

Of Dragons, Magic and Love - World Collection 2024

Release II of *WindySilver's
World Collections 2024*

N. WS. Jokela

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Of Dragons, Magic and Love - World Collection 2024

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About this collection

Of Dragons, Magic and Love (as it is currently titled) is a vast fantasy world full of magic, dragons, technology and many other things. The collection features multiple storylines (17 at the time of this edition of the world collection) involving different people and different parts of the world. Some storylines are tied to certain people while some are tied to certain areas. Whether or not any of these storylines coincide with one another is currently a mystery.

The storylines and their stories are, in the order of appearance:

1. *The Edge of The World*: Set in area called "The edge of the world" and inhabited by a solitary starlight-gathering fairy who lives by the local abyss — [Starlight](#)
2. *The Techiest*: Set in an area of the world that has embraced technology the most in a way that makes the area feel surprisingly familiar to someone from the 2000's. The storyline focuses on the family of Kelly, a young woman who inherited a necromancer's necklace from her grandmother Lizbeth, but some of the stories feature other characters such as Lizbeth and Kelly's brother Gary — [Necromancer's Necklace](#), [The Ultimate Prank](#), [The Beginning of an Apprenticeship](#), [Blown Expectations](#), [A Music Box](#), [Infuriating Computer](#), [Hotshot Levitator](#), [Date Gone Wrong](#), [Overly Stingy](#)
3. *The Ringkeeper*: The story of Bereth who now guards the ring his late mentor used to hold — [Possessed Armor](#), [Past Mistakes](#), [The Tree on a Desert](#), [Threatening Village](#), [Observations](#), the [Imprisonment](#) — [The Road to Freedom](#) — [Recovery](#) arc
4. *Possessive Cupcakes*: The village that a witch possessed with cupcakes — [Cupcake Possession](#)
5. *The Warborn*: The story of Isabella Warborn, an aspiring knight who was born on a battlefield — [Message to Deliver](#), [Immediate Danger](#)
6. *The Dragon Kingdom*: A kingdom home to many fire sorcerers and dragons. The stories are ordered chronologically rather than by

character. This is the vastest storyline so far, as it features many prominent characters, including Veriwia the Dragon Warrior, Friat Brann the fire sorceress and the kingdom's (currently unnamed) crown prince — [*Child of Dragons*](#), [*Hot Embers*](#), [*Veriwia's True Powers*](#), [*Almost Home*](#), [*Gratefully Prosperous*](#), [*Almost Overwhelming*](#), [*Should Have Known*](#), [*Annual Flyby*](#), [*Farewell*](#), [*Duel for Marriage*](#), [*Dragon Warrior*](#), [*Smoldering Remains*](#)

7. *The Ice Kingdom*: A kingdom located on an icicle that faced evacuation when the ice underneath gave out — [*Rotting Ice Underneath*](#), [*Lost Home*](#), [*Saved Plushie*](#), [*Rotted Ice Home*](#)
8. *The Manor of Scientists*: A manor inhabited by a group of scientists working on delicate research — [*What the Lack of Discipline Can Do*](#)
9. *The Dark Artist*: The storyline of the dark artist Miakil who, backed up by his friend Jaden and the security expert half-demon Scarlet, tries to revive griffins and pegasi that went extinct in the wild — [*A Dark Heart*](#), [*Determination*](#), [*Scarlet*](#), [*After Vengeance*](#), [*A Quest For Pegasus*](#), [*An Hourglass*](#), [*Talking to the Ceiling*](#)
10. *The Amulet of Fly*: The storyline of Lily, the current holder of The Amulet of Fly — [*Dishes*](#)
11. *The Magicals And The Magicless*: An area where those who can wield magic (magicals) and those who cannot (magicless) are especially divided. The storyline focuses on Sasha, the daughter of a local magical politician, and The Riot Squad, a group of bitter magicless people whose method of expressing their bitterness is by vandalizing magical neighborhoods — [*The Magical Girl*](#), [*A Punishment Deserved*](#)
12. *Summoning Demons*: A part of the world where summoning demons is easier (and far more acceptable and commonplace) than you think — [*Reading Choices*](#), [*Candy Summoning*](#), [*Fish*](#), [*Ribbons and Sherbet Ice Cream*](#), [*The Next Step*](#)
13. *The Treasure Hunter*: The storyline of a treasure hunter who misses their greyhound, Lopez, whenever they are on a long treasure hunting quest — [*Artifact Quest*](#)
14. *Does Mexico Exist Here?*: The storyline of Klinrau, the dragon whose solution to everything is fire, and his partner whose solution to everything is tacos — [*Different Solutions*](#)

15. *Thievery*: Alternatively titled *Does Egypt Exist Here?* The storyline of a group of thieves, set in the same area as *Does Mexico Exist Here?* Some heists go well and some... well, best not to talk about those too much — [Heist](#)
16. *Sometimes, Necromancy Is The Answer*: The storyline of an untitled protagonist and Zach the necromancer. Like the title says, sometimes necromancy is the answer to the problem at hand — at least for Zach — [Bears VS Zombies](#), [Bears VS Zombies 2 – Time Loop 2](#)
17. *Treacherous Hearts*: In conflicts, hearts can betray people — both the hearts' owners and those who are held the dearest in those hearts. The question is: which betrayal is the last one? — [Enemies Ahead](#), [Untitled Hearts](#)
18. *The Gambler*: If one knows the right person, they can make a gamble to get their wish... but if the house wins... well, let us just say that you do not wish to be on the other end if that happens... — [Gamble at The Mall](#)
19. *The Trader*: The Trader is a multiheaded being who is the heads of the Hydra Trading Guild. They greatly enjoy good deals and greatly dislike having to hibernate every now and then. Fortunately, they have faithful trader-merchants in their guild who help them out especially during times of hibernation. — [A Fair Trade](#), [The Trader's Irritation](#)
20. *The Protected Nemesis*: Sometimes, your nemesis just is protected by some stupid magic that makes him immune to your magic. Maybe trying less magical methods can do something, *anything at all?! —* [Lowering the standards](#)

Starlight

Collected in [*Modern Problem*](#)

There are two versions of this story — a bad-grammared version that I wrote, inspired by [You'Re Mind](#) by [eV13il](#) and the proper-grammared version that I made afterwards. Both were inspired by artwork and words I found when I searched DeviantArt with the word *Starlight*. The words I used for inspiration were *Wind chime*, *Waterfall*, *Fairy*, *Silver wind*, *Abyss*, *Star mist* and *Mask*.

Bad-Grammared Starlight

Me listen to wind chimes sound echo through the abyss. It is finally come: the every years night of star mist.

It are time to take off and gather teh starlight and all dfust. The next time this would came is year a way.

I missed this night lastyears be cause had hurt me wings, but this time I is fine. This time I could makeup to them.

I put in the mask I crafted me self from local materials and starlight I had once gathered. I take me hamper, walk too a balcony and, with wind chimes tingle over the roar of the waterfall next door, I letted my wings spread.

I delicately jump to an railing and breath in fresh air, spreading my arms, feeling the monlight on me skin. Then the silverwind takes my fragile-lookking body and I allowmyself to fly.

It are finally the time to get he material what makes me handcraft unique...

Fixed version of Starlight

I listen to the sound of wind chimes echo through the abyss. It has finally come: the annual night of star mist.

It is time to take off and gather the starlight and all dust I can carry. The next time this would come is a year away.

I missed this night last year because I had hurt my wings, but this time I am fine. This time I could make up for the lost time.

I put on the mask I once crafted myself from local materials and the starlight I had gathered. I take my hamper, walk to a balcony and, with wind chimes tingling over the roar of the adjacent waterfall, I let my wings spread.

I delicately jump to a railing and breath in fresh air, spreading my arms, feeling the moonlight on my skin. Then the silver wind takes my fragile-looking body and I allow myself to fly.

It is finally the time to get the material which makes my handcraft unique...

Necromancer's Necklace

Collected in [*Past Mistakes*](#)

Flashback Prompt: *Okay, so the necklace could bring back the dead, it seemed this would be a funeral to remember...* by [gredge](#) (Year 2012).

In her will, grandma Lizbeth left me a necklace. Some days later, it did not only turn out that she was a full-blown witch – or more precisely a necromancer, but that's beside the point – but also that the necklace would bring back the dead.

Thus, it seemed that this would be a funeral to remember...

The Ultimate Prank

Collected in [Past Mistakes](#)

This story is a follow-up to [Necromancer's Necklace](#) that I wrote because there were people who wanted to see the aftermath for it. It also received a Daily Deviation (my first, no less) on 13th of October, 2019, featured by [GDeyke](#).

Lizbeth looked at the sky, its black velvet covering the land. She was writing her notes on the necromancer's necklace she had acquired during her witchcraft studies so that someday a descendant of hers would be able to utilize it – and utilize it for good, not evil.

As she raised the recently deceased puppy from the dead, she felt even more convinced that utilizing the necklace for good correlated heavily with not using it. While the puppy was alive again, it was visible that its soul was already long gone. It would not bring any good to her daughter who mourned the loss of that cute ball of fluff.

With tears in her eyes, Lizbeth inverted the necklace's spell and laid the puppy back into the small coffin her husband had crafted for him. Then she lowered the coffin into the small grave and buried it, setting a small headstone at the site of the burial.

She made sure to mark in her notes that while it hurt, raising the loved ones from the dead did not make the pain go away. Instead, it made the pain even worse.

I studied the notes grandma Lizbeth had left behind to learn to use the necklace she had left to me. Everywhere I looked, there were either cold instructions written with neat handwriting on hand-crafted paper, nearly-matter-of-fact notes about the ethical standpoints or notes about her own

experiences, some of the last ones written on tear-stained handcrafted paper or paper that had just been picked from somewhere. One of those notes was actually written on a surprisingly well-preserved napkin. I could only assume that some spell had preserved it to this day.

As I read the notes, I understood why grandma had left the necklace to me. She trusted that my judgement would incline on using such a power only at direst of times, times when the power of an undead army would be absolutely necessary – and even then with utmost discretion. She trusted that I would read her notes and take them to heart so that I would not use it to prank anyone like I had first thought when I had learned of my inheritance's true nature.

I was already going to decide against using the necklace in the funeral despite of training myself to use it without raising the whole cemetery from the dead when I found the last note grandma Lizbeth ever wrote: a secret part of her funeral plans.

In addition to a quick and simple funeral carried out soon after her death, she wanted me to use the necklace so that she would get to see which of the hypocrites who called themselves her family had bothered to attend. In her notes, she called it *The Ultimate Prank*. She had planned it all out and placed her trust in me to make the judgement that she herself *wanted* this.

A smirk rose on my face. I loved every single bit of grandma's plan.

I would have the ultimate pleasure to deliver it for her.

Lizbeth looked at how few of her family bothered to talk with her whenever they did not need anything from her. It had been disappointing to notice that so many cared only for her powers, not her.

The dead had recently started to call her to join them. That was the warning sign she had been fearing to spot for some time – her time among the living was up. She wrote her last notes, detailing the end of the life of a necromancer and how to see it coming. Then she took pieces of clean, pure

white paper, looked through the family communication and wrote the final version of her will, as she had agreed with her undead lawyer who would be able to make sure her will was carried out to the letter.

Once the will was ready, Lizbeth slept for a while, dreaming of the undead calling for her. She could swear the puppy she had buried at night many years ago when her daughter had been young was barking for her among them.

When she woke up, Lizbeth knew it was time to exact the vengeance only a necromancer could come up with on the selfish members of her family. She took the final pieces of paper she had crafted with her husband years ago before they had gotten married, back when her career had been fresh and they had been young, and started to write the ultimate prank.

She would have to trust that her granddaughter who bore the magic in her spirit would follow her notes once she would acquire the necklace she was entrusting her.

The day of the funeral came as quickly as grandma had wanted. I hid the necklace under my black dress, kept tabs on the dead to make sure that I didn't accidentally raise any poor person from the dead nor raised grandma too early. The timing was not too important, but I had to get it done in the right window: when the priest was blessing grandma.

I waited, trying to hide my glee. The mere thought of the prank my grandma had concocted was deliciously mischievous. I could feel the taste of revenge she was going to get.

I had not told anyone that I was actually going to do something with the necklace. Those who knew of its true nature I had convinced that I would only guard it. In fact, I had left a replica to a locked chest at home to convince Mom that I hadn't taken it with me. She had no idea of the plan grandma had left for me and it would serve her right to find out the same way as everyone else: when it was already far in motion.

I hid my face behind a veil. Few tears escaped my eyes as I was overcome with glee more than grief, but I did my best to play my part.

Then the time came. I let the magic flow to the coffin where grandma Lizbeth lay and initiated what she and I had prepared for: *The Ultimate Prank*.

"...And thus, she will return to the earth from..." the priest said.

"Whoooo daaaaresss?" came from the coffin. The priest froze in horror mid-sentence. I knew that he was aware of grandma's nature, but he probably had never encountered an undead – especially not at a funeral!

I put my hand over my mouth to hide any trace of a smile and feigned shock.

"Whoooo daaaress to attempt to put me to rest when I still have a bone to pick?" came from the coffin again. The whole church was silent. My brother glanced at me, trying to keep his face straight, but his eyes betrayed his extreme amusement. I bit my teeth together and avoided Mom's angry eyes.

The coffin opened and the priest backed off, horrified. Grandma Lizbeth got up from the coffin, her eyes slightly alit with the life she had reserved for this very purpose with her lawyer – an undead, I presumed – and straightened her funeral gown. She looked over the family assembled in the church, smiling. "So this is all the mass that never bothered to give as much as a birthday message if they didn't need anything from me, all crying that their family witch won't offer her services anymore?" She gave a laugh. "So, how does it feel to know that you'll have to go to another witch and pay the full price? It's been just days and how many of you have already gone to someone else instead of paying your respects? How many?" She looked over the crowd again. "Don't bother to answer, I already know. Shame on you, James, Miranda, Lydia, Ollie, Gehrman, Rocco, Ashley and my own daughter, Helena. You are nothing but selfish wretches who want everything for free, no matter everyone else's livelihoods."

Many started to shift in their seats, most of the ones grandma called out seeming uncomfortable except for my mother who looked at her own mother furiously. My brother and I no longer tried to stop nor hide our grins.

"It's good to know that so many of you bothered to come here so that you could get a taste of this," grandma Lizbeth said and held her arms out. "The only time many of you came to me without asking anything from me in many years, and even now you would probably ask something of me if you had not already switched the witch." She took a deep breath and grinned.

"Does anyone have anything to say to me now that you got the chance?"

"You rock, grandma!" my brother shouted and waved.

"As do you and your sister," grandma Lizbeth said and smiled at us both.

"I love you, grandma! Thank you for everything!" I shouted.

"Love you too, sweetheart. Take care of my heritage while I'm gone," grandma told me. "And Debbie, Justin and Ben, take care too, and thank you for being there for me when the adults would not be."

The three other grandchildren shouted their last words to grandma, each of them in tears.

"Anything else?" grandma asked.

"How dare you?!" Mom shouted and stood up. "How dare you pull something like this off when we did everything you asked to the letter?!"

"I dare easily, my dear Helena," grandma told, her voice serene. "Because I did exactly as *you* asked to the letter and gave every single one of you a notable discount at the expense of my own livelihood. And how many times did you, my child, call me or send me a message just to keep in touch instead of wanting something during these last five years?" Mom was silent.

"Exactly. Your own children kept in touch with me more. Heavens, even your aunt actually kept in touch more than you during her life despite of all the times we fought one another. I guarantee you, I dared with no effort and I am glad I did."

Grandma waited for more words. None came. "I take it you don't have anything else to say?" No one said anything. "Very well. Then it is my time to go. Thank you for my faithful grandchildren for being there for me and thank you to Kelly for making this possible."

Grandma turned to look at the priest. "I apologize for the interruption. You may continue." Then she climbed back to the coffin, closed it and gave me the sign to invert the spell. That I did with a huge smile on my face and tears of joy and grief running from my eyes. I could feel the last bits of her life pass on, more than satisfied with what we had achieved together.

Someday, I would do the same if need be. Hopefully, the rest of the grandchildren would be there to witness it.

Flustered, the priest resumed the funeral, even paler than usual. Most of the people were uncomfortable all the way through.

Once we got outside, my brother and I high-fived and hugged, allowing ourselves to laugh now.

"That was awesome!" my brother told.

"I know!" I said. "I'm glad grandma planned this! It was the best revenge ever!"

Ben and the others came to us.

"I had no idea grandma Lizbeth made you her follower," Debbie told.

"It was quite sudden. It was in her will," I told. "It was quite some quick crash course on necromancy that I took with her notes to make this possible."

"Could you train me when you've learned more?" Justin asked.

"Perhaps," I said. "Not sure, though. Necromancy is a power that shouldn't be taken lightly. Grandma left lots of notes on the ethics of it and I still have lots to read. Check in with me when you've become of age if you're still interested then and we'll see about it."

"You bet I will!" Justin said and high-fived me.

"What are you going to do now?" Ben asked.

"I don't know. Probably read the rest of grandma's notes, learn more and see about it. I'll probably just keep the necklace out of the wrong hands unless I actually have to use it from now on and concentrate on other witchcraft. I'll have to find someone to teach me once I feel I'm ready to commit myself to the career," I told.

