the first time Nymph could believe that maybe the woman did know Roe, the pain in her voice was obvious, and not something a children’s story could have accomplished on its own. In a flash the woman’s voice was filled with excitement and mystery once more, “Does that make Roe of the Ancient Days any less real? Of course not. It’s never as simple as that. That’s the first thing you’ll need to know.”

 “The *first* thing?” Nymph repeated, “You got a lesson plan or something?” The woman chuckled a bit.

 “I knew I liked you. Yeah, you could say something like that. I was always the student, but I think it’s time I passed knowledge on to someone else. You want to know who I am? I spent a lot of time wanting the same thing, and I find myself once again fuzzy on the details. That’s the trouble with *searching* for an answer to that question. Tell me Nymph, which of them cares who I am?” She gestured her hand towards the kids, Nymph had all but forgotten they were there. She furrowed her brow and stared out at the field of young ones.

 “I don’t understand, if this is a dream none of them are real.”

 “This *is* a dream, yes, but they’re all real Nymph, and real or not the answer doesn’t change, because *none* of these children care about who I am. They’re too busy playing through their games, chasing one another, watching the world grow around and with them. It’s sweet if not dangerous. Yet, none of them will have to learn the risk they’re taking, because I am who I am. It’s a catch 22, how much curiosity is too much? When is it not enough?”

 “I’ve figured you out, you know?” Nymph’s voice was once more confident. The woman’s face looked bemused, she was clearly interested to see where Nymph’s thought was going, even though it seemed to ignore the thought she’d presented Nymph.

 “You’re the Violaceous Flame, right?” The woman’s face broke into a wide, mischievous, smile.

 “I knew I liked you.” She hopped up and the park scene disappeared, once more they floated in the void. The woman gestured her hands wildly, small sparks shooting from the tips of her fingers in a brilliant display of purple lights. “Yes, the Violaceous Flame at your service, what gave me away?”

 “You called mortals heavy handed, but you displayed all of your domains in this little chat Flame; Children, Curiosity, Dreams, and Sunshine. You’re heavy handed too.”

 The Flame shrugged her shoulders, “What can I say? Old habits are hard to break. So you know who I am, what now?”

 “I was going to ask you the same thing. You came to me, Flame, you didn’t have a reason?”

 “Of course I did, but I’d never make it that easy. You need to figure it out on your own, but I’ll be here for you as you go, and I’ve got a tip to get you started.” She winked at Nymph, “Find Tenacity, and you’ll be on your way.”

 Nymph woke up in a cold sweat, her bedroom was dimly lit, beams of starlight poured through the window to her right. Her head was pounding, and the floor was ice cold under her feet as she got out of bed. Her legs wobbled under her, and she reached an arm out, grazing her wall with her fingertips, in an attempt to balance herself for a moment, shaking the lingering sleep from her brain. The fog was starting to clear, and with it the memory of her dream, by the time she’d brought a glass of water to her lips the only thought that remained was “Find Tenacity and you’ll be on your way.”

 She downed the water, and stared out the window, in the distance she could see the outline of the Temple of the Wind. It stood tall against the skyline of Kyosay. Nymph had never given it much thought. She wasn’t a believer, not in the Wind anymore so than any of the other Gods of Zyrehm, they’d never given her much mind so she’d returned the energy. Yet for some reason, something nagged at the back of her head, dragging her attention back to the temple no matter how many times she looked away.

 “Oh what the hell…it’s only the middle of the night, who’s gonna notice a girl snooping around the temple.” She shimmied herself into pants, and pulled a sweater on. “This couldn’t possibly end poorly.”

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**The Girls**

Amnyria let out a sigh of relief as she approached the ornate Temple of the Wind. Not for the first time in the last few days, she wondered if she’d always do that or if the muscle memory would eventually fade and this would become one more force of habit inevitably claimed by the vampirism. Gate City, the bustling metropolis to the south by way of the Ourean Sea that Amnyria called home, had a large vampire population. As such, she had grown up around them. She was far from afraid of them, like some on Zyrehm were, in fact she was rather intrigued by them.

The Turned are sacred beings in the teachings of the Clock. Some of the eldest vampires spent time with the Old Man in the days before his ascension. They remain unchanged constants in the timeline. Amnyria had always been interested in the potential an eternal lifetime held. What one could do if time was of no concern. She’d strongly considered turning, but now that it had happened under such mysterious circumstances she wondered if she would have made the decision to turn on her own. She shook her head, bringing her back to reality. That was a mystery that would need more time than she could afford it right now.

Amnyria stared up at the building before her.The Ellipse of the Horned Wind were known for their elaborate displays of worship. People pay good money to watch the siblings of the faith perform their intricate rituals and ceremonies. Architects the world over incorporate design principles seen in their temples into secular buildings. The homilies and poems written in praise of the Horned God are studied across Zyrehm and often held up as quintessential pieces of classic literature. Everything is an act of worship in the faith, and as such nothing is done with any measure of restraint.

There was a temple in Gate City, Amnyria had always thought it looked like a fancy perfume bottle. Its outer structure was made of beautifully tinted glass in a variety of hues from black, blues, purples, with pops of reds and greens. Amnyria had never been in, so she wasn’t sure how it looked on the inside. She realized though, as she stared up at the impressive structure, that the Ellipse built their temples to fit into the city around them.

This building was far from the bizarre glass structure Amnyria had passed a thousand times. She found herself struck by the detailing around the peaks and spires of the many towers that extended from the main structure. The columns twisted upwards supporting various balconies and extensions. It was made mostly of the same deep grey stones of the surrounding buildings, but the shingles of the roofs shimmered in swirling patterns that did remind her of the temple back home.

She fumbled in the pocket of her dress for the picture the Hour had given her. The picture showed a tiefling about Amnyria’s age with skin yellow like mustard, and hair black like a ravens. The eyes of the figure were blue, almost as though they were glowing, and their face wore a toothy grin as they stared into the camera. It wasn’t much to go on, but it wasn’t nothing. Amnyria had recognized the robes the tiefling wore as denoting them a member of the Ellipse. So she assumed the temple was as safe a start as any.

Hour Zendria was infamous for her short attention span, but Amnyria had no idea that working with her would prove so …vague. She laughed a little at the thought, how far she’d come in such a few short days, a vampire, working for *the* Hour Zendria. The old woman had given Amnyria the picture along with a small black stone that could send messages back to her.

She’d been mysterious about what exactly Amnyria was supposed to be doing, only really instructing her to find the tiefling and use the stone to send updates back to her. She wasn’t certain why exactly Hour Zendria was concerned with the child of the Wind, but she’d been emphatic when giving Amnyria the photo, something was beginning and Amnyria needed to be there when it happened.

The gates were pulled close, unsurprising given the time of night. Amnyria had left Zendria’s office hours ago, armed with only the picture and no understanding of the layout of Kyosay. So, for hours, she’d been wandering the streets desperately trying to make her way toward the temple. Despite its size and prominence in Kyosay’s skyline Amnyria lacked anything resembling navigational sense, so she was nearly moved to tears to have made it to the building at all. She wasn’t going to let locked gates stop her.

She shoved the photo back into her pocket and bent over to further inspect the lock. It was old, and huge, wrought iron. She went to touch it and it surged with magical energy so she thought better of it. “Huh…” she muttered to herself, “why so keen to keep people out?”

“It’s not *meant* to keep anyone out, just to keep one person in.”

Amnyria screamed and jumped a foot in the air landing in a heap ungracefully on the ground at the woman’s feet. An elven woman with pale blue hair wearing a knitted sweater crouched in front of her. She cocked her head at Amnyria. “Nymphimae, friends call me Nymph. What’re you up to?”

Amnyria blinked up at the woman in a moment of total confusion. “I-I’m sorry. I wasn’t–I’m not–this isn’t what it looks like.” she stammered out the words, attempting to pull herself together, rising to her feet and dusting herself off.

“Soooo, you’re *not* snooping around the Temple of the Wind looking for a way in in the middle of the night, for reasons yet to be determined?” Nymph’s face scrunched into a quizzical expression as she too hopped to her feet.

Amnyria blushed slightly, this wasn’t going to plan at all. “Uhm, no I’m just a…uh, a lock enthusiast, I’m not from Kyosay, I’ve never been before, so I was just admiring the uh, the intricacy.”

Nymph’s eyes flitted briefly to the massive, but plain lock. “This lock caught your eye? More specifically the intricacy in what…all it’s…simplicity?” She crossed her arms and stared Amnyria down. “Look, I’m not part of the Ellipse, I don’t *care* why you’re here, hell I don’t even know why *I’m* here, but I’m sure it’ll end up in some level of trouble. So, I figure why not start by helping the hapless girl from…” she pivoted to the heels of her feet and gave Amnyria a thorough once over “what, I’ll guess you’re from …Gate City? Wait...are you…” Amnyria watch realization dawn on Nymph’s face.

“A vampire?” She finished the thought for her, and both women’s eyes darted to the ground, as though eye contact might break them. “Yes, but I promise I’m not here to cause problems.” Amnyria was still adjusting to the public’s reaction to her. Vampires may be common in Gate City but they’re not everywhere, and not everyone is comfortable around them.

Nymph’s expression softened, and her arms dropped down, “No, I’m sorry, I’m not worried about it, I just, I didn’t realize it, and then…well, then I did, and now you think I’m one of those people who get weird around vampires, but I’m not, I swear I don’t care it just took me by surprise.”

The two women stood there in awkward silence for a minute. Finally Amnyria spoke, “Well, this has been…weird. We should…we should start again. You said your name was Nymphimae? Well, Nymphimae, I’m Amnyria Fallfought. Yes, you were completely right, I am from Gate City, and I was lying about the lock, but I really am new to Kyosay.” Nymph laughed at the overly polite nature of Amnyria’s candor.

“I said friends call me Nymph, and something tells me we’re going to be spending a lot of time together, so you might as well start now.”

“Okay… Nymph,” Amnyria did her best to seem at ease with the familiarity of the nickname, “you said you didn’t know why you were here? Do you often go about the city in the middle of the night? And what did you mean that they’re trying to keep someone locked in? Do you mean to say there’s a prisoner of some manner in the temple of the Wind?”

Nymph nodded her head, “I don’t really know how to explain it, but sometimes I just need to be places, it’s like I know *something’s* going to happen, but not what. I’m not an oracle or anything, it’s more intuition than anything else. Suffice to say, it brought me out tonight.” She shrugged a little at the words, Amnyria was under the impression this wasn’t the first time she’d delivered these particular lines. “As to the prisoner, yeah. I mean, that’s strong phrasing. I doubt anyone inside the temple would call the reincarnate a prisoner, but the fact of the matter is that they’re not allowed to leave.”

Amnyria furrowed her brow and pulled the photo out once more. She showed it to Nymph. “I’m not sure I understood all of that, but this *reincarnate,* you mentioned, this wouldn’t happen to be them, would it?”

Nymph stared at the photo, there was something about the image. The figure in the photo brought up more of that feeling that she was close to something important, she smiled. “I’m not sure, no one outside of the Ellipse knows the identity of the Reincarnate. It’s a tightly guarded secret for the safety of the individual, but the robes, the relative age, I’d buy that this tiefling was born the same year the last one died. Assuming this picture isn’t outdated. Dare I ask why you have it?”

“Would you leave it at *it’s personal*?” Amnyria asked sheepishly.

“For now.” Nymph’s tone was mischievous and did little to assure Amnyria that the topic would be dropped. “So, let’s see, front gate’s locked tight. Maybe we’ll have better luck at the back gate?” She grinned at Amnyria and stuck her hand out.

“Welcome to the adventure Nymph.” Amnyria grasped her hand and shook it firmly.

“Let’s find us a tiefling!” Nymph hollered as Amnyria clasped a hand around her mouth tightly and brought a finger to her lips in one fluid motion. Her eyes begged for any amount of discretion.

“Quieter, so, so much quieter Nymph.” Amnyria’s voice was weary and raspy as she hissed out the whisper. Nymph nodded emphatically as Amnyria released her hand, and the two set out to find another way in.

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**Tenacity**

The stars were beautiful. They weren’t new, they hadn’t changed, but seeing them from outside of the temple’s grounds filled Tenacity with a new admiration. They twinkled, and shone in the dark vastness of the night’s sky, Tenacity stared up at them, wondering what stories they would tell if given the chance.

“Let’s find us a tiefling!” The words rang out in the cold quietness. Tenacity’s heart dropped. They had expected the streets to be quiet, it was the middle of the night after all. They had expected to have some time to quietly wander the city, take it in, admire its beauty under the night sky. They had expected a number of things, but they hadn’t expected this.

They stepped quietly and skillfully into the shadows. The Reincarnates were known for their dexterous skill. Tenacity had been considered clumsy as a child, but a lifetime of training and dedication will make a master out of anyone. They were far from the cloddish child they’d once been, and, even in the chaos of the moment, they were proud of that. Tenacity inched along the walled grounds of the temple, towards where the words had come from.

They wondered briefly if they should return to the tunnel, and wait for the source of the noise to leave. They could see the grate on the ground a few paces away from where they stood now. The grate marked the end of the tunnel that Tenacity had followed out of the temple. It would be risky, but possibly worth it. Then again, they could make a run for it now. They hadn’t been spotted yet. Nothing was stopping them from turning and running… but the voice had said “tiefling”. Not Reincarnate, not Sibling, *tiefling.* It wasn’t much reason to stay, but in that moment, it was reason enough.

Two women wandered into Tenacity’s line of sight. Tenacity had seen many races, genders, heights, weights–faces of many kinds come through the temple. It was a great privilege bestowed upon those most dedicated to meditate at the feet of the Reincarnate. Not including the rotation of monks that serviced the temple itself. Tenacity had met a number of people in their years, but they all wore themselves in the way of the Ellipse. Every one of them had an air of familiarity to them. They were all the same even in their differences.

These women were unlike any of them.

They stood out starkly both from each other and from any member of the Ellipse. There was nothing familiar at all in the way either of them carried themselves. The taller of the two had on a dark purple knitted sweater. It was slightly too large for its wearer, the right sleeve dangling off her shoulder. Her dark pants glimmered slightly in the dim light thrown from a gas lamp a few paces down the street. She had on thick black boots, muddied on the toes, with large buckles made of dull brass. Her hair was cropped at the jawline, fluffy with bangs, an icy blue color.

Her companion wore a shimmering gold dress. It wasn’t fitted for the weather of Kyosay, but Tenacity marveled at the many folds and the way the garment flowed so effortlessly as the woman moved. The gold stood out against the woman’s incredibly pale, marble-like skin. Her hair hung in loose curls, ringlets of pale lilac in the moonlight. Even from the shadows Tenacity had the sense that this woman was softer than the other, not to say she felt weak, far from it. No, she just had an almost aura to her that invoked kindness.

“I think we’re close… I can’t explain it, but… I don’t know, take my word for it. Something feels right.” The taller woman in the sweater spoke. Her voice bubbled with chaos, she’d been the source of the earlier hollering. The shorter woman stood for a moment, clutching a scrap of paper to her chest, and scanning the area. Tenacity’s breath caught, goosebumps rose on their skin, as the woman’s eyes met theirs. *She can’t see me, there’s no chance.* Tenacity thought to themselves. They blinked and the woman was gone from their view.

Suddenly, they felt the chill of ice grasp their wrist, pulling them from their place, comfortably hidden in the shadows, out into the dim light of the night. The smell of cinnamon hung heavy in the air. Tenacity blinked down at their wrist. No ice had formed, the sensation had come off the woman who’d only a second ago been several paces away.

“What–How??” their voice shook a little as surprise coursed through their body.

“I think,” the woman’s voice was tight, she was clearly nervous, “we were supposed to meet you. This, this is you right?”

 She held out the scrap of paper to Tenacity and as they grasped it with their fingers they realized it wasn’t paper, but a small photo. Tenacity took the picture from the strange woman, and their jaw dropped as they realized the image was of them. “Wha–why do you have this?” their voice was light, as though they’d had the wind knocked out of them.

But just as she opened her mouth to respond the lights of the temple flooded the area. Tenacity’s head snapped toward the building, now brightly lit, “They know I’m gone.” the words fell out of Tenacity’s mouth before they could really process it. The woman’s face contorted into confusion.

“You’re not just any member of the Ellipse, are you, you’re the Reincarnate? Right? I’m right, aren’t I?” The second woman, the one still standing further down the street, spoke confidently, and excitedly. Her voice still bubbling, though this time with anticipation. She took a few steps forward as she spoke. Tenacity could see her better now, her face was etched with lines of laughter, her eyes screamed with the promise of a thousand stories. Everything about her intrigued Tenacity. They wanted to know more, they truly did, but whoever this woman was she knew who they were, that much was clear, and that made them potentially dangerous.

 “No time to talk.” Tenacity bowed slightly, “It’s been a pleasure to meet you.” They turned and broke out into a sprint running the opposite direction away from the temple. The two women exchanged looks briefly before running after them.

 “No, seriously, I think we’re here to help!” The first woman bellowed as Tenacity ducked down an alley trying desperately to lose them and put distance between themselves and the temple. No matter how hard they pushed themselves, how many twists and turns they took nothing seemed to shake the women. They were always just around the corner, the three remained in chase for several blocks before Tenacity saw a flash of yellow magic out of the corner of their eye.

 “I have somewhere you can go to lay low.” The second woman’s words stopped them dead in their tracks. The voice sounded as though its speaker were whispering in Tenacity’s ear. Tenacity pivoted on their heels, once more staring at the pair.

The two women had stopped a few feet short of Tenacity. The first woman was standing there, legs crossed at the ankles, arms locked behind her as her grip encircled her left wrist. She gave the impression that she was strolling casually through the city. If Tenacity hadn’t been the person being chased they wouldn’t have believed this woman had been running only moments prior. The taller one was hunched over themselves, hands on their knees panting.

She looked up, squinting at Tenacity, and doing her best to catch her breath. “We don’t… even have… to run… to get… there. Unlike… you two… I know…Kyosay’s...secrets!” She struggled to get the words out, large gasps littering through her thoughts. Tenacity stared at her, then at the other woman, whose gaze was fixed on the spectacle the first woman was creating. She looked taken aback by the sorry state of her companion. *What an odd couple these two make.* Tenacity thought to themselves.

“You can… really help?” Tenacity asked hesitantly, their eyes darting between the two figures, attempting to absorb everything they could about them.

“I can…*really* help.” she emphasized the word really, “Please, holy hells… just… stop. Running.” Her gasping continued until finally she sucked in a deep breath, holding it for a second before letting it go, calming her breathing substantially.

Tenacity bit their lip, they couldn't afford for this to be a trap, but they also couldn't afford to pass up the help. “Okay…” their voice was uneasy, “what do we do?”

The woman’s face lit up, “Great. Fantastic.” she waved her hand and a crack appeared in the ground between them. It glowed with a wispy yellow aura that lit the unlikely trio in hues of gold.

Tenacity stared into the faces of their companions, the first people they’d ever met on their own. They didn’t know their names, had yet to learn their stories, but something in their gut told them that trusting the women was the right call. They took their next deep breath of the night, and plunged into the crack, trusting that everything would be okay.

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 The wind is cold and harsh on the outside of the bubble. It has been all my life, and it will be long after I’m dead. It cuts right through the thick layers of our tent, rattling the poles in the process. It's a common occurrence, most of the time the cold and the noise isn’t enough to wake me. Something was different about today. This morning, unlike the others, I woke up to the sound of the poles clattering against their glass foundations. I sat up in my makeshift bed. It wasn’t a bed really, in reality I’d taken one of the layers that was meant for the tent and folded it over a few times to create a soft spot to lay on. No amount of fabric was ever going to keep the wind out, I knew that, everyone in the Cavalcade knew that, so this was a common practice.

