

What was it about parties that made John want to jump off a cliff? Of course, being immortal, jumping off a cliff was little more than a painful inconvenience for him, but the sentiment was earnest. He felt a thousand miles away, watching a lot of glittery, cheerful people prattling on about the weather, or the new branch of Calliope's Cauldrons that just opened, or Ariadne Cattispree's mismatched outfit. Did they really care about these trifles, or were they just pretending to care, as John was? A part of him wanted to unleash a band of pixies on the hall, or magic off all their fine clothes, just to make the evening interesting.

The minute it had become clear that Hogwarts' harvest dance had more chaperones than was needed, John had slunk away with a muttered excuse. Now he was sitting on a seaside cliff beyond the castle, his legs dangling over the rocky edge. Behind him, the castle pulsed with the raucous din of Circe and the Argonauts. Before him, the moon and the ocean performed their solemn nightly promenade. His left hand stroked the blue grass beneath him. His right hand held a silver flask that never seemed to empty, no matter how much he drank.

It would have been a good night for magic, if he'd had any magic to do. Or someone to do it with. What a waste of a harvest moon. Only wizards would gather on such a night for a mere dance, leaving their magic at the door. Chaos magicians would not have allowed a harvest moon to pass by so uneventfully. For magicians, revelry was not a break from one's magical studies. It was central to one's magical studies. Magicians' power came from flouting such conventions as classrooms, schedules, and codes of conduct.

What a pack of miscreants John—or Crastor, as he'd been known then—and his fellow chaos magicians been. Once, they'd bewitched a local lord so that he'd believe they were noblemen. John and his friends had remained guests in the lord's castle for the better part of a month before the spell wore off. On another occasion, they'd cast an enchantment over an entire town so that the men had to wear dresses and the women had to wear pants, because anything else would itch and burn their skin. There was the time they'd cursed a local sheriff so that he was capable of speaking only profane expletives or sexual suggestions. The best part was that the sheriff thought he was speaking normally.

Wizards at the time had said the chaos magicians were abusing magic. Chaos magicians leveled the same accusation back at the wizards. What was the point of having magic, the magicians cried, if you were just going to use it to build the same sorts of institutions that the muggles build? Magic was a force for creativity, disruption, and change. Wizards were so busy dominating magic into submission that they failed to see its potential as an engine of rebellion.

John had been the greatest of all chaos magicians—their leader, inasmuch as that gaggle of rascals could have been said to have a leader. He'd promised that with his guidance, chaos magicians would change the world.

They hadn't.

And now he was the only one left.

With a familiar twisting in his gut, John recalled the purges. The muggles' witch hunts could usually be thwarted, for it was a poor magician who could not worm his way out of a witch hunt. Still, there had been poor magicians, and there had been hangings and burnings to which John and his fellows had arrived too late. The persecutions by the wizards were worse, though. Many wizards had eschewed the noose, the pitchfork, and the stake in favor of darkly comic forms of execution that mirrored the magicians' own tomfoolery. Of course, the magicians' pranks had always been in good fun. They had never hanged a man by ladies' undergarments, nor stuffed any dead man's genitals into his mouth, nor arranged corpses into a noble court about a grisly throne. John, who had promised that chaos magic would change the world, had merely led his friends to gruesome deaths.

The world had changed, alright. But John hadn't changed it. He'd merely crawled into a hole and watched it change, as the moon hides behind her nest of clouds, peeking out to gaze on humanity from time to time. For him, defeat was not an event but a lifestyle. He'd spent five centuries living in a state of defeat, and even now that he was surrounded by ignorant, trusting, wizards, he had no

particular interest in revenge. Chaos magic was dead and a part of him had died with it. And so as the wizards of Hogwarts danced in memory of long-forgotten harvest moon traditions, John swung his legs carelessly over the precipice, quietly remembering the past for them.

“Oi! Beetlebrain! You got a death wish or something?”

John whipped his head around to see where the voice had come from. A teenager stood behind him. At first, he thought she was dressed in rags. Squinting in the moonlight, he saw that she was merely wearing a dress that looked as though it had been sewn together from frilly pink tablecloths and lace doilies. Here and there, a couple of fabric flowers dotted the odd getup. Contrasting her self-assurance of a moment earlier, her mouth was suddenly agape.

“Professor Hennessy! Oh, sorry... I didn’t recognize you from behind.”

“’s quite alright, Sam,” he said, backing away from the cliff’s edge. The movement made him dizzy. He became dimly aware that he was more drunk than he felt.

“But I’d rather you didn’t make a habit of calling me beetlebrain,” he added, settling into a cross-legged position several feet back from the cliff.

She laughed with such enthusiasm that she snorted a little. John couldn’t help chuckling. The top half of her long blonde hair was tied back, while the rest of it dangled down to her waist. Sam’s hair had always reminded John of certain refined Victorian women who’d kept their hair long like that.

“What’re you doing out here?” she asked.

“Oh, just getting some fresh air,” he said, making an effort at nonchalance.

“Mind if I join you?”

Before John could answer, she’d already sat on the grass beside him, her legs extended in front of her.

“I had a date, but he’s as boring as mud. And anyway, he just wanted to talk to his mates. And all my friends are talking to their dates, and you can tell when they just want to be left alone, y’know?”

“Er, yeah.” Did he want to be left alone? He supposed that that depended on the company in question.

“I’ve never really cared for parties, to be honest,” Sam went on. “A lot of boring sods carrying on about nothing. I’d rather be at home, reading, or relaxing, or making something.” She leaned back on her palms and let out a sigh.

John smiled. “What sorts of things do you like to make?”

“Hmm? Oh, silly stuff. Like this.” She shook her legs so that her dress jostled up and down.

John nodded appreciatively.

“It’s very nice.”

She smirked. “Thanks. I don’t care if it’s nice, though. Making it was dead fun and that’s all I care about.”

“Ah. Spoken like a great artist.”

She smiled.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Professor, but I’m no artist.” Sam had taken two of his art classes, in her first two years at the school. John remembered that her work was earnestly made, but only in that regard was it special.

“I do *crafts*,” she explained, idly threading a lock of hair between her fingers. “I call it crafts so people know the stuff I make’s not supposed to be pretty. And then it’s a nice surprise if it does turn out pretty.”

“Hmm.” John smiled thoughtfully as he watched a dark cloud above drift past the moon, unveiling the bright orb beneath.

“That’s how I’ve always felt about photography,” he mused. “With painting and sculpting, you can sort of see what you’re getting. But with photography, you never know what you’re going to get, and when you get something good, it feels like a happy accident. At least, that’s how it feels to me.”

“Huh. I never thought about photography as an art.”

John gawked at her, wide-eyed. Upon reflection, though, he supposed that he had never encountered a photography show in the wizarding world. Wizard photographers usually worked in journalism or portraiture. It wasn't a popular hobby.

"I suppose few wizards do," he said slowly. "Regard photography as an art."

Sam shrugged.

"That's a bloody crime."

"Yes, we witches and wizards can be a bit backwards sometimes," Sam said plaintively.

They watched the ocean in silence for a time, or relative silence, since the castle was still broadcasting its discordant merriment. The waves were lit with the moon's image, distorting it like a thousand tiny mirrors. John decided that Sam's intrusion upon his solitude was not entirely unwelcome. She was easy to talk to, and apparently just as content to speak her mind as to make space for the evening's quietude.

She pulled a large, square bottle from a patchwork purse, and then took a drink from it. John's right eyebrow shot up.

"That'd better be pumpkin juice!"

"Sure it is," she said with a wink. "Come off it, you've been at the pumpkin juice, too," she nodded toward the flask that was falling out of his pocket, where he'd hastily hidden it.

"That's different," he said, stuffing it back down. "I'm a grown-up."

"I'm a grown-up," she repeated in a pompous impression. "How old were you when you started? Not much older than me, were you? I'm sixteen."

"I'll have you know I started on the pumpkin juice rather late. Consequence of being raised by a space alien."

She snorted with laughter again. "You're barmy."

"I take that as a compliment."

"I meant it as a compliment!"

John smirked as he watched the gentle waves. He pulled his knees up toward his chin and hugged them. He was feeling as though a heavy backpack was being lifted from his shoulders. The grim resentments that had so preoccupied him moments earlier seemed to be receding like a landmark behind a speedy train.

"So, why are you really out here?" Sam ventured.

John looked at her, then his eyes darted back toward the sea. He could hardly have expressed the complicated stew of feelings the wizarding dance had stirred up in him. So he simply shrugged.

"I mean, it's one thing to step out for some fresh air," she went on, "and it's another to go hanging off a cliff."

"I wasn't hanging off a cliff."

"You know what I mean." Her tone was gentle and serious. "Is everything, you know... alright?"

John blinked at her, slightly baffled. Then comprehension dawned. Of course. She didn't know that for him, sitting on the edge of a cliff was no more dangerous than sitting on the edge of a chair. She might be thinking she'd just witnessed something like a suicide attempt.

"I'm fine," he said, smiling out of the corner of his mouth. "Really."

Sam looked skeptical. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you seemed... lonely."

John chuckled. "I'm not lonely."

"Really? If you needed a friend you could talk to, who would you call?"

John glared at her, his chest puffed out with whiskey-soaked courage.

"I have people. I have Kate. And I have..." he looked up and gestured vaguely outward. "The moon."

"The moon?" Sam asked skeptically.

“Aye, well, the others are slipping my mind at the moment. Listen, I’m not lonely. I like being alone. I came out here because I wanted to be alone. And if you only sat here because you felt sorry for me, you can leave now.”

“I sat here because I wanted to sit with you,” Sam said matter-of-factly.

John narrowed his eyes at her.

“Hmph,” he grunted.

The ocean twinkled and ebbed with steady calm. John was suddenly feeling irritable, and he took a couple of discreet sips from his flask. Suddenly, Circe and the Argonauts struck up a particularly dissonant chorus. It sounded like they were screaming and banging on trash cans.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, you’d think they were drowning cats in there,” Sam moaned. “They call that rubbish music.”

“Oh good, you don’t like it either. If you did, I’d have to ask you to leave.”

“Like it? It’s awful. But they’re no better than most other wizarding bands. It’s a disgrace, really. We can do magic, but we can’t even make good music.”

John nodded. “Sure. Everyone knows muggles have better art and music, but wizards are too proud to learn from them.”

“Yeah!” Sam knocked him gently on the shoulder, startling him. “I mean, you’d think magic would make us better at it,” she exclaimed. “But it’s almost like magic makes it worse.”

“’s because you’re doing it wrong,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, er, nothing. So you like muggle music, eh? What sort of muggle music?”

“I dunno, rock and pop I suppose.” She shrugged. “Queen. The Beatles. ABBA. You know, good stuff.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “That’s good stuff.”

Sam flopped backwards so that she was lying flat on the grass.

“I feel like dancing,” she said. “But not to this rubbish.”

“What song would you rather dance to?”

“I can think of twenty off the top of my head. You’re going to make me choose?”

“Yep.”

“Hmm. Fine. Maybe ‘Bad Reputation’ by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts.”

As soon as she said it, the noise from the castle died away. A cool breeze began to whip her lacy gown. Moments later, the breeze brought with it the bold notes of a guitar, soft but crystal clear.

*I don't give a damn 'bout my reputation...*

“Do you hear that?”

“Yes,” John replied calmly, suppressing a smile.

*Living in the past, it's a new generation...*

“How...?”

“Don’t ask,” he said with a grin, “or you’ll scare it away!”

*A girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do...*

“Dance with me!” Sam was standing, brushing dirt off of her lace and frills.

“No thanks.”

“Dance with me, or you’ll scare it away with your sulking!” Then she unceremoniously grabbed his hand and started bounding away from the cliff, pulling him to his feet.