"Are you going to give us hefty family discounts?" my brother asked and winked at me. "C'mon, give one at least to me since I'm your bro and I've seen you in diapers."

I guffawed. "No way! You can't extort me like that! No family discounts to anyone. You saw where it led grandma." I made sure my voice was loud enough for everyone to hear it. I knew that if I found some family members keepers, I'd give them a discount – but that wouldn't be a family discount. It would be a keeper discount.

Once the funeral was over, the family communication to me from anyone but my fellow grandchildren was cut to a minimum – I was actually surprised it could go any lower. Mom wouldn't talk to me for a week and I ended up moving out as I caught the attention of a sorcerer who wanted to teach me magic. Apparently, he was a good friend of grandma's and thus had known to watch me due to her own recommendation before her death. After I found grandma's letter of recommendation written about him among the important notes, I accepted his apprenticeship offer.

Today, I'm doing well as a sorcerer apprentice and I'm most certainly up for a good career in the future once I graduate.

So yeah, grandma's ultimate prank truly played out in my favor. That must've been her plan all along – not just benefit her spirit but also me, who helped her achieve the ultimate act: raising herself and her spirit from the dead.

The Beginning of an Apprenticeship

Currently uncollected

"I knew Lizbeth was up to something with that necklace, but I had no idea that you were already so advanced with it. Did she teach you in person before her death?"

I shifted, trying to figure out where my hands should be. When grandma's friend had offered to teach me magic, I'd had no idea that he was the overseer of magic. "No, overseer. I only learned from her notes."

"Only her notes? Did you practice before that stunt you told me about?"

"Only with mice and a roadkill bird, overseer."

"Please, call me Salim. Your grandmother was right when she told me that you could make an excellent apprentice. You clearly have talent."

"Thank you, o... Salim."

"When are you ready to begin your apprenticeship?"

I forced a bigger smile on my face to cover my nervousness. "Right away." Salim smiled back. "Excellent! I'll deal with the paperwork today and you can start tomorrow. Please be here at ten in the morning."

"I will. Thank you for this opportunity."

"Thank you for accepting my offer, my new apprentice. I look forward to training you."

Blown Expectations

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

Having only seen that of her fairly modest grandmother, Kelly had not known what exactly to expect from the den of the overseer of magic. Something flashier perhaps, maybe elegant furnishing and colors, probably clear organization.

It turned out that the last expectation on the list — the most obvious one — was actually as she expected; Salim's den was organized as logically as a magician's den could be organized. The rest of it, however, surprised her; aside from the deliberate organization, the place was homely like a hut hidden in the middle of a forest. Most of the color in the room came from furniture and the items Salim needed for his work while the walls, floor and ceiling were unpainted wood. A magic fire burning in the fireplace cast a warm glow of its own into the room.

Kelly was brought back to the present moment from admiring the den by Salim's soft laughter. "I see you, too, had preconceptions of what this place would look like."

"I-I'm sorry, I-"

"There is no need to apologize, my new apprentice. Seeing expectations be blown away like this is something I take a lot of joy in, especially since many magicians in high positions like to make their dens fancy rather than particularly comfortable to spend time in."

"I see."

"When you're done with admiring this place, I'll show you what belongs where."

"Alright. Thank you."

A Music Box

Collected in [*Ananas sanana*](#)

Standard prompt: *There was an entire world within the music box.* by
WindySilver.

"I wonder if they think of the music box's tune as a background music that occurs at times," Kelly murmured.

"They probably feel the music box's systems move. It's probably more of an earthquake combined with music," Salim mused. "I would imagine that to them, that song and the sound of someone winding the music box up are signs of disaster. Moving the music box too, considering how it can shift things around if whoever moves it isn't careful."

"So, kind of like if some larger-than-life being grabbed our world and moved it around but without the ill effects it would have on the solar system level."

"You could say that."

Infuriating Computer

Collected in [*Hunting Inklings*](#)

Challenge: Your story must incorporate a real-world event from your personal life – not from the news or other media outlets – from the last 3 days including today. The story does not have to be autobiographical in nature, though. In addition to this, the story must be magical realism and include three callbacks to previous stories written this month. Optionally, the wordcount should be 333.

My event of choice was from the day before when I had to force my laptop to shut down twice due to software issues. The callbacks I made are to the stories *Refugees* (from the world *Galaxy Hiding Underwater*), *A Wish for An Explosion* (from the world *War Against Mechs*) and *Bad Contract* (from the world *Louise the Shade*), all of them available in *Hunting Inklings*.

Gary pressed his laptop's power button down for the umpteenth time that month. This was the second time the darn thing was acting up today, and he was starting to get frustrated. He needed to get his work done and the stupid thing was not helping at all.

It was even more infuriating than the constant news about Windows 10 updates breaking yet another thing over and over and over again. If only he could afford a new laptop to replace the old one...

Or "if only his sister, Kelly, could use her magic to do something about it". Actually, he had asked her about it as a joke, but she had told that she could raise the dead — among other things — but not fix computers more hellbent on ruining their users' days than greedy, warlike aliens ravaging inhabited planets, leaving countless refugees at their wake, or humanity blowing up mechs that are trying to kill them into extinction.

Maybe he should stop reading such apocalyptic stories on his computer. For all he knew, they could frighten the poor thing and be causing its episodes.

Gary chuckled to himself as the laptop booted up. *What nonsense. This one's is just a combination of crappy components and even crappier software. It doesn't think. There's no way I'd ever be able to afford a sentient, magic-imbued computer like the one Kelly says her teacher has. And even if I did, it could tell fact from fiction for sure and not get an episode over what I read, not even the raunchy or gory stuff.*

Had he not needed to get his work done in time, he might have sidetracked to reading something. However, he could not afford that; the bastard who was currently paying his salary had hidden some crappy extra conditions into his contract in such fine print that he had missed it. He would have to have his reading break later.

Holding onto that hope, Gary logged back in and resumed his work.

Date Gone Wrong

Collected in [Past Mistakes](#)

Flashback prompt: *I shot for the stars, but I didn't mean to hit one! (So sorry!)* by [Roskvape](#) (Year 2013).

Standard prompt: "...Bring in the lice." by [WindySilver](#).

You were trying to heal an awful bruise on your cheek after a date gone wrong. You did not know which was more humiliating: the fact that you had dropped your guard or the fact that you, the overseer of magic, had actually gotten *hit* with a fist in the face by a non-mage human as if you were a mere commoner like her.

You had gotten so many magic-induced injuries during your years that you had nearly forgotten how to easily heal *a simple damned bruise* and it was infuriating you close to the limits of your self-control.

Then your phone vibrated; your date had sent you a message. Against your better judgement, you gave her the benefit of the doubt and checked it. The message said, *I shot for the stars, but I didn't mean to hit one! (So sorry!)*

Okay.

That was it.

You had had enough of this. Screw your status; the line between your self-control and rage has been surpassed and now the only thing that mattered for the rest of the night was getting it back down.

It was time to go and get some good old revenge.

"Bring in the lice," you told your apprentice. "Tonight, we're hunting arrogant bitches."

Hotshot Levitator

Collected in [*Searthern Dangers*](#)

Standard prompt: *What does a janitor need all these USB drives for?* by [Memnalar](#).

Challenge: Magical realism, no direct dialogue, roll a d10 to get an archetype at least one of the characters must fit. The archetypes are, in the order: *The Mother/Father Figure, The Mentor, The Bully, The Martyr, The Friendly Beast, The Hotshot, The Chosen One, The Sage, The Lovers, The Magician*.

I must say, levitating a whole bridge into its place on a construction site is deeply impressive, but still that idiot of a hotshot is taking an unnecessary risk even though he has been advised against doing stupid, risky things like this. Levitation is such a risky thing to do, too risky for something as huge and important as a construction work; one slip, one obstructing thought and the thing goes down hard, pulled by gravity.

Alas, I had to note that that lad did have lots of skill. Maybe even too much skill; while he did earn his pay and sped things up a lot, it didn't do good to our wallets, just whoever benefits from this construction – and those who have to pay less for this since it took far less time than estimated. Not to mention that his skillfulness made him a cocky, arrogant risk-taker.

I sighed and shook my head. So far, the hotshot levitator hasn't screwed up. Hopefully I can turn my back on him and not hear the bridge crashing down – and obliterating weeks of work – while I look at what I've found: the janitor's stash of USB drives. Numerous USB drives. Seriously, what does a janitor need all these USB drives for?

I guess it's best to check them out later and hope for the best... If only those drives would have just cat pictures or even porn and not our corporate

secrets or anything like that...

Better have the tech whiz check these out. I turned to look at the hotshot. From my position, I saw that his eyes were wide open, a sign of intense visual and mental work. Yet his face was serene, which was just what we all needed. As long as he was serene, things would go as intended and no accidents would happen.

Then I saw the grin appear.

The sign of doom.

The lad suddenly started to rotate the bridge while raising it back up into the sky. I cursed and grabbed my communicator, then realized that if I contacted him, I'd break his focus and cause the bridge to fall.

All I could do was watch in horror when that idiot kept rotating the bridge like a juggler...

Dammit, you idiot! Next time I see you, you're fired!

Overly Stingy

Collected in [*Birbs*](#)

Challenge: Choose one of the three:

- 1) Your protagonist has a great character trait, but this is the worst time for it and it does no favors for them.
 - 2) Your protagonist has a character trait that usually causes all their problems, but this time it is their saving grace.
 - 3) Your protagonist must have both 1 and 2 as separate traits and the story has to be 567 words long.
- I chose to pick number 2.

"Hey, Ben, we're heading out for drinks tonight." A cockatiel shrieked in the background. "Shut up, Marge." The cockatiel's shouting continued. "Just a sec."

"Take your time, Meredith." Ben rolled his eyes. He already knew where this was going.

After some shuffling and more cockatiel noises, Meredith continued, "So yeah, you wanna come with?"

"No thanks. Even a glass of water is too expensive, you know."

A snort. "Of course. Overly stingy as always..." A sigh. "Well, it was worth a shot. I'll see you at Svensson's lecture on Monday then."

Ben chuckled. "Don't be there in a hangover."

"I'll try. Bye!"

"Bye."

Click.

Ben sighed and logged on to the online bank service to take look at the balance on his account. 253.66. Just enough to cover the next month's rent and get him something cheap to eat. If he got lucky, he would get his pay before it ran out and he — the one whose stinginess was called "good

financial management" (which it wasn't) — would *not* have to borrow money from his friends.

Honestly, this was one of those days when he would rather starve than suffer through the jesting he would face.

Little did he know, that was the last time he spoke with Meredith or any of his other drinker friends.

Possessed Armor

Currently uncollected

The armor looked rusty and inanimate but it somehow spoke to Bereth.

"It's possessed," his mentor told. "You shouldn't touch it. It's eaten more than its fair share of seasoned magicians."

"Why is it here?" Bereth asked.

"Because some dummy thought that it belongs into a museum even though it should be sealed away until the world produces an exorcist strong enough to turn it into mere armor."

"Oh."

"You'd be surprised how many museum-goers have been eaten by this thing here during the time it's been here."

"Actually, probably not after the rocket crab case."

"Good. That's a vital step to becoming a magician who might get less than average stupid bystanders killed."

"Are there statistics for that?!"

"There are."

"*Great...*"

The fact that there were such statistics spoke a lot about those bystanders.

Past Mistakes

Collected in [Past Mistakes](#)

Flashback prompt: *A boy's science fair project calls down a lightning bolt.*
by [OnLinedPaper](#) (Year 2016).

Nasty Ass Challenge: The story must be in the past, at least two centuries prior to where the characters originate, you must include something that was previously dead and there must be two well-defined choices and only one of them can be answered verbally. Optionally, tell how the story ends (e.g. do the characters make it back to their original timeline).

Since this is 1000 words long, this counts as my second entry for [Prose-ject's Little Prose 2019](#).

Bereth groaned. His head throbbed as he sat up. Someone had knocked him out. If he only remembered what he had been doing...

He looked at the heavy object on his index finger. It was the ring that belonged to his mentor.

At the very sight of that, memories started to come back to him.

*Once the ashes had cooled and everyone else had left, Bereth dug out the ring none of the heirs had agreed to surrender. In the stalemate of everyone wanting it, they had ended up settling on Bereth's idea: **If any of you cannot have it without a fight ensuing, none of you will have it. Let's burn it with her.***

Bereth was glad for that stalemate and the fact that they had agreed to burn the ring with their mother. While it was valuable for its gold, the heirs had no idea of just how valuable it was.

Of course. There had been a battle between the undead and the magicians, and Bereth's mentor had died. But why was he wearing the ring? Bereth dug deeper into his memories.

"Bereth, if I fall in this battle, will you take my ring and make things right? I want to tell my sons that I love them one more time."

"I will, Master. I promise you that."

That was it. The ring meant everything to his mentor for its powers to make things right, although Bereth did not know how it worked. He was starting to remember everything: when he had found the ring from the ash, he had cleaned and hidden it, then slouched back to the inn. There, he had gathered everything he might need and taken his leave "to clean his mentor's workspace".

The truth was that the workspace was already clean when he had gone there. It just was the one place where his prolonged presence would not be suspicious and where he would not be disturbed.

The pain started to come back, so Bereth closed his eyes, allowing his mind to remind him of what had happened.

Once Bereth had locked himself inside the workspace after seeing a boy's science fair project call down a lightning bolt, he took a deep breath, taking in the surreal look of the empty workspace. There was nothing left of the orderly chaos his mentor had loved – and which he had learned to love once he had learned its ins and outs.

The mere thought of it made tears burn his throat in a way no internally sustained Dragonfire ever could.

Banishing the tears, Bereth took the ring and stared at it. He would make things right. He had made that promise.

Bereth slipped the ring to his index finger and concentrated on whatever had to be done.

Then he had been knocked out. Only now Bereth dared to look around himself: he was in a livelier but less chaotic version of the workspace. The walls were not as blackened as he remembered but the place was in use. Confused, he stood up, faltering. The freshest notes were certainly written in his mentor's handwriting, but they were dated – Bereth nearly fainted when he realized it – two centuries earlier. As he read them, he knew for certain that these were indeed the old notes he had once read.

Bereth looked at the ring. Was its power to make things right... time travel?

Out of all the things, Bereth's mentor had warned against messing with time the most. It was the most fragile thing there was – capable of wiping whole galaxies into oblivion if messed with – and *she* had still worn something capable of time travel?

Perhaps that was why she had been so insistent on warning about it. She knew the risks, she must have. Yes, that made sense to Bereth. She would have never used those powers if not absolutely necessary.

Bereth looked around himself, trying to fathom the situation he was in. Panic was starting to set in; he had traveled far too deep into the past!

Hopefully, his mentor in this era would know how to direct him to the days before the fatal battle.

Meeker than back in the first days of his apprenticeship, Bereth walked to the potion lab. And there she was, just like in the pictures from the days gone by...

His mentor looked straight into his eyes from a potion and paled.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I..." Bereth started, then decided against telling his name. It could mess everything up. "I'm a friend."

"How did you get in? I locked the door!" his mentor hissed.

"I... I believe I've traveled in time," Bereth told and showed the ring. His mentor's eyes widened as she recognized it. "I believe I have ended up two centuries too far in the past. Can you help me reach the right time?"

"The ring doesn't answer to such commands. It directs you straight to the time when whatever has to be changed happens."

"But..." Bereth did not understand it. "What happened at this time?"

"I don't know. I was hoping that you'd know, but apparently you don't either."

"You... In the future, you directed me to use the ring to make things right. You said that you want to tell your sons that you love them one more time."

"Why?"

"Are you sure you want to know why?"

"I haven't told them... they're leaving..." Bereth's mentor was talking to herself, ignoring her future apprentice's presence. "Are you sure about this?"

"I know what I've been told. It's up to you to decide whether you act upon it or not."

"If the ring sent you here, there has to be a reason." Bereth's mentor extinguished the fire under the potion and rushed outside, leaving the man all alone.

Bereth was knocked out again. He woke up in an empty workspace.

Tears escaped his eyes. His mentor was still dead.

If anything, that trip in time had twisted the knife in the wound of grief.

The Tree on a Desert

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

[Prose-ject 2020](#) day 18. Prompt: [The Vision](#) by [Maxime Daviron](#).

After he had finished everything he needed to with his mentor's estate, Bereth set forth away from the settlement. He knew that since he had taken her ring without her children's permission or knowledge, he ought to hide it. In addition to that, the ring's powers, although limited in use cases, were too great to risk getting into the wrong hands. He had to guard it as long and well as he could.

Besides, he wanted to leave anyway. No one could blame him for it, either; everything in the settlement reminded him of her. He needed a change of scenery to let the wounds scab and process his grief to move on.

Plus, he had learned everything he could under her tutelage. There was nothing but him holding him back — it had been that way for long. It was about time he spread his wings and started to make a proper career for himself on his own. He had to learn to stand on his own now.

Perhaps it had been all according to the fate's plan; he had been too afraid to leave her, so his mentor had died so that he would have to learn to be alone.

As he rode across the desert, shielding himself and his mount from the heat with his magic, he found a strange, lonely tree right in the middle of it. There was no visible water around, but it still stood taller than him and seemed to be alive.

"What's a tree doing all the way here?" Bereth muttered to himself and dismounted, approaching the tree with caution. There was magic in the air, but it was not hostile at all. Bereth touched the tree's bark, ready to cast a

protection spell if necessary, and felt the power within it. Whatever spell was sustaining the tree, it was incredibly strong.