Lyribel [[7]](#footnote-6)rustled beside me, pulling me out of my thoughts. She shifted about in the bed for a few moments before sleepily rolling towards me and rubbing a paw at her eye. I cracked a bit of a grin looking at the small black dog. Her fur wasn’t long exactly, but it was long enough to run your fingers through. It was tussled, and crazy from rolling around through the night. Her legs were short, but stretched out with all her might, taking up as much of the space as she could. Her tongue stuck out, just a bit, as it always does, hanging to one side. As she came out of the haze of sleep her one good eye fixated on me.

 “It’s a new day?” she spoke with a long drawl, that I’d never been able to place the origin of. Lyribel didn’t talk about where she came from, or how a dog spoke at all let alone with an accent. She’d just always had it, and probably always would, a bit like the wind in that way. I had spent many a night deep in dialogue with Lyribel, I knew how effusive and eloquent she could be, but some phrases seemed deeply engrained in her. For instance, I knew every day would start with those words, it always did.

 “Yeah, a new day Lyri. Any new dreams?” I asked the question, more out of habit than actual curiosity. Lyri never had any dreams, but I always asked.

 “Actually, yes.” she rolled onto her stomach, her expression was as surprised as I felt. My eyebrow shot up, as I dropped back on to my elbows, waiting to hear her words.

 “Go on.” I prompted, shuffling my hands.

 “There was…” her gaze shifted from me, as she tried to bring the details back to the forefront of her mind. Her bad eye, the one usually clouded over, began to glow a silvered, yet still milky color. “The hand falls off,” her voice shifted, I’d never heard her sound like this, a raspy yet warm tone, the words came out in a cadence as though she was singing, “the wind stops cold, the flame utters what’s yet been told.”

 The energy of the tent had grown tense with Lyribel’s words, the wind whipping through the layers of fabric that formed the walls, shaking the poles in violent thrashes as loose items whizzed through the air all around them, peaking with the final syllable. Everything was now eerily still. For a second the wind seemed to stop entirely.

 I stared at Lyribel for a moment, she laid calmly on the bed, not stirring. “Are…are you okay?” my breath hung on the last word, catching as I waited for my answer.

 An eternity passed in the silence that sat between us.

 “Wha…” finally, her good eye fluttered open, scanning the room lazily for me. “What was that?” her voice was weak, but the drawl had returned once more. A wave of relief flooded me. I tussled her head, and shook mine, the grin returning once more.

 “I was hoping you’d tell me.”

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**The Party**

 The trio tumbled out of the magical crack Nymph had conjured into a large pile of pillows, clearly placed for this exact use. Despite the cushion and the foreknowledge, Nymph landed hard in a loud thud followed shortly by a small groan. Tenacity quite gracefully maneuvered the unwieldy tumbling of the Nevertwain into a somersault, landing calmly on their feet. Amnyria’s newly found reflexes prevented a repeat of the inelegant landing Nymph had performed, but her inexperience with them found her landing far less dramatic than Tenacity’s had been.

 The room around them was dimly lit, a single lantern hung in the corner. What light it shed revealed a small room, painted a deep purple, with silvery vining details handpainted, and sprawling throughout. In the corner beneath the lantern was a small bookshelf, several large leather bound tomes lining the shelves, an open tome on top, with a large quill next to it. The quill’s extravagant plume cascaded off the side of the bookshelf. It was a deep green, spotted with blues, not unlike a peacock’s feather, though its patterning was largely different, suggesting it came from another bird. Next to it was an ink pot made from cobalt blue glass, stoppered to prevent it from drying out. The room was quiet, the air still, a momentary calm spread across the three unlikely companions.

 A few seconds passed and Amnyria broke the silence, “Are you always this… uh, well… coordinated?” Her eyes scanned Nymph over. She was still collapsed on the pillows. Her hair tousled, the large sweater slouching dangerously low in her state of disarray. Amnyria smirked a little, Nymph’s was quite the sight, for someone who’d orchestrated the escape she’d come out the worst off.

 Nymph chucked a pillow half-heartedly at Amnyria, “Hey now, who got you out of there??”

 Amnyria laughed as she effortlessly caught the pillow. “No, no you’re right. So, where exactly did you bring us?” Her eyes flicked around the room, quickly assessing it.

 “We’re downtown, This is my… uh, workshop I guess.” Nymph stood up, fixing her sweater, and walking to the bookshelf. She picked up the quill, and scribbled something down in the book. As she did, the outline of a door appeared on the wall. By the time she’d place the quill back on the shelf, a door had completely materialized. Amnyria and Tenacity both had closed the distance, intently watching the impressive magic being performed in front of them.

 “You’re a very impressive conjurer, Nymph.” Amnyria’s eyes were wide, and her voice softened into a syrupy sweet tone. “Have you checked the time on the Old Man’s clock?”

 Nymph shook her head stifling a laugh, “You’re a Minute Hand, then? What have I gotten into?” She grasped the doorknob, swinging the door open and revealing a larger room. Tenacity stepped in first, jaw agape, taking it all in. Large circular windows took up most of the wall space across from them as they entered. Hanging sporadically, at different lengths and of different sizes were dozens of crystals that cast rainbows across the room as the moonlight hit them, just right. The dark blue walls, lined with green, crawling vines, served as a perfectly ethereal backdrop. It was a beautiful sight to witness.

 “Wow… this is impressive… uhm, what was it you called her?” Tenacity asked, waving a hand absentmindedly behind them as they stepped further into the room.

“Oh, good point,” Nymph chuckled as she followed the awestruck monk into the room. “I’m Nymph.”

“I’m Amnyria.” Amnyria piped up as she too entered the room, closing the door behind her. As she did, the door fizzled out with a small popping sound. Her expression changed from one of admiration of the spectacle around her, a large smile replacing it. “I’m not letting it go, Nymph.”

 “You are for now. So, yes, we are Amnyria and Nymph. Introductions work both ways, you know.” Nymph’s eyes fixated on Tenacity.

Tenacity snapped out of their intrigue in the view, and turned to face the women again. “My apologies, yes, Tenacity. You two, seem to have an advantage on me though, how did you acquire the photograph? Why *were* you at the temple? What mysterious force brought us all together?” There was a tone of amusement to Tenacity’s voice, but at the very edges lingered caution. Their eyes tracing the outlines of the two figures, committing as much of them to memory as they could.

Nymph stiffened a bit, she wasn’t sure how to explain what brought her to the temple. “Well, I was out wandering, and this one’s real into locks.” She hooked a thumb at Amnyria, who rolled her eyes.

“No, no, not into locks. I was uhm…well not exactly sent for you, but yes as Nymph pointed out I am a Minute Hand on the clock of the Old Man. The Old Man teaches nothing, but may he leave you with your lesson.” She bowed her head briefly. “I was guided by an Hour Handed to meet you.”

Tenacity’s blood ran cold. How could anyone have known, had the church somehow been tipped off. Amnyria noted the change in their demeanor. “I’m not here like…for you, or anything. I’m here as Amnyria, not as a member of my faith. You’re um, well you’re obviously a follower of the Horned Wind, um, I’m sorry, I don’t know very much about your faith. Do you have a greeting? Some sort of honorific, how are we to address you? You’re important right?”

Blood rushed to Tenacity’s cheeks, turning them an almost mustard like color. “Oh, no nothing that formal. You’re not a sibling, I’m no one to you.” The question clearly had flustered them. Amnyria smiled a little, Tenacity’s unusual demeanor was rather endearing. She hadn’t met someone so formal, but so amusingly awkward at the same time.

“Okay, *no one*.” The sweetness had returned to her voice. Amnyria noticed it briefly, and found herself wondering if she’d always done that, or if this sudden burst of charisma was yet another new side effect. “Well, my Hour Hand believes that the Old Man will smile upon our friendship, and Nymph I have so many questions. A lot of curiosity, I think the two of you are stuck with me for the time being.”

“Look, I’m not saying I’m a follower, but for sake of argument let’s suggest I may have a link to the Violaceous Flame. That would make us each affiliated with the big three.” Nymph leaned in a bit as she spoke. “It seems fate may be pushing us together, and I’m extremely curious why. Tell us though, Tenacity, are we… safe in the city?”

Tenacity sighed, leaning on the back of one of the large velvet couches in the room. “Well, *safe* is subjective. Unless they think you took me you two are likely safe no matter what, even if they think you’re aiding me after the fact. To force the hand of the reincarnation cycle is very rare, but to break the bonds of my role within the Ellipse is rarer still. I can’t really speak to my relative safety at the moment.” Their eyes glassed over as the truth of their words sank in. Would they return to their life when this was all done?

“Well, it sounds like we’re thick as thieves for the time being. If you’re not safe here, we should leave. Buy us some time to work things out. I don’t suppose you’ve got non-Ellipse related connections, do you? Somewhere outside of Kyosay we can stay?” Nymph’s eyes locked on to Tenacity, a level of determination backing each word.

Tenacity shook their head, “No, I don’t know anyone outside of the Ellipse to my knowledge. I suppose maybe some of the siblings I’ve met might not be in the Ellipse anymore, but I don’t know which if any. You don’t know anyone outside of the city?”

“I’m someone from outside of the city.” Amnyria chimed in, placing herself between the two others. “We could go home, well my home.” Her eyes were wide, she was smiling once again, she had an almost childlike essence to her demeanor. She was excited to have provided a solution.

Nymph looked at Tenacity, then back to Amnyria, she shrugged, “I mean, sounds as good a plan as any right now.”

“You can make us a door I assume?” Amnyria gestured to the small bookshelf that sat on the wall where the door had been, identical to the one from the other room. She was all but beaming now, her energy had completely shifted from the calm, poise of earlier, she was bouncing off the walls at the idea of getting to witness the magic again. Her companions didn’t notice at the time, but had their eyes been keener, their senses just slightly sharper, they would have seen that her eyes turned gleamed slightly redder and her fangs sharpened slightly. A fire hit the back of her throat, her lips chapped ever so slightly.

In an instant Amnyria stopped, realizing for the first time that she thirsted in a way unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. It was the blood call, she was certain of it, but no blood had been shed, nothing should have sparked it. She felt a wave of concern for her companions well inside of her. There were so many questions left without answers to her change. Were they in danger?

“Can *I* make us a door? No. But you can. Let me pack up, first.” Nymph waved her hand dramatically and trinkets, books, quills–all sorts of items began flying around the room. Amnyria locked in place, holding herself together desperately as her mind flooded with the rush of the call once more. A sweet honey like scent filled her, before she realized what she was doing she closed the distance between her and Nymph. She stood behind her, her right arm grasping her around the waist, her left flicking her head gently to the side. The scent filling her with every breath, the call pounding in her head, as wave after wave of unwavering desire hit her.

“What’s… happening?” Nymph’s words sounded heavy and thick, like dripping molasses, slowly cutting through Amnyria’s haze. The objects that had been flying just moments earlier, clattered to the ground as Nymph’s attention wavered and the spell dropped.

As the spell faded, so did the scent, as the scent went, the call loosened on Amnyria, who came out of her fog. She blinked a few times before it hit her where she was, and what she was doing. She jumped a foot back immediately putting space between herself and Nymph. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t, um I’m honestly not sure what just happened. I mean, no I do, literally, um, I mean… that’s obvious, you know, but I don’t know why, I just, um, I’m newly turned, um it’s all quite strange. I’m so sorry, please, I didn’t, I just…”

Nymph shook her head. The experience had flooded her senses, though not identically to Amnyria’s experience, it was hardly something that left her in full control of her faculties. She needed a moment to say the least, but she knew she wasn’t angry.

Tenacity just stood there, not fully understanding what they were witnessing. “Were… were you just called to her… her *magic*?” their voice was airy, fully conveying their level of stun.

“I… I think, maybe?” Amnyria wasn’t sure, but it felt right. It’d been days since she’d been turned, and she’d yet to feed. The blood call is supposed to be ravenous when your newly turned, but she had had no interest. She fully wanted to feed just now, something about Nymph was… well, truly intoxicating.

“Okay, we don’t have a lot of time to deal with this new level of complication.” Nymph was coming back to her senses. “Look at me,” her voice was firm as she stared at Amnyria until she looked up at her from the floor, locking eyes. “Don’t kill me, and we’ll be fine.” and she began casting her spell once more.

Once again, Amnyria was by her side in an instant. Quick as a flash, her fangs fully extended and sank into Nymph. Nymph let out a small groan as they made contact with her skin, she slumped against Amnyria, who held her delicately as she fed. The scene held like this for a moment, Tenacity watching as every item not nailed down in the room flew wildly toward a magical rip to a pocket dimension, as the two women stood motionless in the middle of the room locked in their places.

Once again the spell came to an end, breaking the trance. As Amnyria parted from Nymph again Tenacity could have sworn that Nymph’s blood, what trickled out of the wound, and what stained Amnyria’s lips sparkled silver flecks in a dark purple liquid, but as they moved forward to further inspect the blood turned the dark red they’d been expecting. Tenacity blinked a couple of times, half-expecting to see it change again, but Amnyria cleaned her mouth, Nymph held a hand to her neck, and the moment for inspection passed.

Nymph blushed, kept her eyes down and crossed the room back to the bookshelf. “You’ll need to picture the place where we’re going clearly in your head. Clear any other thoughts, and focus only on the destination. Then pick up the quill and write it out, the clearer the image the more powerful the connection.” She brought her eyes to Amnyria’s only at the end of her sentence.

“We’re okay, that was… um that was fine. We can talk about it more later, but everything’s fine. I um… I feel okay. It was, um, it was not… well, you know, it’s not exactly… um, well bad, it’s fine, no time. Let’s go.” Nymph did her best to comfort her new companion. She wasn’t lying, it really wasn’t bad, just a lot. She’d heard what it was like to be fed off of before, though she’d never experienced it herself. It still caught her by surprise. The last hour had been a whirlwind, and she certainly hadn’t expected any of this, let alone that.

“Okay, um, yes, you know. Just um… well, thank you I suppose, I’m not sure what um, what to say.” Amnyria’s voice was tight, but she closed the distance to the bookshelf and began to focus on the task at hand. It was time to go home.

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**The Girls**

 Stepping through the doorway Amnyria’s head was swimming. It was as though Nymph’s blood was still warm on her lips. She could vividly recall the sensation of the feeding. It had lit her nerves up like a star on the edge of collapse–a personal supernova that had burned through her system, and left her on edge. Though the blood call had passed, she knew she’d want more. The *need* had passed, but the desire lingered at the edges of Amnyria’s consciousness.

 Nymphimae wandered into the room, her mind still mostly in the haze of the feeding. She’d pulled herself together enough to help Amnyria, but it had been a fleeting moment in time. She had quickly and happily slipped back into the warm state of elation. Nothing really registered in Nymph’s head as she had entered the new space, her attention span fixated on Amnyria. The new space was warm enough for a passing thought, but nothing else had cut its way through. She brought her hand to her cheek, it was still cool to the touch from Kyosay’s far colder climate.

 “Where… where are we then?” Her voice sounded far away even in her own head. Under other circumstances she’d have found that alarming. In the moment though, all Nymph could muster was calm, her only real concern was in getting a response from Amnyria.

 The response came quickly, though it felt extremely delayed to Nymph. “My home.” Amnyria’s voice was soft, but she had moved closer to Nymph, so it captivated her. The two women locked eyes, each scanning the other for some indication of where they stood. Standing only a few feet apart, Amnyria thought to herself that his was probably the closest they’d stood to each other all night, with the exception of the feeding of course. Nymph took in the finer details of Amnyria’s face. She was lightly freckled, with a small scar on the outside corner of her left eye. Her eyes were large, as though she was widening them, the dark red pools reminded Nymph of garnets. She shook her head, *it’s warm in here*.

 “I’m hot. This is your home? Do you have something lighter?” Nymph’s words and tone bounced around, the thoughts barely strung together. As she spoke, Nymph tugged at the oversized neck of her sweater. Amnyria smiled slightly.She crossed the room to an oil lamp sitting on a table. She clasped her hand around the small brass pocket watch that hung beneath the folds of her dress, resting cooly against the skin of her sternum. She held her other hand steadily over the wick of the lamp.

 “A spark of genius.” She whispered the words, and although they’d been spoken in plain common, the cadence with which she spoke them gave the feeling as though she’d been speaking in a tongue as old as the world. Her hand grew bright for a moment before the light transferred from her palm to the wick, igniting the scrap of fabric, and illuminating the room.

Nymph found herself smiling, watching Amnyria brought a sense of clarity in the fog. From the way Amnyria had reacted to her magic Nymph had incorrectly assumed she had none of her own. Seeing Amnyria cast however put the earlier scene into perspective for Nymph. She shouldn’t have been surprised, Nymph’s magic had always been around. She was a sorcerer, it was instinctual, and inherent, she’d never had to learn it–it was, quite literally, in her blood. Nymph knew the Old Man was widely known for being the wellspring of magic on Zyrehm. Sorcerers of his bloodline and warlocks bound to him are extremely powerful, though rare. If Amnyria was a pact practitioner or a studier of the arcanic tomes her magic would be substantially different from Nymph’s.

 Amnyria turned around to face Nymph once again, pulling Nymph’s thoughts away from magic back to the room. With the warm glow of the lamp lighting her from behind the silhouette of Amnyria’s body stood out through the thin layers of her dress. The outfit was easily lighter she thought to herself. She stared at the golden garment, deciding the colors and styling of it would be flattering on Nymph. She pulled her hair to the side, once again exposing the ribbon that tied her dress up before pulling it, dropping the gown to the ground.

 Tenacity sucked in, and whipped around facing a wall. “I didn’t realize you’d be doing that, so sorry!” Amnyria blinked, slowly turning in the direction of Tenacity, she’d forgotten that they were there, but it didn’t matter much from where she stood. She’d never been uncomfortable in her body, she’d felt no different undressing in this moment than she had when she’d allowed Zendria to examine her back in Kyosay.

 “You’re fine. My apologies if I… um, *scandalized* you?” Her voice was once again syrupy.

 “No, no I just, um, this door? Does it lead out, or to um… more… building?” Tenacity pointed at a door to the left of where they stood.

 “It leads to the living room.” The sentence was barely out of her mouth before Tenacity had moved to the door.

 “Great, I’ll just wait out there for you two to sort yourselves out.” They opened the door and stepped out of the room. Amnyria laughed a little, she hadn’t meant to make them uncomfortable, but it amused her how flustered it had left them.

 Nymph fought the urge to stare as Amnyria stood a few feet away from her still completely nude, her dress at her feet. The shocking boldness of Amnyria’s actions was pulling her further out of the haze. “Was there uhm… is this the answer to the question *do you have something lighter*?” She used her hands to mock quotation marks in the air, emphasizing the words. “You didn’t have to literally give me the clothes off your back, you know?”

 Amnyria chuckled once again, turning back towards Nymph. “I mean, I have other clothing, but you’re much taller than I am and my dresses don’t get longer than this one. Plus the color will look good on you, and it fit your criteria of *lighter*, so… here we go.”

 Suddenly, Amnyria was behind Nymph once again, she could feel her body pressed up against her as she tugged at the bottom of Nymph’s sweater in an effort to remove the clothing. Nymph hands jolted down, clutching at the hem of the garment, while stepping forward and giggling a bit in her nerves. Amnyria stared at her, she held the dress in one hand, despite Nymph having no idea when she could have picked it up.

 “I’m sorry.” She bit her lower lip slightly, “I’ve made you uncomfortable.” She said the words as a statement, but her head cocked slightly to the side, and her brows furrowed a bit, as though she wasn’t quite sure what had happened. She looked down at her naked body. After a moment, her facial expression changed as it dawned on her. She did her best to hide herself behind strategically placed arms. A feeble attempt at modesty. “I’m *making* you uncomfortable.” She cast her eyes to the ground and the two women stood there not looking at each other for a moment.