John knew it was a bad idea. Deep in his gut a quiet instinct warned him to stop, but his rebellious bones ached to dance a foolish dance. It had been nearly six hundred years since that wild night when he’d first discovered magic. Six hundred years since the antics of his chaos magicians. All he wanted now was to feel young again, and to wash away all the pain that had happened in between.

One song flowed into another, and John and Sam danced like a pair of demons. At first, she grabbed his hands tentatively, tugging them back and forth with clumsy rhythm. Gradually, she became

bolder, and so did he. She rested hands on his shoulders. He rested hands on her hips. The castle was gone. They were on an island, encircled by a vigorously churning sea. They kicked off their shoes and felt the sand between their toes. Fireflies twinkled about them like stars. Birds sounded from the few trees on their little island, harmonizing with the sweet tones of 70's rock and roll. Neither of them reached for the alcohol, for they were liberated by the dance and drunk on the moonlight.

"You know what song we really mustn't play!" Sam squealed with delight.

"Hmm," said John, tracing a finger along the palm of her hand.

"Does Your Mother Know!"

"No. You're quite right, we can't play that one," said John seriously, but the familiar chords of the song were already starting.

"Too late!"

"Well," he huffed, rolling his eyes, "You can't say, 'don't play this one.' It's like saying 'don't think of an elephant.' Of course it's just going to make me think of an elephant."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Sam asked as she laced her fingers between his. "Since when is that how magic works?"

*You're so hot, teasing me...*

"That's how it works when you're doing it properly."

*So, you're blue, but I can't take a chance on a chick like you...*

"Properly! What do you mean?"

"Oh, well, you know. When you're comfortable with it, it just sort of, flows."

"That's... that's..." she thought aloud. Her stray hairs floated about her face with the momentum of dancing.

"That's like how little kids do magic, before they learn spellwork and wandwork!"

"Yeah, well, maybe kids are wiser than we give them credit for," said John with a shrug.

*I can read in your face that your feelings are driving you wild...*

*Ah, but girl, you're only a child...*

"Ugh," John grimaced, "that didn't come out the way I meant it to."

Sam laughed, and her laughter was like the joyful sound of a babbling brook.

"Would you relax?"

She took his hand again and smiled up at him. Her voice was suddenly as smooth as velvet, and her eyes were a brilliant blue the moonlight.

"Just relax and say what you mean."

John closed his eyes. Her hands were soft and warm against his. She wasn't dancing anymore, just swaying this way and that, like seaweed in a current. When he opened his eyes, he and Sam were still alone on their impossible little island.

"I just meant that, well, maybe growing up means..." John said slowly, gazing up at the stars, "losing something."

"Losing what?"

"I'm not sure. Never mind. It's nothing."

"No, I think I know what you mean." Sam's bright eyes remained fixed on him. "When you're a little kid, grown-ups are always telling you it's wrong to do this or that. Maybe you'll stop doing it, but you don't really believe it's wrong to build a castle out of mashed potatoes, or to wear your knickers on your head. But then, somewhere along the line, we grow up, and we start to believe it's wrong. And then we can't imagine wearing our knickers on our heads."

"Yeah," said John breathlessly. "That's it." He looked back to her wide eyes, and he felt like he was falling into them.

"Kids just do what they want," she said, drawing close to him, "and they don't worry about whether it's right or wrong."

His body felt light, and his legs felt weak.

She brought her lips to his. He did not resist her delicate advance. Their noses brushed each other, and their warm breaths mingled. He savored the softness of her lips with the exquisite sensitivity of his own. Pleasure coursed through him. Sam's subtle movements were unhurried. It was a grown woman's kiss, was not the hard, hungry sort of kiss that was so common among the young and inexperienced.

Sam raised one hand to his cheek. Her touch was tender and enticing. He was suddenly gripped with a wild urge to have her fully, to show her what he'd learned in his six hundred years' experience with magic and intimacy. He would take her into his arms and carry her off into some garden of forbidden pleasure.

He paused. Then he closed his eyes and tore himself away. He moved only inches, but it was as though he had put miles between them.

The music died. The fireflies faded away. They were back at the cliff's edge, and the din of Circe and the Argonauts almost drowned out the ocean's steady inhalation and exhalation.

John stood with his eyes closed and his head bowed, allowing sober reality to wash over him like cold water. When he opened his eyes, Sam was looking at him affectionately, and her face was round and flushed.

"You should go," he said quietly, taking a step back.

"I don't want to go," she pleaded.

"Please. Go." He was flustered, frightened, even, but the more distance he put between himself and Sam, the more certain he felt that he was doing the right thing. He put his hands in his pockets and backed away from her, towards the sea.

Sam bit her lip. Then she bent down, grabbed her shoes and her patchwork purse, and strode away.

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"She's how old, did you say?"

John groaned. "Sixteen."

"Sixteen's old enough for sex."

"Christ, Kate, I never said anything about having sex with her!"

"You didn't have to."

It was a grim and chilly day. The sun was obscured somewhere behind a dappled gray sky. John and Kate were walking a cobblestone path around the castle. It was a less-traveled path, one they'd leapt onto after John had glimpsed a shock of blonde hair that might have been Sam.

"I wasn't thinking about sex! I'm not! I'm really not. It was just a kiss, and it was a stupid mistake."

"Why?"

John eyed her with confusion.

"You mean why did I kiss her?"

"Why do you believe it was a mistake?"

"She's sixteen!"

"So? I was married at her age."

"That was two thousand years ago, Kate. Things have changed."

"Some things have changed. Some things haven't."

John lingered behind a corner of the east wing of the castle. Around the corner, a classroom opened and students spilled onto the courtyard. He turned away from them and back to Kate, who was carelessly tucking a loose strand of black hair into her French braid. She wore a burgundy robe that brought out the warmth of her honeyed skin and her wide, crimson lips.

John was supposed to be at Hogwarts for the same reason she was—to guard the portal to the multiverse that lay in the forbidden forest, unbeknownst to anyone but the two of them. The real reason he was there was that he adored Kate and would not be parted from her if he could help it.

“How old were you when you became immortal?” Kate asked. “Twenty-one? Twenty-two? As far as Sam knows, you’re only a few years her senior.”

John leaned against the wall, out of sight of the emerging students.

“And the fact that she’s mistaken only makes it worse! I can’t believe you don’t disapprove.”

“I haven’t decided whether or not I disapprove.”

Her gaze flitted through the pack of students behind John. If Sam was among them, Kate’s face didn’t show it.

“On the one hand,” she said thoughtfully, “I cannot condone any behavior that might get you sacked. I need your help guarding the portal. Well, all the portals, but especially this one. I have obligations in Aezeroth and I can’t watch this portal all the time.”

The portal in the forest next to Hogwarts castle, which was presumably the reason the castle was built where it was, was the largest and most accessible portal on earth. If any planeswalker or alien riff-raff were to wash up on the shores of earth, they would most likely do so at that portal. They already had on several occasions.

“On the other hand,” Kate continued, “I trust that you could be discreet. After all, you have been discreetly avoiding Sam all week quite successfully.”

“I’m not avoiding her,” John said defensively. “I’m just... I just need a little time to myself.”

Kate rolled her eyes. John peeked out from behind the corner. The cloud of students was dispersing, as if blown across the campus by a misty breeze. He stepped out and they continued their stroll, Kate’s heels clicking on the cobblestones.

“Anyway, planetary catastrophes aside,” she went on, “I think it might do you some good to have a friend besides me.”

John glared at her.

“First off,” he asserted, “I’m not lacking for friends. Second, I’m pretty sure Sam’s interested in something more than friendship.”

“So much the better.”

“Why is that better?” John demanded.

Kate shrugged.

“You could blow off some steam, attend to your masculine needs...” Her voice grew low. “And you could direct your romantic inclinations towards someone who returns those inclinations.”

John stopped walking. Kate continued on with a couple of slow steps, as if encouraging him to catch up. However, she soon resigned this effort, and turned to face him. John held her gaze defiantly, until a door closed somewhere behind him and gave him a start.

He collected himself and said stiffly, “I don’t recall that I’ve ever spoken to you of any romantic inclinations.”

“Oh John, please don’t think I’m faulting you. You have been very discreet. It’s just that...” She stepped toward him and looked into his eyes. Depending on her mood, Kate’s brown eyes were always either hot or warm. At the moment, they were warm.

“This grudge you bear against wizards is like a fortress in which you’ve sealed yourself. You’ve been here for four years and you haven’t got any friends besides me. You want me to be your friend, as well as your lover, as well as your colleague in this effort with the portals, but I can’t be your everything. Especially not when you won’t tell me how you really feel.”

“Tell you how I really feel?” John spluttered, as outrage rose in him and crowded out any other sentiment. He didn’t raise his voice, but it prickled with anger.

“Sure. I’ll tell you how I really feel. I’m tired of everyone acting like I’m some pitiful charity case. I’ll admit, I’m not a particularly happy man. I don’t fit in anywhere. All mortals are children to

me. And the only person on earth who understands what that's like is you, and you're even further from me in age than they are! You're like a goddess sprung up out of the pages of some ancient epic, in which lascivious gods unleash their masculine urges upon nymphs and washerwomen. I'm not a part of the mortals' playground, nor am I a part of your pantheon. You've no idea what it's like to be caught in the middle. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to set up any play dates for me. I don't want friends. I don't even want a lover. Even though, I'll admit... "

John hesitated, and he felt his cheeks grown hot.

"Even though I'll admit that I don't find you unattractive, Kate. But any time I let people in, they inevitably fail to understand me and I end up feeling worse than when we started. Mark my words, and believe them. I am alone because I *like* being alone."

Kate smiled sadly, but then her eyes darted aside as she seemed to glance at something over his shoulder.

"I see," she said softly. She drew in close to him and straightened his unruly scarf. "Well, I appreciate your honesty. I'll do as you wish and leave you alone, then. If that's really how you feel. And if that's really how you feel, then I'm sure you'll have no difficulty communicating it to Sam."

Kate gave his chest a gentle pat. Then she glided past him, and as John turned to follow her, he found himself face to face with Sam. He froze like a deer in a pair of headlights.

"Hi, Professor," she said in a breathy voice, as if she'd just been running to catch him. Her long hair was tied up in a messy bun that framed her face in romantic wisps.

John took a deep breath.

"Oh. Hi."

"I've been wanting to talk to you."

"Right. Yes. I've been wanting to talk with you, too," he lied.

"Over here," she said, beckoning him through a doorway that led into the castle. With quick, anxious strides, he followed her. He glanced around feverishly as they passed through the doorway and turned into a corridor.

"Listen, Sam," he began, but Sam didn't slow down or turn to look at him. They turned again, into a smaller hallway that grew increasingly cold and dim. John still felt painfully exposed.

"In here."

She opened the door of a small, empty classroom and pulled him inside. She closed the door roughly and threw up the deadbolt. John was just about to say that he might have preferred to talk in the hallway, when she grabbed his scarf and pulled him into a kiss.

Their lips connected. John froze, dumbfounded, but after a brief moment's shock, he pushed her away as gently as he could.

"Ooookay!" he said, letting out an involuntary nervous laugh. "We were clearly envisioning very different conversations."

"I've missed you."

"Sam," he said decisively. Then he faltered. His words evaporated under the light of her shining blue eyes.

"Don't look at me like I've just sprung on you out of the blue," she said in mock reproof. "You've been thinking about me as much as I've been thinking about you, haven't you?"

John took a deep breath. "Sam, what happened on the night of the dance was a mistake. A terrible mistake."

"A mistake?" she cried sharply, and John twitched apprehensively, fearing that a passerby in the hall might hear it. "Whatever happened to happy accidents?" She touched his sleeve lightly, and her eyes were steady and passionate. "We shared something exciting and real."

"No. I mean, yes, but..." he felt like his throat was full of cotton. His face was flushing terribly.

"What were you expecting, Sam? A relationship?"

"Why not? Isn't that what you'd want, if you could have your way?"

“No,” John said flatly. “I don’t want a relationship with you.” He could feel that his face was still hot.