Even though it was a clear day, the land around him started to get dark. In confusion, he looked up. As his eyes did not find any clouds, he cast a protection spell on his eyes and looked at the sun. Then he saw why it was suddenly dark: an annular solar eclipse was in progress.

He stared at it, surprised that these two experiences happened to him at the same time. The moon eventually moved away, and the desert became scorching once again, but Bereth could not get the sight out of his head. Was this a vision induced by the tree or a strange coincidence?

The tree stood there, unfazed by the incident. It revealed none of its secrets, so Bereth mounted and rode away. Perhaps the settlement on his path could tell him more about this mysterious tree.

Threatening Village

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

Bereth looked at the village in the horizon. Something in his gut told him that he should avoid it; whether it was the threatening magic hanging over the perimeters or the fact that he was supposed to safeguard his mentor's ring, he did not know.

He could easily turn and go around. His magic could sustain him in the desert for much longer, after all. He did not have to stop for supplies yet.

However, his mentor had not taught him to be a coward.

Bereth continued towards the village, already coming up with responses to different scenarios.

Observations

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

The streets were quiet, tension hung over it thick like vines. Bereth kept his head down and observed as he kept walking. There was either a curse or a powerful sorcerer in control of the area. Since he had not heard anything about this place, he assumed that it was the latter.

Someone stopped him and whispered, "Foolish mage. You can never escape this place."

Before Bereth was able to look up at the stranger and respond, he felt someone stabbing something onto his back. His muscles gave out in response and everything went blank.

Imprisonment

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Cold. That was all that Bereth felt when he came to. He could somewhat feel his own presence but none of his limbs. His body altogether felt as good as nonexistent.

The ring was still with him, at the very least. That was a relief even though Bereth had just enough presence of mind to understand that he was in no position to defend it, should someone try to take it from him now. Moving felt impossible.

Something stabbed him in the back again and he found his mind going completely blank again.

Imprisonment — Take II

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

"Kh..." Bereth forced his eyes open. His limbs were still as good as nonexistent, but at least his eyes worked... and his brains worked at least somewhat. Based on what he could see, he was hanging from something... and he was not the only one. There were others, some looking gaunt like they had been here for months on end.

A part of him had known that he should not have approached this place, but his mentor's bravery and integrity had rubbed off on him. Look where it got him.

He had to figure out how to get away.

Only, something stabbed him in the back yet again and his thoughts ran dry.

Imprisonment — Take III

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

The third time Bereth regained consciousness, he was able to assess his situation: he — and everyone else imprisoned in this room — was chained to some hellish contraption that was siphoning his life force. Probably. He was not properly acquainted with blood magic to tell what exactly would be done with the blood that was being harvested from them all.

He was not sure what was being used to stab him in the back, however. It was a part of the contraption but how it worked was a mystery to him — especially because he could not see it nor any mechanics related to it. Since his blood was being used and the effect had been instant, he assumed some sort of neurological attack instead of poison. Still, just about paralyzed he would be hard-pressed to get out.

Nevertheless, he had to get out. If he died now, his ring would be lost and there was no telling who might get their hands on it, especially under circumstances like this.

In anticipation of yet another stab, Bereth resolved to figure out more later. He managed to get to that point just in time.

Imprisonment — Take IV

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

There was no way out, at least as far as Bereth could see; going back in time was risky especially in his weakened state while he had a feeling he was not going to be able to move enough to escape. It seemed that he was doomed to atrophy in here...

...So he had nothing to lose. He gathered the little power he had left and cast an explosion spell behind himself, hoping that it would free him from the contraption.

What he did not take into account was that the explosion struck the stabbing tool into him, forcing his mind to go blank yet again as pandemonium broke out.

Imprisonment — Take V

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

When Bereth regained consciousness again, he was on his side. His limbs were in a mixture of numbness and a kind of pain that burned with crackling lightning. There was something on his back but he could not tell whether it was his blood or some kind of goo.

When he opened his eyes, he was immediately blinded by light, so he squeezed his eyes back shut. His ears, ringing, picked up some kind of chatter and movement. It sounded like someone came next to him. That someone said something in a hoarse voice, but Bereth could not understand what they said. He grunted some kind of a response, tried to say something and probably failed. There was more chatter and some other voice spoke nearby, voice hushed, "Careful. You're safe."

Okay, that Bereth could understand. He hummed an affirmative response, not that he could have done much anyway at least right away. A callused hand came to rest on his bare upper arm and caressed it. The touch set off a different kind of crackling lightning through Bereth's nerves, one that felt good-ish. He clenched his hand a little, feeling the ring still settled where it was supposed to be, and relaxed. Since he was no longer tied to anything, he was definitely in a better place than before.

The hoarse voice started crooning something that felt like a lullaby or a ballad, not that Bereth could understand a single word of it. He allowed himself to drift off to the sound of it — maybe after a bit of sleep, he would be able to assess his situation properly.

The Road to Freedom — Take I

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

It was dark when Bereth awoke. It was easier on his eyes, but it was also far harder to make out his surroundings. His body was still full of pain and aches and the air was chilly like deserts at night tended to be, but in most areas, his bare skin was in contact with something warm — it felt like someone else's skin. A hand was caressing his hair and... Bereth was fairly sure that his head was on someone's lap. No, it felt like he in his entirety was being held on multiple laps. Almost like people were huddling around him...

...Honestly, that would make sense, considering the coldness and the fact that he was at least mostly — if not completely, Bereth was not sure about that yet — naked.

"Safe," the hoarse voice that had lulled Bereth to sleep whispered with a heavy accent. "No move. You hurt."

Bereth hummed to show that he had heard and understood, relaxing and letting the hand keep trailing his hair.

As he waited for the sun to rise — or someone who spoke the his language more fluently to wake up — the weight of everything that had happened in the past weeks — months? — settled in for real. Bereth had not allowed himself to fully stop ever since the moment he had heard the news of his mentor's death, constantly on the move both to keep the ring safe and to run away from the pain he had thought he had left at his former home. Now that he had nothing to do but wait and listen to the sounds of his living fellows, everything caught up to him. As he lay still, injured and held by naked strangers who were most likely also injured, his mentor's ended existence — the loss of his only (seemingly) permanently standing support network — realized itself properly. He had always given everything to his mentor in exchange for taking an orphan like him in and now...

...now, he had nothing but a dangerous, powerful ring on his finger. The woman who had taught him everything he knew and given him strength when he had been weak had been reduced to ashes and scattered to the winds.

He was all alone again.

When others woke up to his sobs and soothed him, Bereth claimed his physical pains to be the cause of his tears. The pile of people, all of them battered and naked like him, wrapping themselves around him was comforting in a way nothing had been ever since he had lost the greatest parent figure he had ever had.

The Road to Freedom — Take II

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

At daybreak, Bereth took in the group he was being held by: four mages, all except one more battered and withered than him. Only one was fluent in a language he understood, but, fortunately, they all shared a language with at least one other member, so they would be able to communicate rather effectively.

The one with a hoarse voice — the one who had, apparently, been trapped for the longest — turned out to be the local (now former) archmage, Nedyom. He did speak plenty of languages, but Bereth knew none of them. He, based on the translation that Merlina gave Bereth, had taken charge of directing the group to a hiding place following the explosion. It was also thanks to him that Bereth had gotten out; he had insisted on taking him with them and managed their energy usage to keep them safe and to aid Bereth's healing.

As the sun climbed higher, Nedyom told them of the cult that had taken over the village and captured every outsider mage to fuel their rituals. Nedyom himself had been outnumbered and struck with a dagger fashioned to paralyze when he had come to investigate, a story that each of them echoed.

At that point, Bereth's consciousness started to slip again. Nedyom made him lie down and rest, focusing on both trying to figure out how they could get food and gentling him into sleep.

The Road to Freedom — Take III

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Bereth woke up to the feeling of being on his side, his head in someone's lap and a hand settled between his shoulder blades. When he made a noise, the thumb of the hand started trailing small arcs on his skin. It was only some time later that Nedyom — it was Nedyom who had been holding him yet again — allowed him to sit up. His limbs were far too weak to let him stand, but so far there was apparently no need for it. They had not been spotted yet.

While he had been unconscious, Merlina and Odlanya, the two least injured of them, had been able to scout and secure food for them. How they all had gotten out of the village, Bereth had little to no actual idea. Merlina had told him that it had been a combination of using magic to keep them going and being lucky enough to reach an old — it-was-new-when-Nedyom-was-young old — Waystone that had gotten them outside of the perimeters and near an abandoned house. They would have to get further away, however, soon or else the Cult of the Red Sky would find them. They were in no condition to fight.

Bereth lamented his own state even though he knew that without his desperate — and reckless — move, his companions might have never gotten out. All this, of course, assumed that all of these people were his friends; he had no way of ensuring that he had been told the truth. Did he have his doubts? Yes. Could he do anything about it? Not at all.

He would have to gather his strength, heal up as fast as he could and get back on his feet. He could not die now, not when he had his mentor's ring to protect.

If only he could shake off the warm feeling he got from seeing strangely empathetic, almost affectionate look in Nedyom's eyes when the archmage

looked at him...

The Road to Freedom — Take IV

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

The first time Nedyom left Bereth's side was at nightfall when he took Odlanya and Xyr with him to find food. Merlina remained with Bereth, joining him in healing his injured back further.

"You're going to scar quite badly," Merlina remarked as she looked at the half-healed skin. "The explosion and rubble did a lot of bad."

Bereth hummed. "What about everyone else? How have they healed?"

"The rest of us are just malnourished aside from the stab wound. They'll probably scar too since we only healed them enough to stop bleeding, but it's nothing compared to your injuries." Merlina brushed the uninjured part of Bereth's upper back with her fingers, observing how the more injured mage shivered at that. "...You're touch-starved, aren't you?"

"Touch-starved?" Bereth repeated.

"Everyone needs physical contact. It's a primal need. If you don't get enough of that, you'll wind up touch-starved, which will poorly affect your health, both mentally and physically."

Bereth hummed noncommittally.

Merlina moved her fingers to Bereth's shoulders and massaged them lightly, feeling how the man melted under her touch. "That wasn't a *no* to my question."

"...I don't want to talk about this. If you don't mind," Bereth murmured. He added to ease the tension, "Maybe when we're safe. But not now."

"Understood." Merlina smiled to herself and hoped that she could help where magic would always fail.

Bereth was asleep again by the time the party came back with food and water, his head on Merlina's lap and a hint of a smile on his face as Merlina stroked his hair. Merlina looked up to Nedyom and murmured, "He needs more help than we can give."

Nedyom nodded. "So his dreams have told me."

The Road to Freedom — Take V

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

The next day, it turned out that Bereth's injuries were graver than first expected; even though he had some of his strength back, his legs refused to work properly. Xyr, according to Merlina's translation, suggested that it could be caused by the injuries from getting the paralyzing knife wedged deeper into his back at the explosion.

Well, that was a setback that was going to be a massive hindrance, especially when none of them knew neurological healing magic. Still, Bereth could not give in and die here; he had the ring to protect still, no matter what. He forced himself to try to get back on his feet.

Nedyom was looking at him with that strange empathetic look again and Bereth had an unnerving feeling that he was forgetting something about the man, something that his mentor had told him about or something he had read sometime. He could not remember it and he sure as hell did not want to ask in these circumstances, so he focused on getting his body back into his control. The sooner he was able to walk, the sooner they could make their way to the next Waystone and get help.

The Road to Freedom — Take VI

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

To say that walking was excruciating was... well, not an understatement, but it felt a bit too mild for Bereth. A part of him wished he had avoided the village in the first place, but then again, if an archmage had not been able to escape the cult, perhaps it was for the best that he had not played it safe. He would just have to grit his teeth together and force his body obey his mind.

The others were truly trying to help, but between having to conserve energy and flat out being unqualified, there was not much they could do. The walking stick Odlanya had taken the liberty of pilfering from the house while looking for something to clothe themselves with helped, but with a long distance on a hostile environment to cross, it would not fix everything.

Nevertheless, they were running out of food and making another trip to the village was bound to be even more dangerous. They would have to leave as soon as possible.

Bereth ran his thumb over the ring during one of his breaks and wished for his mentor's tenacity.

Nedyom looked at him yet again with that strange affectionate look and for the life of him Bereth could not understand why aside from feeling pity for his broken state.

That did not matter right now. What mattered was survival. So today. They would have to leave today, even if it meant leaving him behind on the desert, should his body fail him.

Nedyom's eyes grew sad at that announcement and Bereth felt even more deeply that he was forgetting something.

The Road to Freedom — Take VII

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

The moment the heat outside hit him in the face in full, Bereth knew it had been a mistake to push himself to leave. He was never going to make it, not even with the help of the others.

The others had to survive, however, and at this point they would not leave him behind unless they had no choice. Therefore, Bereth carried on and did his best not to slow the group down.

He could only hope that when he would inevitably die, the sand would hide both him and the ring forever.

The Road to Freedom — Take VIII

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Thanks to magic, Bereth made it through the daytime heat. They were... about halfway there, was what Nedyom said a little while ago? Bereth was not sure; he was just focused on keeping himself going forward.

The night's coldness was going to be their next major problem. The group huddled closer together in response to the sunlight fading away and carried on.

Bereth could only hope that nothing lurked in the darkness. There was no telling what would happen if they ran into either bandits or the cultists.

The Road to Freedom — Take IX

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Prompt used: *A man with 3 arms, a girl with 9 toes, and a horse that can only walk backwards.* by [SarcasticCupcake5](#) (Year 2017).

He was flicking in and out of unconsciousness. Bereth was quite sure of that. He was pretty sure that Merlina was asking him at some point if he could hear her — he did not remember responding — and chatter around him. There was something under his arm at some point.

At some point, the sun rose, or so Bereth thought. They were met with a man with 3 arms — all of them fully formed somehow — a girl with 9 toes — she must have been using magic to keep the desert sand from scorching her soles just like they were — and... a horse that was walking backwards. That made Bereth question whether or not he was having a dream... but if he was, that had to mean that he was dying. The others must have forsaken him in the sand, probably with promises to his unconscious body that they would come back for him with help soon.

The girl looked like her mentor did in the pictures of her childhood. How had she described her own mentor, a man who had wound up forsaking honor before Bereth had been born? Had he had three arms?

The trio reached them. The man lifted him on the horse, which then pivoted and started walking the same direction as them, the man and the girl pivoting and joining as well.

Bereth turned his head to the girl. The eyes were his mentor's, he was sure about it. He had looked into those eyes so many — and in the end so very few — times growing up. The amber in them had watched over his sleep in the tumultuous nights, a sheen that had pierced the darkness time and time

again until Bereth had become strong enough to ward off the haunting things himself.

With a hoarse voice, he asked, "Are you here to take me away?"

The girl smiled, the same sly look that Bereth had seen in photographs of her mentor's mischievous years. "And what if we are?"

"...I wouldn't mind," Bereth found himself saying even though he did not want to. He had the ring to protect still.

The girl jumped up, landing on the back of the horse, balancing herself lightly on Bereth's shoulders. "You and I both know that's not true." Then she was gone.

Bereth knew, in some way, that this had to be a dream, but his mind was too tired to properly process and highlight it. The three-armed man was humming something that sounded like what Nedyom had hummed when he had rested... a soothing melody that was... pulling him under... into the dark...

Bereth knew he was forgetting something. The ring was with him, he could feel it dig into his finger... so what was he... forget...ting...?

The Road to Freedom — Take X

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Bereth was... not dead. Probably. He was feeling far too awful to be dead. Probably dehydrated... in addition to every single one of his joints protesting both existing *and* being on the move. The humming became louder, creating a feeling of someone putting earmuffs over his entire mind. His consciousness slipped like he was on wet ice at each step and second, up and down.

A bit of light registered. It hurt so much that Bereth became more alert despite squeezing his eyes shut. He was lying on the weird horse... probably? He did not know.

The humming grew louder still, not entirely masking a hushed conversation nearby.

A touch on his head, soft words in his ear almost forced Bereth's mind to go back down into the unconsciousness. He tried to fight it, but his mind wound up slipping again and crashing down.

He was probably not dead, but he could feel that he was dying. The ring was still with him, but it would not save him. It would not make any of this right, especially not when he was too weak to use it.

...Maybe he would not wake up again...

The Road to Freedom — Take XI

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

There was no movement. That was what alerted Bereth to wake up. Something was covering his eyes. Was he dead? Was he about to be buried? He did not know... and he had too little strength to move. Had they been caught by the cult when he had been unconscious?

Despite the background noise, Nedyom was not humming around him.

Recovery — Take I

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Bereth awoke on a bed. A legitimate bed. Despite his body's protests at moving, he sat up and checked the ring. It was still there, untouched. Good. Next, he inspected his body. His clothing was gone, replaced by what looked like a hospital gown — not that he smelled the antiseptic smell he associated with hospitals — there was an IV on his arm and... his legs were not moving. At all. *Oh no.*

Someone opened the door, startling him. It was a young man wearing a hospital garb. "Oh, you're awake! Wonderful!"

"Where am I?" Bereth managed to ask before his voice failed him and made him cough hard.

The young man was at his side almost in an instant with a glass of water.

"Here, this'll help."

Bereth, against his better judgment, took the water and drank it. It was an instant relief. "What happened to me? Where am I?"