 “The dress is very pretty, you um… you really think it’ll look nice on me?” Nymph removed the sweater, tossing it at Amnyria’s feet. Her voice was sweet, but brimming with nerves. “I’m not as um, well *open* as you are, so keep your eyes down for now for me, would you?”

 Amnyria couldn’t blush, but if she could she would have. She nodded eagerly. “Of course, I just wanted to help. My apologies, the Old Man encourages… *openness*.” She stretched out her arm, holding out the dress in anticipation of Nymph’s need for it. Nymph stripped out of the rest of her clothing, before taking the dress from Amnyria.

 The fabric slinked down on Nymph, it sat in loose, flowing, folds that came down right about to her knees, a far cry from the ankle length it was on Amnyria. Nymph tied it at the base of her neck in a tight bow. Doing her best to ensure that it wouldn’t so easily come undone. She took in a deep breath, “Okay, let’s get you into something now.”

Amnyria looked up at Nymph, who was standing there, still attempting not to stare. “It’s okay. Truly, you don’t need to avert your eyes for my sake. My body is pleasant, and we’ve been far closer than you merely looking at me.” Amnyria stated it very matter of factly, but the words caught Nymph off guard. She met Amnyria’s gaze once again.

 “I mean… I guess you’re right, yes. We should uhm… talk about that, right?” Nymph allowed her eyes to wander. Amnyria’s frame was small, especially compared to Nymph, but the curves of her body filled her out. Her skin was so pale, a creamy white canvas lit warmly in the rays of the lantern. *Her body is pleasant.*

Amnyria nodded, “You’ll want me dressed first?” Her voice was earnest, the question asked honestly. Nymph laughed at the question.

“Yeah, let’s uh… let’s start with that.” She shook her head a little, this woman was peculiar in a fascinating way. Nymph hadn’t had much experience with the Hands of the Clock of the Old Man, and she wondered if they would all be this strange.

Amnyria turned and walked to the opposite side of the room, grabbing at the pocket watch once again. “Open sesame” she said as she rapped on the wall with her other hand. A piece of the wall slid back and then to the side in response. She stepped into the new area for a moment before returning in a short black dress made of the same material and fastened in the same way as the golden one. She was gathering her long hair into a bun, pieces cascading gently from her hand as she hastily tied it in place.

Once again her hand clutched at the timepiece, by now Nymph was sure it was Amnyria’s casting focus, though she wasn’t sure she understood how it worked. She placed her hand on the wall, half of it hanging over the ledge where it had parted. “One last call for alcohol”. The wall slid back into place seamlessly hidden once again. Just as with the oil lamp, all these phrases were said in common but in a way that called back to ancient days. Nymph knew the words, and yet they sounded so foreign.

“So,” Amnyria gestured at herself, “I’m dressed. You’re dressed.” She gestured at Nymph. “You want to talk?”

Nymph smiled again, “Yeah, uh… what was that?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure Nymphimae.”

“Oh, we’re *well* past Nymphimae Amnyria. Honestly, *you’re* going to need to figure out a nickname, I can’t keep calling you Amnyria. It's far too formal, so you work on that before I just decide on something, and in the meantime I’ll still be Nymph.” Nymph’s words brought Amnyria comfort, *she’s talking about things in the future*.

Amnyria smiled a little, “Okay, Nymph, I don’t have a lot of answers right now. I’ve only recently been turned, you… um, well, you see, that was… for me… well I’ve never,” she cleared her throat struggling to speak, “I’ve never, um, well *fed* before.”

Nymph blushed slightly, before the words fully hit her. “You were turned… *days* ago?” Her eyes widened.

“Yeah, there are… well, I’ve got a lot of questions of my own, so I don’t know that I’m going to give you much of what you’re looking for right now.” Amnyria felt like she was floundering now.

“Okay, so… why me then? Why all of a sudden? Had you been holding it back the entire time? Am I in danger?” The haze was all but gone now, and Nymph felt herself welling up with the need to know more.

Amnyria shook her head vigorously. “No,” the word was louder than she had meant, a side effect of the anxiety boiling inside of her, “you’re safe. Sorry, I know that didn’t help. You’re safe, I don’t know why you, I think it has to do with your magic, but I don’t know.”

The two stood there, Amnyria leaning against the wall, Nymph standing in the middle of the room, once again staring at each other in silence. Both women were so completely lost in thought, that neither noticed the beam of unmistakable sunlight, creeping across the floor through a slit in the curtains, in the middle of the night.

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**Tenacity**

Moonlight spilled in from the large windows in the open area of the room on the other side of the door. Tenacity wandered over to them, winding through the room, doing their best to avoid the stacks of books cluttering the floor. The three windows were easily twice as tall as Tenacity, starting at about their knees. They were spaced with about a foot of wall between each window. Someone had painted intricate designs that twirled and knotted into one another, creating a beautiful pattern that framed them.

A single pillow sat on the sill of the middle window, Tenacity wondered how often Amnyria would sit here and stare out at the city. They sat down on the pillow, leaned up against the side of the wall and stared out. The view was astonishing. Even at night parts of the city were lit up, buzzing with energy and movement. Gate City was nothing like Kyosay, looking out this window for even a moment confirmed that. Tenacity let out a small gasp and took it in. Large spiraling towers shot into the air from seemingly every building, domes gleaming, brightly colored shingles and curtains swaying in the light breeze of the night.

Tenacity breathed in deeply, the whole city smelled of the cinnamon that they’d caught on Amnyria in their earlier interaction. It was much warmer, even at night. Tenacity wondered what the heat would be like once the sun came up. They stared out at the city, taking in the sounds, smells, lights, the heart of a city that lives at night, a far cry from their home. Gate City looked and felt nothing like Kyosay, Tenacity’s heartbeat quickened a bit as they mused on the adventure that awaited them down the streets and alleys that sprawled out before them.

After a few minutes their attention returned to the room they were in. The city wasn’t going anywhere, and would likely be explored with their new associates later once they had sorted out… well, whatever the hell was happening between the two of them. Tenacity blushed thinking about the scene on the other side of the door. They’d read tales of romance before but Amnyria and Nymph had something… raw, almost animalistic growing between them, and Tenacity was fretting about getting caught up in it again.

They shook their head, attempting to clear their mind, and once again returned their attention to the room. They’d noticed the stacks of books on their way to the window, but hadn’t stopped to inspect any of them. One sat within arms reach of the window sill. They grabbed the first one off the top.

“Tales of Time and Bullshit.” Tenacity read the title off the cover and chuckled a bit to themselves. The binding was a dark blueish leather, the lettering embossed and leafed in gold. They flipped the book over, on the back a large hexagonal design had been pressed into the leather. The top of the hexagon had two small rectangles, long on the horizontal edge, unlike the two bigger rectangles held inside the hexagon, that were longer on the vertical edge.

Tenacity opened the book, and began to read. After a few pages they realized the book had to have some connection to Amnyria’s faith. The story had begun to take shape, telling the tale of a young man searching for a lost stone and a wandering bird. It was the description of the bird that made Tenacity connect it to the Old Man. The book described the bird as white feathered with dark purple eyes, talon, and beak, physically similar to a crow. Crows are a favored sign of the Old Man, but this iconography was specifically used to depict him. Tenacity was reading a religious text, they were sure of it.

Tenacity put the book back on the stack, stood and walked quickly over to the next closest stack, once again grabbing the book on top. This time the book was smaller, softly bound with thicker paper. It was well worn, it had been read a number of times. Not so many that it was falling apart yet, but it was close. The ink had faded from the cover, so they couldn’t make out the title, but could read the letters “By Sh” in the bottom right. Carefully Tenacity opened the cover and read the first lines of the book.

*“Once a long time ago, on a planet you’ll likely never see, was born a girl who’s life, and the adventures she would have would shape the universe around her. She would come to be loved by a man so deeply and so true, he would rewrite the stars, if only to give her a better view. In so, she is largely remembered through the lens of the love of this man, but she was never a footnote, something he knew all too well.”*

Tenacity was interested, they weren’t fully sure what they were reading. The figures in the story–the woman the narrative focused on and the man who loved her, Tenacity wondered if the story was influenced by the romance of the Flame and the Wind. They looked back down at the stack of books. The next one, staring back up at them was a glossy covered paperback, with a large bright green raw cut gem on it. It had bright yellow letters labeling it A Guide to Peridots. The books seemed to have no commonality between them so far. A religious text, a book on gemstones, a piece of fiction–Tenacity had hoped the books might give some sort of insight to Amnyria, but they’d asked more questions than they’d answered.

The handle of the door Tenacity had entered through clicked. Tenacity whipped around quickly, spotting the turn of the door knob. They delicately placed the fiction piece into a pocket of their robes, hiding it for later. The door opened, and the two women walked into the room, neither speaking. The energy felt different to Tenacity, not uncomfortable, but also not teeming with the tension from before.

“So uh… did you two… um…” Tenacity’s voice trailed off, as their eyes shot to the ground. “You guys, work things out?” their voice squeaked, cracking like they were suddenly a teen again. Things were *now* uncomfortable.

“Okay, this can’t continue. We’ve got to address it, everyone’s getting too weird.” Amnyria threw her hands up. “I’m a vampire, don’t ask me more than that because, I promise you, I don’t have answers. Honestly, Tenacity, I don’t think you’re in any danger, you haven’t triggered the bloodlust at all. Yes, Nymph, you have, but I don’t think you’re in danger either. I uh… I definitely want to keep you around.” She rushed through the last of the words, her eyes shooting to the ground. Tenacity blushed, reflexively for her.

“Okay, but *that,*” Tenacity stepped closer to the two women, pointing at Amnyria, “right there, that… well, pardon my language, but that sexual tension, right there. That’s what’s making things weird Amnyria. I’ve known you both for all of a half an hour, and you two clearly don’t know where you stand with each other.” Their voice was rising with emotion, it was catching them by surprise, they had no idea how to quell it, so the words just continued.

“I don’t know how you two are supposed to interact with each other, let alone how I’m supposed to interact with you. This has all become very complicated very quickly, and I’m… I’ve…” their breathing was quickening, the emotion continuing to grow, causing a sensation like fuzz growing on their brain, they’d never felt like this, but still the words came.

“I’ve *never* been outside of the temple, Amnyria. I’ve spoken to the *same* 10 people for the last 5 years because the Ellipse hasn’t deemed anyone *worthy* of meeting me in 5 years. Five years of the same dialogue, the same views, the same… everything.” Their eyes now fixated on Amnyria. “I am so… scared. I don’t know what I’m doing, and I have made it so much further than I ever dreamed I would, and that,” their breath caught up to them, causing a pause for a moment, “that is thanks to the two of you.” Their eyes flitted to Nymph, as the fuzz began to recede.

“You two are the first two people I’ve ever met outside of the Ellipse. We barely know each other, but here we are, in Gate City of all places.” They laughed a little, so did Nymph, the tension truly easing for the first time since they’d arrived. Tenacity returned their gaze back to Amnyria, who’s expression was closer to quizzical. “Okay, sure Amnyria, I know, this is your home, but come on… were you expecting two Kyosians in your living room this morning when you woke up? Let alone these two Kyosians?” they searched Amnyria’s face for any indication of a response, while gesturing between themselves and Nymph. Amnyria’s face was stoic for a moment, before a smile creeped across it.

“You’re a bit of a weirdo, aren’t you?” Her voice was playful.

“I told you, 10 people, 5 years. My social skills leave some room for improvement. I’m serious though. We’re here, together, the three of us, one day, we’ll look back on this night. This one, right here.” They emphasized their words with wild hand movements. “It’s the night everything started. Don’t pretend you can’t feel it, I hear the whispers on the wind, surely you hear the ticking of the clock, and you, the crackling of the pit?” The three companions looked at each other, no one disputing the words. “Soooo, we can focus on the weird tension, OR” the other two jumped a bit as Tenacity had nearly shouted the last word. “We can start actually getting to know one another.”

Tenacity was now standing between Amnyria and Nymph, who were facing each other, Tenacity held out her hands to them. The two women stood silently for a moment, taking in the words, before they each grasped their respective outstretched hand, creating a chain between the three.

“HELL YEAH!” A creaking old voice exclaimed as the three held hands. A new sound in the room, taking all of them by surprise.

“A pact has been formed.” This time a smooth, deep, feminine sounding voice spoke.

“A mystery to unfold.” A third voice, this one raspy, but calm.

From the shadows of the room, three figures emerged. One, an old man with long white hair, blood red eyes, the hint of fangs in his toothy grin. He was smartly dressed and checking a large, chained pocket watch. Next to him, a short gnomish woman, hair, bright and purple flowing freely and wildly, like twin flames out of tightly tied pigtails atop her head. A faint halo of sunshine enveloping her as she stood, hand on one hip. Finally, on the other side of the woman stood a tall, intensely red tiefling with dark hair, and eyes brighter than any blue of the world. His hair jostling gently in a breeze all his own.

Before them stood the Old Man, the Violaceous Flame, and the Horned Wind.

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 The city’s real name is Vensai, but locals call it the Bubble. Inside the Bubble the world runs differently. The people who live in the bubble have lived on the land for millenia, or that’s what they say. It’s hard to know for sure, their history and their mythology are nearly impossible to separate. If they’re to be believed they descended from Gods, both old and new. So they make the rules, and anyone who disagrees is welcome to the world outside of the Bubble.

 I was young when my mother died, and she was never one to talk about her past, so I’m murky on the details of our family history. I’m darker skinned though, a deep olive color, like the people who live in the Bubble. I might not have all the details but I’m fairly certain my mother was from inside the protective glass dome. That’s not unheard of for the citizens of the sand, but it’s rarer these days. Most people who leave never turn back, they go as far as the road will take them and then build new lives wherever the feet have led them, far from the land they once called home, but more importantly, far from the rules of the city.

 My mother’s final words to me, just before the illness took her, were “The wind called my name, and offered me life. Who was I to turn away?” Her voice had been weak. It still creaks in my memory. Haggard from fighting an illness that was never given a name. I assume she had meant the words as some sort of explanation–a rationalization of sorts intended to give me a shred of comfort as I watched her slip away.

They’ve never made any sense to me.

My mother was devout, she believed fully in the words of the Lady of the Low. When she spoke of the wind she meant the weather event, certainly not the God. She had never spoken ill of the followers of the Horned Wind, but she’d never spoken highly of the god himself. The Horned Wind’s expansive energy always seem to tire her when the topic of religion was brought up. The Lady of the Low held herself with a certain elegance. With her there was an air of mystery, a serene calmness in the face of the unknown. Mom used to say the Lady of the Low was the moment of silence before an explosion, and that was what had drawn her in.

My mother had her faith to guide her. In my time with her I never once saw it falter. She believed in the power of the Lady, and in the unwavering integrity of her plan, and my mother’s place within it. I’m not crazy, I know the Gods are real. They certainly won’t let us forget, but I never really believed they cared about us. Not really, we’re more like play things to them. A hobby to pass the time.

My mother’s faith didn’t save her from dying brutally from a long, drawn out illness. Her faith did nothing as she wasted away. When she was so small, and frail that the wind could easily take her had she not been *tied down*, the Lady of the Low didn’t save her, nor did she spare her the pain of her disease. I wonder if she even bothered to usher her to the afterlife.

So, no. I don’t *believe* in the Gods. Almighty figures watching over, and protecting the people of Zyrehm don’t exist. It’s just a world of mortals and immortals alike looking out for themselves.

If you’re really lucky you meet a dog with a silly accent and a knack for prophetic visions along the way.

Lyribel’s words earlier hadn’t meant much to me, her visions were like that though. Usually she only gets a word or two out, nothing particularly helpful,and certainly nothing that rhymed. This morning had been special. It felt important and meaningless at the same time.

 “The hand falls off, the wind stops cold, the flame utters what’s yet been told.” I muttered the words to myself. *The wind*. I wondered if she meant the wind as in *the weather* or the wind as in *the God*. I looked down at Lyribel, who trotted happily alongside me as we wandered through the city under the glass.

I shook my head, knowing there was nothing but joy in hers. She hadn’t understood what happened immediately afterwards, she didn’t remember any of what she’d said, and she couldn’t make any more sense of it than I had once I’d explained it to her. I needed to be able to talk it through further, but Lyri wasn’t going to be able to help me. That’s what brought us inside the city.

Something about the Bubble always felt off to me, it was probably how still the air is. Despite having lived my entire life above it I only came into the bubble when I absolutely had to. Lyri and I followed a path not unfamiliar to us, we’d found need of the Sisters Honorable before, and would surely find ourselves winding through the city seeking their guidance in the future. They were an old divinatory sect that followed ancient teachings from the dawn of magic.

The Sisters are an interesting group. They aren’t religious, though they are often mistakenly associated with Mester Howl, God of the Pack. A number of the current practitioners follow Howl, but it’s not a requirement. They’re loyal to no man of the new gods, as they put it. They don’t hide how little they care for any governing body, inside or outside of the Bubble. If anyone was going to be able to help me make sense of things it would be one of the diviners there.

Lyribel trotted out ahead of me, her tail wagging with excitement, she almost bounced between her steps. “So, we’re meeting new people?” her voice was brimming with jubilation at the prospect. She loved new people. She was sweet and silly, and people were always so amazed by her. A few passers-by slowed at her words, gawking at the little creature.

I shook my head, “No, Empathy should be available. We’ll go to her.” Empathy was one of the few non-human sisters. She was a tiefling, the daughter of an infernal creature and a former Sister, the “reference” so to speak that had allowed her entrance to the sisterhood. I scooped Lyri up and picked up the pace ready to be off the street and away from interested eyes.I quickly climbed the large granite steps outside of the Sisters’ Lodge, pushing against the large oak doors that had been painted a deep shade of emerald green and entered the hallowed building.

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**The Chosen of the Old Man, the Wind, and the Flame**

The three unlikely companions stood, mouths agape staring at the three deities before them.

“Your face’ll freeze like that, if you’re not careful.” The Flame’s voice was tempered, a slight crackling at the backend of her tone brought a deepness to it that evoked memories of campfires and higher spirits. She flicked her hand and small bright purple flaming elementals appeared, blazing through the room, and cleaning the space in the process. After mere moments the flames died out and the room was meticulously organized and tidied. The gnomish woman sat in a large overstuffed chair that Nymph and Tenacity weren’t sure had been there before the magical cleaning.

“Ah yes,” the Old Man’s voice was high pitched and aged, a caricature of itself, “the little show is always impressive Flame. I’ll give you that little miss book hoarder over here needed the clean up help, BUT WHAT, I ask you, if she had a *system*.” His attention shifted toward Amnyria, “Seriously, though you couldn’t have been bothered to clean? You have three Gods in your living room, young one.” He elbowed her playfully in the ribs, shirking the serious tone of the words.

Amnyria’s eyes darted to the ground, she was clearly embarrassed once again “well, but I didn’t know.” she stammered the words out, her voice immediately lacking the confidence it has oozed with earlier. She sounded like a child being chastised by a beloved father. A need to please him mixed with a sense of frustration with herself for not meeting his expectations coated her words.

“Come now, you’re a hand of the clock. You could have known if you wanted.” His voice was soft, and he caressed her face as he spoke. Something in his tone bade her to lift her gaze to his in time to catch the soft wink he used to punctuate the sentence. For a moment he seemed younger to her, not in his appearance, but in his eyes. They held an air of youth, and many lifetimes of sadness all at once, a sharp contrast from the whimsical Old Man of legend.

 “No matter now. I assume you have food?”

And the moment had passed, Amnyria snapped out of the haze as the Old Man disappeared from her line of sight. In a split moment he was suddenly in her kitchen, rifling through her cupboards, tossing around cans and spices, and creating quite the commotion. Then, nearly as quickly as he’d left, he was back, seated at the sofa with a spread of soft cheeses, meats and crackers–all of which Amnyria was sure he hadn’t found in *her* kitchen–laid out on the coffee table before him.

“Alright, we can leave now, I’ve got the cheese.” He beamed at his two companions.