“You’re a bad liar, John Hennessy,” she crooned with a sideways smile.

He rolled his eyes. “So I’ve been told. Look, what I want doesn’t matter.” John stood up as tall as he could, though Sam was still at least an inch taller than he was.

“Of course what you want matters!” she cried. “Are you mad?”

“Sam, we had fun, but it was reckless. Reckless fun today could become a deep wound later down the road.”

To his surprise, she laughed.

“Bloody hell, I’m not asking you to marry me. I was only going to ask if you’d like to go for a walk with me sometime. Or are you afraid you’re going to wound me with a walk?”

“This isn’t a joke, Sam. It’s against the rules for a reason.”

She leaned in close to him and tilted her head coquettishly. Her blue eyes and rosy cheeks glowed with vivacious color. She traced one finger lightly along his jawbone.

“If you’re so fond of rules,” she said softly, “then you’re not the man I thought you were.”

John looked steadily into her face, which was very close to his.

“It’s for the best, Sam. Trust me.”

Her playful expression fell. Her brow furrowed, and her gaze became hard.

“How dare you act like it’s up to you to decide what’s best for me,” she hissed. She shoved him with both hands. “You’re an arse, John Hennessy. But I’m an idiot, so I’ll still be waiting for you to change your mind.”

She threw open the door aggressively and stomped out of the room, a few long wisps of hair trailing behind her. Staring at the open doorway into the empty hall, John reflected that he did not feel nearly as relieved as he’d thought he would.

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John remained so preoccupied with thoughts of Sam that he was almost glad to detect an intruder at the portal a few days later. He had several warning devices that he carried with him at all times—an anklet, a ring, a key, a watch, and a little crucifix on a necklace. Each one corresponded to a major portal on earth: the anklet to a portal in Bangladesh, the ring to a portal in the middle of the South Pacific, and so on. When the crucifix vibrated, that meant someone was in the vicinity of the portal in the forbidden forest.

It was a Friday, and John had just finished teaching his final class of the week. He was picking up razors, sponges, and bits of clay from the art studio’s battle-worn tablecloths. Someone had left behind a lump of clay about the size of a thumb that, upon closer inspection, appeared to have been molded into something resembling a hippopotamus. John smiled. *I’m no artist. I do crafts*, echoed Sam’s voice in his memory. He swallowed. Then he squished the hippo into the ball of clay in his hand, along with the other scraps.

That was when the crucifix vibrated. His heart leapt, and he tossed aside the sundries he was carrying. The only thing that mattered in that moment was getting to the portal. Every second that passed was an opportunity for the intruder to get away. If they managed to flee before John or Kate could intercept them, the two of them would have to search all of human society for the planeswalker, like searching a haystack for a poison needle.

John casually thrust his hand under the table and grazed its underside, as if he were retrieving a piece of chewing gum he’d laid there for safekeeping. He pulled out a gray stone with a cryptic sigil engraved on one side. That was not where the hearthstone lived, of course, but conjuring what one wanted with chaos magic usually required nothing more than some sleight of hand.

He traced the sigil with his index finger. It glowed with blue light, and a surge of energy engulfed his hands and spread down his arms. The floor beneath him shifted, and the world began to spin as if he were drunk. He held the hearthstone like a steering wheel, though the wheel was in fact steering him. A moment later the spinning settled down, and he found himself in the familiar forest clearing.

The beech trees trembled. There were no shadows, for there was no direct sun. There was only a pregnant gray sky and a threatening whisper of wind. The intruder made no move to run nor to attack. He stood patiently, as if awaiting a scheduled train.

“Hello, Crastor,” he said silkily, in language John had not heard for many years.

The intruder might have been an ordinary man, if not for the fact that his skin was a vibrant purple. He was bald and clean-shaven, and wore a purple robe embroidered with gold details that here and there formed obscure symbols.

For an instant, John held his breath involuntarily, every muscle tense and frozen. Illyrio remained where he was, smiling pleasantly. A chill breeze penetrated John’s thin robe, making his skin crawl. He was by no means relieved that the visitor was not a stranger. In fact, he would have preferred a stranger.

“Hello *father*.” He spat the word with as much acrimony as he could muster. “Surely you are here by accident. Please let me know how I may help you achieve your destination. And by the way, is there any point in reminding you that my name is John now?”

Illyrio’s smile did not falter, but it stiffened slightly.

“Very well. John.” He extended a hand to John. John eyed it as if it were a dead rat on his dinner table.

“What in hell do you want, Illyrio?”

Illyrio sighed and rescinded his hand.

“Peace,” he said simply.

“Bollocks.”

“Cr—John, our entire relationship has been one long fight. We fought while we were mortal, we have fought as immortals, and we could keep fighting forever. It’s been six interplanar ages since we last spoke. Why? Somewhere along the line, we grew weary of fighting, but we never actually reconciled. It’s clear that we both want peace.”

John eyed his adoptive father suspiciously. If Illyrio was being friendly, it meant he was plotting something.

“Peace *from* you does not mean friendship *with* you.”

Illyrio began to walk forward. Instinctively, John took a step back. Illyrio stopped himself mid-stride, and remained where he was.

“I understand that you don’t trust me.”

“You always were a clever one.”

“I know it sounds crazy, but I *need* you to trust me.”

John laughed.

“You mean you need something from me? And here I thought you simply came to ask whether I am enjoying my art lessons.”

Illyrio took a deep breath. John was rather enjoying frustrating him.

“Yes, I came here because I have a favor to ask. But I have been thinking. Perhaps this is also an opportunity for a genuine reconciliation between us. Perhaps fate is bringing us together, telling us that it’s time to set aside our differences.”

“Now *that* sounds crazy.”

Illyrio paused. John awaited Illyrio’s next overture with low expectations.

“Please, John. I promise I have a very good reason for being here. Won’t you hear me out? On the off-chance that I’m telling the truth when I say that thousands of innocent lives are at stake?”

John narrowed his eyes.

“From when do you care about saving innocent lives?”

“Since when,” Illyrio corrected. “Come now, son, do you think so little of me? I’ll admit, I can be spiteful. Callous. Self-centered. But I am not evil.”

John looked at him dubiously.

“It is precisely because I have been spiteful, callous, and self-centered that I am trying to help these innocents. I want to be a better man. And for what it’s worth, I am sorry for all the ways I’ve used you and toyed with you in the past. The greatest regrets of my life are all things I’ve done to you. I was supposed to be your guardian, but I took advantage of you for my own selfish gain. And then, when my immortality potion unexpectedly worked on you—on both of us—instead of taking that as an opportunity for a fresh start, I simply went on tormenting you. Our feud never should have reached the disastrous proportions that it did, and for that I entirely blame myself.”

John suddenly felt doubt creeping up on him. He closed his eyes and tried to sort through the confusion he was feeling. The bushes near their feet rustled. Somewhere above, a thrush whistled a little tune.

“Walk with me,” Illyrio urged. “Hear me out. Please. If you believe in second chances, John, I could use one now. People can change, surely you appreciate that! I have changed, or at least I am trying to.”

Illyrio took a cautious step forward.

“Look. I’ll admit I don’t entirely forgive you for all the things you’ve done to me. Nor do I entirely regret all the things I’ve done to you. But I’m slowly working toward becoming a better man, and I do not want these innocent souls on my already heavy conscience!”

John frowned. Illyrio had struck a nerve by mentioning second chances. Perhaps the old trickster had known he would.

John let out an exasperated sound that was somewhere between a groan and a growl. He turned slightly in the direction of the nearest path, and gestured for Illyrio to go first. They walked toward the path together, John careful not to turn his back to Illyrio.

The two of them made their way along the forest path. Dead leaves and pine needles crunched beneath their feet. Around them, the birds and squirrels chattered with unusual energy, as if making hasty preparations for the coming rain.

“Your Planeswalkiri has deteriorated,” Illyrio said, as if this were a perfectly polite observation. “I suppose it’s been many years since you last planeswalked.”

“Yes. Why should I planeswalk? Any plane worth visiting does not want visitors. And planeswalkers are cheating, foul-smelling, flea-ridden, shit-headed bastards.”

“At least your curses are still intact, I see.”

“Perfected through practice. Planeswalkers always give me good reasons to curse.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. Of course, it’s partly my fault that you do.”

“Yes, it is,” replied John. He kicked a pinecone out of their path with more force than was necessary.

“So,” Illyrio began breezily, “How are you enjoying your art lessons?”

John shook his head, but he couldn’t suppress a smile.

“You are such an arse.”

“What? I’m interested. Tell me, what sort of art do you do?”

“The same sort of art I have been doing for the last four hundred years. That is,” John did the calculation. “Sixteen interplanar ages.”

“Oh. Well. I suppose I have been rather out of touch with you for some time.”

“You think?”

Above them, a red-headed woodpecker drummed noisily, undeterred by their presence.

“Enough of this, Illyrio. You owe me an explanation.”

“Right. Very well. I’m here about an uncharted plane.”

“No, not about what brings you here now.”

John sighed. For centuries, he and Illyrio had tormented each other, undermining the other’s life and livelihood, until finally, one day, John went too far. Then, as payback, Illyrio went too far. And with that, in the mid-nineteenth century, their feud had unceremoniously ended. Just remembering the calamity that ended it filled John with an overpowering sense of shame. Nevertheless, he needed an answer.

“Tell me why you disappeared.”

“Oh. Why? Did you miss me?” Illyrio teased.

John’s gaze hardened. Only dimly aware of it, a flame manifested in his palm. Illyrio glanced down at it with a raised eyebrow. John looked down and balled his fist, quenching the flame.

“*Theurgica Sinestra*,” John said quietly. “A very old leather book. The bookmark was on a particularly... sinister page. You left that book for me to find. You left the bookmark on that page.”

Illyrio’s smile faded. He turned and continued walking, saying nothing for several moments.

“You knew I would be sensitive to that ritual,” John prodded.

“I was angry about Vashtar.”

“Oh, so I deserved it, then?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, you will be happy to hear that your little plan with the book worked splendidly.”

“I’m not in the least bit happy about it,” Illyrio protested. “I had no idea that that ritual would have such catastrophic consequences. You did a terrible thing on Vashtar, John, but giving you that book was worse. That’s why I left you alone after that. I decided you’d suffered enough.”

“So it was real?” John asked feverishly, gripping Illyrio’s arm. “That ritual, it was no charlatanism? It was real?”

John searched Illyrio’s face, trying to read the thoughts etched on it. There was confusion, calculation, and something else. The third emotion grew and encompassed all his features. Then John realized what it was. It was pity.

“My God, John. I’m so sorry,” Illyrio said, his voice losing its characteristic silkiness. “I’m so sorry for what I did to you.”

John threw up his hand and a burst of white light knocked Illyrio off his feet. Illyrio staggered backward and collided roughly with a tree. Pine needles rained down from above.

“I am not the one you should be apologizing to!” John bellowed.

“I know. I understand—”

“You understand nothing! That is the biggest lie you have told me today!”

“I never meant for it to go as far as it did.”

“But you did not stop it!”

John’s chest was heaving. Illyrio stepped forward from the tree, brushing pine needles off his robe.

“No. I did not stop it. I was angry, and my anger made me cruel and selfish.”

“How dare you come back here,” John said through gritted teeth. “And with the audacity to ask for a favor? Why would I help you?”

“It’s not I who needs help.”

“Oh, right, your ‘innocents’,” John said in a skeptical tone.

They stood on the forest path, facing each other. John’s fists were clenched. He wanted nothing more than to toss Illyrio back into the portal that he came from. Yet it was as Illyrio had said—John had to listen, on the off-chance that it was true.

“Please,” Illyrio said, gesturing ahead and taking a step forward. “I’ll explain.”

John’s feet were heavy, as if he were walking through sand. Still, he walked.

“There is much I can’t tell you. As the steward of an uncharted plane yourself, I think you can understand why the inhabitants of this particular uncharted plane don’t want me blabbing about their home to other planeswalkers.”