"You're at the Golgardo University Hospital. You fell victim to the Cult of the Dark Blood, managed to escape with a few others and made your way there. In addition to injuries to your neural system and spine, you were severely starved and dehydrated by the time your fellows dragged you to Golgardo. You have been in a coma for 16 days, first out of injuries and later in a medically-induced, stabler coma once you were healthy enough for us to start repairing your damaged nerves. Oh, and I'm Giraeth, by the way. Pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure," Bereth breathed out. That... was all good news so far? "I... can't move my legs at all."

"It's a miracle you could walk at all," Giraeth stated. "Have no worry, however; as of yesterday, your likelihood of full recovery was 80%. It's almost guaranteed that you will be able to walk with your own two feet at least somehow, provided you follow the physical rehabilitation regimen."

Bereth nodded, wincing at the pain it struck across his neck. "Alright... That sounds good..." He took a deep breath. "What about the others? How are they?"

"They have all recovered from their injuries and been discharged." Giraeth gestured at the bedside table. "They left their contact information with the request that you contact them once you're awake again and cleared for moving around."

What a relief. Bereth felt fatigue press him down, so he lay back. "Good."

"Rest up for now. You won't have to worry about anything while you're here." Giraeth sat down next to Bereth's unmoving legs. "The cost of treatment won't be a problem, as your injuries have come out of heinous crimes and thus will be covered, and no one will harm you here. Plus, the archmage will most likely keep visiting you daily, so you won't be lonely."

"The archmage...? You mean Nedyom?" Bereth asked.

Giraeth smiled widely. "Precisely. He said that it was your valiant actions that allowed him and the others to break free and I, among so many others, thank you for it. Losing him was a huge blow to our community."

Right, Bereth could probably ask about Nedyom here... "About him... what's he known for? I know I've been forgetting something that I've read about him and I still can't remember it."

"Oh, you must mean his specialty." Giraeth's eyes lit up. "He's *the* leading expert in controlling dreamreading."

Dreamreading. That has to be it. "He's a dreamreader?"

"Yes. And his life's work of finding ways to channel it into a controlled form has helped countless people like him. Myself included!" Giraeth looked startled, like he was not supposed to tell that. "Don't worry, I haven't read any of your dreams. I was lucky enough to be born here after the archmage had created a foundation for controlling dreamreading powers and my parents have had me learn that ever since I was young enough to follow instructions. I'm a pro at it."

"Okay. Thank you." Bereth forced himself to chuckle. "I feel a lot better now that I no longer have to wonder what I've forgotten."

"No problem. I'm happy to help. Is there anything else you need?"

Bereth thought for a moment. He did have more questions, but they should probably wait. "Not for now."

Giraeth stood up. "Got it. I'll let the doctors know you're awake so someone can come examine you. If you need anything, just call out. Someone'll come."

"Thank you."

Giraeth nodded and walked outside, leaving Bereth to his thoughts.

Nedyom was a dreamreader. The one who had created the school of controlling those powers, yes, but Bereth knew from his readings that controlling one's involuntary dreamreading powers required focus and energy, both of which had been in limited supply when they had been on the run. The man must have involuntarily read his dreams... and that would honestly explain a lot.

Well, Giraeth did say that Nedyom has visited him daily. Today — or tomorrow — would most likely not be an exception. He could ask about it then... if he dared...

...Right now, though... Bereth could feel that his body was more interested in rest than anything else.

Recovery — Take II

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Over the next few hours following waking up again, Bereth came to find more issues with his body: first of all, his fingers did not obey him well enough to type, forcing him to use text-to-speech systems to write on the tablet he had been given. Second of all, his sense of smell was gone. Third of all, so was his sense of taste.

It was all pretty terrifying, in all honesty. His powers were returning to him now that he had gotten adequate rest, hydration and nourishment, but even with them navigating the world would be difficult until his body would be fixed. At least the doctors were optimistic about his recovery; at worst he would have to use a cane to help his legs either for the rest of his life or only a part of it, depending on his body's ability to fix itself, he had been told.

Well. That was far better than being dead or still imprisoned in that hellhole. At least he would not be worrying about anything other than rehab for a good while.

Well, rehab *and* Nedyom's sudden appearance. The archmage was dressed in robes that made him more recognizable and he looked healthier, although his clothing and paleness accentuated how gaunt he had become while imprisoned.

"Hello, Bereth," Nedyom greeted. When Bereth's eyes widened, he chuckled. "A friend of mine is a professional with interpretation spells and I was lucky enough to get his help with communicating with you."

"Huh..." Bereth relaxed a little. "It's good to see you, Nedyom. How are you?" He almost cringed at how stilted he felt like he sounded.

Nedyom smiled, sidestepping the awkward start. "I'm far from fully recovering my strength, but I am already doing far better than before. What about you?"

"I'm recovering and in for a lot of rehab since I'm currently paralyzed hip down." Bereth shrugged, trying to look unfazed when Nedyom's eyes grew more empathetic. "Could be much worse, apparently."

"Yes, the doctors were quite forthcoming about how miraculous your ability to move was." Nedyom sat down at the chair next to the bed. "Your perseverance was admirable."

"...I just did what I had to."

"Nevertheless."

Once silence fell between them, Bereth wanted to ask about dreamreading. Yet he was feeling just anxious enough about that conversation that he could not voice his question, no matter how much he had thought about it beforehand. It turned out to be Nedyom who brought it up, "By the way, nurse Giraeth mentioned that you'd asked about me. Is there something specific you want to ask from me?"

Bereth cringed before he could stop himself. "...I've read about dreamreading... When we were out there, did you... read my dreams?"

Nedyom nodded and explained in his familiar soft tone, "Yours and those of everyone else around us. In the cult's hold, I simply did not have the needed strength to control my powers, and when we were fleeing, I had to prioritize our survival."

"I figured as much... What did you... what did you see?" Bereth only barely could keep eye contact. *You must have known about the ring. It could not be with me still otherwise.*

Nedyom looked down. "A lot of things that did not make sense. Bits and pieces of your life. The road you have been on for a while now and how your grief is affecting you." He looked back up. "You lost your mentor too early."

Bereth got defensive immediately. "She said I was ready to leave."

"Skill-wise, yes, but not otherwise." When Bereth opened his mouth to protest, Nedyom raised his hand to pause him. "I knew Eleni mostly by her reputation, but what I do know has me suspecting that she was as poor a mentor as she was a parent."

"How- you don't know-" Bereth started, feeling like his need to defend the only proper parent he had was a knee-jerk reaction.

"She was an excellent teacher, no doubt," Nedyom interrupted, still keeping his voice soft, "but when a mage takes an individual who is not already a fully functional adult under their tutelage, they also have a parental role. And based on your dreams and the way you've been saddled with protecting the last thing remaining of her, she failed you as your parent even though she clearly did not as your teacher. As such, she failed as your mentor. Does the transcription spell convey the distinction?"

Bereth wanted to deny, to say that there was a language barrier but... it struck home at an alarming accuracy. Feelings he had been running away from, the resentment that was constantly lurking in duty's shadow... now that he was forced to remain stationary, he could not run away from it.

"I have met people like you before. If you want, I can help you when you have recovered more." Nedyom smiled a little. "I owe you that and so much more for giving me the chance to escape."

"What's going to happen with the cult?" Bereth asked, knowing how jarring the change of topic was even with the allusion to the cult's actions.

"A taskforce is dealing with them currently. A good portion of the cultists have been apprehended, but the top brass is still in hiding within the village. I'm sure that things will turn out fine soon, however; last I heard, the rest of the surviving mages have been rescued and are being tended to." Nedyom leaned back a little. "Don't worry. It'll be fine anyway. And you will as well, I'm sure. Think about my offer while you recover, though. I truly do want to help."

Bereth nodded a little, just enough not to feel too much pain. "I will. Thank you."

Nedyom nodded, his smile brightening. "Don't mention it."

For the first time since waking up, Bereth smiled a little. Maybe things would turn out all right after all in time.

Cupcake Possession

Collected in [*Past Mistakes*](#)

Flashback prompt: *Cupcakes + Possession* by [SarcasticCupcake5](#) (Year 2016).

When the witch baked everyone cupcakes as a gesture of kindness, no one expected those delightfully delicious pastries to be the tool of possessing the whole town.

When people realized that, it was far too late. Now, the town she inhabited was a slave town, all working under her orders, wishes and plans of grandeur.

A Message to Deliver

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

Prompt used: [He Lies in the Snow](#) by [sarahfinnigan](#).

When I reached the two fighting battalions, I saw that it was already too late. They had fought to death, like they had sworn to do.

My message about the peace treaty had come too late.

The rocky hills were littered with bodies, the snow stained red by so much blood that could've turned out unshed if I'd been fast enough.

I spent a moment to take the view in, looking for any signs of life. No one moved, did not even breathe. They were all gone already.

Instead of bringing the message of peace to the soldiers, I would have to bring the message of death to the two queens.

I was already heading back down the hills when I heard a voice – a baby's cry. I stopped to a halt and turned my head around to locate its source. There, that rubble over there, the voice is coming from there! As the baby kept crying, I dashed to it.

Then I saw it and I... I could not believe my eyes.

The baby was still attached to its mother. I looked at the woman to whom the umbilical cord led – she was still breathing, albeit just barely. How on earth I had missed these two?

I lifted the child from the cold snow, cut the umbilical cord with my knife and took a corner its mother's cape, wrapping it around the baby. As it felt

my touch, it calmed down. I went closer to the mother. "M'lady, can you hear me?"

The mother opened her eyes. "Is... my child... alive?"

"Healthy as far as I can see," I told.

"Is it... a... boy?"

I checked. "A girl."

"Name her... Isabella..." the mother's breathing suddenly stopped.

"M'lady, please stay with me!" I cried out. However, as I tried her pulse, I knew that it was too late. Her last breath had been her newborn's name.

Isabella started to cry again.

"Shh, it's ok, it's ok," I whispered, rocking the girl a bit. "Everything's going to be okay."

I took the mother's cape off her and wrapped the rest of it around Isabella. I saw the insignia of Queen Marissa on it. Hopefully she will be able to find a family for this poor girl, or perhaps her father if he did not fall in this battle as well.

As I left back towards the castle with a message of not just death but also birth to deliver, doing my best to keep Isabella calm, I could not help but wonder,

Who in their right mind goes to a battle while pregnant?

Immediate Danger

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

[Prose-ject 2020](#) day 26. Prompt: "I'll be back." -*The Terminator*

Isabella listened to the ghoul's breathing. Its back was turned towards her and Mychal, but it would only be a matter of time until it would spot them. It only needed to turn back, walk a few steps forward and turn right.

Mychal prayed silently to the powers that be that the ghoul would leave the room. Isabella clenched her training sword and wished that the ghoul would indeed leave and give her an opening to strike. Her sword would not do much if she did not hit the gaps in its armor, but the element of surprise might just give her enough time to slice its head off.

By sheer luck, divine intervention or a trap being placed in front of them, the ghoul left the room. Isabella peeked from behind the desk to ensure that the door was closed. She let out the breath she had held, relieved; she could not leave the room yet, but at least now they were not in the most immediate danger.

That did not change the fact that they were still in immediate danger as the ghoul was behind the door, though. Isabella had to come up with a plan fast before the ghoul would open the door again. She would not be able to fare against it for long without backup.

Mychal was shaking, her hands clasped tightly together. Even if she was an adult or even a teenager like her instead of a little girl, she could not help in that state.

As the footsteps started to go away, Isabella knew it was her only chance. She whispered to Mychal, "I'll be back."

Then she left their hiding place and walked out the door.

The ghoul turned to look at her when it heard the door close behind her.

Child of Dragons

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

The prompt used: *The Power Within*

She was always told that she had the power of the suns within herself. She did not understand what they were saying; how could an earthly vessel such as her body hold such power especially when the power was brimming all around her with strength unlike any other.

It turned out that she was not carrier of the power of the suns. Instead, her power was the fire burning inside her, a dragon's might unlike any other.

At some point, people realized that instead of a pureblood human, she was a child of dragons. That was when the persecution started, her whole family suffering for what she was.

That was also when she found out that she was adopted. And, for that reason, she was left for dead in the mountain range.

When the hunters came, knowing she had survived, she ran as fast as she could, as far as she could.

Eventually, she reached the border of kingdoms even though she did not know it. She only knew two things: the hunters had given up their pursuit and going back was out of the question for her.

She had been cast out of her home, she had no idea where she was and she had no place to go to. Therefore, she learned to survive on her own, hunting animals and search for edible plants.

As she lived and survived around the border of the foreign kingdom, hiding from everyone she saw in fear of being attacked, she slowly made her way towards the Dragon Peaks, unknowing of what would await her there.

Hot Embers

Currently uncollected

The embers were still hot even though everything around it was days old. Magic.

There was a fire mage or a dragon on the loose, although it was already days away. If it was a dragon, it could already be hundreds of kilometers away if it had flown.

The hunter growled. He would catch this being, no matter who or what it was.

Veriwia's True Powers

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

The prompt used: *True Power*

As Veriwia made her way towards the Dragon Peaks, she felt an intensifying call. It was beckoning her, welcoming her. Once she understood that the call directed her towards the mountains, she got her wandering a direction other than *away*.

She walked deeper into the unfamiliar kingdom she did not know she was trespassing.

Whenever a hunter, knight or farmer came to the line of her sight or hearing, she hid in the foreign land, having gotten to know it well enough to hide. No one ever spotted her, only signs of a wanderer having been there. Soon, rumors of a wandering ghost started spreading wherever she went, and she started hiding her traces.

Thus, the rumors evolved into a fallen angel walking and flying amongst them unseen and unheard.

This frightened Veriwia – she feared going anywhere near any place with people more and more after each rumor she overheard. She hurried ahead, towards her destination, like she was being hunted again, although she was not. The people never had anything more than a ghost to chase when they found her traces.

Then she was met by a burning town and its people screaming. The call called upon her to unlock her true powers in aid of those people. Veriwia did not know what to do, but she did what she thought to be for the best: she

unleashed her fire powers at their strongest, putting out fire wherever she heard someone scream for help.

When the fire was put out, Veriwia looked at her hands. They were scaly like a dragon's arms. Knowing that people would see them, she ran away before the grateful citizens of the Dragontower village would get to award her for her bravery and skill.

Thus, the rumors turned into a wandering ghost of a fire sorceress who appears only to those in dire need of her magic's aid.

After saving the village, Veriwia did not stop running. Only when she would meet the caller at the mountain, she would unlock her true power. That she knew now.

And until then, she would not stop.

Almost Home

Collected in [*Hunting Inklings*](#)

Veriwia stared at the Dragon Peaks. The journey towards them that had felt like it was never going to end was almost at its end. The mountains that had once looked as tall as her index finger were now looming over her. She could even hear the dragons' cries with her ears and not just her soul.

With a new burn spreading from her heart to the rest of her body, Veriwia started to run again. She was almost there.

She was almost home.

Gratefully Prosperous

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

[Prose-ject 2020](#) day 14. Prompt: *the warm thrill of prosperity.*

Friat looked at the city around the castle from one of the castle balconies. The city was peaceful, yet each time she looked at it, she reminded herself that she had been fortunate to become an apprentice to one of the court sorcerers, Ezidretim. She still remembered the first months at the castle, learning to know its layout, staff and even the royal family; the warm thrill of prosperity was impossible to forget.

As she had grown up — and as part of her training — she had learned to be grateful for her good fortune. Ezidretim had instilled his daily gratitude ritual in her during the years, like his mentor had done to him when he had been an apprentice. Friat was planning to continue the tradition when she would take on an apprentice herself, whoever it would end up being. A part of her wished that the apprentice would be someone from the less affluent areas of the city like her so that they, too, could better help the poor with their sorceries.

That time was still far away, though. Friat was still young and the crown prince, hardly an adult to begin with yet, had yet to take the throne after his father. Heck, the prince did not even have anyone to marry yet! Not that she could blame him; the guards shadowed him everywhere outside of the castle grounds, so it was close to an impossibility to become friends, let alone lovers, with someone outside of the castle and the people in the castle were like family to him, too close to be married.

Friat smiled to herself. If the prince found someone for himself, she would have to go and look for an apprentice whose heart burned with fire just like hers, lest she wish to be second to him.

Before that, however, she still had learning trips to the Dragon Peaks to make with Ezidretim and a final sorcery exam to pass once Ezidretim would deem her ready.

She could hardly wait to see the mother dragons again.

Almost Overwhelming

Currently uncollected

The power of the fire was almost overwhelming when Veriwia first started to learn to use it. She had lived most of her life in a settlement with little contact with magic or on the run with little to no contact with a single being, let alone someone who can use magic.

Nevertheless, the others assured her that it would be all right, that she would get used to it in time.

Veriwia decided to believe them.

Surely everything would be all right now.

Should Have Known Better

Currently uncollected

You should have known better than to throw pine-cones at that dragon.

You could almost hear the spirit of your late big sister as if it was real.
Except that spirits did not exist, right?

Oh well. You were about to find out.

That dragon was already coming at you.

Annual Flyby

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

Prompt: *Dawn*

Each dawn, the people watched the skies, wondering if they would see a glimpse of the dragons making their annual flyby. No one knew the pattern for the timing except that it happened once a year at dawn.

Most of the time, they merely saw dragonflies beginning their daily hunt for food or mates.