“Sit Crow, you know our business isn’t done.” The Horned Wind’s voice was higher than Tenacity expected it to be. Tenacity wouldn’t have called it feminine by any means, but the teachings of the Ellipse present the Wind as a deeply masculine energy. As such, Tenacity had envisioned a deeper tone, though the firmness was spot on.

The Old Man shot a look at the deity. “There are mortals around, and Crow is certainly ages from here.” His red eyes flashed as he spoke, and Amnyria could feel her own bloodlust welling in the back of her throat.

The Old Man continued, a quiet cold rage building behind his eyes. “He may not have been of this plane but I assure you, I am. As such we are peers, lest I remind you this need not be a mission of peace.”

Amnyria gasped quietly as her fangs enlarged in her mouth. She’d barely felt the bloodlust the last few days, but it drowned her senses in this moment. Her thoughts were turning to Nymph, the edges of the living room began to blur and fade from her sight. She could feel the Old Man’s rage burning through her.

“Hey maybe we don’t… I don’t know, start an inter-religious war in Nyr’s–Oh! That’s what I’m going to call you Nyr, told you you needed to pick a nickname before I picked one for you, well you’re stuck with it now, hope you like it–but seriously though y’all. Who wants to fight in a war that starts in a living room?” Nymph’s voice cut through the tension in the room. The rage disappeared from Amnyria’s veins, and the Old Man’s eyes. The air, which had frenzied into the beginnings of a storm, calmed back to a gentle breeze. The Violaceous Flame’s hair burned brighter, her face beaming with pride.

“Nymph is right. Besides, Old Man,” The Flame tipped her head slightly at this, “we *are* here on a mission of peace. The young ones have found each other, and now that they have I believe we each have something for them. I’ll start.” She crossed to stand beside Nymph, and grabbed each of her hands. “Nymphimae Willowstar, I bless you with the eternal flames.” As she spoke her hands glowed bright purple like her hair, the energy slowly seeping into Nymph’s hands.

“And I bless you, Tenacity Baevyr[[8]](#footnote-7), with the knowledge of the Wind, and the secrets carried thereon.” The Horned Wind locked eyes with Tenacity, their irises each shining brightly filling the areas where they stood with blue light as bright as the Flame’s own fire.

“Finally, I bless you with more time.” As the Old Man spoke a large, yellow, spectral glowing clock-face formed in the air between him and Amnyria. He reached out a spindly finger and flicked the image toward Amnyria. It wrapped itself around her, and for a moment the entire room was flooded with the light of three god-given blessings.

In the blinding light the three new companions could just barely hear the Flame as she spoke, “Darkness returns to Zyrehm. Fire to fight fire, the truth to fight lies, and time to fight death, take these gifts and save us all.”

And with that final word, the light vanished, and the three travellers were once again alone, in a living room in Gate City.

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**Nymph**

Nymph looked down at her hands, they were warmer than the rest of her body, but had stopped glowing a few hours ago. After the Gods left Amnyria had retreated to her room. She’d been cordial, welcoming Tenacity and Nymph to her couch and her spare room, but she was clearly shaken from the events. Nymph had insisted that Tenacity take the room, she wasn’t tired and Nyr’s view of the city was amazing. So for the last several hours she’d been sitting in one of the large windows, silently watching the city hum and come to life as the sun lazily rose in the sky, bringing with it dawn.

As she looked at her hands her mind raced, replaying the odd events of the prior night once again. It didn’t matter how many times she’d gone through it, she wasn’t really sure what to make of any of it. The Violaceous Flame wasn’t going anywhere, that was becoming clear. Everything was changing, new people, new places, blessings from gods, dark omens. It was times like these that people turn to a god, it had never occurred to her that the gods might turn to a mortal.

There was clearly tension between the three deities, she wasn’t sure why, but she could feel it in their interactions with each other. The Flame and the Wind, famously battle-tested lovers, had felt as though they were standing on opposite sides of the world. Whatever the “crow” nonsense had been between the Wind and the Old Man left little room to imagine warmth between them.
 There were no stories of the trio working together, or even being associated with one another in what Nymph knew of the religious stories. They were of one pantheon but all of the living Gods are of this pantheon. Maybe there were stories and Nymph just wasn’t familiar, she’d never been particularly pious, nor interested in the religious sect.

“Maybe Nyr knows…” She mumbled the words to herself, still staring absentmindedly out the window. It had been about an hour since the blood haze had fully lifted. It had waned in the presence of the Gods, but came back when they left. It was probably at least part of the reason she hadn’t moved from her spot, she’d lost an hour or two in… primal thoughts about Nyr. The thoughts weren’t words or sentences, more raw emotion than anything else. She had imagined the feeding over and over. Amnyria’s super human grace and speed, the feeling of the heat in her neck as Nyr fed contrasting against the cool of her body, supporting her body while her mind was flooded with magical insight far beyond what Nymph could possibly understand.

While Amnyria fed, Nymph’s mind was filled with magical mystery that she couldn’t attempt to grasp now that she was out of the haze. She could remember two faces, one feminine, the other masculine, etched in the stars in swirling blue and green energy. She’d never seen either image before but something about the image had felt ancient and new at the same time. She had spoken with them, she was sure of it, but she couldn’t repeat a word if her life depended on it. A flash of the faces went through Nymph’s mind as she pondered whether the others knew of any connection between the three Gods. She wondered if letting Nyr feed on her again would produce the same results.

The whole apartment had been quiet in the time the three spent away from each other, but in that moment she was certain she was crossing Amnyria’s mind. She turned from the window towards Nyr’s door, staring at the darkly stained wood. Nymph’s mind wandered back to the image of Amnyria, naked, standing boldly before her. She blushed, she’d known that the Hands of the Clock were brasher, but to looks at Nyr’s small frame and delicate features you’d never expect the behavior.

There was something in the dichotomy of her appearance and her personality that made Nymph smile. All the strangeness and stress aside, Nymph couldn’t deny that she had found her cute. And just like that, she found herself in front of Nyr’s door, she hadn’t realized she’d risen, let alone that she was moving. She’d been lost in thought, and as she stood there debating opening the door she fiddled with the hem of the dress Nyr had lent her.

Suddenly, the door swung open, Nyr stood there, her robe lazily thrown on, tied so loosely it did little to hide her form, the fabric clinging to her curves. Her hair had been tied up, plopped hastily into a bun on the top of her head. She was lit in the warm tones of candle-light from further in the room, Nymph could smell incense, a blend of earthy and musky notes. Nyr’s eyes were clear and shocked at the sight of Nymph.

 “Well, well, well, I thought it might be you.” Nyr’s voice was once again the audio equivalent of velvet, rich and soft, begging to be touched.

“Pause.” The voice came from behind Nymph, causing her to jump as she turned to see Tenacity, exiting their room. “I can see where *this* is going, and I don’t need to be sharing a wall with that. You’re a vampire, so I’m gonna guess we won’t *spring into action* until this evening? What, around dusk?” They shot their gaze from Nymph to Amnyria, who nodded, adjusting her stance slightly to convey an attempt at modesty. “Okay, great, I want to explore the city. I don’t think I’ll be in any danger, but I’ve discovered my blessing has two immediately practical applications. First, I can hear damn near… everything, hence the uh, well… not being here, that I’m attempting. I think if you need me you’d just have to yell, and the wind will carry your message to me. Similarly, I can carry messages *to you.”* They turned their back on the women and whispered as quietly as they could, but both women could hear it clear as day.

Amnyria looked at Nymph, her eyes clearly searching Nymph for an answer. Nymph hesitated for a moment, “Alright, don’t get recaptured in less than 24 hours. We’ll meet back here no later than dusk?”

Tenacity let out their breath, visibly relieved that no one was going to fight this decision. They nodded, then winked at the other two, “Have fun! Play!” They hollered over their shoulder as they made their exit.

Nyr chuckled a bit, and stepped backwards into her room. “Care to come in?”

Nymph looked at Nyr, standing there, barely dressed, beckoning her into her bedroom. The two locked eyes, and Nymph could practically feel the hesitation melt away as she nodded and stepped into the room. Nyr closed the door behind her, and stared at the elven woman across from her. “What brought you to my door, Nymph?”

“Honestly?” Nymph laughed at herself. “Too many things, Nyr. Too many.” She shook her head slightly, and ran her hands through her hair.

“Is… *this* a reason?” Amnyria loosened the tie of her robe, letting it slide back, exposing her naked body once again. Nymph looked at Amnyria, this time, she held her gaze steady, her eyes scanning the curves and valleys of Amnyria’s body. Nymph marvelled at the way the light danced over Nyr’s perfect, pale skin. She felt a flood of desire well up inside her.

“Honestly?” Nymph’s voice surprised her, the confidence it held felt foreign and unexpected, she reached out, grabbing Nyr by the small of the waist with one hand, and clasping her hand with the other as she spinned her from the door, putting Nyr between Nymph and the bed. “Yes.” She pushed her back towards the bed, climbing in with her, and kissing her gently but passionately.

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**Tenacity**

They stepped out into the hallway of Nyr’s building. It wasn’t anything to marvel at in and of itself, but it bubbled with the sounds of people starting their days. Tenacity wandered toward the stairwell, their newfound sense of hearing flooding their brain, making the task require more dedication that it would have normally. They reached out a hand and steadied themselves against the wall, but continuing their journey.

“What brought you to my door Nymph?” Amnyria’s voice, though distant, carried to Tenacity’s ear. *Dear Gods, need to get further.*

“Yeah, heaven forbid you hear your new friends *fuuuu-ck*.” The voice emphasized the hardness of the ending consonants really forcing itself into focus amongst the sea of noise. “You know, I’m here to help. Come on, I gave you that info about the messages on the wind, really saved you the torture of having to listen to those babes go to town on each other… Why did I do that again?”

“Stop, I don’t know who you are but I can feel *what* you are. I don’t know why you’re here, but I won’t indulge you.”

“Oh, come on, you don’t mean that. I’m an old friend of the family.” The voice sounded sincere, but Tenacity knew better than to trust it. The moment it had appeared they’d felt nothing but infernal energy radiating from its disembodied direction.

“My family are the monks who’ve raised me.” Tenacity’s voice was firm and steady.

“Yes,” the voice sounded as though it’s speaker stood behind Tenacity, they could almost feel hands resting on their shoulders. “And this is one of the fun moments of the universe in which what I said, though unintentional–or is it?--still applies. I am a fiend of the family, no matter how you slice it Tenacity.”

“A *fiend* of the family? Better watch your words closer.” Tenacity quipped back. They lowered their hand, really focusing on the sounds closest to them, working on turning off the sound further out.

The voice laughed, “You are a strong one, but strength does not give you knowledge, and one day you will seek more knowledge from me. I’ll be here when that happens.” Tenacity felt the presence shrink, ultimately tucking itself behind their ear, a dull nearly pain-like sensation still, and continuing.

Tenacity shook their head, they had made it to the ground floor of the building, and in that time they had successfully managed to escape any further… eavesdropping, with the girls, something they were pleased to have accomplished. As they stepped on to the street, Tenacity caught a single flash of Nyr, seductively moaning Nymph’s name. They blushed despite themselves, and both felt reassured, and lamented the confirmation that louder sounds would carry no matter the distance.

This blessing would take some getting used to and some mastering to ensure that it did not become a curse that would drive Tenacity mad. For now though they had found some version of control. Their thoughts lingered for a moment on the disembodied voice. It felt familiar, as though it belonged to someone they’d always known, though they couldn’t place who.

The personality was certainly crass, Tenacity found themselves questioning if they were wound too tight, or if the people around them were simply too loose. They didn’t mind that people had differing sensibilities, whatever was going on between Amnyria and Nymph was certainly of no concern to them, they just didn’t want to be around for it. It seems an awfully personal matter, and Tenacity barely knew either of them, and certainly didn’t know either of them in *that* way.

This voice though, despite giving Tenacity the information that guaranteed them an escape from being the most immediate third wheel of all time, had seemed keen to stay near by. *Perv*. they thought to themselves.

“Hey, you get up to something interesting and I’m happy to tag along to that, but I haven’t been corporeal in a very long time, sue me if I’m interested in what’s going on in that bedroom.” The voice was filled with snark.

*You can hear me? This? You’re in my head?* Tenacity was shocked, they’d expected some level of privacy. They stopped in their tracks, a sudden pillar in a sea of people walking the street during morning commute time.

“Yes, I’m in your head. Look, he’s placed me on your soul, it came with the blessing, you should be honored, he’s the only other being to have held me in thousands of years. You must be something special. But I’m not here for all this, you don’t want to work with me, I just wasn’t going to stand for my good name being slandered.”

*No slander here sir, you’ve stated your case, you’re still a perv.* Tenacity could almost hear the eye roll they were sure that sentence was met with.

“Alright, I’m just going to go back to my little corner of anger.”

*Wait!*

“Yes?” their voice sounded so eager.

*What do I call you?* An image flashed through Tenacity’s brain, shiny, perfect, white teeth, breaking into a grin.

“Call me, Jar-ich[[9]](#footnote-8). They say I’m a real son-of-a-bitch.” and with that he laughed at his own joke, which had been completely lost on Tenacity, and settled back into the small sensation on the side of Tenacity’s brain.

Tenacity looked around, and realized that they had stopped in front of a small building that appeared to specialize in clothing. The women inside the building smiled out at them from the large windows that had perfectly modeled and clothed mannequins.

Tenacity looked down at their sibling’s tunic and decided that they should find something less conspicuous to don. They wandered into the store, and tried on several outfits before landing on a pair of loose fitting dark, charcoal grey pants, with large slits up the leg revealing more than a little leg. They had paired the pants with an electric blue tube top, and a sheer spider-web styled pair of sleeves to finish it off. They felt good in the new clothes. Tenacity looked around the small store and spotted a few items that they were sure the girls would like. They snatched up the items and with that, they paid the clerk generously, and strode with confidence out into the strange new city.

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**The Girls**

As she pushed her down onto the bed, Nymph pressed her lips against Nyr’s, soft and plump yet cool to the touch. In contrast Nyr reveled in the heat of Nymph’s body, her lips burning into her skin as Nymph began to trail down her neck. As she moved, Nymph’s hands found the edges of Amnyria’s robe–barely hanging on to her at this point–and gently but deliberately pulled the remaining fabric off. Nyr let out an ecstatic giggle, squealing “Nymph!” as she did.

The sound of her name brought Nymph’s mind sharply into focus, and for a moment she faltered, her face burning with embarrassment at how forward she was being. She barely knew Amnyria, and this wasn’t like her, but something about this woman had gotten under her skin. She wanted her badly, and Amnyria had hardly shied away from the attention. Amnyria couldn’t help but notice as Nymph’s face flushed a deep red. She shook her head, working her fingers through Nymph’s hair. “Whatever’s holding you back, let it go. It’s not doing you any favors.” She kissed Nymph passionately, then pulled away once again. Her voice was velvety and inviting, “Let’s have a little fun, make a little…*magic*.” She shivered as she whispered the last word, while pulling Nymph once again into another kiss.

Nymph melted into her. The nerves dissolving away, the feel of Nyr’s delicate fingers in the short tufts of her hair, the cool softness of her lips once again becoming the only thing her mind could focus on. *A little magic.* The words floated through the haze of Nymph’s thoughts, casually at first, then louder *A little magic?* Nymph’s thoughts momentarily wandered back to the earlier display. To the intensity she’d felt off of Nyr in that moment, how badly she’d *needed* her.

How *incredibly hot* that had felt.

Nymph grinned as she moved once more to Nyr’s neck. Nyr moaned slightly as she did, a sound that excited Nymph. Nyr’s body writhing beneath her in waves of lust lit Nymph up, she craved more. Her hands confidently fondled Nyr’s breasts. Despite her small stature they were large and heaved as she squeezed them. She played with them, occasionally diverting her attention to her nipples as she went. “Do you…like this?” she struggled with the words, but the genuine inquiry came through to Nyr nonetheless.

Nyr chuckled a bit, “The consideration is appreciated, but not needed. This is great.” her voice was breathy and Nymph couldn’t help but stop for a moment to marvel in…well *Nyr*, naked, practically glowing. Her hair splaying out on the bed beneath her in long ringlets of ivory, just barely paler than her skin. The red of her eyes burning into Nymph as she stared, begging her to close the distance between them. The curves of her body just mere inches beneath her. Waiting and willing.

“Good.” Nymph’s voice brimmed with confidence once more as she lowered herself onto Nyr, pressing her tongue into her mouth, and squeezing a breast in either hand. Only this time silently casting a hand made of pure magical energy, that reached down between Nyr’s legs, and began massaging her as every muscle in her body suddenly tightened.

“My god Nymphimae!” Nyr gasped out, her eyes gleaming once more, the red intensifying. In a flash the two women had switched places. Nyr held both of Nymph’s arms above her head, pinning them to the pillow as her other hand ripped at the dress she’d lent to Nymph earlier, tearing it to shreds to reveal Nymph’s body. As her fangs sunk into Nymph’s neck, Nyr’s free hand shot down between the elf’s legs. It was warm and wet, inviting. Nyr slipped a finger as deeply as she could into Nymph, who moaned loudly with pleasure. Nyr was cool, a sharp contrast to the heat Nymph had felt swelling at her touch. The elf let out a breathy moan as Nyr inserted another finger and began to massage her, the motion hastening with her breathing. Nymph’s spell faltered for a moment between the quick change of positions, and the waves of desire that were all but drowning her.

“Oh…gods…*Nyr*.” She did all she could to refocus the spell, desperately clinging to the need to satisfy Nyr. Once more Nymph manifested the hand, and used it to explore Nyr’s body. Nyr stopped feeding for a moment as the magic surged, and let out a moan at the feeling of Nymph’s magic. It was intoxicating and tantalizing, coursing from Nymph’s neck through her blood, and as it reached out to her the magic felt electric between her legs. It overwhelmed her. It was all she could think of, she’d had plenty of sex before but nothing like this.

Suddenly she ripped herself away from Nymph’s neck. Nymph’s head lolled for a second, the hand wisping back to the ether. Nyr flashed with fear as her mind raced to the worst. Then Nymph’s head snapped sharply into a defiant stare at Nyr. The blood haze was surely filling her mind but the way Nymph stared… Nyr felt certain that Nymph was thinking straight.

“I *want you*.” Nymph’s words were steady and clear. Nyr smiled.

“Good.” Nyr echoed Nymph’s earlier sentiment. Nymph smirked and took her hands and rested them gently but firmly on the top of Nyr’s head. Slowly, Nyr lowered her body down so she rested with one of Nymph’s legs on either side of her head, and the two women continued as such until they both collapsed into exhausted heaps in each other’s arms, passing out until a once again exasperated Tenacity came upon their sleeping naked bodies, when they returned at dusk. “Well good thing I bought everyone new clothes then, huh?”

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“Welcome back.” Her voice was deep and gentle. Had I been blind I would have described a million women each likely more demure than the last.

And they would have all been wrong.

Empathy of the Sisters Honorable was a figure unlike any I’d ever laid eyes on. I have known her since we were both quite young, and I’d never seen her wear her hair the same way twice. Her intricate braids wove in small, often colorful, trinkets throughout her jet black hair. She stood a good head taller than most of the women of the Bubble. That was before you considered her horns. Despite her height, the hair and it’s ever changing display of intricate braids, came down to the back of her knees. Today she wore it in a million tiny braids that had surely taken her and at least ten of her attending Sisters most of the morning to accomplish. She’d wrapped a few into a crown, weaving around her horns, and tied loosely in the back.

Her skin, a testament to the strength of the ancestral blood of the Vensai people, was a deep, caramel color, flecked with shimmers of silver, a signifier of her infernal bloodline. Had her horns not come in, and the tail with them, one would have been forgiven to assume her human. Today she wore the Sisters’ travelling robes. They were made of a lighter material, likely Bubble Silk, that had been dyed lilac with swirling deep blue patterning throughout. It hung loosely to her shoulders, cutting into a deep v across her chest as the fabric had been folded over itself and tied into position with a bright red ribbon matching the riding pants she wore. The red of the Sisterhood.