“I am not a planeswalker.”

“Sure. What I can tell you is that on this plane there is a nation of people who live at the foot of a dormant volcano. At least, it used to be dormant. It has turned active very recently. It looks as though it will truly erupt any day now, and when the volcano does erupt it will destroy this nation, at a minimum. If it pours as much ash into the atmosphere as we believe it could, it could block out their sun and eradicate life on the entire plane.”

“And there is something here on earth that could quell your volcano?”

“Yes. You.”

John halted and looked at Illyrio incredulously. For a moment, he was at an utter loss for words. The clap of distant thunder resonated through the shivering forest. He shook his head, mouth agape in a stupid half-smile.

“Whatever game you are playing Illyrio...”

“This is no game,” Illyrio insisted. “You don’t know your own power, John, but I do. I raised you, after all. You have the power to stop this catastrophe. You have powers that I lack.”

John maintained his skeptical smile.

“No. I know you too well, Illyrio. This smells like your usual trickery. You have a piss job to do, one that requires an immortal person, and you do not want to do it yourself. So you are asking me to do it.”

“John, I swear, for once in my life I’m not lying to you.”

“I deserve your tricks, Illyrio, if I am foolish enough to fall for them after all these years.”

“What oath can I take that will make you believe me?”

“None! Do you not understand?!” John’s voice rose to a hysteric pitch. “I will not fight you anymore, Illyrio, because I am a tired old man! And neither will I help you, for the same reason!”

“John, please, I’m begging you. Thousands of innocent lives are at stake! Maybe even millions!”

John crossed his arms. He shivered. He’d come in such haste that he was not adequately dressed for the cold. Behind them, a crow cawed ominously.

What if Illyrio’s story was true? He mulled it over in his mind. Only the possibility of rivers of innocent blood on his hands would make John consider trusting Illyrio. That, and... John could not deny that he had a moral debt to pay. Not to Illyrio, exactly, but to the universe. He’d gotten enough blood on his hands on Vashtar.

“Damn you, Illyrio.” He shook his head. “You knew I wouldn’t be able to say no to this. Not after Vashtar.”

“Is that a yes?”

John closed his eyes. The prospect of working together with Illyrio was utter madness. Every rational bone in his body told him it was a bad idea. On the other hand, didn’t he have a moral obligation to look into it, at least, as long as there was a small chance that it was true?

And then there was a part of him that wanted to believe it. That Illyrio really was sorry, that he really did want to be a better man. Deep down, John did want reconciliation. Illyrio was the closest thing he had to family, as well as being the only person in the multiverse who was the same age he was.

John sighed. He was just about to offer a cautious ‘yes’, when somebody appeared by his side out of thin air.

“The answer is no.”

John and Illyrio both leapt back in surprise. Kate was standing between them. Her hair was tied in a tight bun, and she wore a hunter green cloak that fluttered in the cold wind.

“One of these days I’m going to put a bell on you, Kate,” John muttered.

"I'd like to see you try," she responded playfully.

"You were spying on us?" Illyrio asked sharply.

"My apologies for intruding on your privacy," she responded in rapid Planeswalkiri. "I didn't want to interrupt. You seemed to be in the middle of something important."

"Not at all," said John with forced cheerfulness. "Illyrio, this is my sometimes-invisible friend Kate. Kate, this is my consistently disappointing father, Illyrio."

Each bowed slightly to the other.

"Kate," Illyrio said thoughtfully. "That wasn't your name the last time we met, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

John looked at the two of them with his eyebrows raised.

"You know each other?"

"Not really," Kate shrugged. "We met once or twice. A long time ago."

John rolled his eyes. Kate was deliberately vague whenever she spoke about her past. Coming from her, 'a long time ago' could mean anything from several decades to several centuries.

"I'd love to chat, but I need to get back to my class," she continued, glancing at her watch. "I've been gone too long as it is."

She turned toward John.

"You can't possibly be considering going with him. Your place is here, helping me watch the portals. Besides, he is as trustworthy as a hungry wolf. He is probably lying. He is certainly hiding part of the truth."

Then she turned to Illyrio.

"Our loyalty is to the sister planes of earth and Aezeroth. There are very good reasons why uncharted planes don't form alliances with one another, as you surely know. If one plane is discovered, its allies are discovered, too. To name one reason. We are isolationists. Ordinarily, John and I kill planeswalkers who wander onto earth or Aezeroth, setting an example for any other curious or foolhardy planeswalkers. But, since you have known about this place for centuries and you haven't betrayed it yet, despite having very good reasons to do so, I think it is safe to let you go. Consider yourself lucky to walk away unharmed."

Then she reached for her throat. She unclasped her heavy green cloak, and swiftly brought it up off of herself and wrapped it around John. He started, but she was already clasping it on him.

"What are you doing?"

"You must be freezing. You can give it back to me later." She finished securing the clasp, but her hand lingered on his collarbone. She spoke in a low voice.

"I know you want to help these people, John, but there are plenty of people on earth trapped in slavery, hunger, and wretched misery every day. It is not our responsibility to save them. And it's certainly not our responsibility to go off to some far-flung plane and save the wretches there. We are already engaged in very important work."

John's face flushed. He didn't know what was more upsetting to him: that Kate felt entitled to tell him what to do, or that she was absolutely right. He'd been mad to consider running off with Illyrio. He was chagrined that he—who had so many reasons to mistrust Illyrio—had failed to see that.

He fiddled clumsily with the clasp of her cloak. When he'd finally unhooked it, he shoved it back into her arms.

"I don't need your help or your protection," he hissed.

She looked at him imperiously, with one eyebrow slightly raised. Then she nodded deferentially to him.

"Forgive my interruption, then."

She draped the cloak over one arm with the stolid grace of a butler. Then she stepped back, and pulled a gray stone out of her pocket. In a flash of blue light, she disappeared as swiftly and silently as she had come.

Ordinarily, one couldn't have multiple hearthstones at once, but Kate was hardly ordinary. Two thousand years of dabbling in exotic sorceries had left her with an arsenal of unique magical shortcuts. Which, come to think of it, got John wondering.

"Tell me, Illyrio," he began, turning toward the portal and walking back the way they'd come, "What exactly did you have in mind when you said that I have powers you lack?"

He walked briskly. He really was very cold and wanted to warm up. He could hear Illyrio's footsteps lagging behind him, but no answer came.

"Hmm?" John pressed. "Why is it that neither you nor your friends can stop this volcano? Why does it have to be me?"

He whirled around and scanned Illyrio's face. He was nervous.

"Well, you know, it's... your chaos magic. Your own, unpredictable brand of magic. We've tried everything we can think of, and now our only hope now is a lucky longshot."

John smiled.

"There it is," he said triumphantly.

"There what is?" Illyrio huffed.

"The lie."

"John, will you allow yourself to be so easily swayed by this woman?"

"That *woman* has had to deal with people like you all her life. Smug, lying weasels who think they are better than she is."

"But you were just about to say yes!" Illyrio could not hide the desperation and rage that were leaking into his voice.

"I had not decided. Now I have."

"You'd already said you couldn't say no! You were going to say yes, John! Think about what you are doing, about the people you are condemning!"

John said nothing. They walked in stubborn silence until they reached the clearing.

"A few days, John, that's all I ask," Illyrio pleaded. "A few days of your time, and you can save a plane. Think with your heart. Think with your conscience."

"You know what really convinces me, more than anything else, that you are lying?" John asked, glaring at Illyrio through narrowed eyes. "It is the fact that you seem to care so much about these people. That cannot be real. Because you have never cared about anybody but yourself."

"John—"

"Go!" John gestured toward the portal. "Go to hell, and never come back!"

Illyrio's lips became a thin line, and then he nodded. He slumped like a deflated balloon.

"Very well."

He crossed his arms and stared pensively at the ground. He seemed lost in his own private world. Another clap of thunder stormed over the forest, and the trees trembled in response.

"Very well, John. I will go. And I will tell these people that I did all I could. But I will not promise to never come back. Because in spite of all our problems, I still think of you as my son. I have not given up hope that one day we might be allies, if not something closer. We have been enemies for ages, yet I feel we understand each other better than most lovers do."

He smiled sadly, and extended a hand toward John.

"Goodbye for now. And I promise that the next time we meet, it won't be because I have a favor to ask."

John glanced down at the hand, and he felt a familiar tugging on his heart. There was that feeling again, that longing to be understood by someone his own age, by someone who knew his story. He took Illyrio's proffered hand.

At that moment, his hand was struck with sharp, intense pain like a bee sting.

"Agh!" He shrieked. "Satan's tits!" He cradled his hand as if it were a crying baby. There was a small puncture wound from which blood was oozing. The mark was tiny, but the pain was intense.

"I'm sorry, John." Illyrio pulled something off of his own hand and tucked it under the breast of his robe.

"What did you do?"

"What I had to do to save the people of this plane. Now I've done all I could for them. And both our consciences will be clear."

John pulled up the sleeve of his robe and pressed the edge of it against the wound, which throbbed painfully.

"What... did you... do?" He said through gritted teeth.

"I gave you an incentive. I'm sorry John, but I simply couldn't take no for an answer."

And then John understood. That was no ordinary pinprick. There was something on it, some curse, or poison, or pathogen.

John could not contain his rage. Suddenly, a dinosaur-like creature appeared out of nowhere behind Illyrio. Illyrio spun around and did a complicated gesture with his hands. A beam of light shot toward the reptilian beast, but the light merely bounced off its chest. The beast roared and lunged for Illyrio's head. Illyrio ducked aside and did another artful routine with his fingers. As the creature swerved and lunged again, a ball of blue light shot from Illyrio's hands into the creature's mouth. It cried out in pain. Illyrio made a swift sweep of one hand while signing something with the other, and the creature's head was sliced off. It toppled over, but before it hit the ground, it turned to ash and disappeared on the wind.

John and Illyrio glared at one another with daggers in their eyes.

"You killed it because I permitted you to kill it," John snapped bitterly. "And you are alive because I am permitting you to live."

"Go ahead and kill me," said Illyrio, waving one hand listlessly. "You'll just have to wait for me to heal. But I don't recommend it, since you don't have that kind of time."

John balled his fists so hard that his knuckles cracked. He waited, saying nothing.

Satisfied, Illyrio continued briskly, "I've injected an extremely rare and exotic poison into your bloodstream. Only I have the antidote. If you want it, you will accompany me back to this uncharted plane. You have a little time before the poison takes effect. It's hard to say how much time. Get your affairs in order and meet me back here promptly. Bring clothes for... I don't know. Up to five earth days. Bring sturdy shoes. Dress casually. It will be warm."

John trembled with fury. "You cock sucking, shit-eating, son of a milk goat."

"Yes, yes, right. Now go, you are wasting time."

With fumbling fingers, John pulled a different hearthstone from his pocket. "You lying, hateful bastard. This kind of villainy," he said, pointing at Illyrio, "this is why I grew up to be a hateful bastard, too."

"Mmhmm. Tick tock, my boy."

~

John was trembling, but he wasn't sure whether it was from the poison or from the rage. He was so hot and sweaty that he hardly noticed the light rain that was starting. He plowed through clumps of students as he hastened away from the castle, back to his room above the art studio. He had gotten word of his 'family emergency' and abrupt departure to several teachers, and only just in time judging by his rising body temperature and the progress of his headache. He would have sent word magically, but all the methods by which Hogwarts teachers usually sent messages to each other were dainty little spells his clumsy chaos magic could not reliably do.

As he strode across the grounds, ignoring the occasional friendly greeting or puzzled glance, he plotted how he might make life as difficult as possible for Illyrio. What would Illyrio do if John simply refused to go along with the plan? Would Illyrio really leave John to languish in illness? No, he

wouldn't. Illyrio would drag him to this mysterious plane kicking and screaming. Maybe John actually would kick and scream, just for the satisfaction of it.