The crown prince did his best to follow the dragons' flybys, hoping to find the pattern and perhaps befriend them when he would know when to be there for their flyby over the castle. The young fire sorceress Friat followed his research with interest. After all, dragons were the mothers of fire and fire was her element, the type of magic which had chosen her at birth. She wanted to learn more of it from its mothers someday, so she did her best to aid any benevolent research on dragons, especially that of her best friend, the crown prince.

Each dawn, the crown prince stood at his balcony, waiting for the familiar huge figures with wings longer than his balcony to appear. Friat did her best to join him as often as she could.

While Friat slowly grew impatient of waiting at each dawn as the years passed by, the crown prince never did. Confined in his castle, always guarded heavily whenever he left its grounds, this was one of the only times he could spend in the fresh air without heavy, suffocating guarding.

And each year, as he saw the dragons fly by at dawn, he greeted them with joy.

And each year, as they saw the crown prince smile widely at them at dawn, the dragons greeted him during their flyby with a mighty collective roar.

Farewell

Currently uncollected

Prompt: *Farewell*

Friat watched as her former mentor, Ezidretim, gasped in pain. She could do nothing. Even the best healers in the whole world could do nothing to save him even if they were right there beside her.

The injuries were too severe.

"Ezi, is there anything I can do to ease your pain?" Friat's voice was hardly louder than a whisper.

"No, Kindling. Just say with me... until the end," Ezidretim croaked. "I'm... sorry you had to see me go like this... but I'm glad to I got to train you. Just know... that no matter what... I'm proud of you, Friat Brann."

"Ezi..." Friat fought the tears. "Thank you for everything."

"Thank you, too, Kindling." Despite of the intense pain, Ezidretim managed to put a smile untainted by pain on his face. "Take care, always remember what I taught you and follow your heart."

"I will, Ezi, I promise."

Ezidretim could already feel himself fade away. "Burn brightly with the dragons, Kindling. Farewell."

"Farewell, Ezi, the bright dragon fire that lit me up," Friat breathed, smiling through the heartache.

Ezidretim's eyelids fell over his eyes and stayed there. They would stay that way forever.

Once the injured fire sorcerer's heart stopped beating, tears blurred Friat's eyes.

Then, for the first time in her life, the fire sorceress wept openly in front of a crowd, her tears soaking her former mentor's clothes for the last time in her life.

Duel for Marriage

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

The prompt: the visual prompt, [Episode 42 - D r o w n i n](#) by [AngelGaney](#).

It was no coincidence that the duel which would decide which of the two sorceresses would get to marry the crown prince was held at a cliff. Both Friat and Ociraviel knew it was a fight to death and getting knocked out, then thrown off a cliff into the ocean, would mean certain death.

Although, Friat could not help wondering why the prince, in all his pacifism, had not come to stop this. Did he not know of this duel? Or had he been unallowed to intervene, perhaps locked somewhere inside the castle to make sure that he would not come here to stop this?

Whatever the reason, the crown prince was not there to stop the duel, so Friat prepared her mind, recalled every single combat lesson her mentor had taught her and dug her heels into the soil. There would be no backing down from this. No matter how much Ociraviel claimed she loved the prince, Friat would not let her have him, her best friend.

For even though the blonde witch did not know it, Friat had heard her say bad things, *vile* things, about the prince's little sister, whom he treasured more than anyone in the whole kingdom. Thus Friat knew that this woman would only bring pain and sadness to her best friend.

And even more than that, Friat knew that she had to keep this woman from hurting the prince or she could not just stop calling him her best friend but also abandon him altogether for her failure to watch his back. Hells, she could even stop calling herself a just sorceress if she let that happen, turn her back on magic and become a peasant like her brother had done after dropping out of the sorcerer school.

There was so much to lose that Friat would accept nothing but a victory.

When the duel began, however, Ociraviel caught her off-guard immediately with a telekinetic push she had not known she could do. Friat flew off the edge and into the water, sinking down in pain. She had heard some of her ribs crack at the impact on the cliff, and after falling to the ocean her left shoulder hurt like it was on fire.

That was fast.

Ociraviel was already leaving, certain of her victory, when the pendant of protection on Friat's neck activated and cast the sorceress out of the water and back to the cliff, light as feather.

When she cast her ultimate spell on the unsuspecting Ociraviel in retaliation, Friat made a mental note of visiting her mentor's grave to give her thanks for the pendant.

The duel was over before Ociraviel even knew she had lost.

It was time for Friat to limp back to the castle, deliver the good news and find a healer to fix her broken bones.

Then she would have to figure out what she would do about the whole marrying thing.

Dragon Warrior

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

The prompt: the visual prompt, [Light of Lyvaanth - Dead of Winter](#) by [Forest-Walker](#).

She was a warrior, one of a kind. Strong, brave and fierce unlike any other. Her fierceness eventually earned her the title *Dragon Warrior*, for the only ones who rivalled her in that were the archdragons themselves.

Little did I know that when I got together with her, I would find out that there was more than met the eye in that very title she carried so proudly with her head held as high as the Dragon Peaks themselves.

In hindsight, her innate proficiency at fire magic should have given it away. I guess everyone just turned a blind eye on it, saying it was just a random proficiency. After all, she was among the most honorable of our warriors and she, oh, she defended her pride like she defended the royal family. There was no person who challenged her and prevailed.

This warrior, Veriwia was her name, rose in ranks and became the captain of the royal guard. Through that, we became close, fell in love even, and as sorceress Friat, my best friend since childhood, turned down the marriage proposal after defeating sorceress Ociraviel in a duel for my marriage, we got together. We were, after all, in love, while Friat and I were best friends, nothing more, nothing less.

Then came the day when a group of assassins tried to take my life and I saw just why Veriwia loved her title so much.

In the forest where the assassination attempt took place was a fire that day and the townspeople witnessed a pale dragon carry me to safety, then

disappear into the castle.

That was how I found out I was dating a dragon.

Smoldering Remains

Collected in [*Birbs*](#)

Veriwia looked at the smoldering remains. Even for the Dragon Warrior, it was hard to tell who or what exactly this person had been before they had been toasted. The only thing she could tell for certain was that this someone had angered a dragon — hopefully at the very least simply angered; if it was a rogue dragon what was just out there murdering people, the kingdom had a bigger problem than a sudden death by dragonfire.

Perhaps the mockingbird that was nearby could tell her more.

Rotting Ice Underneath

Collected in [*The Journey's End*](#)

The prompts: The visual prompt, [Crystal Waltz](#) by [sakonma](#), the written prompt, ["it's breaking," i whispered, i cried](#) by [MatieuCanadaWilliams](#) and the word prompt, *Float*.

While people danced in the ball, the world as they knew it was ending.

The ice straight under their land was done rotting and the glacier keeping their world floating on the ocean surface was finally coming apart. The ice dragons sensed it and rose to the air, trying to alert their people with their sudden vigilance, but the guards started to look for thieves and intruders instead of evacuating. The dragons flew around, trying to herd their people, but all they heard was laughter.

The people thought that the dragons merely wanted to dance with them.

The leader wanted to shriek in frustration, but she knew that no one in the hall could understand her language and thus her distress. This was the direst possible emergency, not a game, and now was not the time to get removed from the hall for trying to do her job. She organized a new evacuation plan with her subordinates, hoping that once their people would realize there was a true emergency right under their feet, they would be able to save everyone – or at least as many as they possibly could.

The ice dragons had felt the ice rotting for some time and thus they were prepared for the end of their people's world. They had arranged a new place for them to live on a nearby island, one made of rock instead of ice, made a pact with the local earth dragons to ensure their people's safety and made sure that they had boats and everything ready when the time would come.

Now, the leader knew it was the time. She sent a scout out to alert everyone else so that once the action would start, everything would go as close as possible to what was planned.

That was their people's only hope even though the humans did not even know it.

Lost Home

Collected in [*Hunting Inklings*](#)

The ice dragons watched their old home fall apart. Buildings and countless of items started to float once they met the ocean.

They had made it just in time, but they still observed the area to make sure they had not missed anyone. It was their duty to protect their humans.

It had always been.

Saved Plushie

Collected in [*Hunting Inklings*](#)

One of the bigger ice dragons came to us, carrying something in its paws. Once it landed, it presented the item: a familiar dog plushie.

"Pawsie!" my daughter exclaimed in joy and rushed to take the plushie.

I smiled at the ice dragon, grateful for its effort to save items important to us. "Thank you."

Rotted Ice Home

Currently uncollected

Prompt: *Loss*

The world as my people knew it is in shambles, turned into mere pieces of rotting ice. I followed the destruction from afar with my telescope from the safety of the island based on rock rather than ice. I wish they would've seen reason when I told them of this development in the ice base of our island.

One of the earth dragons I had befriended during my time here came to my side, so I put my telescope down and scratched his chin. "Don't worry, buddy. I'm sure everyone will get used to this place."

Many probably would not. They would yearn for their icy home. It was too bad; our island wasn't the only one that had already gone through this or was going to go through this. The ice was melting and there was nothing we could do.

What the Lack of Discipline Can Do

Collected in [*Birbs*](#)

"What's inside this snow globe?" the child asked.

"Don't touch it; it's not a snow globe," you told.

"Then what is it?" the child asked.

"It's a delicate scientific project that must not be tampered with." You looked away for a moment to find the paperwork you needed but from the corner of your eye you could see the child reach for the ball again. You turned back and snapped, "Keep your fucking hands off that thing!"

The child startled, pulled his hand away and started to bawl.

"And stop crying. I told you not to touch it. If you want to live here, you do as you are told." You glared at the child. "None of the items outside of your room are toys. I have worked on that thing ever since before your parents made you. One of my colleagues works with highly explosive substances and has items that blow up the moment they come into contact with either air or bare skin."

"You're meeeaaaan!" the child bawled.

"No. You, however, have already proved to be disobedient and a danger to us all. Now be quiet and look at me." Once the child finally did do as you told him, you continued, "Your parents may have let you do whatever, but this manor is full of dangerous and invaluable items that are not meant to be handled by anyone except the person responsible for them. Here, you will do as you're told and only as you're told until I say otherwise. If I find you even reaching for an item that belongs to me or my colleagues, you can be sure that you will be sent to the orphanage if the item doesn't kill you before that. Do you understand?"

"Noooo!" the child started bawling again. "You're meeeaaaan!"

The child had been in the manor for less than a day and you already regretted giving in to the extended family's demands to take your grandchild in. You had previously expressed concern over the way your only daughter

had been raising her child — reasonable rules and enforcing them were the basis of the society, after all — and denied visits to protect the research at the manor, but months of endless guilt-tripping from family members who would have never taken such a poorly raised child into their normal homes had worn you — and your colleagues — down. Had the guilt-tripping — more like harassment at that point — not extended to people coming to the manor unannounced just to rant and whine at anyone they could find — or better yet, had the damn police actually done something for once and gotten the restraining orders both done and enforced — you would not have agreed. But no, the restraining order applications were still pending somewhere in some useless bureaucrat's office and here you were, dealing with a child who had never been disciplined in his life in a manor full of scientific research a simple tantrum would destroy in a blink of an eye.

The child's proximity was a risk for the miniature sanctuary for Lear's macaws — among other endangered species you had managed to conserve after finishing the prototype of the protective miniature world — so you stood up, walked briskly to the ball and picked it up, careful not to disturb the contents. For those living inside the ball, everything within it was the whole universe, and disturbing the balance of it could destroy everything he had worked for. You would not have moved the ball instead of the child, had you not calculated that moving the ball posed a smaller risk of conflict and danger to your life's work.

"Gimme the snow globe!"

You ignored the petulant demand, but then you felt a push in your lower back, a leg at your left ankle and suddenly your elbows met the floor with sickening crunches, followed by your torso. The ball, a whole universe full of life you had worked so hard to save from extinction, flew off your delicate grip.

Your life, all the years of work, flashed before your eyes as you watched the ball fly up — already most likely killing everything inside it — and then descend, as if in slow motion, until it hit the floor well out of your reach and shattered.

Your life's work — the only prototype there was and would have been for years to come — was gone, and so was everything within it.

Your grandchild, no, your whole family, had just destroyed what could have saved many endangered species from extinction.

You don't know if it was the searing pain in your elbows registering or the realization that your work had been reduced to tiny shards of glass, but you screamed.

Determination

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

There were less and less griffins and pegasi flying around each year. Jaden said that apparently they were endangered in the wild due to poaching.

Miakil tried to learn necromancy. It yielded distasteful results — and finding suitable bodies was a migraine-inducingly massive hassle in any case. Jaden suggested breeding; he knew how to do that, after all.

Miakil started to learn arts that would allow him to protect the creatures they were trying to save.

One summer, Miakil did not see any griffins. Fearing the worst, he investigated.

The poacher who had killed the last living griffin in the area did not live to boast about his "success" for long.

Security would not be the only problem. They needed resources — money, food, tools, enough space for a massive project like that. Fortunately, Miakil had an idea on how to get started with that.

The bounty for catching the poachers was barely enough to get them started at Miakil's family's farm, but neither Miakil nor Jaden was going to give up. They had to start somewhere sooner rather than later. The longer they waited, the worse things would get.

If Miakil's parents disapproved the path their son took to get the funds for the project, they never said it aloud although they never visibly supported it beyond allowing the breeding to take place on their land. Miakil was deeply grateful for that.

Two summers later, the pegasi disappeared. This time, however, Miakil had no one to kill; a disease had taken out the three remaining ones. He added it on the list of things they needed to be able to counter. Medicine was expensive, but losing all of their hard work would cost even more.

The first hideout — necessary once crime became a more commonplace way for them to obtain what they needed — was crummy and small, but it was enough. It was far more secure than the farm and that was the most important thing.

Sometimes, Jaden and Miakil both wondered if what they were doing would ever bear proper fruit. Still, this was the path they had chosen and they had gotten too far to give up now.

Miakil kept hope in his heart. They were going to succeed, no matter what it took.

One day, pegasi and griffins would soar by his family's farm again just like when he was young.

Scarlet

Collected in [Untitled Hearts](#)

"I am Scarlet and I know what you are doing."

Miakil leaned back on his chair, faking that he was not disturbed that this young lady had bypassed his magic defenses. "Since you are here alone rather than with authorities, I assume you want something from us."

"I want to join you."

"I see." Miakil kept his posture the same, hoping that the aloof expression remained on his face unchanged. "What can you offer us in return of having you?"

"A far better security system. Yours is lackluster to say the least, and easy to bypass if you know what you are doing."

"Oh?" This did sound too good to be true, but it was probably a good idea to see what Scarlet could do. "Well then, how about you demonstrate your skills?"

Miakil had no idea how he had garnered the favor of a half-demon, but Scarlet had proved useful from the get-go. What surprised him the most, however, was the undying loyalty that she showed him. It did raise some concerns of having unknowingly made a pact with her, but if there were drawbacks, Miakil did not notice them yet. He figured that if some would appear, they would be a cost of keeping the breeding project safe.

He could only hope that someday he would learn more about Scarlet and her past.

After Vengeance

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

Scarlet knew that she was unwanted before she understood anything else about the world around her, even the cruel words that were used of her. Once, she thought that wiping everyone who looked down on her would make her feel better about her existence that no one asked for.

Well, it did, but vengeance was followed by sheer emptiness, a lack of purpose.

Then she found a secret lair dedicated for breeding mythical creatures she had never seen, guarded by a dark artist, and she realized that the purpose of her life did not need to be her own.

A Quest for Pegasus

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

This is set sometime after [*After Vengeance*](#).

Challenge: Write an adventure story featuring at least three characters who take part in the adventure. A character must do at least one act of MacGyvering during the story.

"So," Scarlet said, cocking her eyebrow, "you're telling me that *we*, as in all three of us," she gestured at the trio in the room, "must cross this ravine filled with murder vines so that Jaden can get this 'magnificent' pegasus for your breeding program?"

"That's the idea," Miakil confirmed. "Of course, if you want to stay behind and miss out on seeing how I handle vines that are not happy about my presence for a change, that's fine by me." He turned to Jaden. "You got any protests?"

Jaden huffed. "I trusted you alone to keep me and our animals safe before Scarlet came along. Unless you're telling me you've lost your touch after she joined us, I think I can trust you on this one too."

"Like hell I'm letting you have all the fun," Scarlet snarled. "I'm in."
Miakil grinned. "Splendid."

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Had she been a mere mortal and not a half-demon, Scarlet *might* have been concerned for her safety when Miakil commandeered the *first* massive vine that tried to drop them off the face of the cliff. "I thought you implied that you would have problems with these vines."

"Oh, I can handle one all right." Miakil laughed and swept his arm over the horizon. "It's the bazillion other vines that will be the problem."

"Oh joy," Scarlet deadpanned. She stepped on the vine, crossing her arms.  
"Well, show me what you can do, mage boy."

"It's 'dark artist', sweetie," Miakil said. "Jaden, you ready?"

"Hmm, give me a couple of secs." Jaden prodded at the gadget he had. "Do you think either of you could snatch a piece of a vine that tries to get us? I think I got your gemstone to resonate with the antennas, but I need to calibrate the frequency to get it to repel the vines properly."

Scarlet told herself that she was here because it would be entertaining.

"Uh... what?"