On her back the emblem of the Sisters Honorable–a black-lined, solid white circle. Inside the circle a curved silver line sits at the top, beneath that a down facing triangle with a line bisecting the point horizontally–had been embroidered in that same bright red. She wore a simple silver necklace adorned with a single charm. I’d asked before but she’d never shared its meaning with me. She’d simply laughed off the question and changed the subject, and I’d never cared enough to push. We’re allowed our secrets. Even the ones we wear proudly around our necks.

Empathy was well muscled, combined with her height I’d always found the word “sturdy” came to mind when trying to describe her. However described, one thing was certain, Empathy was a woman of great multitudes. That quality alone would have made her useful to me, but it was just the tip of the iceberg so to speak.

“*Welcome* indeed.” I rolled my eyes, and she rolled hers, never once dropping her full faced smile. The motion came off exceedingly sarcastic and for a moment I felt at ease in her presence.

“Do I welcome you as a Sister today?” Her voice hadn’t changed, but her tone had. The playful lilt from early had dropped entirely, replaced now with a barely veiled edge. Her presence intensified as she closed the distance between us. A pang of guilt shot through me as details of an otherwise black-ed out night came crashing into my mind. *Our last encounter… I’d forgotten.*

I briefly flashed back to a series of memories: the two of us at a bar.

The two of us at a different bar.

The two of us going through a window at what I presume is a third bar.

The two of us getting very close in a very casual way, a fourth bar on fire behind us. . .

I shoved down the guilt and resolved to carry on as though I hadn’t remembered the details, maybe she’d forgive the ass I’d made of myself if she imagined I was unaware of the details. Could be easier to get out of that way. I put on a grin, and did my best to look dashing,

“Come now, don’t you always?” The words slipped out of my mouth coolly as I narrowed my eyes. For a beat she didn’t react, but then, almost imperceptibly, a shudder crossed her. She always did have a soft spot for me, I have her on the line and I know it.

“How can the Sisters serve?” Her voice landing on the tone she usually uses with me, similar to the first tone but with a touch of… sensuality to it.

My grin widened to a smile. “I was hoping you might afford me an interpretation.” I leaned in, as though hugging her, my lips resting just next to her ear, “Lyri’s had a vision. This one’s different.”

As I whispered the words, I felt her tense slightly. We pulled a part and her eyes briefly scanned mine. Whatever she was looking for, she must have found as she nodded her head solemnly and turned to one of her attending Sisters, who’d been standing a few paces behind. “We need chambers set. You must tell the Siblings of the Elipse I have business to attend to here. I will be no more than an hour–” she shot her glance to me, emphasizing the words. “–late. You’ll want to follow us.”

The woman Empathy had addressed looked stunned, but after a stern look from Empathy she shot into action, directing the fellow attendings to carry out the various pieces that composed the tasks Empathy had set before her.

As our relationship was…well complicated, and twisted in and out of her…well personal and professional lives, it was always interesting to watch her here inside of the walls of the sisterhood. I knew her position had been hard fought, though I didn’t fully understand what it meant, or what she did. She referred to herself as a Rook. It was a title of some sort, but the actual machinations of the Sisterhood were closely guarded. I probably wasn’t *supposed* to know that she was a Rook.

So not knowing fully what amount of command a Rook should control, it was clear in how the others interacted with her that Empathy controlled a lot. It was refreshing, she tended to let others walk about her in her personal life, something I’d never fully understood. She was impressive, in every manner the word could be taken, and yet she seemed so blindly unaware of what it meant.

For once, I obeyed and followed silently as she led me to a room that the others had managed to furnish with all needed items in no time flat. She lit a candle, and signaled to her primary attending to light incense before leaving. The room teemed with a quality of magic. The way the Sisters used magic was unlike any other spell caster I’d ever seen. I could always feel it before they cast, the way it swells in response to their need. There was a primal quality to it that seemed deeply lacking in other practices.

I lowered myself onto one of the floor pillows the Sisters had been gracious enough to put out for myself and Lyri. Lyri was already seated and staring at Empathy from the other seat. She also found their magic enthralling. She always said it felt like home. Something I had resonated with, but yet another thing I didn’t fully understand.

Empathy wafted the smoke from the incense across the room. I wasn’t sure when it had happened, but I realized for the first time that she was no longer wearing the travelling robes from earlier. Now she wore the familiar, thin silver robes of divining. They were dimly lit by the red tattoos that twisted around her body, glowing as she spoke in an ancient language.

With a gust of air the candles extinguished at once. The wax now glowing as though the flame were in their cores instead of having been on the wicks. The effect covered the room in dim light, casting ethereal shadows that seemed to have no source across the space.

“The hand falls off, the wind stops cold, the flame utters what’s yet been told.” A chill raced down my spine as Empathy spoke.

“I… I didn’t tell you that.” I looked up from the floor into Empathy’s glowing red eyes, but it was like looking into Lyri’s when she was in a vision. “Empathy?” I could feel the anxiety welling in my throat, I was barely able to choke the word out.

“The hand falls off, the wind stops cold, the flame utters what’s yet been told.” She spoke the words once again, in the same, almost song-like manner that Lyribel had only hours earlier. “When days were old, and brother and sister fought, a lesson was learned and then forgot.”

She dropped to the floor, the candles returning to normal, the energy in the room dying down. “Sister Empathy has seen what was not meant for her.” The words came from Empathy’s mouth, but they were cold and stiff, sounds I’d never heard from her before. “You have pulled more words from their speaker than should have been heard at this time. I mark you, in the hunt of the Howl.”

And that’s the last thing Lyri and I remember before waking up in Gate City, on the other side of the continent.

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**Amnyria**

Walking up the stone stairs of the Caathous[[10]](#footnote-9), Amnyria found herself longing for the warmth of Nyx’s body, not in the hungry, lustful way of the day’s earlier events, but with a searching need, as though desperate for the comfort it could provide. She wasn’t sure why her stomach had dropped, or what exactly the small voice nagging at the back of her brain was saying. She was certain if she’d had a pulse it would be racing, *something* wasn’t right.

The stairs were made of cobbled sandrinite, a stone Gate City had in abundance, though was considered rare elsewhere on Zyrehm. She’d walked them a thousand times in her lifetime and was bound to walk them countless more times in the eternity that now stretched out before her. In the many times she’d walked these steps she’d never felt like this. She’d had no reason to suspect any danger, beyond the inherent danger of Gate City. For the first time ever, she wondered if this general sense of foreboding was just what normal people felt in the city.

Caathous Obelishim [[11]](#footnote-10)was unique in that it stood in one of the largest cities on Zyrehm, and yet there were no permanent Hours stationed in it. Nor in Gate City at all, in fact. The town isn’t exactly a bastion of peace and good citizenry. The history books tell us that Gate City gets its name from its ancient purpose–it served as a Gate between a portion of the continent that held the still standing city of Saern, and the rest of Zyrehm.

In the ancient days Saern was a prison town, inhabited solely by the worst Zyrehm had to offer. Gate City became the place that a lot of people chose to build lives in after being released from Saern. Nowadays, Saern stands as one of the safest cities in Zyrehm despite its geographical closeness to Gate City, and Gate City is where the criminals go to play. As such, many of the churches of Zyrehm had refused to cultivate any followings in the town, but not The Old Man.

The story goes that this obelishim–the official name for any holy building of the Old Man–started as a pub, long, long ago, when the Old Man was still new to Zyrehm. Some claim that the Caathous was the very first obelishim, a place the Old Man would frequent, and whose patrons he bestowed his blessing upon. From there his following grew, and would eventually become the Clock as it’s known today.

But that’s the thing about the obelishims, the Clock, hell even the Old Man. There’s a story for everything, and it’s anyone’s guess as to which ones are true.

Amnyria tried her best to pull herself out of her thoughts, being distracted wasn’t going to do anyone any good. She’d been sent on a mission; scout out what, if anything, the Clock knew about Tenacity and their recent disappearance. Amnyria had tried to explain to Tenacity that she was a nobody, merely a Minute, and certainly not important enough to warrant an unscheduled meeting in the obelishim with its leading Minute hand. But Tenacity had been persistent, and had reminded her that she was no longer some mere Minute hand, her status had been changed when she became a vampire.

Tenacity didn’t know the mysterious nature of her vampirism, other than what they had witnessed, so they had no way of knowing just how true their words were, but it had inspired Amnyria in the moment nonetheless. She was a member of the Turned, she had been pledged to Hour Zendria, walking into the Caathous should no more bother her than a fox is bothered entering a hen house. Gods, she had *met* the Old Man.

But still she felt exposed and rubbed raw as she gripped the handle of the large door that welcomed you into the Caathous. She shook her head, trying once more to bring her brain into something resembling order, and swung open the door.

The inside of any obelishim is a unique experience, no two really look alike. The Caathous’ main room was still fashioned as a bar, it still served as one too. To her right upon entering, was a modest stage. The room was lined with booths on the perimeter walls. Directly ahead of her, beyond a sea of tables, stretching the whole length of the back wall, save two doors on either side of it, was a large darkly stained bar. A few Seconds were polishing the glinting silver faceting along its length. They paid no mind to the sound of the door opening, and Amnyria was able to quickly ascertain the reason why.

Behind the bar stood a tall, well muscled man, with thick dark hair that hung about his face like ribbons. His eyes were the same rich red that Amnyria’s took on during her blood lust, though he stared as though he commanded an army rather than taking on the affectation of a man on the brink of a feeding. Something about the way he carried himself made it clear that he was being groomed for the title.

His eyes shot over toward Amnyria, feigning mere curiosity at first, then lighting up at the realization of what she was. Vampires are everywhere in Gate City, it’s the only city in all of Zyrehm where the undead outnumber the living. Not every vampire follows the Old Man though, in fact a large number don’t. Who needs a God when you’re stronger than most mortals, and you’ll live longer than even the elves? The sight of a vampire entering the obelishim at dusk had clearly piqued his interest.

He flicked his hand, dismissing the Seconds who wandered off to various positions throughout the common room. He carefully and gracefully wove through the chairs and tables across the room closing the distance between himself and Amnyria. “Enchante.” He said, grasping Amnyria’s hand gently, guiding it firmly to his lips to plant a kiss.

Amnyria would have blushed if she could. A warm feeling crashed over her like a wave anyway. Her head swimming, she awkwardly curtsied, nearly falling in the process. His free arm shot out with precision timing to catch her, leaving her wrapped up in his embrace. Amnyria could feel his hand on her waist, and for a moment she softened to the touch, barely resisting the urge for more.

But a retching feeling in her stomach brought her back to reality, *This isn’t right.* She and Nymph had barely begun to figure out what they were, but she was sure that Nymph would not be pleased to see her in this position, and certainly not in any position this might lead to. She pulled herself away and smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress, laughing nervously. *What’s come over me?*

“My apologies, I am Amnyria Fallfought, I have been a Minute Hand on the Clock of the Old Man for more than 3 million minutes. My parents before me, my children to come. I seek only questions in the chaos that unfolds. The Old Man teaches nothing.” She hoped slipping into the familiarity of tradition would bring her a shred of comfortability.

The man cracked a wide grin, one that only a few days ago would have melted Amnyria to her core. Today though she steeled herself to his whiles, and waited for a response, impatiently cocking an eyebrow.

“But leaves us with our lesson. I am Ristin Bovwire, I have been an Hour Hand on the Clock of the Old Man for less than an hour. My parents before me, my children to come. I seek only pleasure in the chaos that unfolds.”

Amnyria’s jaw dropped. “You’re an *Hour*?” the words escaped from her mouth without any conscious effort on her part. Not in her lifetime had an Hour been *appointed* inside of Gate City. This was undoubtedly a bad sign.

Another, more mischevious, grin crossed his face. “I am, freshly minted and all. You are my first visitor, Minute hand. To what do I owe the honor?”

He was staring at her with a look that did little to ease her wariness. A look that backed up his spoken search for pleasure. One that invited and teased, and in no uncertain terms assured her that all she had to do was ask. Her head was still swimming, and for a moment she considered taking him into the back and well… *taking* him. “You’re in my head.” her voice was weak, a bare whisper as the words tumbled out of her mouth. They felt foreign, and she wasn’t sure they’d come *from* her.

“It’s my charm.” His voice was thick, and tinged with desire, but his word choice had overplayed his hand. *Charm?* Amnyria clutched at the silver timepiece hanging from her neck.

“I don’t want no scrubs.” The ancient magic that coursed through everything on the planet surged up through Amnyria’s body, channeling through the clock and encasing her in a glowing aura. Her head clear for the first time since laying eyes on Ristin. Her eyes narrowed, “You would use magic on me? Another of the Clock? Without so much as asking?” she spat out her words as though they were venom. No longer under his spell, she could feel the anger rising within.

Ristin’s eyes shot down, “I, uh, well, it’s just that…” he stammered over the words, his suave affectation dissipating at the harshness of her tone.

“Spit. It. Out.”

“No, it’s just that, most people don’t mind… or, well, notice, I suppose is probably the more correct word. I didn’t mean anything by it. I, uh, well, I’m a seeker of pleasure, not just for myself but for everyone. You seemed to enjoy…” He trailed off, his composure now completely abandoned.

“You may be an Hour, but have no doubt that I am not some mere Minute hand here at your mercy. I have been chosen of the Old Man himself.” Confidence coursed through Amnyria once more, she could almost hear Nymph and Tenacity cheering her on in the back of her head. Could nearly see their proud smiles as she took control of the situation. “I am Minute hand Fallfought. Devoted to the Old Man, one of both his followers and the Turned. I am here as *the* Minute Hand of Hour Zendria–” Ristin’s face dropped at the name “–I have only recently returned to town and have come to catch up on what I have missed in my time abroad.”

At the end of her words, Ristin dropped to a deep bow, kneeling on one knee. “My apologies Minute hand Fallfought, I didn’t know we had such a prestigious guest grace our obelishim. I will get you a booth, and bring you a blood ale and will tell you what it is you need to know. I suspect my recent promotion was arranged to support your arrival.”

“I supsect it was.” Amnyria didn’t believe the words she was saying, or his sudden change in demeanor but he had information and she needed it. All she had to do was keep up this act and she would find out what they needed to know and then the three of them could get out of Gate City. For the first time in her life, she didn’t feel safe in the only town she had ever known.

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**Nymphimae & Tenacity**

Amnyria had changed into the clothes Tenacity had purchased for her before slipping off to her church to get a feel for how far word had spread about Tenacity’s sudden adventure into the world. Nymph stood, staring at the clothing they’d bought for her. If nothing else, Tenacity’s taste was well developed for someone who had been shut away their entire life. They’d taken the time to find clothing that Nymph and Nyr would feel comfortable in, meaning a dress with so many slits she may as well not have been wearing clothing for Nyr and a more practical outfit for Nymph.

She slipped into the flowing pants, with slits of their own, starting just above the ankle cuffs and ending approximately mid thigh, made of a periwinkle colored fabric that Nyr wouldn’t have picked for herself, but had to admit looked very nice on her. The shirt was two pieces, a dark royal blue tank top that fitted her snugly though not too tight. The purple nearly see through covering sparkled in the few shafts of day light that struggled to peek through as the sun set. The article of clothing hung jauntily off her shoulders and while she wasn’t sure it was meant to be worn this way, she had tucked the bottom hem into the top of her pants pulling at the fabric to fluff it out about her.

She’d barely finished dressing when Tenacity spilled into the room. “This city is AMAZING. Truly, it’s something else, gods, I can’t wait to get out there and show you, to experience it with a local is gonna be a blast.”

They’d been buzzing all evening since they returned. Their brief adventure into the city on their own had obviously excited them, and while Nymph was happy to see Tenacity really come to life for the first time since they’d met she was worried too.

“How much do you know about Gate City, Ten?” Nymph’s voice was gentle, this wasn’t a scolding moment, and she wanted that to be clear.

Tenacity blinked a little, Nymph didn’t know that they had never been called by a nickname before. She had no way of knowing that in three letters she was sealing a bond forged in all the excitement they’d been through together. In a flash through Tenacity’s expression changed, they were beaming now. “I know almost nothing. I know that the Ellipse has a temple here. It was built as commentary of the fragile beauty inherent to the town. It’s made mostly of stained glass, you can see into it from certain angles within the city.”

Nymph shook her head a little. “So you know that there are people here who for sure want to take you back to Kyosay.”

Tenacity hadn’t thought about it like that, but she was right. “Yes… I suppose that’s true. But…”

Nymph threw her hands up palms outward facing Tenacity, “No, no, I’m not about to tell you that you can’t go outside or anything. I’m not a sibling of the faith.” the words came out before she could stop them. Crueler than she meant, and for a second Tenacity looked hurt.

“They’re not monsters.” They said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. “They’re really not. Keeping me safe keeps the Wind safe. Being his vessel should he choose to walk the world, it’s an honor.”

“But… not to be that guy, Ten, but wasn’t he here? Wouldn’t you call *that* walking the world?” Her voice was still gentle, but this had been nagging at her mind since they’d returned home and Amnyria left, taking with her the bulk of the blood haze.

Tenacity was stunned once again, although this time they found themselves at a loss for words. She was right. The Wind *had* walked Zyrehm.

“Oh come now.” Jar-ich piped up for the first time since Tenacity had returned to Nyr’s home. “Of course he doesn’t need you to walk the planet. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t need you at all.” The words shot through Tenacity like icy tendrils. They weren’t sure what any of this meant.

“Tenacity?” Nymph’s voice was thick with concern, *how long have I been quiet?* The thought barely registered in their head.

“You’re a vessel alright, but someone’s been lying to the little… err, lad? Lassie? I’m not too sure what’s happening here.” Jar-ich again.

Tenacity shook their head. “I’m starting to think that maybe I don’t know as much as I think I do, Nymph.”

Nymph stifled a small laugh at that. Tenacity had all the brashness of a person who’d lived a life well adventured. Even though they both knew that not to be the truth it was easy to forget sometimes. She pulled Tenacity into a hug. The tiefling stood almost eye to eye with the elf, but in that moment they felt so small to her. “It’s okay Tenacity, you don’t need to know everything. No one does.”

“But I should know *some* things, right?” Tenacity’s voice was suddenly weak, as though the pressures of their life had, for the first time ever, become too much for them.

“Tenacity,” Nymph pulled away grasping them by the shoulders and staring them directly in the eyes, “You are the chosen of your God. You are the companion of Amnyria and Nymphimae, chosen of their Gods.” she did her best to hold her expression at the suggestion that she actually followed the Flame in some way, but that wasn’t the point right now. “You are a tiefling destined to leave their mark on the world. If you know nothing else, you know all of that.”

Tenacity smiled a little, her words had brought them some comfort if not totally calmed them. “Kiss her!” Jar-ich all but wailed. “Come on, Tenacity!”

Tenacity forced Jar-ich down, ignoring the command. It may feel like their knowledge was slowly slipping through their fingers, but they were sure they knew that was not the right decision. At least not right now. Instead they hugged Nymph tighter.

“So, Gate City, huh? Tell me more about it?” Their tone had once again returned to its bubbly nature, they were keen to get onto any new topic.

Nymph smiled a little bit, she’d grown softer to both of her companions faster than anyone she’d ever met. She felt as though she’d known these two her entire life. Under different circumstances she would have been alarmed, certain it was a con, or a trick, or magic of some sort. But not with these two.

“Well, it’s an old city, built on the ruins of an ancient city, so parts of it have been around a very, very long time. It’s beautiful, but a dangerous place for sure. Not just for you, but for everyone. It houses the Blood Market, shockingly nothing to do with the Vampiric population, but a network of criminals. Most everyone living here has a secret of some kind and no one’s looking to share.”