John had not had the courage to tell Kate directly. He'd merely slipped a note under her office door to the effect of, "I have to go. Sorry. Will explain later. Don't follow me."

He wasn't entirely sure why he hadn't the courage to ask for her help. He simply couldn't, not after he had so vehemently rejected her help twice in one week. Besides, what could she do, really? Torture Illyrio into providing the antidote? John was tired of torturing Illyrio. In their relationship, violence only ever led to more violence.

And then there was that part of him that still felt drawn into the whole affair. Clearly Illyrio's claims of turning over a new leaf were lies, but John suspected that the volcano story was true. Even if it was, as Kate said, mere half-truth, there was a sound chance that people really were in danger. The story felt too outlandish to have been entirely fabricated for this purpose, and the fact that it didn't quite add up was consistent with the theory of half-truth.

John reached the front door to the art studio and wrenched it open. He was hot, nauseous and dizzy, and felt like the back of his head was full of needles. Seeing the splattered canvas tablecloths reminded him of his students, and somehow he found himself thinking once again of Sam. If she were here, she'd probably tell him to buck up and relax. She'd probably find a little adventure exciting.

He berated his own brain for returning to thoughts of Sam. He was the one who'd turned her down, so why was he having such a hard time moving on?

He stomped up the stairs to his bedroom. Was a normal life too much to ask for, one in which he knew people his own age besides his nemesis? One in which the fate of worlds did not depend on his choices? But who was he kidding. In normal circles, he felt like a freak. Among freaks like Kate and Illyrio, he yearned for normalcy.

John staggered to his bed. He still had not packed, but he felt so exhausted that he had eyes only for bed. He flopped down onto his belly and immediately felt a strong urge to vomit, so he rolled onto his side. The room swam around him. He was shaking and sweating harder than he had been, and he could no longer believe it that was simply anger. He suddenly felt very weak. His whole body seemed to be breaking down. His head and his eyelids felt heavy, and he knew he was mere moments from sleep. He knew he ought not to. He ought to pack and meet Illyrio beside the portal. And yet, sleep was beckoning him like a beautiful woman offering to wave away his troubles for a limited time.

When John woke, it was pitch dark. It took him a moment to remember where he was and why he felt like he'd been stabbed in the back of the head. He felt dizzy, disoriented, and very hot. He must have slept for hours. He kicked off his sweaty sheets. He looked toward the window to try and guess what time of night it was, but he couldn't make out the window. All he saw was inky darkness.

His heart began to pound rapidly. Something was wrong. Something was missing. Why did he feel so displaced, like he was not in his body, or in his room, but just floating in nothingness? He rolled out of bed and stood up. He was definitely in his own room, feeling his own carpet between his toes. But where was the window? A vague terror gripped him. None of this was making any sense. He wasn't just sick, he was... lost.

He found, or rather bumped into, the desk across from his bed. From there, he put his hands where the window ought to have been. It was there. The cold glass was wet with condensation. Still he saw nothing. Where were the moon, and the stars? Then with an icy pang in his heart, the terrible truth dawned on him. He couldn't see.

Frantically, he flipped the latch on the window. Nothing happened. He raised the window. Not a sound. A cold chill spread from the window and seemed to penetrate directly down his spine. He stuck his hand out and felt fat raindrops on his hot hand. A storm was raging outside, but he could neither see nor hear it.

Something came fighting its way up from his stomach. He hurtled toward the bathroom, stubbing his toe on a table and nearly walking into a wall along the way. He made it to the toilet just in time. He coughed and cursed between bouts of vomiting, all in eerie silence.

When he'd finished, and he could add the fire in his throat to his long list of bodily grievances, he sat leaning against the bathtub, panting. His chest heaved while his head throbbed. This was a new low for Illyrio. As despicable as his adoptive father was, John would not have thought him audacious enough to give him a poison that would render him deaf and blind.

John cursed loudly. Or it would have been loud, if anyone had heard it. Again he cursed. And again. He hammered his fist against the bathtub several times, even though it made no sound and merely sent a dull pain coursing through his hand. A sense of overwhelming despair settled on him like a cloak, and he pulled his knees up to his chest and cradled his aching head between them. Perhaps it wasn't terribly surprising. After all, Illyrio had forcefully administered the poison that had rendered John immortal. Six hundred years later, Illyrio hadn't changed at all.

There was no question now that he would go with Illyrio to this mysterious plane. John lived for three things: art, music, and magic. In one stroke, Illyrio had taken away two of those things.

Slowly, leaning on the bathtub, John stood up. He swayed a little, feeling nauseous. He put a hand to his heart and noticed that his shirt was plastered to his chest with sweat. He felt short of breath. The prospect of packing was daunting, but at least every step towards Illyrio was a step towards the antidote.

Extending his sweaty hands in front of him, he felt his way along the walls and furniture. He felt self-conscious groping about. He could not shake the feeling that he was being watched.

In the back of his armoire there was one of those extremely useful Aezerothi bags capable of carrying far more than it ought to be able to. He dumped the satchel's considerable contents onto the floor, and shoved several fistfuls of clothes into it. He threw on a cloak, even though he wasn't cold.

Then he had an idea. He began searching wildly for a particular tiny object. He turned out pockets and shoes, and tossed out the contents of drawers by his feet. With a groan of frustration—which of course he did not hear—he gave up on the armoire, and flung open an enormous trunk beside it. His joints complained like rusty metal. His head felt like it was being gripped in a vise. He longed to simply lie down with his pain, but still he searched. Now and then he realized with dismay that his fingers were examining an item he'd already examined. Finally, he found the little leather pouch. He tore it open eagerly. His heart sank a little at the realization that there were only two pebbles inside. They were smoothly polished, conical-shaped, and he knew them to be purple. He was quite certain that he had more Aezerothi whisper stones lying around somewhere, but now was not the time to track them down. Two would be enough.

He stood, and after a moment's dizzy head rush, he picked up his satchel and the hearthstone that would take him to the portal. Hiking the satchel up his shoulder, he traced the familiar engraving on the stone. A moment later, he had the distinct sensation of being pulled by the arm. He felt like vomiting again. The next thing he knew, he was being showered with cold water.

He'd forgotten that it was raining, and so he had not brought an umbrella. For a full minute he stood in the rain in sullen silence, waiting for something to happen. Chills ran up and down his whole body, though it was unclear whether these were from his fever or from the cold of the forest.

"Illyrio!" he called. "Where are you, you son of a pauper's whore?"

Of course, he received no response. His cloak was becoming heavy as the rainwater penetrated it. Then he remembered that he was a magician. Embarrassed at his own foolishness, John called into existence a kind of bubble around him. He could not see whether it materialized the way he'd imagined it, but the annoying taps of rain on his head and face ceased.

Suddenly, something he might have mistaken for a dead fish gently patted his cheek. John jumped back involuntarily at the icy touch.

"Illyrio! Is that you?" he asked, and then remembered that he would not hear the answer.

“Here, come close to me.” It felt extremely odd to talk without hearing oneself. He hoped he was speaking loudly enough to be heard over the rain.

John extended a hand outward until he felt a broad chest draped in a finely embroidered and magically dry robe. Illyrio had avoided the rain.

“Watch me!” John extracted the pouch with the two stones, and with exaggerated movements, he placed one of the conical stones in his right ear. Then he reached toward Illyrio’s head with the other stone. Before he could get near to Illyrio’s ear, the stone was roughly plucked from his fingers, and his hand was swatted away.

“Oh don’t be... just put it in your ear, Illyrio.”

John waited a moment, then he whispered, “Can you hear me?”

A moment’s silence.

“You have to whisper,” John added, still whispering. “We will hear each other with our minds, not our ears.”

Illyrio’s voice resonated in John’s head. “Why are you acting like you can’t see or hear?”

If John had been able to see Illyrio’s neck, he might have throttled it.

“Because, you deceitful jackal with a pancake for brains, I CANNOT see or hear!”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What does not make sense is me standing here talking to you, instead of conjuring a tool to disembowel you, and a vulture that will eat out your eyes.”

“Hmm.” Illyrio’s voice, as loud and clear as if he were speaking plainly, sounded only mildly perturbed. “This is odd.”

“What in hell do you mean, odd?”

“*The* hell, John. We say, ‘what *the* hell.’”

“Are you seriously correcting my grammar right now?”

“Some poisons are more predictable than others. I’ll admit this one surprises me. When I was infected with it, I only lost my senses of taste and smell.”

“What?! You can fix it,” John said, sounding slightly hysterical. “You *can* fix it, right?”

“Of course I can fix it. Come along.”

John felt Illyrio’s cold, hard hand grasp his own, and it tugged on him gently.

“You sound awfully confident for someone who has just made a huge mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake. Just a surprise. Do you know how hard it is to find a poison that will affect an immortal body? As I said, this one is a little unpredictable. I should have guessed that you would be more sensitive to it than I was. It is of little consequence. I can fix it.”

“Of little consequence?!”

There was a pause, and Illyrio released John’s hand. John assumed they were near the portal, but he was utterly disoriented. He crossed his arms and shivered in the cold.

“The plane to which we are headed is remote,” Illyrio instructed. “We will use my spaceship to get there. The journey will take—well, it will feel to us like one or two earth days. First, we’ll take the portal to the ship. Then we’ll take the ship to the next several portals.”

“Will you will give me the antidote once we reach your ship?”

John shivered as he waited for Illyrio’s response to be magically transmitted through the stone in his ear.

“Oi! Will you?”

“No, Crastor, I don’t think I will. I will give it to you once you have completed your task.”

“What? You are joking. Either you are joking, or you are even more cruel than I thought.”

Something shifted energetically around them. John could not see or hear it, but he could feel it in his bones. It was as if gravity were pulling him forward instead of down. Illyrio must have activated the portal.

“No, I am neither joking nor cruel. It’s just that I happen to prefer my bowels on the inside, and my eyes in my head rather than in a vulture’s beak. As long as you are crippled, I think my organs have a better chance of staying where I like them.”

Then he gripped John’s hand tightly and pulled him through the portal, into the magical jetstream that flowed toward the unknown.

~

John spent the next twelve hours tossing and turning in a bed on Illyrio’s spaceship. The sleep that had come to him so easily in his own apartment eluded him now. He felt thoroughly miserable, having nothing to entertain him but his anger, his fears, and his various physical ailments. He tried not to worry about what might happen if he failed to complete this task with the volcano. He tried not to worry what his life would be like if Illyrio could not undo the poison’s damage. He tried not to wish that Sam were beside him, telling him to relax in her most velvety voice.

He had lots of time to chew on one question in particular: why did Illyrio believe that only John could accomplish this task? They were both powerful sorcerers, and they were both immortal. The story about the volcano, which presumably had at least a grain of truth to it, didn’t make sense. There was no reason to believe that John could contain an active volcano any better than Illyrio could. What could John do that Illyrio couldn’t? Like a moth circling about a flame, he kept returning to one answer. There was only one thing John could do and Illyrio couldn’t, and they both knew it. John was easily possessed. By demons, by ghosts, by fairies, by other weird entities he couldn’t even name. John decided that there was only one most likely, and thoroughly unpleasant, conclusion. Illyrio had someone, or something, that needed a body.

After his third fitful nap, John decided that he was feeling a bit better, at least physically. His fever was gone, and his headache had largely subsided. He still felt muddled, as though someone had popped off his head and shaken the contents before replacing it. He was craving a distraction. He climbed out of bed. Pushing his greasy hair out of his face, he began exploring the bedroom with his hands. It was surprisingly large and spacious for a bedroom on a spaceship. Then again, for all John knew, Illyrio might be a very wealthy man, able to afford a luxurious ship.

Opposite the bed, there was a staircase leading up and out of the bedroom. Bored and restless, he ascended it. When he reached the top of the staircase, he hung onto the railing and hesitated. This room was warmer, and a smell like pepper and garlic wafted toward him from somewhere to his left. He longed for a comfortable chair, but he doubted his ability to navigate the unfamiliar space. And he did not want to look silly if Illyrio was watching.