Miakil chuckled. "TL;DR: Jaden picked up an old radio, one of my repellent gemstones that's too weak to do anything real, my lunchbox and who knows what else—"

"Three batteries, an egg timer's insides and duct tape," Jaden interjected.

"Yeah, I'm not even going to ask why you have an egg timer's insides with you." Miakil shook his head. "Anyhoo, Jaden does wacky stuff like that with wacky ingredients. It's techno magic as far as I can tell. It comes in handy every so often."

"...Techno magic. Sure." Scarlet turned her attention to the horizon. "I'll get that vine you want."

"Sure thing." Miakil pumped his fist high up. "Let's go!"

"Thank you," Jaden said.

~~~

Scarlet could have burned the vines that came too near, but even as they dodged for their lives, she had a gut feeling that her companions would not like the suggestion. Hence, she only focused on snatching a vine for Jaden — an easy feat when the vines were more than happy to come within arm's reach — and then dodging as the man worked on his thingamajig under Miakil's protection.

Frankly, she was more surprised that the thingamajig worked than the fact that Miakil was not able to protect both of them. Was it a test, something to measure her capabilities? A limitation of being a mere human? Or was the man just being petty? It was hard to tell at this point.

Nevertheless, it was a relief when the vines recoiled from their near vicinity, even though the vine they were traveling on faltered.

What a load of stupidity, this whole quest.

~~~

Well, even Scarlet had to admit that the pegasus they had come for was marvelous. A nearly iridescent sheen on its hair and feathers, strong and wide wings and the most noble form she had ever seen... It truly was as Miakil and Jaden had said: magnificent.

Scarlet smiled to herself as the two men gushed over the winged horse. Perhaps she would not mind sticking around for longer.

# An Hourglass

Collected in [\*The Last Dessert\*](#)

Challenge: Comment “Challenge me” to today’s FFM Links post and challenge other writers with the following things: a one-line description of a small event that should happen in the story, the tense of the story (past, present or future) and a genre the challenged person cannot write in. Challenge from [Serenity Feueropal](#): *A broken hour glass can still tell time, present tense, not science fiction.*

Miakil looks at the horizon for a moment more before he turns to Scarlet. The half-demon sits still, her eyes trained on the pegasi and griffins flying around. That allows the dark artist to take a proper look at her — the hints of horns rising from under her fire-red hair, the ash-colored eyes that look human to anyone who has not met a demon before, the prim backwater-town-girl posture that is either a way to hide the fact that she can burn you to coal within seconds or ingrained to her growing up... And the hourglass pendant she always carries, its glass cracked and halves only together because of the magic it holds.

He has not been burned yet, so Miakil asks, "Do you mind a question?" The ashen eyes go from serene to distrustful in a way that would make any mortal not ingrained in dark magic terrified of what is to come. "Just ask." "What's that hourglass you have? I can sense magic from it."

Scarlet smirks, takes the hourglass into her hand — showing off the predator-like claws that she has instead of nails on her fingers — and flips the hourglass. "It tells the time."

"So, the magic is to keep it working despite the damage?" Miakil has a hunch he is correct, but the pride in Scarlet's eyes makes him want to hear more.

Scarlet nods. "My first project of magic." She puts the pendant back against her chest, the sand still falling down, and turns her eyes back to the horizon.

Miakil cannot help but be curious about the story behind it, but it is clear that the conversation is over. He might be a dark artist, but even he knows better than to irritate a demon when he can avoid it.

Maybe someday Scarlet will tell him more.

# Talking to the Ceiling

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

You stare at the ceiling. The ceiling stares back at you. You blink. The ceiling blinks back.

"We should stop meeting like this, you know. Possessing hospital ceilings is weird," you say.

The ceiling blinks again. "You know Scarlet is busy with security. Someone else needs to handle the stables while you recover."

"You could teleport to the hospital and back."

Had the ceiling had a mouth and teeth, it would have grinned and you know it. "Now where's the fun in that, Jaden?"

You shake your head. "Sometimes I can't believe I'm talking to you of all people."

The ceiling chuckles. "You and me both."



# A Dark Heart

Collected in [Birbs](#)

Challenge: This challenge utilizes some of the answers given to the [FFM 2021 Sign-up Sheet](#). The story's primary genre is the genre you gave as your least favorite one to question 1, include the three favorite story elements you gave as your favorite ones to question 3 and the main character must be drawn from the specific literary character or archetype you gave as the answer to question 9 (if you gave an existing character, avoid making a carbon copy/fan fiction of it).

Some people, myself included, listed erotica as the least favorite genre, but on FFM's Discord server we were told that we did not have to write erotica and could pick our second least favorite genre. With this, my elements turned out to be: *mystery, representation for asexuals, badassery and wholesomeness and a villain who is or becomes more wholesome than you'd expect*. The aforementioned FFM Discord chat also brought me another challenge to the story from [KiriHearts](#): *include a love interest* (according to them, it would get me "bonus cool points"). I ended up taking on that challenge (because of course I couldn't say no, and also partly because Entrapdak from Netflix's *She-Ra* reboot is one of my favorite canon ships ever and it was in my mind a lot... because of certain challenge elements that I probably wrote quite soon after watching said reboot).

Anyhow, I ended up writing almost 600 words over the 1000-word limit, so I decided to make a heavily cut FFM version and the full version. This is the full version.

A pin that said *Out of fucks* gleamed in the sunlight. Next to it, a pin that had a rocket and the text *Acetronaut* on a distinct black-gray-white-purple background reflected the same sunlight at the adjacent wall.

"Do you think the detective got lost?" she asked, her eyes glimmering brighter than the pins despite of the shadows on her face.

He smirked. "He probably found one of Scarlet's pitfalls."

~~

*Missing person* posters with a woman's face. He recognized the face from the numerous times he had visited the *Glittering Kalimba*. Izora. Miakil looked at the poster on the café's door, then walked in like he had read an uninteresting festival poster, his confident walk completely unchanged.

Once he had gotten a tea — the sweet *Blue Jay* blend — and a healthy sandwich, he cast a hearing spell to hear if someone had found out something about Izora's disappearance. Scarlet had told him before leaving that a detective had asked questions but the investigation had not gotten any progress.

~~

"Who's that guy?" he overheard a new voice ask.

"Shush. Don't approach him," another voice — the manager, Lizzy — hissed.

"Why? He looks cool." The new voice did lower its volume, but not enough for his ears not to pick it up.

"He's a dangerous dark artist. Get back in the kitchen and do *not* mess his sandwich up."

When Lizzy delivered his order, tenser than usual, Miakil winked at her as he thanked her. The manager's smile tensed but she opted not to acknowledge the clear message that the conversation had been overheard.

A moment later, he could see a blue-haired young woman getting chewed out for something. Their eyes met. He gave her a smile and a wink.

~~

"Hey, you!" a gruff voice interrupted his target practice at the edge of the forest. "You got something going on with my girlfriend?"

He turned, his leather jacket swooshing. "I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking about. Could you please elaborate?"

"You winked at my girlfriend." The man who had approached him grumbled.

"I wink at many people," Miakil remarked, his voice mild. He had a feeling this was the partner of the new woman at *Glimmering Kalimba*. "Besides, I have no interest in anyone. Your jealousy is unwarranted."

"You better stay away from my girl, *freak*, or else." The man showed a gun hidden under his jacket.

Miakil considered his options. He could easily erase this fool from the face of the earth and save his girlfriend the bother of having to deal with a man so jealous he would come and threaten a known dark artist over a customary wink. He could also just end the conversation and leave to see how Jaden's breeding project was going.

He decided to see what kind of a man he was dealing with. "And what is this 'else'?"

"I'll fire some bullets." The man patted his gun.

That much was clear. "At me or her?"

The man grinned now, revealing rotting teeth. "Why not all three of us?"

That did it. Miakil snapped his fingers and watched as vines devoured the man.

The next day, there were *Missing person* posters with the man's — Arthur Wellington — face scattered all around the town.

A week later, he indicated the location of the bones and the gun to a police officer near *Glimmering Kalimba*, knowing that the authorities could not catch him.

~~

One morning, his breakfast was served with a question, "Did you kill Arthur?"

He looked at the blue-haired woman — Izora — in the eye and smiled. "It depends on why you ask."

Izora blushed. "The grapevine said that you did."

"I could have very well stumbled upon the remains while training."

"You're deflecting."

Miakil narrowed his eyes. "Watch your tone, miss."

Izora's eyes widened. "Right. Sorry. Please enjoy your breakfast."

Miakil downed his plain black tea and took his sandwich with himself when he left. He could hear Lizzy shout at someone as he walked out the door.

The next day, he acted like nothing had happened. Izora did not work that shift. Lizzy handled his order, tenser than he had seen her be ever since she had gotten used to a (polite) dark artist who could kill most people with ease visiting her café.

~~

"Excuse me?" a familiar female voice interrupted his meditation.

"State your business," he told without even opening his eyes.

"I just wanted to say thank you."

"For what?"

"For whatever you did about Arthur."

"Was his death deserved?"

"You could say that..." A pause. "Whoever killed him saved me from having to risk my life getting away from his jealousy. He had enough guns to shoot up a couple of malls."

Miakil opened his eyes. Izora stood in front of him. "Please sit with me."

Izora startled. "I-I'm sorry?"

Miakil gestured at the grass next to him. "Please sit with me."

Gulping, Izora did as he requested, making sure that she did not even brush the long leather jacket she had marveled for weeks.

"He came to threaten me one day and implied that he would also bring you harm."

"Of course he did... He started many fights during his life over nothing. I lost my earlier job because of him and had to move."

"Then it seems that the world is better off without him."

"You could say that again." A pause. "If you don't mind me asking..."

"Go ahead."

"What is a dark artist like you doing out here?"

Miakil made sure that his voice was neutral when he replied, "I'm afraid that is none of your business."

"Okay..."

~~

A few days after Izora's disappearance, an obnoxious detective came up to him when he was having his breakfast. He could see Lizzy's eyes widen in fear — she, if anyone, knew that he could decimate the whole café and everyone in it.

However, no matter how irritating deflecting questions was, that would not do. Lizzy's job was a thankless one and he would not make things worse for her, especially not with such an overuse of his powers. That would simply be senseless.

~~

Izora had no idea what to expect when Miakil told her to come along. The dark artist's headquarters were labyrinthine and filled with strange items. The dark artist stopped at one door. "Here are the stables."

"The stables?" Izora repeated.

He opened the door and gestured her to follow.

Izora would never forget what she saw next. Miakil walked up to one of the creatures and patted its sharp beak, his eyes tender.

"Why do you have a griffin?" Izora asked.

"Griffins." Miakil gestured at the pasture around them. "And pegasi."

For a moment, Izora marveled the winged creatures. Then, she found her tongue again. "But why?"

"They're Jaden's project." Miakil looked at the scenery. "And I very much like what he has done."

As she took in the look on the dark artist's face and eyes, Izora's heart pounded faster.

Would the man give her the same look someday too?

~~

A griffin brought the detective to Jaden. Izora gasped as she saw the injuries the man had gotten along the way. Miakil knelt next to him, viewing how badly the fall and fighting against the griffin had actually done, then flicked his wrist. Vines started to wrap around him. Miakil ignored Izora's protests and watched as his magic healed the detective.

Once the vines were done, he turned to Jaden. "Take him back to the town. He can try again with more caution."

~~

"Listen, I've been here for a month now. I think I have the right to know."

"Know what?"

"Why are you here? You could relocate anywhere, disappear from the police forces."

"I like *Glittering Kalimba's* selection."

Izora huffed. "There are better cafés out there. Surely that's not the only reason. What even are you doing with your life? I know Jaden breeds creatures for you and Scarlet follows you blindly, but what do you do aside from training?"

Miakil kept his nonchalant smile on his face. "You would laugh if I told you."

Izora frowned, frustrated with the charming man she had spent a month with. "Is that so?" Knowing Miakil was above injuring her for hurting his ego, she dared, "Try me."

Miakil looked out of the window. After a moment of silence, Izora muttered "Fine, keep your secrets" and turned to leave the dark artist's chamber.

Halfway to the door, Miakil spoke up, "Those creatures went extinct in wild when I was a child. We've spent decades to learn enough to restore and protect them."

Izora looked at the dark artist and the black-gray-white-purple flag on the wall. There was a gentle smile on his face. "I want to see them soar by my family's farm again someday just like back in the good old days."

That was the moment Izora saw that his heart did not have space for her.

~~

Before, when she tried to leave the headquarters just to see some other scenery, Scarlet stopped her from leaving in the name of security.

When she tried to leave the headquarters to find her life again, Scarlet opted not to stop her when she swore she would not tell anyone what she had seen.

A week later, a hiker found her body two hundred kilometers away.

The next day, as the headlines were coming in, Miakil ate his breakfast at *Glittering Kalimba* like nothing had ever happened.

The detective who had spent weeks trying to locate his headquarters — and failed every time — was none the wiser of what had truly transpired.

# Dishes

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Challenge: Take a daily task or a niche job and give it a twist, the story must either be in first person point of view or include one strange item and it must be longer than 500 words.

This story was made for FFM's week 4's sidequest, which meant that I gave this story far more planning than I'd usually have.

"Hello and welcome back to W3, AKA Weird Wordly Wonders! I'm Ruby and today I'll tell you about some weird jewelry that sounds fake but is actually real!"

Lily touched their amulet, just to make sure that it was still fastened on their shirt. Of course it was, they told themselves, otherwise they would be on the floor. Still, it was like an instinct, akin to making sure that your phone was still in your pocket. They shook their head, readjusted their headphones' strap — it would not do to drop them in the dish water — and resumed scrubbing a particularly dirty plate.

"While rings like these are usually family heirloom, other strange jewelry is more often untied to any family or place."

Lily snorted. Neither was correct about theirs. The neighbors upstairs were fighting again, so they stomped a few times. The fighting subsided, if only for a while. They would be at it again soon.

"For example, the Forlorn Pendant, much like the Ring of Solitary Sandpiper, works only in solitude, as it draws its energy from the feeling of loneliness, although in contrast to the aforementioned ring, the Forlorn Pendant is more often used to refurbish abandoned houses — at least when in the hands of people who are into that sort of thing. During its existence, it



has also been used for mind control to make friends — an action which has, as you could guess, backfire once the user no longer felt lonely."

So far, the podcast episode had been disappointing. Nevertheless, Lily's phone lay on a countertop beyond their reach — had they had a spider-themed pendant, they might have been able to reach it with some Spiderman-esque action — so they kept listening. Once they would be done with this batch of dishes, they could go back down for a break and change the podcast if they still felt like it. Perhaps in the meantime Ruby would actually tell about either their amulet or something spider-themed and where one could acquire one.

"Amulets are among the most common of jewelry of strange powers, partly because they are easy to carry around and, when worn properly, don't get in the way the same way rings or bracelets do. As such, they are also easier to hide and can, depending on the amulet's powers, still be used when hidden."

That was actually correct about Lily's amulet. After their class had read *Lord of the Flies*, they had had to hide the pendant (and not use their powers at school) because children were idiots.

The spider theme would've been more useful there, as well, Lily mused as they glared at a permanently tea-stained mug. Their own only allowed them to see if bullies were nearby, but in a small, enclosed space it did not help much. There were only so many places to hide in at school, and most of them were toilets, half of them out of their reach.

"The Amulet of Fly, however, is an oddball among them, as it grants the wielder the ability to summon and command flies *and* have their abilities, such as walking on all solid surfaces. This amulet has been passed down in a family for generations. Our writer, Emmy, actually managed to contact the current wielder, but unfortunately the only reply was a wish to be left alone."

Lily smirked. *Serves you right.*

The batch of dishes was done before the podcast episode, so Lily, after stomping a few times to make sure their neighbors knew that they could still hear them, walked to the wall and down it to the floor to shut the playback off. They would finish the episode when they would feel like tackling the next set of dishes — an unsteady pile of kettles — and hope that the next one would be more interesting.

# The Magical Girl

Collected in [\*Searthern Dangers\*](#)

Standard prompt: *magic doodles* by [TheSkaBoss](#).

David Bowie Day's Nasty Ass Challenge: Include five distinct images from David Bowie's lyrics, include the names of at least two of the bands David Bowie was featured in during his life, your character must be iconic in some way and the story must end in a different genre than it began. Optionally, the wordcount must be the length of any song from Bowie's last album, *Blackstar* (i.e. of a song's length is 3:24, the story's wordcount must be 324).

The images I picked were, in the order of appearance: *the soldier with a broken arm (Five Years)*, *people stared at the makeup on his face* and *the boy in bright blue jeans* (both from *Lady Stardust*), *thunder clouds will vanish (When I live my dream)* and *monkeys made of gingerbread (Come and buy me toys)*.

Sasha stared into the horizon colored by twilight from her balcony, swallowed in her thoughts. No matter how hard she had tried for so long, she could not even pretend to be what she wanted to be even for a while: one of the magicless.

In times countless generations ago, humanity had divided into two tribes: the magicless and the magicals. Upon gaining control of their magic abilities the magicals had started to create beings of fairy tales, and as population had grown, the magic had gotten out of the control of few.

Now, magic was everywhere. Each tin machine on the streets gave out one-use spells for the magicless and the magicals who could not use their magic like the soldier with a broken arm whom Sasha saw take a spell of his choice from the tin machine across the street. From her vantage point, she also saw that people stared at the makeup on his face, as if it was something

unusual. To Sasha, it was not. Her brother put on such similar makeup, if not even heavier makeup than the soldier.