“Most everyone?” Tenacity’s eyes flicked around the room slightly.

“Oh come on Ten. She’s a vampire, with no markings–and trust me on that, I’ve looked–who seems to be feeding on my magic. You think Nyr doesn’t have her secrets? You think I don’t? Secrets aren’t the problem Ten, it’s how far we will go to protect them that can be dangerous.”

“Plus little one–that’s safe right? No harm, no foul, no gender identity there, eh? Anyway, plus little one, it’s not like you don’t have secrets of your own you’re keeping from her, right?” Jar-ich’s voice hissed at the edges of Tenacity’s consciousness. He was right, Tenacity hadn’t told them about Jar-ich, and didn’t plan to for the time being.

“Tenacity.” A chill ran through Tenacity, the voice hadn’t come from Jar-ich or from Nymph, they recognized it immediately as Amnyria. It wasn’t her normal tone, it was spiked with a panic they’d not suspected Nyr could feel. Meaning somewhere, Nyr was scared and hoping that they’d hear her. “I don’t know if this will work, but if it does you and Nymph are not safe in my building. You need to leave. Now. Get to the Caathous obelishem quickly and quietly. Don’t talk to anyone, stop for no reason, just make it here, as quickly as you…”

Her voice trailed off and a pit formed in Tenacity’s stomach. They knew that it could only mean one thing. Nymph and Tenacity *might* be in danger, but Nyr was already there.

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**Nymph**

Nymph’s mind raced. The Caathous obelishim. No further detail. No time to think it through. Barely enough time for a cursory once over of Nyr’s apartment for items of use. Nymph’s eye had caught an endless bag upon their initial entrance. Not a wholly uncommon item, but one she hadn’t fully expected Nyr to have on hand, and was grateful for now. She hopped over the couch, rushing toward it.

“Grab anything you think we might need.” Her voice was stern. She didn’t have time to argue with Tenacity, she needed them to listen and hoped the tone added enough gravitas to get that point across.

Tenacity nodded and earnestly began grabbing items from the house. Nymph noticed they were picking up books. *That’s on me, I should have been more specific.* She shook her head and grabbed a few blankets off the couch, some knives from the kitchen. Finally, she all but flew across the room back into the bedroom. She ripped a few outfits at random out of the closet and then found herself facing the bed.

A pang of sadness shot through her, would she be here again? Just a few hours ago she’d felt safe and happy, and so, *so* content, there wrapped up in Nyr in her bed.

“Nymph!” Tenacity burst into the room, slamming the door shut behind them and holding it closed with their body. From the other side of the door Nymph could hear the commotion that had sent Tenacity into the bedroom unfold.

There were people in Nyr’s home.

Quickly she grabbed at the blanket on the bed. She heard a ripping sound as she pulled, she grimaced for a second before shoving it into the bag and turning her attention back towards Tenacity.

“Do you trust me?” she set her gaze on the tiefling. It was intense and burning. Tenacity found themselves momentarily intimidated. They could almost feel the heat radiating off of her. Tenacity nodded their head vigorously, they couldn’t summon the words to respond, but they did trust her implicitly.

“Good. On three, throw open the door and duck. One…” a crash from the other room. “Fuck it, three!”

Tenacity whipped the door open and dove out of the way. Nymph’s hands swirled about her in intricate patterns. Movements she had never been taught but had always known. These ones boiled the magic of her blood into a fire that could not be contained by her body. A spell that had gotten her out of a number of tight spots, if not delicately then efficiently.

The fire grew in the span of an instant, the movements changing in time. Where before they generated the fire, now they worked to bring the inferno out of her and into the world in spectacular purple flames that barreled through the open doorway and into the commotion of the other room.

Screams filled their ears.

The sound of crackling fire ripping through the tinder box that was Nyr’s living room. Nymph knew they didn’t have time now to be horrified by the sounds, or to check to ensure that the spell had hit everyone. They definitely didn’t have time to put the fire out. Nymph rushed over to Tenacity and yanked them back up to their feet, and towards the window.

“You’re like… a real monk right?” Nymph asked, the words frantic as they left her mouth.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Tenacity asked, their face distorted with confusion. Nymph gestured out the window. They were several floors up. “Oh! You mean like, can I scale down the side of this building–”
 “This is taking too long. Here we go!” She tightened her grasp on Tenacity’s wrist and launched them out through the window with all her might, Tenacity shrilly screaming as they plummeted. Once again, Nymph reached down deep, calling forth her magic, just in time to slow her and Tenacity’s descent in its final moments, stopping them just short of a violent landing.

Tenacity had stopped screaming, and was staring at Nymph in what could only be described as dazed panic. Nymph could see that Tenacity’s mind was shutting down to the scarier sides of this moment. That could leave them a liability. She scanned the area around them, no one was immediately close by, they had exactly one moment for her to try and fix this.

“Tenacity. You’ve been dreaming of a life outside of your walls, right? *This* is that life. *This* is the great big adventure you’ve always been on the verge of. You can do this, but we don’t have time for lectures or debates or even long winded answers. I’ve used it all up on this. No more screaming, no more fear, Amnyria needs us–per your own words. You’ve got to pull yourself together.”

Tenacity nodded their head once more. Nymph did her best to provide a reassuring smile. She wasn’t sure it had worked, but for the time being Tenacity seemed a bit better. If she was being honest, she’d needed to hear those words just as badly as they did, even if it was her own voice she was listening to.

They could hear the fire ripping through the building now. Nymph looked back for the first, and likely last time, at the outside of Nyr’s apartment. The purple flames lashed out through open windows no longer contained to the front room of Amnyria’s living space. Her magic had never been purple before, she wondered if it had changed in other ways too. Another pang of sadness pulled Nymph’s thoughts away from her changing magic and back to the scene at hand. No, not sadness, this time, it was guilt. “Time to go.”

She and Tenacity raced away from the building, even as a crowd began to race toward it, carrying buckets of water, people hollering for magic users to help, anything to put the flames out before it spread too far. They slipped through the people, Nymph pocketing a few coins and a set of sending stones off various passers by. The familiar act calming her nerves.

She wasn’t sure what her plan was really. Make it to the Caathous, certainly, but then what? She moved silently through the city, stopping only briefly to steal large shawl like wraps from a street display for herself and Tenacity, to help better conceal themselves. Nymph was only vaguely aware of where the Caathous was, though she moved as though she’d lived her entire life in Gate City. In reality, she’d only been to Gate City a couple of times before, and her visits had always been kept brief. She’d never been to the Caathous specifically, but she’d heard of it, and she knew how to get to the right part of town at least.

Despite being an obelishim of the Old Man, it was a relatively popular watering hole in the City. The bar hosted burlesque shows, and was generally considered to be neutral ground so long as you weren’t there on a Tuesday at 2 in the morning–the time when service is held. The Seconds and Minutes that work the bar are seekers of pleasure. So they didn’t care too much about the theology of it all, just that everyone was having a good time.

Nymph didn’t fully know what that meant, being “seekers of pleasure”. She understood broadly that the faith of the Old Man was a spectrum of beliefs, questions, and answers that, to most outsiders, seemed like a practical joke played by the God on his flock. Still, due to the varying nature of his teachings, the hands on the Clock of the Old Man were only expected to seek him through the path that most suited them.

She wondered briefly what path Nyr sought in the Old Man’s chaos. Did it matter if she sought something beyond pleasure? She obviously hadn’t been safe at the obelishim, but why? She was a vampire, not only a follower of the Old Man, but chosen by him directly. Surely if she had been safe anywhere it should have been at the Caathous, and yet she and Tenacity were running towards an unknown danger.

Nymph shook her head, hoping to clear her mind of the racing questions and the growing anxiety. A large, magically painted and glowing sign pointed them in the direction of the Catthous. It was a massive, stone building, with a thatched roof, and a truly ridiculous number of signs proclaiming its name. It stood proudly on the top of a hill, stone steps carved into the landscape formed a path directly to it.

“She should have been safe here.” Tenacity voiced the words Nymph had been trying to shake off.

“She’ll be safe when she’s with us.” Nymph’s voice was controlled and determined in a way that Tenacity hadn’t expected. There was a quiet intensity to it that they didn’t dare to question. “No more splitting up, at least not for a while. We get our girl back, and we leave this place. Fast. The city’s not safe, but I can think of one place the Ellipse isn’t likely to look for you in, at least no time soon.” Nymph stopped briefly on the steps, staring out toward the south, where the faint skyline of Saern could be seen.

“Isn’t Saern the safer of these two cities?” Tenacity asked, following her gaze to the sister city.

“Sure is, but the City Below is more dangerous than any place on Zyrehm.”

“The City Below?” Tenacity couldn’t believe what they were hearing. “But… but the City Below is just a tale told to frighten children. Surely you don’t mean it’s *real*.”

“Oh, it’s very real. A city of monsters that most people don’t believe in, can you think of a better place?”

Tenacity wanted to, but found themselves agreeing with Nymph. It was an exceptionally good hiding place. “No… you’re right.” the words trudged out of their mouth.

“But first…” Nymph flicked her hand at the doors and they exploded inward. She channeled her magic into the form of a small dagger, the pulsating energy glowing bright purple in her hand. “Amnyria.” She yelled the name into the now scrambling crowd inside of the holy bar. “Come to me.” and she sliced at her leg, a trickle of blood spilling out in the process.

“Hey, Nymph.” Tenacity’s voice was tight.

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t you say this city’s population was mostly vampires?”

“Yeah.”

“And I get that your blood is specifically attractive for Nyr, but isn’t it… you know… still blood?” The glinting eyes of a dozen or so hungry vampires stared at them from amidst the calamity in the bar as mortal patrons scrambled to get out of the way.

“Shit.”

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**Amnyria**

The bloodlust hit Amnyria before consciousness did. She was lying on cold stone flooring. A back room of the Caathous. For a moment she stared blearily at the pattern of the stone, alternating greys and blacks that formed little geometric designs. She could feel the grooves of one such pattern against the skin of her face.

She couldn’t remember how she’d gotten there but before she could spend time searching for the answer to that particular question her vision snapped into a sharp contrast. She was aware of every tile and none all at once, the information overwhelming her senses. She could smell the soft scent of gardenias that she’d come to associate with Nymph. Her mouth watered, the need to find Nymph overwhelming her.

She was nearby. Nearby, and casting magic, Amnyria was sure of it.. “Oh, you naughty girl.” Nyr whispered to herself, a wide grin breaking her face. Her eyes alight with hunger. She breathed in the scent, it was coming from beyond the door to her left. In a flash she moved to the door, all but ripping it off its hinges.

Amnyria’s senses, though razor sharply focused on Nymph, had all but become blinded to the rest of the world. She barrelled through doors, navigating effortlessly through the corridors of rooms that comprised the upper floors of the Caathous. When panicked Second hands began rushing past her, Amnyria could barely be bothered to effortlessly push them aside as she continued to push forward.

Her whole body was consumed by want. Nymph had cast a few spells, Amnyria was sure of it. Every so often the bloodlust would well, the power of it spilling past the edges of her sanity. She was certain these moments were Nymph unleashing a spell on someone or something. She could feel the magical energy, growing as she took each step, closer and closer to the source. To Nymph. If her heart could race it would be slamming in her chest. As it stood, she could practically hear the pounding of her pulse in her ears, rhythmic and strong.

And then suddenly, a flash of white hair through an open doorway at the end of the hall.

“Nymph.” The breath needed to speak the word had barely left Amnyria’s mouth before she was down the hall through the door, and bursting into a room of chaos, in the middle of which, stood back to back, throwing spells, and cutting down enemies with a long whip were Nymph and Tenacity.

“Amnyria!” Nymph’s eyes locked with Amnyria’s, the two women sharing a moment amidst the battle. Amnyria quickly took in the scene, Nymph had only one major visible injury. A large cut on her leg that while long, did not look very deep, still it was bleeding well. Amnyria instinctively lurched forward. The blood called her.

“Amnyria!” Nymph’s voice pulled Amnyria from her focus on the wound up to the panic in her eyes. “Vampires!”

And at that moment Amnyria understood. Nymph was in trouble. Getting her safe was all that mattered. She turned her attention to the nearest person, a man she recognized as a regular patron of the bar. His salt and pepper hair was slicked back, and his eyes shone the same rich garnet like red as hers, the bloodlust compelling him.

He let out a low, guttural snarl, baring his fangs and crouching, gearing to leap at Nymph. Nyr gripped at her clock, her tongue lashing out the syllables “You’re not you when you’re hungry.”

The regular and several nearby vampires dropped to the floor. Immediately, Amnyria’s attention snapped to the vampire jumping towards her, her hands effortlessly shooting out to catch the vampire mid-leap, and hands on either side of their face. She leaned back, and then threw all her power into a cracking head butt, the sound slicing through the roar of the battle, before throwing them limply to the side.

“Stay behind me!” It was Nymph, Amnyria whipped around in time to see Nymph’s arm tuck around Tenacity, scooping them behind her, as her free hand surged with magical energy. Amnyria felt her control of herself break, she was too close, and the air was already too thick with the scent of Nymph’s magic. Before Nymph could even finish the spell, Amnyria was at her side, teeth sinking into her neck, her arms wrapping around Nymph to steady her as her body went slack, and she began to sink to the ground.

The purple energy of Nymph’s spell shot forward, tracing its way around the last three opponents that threatened Tenacity and herself. It expanded, lighting each of them in bright purple flames that grew larger until–through screams of panic–each combatant dropped to the ground, no longer threats.

Amnyria suckled at Nymph’s neck, the magical energy coursing through Nymph’s blood felt to Amnyria as she imagined water felt to someone who’d been wandering a desert. After a few minutes that felt in the moment to be an eternity, but would later feel closer to seconds, Nymph’s hand casually caressed Nyr’s face, feebly pulling at Nyr’s hair. A motion that, even while in the act of feeding, Nyr recognized signaled an end to the encounter. She pulled herself away from the woman. She didn’t want to, but she knew if she kept going she wouldn’t have the self control to stop again. Nymph chuckled a little, “See… Tenacity, I told you, I had… a plan.”

She was struggling to stand on her own, Nyr still more or less held her, but she weakly gave a thumbs up to their companion. “I… I think we should… your eyes are so…pretty…go…” she might as well have been drunk. Much as the bloodlust had overwhelmed Amnyria’s senses, the blood haze was now overwhelming Nymph’s. Amnyria looked at Tenacity, confused, hoping they might know where Nymph’s thought had been going.

“She said earlier that once we had you we should go to the City Below.” Tenacity’s voice was shaky, the adrenaline now wracking their system, exhausting them and as it faded they were becoming aware of their wounds. Nyr beamed, what a team they were becoming.

“Are you okay?” Amnyria’s voice brimmed with genuine concern for Tenacity. Tenacity patted themselves down, counting limbs as they went, before finally giving Amnyria a thumbs up.

“A few scrapes and bruises, but nothing I can’t sleep off.” They laughed a little, looking at the scene, bodies littered the floor of the bar, chairs and tables scattered in smashed remnants throughout the room. They’d made quite the mess. “How are we gonna get there, Nyr? I didn’t even know it existed an hour ago, and I gotta imagine that someone’ll be out here any minute to deal with this mess, don’t suspect we should be here when that happens.”

“You’re right.” Amnyria did her best to scoop Nymph up into her arms. The weight of Nymph was nothing to Amnyria, the only thing that presented a challenge was the height difference. Nymph didn’t exactly fold up neatly. Tenacity instead crouched down, allowing Nymph to lazily cling to Tenacity’s back as though they were giving her a piggyback ride.

“Here, let me help.” Tenacity looked earnestly at Amnyria, who forced a smile, she didn’t love it, but even she had to admit it was their best bet. A clock tolled out from somewhere inside of the Caathous, 12 long rings.

Amnyria smiled, and gripped her clock, once more calling out to the ancient river of magical energy that flowed through the universe. “She took a midnight train going anywhere.”

The energy swirled around Amnyria and her friends, glowing and entwining between them. The light poured through them, blinding their view as a howling wind filled their ears. Then as suddenly as it came it dissipated. Leaving them standing in a dark room, filled with the faint scent of cinnamon.

“Welcome to the only safe place in this gods foresaken town, Tenacity. This,” she waved her hand and lights flickered into the lanterns throughout the room, “is my room in the Witches Hat.”

No sooner had the words left Amnyria’s mouth was there a rapping at the door. Tenacity looked at Nyr with a nervous energy. Amnyria shook her head, gently guiding Tenacity toward the bed to deposit Nymph, before taking their hand and going to the door. “There’s only one woman who could know we’re here that fast.” Another knock on the door, this one sharper.

“I think you’re gonna like her.” Amnyria opened the door, revealing a woman with dusty blonde hair and bright green eyes accentuated with an orange like brown ring around the iris, and an undeniably impatient look stood there, hands on hips, a small black cat standing on her shoulder, somehow matching her energy.

“Amnyria!” Her voice was high, and crackled with energy. The kind of sound that dared you to ignore it. “You’ve brought new friends.” She rubbed her hands together, her eyes narrowing on Tenacity, and flicking briefly to Nymph, who’s blood haze stupor was causing the room to spin as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Nyr chuckled a bit, she nudged Tenacity forward slightly. “This is my friend, they haven’t traveled much, and it’s imperative that their presence here remain a secret. I’m ready to make a deal for their safety.”

The blonde woman’s eyebrows shot up. “Been back two minutes, and you’re already asking for a deal dear Amnyria? What have you gotten yourself into? But I’m hardly going to turn my nose up at the offer. I keep them safe, you owe me?”

Amnyria nodded in agreement. “You keep them unharmed, unchanged and untrapped until we leave and I will owe you one.”

Tammy’s grin darkened, “I’m no genie young one, but you’re terms are agreeable. They’re only safe in the hat, the rest of the city is free game for anyone who wants them, but they shall remain unharmed, unchanged and untrapped inside these walls.” The woman’s tone was stern, her words seemingly serving as both reminder and warning to Amnyria. Once more, Amnyria nodded. The woman’s hand shot out, a crooked pinky waiting.

Amnyria wrapped her pinky around the woman’s in response, magic swirling around their wrists as ropes bound them to one another. “A deal is a deal Amnyria, don’t forget this, I know I won’t.”

Tenacity stood there analyzing Amnyria’s face for any indication of just how bad that decision had been, they suspected greatly, but couldn’t get a read off her to confirm. Amnyria’s voice was different when she spoke next, “A room, adjoining for Inquisitive here please. Thank you.” She gestured to Tenacity.

The woman’s eyebrows shot down once again. “Keep your secrets then.” she hissed at Amnyria, before turning on the balls of her heels to look at Tenacity. “*Inquisitive*,” she said the name with a thick layer of sarcasm, “follow me. We adjoin through magic here. I notice she didn’t ask for a room for the third of you, so I imagine we need to give them some, erm, privacy. Let’s get you settled in while I ask exactly no personal questions about yourself, and do my absolute best to not get pulled into whatever bullshit is chasing you folks.”

“Thanks, Tammy.” Amnyria said, shutting the door behind Tenacity as Tammy ushered them out into the hall.

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**Nymph**

Nymph swayed a bit from her position on the bed. The air was cooler wherever it was that she was at now, it felt refreshing on her skin. She could hear Nyr and an unfamiliar voice exchanging words at the door. Nyr’s voice sounded like honey, Nymph wanted to drown in its sweetness. She blinked and suddenly Nyr was seated on the bed next to her. “Hey there.” the sweetness soaked into her soul, Nymph smiled a little, and she nestled into the crook of Nyr’s neck.

“Heyy...” The word trailed at the end in a way that took Nymph by surprise. She sat up and shook her head.