“Do you need something?” Illyrio’s voice rang through his head. It was impossible to tell how close or far he was, since the whisper stones transmitted their messages faithfully at any distance.

“No,” John said sullenly. “Just looking for a new place to be sick and angry.”

An arm hooked itself through his own and led him toward the right. John quickly conjured a cane, though he didn’t need it. Illyrio led him to a seat. John ran his hands over it and found that it was a couch, or at least a sort of bench with arm rests and a lot of cushions. He sat curled up at one end of it, his head throbbing dully.

“I was just going to bring this down to you. Here, you should eat something.”

Illyrio guided John’s hand to a warm bowl on a table beside him, and in the other hand he placed a utensil that turned out to be a sort of triangular-shaped spoon.

“I do not feel like eating.”

“You’ll feel better if you do.”

John twirled the spoon in his hands. Then he called up a little magic, and the spoon became soft and rubbery. He tied the spoon into a bow.

“You know,” John whispered into the stone, “in many earth myths, the god of the underworld tricks you into staying in the underworld by giving you food. Once you eat his food, you are trapped with him forever.”

“Well, we’re already trapped together forever, aren’t we?” Illyrio replied. “So you might as well eat.”

John merely hovered his hand over the bowl, feeling the warm steam caress his palm. Its contents smelled comforting, like fresh bread, aged cheese, and apple cider in a meadow in the afternoon. He considered eating it, but then he just returned to playing with the spoon.

The couch shuddered, and John surmised that Illyrio had seated himself on the other end of it.

“You know, I wasn’t lying when I said I wanted to be a better man,” Illyrio volunteered.

John snorted derisively. Then his heart ached, because the snort reminded him of Sam.

“Think about it from their perspective, John. How would you feel if your plane were on the verge of collapse, and the one person who could save it declined to do so because he simply didn’t care?”

John’s face grew hot at the accusation.

“It is more complicated than that, Illyrio. You know it is. Who are these people to you, anyway? It is not your plane either.”

Illyrio was silent for a moment. John waited, confused. Then a realization dawned on him, and he felt as though he’d swallowed a stone. His face grew even hotter, but this time with shame rather than indignation.

“I have no homeland to protect anymore,” Illyrio replied in a hard, cold voice. “Vashtar is gone. So I must find someplace else to care about.”

John waited for some kind of outburst, but it did not come. He continued folding the soft spoon in on itself like clay.

“I am sorry for the part that I played in that, Illyrio. I regret it deeply, I really do.”

The cushions shifted slightly.

“The plan to save Vashtar might have worked.”

“It almost certainly would not have worked.”

“Well we’ll never know, will we?! Since you sabotaged it!” The whisper stone prevented Illyrio’s volume from rising, but his voice shook with fury.

“Yes. Yes, I am sorry.”

With a flick, the spoon became a rigid utensil again. John picked up the bowl and scooped up a bite of the stew. Only once he took a bite did he notice the tines against his tongue. The spoon was a fork. He flicked it a couple more times until it became a spoon again. John took another bite and chewed thoughtfully.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Illyrio. What does one say, after a thing like that? Sorry? Sorry I ruined your life? Sorry I helped destroy everything you loved? Maybe that is why we stopped talking. Because we both realized there was nothing left to say.”

John tried to focus on the stew to distract himself. He ate in silence for a few moments, savoring the foreign flavors and textures with the few senses that were left to him. Meanwhile, he struggled to think of something meaningful to say.

“We have both done terrible things that we regret,” he ventured. “And yet... it is *so hard* to forgive you, Illyrio. Let alone trust you. I wish we could be like a real father and son, but you have treated me like dog shit for as long as I can remember. Why? Is it because you think I am stupid, or... or, dispensable? Or what?”

Illyrio paused, apparently considering the question carefully.

“Stupid? Maybe sometimes. Dispensable? Never. Quite the opposite. I treat you the way I treat you because I know you are special. You are capable of so much more than you think you are. You could do so much good for the multiverse, John, if you would only agree to be a part of it.”

John put down his soup roughly, feeling the clatter he could not hear.

“I could do good for the multiverse, or I could do good for you?”

“Both!”

“So, just because I am good at magic, that means I have to sacrifice my life to it? All I ever wanted is a normal life, with a nice girl, and to do silly magic and make pretty things! And that was never good enough for you!”

“You never wanted a normal life, Crastor, you just wanted an easy life! A life without responsibilities, or consequences, or difficult choices!”

John opened his mouth to respond, but he had no words.

“Cr—John, I know your childhood with me was difficult, but it was meaningful and important. It contributed much to magical science.”

“You means *the experiments you did on me* contributed much to magical science.”

“Yes! The work we did together spawned new fields of research, and even a new religion!”

“What? You are joking.”

“I’m not joking. Our greatest contributions were toward understanding life after death, after all.”

John smiled skeptically. “What, you mean immortality? Us?”

“That’s part of it. You mean you don’t know?”

“All I know is that you made an immortality potion that worked twice. First it worked on me. Then it worked on you, when you crawled into your laboratory and drank it after I left you for dead. Bloody useless after that, and no one knows why.”

“The potion is only a small piece of the puzzle. The Kothkari is... are... the heart of it.”

“What... er, is or are the Kothkari?”

Again, Illyrio paused and seemed to think. The couch sprang up, releasing his weight.

“Are you done with your soup?”

John nodded. He pushed the bowl away slightly, and then he felt it disappear. Illyrio was cleaning up. Stalling.

“I’m waiting for an answer.” The whisper stones were convenient for holding a conversation even when the other person was out of the room.

“Yes, yes. It’s just rather hard to explain. But you must know that. I really thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What we are.”

John’s heart began racing. He had always had a thousand questions about what he was. How many others were there? Was there some secret trick to killing him? Did he have an infinite number of lives, or a limited number, like a cat with 999 lives? Would he reach a certain age and then die? Or would he live *forever*, until the sun exploded, until all life everywhere was extinct, and he would just drift in space for billions of years until the universe itself collapsed?

“You knew, or perhaps know, the Kothkari better than anyone. When you were a child, you called them ‘the purple people’.”

John inhaled sharply. He stroked the couch cushion next to the arm rest nervously.

“The purple people... they were real?”

“Of course. That’s how I found you, and it’s why I took you in. You had some special connection to them, unlike anything that’s been reported before or since.”

John did not speak. He scarcely dared to breathe.

“When people die, their souls ascend to the Kothkari,” Illyrio continued. “A peaceful, benevolent, and perhaps extremely powerful sentient entity. Or collection of entities. It’s hard to say. Back then, the Kothkari didn’t have a name. We were just beginning to learn of their existence. They can be detected only as subtle perturbations in certain magical fields.”

John had always thought of it as his ‘other’ childhood, those fragmented memories of the misty purple people who took him in like family. Things with them had been perfect. They had been perfect, albeit a bit hard to understand sometimes. They had been kind and loving, beyond time and space, yet infinitely curious about the material world. He’d always assumed that they were just a childish fantasy, an imaginary friend that he’d invented.

“So the purple people were... like... heaven? Paradise? For dead souls?”

“Yes. I figured that out based on what you told me. You were closer to them than anyone, closer than any Hitchri or even Hitchari has ever been.”

“I have no idea what those are.”

“Well, if you haven’t been following up on our research, you wouldn’t. First, the Hitchri. Sometimes, a person dies and there is a problem incorporating their soul into the Kothkari. They are, for some unknown reason, rejected, like a bad organ transplant. The soul returns to the body, and it stays with the body until the Kothkari decide to finally accept the soul. These people are apparently immortal, for they cannot ascend and die. You and I are Hitchri.”

John shot up off the couch. He began pacing about, and promptly ran his shin into what felt like a coffee table.

“Ouch!”

“Cr—John, what are you doing? Settle down,” John felt Illyrio’s hand on his shoulder. John shook it off, and paced around the little table.

“What the hell, Illyrio?! Why did you not tell me? This is huge!”

“Well, we weren’t exactly on friendly terms.”

“For nearly six hundred earth years, I have been desperate to understand what I am!”

“Maybe you should have taken more of an interest in my research and less of an interest in vengeance.”

John let out an exasperated grunt. “You...” He pointed a menacing finger that was probably nowhere near Illyrio’s direction, but then he retracted it. He bit his tongue, literally. This conversation was too important to devolve into bickering.

“Your potion. Why did it only work for us, and only at that time?”

“I’m not sure. The factors that determine the whether a death will create a Hitchri are, as you might imagine, a subject of great interest and heated debate. I think the potion was only part of it. I think another part was your proximity to the Kothkari, and the Kothkari’s interest in us. When they moved on, the potion lost its power.”

John continued to pace, but very slowly. He had a million questions, but he had to prioritize them. He didn’t know how long Illyrio would be in a talkative mood.

“So we *will* die, someday. Really die.”

“Yes.”

“When? How? How do the purple people decide to let you in?”

“That’s an area of active research. No one can say for sure. From what I hear—and this is little more than rumor—the Hitchri do not ascend until they are ready to ascend *and* the Kothkari are ready to receive.”

“Well, I have been ready to go back to the purple people since the day they abandoned me.”

“Was it one day, then? All of a sudden?” Illyrio asked eagerly.

“Piss off,” said John with disgust. “I am not your research subject anymore.” Then he walked into the couch and fell painfully onto it in a clumsy, lopsided heap.

“I meant to do that,” he said, straightening himself into a seated position.

“Here, let me move this table.”

“How long do immortal people usually live? I’ve only ever met a couple of them.”

“I’ve no idea. I’ve never heard of any Hitchri dying at younger than an interplanar eon, but that doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened.”

John knew that an interplanar eon was roughly 8,000 earth years.

“And the oldest?”

“That’s even harder to answer. The oldest beings in the multiverse are the Hitchari.”

“That’s different from Hitchri?”

“Yes. When a Hitchri is ready to ascend to the Kothkari, and the Kothkari is ready to receive them, there is the possibility that there may, again, be a problem. A second rejection. And so the soul may be cast out again, but for some reason, the body decays this time. The Hitchari is a disembodied soul. They are people, but not quite human. They are pure energy, with limited capacity for rational reasoning, at least at first. As I say, these are the oldest beings in the multiverse, besides the Kothkari itself. The oldest Hitchari in the known multiverse claims to be older than the current era.”

The current interplanar era covered the past million years or so. John felt light-headed as he tried to imagine living to be a million years old. His headache was resurging, burning behind his eyes, but he paid it little heed. He stood and began pacing again, to try and orient himself. The table was gone this time.

“So let me get this straight. Normally when somebody dies, their soul joins the Kothkari. If there is a screw-up, they do not die, but instead become immortal. If there is a screw-up when an *immortal* person dies, they become a broken, disembodied soul.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m the first thing. A Hitchri.”

“As far as I know. But you always were in a class of your own, John. I was a researcher, tracking the Kothkari, when I found you. I could hardly believe it. You were a mere mortal, a child at that, and yet you talked as if you knew the Kothkari intimately. You could see them, but they were invisible to us. You knew things about the Kothkari that only researchers could know. And you knew things about the world that only the dead could know.”

John nodded. He remembered sharing his memories with the purple people, and he remembered them sharing memories with him. He continued pacing slowly. He could take about four steps without running into any furniture. So he went up and down the room, four steps forward, four steps back.

“How would I know if I have ever met a Hitchari? The, er, broken, disembodied soul?”

“Well, you will be meeting one very soon.”

John stopped pacing. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he suddenly remembered the conclusion he’d reached in his sickbed.

“The Hitchari are bodiless, but no one likes to be homeless,” Illyrio continued. “They often take up residence in objects or places.”

*Or people*, John thought.

“This volcano I told you about is no ordinary volcano. The locals say it is occupied by their goddess. I know better. It is occupied by a Hitchari.”