Perhaps it was just a matter of one's point of view. To her, the boy in bright blue jeans and heavy makeup was a brother whom she would never trade for anyone else, but to someone else he was merely a weird stranger in makeup.

When she looked south, Sasha saw that there was some ruckus coming towards her neighborhood. Judging from the fireworks, it could be no one else than The Riot Squad, a group of magicless bitter about how well-off the magical were while the magicless, naturally in today's world, were poorer and more often unemployed due to their magiclessness.

It was probably for the best to move inside before The Riot Squad would arrive; staying in their line of sight would only provoke them to throw something at her and her home.

For long, Sasha had wanted to step into the shoes of the magicless, not only to avoid the pressure coming at her from everyone because she was the daughter of a magical politician, but also to see just how bad life was for them. She was to follow her father into politics when she would be older, so she knew that she had the chance to make things better for the magicless. She just had to find out what was wrong.

Perhaps then The Riot Squad would stop harassing people who had nothing to do with their issues. Perhaps then the city's social thunder clouds will vanish.

At least that was what Sasha hoped. She was not happy with how the world was now, as divided as it had become generation after generation as the magic had become mainstream. While the magicless had it worse than the magicals, the hybrids had it the worst. They were disdained especially if they turned out to be magicless.

She had seen that happen to her brother...

The Riot Squad marched past her home, shouting jeers and tossing one-use spells at all houses to smear them with graffiti and other, nastier things. When Sasha crept to look from behind the curtain, it seemed that each riot was getting increasingly creative; at the door of a magical with fire expertise, they left monkeys made of gingerbread, the burnt variant.

Whoever had gotten that idea should try to direct their creativity to something productive, art perhaps, and thus improve their life and possibly even get the message across better than through vandalism, Sasha thought. Although, looking at the day's graffiti, magic doodles, one had to admit that even vandalism could be art, as strange as it was to a girl raised in a pristine world thoroughly cleaned by magic.

# A Punishment Deserved

Collected in [\*The Journey's End\*](#)

[Prose-ject 2020](#) day 9. Prompt: *a punishment deserved.*

The vandals were scrubbing the graffiti they had magicked on the walls — with only soap and water, of course, no magic. They had made the graffiti be hard to remove with the means of the common folk and now they could reap what they had sown. That ought to instill some empathy into this gang of troublemakers. If not... at least they had to waste their time doing this, so perhaps they would do something that was easier to clean or fix to avoid doing this again.

It was always good to hope that a punishment deserved would actually teach troublemakers both young and old not to do that again.

Sure, with the number of old troublemakers around, some of that hope was in vain, but perhaps these kids would learn better. Perhaps they would be better than their elders.

The very best thing would be if these graffiti gangsters turned their artistic energy into a more productive medium. I mean, I don't like the graffiti any more than the people who complained about it, but you can't deny that these kids have talent both in visual art and magic. They could use it and their time so much better than this.

I guess I just can't understand the allure of doing stuff like this. I wish I could, though; it could help me get through to these troublemakers' skulls and find a common area where we work together instead of fighting against each other like we're currently doing.

I should probably try talking with these kids about it first. Maybe they could shed some light on it.

Here's to hoping that they'd actually be willing to talk with me.

## Reading Choices

Collected in [Untitled Hearts](#)

"I can't believe you're still reading that book."

I looked up from my worn (bloodstained) copy of *Terrific Demons and How to Summon Them*. "It's a good read. I recommend."

"Thanks but no thanks. I don't want to have anything to do with any kind of demons."

"I figured as much. To each their own."



# Candy Summoning

Collected in [\*Searthern Dangers\*](#)

Standard prompt: *Summoning a demon with [Mynthons](#).* by [WindySilver](#).

I sighed and searched my pockets. There had to be something I could use to summon the great candy demon.

Bingo! A carton of Mynthons! I threw it to the summon sign and hoped for the best.

With a sudden puff of marshmallow dust, the great candy demon was in front of me. He didn't look happy.

**"WHO DARES TO SUMMON ME WITH SALMIAC-LIQUORICE MYNTHONS?!"** he roared straight at my face.

It turned out I had picked the wrong flavor.

# Fish, Ribbons and Sherbet Ice Cream

Collected in [\*Searthern Dangers\*](#)

Optional theme: *a deal with the devil.*

Standard prompt: *You know your sister died when you were a child. You don't know your mother killed her to grant you a second chance.* by [bookcrusher](#).

Flashback prompt: *Selling your soul for a bucket of sherbet ice cream seems a little extreme.* by [SkullHunter900](#) (Year 2013).

"You know, selling your soul for a bucket of sherbet ice cream seems a little extreme," Louisa said.

"Not just a simple bucket of it. A *huge* bucket that reaches to the heaven!"

Nick said, raising his hands to the sky in *praise the sun* pose to fake excitement.

"This deal with this devil you've met... it seems fishy," Louisa noted.

"Well, it is a fish devil from the Arctic Ocean near the north pole. That's how I can get the *ice* cream."

"Whatever. But if things go wrong, don't tell me I didn't warn you."

*Nick had only seen the bloody corpse. His parents explained that a burglar had stabbed his sister to death and that his mother had found her first soon after that when it had already been too late.*

Not that he would ever admit it even to his BFF, but it was not the sherbet ice cream that had prompted him to summon the devil. No, he, unlike everyone else who had ever been in his family, hated sherbet and each time he thought about such ice cream in detail, it became difficult to fake even interest, let alone excitement. It was his dead sister, Sasha, he was looking for from the deal with the devil. There had to be a way to connect with her spirit, and if someone could do it, it was a devil.

Yes, even a fish devil living in the coldest of seas.

And his sister had liked fish as much as sherbet, ice cream and ribbons, so it would only make sense that a devil associated with fish would be able to help him.

*"Son, I need to talk to you about something," Nick's father said. "Come over here. Now that you are an adult, it's time to talk man-to-man."*

*Nick believed this was about the truths of life school had taught him, but he followed his father. It would not hurt to hear the manly wisdom, no matter whether he had already heard it or not.*

*"You do remember that your sister was killed back when you were young, right?" his father asked.*

*"Of course I do! You and mother said that it was a burglar's doing," Nick noted.*

*"There is something you were never told about it. Your mother doesn't want you to know but... I think you should know the truth."*

*"What is it, father?"*

*"Your sister wasn't killed by a burglar."*

*"What?!" Nick exclaimed. "Who was it then?"*

*"Your mother."*

*Nick's mouth fell agape. "No, it can't be..."*

*"Your mother and I both knew of the incoming rule of having only one child made by the same parent. It was meant to cut population growth, but it also meant that any extra children had to be killed while the oldest was to be left alive. Your mother did not want you to die so... she chose Sasha."*

*"No... you're lying. It cannot be..." Nick could not believe it.*

*Or was it that he did not want to?*

If the fish devil helped him, Nick would find out the truth.

It was best to get on with the summoning and hope for the best.

*Sasha was trying to tie her hair with her pink ribbon, her favorite. It was not going well, so her mother helped while Nick followed her hands' movement intently, swearing that one day he would help his sister with her hair.*

Some years later, fate decided that that day would never come. Or was it their mother who had decided it? Nick was not sure anymore.

*The funeral was small yet painful. Nick only remembered the ribbon on Sasha's hair, the ribbon that he snatched as a memento when no one was looking. No one even noticed it was no longer there.*

When the devil appeared, Nick was ready with the old ribbon in his hand. There was a strong, sickening smell of fish in the air, but he was determined to take it for his sister's sake.

**"Who calls upon my power?"** The fish devil asked with a deep voice.

Nick knelt and raised Sasha's ribbon high in to the air so that the devil could see it. "O' mighty fish devil, I call upon thy power. Help me seek out the spirit of this girl whose ribbon I hold."

The mighty posture of the devil collapsed and it looked at Nick, baffled.

"So... you are not here to seek fish?"

"No," Nick told.

"Then I cannot help you," the fish devil said, starting to dissipate. "Go find a spirit devil or something to help on your quest."

"But... wait!" Nick exclaimed and ran towards the devil, but the summoned being was already gone.

He looked at the ribbon, then sighed.

"That fisherman was right. This could've never worked. I guess it's time to research these spirit devils and figure out how to summon them... I hope it's not too difficult... I need to find out the truth."

*Nick was not exactly sure when, but he did notice that something was strange about his mother after the funeral. It was as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.*

*And each time he mentioned her seeing someone like Sasha, seeing her in a dream or thinking that he had seen her ghost, each time his mother had paled...*

The more he thought about it, the more it looked like his father had told the truth.

The only thing he needed now was confirmation.

Confirmation from the only person who knew the truth.

Sasha.

# The Next Step

Collected in [\*Ananas sanana\*](#)

*"Go find a spirit devil or something to help on your quest."*

Nick sighed as he scratched his head. Just as he had feared, summoning a spirit devil was far, far more difficult, not to mention far more dangerous. Many prospecting summoners lost their own spirits rather than got what they wanted in the process, if they got the devil to appear in the first place.

It was starting to look like he might have to enroll at a Summoner school. That was going to be difficult to explain; it was fine enough to tell Louisa that the fish devil he had summoned did not deal in ice cream, even though she laughed at him for his failed task. Telling his parents, on the other hand, about the changes to his planned education was bound to raise red flags. And that was all before he could even apply for a school and see if he had any hope of getting in.

Maybe he could find a Summoner who could help him?

...Where would he find a Summoner anyway, let alone one who would be willing to be discreet and within his budget?

He had higher chances of succeeding at summoning a spirit devil by himself with just this one outdated library book than finding even a single Summoner in these parts. It was for the best to start looking for more recent books on spirit devils.

# Artifact Quest

Collected in [Searthern Dangers](#)

Standard prompt: *"Aren't ghosts suppose[sic] to be, I don't know, ghostly?"*  
by [PhantomMarquis](#).

Nasty Ass Challenge: The opening sentence must be the last sentence from a flash fiction story written by someone else during the month, include at least one dynamic character, incorporate 10 cocktail names from [this list](#) (only one per sentence) and prominently feature two things that do not ordinarily go together. Optionally, the final wordcount should be either 377, 610, or 987 words.

My line is "Beware." from [Oreramar](#)'s story [The Codex](#).

*Beware.* That was what the sign said. The only problem I had with it was that it was a corroded wooden sign. It was cold in here, so a sign made of ice would've survived here better. Well, at least the snakebite I had was no longer bothering me. Too bad it can't be said about my companion, Batida. May she rest in peace.

No time for pondering anymore. My fair lady is waiting for me to retrieve the artifact of gods for her from this forsaken place. Should I succeed, I could get back to my greyhound Lopez. Heck, I missed her so bad; I've been on this quest for months. I hope Wolfram is taking good care of her *and* the house while I'm gone.

The sign may tell me to beware, but I'm not going to do so. I can deal with anything this place possibly could try to kill me with. Avalanches, extreme cold, yetis? Not a problem! I have prepared thoroughly.

Therefore, I marched on, confident that my magic could protect me all the time.

As I kept on going towards the place where ice met fire, it turned out that while I had prepared myself to ice-related hazards, not even in my craziest dreams I could have imagined that I'd have to face fire monsters wearing black velvet jackets *here*!

It took a while – and a few burns – to get my anti-fire spells working; water spells kept freezing mid-air and thus did nothing to the monsters. After I was done, I smelled like carrot cake, one of the most sickening smells in the world.

I do wonder... What would my godmother think if she knew where I was? She'd probably want me to get her a snowball; I could make a preservation spell that would let me carry it long enough to give it to her and she knew it as well as I did.

Once I finally got to the border, I was met with an identical wooden *beware* sign, only more scorched than decayed.

I looked at the flames and partly petrified lava ahead. If there were fire monsters before, ice ones were probably here. And if ice monsters were in the fire area, they were most likely immune to fire. I had to prepare other anti-ice spells before marching on.

Once I was ready, I walked forward again, now more cautious than before.

There were no monsters there, only lava and fire. No matter how many protective spells I used, I still got more burns. Only once I had gotten out, they started to work properly. How very strange...

The chest of the artifact was now ahead. Guarding it was a knight in silver armor.

"Stop!" the knight commanded. "I am the arch ghost of this tomb. Do not trespass!"

"Umm... Aren't ghosts supposed to be, I don't know, ghostly?" I asked.

"I *am* a ghost," the knight told, sounding offended by my question.



"Okay, fine," I told, trying to think of how I could combat this enemy. "So, what happens if I trespass?"

"I don't know," the knight admitted. "No one has ever gotten this far, and the god of ghosts never thought anyone would get here."

"So... you don't know what to do?" I asked.

"No."

"Okay. I have a good idea: Do nothing. You haven't been told what to do, so it's best to stay idle."

"Fine."

I went to the chest past the ghost, took the artifact and teleported to my last waypoint before the ghost could stop me.

Time to mark this quest as a success.

Wait for a while, Lopez, I'm coming back for you!

## Different Solutions

Collected in [\*Searthern Dangers\*](#)

Standard prompts: *Tacos were the answer to everything.* & “*Fire is not the solution to everything.*” both by [SarcasticCupcake5](#).

"Duuuude!" I huffed, looking at the burning city hall. "How many times do we have to talk about this? Fire is *not* the solution to everything!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know that chant. 'Fire is not the solution to everything, but tacos are.' Listen, I'm tired of it. I'm a dragon, not a Mexican!" Klinrau grumbled.

"That's racist," I said.

"No, it's not. Tacos are Mexican food," Klinrau objected.

"But not all Mexican people eat tacos," I reminded.

"Who cares?" Klinrau asked. "Well, I do not."

Then he took off to the yellow sky and proceeded to burn the local church.

# Heist

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Challenge: Challenge other FFMers and get challenges in the form of five individual words that are not in sentence form to be used in the story.

Optionally, each story must start with the same letter.

The challenges used for this one are: *Roar, Rug, Refresh, Research, Rebel* from [eV13il](#), *yacht, yonder, yellow, yearn, yet* from [bookcrusher](#), *enthusiastic, effervescent, euclidean, eucalyptus, ewwwwww* from [DamonWakes](#), *whisper, wisdom, woozy, willow, wasp* from [MMBaird](#) and *panoply, paranoia, pyramid, pelvis, pug* from [SubjugatedSandwich](#).

In addition to them, I got two additional challenges after writing the 1<sup>st</sup> draft: *Hesitate, muggy, job, suggest, bean* from [GabbieMeza](#) and *Fire, Fountain, Face, Farmer, Fool* from [SpearHawk](#).

"Ewwwww," Masquerade whispered. "It's just as fugly as I remembered."

"C'mon, it's just a yacht with a poor choice of coloring," you sighed.

"He does have a point, Willow," Glasses piped up, "it *is* fugly. It's a yellow yacht named *Woozy Wasp*."

"Not just any yellow, either. It's piss-yellow," Masquerade added.

Toon shook her head. "Stop whining, Masquerade. We need to get this gig done soon or else I'm going to miss my flight to Egypt. I don't want to miss my chance to see the pyramids."

You nodded. "Toon is right. Let's go in and get this over with."

When you led the way in, you could hear Masquerade murmur something about a cracked pelvis and pugs.

Perhaps it had been a bad idea to invite him along after what happened onboard the *Woozy Wasp* last time.

Just like last time, you were assaulted by the intense smell of eucalyptus the moment you opened the first door.

Behind you, Glasses gagged. "It's just as smelly as I remembered."

"I wish I'd cracked my nose rather than my pelvis last time so I wouldn't have to smell this," Masquerade grumbled.

I resisted the urge to sigh. You were not enthusiastic about this gig either, but you had thought that the (admittedly refreshing) break that you had had to take following Masquerade's injury would have left the others craving for some action. Guess not.

You probably had to research how to motivate your team when this was over. Now, however, you had better be paranoid about your surroundings and not think about what you should do once you were off this godawful, smelly yacht again.

The rugs on the floor silenced your steps as you proceeded in the tense silence that was only broken by the roar of the wind outside. As you looked for small items to nab along the way to your target, you did what you could to ignore the dizzying euclidean patterning on the wallpapers and disregard the paintings with Words of Wisdom™ that used fancy words like "yonder" and "yearn". A painting that combined both and seemed to depict a victorious rebel of the last civil war however was so sickening that you had half a mind to vandalize it just to spite whoever created it. Yet you had other priorities — and Toon would probably break the silence to scold you for ruining someone's hard work, attracting unnecessary attention to you all again — so you turned away from the offensive painting and led the way onwards, snagging a small bottle of some (hopefully alcoholic) effervescent drink as you passed by the bar. You so needed a drink after this gig.

Unlike last time, when there had been more guards, you made it to your target without having to resort to fighting. The panoply of gemstones was in front of you at last and you left disabling the security around them to Toon. Once that would be done, all you would need to do would be getting out alive and all would be well.

A familiar click above your head had you pause in your thoughts. You looked up only to see the barrel of a gun and a woman in a familiar uniform. "Aw crud," Toon murmured. "I'm missing that flight, am I not?" Widow chuckled, her gun only barely shifting at the movement. "I'm afraid so, Toon. Or should I say Bella Müller?" "Awwwww *crud*."

# Bears VS Zombies

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Challenge: Write a 369er (a story consisting of 3 interconnected but separate 69-word sections) and break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall twice in two separate sections.

Optionally, break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall in two different ways.