“You okay?” Nyr’s voice was full of concern. Nymph shuddered a little, every word Nyr spoke lit through her, hotter than her fire. *Some day, she’ll explain why this blood haze leaves me so worked up.* The thought was errant, but Nyr was confident that the blood haze had been fuel on a fire that was already burning. Watching Amnyria fight through the bloodlust to keep her safe, the way she’d come at Nymph’s call, the way her magic seemed stronger when she cast it in the fight. How strong it had felt when Nyr started to feed as she cast that last spell… The last thing Nymph wanted was Nyr concerned about her, not right now.

“I’m fine.” She pressed her lips to Nyr’s, the coolness of Nyr’s skin sending rippling waves of desire down Nymph’s body. She ran her hands through her hair, twisting and gripping her, pulling back against every better instinct in her body. Nyr stared at her, eyes wide, searching Nymph’s. They weren’t crazed with the blood lust, but they were filled with desire. “You came when I called.”

Amnyria grinned cheekily at Nymph, “We’ll have a talk later about not using yourself as bait in a city of vampires, but… if you’d like,” she gently shook Nymph’s fingers from her hair, and rolled onto her knees, her hands trailing up Nymph’s torso toward her breasts, her face gently lowering to Nymph’s ear. “I’d be happy to *come* for you all. over. again.” Her voice was low and breathy, the words delivered with intention.

Nymph let out a little moan as Nyr’s hands cupped her breasts, her fingers delicately playing with her nipples through the fabric of her top. Nyr’s toes curled beneath her, her body reacting to Nymph. Nymph felt a warmth growing between her legs. She craved more of Nyr’s touch, but the idea of getting her to finish first was intoxicating.

She grabbed Nyr’s hands and lowered them gently while kissing her, this time more passionately, her tongue exploring Nyr’s mouth as Nyr’s in turn explored hers. Slowly she stood up, testing the steadiness of her legs. She wobbled for a moment before securely planting her feet on the floor. She pushed back on Nyr’s chest, sending her backwards onto the bed. “Good. Now, be a good girl.” she flicked her hands and chains made of purple swirling energy shot from the bedpost clasping onto Nyr’s wrists and ankles.

Nyr let out a gasping “Nymph!” as her body reflexively lurched toward Nymph as the magic formed, but then she was restrained. Nymph stood there at the foot of the bed, staring triumphantly at the sight of Nyr tied up, her eyes wide with desire, her dress’s slits leaving little to the imagination. Nymph thought for a moment about how the on-going magical effect must be driving her wild. Amnyria’s legs buckled at the knee, her eyes begging for Nymph to come closer.

“Come. Here.” Nyr nearly growled the words. *God, she’s hot.* Nymph thought to herself.

“Ah!” She tsked at Nyr’s impatience, leaning in close playfully kissing her neck, “you first.” Nymph pulled aside Nyr’s skirt, revealing her creamy white thighs, and a lack of underwear that Nymph found herself surprised by, if not grateful that there was no further barrier to contend with. She crawled into the bed, pulling Amnyria by the hips up to her mouth, and began lapping at her clitoris, varying her speed and the flat vs tip of her tongue as Nyr bucked beneath her, squealing and moaning as Nymph went.

Nymph relished the pleasure that Nyr was in, every moan pushing her closer and closer to finishing herself. She slipped a finger into Nyr, sliding in effortlessly. She began to move it in and out. Soon a secondary finger slid in, just as easily as the first, Nyr’s muscles tightening around the addition. Nyr’s moans were growing, her gasps nearly turning to screams of Nymph’s name as she picked up the pace.

Nymph tightened her restraints mentally, and pressed Nyr’s hips down with her free arm as she focused all her attention on getting Nyr to cum. She was close, she could feel it. She slipped her fingers out, dragging her tongue down the length of Nyr’s slit in one long, smooth motion. Nyr’s body tensed and relaxed in that moment beneath her. Then she was back on the sensitive bundle of nerves, the tip of her tongue massaging it to a climax while her fingers rammed in and out of coaxing her over the edge in a shuddering, silent gasp.

Nymph looked up at Nyr, who hazily smiled down. “I don’t remember saying it was time, just yet.” her voice was playful.

“We need to work on *specific* commands.” Nyr’s voice was light and airy.

“Is that so?” Nymph quirked an eyebrow. “Well then. Cum again. Now.” and once more Nymph’s tongue returned to the wet, warm spot between Nyr’s legs. Amnyria let out a loud gasp, and a low moan as Nymph’s fingers curled inside her, reaching up toward a spot that ripped through every nerve inside of Amnyria. Nymph smiled as she continued her work. She was wet, and would be ready whenever Nyr wanted, but feeling Nyr’s body melting at her touch was doing more than enough for Nymph in that moment. Nyr was complying with the command, and Nymph couldn’t be happier.

“Let me out.” Nyr’s voice was clear, she wasn’t gasping for the words, a steely coolness to them. Nymph smirked.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to make me.” She pulled herself up, propping herself up on her elbows. “Plus, you absolutely can’t rip this outfit to shreds. Who knows how scandalous whatever I grabbed from your closet will look on me. No, I don’t think I’m gonna release you, not… just… yet.”

She slowly shed the sheer sweater-like layer. Taking the greatest care to pull it up over her hair in a way that would put her body on display for Nyr. She dropped the article of clothing to the side at her feet, and shimmied out of her pants. Just as slowly as the sweater she removed the tank top, leaving her completely naked.

Once again she crawled into the bed with Amnyria, this time she tugged at the ties of Amnyria’s dress. The fabric gave way, allowing Nymph to push it aside revealing Nyr’s breasts. They were full, large and heaving with her breath, the small pink nipples erect with passion. Nymph lowered her mouth to one, the taste of Amnyria still thick on her tongue. She played with the nipple for a moment with her tongue before biting the breast gently but firmly, enough to hurt but not so hard she’d cause damage.

Once again Nyr moaned in pleasure. Her legs tensing together, her body writhing with lust against her restraints. “My dear…” Her voice was filled with the honey once more, Nyr softened to it immediately. “I said, *let me go*.”

Nymph reflexively let the magic go, and in a blink, Nyr had their positions fully reversed. Nymph now found herself pinned down by the small woman. The dichotomy between Nyr’s stature and strength was exhilarating to Nymph. She was so strong but so small. She was certainly stronger than Nymph, which meant every touch was measured, a painstakingly thought through calculation of how much Nyr thought she could handle. Something about that realization rushed through Nymph, exciting her in the same way it had excited her to see Nyr tied up not even moments earlier.

“Good girl. Now it’s time for you to catch up. Let’s have a little fun, shall we?” She stood up and shimmied effortlessly out of her dress. She reached into the bedside table. She pulled a long, glass dildo out of it. She gripped her clock once again, “There’s no clean like Mr. Clean.”

The phallic tool shimmered for a moment and then Amnyria returned to the bed, this time burying her head between Nymph’s legs. Nymph shuddered as the coolness of Nyr’s tongue spread her open. She moaned hard as Nyr inserted her toy into her. It was cold, like Nyr herself, and the hard, coldness filled her as Nyr’s tongue drew circles on her clit. She was going to finish sooner than she had expected.

“Nyr… no… I don’t want… we just… gods… I want more… time.” She gasped the words out through moans as Amnyria’s grip on her thigh tightened, pinning her down, as she worked the toy in and out, faster and faster, over and over again plunging Nymph into her orgasm so hard the stress of the last hour finally caught up with her, and as she slumped into unconsciousness she could almost swear she heard an unfamiliar voice let out an excited, “Oh hell yeah!”

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**Tenacity**

“So… Inquisitive?” The woman’s voice was mostly playful, but Tenacity couldn’t shake the gnawing feeling at the back of their brain that she was more dangerous than she let on.

“That’s what the lady said, right?” Tenacity was trying to sound sarcastic, but they were confident they’d laid it on too thickly and were worried it had come off rude instead. Honestly though, they weren’t positive if “Inquisitive” is what Amnyria had called them, and didn’t know how else to answer her. Amnyria hadn’t given them any warning on Tammy, and the two women had flirted between friends and combatants in the short time they’d spent interacting.

Tenacity worried about Tammy’s lack of response as they followed down a long, winding hallway. They passed what seemed to be hundreds of doors and wondered how large the building they were in must be. They wondered how many floors there were, how many windows, what the building would be made of, the color of the roofing, their brain running a mile a minute.

“Where’d I lose you little one?” Tammy had turned to face them, hand once more on hip, leaning forward a bit so the cat could once again stare at Tenacity with the same incredulous expression as its master. She didn’t appear to be much older than Tenacity, but she carried herself with the gravity of an ancient being.

The cat shifted slightly, drawing Tenacity’s attention up to it. It was mostly black, with a white striping across its left eye and a small bow shaped white patch on its chest. The cat’s eyes were narrowed in that moment, the pupils thin slits against golden half circles staring out of the darkness of its fur. Its fur was sleek, and glossy, providing an almost regal silhouette. *What a precocious little thing*. Tenacity thought to themselves.

“Hello?” Tammy’s voice was shriller than before, and she rapped gently on Tenacity’s forehead as she spoke. “You still here with the living?”

Tenacity blushed, this wasn’t their best showing. It dawned on them that she’d been speaking, but they’d been so lost in thought that they hadn’t heard her. “I’m sorry, your cat is quite… striking. Do they have a name?”

“Kitty.” Tammy said bluntly, crossing her arms across her chest and pivoting onto their heels. The cat fluffed up on the woman’s shoulder, puffing his chest at the attention.

“I’m sorry… Does your *kitty* have a name?” Tenacity wasn’t sure why she’d made the distinction.

“We’re gonna work on your listening skills next, Inquisitive. His name is Kitty, and he’s fucking with you. Stop being a bully Kitty.” She shooed the cat off her shoulder, jumping gracefully to the ground.

“You wound me, Tammy. I would never be a bully, certainly not to someone as, well *interesting* as this one.” The cat’s voice was thick with sarcasm and condescension, Tenacity had barely processed that it was speaking before they found themselves annoyed with their attitude. The talking cat finding Tenacity interesting left the Tiefling with an uneasy feeling. One that sunk slowly before settling into the bottom of their stomach.

“Uh huh,” Tammy’s voice cut into Tenacity’s thought, “that’s why you’ve been silent this whole time. Look, this is your room Inquisitive. There’s a door inside, tap it twice and say this word or words.” She leaned forward and tapped a finger gently to Tenacity’s temple. Tenacity’s mind was filled with the booming voice of Amnyria confidently saying “party line” as Tammy’s finger made contact. “That will establish the connection to Amnyria’s room. The rest of the space is yours, feel free to decorate how you will, we hold it for you until such time as your death or should you spend more than 500 years off this plane. If you need anything, don’t. Or I don’t know, ask Amnyria first, she knows how to get things. You got it?”

Tenacity had a million questions and as they opened their mouth to voice them Tammy shook her head, clasped them on the shoulder with one hand, and opened the door with the other. “No? Perfect! See you around, Inquisitive.” and she was gone without another word.

Tenacity stared around the room. It wasn’t anything fancy, maybe slightly larger than the room they’d just been in with Amnyria. Then again maybe Amnyria’s room had just had belongings in it, giving the impression that it was smaller. This room was palpably empty. The bed was stiffly made. The flat surfaces were free of any clutter. The walls were bare, as were the cupboards and drawers. Tenacity looked around at the blank space they’d been given.

They’d never really had their own space before. The Ellipse had given them quarters, but the building was maintained and decorated according to tradition, not to Tenacity’s personal tastes. They’d never been given the space to surround themselves with things they enjoyed, things that might bring them comfort.

They plopped down on the bed, their mind still wandering through how they’d make the room feel like home when their mind wandered to “Inquisitive” They wondered what exactly had prompted Amnyria to lie about their name. They supposed there were plenty of reasons to do it, they still weren’t sure what had happened at the obelishim before they and Nymph arrived.

They weren’t really certain how much danger they were in, but if Amnyria was willing to make shady deals in a city filled with the most dangerous beings in the world Tenacity was worried that it must be a lot. They felt guilty about dragging Nymph and Nyr into their danger. Although it seemed cosmic meddling played no small hand in recent events. Why had their Gods been so keen to see them brought together? To what end did this very unlikely team serve?

Still, they were happy to have met Nymph and Nyr. Nymph was softening to Tenacity in a way that felt like true friendship would bloom. Tenacity had begun feeling certain that Nyr couldn’t focus on anything outside of Nymph until she had volunteered to see what the Clock knew. At the time it had felt to Tenacity like a sign that she too cared, or at least was invested enough to keep them safe. The two women may have made up almost the entire roster of people Tenacity had met outside of the Ellipse, but they felt them both good people to meet.

Plus now she’d met Tammy and Kitty. Two characters they had taken an immediate mistrusting to, affirming that there was some sort of sense guiding their assessments of strangers. Something about Nymph and Nyr felt safe to Tenacity, and they weren’t keen to sever the tie any sooner than it had to be.

With their thoughts drifting back to Nyr and Nymph Tenacity realized that they hadn’t set up the adjoining door. They wavered for a second before getting out of the bed. Tammy had probably been right about them wanting privacy earlier. “You know how to get this answer my friend.” Jar-Ich’s voice piped up for the first time since arriving at the Witches Hat.

Once again Tenacity blushed, Jar-Ich was suggesting they try to listen in, but wouldn’t that be just as bad as walking in? If they walked in that would be awkwardness that everyone would know of and have to endure, but if they just heard something no one but Tenacity had to know, and they could pretend like they hadn’t heard anything. *Right?*

Tenacity wrestled with the moral dilemma for a few more minutes before deciding to risk it with eavesdropping. They sat pin straight, crossed leg in the middle of the bed, clearing their mind and focusing on their breathing. In and out, like tiny gusts of wind. Slowly the sounds of nearby rooms faded into the edges of their consciousness. Backroom deals, sexual liaisons, all blurring into an ongoing roar as they searched for Nyr or Nymph until finally she found one.

“Nyr!” Nymph’s wispy voice, ragged and heavy with lust. *Alright, not now.* Tenacity thought to themselves, turning yet a deeper shade of mustard.

“Or, hear me out.” Jar-Ich’s voice was too excited.

*Would you calm down you…you horny little man!* Tenacity’s voice was sharp within their mind.

“A man can dream, can he not?” Tenacity rolled their eyes at Jar-Ich wondering momentarily if the creature knew or could see that they’d done so.

*Uh huh. So, what’s your story?* Tenacity had hoped to get any information they could to help identify why the Wind had placed Jar-Ich with them.

“Not gonna be that easy kid. Don’t worry, I’ll be here for a while, but I’m gonna get some rest now. Can’t risk Management realizing I’m here.”

Tenacity opened their eyes. *Management?* But after a few moments of silence they realized Jar-Ich wouldn’t be clarifying. Tenacity really wasn’t sure what that had meant exactly. Surely Tammy and Kitty couldn’t be what he’d meant. If Jar-Ich hadn’t been bound to anyone since the Wind walked Zyrehm as a mortal there was no way those two could know him. He wasn’t a legend, and even if he was why it would be a problem for those two specifically to know he was there.

Tenacity was finding that life outside of their temple was full of questions and increasingly they seemed doomed to find no answers.

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Gate City is dangerous in the same way that all cities are dangerous. Walk down the wrong alley, cut off the wrong guy, short the wrong tip, and something bad might happen. It keeps the goodie two-shoes from moving in, but doesn’t scare off the brave. I was rather fond of Gate City. It was a home away from home. A sister city sitting on the edge of a desert, rife with an underbelly of crime. My morals are greyer than most, which makes me stand out in all the worst ways against a backdrop of either extreme, too bad to be around good people, too good to be around bad.

I assisted the Sisters from time to time, usually Empathy, and usually willingly. They’d sent me to other cities before, but I’d never simply woken up in one with a note in my pocket directing me to a bar 6 miles from where they’d dumped me. I’d clearly ruffled some feathers but I still wasn’t sure how I’d done so.

As Lyri and I strolled the sandy city’s streets toward the Caathous I took it all in. There was the thick smell of cinnamon that somehow permeated every inch of Gate City, here it was mixed pretty heavily with the lingering smoke of incense giving an earthy aroma to the area. There were stall vendors on the street peddling meats, candied fruits, small trinkets–pretty baubles to entertain the eye but nothing worth the money.

I stopped to grab meat sticks, one for myself, one for Lyri. I’m sure they have a name, but I didn’t know it. I wasn’t even sure what type of meat it was, something red. Vendor meat was sacred in its obscurity. The more details I had the less I’d enjoy it. We chomped on the snack as we finished the trip, coming up on the stone steps that led to the Caathous.

The building was a bit laughable, a large, spiraling roof sat atop the multiple uneven floors of the tavern. A dozen or so sporadically placed windows with mismatched shutters littered the front face of the building. There were roughly 20 signs of varying sizes and paints proclaiming the building as the Caathous Obelishim. It all came together for quite a comedic effect, but the building was immediately recognizable. You couldn’t possibly miss it.

We made our way into the building and took a seat at the bar. The note hadn’t specified if we were there to meet someone, get something, do something, really anything, all it said was:

*Make your way to the Caathous.*

So I sat there, waiting for someone to say something about Lyri being on a bar stool. The room was mostly empty. Its vastness down playing the dozen or so patrons scattered throughout the tables and booths. A few waiters checked in on the tables occasionally. In total there were just shy of 20 people in the room, myself and Lyri included.

I sat alone at the bar. The bartender was focused on inventorying the bar, and hadn’t noticed me. It was early in the evening, dusk had barely broken. Since most of Gate City didn’t come out during the day, I guess I wasn’t surprised by the turn out. Soon enough it would be packed.

I cleared my throat hoping to get the attention of the bartender. He pivoted at the waist looking back at me from the ladder he was standing on. He was a halfling, wearing the robes of the Clock of the Old Man. His black hair was cropped but tussled playfully. He had a friendly expression, smirking at the sight of Lyri on the bar stool. “I should probably tell you to get the pup out of here but for now it’s fine. When it gets busier though…” His eyes shot toward the door.

I nodded. “Can I get a drink? Something cheap but otherwise dealer’s choice?”

“You got it.” He pushed a glass toward me as it filled itself with a dark blue swirling liquid. I picked up the glass and swiveled around on my stool. An old woman I hadn’t noticed earlier was sat in a booth to my right by herself. She was dressed simply, but if you knew what you were looking for it was easy to spot members of the Clock of the Old Man. Particularly those who’d worked their way higher up. She was an Hour Hand at least, I’d have staked my life on it. Her eyes gave her away. She smiled at me and gestured toward the empty seat across from her.

*Shit.* I smiled back, and gestured for Lyri to follow as I crossed over to her. As I approached the table she nodded once again, confirming that I had read things correctly. *Shit.* I sunk into the booth, keeping my guard up. She looked harmless, which almost certainly meant she was anything but.

“Sit, sit, you’re right to fear me.” Her voice was whimsical, but quiet. I folded my arms at her words, and she in turn threw her hands up. “Don’t deny it, no reason to. There will be plenty of times where we will not meet in good spirit. I will cause you a good deal of pain, both by my hands and by the hands of others. Then again…” Her voice lilted up, under other circumstances it could have been playful, but here it just sounded sinister. “The day will come that I will die at your hands. My blood will coat your soul.” My heart was racing, whatever the hell this was, it couldn’t have been why the Sisters sent me here. She shifted in her chair, her hand shooting out and gripping mine with a strength I wouldn’t have suspected from her. “However, this is not that day. Today a different story begins.”

She shifted once again, her gaze never fixed on me. Her eyes, wild and burning with the madness of her god, bored into me. I hated to admit it, but she was right. I did fear her. Something deep deep down recognized the power sitting in front of me. It froze me into place.

“Who are you?” The words slipped out of my mouth, barely a whisper.