John sighed heavily. “I knew it. I fucking knew it.”

“What?”

“You have someone who needs a body.”

“Oh. Yes, that is the gist of it.”

John closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Well she is going to be disappointed when she gets this one. It is missing a couple of pieces,” he said bitterly.

“I suspect that that will be the least of her disappointments. But we’ll discuss your task when we arrive. Come. You should rest, and I have some correspondences to attend to.”

John knew he had many more questions, but he could not articulate them in that moment. His head was spinning with all this exciting, if somewhat disconcerting, information. Only one question managed to rise to the top.

“What do you mean, ‘that will be the least of her disappointments’?”

“Come, John, we are both tired. We can talk more later.”

Illyrio took John’s arm again and led him slowly away from the sitting room. John did not conjure a cane this time. A few moments later, Illyrio was placing John’s hand on the railing of the staircase down to the bedroom.

“Illyrio?”

“Yes, John?”

“Can I have the antidote yet?”

“No.”

“But I have been very good!”

“Yes, that is the point of withholding the antidote.”

“Then I can be bad. I can be a pain in your arse until you give it to me.”

Illyrio sighed. “You’ve already been a pain in my arse for a very long time, John. I’ve rather gotten used to it.”

~

Returning to bed meant returning to the chaos of his own anxious mind. John was beginning to think that the worst part of his current disability was not bumping into coffee tables, but rather these moments of being utterly alone with himself, bored and anxious, while the world hummed and danced beyond his reach.

How could Illyrio have kept all of this from him? How can he have shared it all so matter-of-factly, as if he were giving a scientific lecture? This was the most important thing John had learned since the birds and the bees. For centuries, he’d grappled with doubt and anguish about how his existence might end. Again and again, he’d built a life for himself in thrusts of worldly optimism, but anything he built inevitably collapsed like a house of cards. On more than one occasion, he’d enacted a marathon of suicides in the hopes that each death might be his last. Meanwhile, the purple people had only ever been a distant memory to him, threads of a dusty, moth-eaten tapestry depicting the good parent he’d never had.

And now, out of the blue, answers had suddenly fallen into his lap! The purple people had been real! John would not linger in despair forever while civilization wasted away around him! He simply suffered from an unusually long life span, that was all. All his pain, anger, and anxiety seemed to soften in light of these facts. What torment could he not endure, knowing that things would be alright, in the end? And yet, how long would he have to wait to enter the gates of paradise?

He tossed and turned in his bed. He couldn’t tell whether he’d been lying there for half an hour or several. The sheets were stifling over his t-shirt and flannel pajama pants. The pillow was an odd foam block. He was anxious and uncomfortable in bed, but leaving it would have only been worse.

Suddenly, he thought he felt something brush his shoulder. He tensed. He reached over and felt around his shoulder, as if he might encounter some insect there, but he found nothing. He returned uneasily to resting on his side. A moment later something definitely shook his shoulder.

John sat bolt upright.

“Ice on your mother’s cunt, Illyrio, if you want me, use the bloody stone! Do not sneak up on me like a nervous mouse!”

He grabbed his whisper stone from the bedside table and put the smooth, cold pebble in his ear.

“What in hell do you want?” he whispered. “Oh, sorry, what *the* hell. Heaven forbid I let my Planeswalkiri curses deteriorate.”

He waited for a response, but none came.

“Illyrio?”

A hand curled around his. It was warm, soft and delicate. The bed undulated as somebody sat on it. John extended his free hand in front of him. It was immediately guided to a smooth, feminine face. John explored it with his hands. This head was not bald. It had very, very long hair.

“Oh my God,” he whispered, as his useless eyes opened wide.

He ripped the stone out of his ear and returned it to the table, cursing himself for bringing only two of them. Then he turned back to his visitor.

“Sam. Oh God, Sam, please tell me this is a dream.”

A pair of fingers gently pinched a bit of his skin.

John couldn't help but smile.

“Ah, thanks.”

As suddenly as it had appeared, the smile fell from his face.

“What on earth are you doing here, Sam?” Then he paused, cursing himself again. “Sorry, of course you can't answer that. I mean, I can't hear your answers. Ugh,” he sighed in frustration. “You've probably surmised that I can't see or hear. I'm sorry. I...” against his will, hot tears began welling in his eyes.

Sam lunged forward in the bed and hugged him.

“I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry,” he whispered into her ear, cradling the back of her head. All the stress of the past couple of days surged up and fought to escape from his eyes. How was this possible? How did she get here? How could he have let this happen? Sam was in terrible danger and it was all his fault. He was in no fit state to protect her. He held her tightly, as if this would keep her safe. He would not let her disappear into the dark, silent confusion that was the world beyond his grasp.

They parted a little but did not release each other. She lay one hand against the side of his face. He did the same with hers. They might have kissed, then, but neither of them moved to do it.

“Oh, Sam, I don't know where to begin. Are you alright? What am I saying, of course you're not alright. I mean, are you physically alright?”

She nodded.

“You're not hurt, or hungry, or anything?”

She shook her head.

John closed his eyes with relief. Sam caressed his face, bringing one finger to each of his eyelids. Then she brought one hand to each of his ears and tugged on them gently.

“Oh, you're wondering why I'm, er, deaf and blind.”

She nodded.

“Yes. A natural question. It's only temporary.” John tried to sound more confident than he felt. “Illyrio—the purple man—you've met him?”

Sam nodded again.

“He did this. Honestly it's not the first time he's done something like this. This is what he does.” John sighed. “This is what we do. Anyways, I just have to take care of something for him. A favor I really don't want to do, but it's the only way to get my senses back, so I'm going to do it.”

Sam grasped one of his hands and squeezed it reassuringly. John smiled.

“I'm glad you're here, Sam. But damn it, I wish you weren't here. How did you get here? Er, sorry. Not a yes or no question. Did you come here on purpose?”

She shook her head. No.

“Did he abduct you?”

She nodded. Yes.

“Son of a bitch. I'm going to kill him.” John gripped her hand tightly. “I don't know how, but I'm going to kill him. He is unbelievable. And you know, when I confront him about it, he's just going to give me some story about how it's for *the greater good*. He's been hiding behind that 'greater good' defense his whole fucking life. There is no justification for this, none! How dare he sit there and talk like I'm the one causing problems? Like I'm the one who's forcing him to be an arse? And just when

were finally having a nice little father-son bonding moment, it turns out he had *you* imprisoned in the other room the whole time! Hell, maybe you were even tied up in a corner! I wouldn't have known!"

Sam put a finger to his lips. Then she pulled it away and kissed him lightly. John was startled out of his rage. For several moments, he was too surprised to say anything. He felt the mattress shift under them. Sam was settling herself at the head of the bed, and she tugged on John to join her. They both sat up with their backs against the wall, their shoulders nestled together. They had apparently silently agreed that the kind of touching and nudging that would have been inappropriate two days ago was permissible here. In fact, they had not broken their physical contact since Sam had first reached out to him. John was grateful for her touching, even as he felt guilty allowing it.

"Does he know you're here? With me, now?"

Sam shrugged.

"Huh. Oookay. You haven't talked to him, have you? As far as I know, he doesn't speak English."

She shook her head.

"Right." John gently stroked her sleeve. It was not a Hogwarts uniform. It was a sturdy, high quality cloth with detailed embroidery. One of Illyrio's, then. John's heart ached to know everything that had happened to Sam since Illyrio had found her, wherever and however he'd found her.

"Oh Sam, I wish I could hear you. All I can do is blather on to you. Do you like this, me talking to you? Would it help if I explain things?"

She nodded vigorously.

John sighed. "Well, where to begin. You remember when I told you that I got a late start on the pumpkin juice because I was raised by a space alien? Turns out I wasn't joking. Worst dad in the bloody multiverse."

Sam's head turned toward him. She elbowed him gently twice in the ribs.

"What? Oh, the multiverse? Yes, well. We live in a multiverse, for lack of a better word. There are a lot of different planes out there. Planes are essentially planets. That is, for the most part they act like planets, but they're connected in other, magical ways. Mainly, they're connected by portals. The magical energy behind the portals is always shifting and changing, so it's usually a dangerous business using the portals. A portal might pop up in one place today and be gone tomorrow. Or it might take you to one plane today and a different plane tomorrow. Or it might drop you to the bottom of the ocean, or in the middle of space. Actually, some planes don't have any reliable portals, so the best way to get to them is through a nearby portal in space. Then you need a spaceship to go the rest of the way. Please don't ask me about the metaphysics because I really don't understand it myself."

Sam was idly stroking his hand.

"I'm not boring you, am I?"

She shook her head vigorously.

"Well then, I ought to tell you about the Hegemony. It's the reason we can't tell anyone on earth about the multiverse. The Hegemony is a big, evil empire that devours planes. Uses them up and calls it progress. When people on isolated planes first make contact with the Hegemony, they often welcome it with open arms. In the end, they discover their mistake. Once the Hegemony finds a new plane, it will incorporate that plane into its culture and its economy by any means necessary. The native people will either talk, dress, and work as the Hegemony demands, or they will face genocide and enslavement. Maybe they will face genocide and enslavement anyway. No one has ever successfully shut the Hegemony out. The planes that reject Hegemony rule face the harshest retribution. Earth wouldn't stand a chance against the Hegemony, so our best hope is to hide from it."

Sam's hand felt rigid but alert.

"The portals that are regulated by the Hegemony are pretty safe. However, most portals are neither regulated nor safe. There are some people who deal with these unsafe portals, and they are called planeswalkers. Some planeswalkers are essentially explorers, paid by the Hegemony to seek out

new planes they might exploit. It's a dangerous job, but there are some people skilled enough and desperate enough to do it. Illyrio is a planeswalker, the whoreson, but he's at least had the decency not to tell anyone about earth."

John pushed a lock of hair behind Sam's ear.

"I'm sorry to burden you with all of this."

She planted a kiss on his cheek, and then leaned her head on his shoulder. He leaned his head against hers. She smelled like old books and candlelight and cinnamon. He yearned to wrap himself in her.

"I don't know why Illyrio abducted you, but I think it's just another..." he grimaced. "*Incentive* to get me to do this favor. I'll do it, and then I'll get my senses back, and then we'll go home. Everything will be alright." He felt more confident just saying it aloud. Then he realized he was reassuring himself as much as he was reassuring her.

Sam began wriggling in her side of the bed. An arm protruded in front of John as he kept a light touch on it. She was removing her robe.

"Uhh, Sam, what are you doing?"

He maintained light contact with her shoulders until she settled down, lying on the bed as if to go to sleep. She was wearing something light and thin, a kind of slip or nightgown. She tugged down gently on the collar of his t-shirt.

"Sam," John began, at a loss for words. "I'm still your teacher."

She put one finger over his lips, and beckoned him down again. He wanted nothing more than to join her. Then, Illyrio's words echoed in his memory.

*"You never wanted a normal life, Crastor, you just wanted an easy life! A life without responsibilities, or consequences, or difficult choices!"*

John suddenly felt very tired. He was tired from the weight of his affections, tired of feeling torn and guilty and confused.

"Please, Sam. Nothing... intimate. Okay?"

She held up one hand rigidly as if to say, "I swear to it."

"How is it that you manage to be sassy without even talking?"

She took his hand and, with her own, tapped the side of her nose conspiratorially.

John smirked and settled back into the bed beside her. He lay on his back, facing the ceiling. She wrapped her arms around one of his. He was glad that her hands did not wander.

They lay like that, Sam nestling against his arm, for several minutes. John was suddenly reminded of his first lover. The one Illyrio had killed. What was her name? It had been something short. Sara? Clara? He felt ashamed that he couldn't remember. He only remembered how she'd made him feel. She'd made him feel just like Sam made him feel now. Safe, reassured, and a little sad. He wasn't sure whether that sadness was a bad sign, or whether love was always supposed to include a thread of sadness.