Standard prompt: *"Now I get where you're coming from and I respect your opinion, but I just don't think Necromancy is the answer in this situation."*

by [b4k4-san](#).

"And that's why we should do this my way."

"Now I get where you're coming from and I respect your opinion, but I just don't think Necromancy is the answer in this situation."

Note from the writer: Necromancy is, in fact, the answer to this situation.

"Well, because of the reasons I just outlined, I firmly believe that you are wrong in this."

"...Fine. Let's do it your way."

~~~

In front of my two very own eyes, the undead were rising. I turned to Zach.

"When you said you were going to raise the dead to combat the bears, I didn't think you'd raise a whole damn cemetery."

Zach looked at me like I had just become an undead myself. "Where else was I supposed to get enough bodies? The morgue is too small."

...I had no words.

~~~

I was expecting a very, *very* ugly and very, *very* smelly result from the undead clashing with the bears. Still, I had to witness Zach's insane plan in action. Well, reader, color me very surprised: while the fight itself was gory

and ugly, in the end Zach stitched the bodies — both human and ursine — back together and moved them where they belonged.  
...All's well that ends well, I guess?

## Bears VS Zombies 2 – Time Loop

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Challenge: The story must be exactly 999 words, the starting and ending lines must be the same as a starting or ending line from a previous story you've written this month (they do not have to be from the same story) and the story must contain a puzzle, cipher or code but **not** a riddle (although you can write a riddle it's in code). Optionally, the puzzle must be solvable by the reader.

My starting and ending lines are both from the day 7 story, [\*Bears VS Zombies\*](#). My puzzle is solvable with the Ceasar Cipher.

"And that's why we should do this my way."

A feeling of deja vu made its home in my gut. "Why does it feel like we've done this before?"

Zach shrugged. "You argue against me and my methods all the time. We've had arguments like this plenty of times."

"No, no, that's not what I meant." I shook my head. "It just... feels like we've done *this* specific conversation before."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"*I mean*, I feel like we've discussed how to combat the bears sieging the city before, including you being hellbent on necromancy being the answer."

Zach laughed. "Don't be absurd. There's no way any of this has happened before."

"That's why I'm confused."

"Well, we can think about your potentially awakening psychic powers after we've dealt with the bears. Now c'mon, let's go raise some undead." Zach started to walk away.

"Wait, I didn't agree to that!"

Zach laughed again. "Do you need to?"

Cursing, I ran after him. I was going to have his head if this didn't work out.



I only barely noticed that the sign to the cemetery said *Uif cfbs't dvstf jt po zpv*. I snapped a quick picture of it and moved on. I could ponder it after dealing with the bears.

~~~

"And that's why we should do this my way."

Immense deja vu slapped me in the face. "I think we've done this before..."

Zach shrugged. "You argue against me and my methods all the time. We've had arguments like this plenty of times."

"No, no, that's not what I meant." I shook my head, frowning. "I think we've done *this* specific conversation before."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I think we've discussed how to combat the bears sieging the city before, including you being hellbent on necromancy being the answer."

Zach laughed. "Don't be absurd. There's no way any of this has happened before."

"I know. Still, something's up."

"Well, we can think about your potentially awakening psychic powers after we've dealt with the bears. Now c'mon, let's go raise some undead." Zach started to walk away.

"Hey, wait!"

Zach laughed again.

Cursing, I ran after him. Something was up and I needed to figure it out.

The sign to the cemetery said *Hp xftu boe bupof*. That was not what it said before. I snapped a quick picture of it and moved on. I couldn't leave Zach alone to his insane plans.

~~~

"And that's why we should do this my way."

Deja vu sucker-punched me. This time, I was sure that something was up.

"We've done this before, Zach."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I just have this feeling that something's wrong." I took out my phone and found two photos from the cemetery I had not taken. "The sign in the cemetery is changing. It's some kind of a code."

Zach looked over my shoulder. "Huh. What do you think it says?"

"I'll copy the lines into a cipher decoder. Hopefully it'll be able to tell us."

*The bear's curse is on you*

*Go west and atone*

"What the fuck?"

"Uh... Maybe we should check the sign and see if it's different?"

"Yeah... let's."

This time, the sign said *Mftu zpv sfnbjo jo uijt mppq gpsfwfsnpsf.*

*Lest you remain in this loop forevermore*

"What the actual fuck, man?"

"I guess the bear gods didn't like your plan and now we're cursed with being stuck in a time loop or something."

"...What do we do now? There's gotta be a way to escape, right?!"

"Well, the signs tell us to go west and atone, so I guess we should try that."

"What does atoning even *mean*?!"

"According to the dictionary, it means..."

"No, I mean, as in, *what* exactly are we supposed to *do*, like, *in practice*?"

"I believe we'll find out if we go west."

"...Yay."

~~~

"And that's why we should do this my way."

I didn't let the deja vu bother me anymore. "No. Your way got us stuck in a time loop." I grabbed Zach's wrist and started pulling him towards the cemetery. "I'll fill you in along the way but now we need to try to get out."

"Wait, what?"

The cemetery's sign was normal now, so I turned us to west and kept on marching despite Zach whining about my grip. He got us into this mess so he can take some pain in exchange. If I squeezed a pressure point on his wrist every now and then... well, no one could prove I did it on purpose.

We ended up among the bears, although to our surprise they did not attack us. Instead, they let us pass.

"I reaaaaally don't like this, man..."

"Shut up. Neither do I."

"Why are you so hostile all of sudden?"

"Because this is the umpteenth time loop and I'm tired."

We ended up coming across a dead bear, surrounded by other bears. It was not any simple bear, however; it was massive and wore something that looked like a crown. The bears looked at us — no, at Zach — expectantly.

"Uh... what do you think all this is?"

"...Since they're looking at you of all people, I'm assuming that they want you to do something about it."

"Like what? I'm not a vet."

"You're a necromancer. Maybe they want you to raise it from the dead?"

Zach laughed nervously. "So it can lead the siege?"

I shrugged. "The bears aren't getting angry at my suggestion so I guess it could be our atonement and way to escape the loop."

"And die in the process."

"Still a better alternative."

"...Fine. But you owe me a lot."

"Just do it."

Zach worked his magic and the bear king came back to life. With a grunt, it started to walk away from the city perimeters and the rest of the bears walked away with it. The siege was finally actually over.

Huh. To think that that actually worked.

...All's well that ends well, I guess?

Enemies Ahead

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

Challenge: The main character(s) must be fighting for or against something, although physical battling is not required. The last line of the story must be a shocker either to the reader or another character. Optionally, use an unreliable narrator.

Morgan unsheathed his sword. "We can beat them if we ambush them."
I frowned, keeping my sword sheathed. "There's too many of them."
Morgan flashed me his trademark grin, then looked down on the enemy forces. "Not for the two of us."
While he was distracted, I took my weapon, pointed it at his head and shot.

Untitled Hearts

Collected in [*Untitled Hearts*](#)

Challenge: The story must begin in media res and contain exactly two characters.

"Why didn't you ever listen?!" A punch. "I kept telling you I'm a bad person!" Another punch. Ragged breathing. "*Why won't you defend yourself?!*" Yet another punch came but the trembling fist stopped before it connected with your face. "Why... why do you insist...?"

Now that your friend was no longer actively fighting you, you gripped his wrist in the same light way you always did — easy to break free from but strong enough to remind him that you were still there for him. Your friend looked up, revealing the tears streaming down his face.

"Why?" he asked. "I'm not worth the effort... Why do you keep insisting on me? Even after I tried to kill you..."

"Because there's still hope for you," you told. "It's not too late. We can fix this together."

Your friend shook his head. "But why me? Why me of all people?"

"Because you're my friend and I want you to remain my friend."

Your friend laughed. "If I ever were your friend, I would have never tried to deceive, let alone kill you. Don't be a fool. I was never your friend."

Your friend tried to withdraw from your grip, but this once you tightened your hold so that he could not break free. Just as you expected, his only reaction was a dumbfounded look on his face. Now was your chance to make your move. You moved his fist away from your face and closed the distance between the two of you.

"Wha-wha?" he stammered as you wrapped your free arm around him.

"What?"

"I want to be your friend and I know that we can make it work."

"You don't get it, do you? I'm a murderer! I tried to *murder you*! I can't be your friend!"

"There's still time for you to stop and turn back. I'll be right by your side if you come back to me."

"You're a true fool... How could you ever trust me again? I betrayed you. *I betrayed you!*"

"I'm not saying any of it would be easy. I'm saying that it's possible and that I'm willing to do the work to make it a reality."

Your friend started to struggle against your hold. "Well, if I don't want to do the work, it's never going to become a reality."

You tightened your hold in response. "Stop."

"Let me go."

"No. I let you go once before. I'm not going to make that mistake again. Not now. Not ever again." *I refuse to let you be the one I couldn't save.* "Long before all this, you wondered what would've become of us if we'd met earlier. Whatever we can make of ourselves after this will not be an exact replica, but it'll be a good substitute."

Your friend stopped struggling and fell silent. You had a feeling you were finally getting through to him.

"When we first became acquainted, you said that you were lonely and wanted to have friends. I was the same way. That's why we formed our friendship in the first place."

"Then why did you turn out so much better than me?" your friend whispered.

"I don't have an answer for that, other than that I was too little, too late. I'm sorry I wasn't good enough for you. Still, if you let me help you, I'll make up for it. Please, let's stop fighting each other. You know we're better as allies than enemies, you said it yourself after you joined my team. That's why you tried to recruit me to your side, wasn't it?"

"...I... I never did want to kill you. That's why I tried to recruit you... Just so that I wouldn't have to kill you. I... I did want you on my side... as my equal... as my... friend..."

"See? There is still hope for you. All you need to do is ask for my help and I will be right by your side, just like before." You softened your hold. "Please, let me help you."

For a while, neither of you said anything. Then, quiet sobs broke the silence and your friend wrapped his free arm around you. "I don't want to continue this. I don't want to kill you. *Please*, help me get out of this mess I've put myself in."

You let go of your friend's wrist and wrapped your other arm around him. "You have my aid, my friend. We'll get you out of this and finish what we started."

Your friend wrapped his freed arm around you tight like a clamp. "Thank you... Thank you... I don't know how I earned this, but thank you..."

"You earned it by being a friend to me."

"You're still a fool..."

"And I will always be if it means I'll get to help you get through this."

"...I guess I can live with having a fool for a friend... Just because it's you... Just because you'll be my fool..."

You smiled. "Words cannot express how much hearing that means to me."

Expressing it would have to wait in any case. "How about we get going and start figuring out how to proceed?"

"How are you going to explain my presence?"

"The same way as last time — you asked for my help. We'll all figure out how to deal with how things have turned out when it's time. The mission is our priority now, after all."

"Fine... but if someone tries to punch or kick me, let them."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. The major consequences will come when all is said and done, but... some comeuppance before that would not hurt."

"Very well. If that's what you want."

"That is exactly what I want." Your friend let go of you. "Let's go, shall we?"

You let go as well, although you took the chance to take a light hold of his wrist once again — just like the good old times. "Let's go."

Gamble at The Mall

Collected in [*The Last Dessert*](#)

Challenge: The story must include a large risk or gamble being taken by a character. Bonus points if actual gambling is included in the story. Also, roll two dice. They will determine your genre/world and what is being gambled on.

My dice rolls were 6 (underground society) and 3 (love).

The bony click of dice against wood wakes you up from daze. You have arrived at The Mall. The smell of all sorts of concoctions that would earn you a decade's prison sentence just from looking at them permeates your nose, although you do not look. You have been sat down at the ebony table, just as you had requested before being put under.

"Well?" The Hostess rattles the dice in her hand. "Shall we play? Like agreed, if you win, your heart's chosen will be brought here and made to drink a love potion for you... And if you lose..." She tilts her head, her smirk so predatory that you feel like a tiny mouse in front of a vicious carnivore. "Well, you are quite a healthy specimen, so I'm sure we can harvest a lot of good out of you."

You swallow and hope that the story of The Hostess's dice being made of the kneecaps of men who have been harvested is actually an urban legend.

"Let's play."

The Hostess chuckles, her voice making shivers run all the way from the surface of your skin to the core of your bones. You cannot shake the feeling that you have made a terrible mistake, but it is far too late to back down now.

A Fair Trade

Collected in [*Ananas sanana*](#)

Challenge: Include at least one (1) mention of tentacles the names of five (5) crystals in the story.

The Trader loomed as I knelt. Their crystalline eyes gleamed in numerous colors, the most striking ones in colors of peridot, citrine and azurite, as they observed the package in my hands.

"Do you have what we asked for?"

"I have, my liege." I uncovered the shiny piece of Gaia stone I had brought with me.

"Excellent."

The Trader's tentacles took the Gaia stone and deposited the promised chunk of gorgeous fluorite into my box.

"A fair trade, as agreed, no?"

"Yes. Thank you, my liege." I stood up and walked away, relieved. Now all I needed to do was smith the rings I needed.

The Trader's Irritation

Collected in [*Ananas sanana*](#)

Inspired by the hydra text of the day.

I could hear the Trader growl all the way into the inn — as did many other travelers. The sound of it discerned the first-timers from those who had been here before.

"What kind of gigantic monster is in the mountains?" someone who looked like a paladin asked as the sound of growling came in through the open windows.

"It's the Trader, not a monster," the innkeeper explained. "Their physiology forces them to hibernate at times, which greatly irritates them as they lose out on good deals during the time they're dormant." She turned to look at me. "Beowulf here is one of their trader-merchants. He and his guildmates' most important job is to be on the lookout for those deals when the Trader hibernates."

The probably-paladin turned to me, wide-eyed. "You serve a beast?"

"My liege is no beast," I corrected the man right away. "They are the heads of the Hydra Trading Guild. The fact that they are not human-like does not make them lesser than us."

"If anything, they are more than us, and not just because they have multiple heads," a regular — one of the East Merchants — piped up from the nearby table. I was not entire sure whether or not it was Esmond since his back was facing us. "They deal in such obscure things that they are a godsend to the merchant guilds."

The probably-paladin did not seem convinced but dropped the topic. I would have to notify the rest of the guild about this guy, just in case he tried something stupid.

After making a trade with Esmond — because Esmond it was at the table like I had suspected — I headed out to send a message to the mountains.

Just in case.

Lowering the standards

Collected in [*Ananas sanana*](#)

Challenge: The story's protagonist must be gullible and there must be an antagonist who tries to exploit their gullibility. Flip a coin. If heads, the story's POV is that of the protagonist. If tails, the POC is that of the antagonist. Optionally, give one or both of the aforementioned characters sidekicks.

I got tails and thus the antagonist's POV.

I stared at my nemesis through the one-way mirror, growling as some pathetic hawker managed to cheat him out of a pouch of gold.

"Have you ever considered that you may be aiming too high?" Diginn asked as he sharpened his axe. "You know there's something akin to divine intervention keeping him safe from your schemes. At this point, why not lower your standards and show your superiority by conning him just somehow, in some minor way that won't get filtered by whatever protects him?"

"And lower myself to level of petty con artists?!" I snarled, turning to him. Diginn just shrugged as he kept his eyes on his work. "What works, works. It's gotten to the point where you'd be satisfied with just conning him anyway. So, show that you are superior by any means necessary, even doing something simpler than your usual schtick. Maybe you'll even finally catch a glimpse of whatever is keeping him safe from your magicks."

I paused to think about that. Diginn was, as much as I loathed to admit it in this case, right. At this point, I was desperate to just pull the wool over Leo's eyes just once in some way. "I suppose I'll have to consider it."

Diginn just smirked, probably already certain I would follow his idea.

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"Oakenshield Mail delivers the day's news!" I called out. "Buy today's paper now!"

"Oh, look," Leo said to someone I could not see, "the day's paper." He walked up to me, his stupid eyes full of naive joy. "I'll take one, please." I smiled as I tried to locate the life signature of whoever my nemesis had talked to. "Thank you, kind sir. It costs two gold."

"Ouch, that's expensive," Leo commented as he shelled out the money.

"Only the best journalism in the entire county, sir," I said in a chipper voice as I handed the paper over and took the money. "Thank you for your patronage!"

Leo walked away, already reading the paper as he did and talking to someone. For the life of me, I could not find a life signature in his vicinity even though he certainly was talking to someone. It was almost as if he was talking to himself or an imaginary friend.

As soon as Leo and his mystery sidekick were out of the earshot, Diginn burst into laughter at the terrace next to me. "You seriously conned him for one gold and some change!"

I allowed myself to flash my teeth at him with a fake smile. "You told me I was aiming too high before."

"And you seriously overcorrected!" Diginn howled.

"A victory is a victory," I announced and turned to the street, putting on my chipper look again. "Oakenshield Mail delivers the day's news! Buy today's paper now!"

Diginn just kept howling in laughter and pounding the table so hard his ale sloshed in the stein. Had I been as petty as I was ten years ago, I would have had the stein fall over and spill its contents on my sidekick.

Alas, such behavior had long since stopped being acceptable for someone of my caliber. I would just have to put up with Diginn finding humor in the fact that I had not bested my nemesis with my superior magick but some traditional con techniques of those far beneath me.

As if reading my mind, Diginn called out, "Maybe you should learn more from the common folk! It might actually help!"

Diginn was, as much as I loathed to admit it in this case, right. At this point, I might as well pay some con artist to teach me their tricks of the trade.

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