“ I am Zendria Nestin, I have been an Hour Hand on the Clock of the Old Man for more than 4.3 million hours. I have seen the Doom. I am here to warn you only once, seek not the path before you. The Old Gods will not grace you with such a warning.” Her voice boomed in my head, shaking my skull and obscuring my vision as she spoke. Her grip tightening into burning lashes on my wrist. When she finished I was alone at the table.

I shot to my feet. “Lyri!” she popped up from under the table.

“I’m right here, what’s wrong?” She looked at me curiously. I shook my head, and quickly pulled at my sleeve, exposing the arm she’d gripped.

“Lyri, look at this.” My skin was red and welted from her fingers, but in the middle of it all was an intricate hourglass pattern burned into my skin.

“Boss, it’s moving.” Lyri was right, a slow but steady trickle from the top of the glass was falling into the bottom half.

*Shit.*

I pulled the sleeve of my shirt back down, and stood up. As I did I heard a small click come from my seat. The telltale sound of a pressure plate.

*Shit.*

A gas erupted from my seat, filling my lungs as I covered Lyri’s snout and dove out of the way. As I did the doors to the bar burst inward.

“Boss! Look!” The waiter had jumped onto the bar, their irises turning a deep red, as they and nearly everyone else in the room began the tell tale signs of succumbing to the blood haze. This was really bad.

“It must have been the gas. We gotta get out of here.” I scanned the room. Two figures had entered in the chaos of the explosion of the front door. One stepped forward.

“Amnyria! Come to me!” She bellowed before slashing at her leg, drawing the attention of the vampires. My wrist began throbbing once again.

“Good gods!” I yelped as my shirt caught fire, the hour glass now ablaze with purple flames, burning away the material.

“Hey, Nymph?” The other figure was talking now, but as they spoke I felt a powerful wind at my back forcing me off my feet and whisking Lyri and myself out past the speaking figures through the gaping hole in the building and onto the street.

“What the hell was that?” Lyri’s voice squealed as she spoke. The second my feet hit the cobblestone she jumped out of my arms.

“What in the ACTUAL HELL just happened?” She was panicking, and pacing.

“That, little doggie, was the sound of a domino falling.” I turned around, greeted by a middle-aged human man who was smartly dressed in draped black and green fabrics that shimmered as he spoke. His pale skin was a sharp contrast to my own, but his dark green eyes felt familiar. Like I’d known him all my life. Lyri had stopped her pacing and was staring up at him. “I think we could be useful to one another. My name is Fylistan Myrtles. Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

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**Amnyria**

“We need to talk about Zendria.” His voice was creaky like old wood, and sent shivers of anxiety down Amnyria’s spine. She knew without turning that it was the Old Man.

“Now?” her voice was flat, she suspected that Nymph wasn’t going to be thrilled at the idea of the Gods popping in whenever they felt. She covered her quickly and gently with the thick comforter. She could never get warm enough in the Witch’s Hat, so blankets littered the area. She lifted herself out of the bed, her skin shimmering in the candle-light, and faced him.

“How wonderfully distracting.” His voice was playful, the sharp edges smoothed into soft curves, as he closed the distance between himself and Amnyria. He placed his hand in the small of her back and pulled her naked body against his clothed one. She could feel the muscled build hidden behind his neatly manicured outfit, and was surprised at how delicate he made her feel. She looked up into his eyes, and for a moment the age disappeared from his face. Every wrinkle, and blemish, and the face of a beautiful young man, hungry and intrigued stared back at her.

He lowered his face to her ear, his breath hot on her neck, and spoke this time in a low, measured tone, “Another place, another time. You stay alive and I promise you that.”

He leaned back, “You’re proving to be quite the handful Amnyria.” His voice returned to his usual octave. Amnyria blinked a few times, her head was swimming from their shared moment. She wondered if this is what the blood haze felt like. Her eyes darted back to Nymph, still asleep on the bed, she’d ask her when Nymph woke up.

“How so?” She smirked coyly.

“Tell me, young one, what do you know of Hour Zendria?” The Old Man flopped indelicately into a chair in the room. As he did he reached into one of the many pockets that lined his coat and pulled out a small toy and set it on the table in front of him, flicking its topper causing it to spin indefinitely. He gestured at the sofa across from him, on the other side of the table.

Amnyria rose from the bed to join him, realizing for the first time that she was no longer naked. As she walked across the floor the gentle softness of delicate silks caressed her body in long meticulously folded sheets of fabric. A thick sheet having been folded in half and tied tightly around her waist held it all together. She wasn’t sure when this had happened, but she was sure it had been his doing.

She joined him at the table, lounging on the sofa, her legs peeking effortlessly through the slits in the ensemble. “She’s powerful. She’s been a member of the Clock for longer than most of its gears. She leads the Gearwork.” Instinctively Amnyria shuddered a little at this last statement.

The Gearwork were the faction of the Old Man’s Clock that carried out retribution. Their methods varied, but no one survives a run in with the Gearwork unmarred. They are the Seekers of the Pain, said to be the embodiment of the Old Man’s righteous rage. There are only ever 12 of them. They give up their names for a number, and they’re only deployed in the most serious of situations.

“Ah, ah.” He waggled a finger at her. “Does a gate lead the sheep, or does it merely contain them? Zendria holds the key to their gate, they are led by One.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Amnyria’s voice was shadowed with fear. The Gearwork served more as bogey men, a tale to frighten children into behaving, than as something of the real world. Nothing good could come from the Old Man taking interest in them.

“Zendria has killed Lady One.” The vocal facade once again dropped. His voice was even, and still like water in the moments before a storm. They sat in silence, safe for the whirring sound of the Old Man’s toy, still spinning on the table between them.

“What does that mean?” Amnyria’s throat was dry, as though she hadn’t drank in years.

“It means she’s starting a war. But I think you knew she was up to something. *Tell me your secrets.*” His magic gripped her brain before she realized what was happening. She felt him rifle through her memories, pulling out the strange encounter she’d had earlier that day.

***Inside the Caathous***

*Amnyria wandered through the bar doors of the Caathous. They were always open, and, to her knowledge, the only way anyone who was familiar with the building entered. Trying the intricately carved clockwork doors of the front of the Obelishim may as well have painted the words “out of towner” on your forehead. She wanted to stay under the radar. So she made her way in, stopping at the bar for a moment to greet Jonner, the Second Hand working.*

*The scene with Ristin played out once again. Ristin hadn’t heard anything about Tenacity, or even with the Ellipse in general. His energy seemed primarily focused on the recently appointed mayor and his efforts to rehab the city’s image. The figure had appeared out of the political ether. He’d carried on about the Clock’s concerns about the motives of the mayor, the details blurring as she looked back on them. The information had been interesting, but it wasn’t helpful to Amnyria now.*

“We can fast forward.” The Old Man’s voice boomed inside of Amnyria’s head, she cried out, gripping her head as speeding images of her walking through the Obelishim, talking to a few other members of the Clock whipped past her mind’s eyes. Finally they slowed, coming into sharp focus as she stumbled onto Hour Zendria, alone in a personal praise room. She could feel the rub of the sofa’s fabric against her face, she’d clearly fallen, but still her mind’s eye played on.

*“Hour! The Old Man teaches nothing.” Amnyria’s voice was light and surprised. The elder Hour hadn’t told her that she’d be in the city. They hadn’t checked in much since Zendria had sent her on the path to Nymph and Tenacity, but she hadn’t expected Zendria to fully leave Kyosay and not tell her. She slipped into the room, closing the door behind her.*

*“But leaves us with our lesson.” Zendria’s voice was shaky, unlike their previous interactions it carried no warmth. “Come, sit. Tell me how things are progressing.”*

*Amnyria hesitated for a moment. She hadn’t known Zendria a good deal of time, and their interactions hadn’t been long. She was still more name than person to Amnyria, and yet she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. She approached cautiously, very particularly sitting on the edge of the seat the old woman had gestured at. “Things are…progressing. Pardon my boldness, but are you well?”*

*Zendria laughed a little to herself. The sound twinkling eerily like a long forgotten nursery rhyme. “You know…I told them you’d come back here.”*

*Suddenly, Zendria’s head snapped up, her hair gently falling in a mess around her. “The dark hand grips us all, child. It rips, and rips, and rips again repeating in the never ending river. Where you stand they have stood. Where you fall so shall they. The Doom hunts for us. Those whose souls are marked. I have seen the Doom, child. I have watched its hands close on my neck, and squeeze. One can not stop the Doom. One can only play.” She gripped the edge of her chair as she spoke, she was beginning to float. Her eyes widening with mad fury. Amnyria stood up, backing toward the door.*

*“Zendria!” She gripped her clock tightly, “Have a break. Have a kit-kat.” But she wasn’t quick enough, Zendria flung a slashing bolt of magic at her, ripping through her side. As Nyr leveled her spell at Zendria, the old woman cackled “Snap, crackle–” and then Zendria disappeared in a loud pop, leaving Amnyria to clutch at her bloodied side as her body set to work slowly stitching itself back together.*

*She winced slightly, her head swirling from everything. She told them. Who was them? Oh no, she thought to herself. Tenacity, Nymph. Suddenly, Nyr felt a slight breeze move across her face. She looked up at the gently skewed window that was allowing the air movement in.*

*“A…breeze…” It was worth a shot. She couldn’t get to Nymph and Tenacity in time, she knew it. Her best bet was to try to send a message, and hope that Tenacity was as good as they claimed to be.*

 *“Tenacity.” A chill ran through Amnyria as she spoke. She was afraid, and hoping against all hope that the tiefling would hear her. “I don’t know if this will work…”*

**Back at the Witch’s Hat**

Amnyria’s eyes fluttered open. “What gives you the–” She was yelling almost immediately. Her head was slamming, and if she’d had a pulse it would be racing. The Old Man held his hands up apologetically.

 “You’re right, should have asked first–” he started.

 “Damn that! I would have told you what happened if you’d simply asked!” She was furious.

 “You’d have left out details that you found to be unimportant. I wouldn’t have gotten the complete story.” His spoke with a very matter of fact tone as though she was in some sort of hysterics and he was detailing the only logical solution available.

 “You don’t know that.” She spat back.

 His eyes darkened, “I do. And when I don’t have the whole story people die. You want that blood? You know they say I became a vampire because of the amount of blood that has stained my life. That, after a while, I just simply couldn’t resist it.” His face broke into a fangy smile. “It’s not true though. That’d be stupid. Vampirism is essentially a disease here, but that’s science.” He leaned back, and shot finger guns at her, once again the fully whimsical Old Man of tale.

 “You’re nothing like they say.” She leaned back against the sofa, staring him down, seeing him all at once as the Old Man, and the younger side. Her God, and her peer. Her path and her folly.

 “I’m exactly like they say. You just have to listen to ALL the sources. You’ve proven even more valuable than I’d initially thought, and certainly more useful than the other two, so I can absolutely rub that in their faces. Thank you, but I have matters to attend to now. Gotta get those Eras tickets before they sell out!” And with that his form turned into a blurry haze of black and white pixels, accompanied by a low humming static sound before disappearing entirely.

 Amnyria heard a long yawn from behind her. “Did I miss something?” Nymph’s voice was drowsy, and as Nyr peeked over the back of the sofa she could see that she’d sat up in the bed, but hadn’t left it. “Why are you over there?”

 “We had a visit from the Old Man. He wanted to know what Zendria and I spoke about.”

 “You talked to Zendria?” Nymph’s voice was clearer now, no longer tinged with lust or the blood haze or sleep. Nyr nodded solemnly.

 “She was at the Obelishim. She’s who attacked me. I think she warned the Ellipse that Tenacity was in Gate City. I’m not sure though, we didn’t talk much.”

 “Oh my god! Tenacity! Where are they?” Quickly Nymph hopped out of the bed, clutching and dragging the comforter with her, and frantically turning about in the room.

 Nyr watched for a moment, enjoying Nymph’s cuteness. “They’re safe, I got them a room.” She hooked a thumb over her shoulder at a door that was painted differently than the others in the room. As if timed, the door swung open and Tenacity stood on the other side, leaning against the door frame.

 “So…are we on the run from both of our religions?” Tenacity’s body language played at being cool and joking, but their voice nearly cracked as they spoke.

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**The Party**

“Listening in, huh?” Amnyria’s voice was tight but her expression was playful.

Tenacity threw their hands up apologetically, “A little. It’s hard not to.”

Amnyria shook her head. She gestured to the large, overstuffed armchair to the left of the couch she was lounging on. Nymph stood there, still clutching the comforter, suddenly acutely aware of how much more clothing everyone else had. She cleared her throat, staring holes into Nyr.

Nyr chuckled at her two companions. She nodded to Nymph, and threw her gaze to a set of doors in the corner of the room. “The one on the left is a closet. I’ve had it enchanted, all discarded clothing ends up in there if left on the floor long enough. I’m sure I’ve got something in there that will suit you.

“And to answer *your* question.” She turned her gaze to Tenacity who had moved to the chair. “Yes, we’re on the run from both of our religions, but neither of our Gods.” Her voice faltered, “At least I think.”

Tenacity’s expression was hard to read. Amnyria wondered if they’d come by that naturally, or if they’d developed it through their Ellipse training. *Probably some of both.*

Inside their head Tenacity felt as if they were treading water, barely keeping their head above water. So many things had changed in a relatively short amount of time, and something was brewing. They could feel it in their bones.

In that moment Tenacity wished deeply to return to the scrolls in the back halls of the Temple. They had spent a lifetime with access to one of the most comprehensive libraries on the planet. No piece of information had ever been out of reach except the personal archives of The Horned Wind. They had never felt so unprepared in their life.

“Take a deep breath.” Nymph’s voice cut through the feelings of apprehension and panic that was gripping Tenacity. They weren’t sure when she’d returned to the room, but her cool hands gripped either side of Tenacity’s face, rubbing gently at their temples. Her presence was soothing and confident. They nodded their head, and followed her instructions.

“It’s a one step at a time kind of journey Tenacity.” Nyr’s voice was calm and even, but Tenacity felt as if they were separated by miles.

“But we’re does it end, Nyr?” Tenacity’s voice was strained, the panic thinly veiled. Nymph lowered her hands, as Tenacity turned to look at Nyr. Nyr shook her head.

“A fair question, but not one I have the answer to. Clearly things have been set in motion, but what it is we’re all moving towards I can’t say. If the Old Man is to be believed Zendria has killed the leader of the Gearwork, and she was behind at least some of the chaos from the Caathous.”

“Yeah, about that.” Nymph stood up. She’d found a pair of flowing fabric pants, cinched tightly around her waist and ankles, and a tight purple shirt with long fitted sleeves. She’d paired it with a hip harness and had affixed the endless bag from Nyr’s apartment to the harness. “Seems like that’s a real big problem right? Like maybe we shouldn’t stay in one place too long?” Nymph was nervous as she slipped onto the couch next to Nyr.

“We don’t know if the Gearwork will listen to her.” Nyr’s voice shook. She wasn’t sure which was better, unrestrained Gearwork or Gearwork under the thumb of Zendria. “We don’t know what she wants, or why she’s doing anything.”

Nyr thought back to the strange interaction at the Caathous. How different Zendria had felt from their previous meetings.

“It was like someone else was in there.” The thought slipped absentmindedly from her lips.

“What do you mean?” Tenacity’s posture changed, they sat straight as an arrow, leaning forward, a sudden intensity that Nyr hadn’t seen on the tiefling before.

“Back at the Caathous I spoke with Zendria before…well before she attacked me. She was acting strange. The moment I entered the room… she speaks like the Old Man, in riddles and nonsense, hiding important information in flashes of misdirection. But not then. No, she was direct… cold. It was like someone was doing a bad impression, actually more like someone couldn’t even be bothered to do a bad impression, but was wearing the costume anyway.”

*Ooooh, I see where you’re going with this.* Jar-Ich’s voice was coying, it felt syrupy and thick as a warmth blazed across the back of Tenacity’s brain. *Who’s gotten inside your friend’s little preacher?*

“Do you think she was possessed?” The words caught a little at the back of Tenacity’s throat as they spoke.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “Maybe? She felt… like a corruption.”

“So a, possibly, possessed Zendria is… what?” Nymph mused.

“She was already in a position of great power inside of the Clock. This doesn’t feel power related, at least not internally. If she is possessed then we need to work on the motivations of an unknown person, and that could be… well anything.” Nyr frowned at the conclusion.

Nymph shook her head. “We don’t have any clue if she is possessed, and if she is who’s possessing her. We’ll spin out going down that path. No, no, we’ve got to come at this differently.” Her brow furrowed as she she chewed on the side of her cheek, her brain firing off thought after thought. Nymph waved her hand at the area behind her “Keep your pants on.” she said cheekily as Nyr’s eyes widened at the magic.

A large board shimmered into existence in front of their eyes, a marker appearing in Nymph’s hand. “What is it that only Zendria can do? What makes her special, why would someone want to target her?”

Nyr marveled at Nymph for a moment, before shifting in her seat, propping her elbows on her knees and pondering the thought for a second. “Well, her connection to the Gearwork could be a reason to target her, as a way to get to them.”

“And we know she’s recently killed their… leader?” Nymph wasn’t sure of the specifics of the Gearwork.

Nyr nodded, “Yes, One was the leader, and that’s where the problem lies. The gearwork each wield a weapon of the Old Man. The artifacts are soaked in the pure arcane magic of the Old Man. The weapons imbue them with an immense power while slowly shredding their minds and bodies to the oblivion. The weapon’s are bound to a pocketwatch which is traditionally held by One. The magic that binds them keeps the Gearwork in check under the will of the One… For the most part.”

Nymph had been rapidly writing notes as Nyr spoke. “So if One is dead… could Zendria have taken the watch?”

Nyr nodded grimly, “She could have, but if the watch didn’t choose her… well it would be bad. She’ll unravel. Quickly.”

“Could that be what’s happening? And what does any of this have to do with us?” Nymph stepped back to stare at the board.

“Zendria sent me to the temple. She wanted me to meet Tenacity. I wonder if she knew you would be there too Nymph. She certainly pushed me into this journey. That’s clear. So it’s important to her that I meet you. She said something, just before she attacked me… something about our souls being marked. This is… this is bigger than the Clock.”

There was silence for a moment, before Nyr turned her attention to Tenacity. They’d been quiet for a while now. She studied Tenacity’s face. For the first time in the conversation they wore an expression, one of worry. “Tenacity, this isn’t a time for secrets. What’s eating at you?”

Tenacity chewed their lip. *You’re going to have to tell them about me. What are you afraid of? That your friends won’t like your inner demon? Come now, I’m so charming.* Their mind flashed for a moment in annoyance, but Jar-Ich didn’t budge. *I’m not going anywhere, and I was a gift bestowed upon you, not this curse you treat me as. You’d do well to remember that. I could help you if you’d let me.*

Tenacity gulped, “After the Gods visited us back in Gate City the Wind bestowed multiple things upon me, the wind magic, which you know, but also a soul.” The words had been said in a single breath, blurred into one long sentence. “A being named Jar-Ich has been bound to me for reasons unknown. He is crass, he is outspoken, and I guess he must be important to the Wind, but I have no honest idea who he is.” They gasped for air as they finished their final words.

The heat at the back of Tenacity’s head suddenly burst. A bright white heat seared the backs of Tenacity’s eyes as they felt themselves slip from the grips of their consciousness.

“Tenacity!” Nymph and Nyr both rushed toward them, catching them as they slumped in their chair. The women braced Tenacity tightly, gripping onto them as their eyes fluttered open.

“Ladies, Ladies! There’s plenty to go around. But we have business to attend to.”

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**Amnyria Fallfought,**

**Minute Hand on the Clock of the Old Man**

1. Zen-dree-uh [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Zur-ehm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Am-near-ee-uh [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. nihm-fuh-may [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. kee-oh-say [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. sar-vank-ee-oh-s [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. leer-ee-bell [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Bay-veer [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. yar-ih-ck [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. kuh-thoos [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. oh-bell-ish-ihm [↑](#footnote-ref-10)