"Do you want to hear something stupid?" he asked. One of Sam's fingers lightly traced the rim of his ear.

"I've taken a few naps since this happened, and every time I wake up, I start panicking because I can't see, and I'm afraid that I've gone blind. And then I remember that I have gone blind. And then I stop panicking."

She gently caressed his ear with the back of her finger.

"Isn't that the most idiotic thing you've ever heard?" He laid his hand against her face so that he could feel her response. She shook her head. He closed his eyes and breathed in her autumn scent. The tragedy of it all dug its claws into him. It was so devastating, so unfair, that he couldn't hear her. She was right here, and yet she was so far away.

"Last week, I said that I wanted to be alone," he said quietly. "I suppose, in a way, I got my wish."

She put one hand on his shoulder and squeezed it tightly. He could almost feel the love and warmth emanating from that little gesture, as if her touch were a healing poultice.

“God forgive me for ever dancing with you,” he whispered. She nuzzled her cheek against his shoulder. Then John closed his eyes and drifted off to peaceful sleep.

~

John woke abruptly to the sensation of something scrambling about on top of him. His heart leapt out of his chest. Terrified, he tried to remember where he was and why he couldn't see. All was darkness and confusion. He reached out to the thing that had been on top of him and found a wrist. The wrist turned, and soft fingers interlaced his. Then he remembered that he was blind and deaf, and Sam was beside him. His heart continued pounding, but his muscles relaxed.

He sat up, and something punched him in the shoulder.

“Illyrio, I swear by Christ's sandals that if that is you, you will regret the day you made yourself immortal.”

John reached over to the whisper stone on the bedside table and put it in his ear.

“I have never regretted my own immortality, John. Unlike you, I do not cope with disappointment by despising myself.”

John swept one hand forward as if he were throwing a frisbee, casting a curse that would pin Illyrio to the wall. He could not see whether it worked.

“Calm yourself, John. Do you really want to be tossing about deadly magic with your mortal lover by your side?”

“Sam is not my lover,” John retorted as he gripped Sam's hand more tightly.

“Sure. All the same. Bad behavior from you can only mean bad news for her.”

“Do not dare threaten her Illyrio, I am warning you...”

“What'll you do John? Make my life a living hell? Go ahead, once our errand is over. But for the present moment, do not make this girl pay for your inability to control your temper.”

John closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. He wanted desperately to strike Illyrio down, and to instruct Sam to grab the stone from Illyrio's ear while he was incapacitated. If he could just be sure that his magic hadn't missed, if he could just keep Illyrio pinned down, then Sam could get the stone safely. He longed to hear her voice, even just one sentence. It would make this whole fiasco infinitely more tolerable. But John did not attack again. He would not attack again. Illyrio was right. He might miss, or worse, he might hit Sam.

“You are...”

“Yes, yes, I know. I am a selfish bastard, the worst father ever. What was I supposed to do when you materialized at the portal with this girl on your arm? Let her go, so that she could sound the alarm about me, and about the portal? Would you have preferred that?”

John was surprised by this. Sam had been on his arm when he'd used the hearthstone? How? Had she been in his room above the art studio? He remembered how she'd dogged him around campus the previous week, when she'd wanted to talk. Had she come up to his room, wanting to talk again? He remembered feeling that he was being watched as he'd packed his bag. And he remembered something tugging on his arm as he'd activated the stone. At the time, he'd thought nothing of it.

John threw back the sheets and climbed around Sam, out of bed. She followed him. They stood across from Illyrio, or at least where John thought Illyrio was. John stood in front of Sam protectively.

“You should have told me,” he spat. “You should have told me she was there, so that I could have spoken to her.”

“Yes, well, it all happened rather quickly. She was there, you were crippled, and the portal was threatening to shift course at any moment. I had to make a decision.”

“Conveniently, your decision resulted in giving you additional leverage against me.”

Illyrio's sigh was audible through the whisper stone.

"You know, John, it would be more convenient for me if she weren't here. Now I have two enemies to keep under control. Two enemies who might conspire against me."

"Conspire against you?! Have you forgotten that I cannot bloody hear?"

Sam gripped his shoulders firmly and rotated them. At first, John resisted, confused. Then he realized that she must be reorienting him so that he was facing Illyrio.

"For all I know, you've been hiding another of these little stones somewhere," Illyrio replied. "That's why I've been keeping you apart. Perhaps I was being paranoid. On the other hand, I seem to have underestimated Sam, because she escaped from her room and found you."

"How do you know her name?" John snapped.

"You said it a few moments ago."

"Oh." John supposed this must be true, but he still felt suspicious and resentful.

"I assure you, I have treated her as I would treat a guest."

"Do you usually lock your guests in their rooms?"

"Aside from that."

Illyrio must have strode across the room, because Sam rotated John by the shoulders again.

"Look, John," Illyrio continued, "We've arrived. Let's go. We'll leave Sam on the ship."

"Don't tell me to *look*, you insensitive cur. We will take Sam. She is not going to tell anyone about your precious uncharted plane."

John reached behind him for Sam's hand. When he found it, it was like finding a railing on steep stair. It meant safety and security. It meant he wasn't alone.

"Fine. But you'll have to let her go eventually."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just that if you want to protect her, the top of an active volcano might not be the best place to do it."

~

Illyrio's mystery plane was, as promised, very warm. It was also muggy and humid. With Sam's help, and to Illyrio's annoyance, John had caught tactile glimpses of the plants growing around them as they'd made their way to the city at the foot of the volcano. He'd felt broad ferns, many-layered flowers, and enormous plants with thick stems and waxy leaves. The place was tropical, which would have been pleasant if not for the smoke. If John had still needed proof of Illyrio's story about the volcano, he got it in the form of that oppressive air pollution.

John had expected some meeting in which he would be briefed on what exactly he was doing here. However, there was no meeting. Mostly, he and Sam had just waited in a building made of clay and straw. In the ship, their physical contact had been playful, but as the smoke from the volcano sapped their energy and clawed at their lungs, their mutual company became lethargic and subdued. Finally, Illyrio returned and delivered a terse briefing.

The people of this indigenous nation were desperate to speak to their volcano goddess. They had pleaded with her by every means they knew. Nevertheless, she continued spewing smoke and, according to the omens, threatening destruction. John's task was to allow her to possess him, so that the native people might speak with her and negotiate some kind of peace. John, Illyrio, and some priests and other leaders would hike to a sacred cave near the top of the volcano, where they would perform a ritual inviting the goddess to enter John. They would set out immediately.

John said a painful goodbye to Sam. The only thing that eased the pain was the knowledge that Illyrio was right: she would hardly be safe at the top of a volcano, where her only friend was possessed by a destructive volcano goddess. They hugged for a long time. At John's obstinate insistence, Illyrio grudgingly handed over his whisper stone to Sam.

“Just for a moment,” was the last thing Illyrio said.

John nodded.

“Sam? You have to whisper, or the stone won’t work.”

“John? Can you hear me?”

John laughed and embraced her. It was the first time she’d addressed him by his first name. Not ‘Professor’, or ‘John Hennessy’, but simply ‘John’. He didn’t care what she called him. Just hearing her voice was an immense relief.

Without releasing her from his arms, he said, “If there’s anything you want to say to me, say it now. We only have a moment.”

There was a pause. John feared that something had gone wrong. Perhaps Illyrio had wrestled the stone back from her.

“Sam? Talk to me,” he said feverishly. “You’re okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Then her chipper voice resonated clearly in his mind.

“What’ve you got your knickers all in a twist for? It’s just a wee holiday.”

John laughed, even as tears of grief welled in his eyes. He felt lighter. He moved out of their embrace, but held onto her hands. Her lips met his. They kissed passionately, as if the whole world were melting away as it had on the night of the harvest dance.

They broke apart, and Sam pulled one of her hands out of his. A moment later, John’s heart plummeted into his stomach as he once again heard Illyrio’s voice in his head.

“See, you hardly even need the stone. Come on. The sooner we get this done, the sooner you can both go home.”

Several hours later, John’s throat was dry and nearly numb from pain as he climbed the volcanic mountain. The smoke stung his eyes, nose, and mouth. Occasionally, he lifted his shirt to his mouth to try and filter out the smoke, but the cloth did next to nothing. Dully, he reflected that he had now lost three senses: sight, sound, and now smell, for the only scent penetrating his raw, tender nose was that of smoke. The path up the mountain was rocky, and his progress was slow. His feet were swollen, clumsy, and throbbing. His shirt and the waist and crotch of his shorts—he was glad that he’d managed to pack shorts, in his feverish haste—were damp with sweat. He faltered on loose or uneven rocks, probably every few minutes but it felt like every few feet. In one hand, he felt the ground ahead of him with a walking stick the natives had given to him. His other hand leaned on a burly arm belonging to one of them.

“Are we there yet?” John whined in a whisper to the stone in his ear.

“If we were there, would we still be hiking?”

“How long have we been hiking?”

“About half of a quadrante.”

John could not recall how many earth hours were in an interplanar quadrante.

“Are you sure we cannot just use magic to go up the mountain? Or at least to banish the smoke?”

“No. I told you, the pre-ritual hike is part of the ritual. It is a sign of respect to H—, I mean, to the goddess. The Hitchari.”

John was too tired to tell Illyrio that there couldn’t possibly be any harm in telling John the Hitchari’s name. Whom would he tell?

“You know, Illyrio, I have been thinking.”

“Now there’s a surprise.”

John was about to hurl some insult when a pointed rock jabbed at the arch of his foot. John clung to the steady arm of the native man who was guiding him.

“Owww! Ugh. I just wanted to ask...” John hesitated. Was there even any point in asking?

“Yes?”

“Well, sometimes, when things possess me... they don’t want to leave.” The truth was that this was almost always the case.

“I doubt that that will happen this time.”

“But what if it is? What is your plan, if she does not want to leave? What if she overpowers you?” John’s throat was so dry it was an effort even to whisper.

“You are blind and deaf, John. I doubt she will overpower us.”

“Well, then, what if you simply cannot get her out?”

“You’ve always found a way to get your possessors out, haven’t you?”

“Sometimes only by sheer dumb luck!”

“Then we will count on sheer dumb luck.”

As John navigated around a broad, sloping rock he’d found with his stick, he reflected that his intuition had been right. There had been no point in asking.

~

The cave was relatively cool after the day’s sweltering heat. John sat cross-legged on a straw mat. He suspected the sun was setting, based on the steady drop in temperature. He was angry and indignant at having been forced to march to this cave, but he was also tired of being angry and indignant. The centuries of being angry and indignant at Illyrio weighed heavily on him, so that he felt stooped and aged. He felt resigned, and there was a miserable kind of serenity in that.

“They’re nearly ready to begin.”

“I should not be blind and deaf for this. The ritual is more likely to work if I can participate in it.”

“Don’t act as if you know anything about these peoples’ magic.”

“Of course I do not, but I do know a thing or two about magic in general, and I am telling you, I ought to be a part of the ritual. Or at least able to hear it.”

“You will be a part of it. You’ll be in the middle of it.”

“A baby would be more engaged in it! You are treating me like an object! I am not an object, I am a magician!”

John waited for a response, but none came. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he began to cough, as the smoky air tore at his already ragged throat. He desperately wished for the thousandth time that this whole thing would just be over and done with.

“It’s starting,” rang Illyrio’s voice in his head.

John thought he felt warm bodies pressing in on either side, though neither actually touched him. He felt eyes watching him as he stared dully into the darkness.

A hand placed one of John’s fingers on a smooth, vertical, wooden surface. It was wrapped in a network of cords. John traced his finger up and down the object until he determined it to be the shell of a mid-sized drum. As he traversed it lengthwise, he encountered one of the drummer’s thighs hugging it.

For a minute, nothing happened. His tired, aching legs pressed into the straw mat on which he sat, while his fingers rested lightly on the drum. Suddenly, the drum vibrated with such intensity that he felt it in his bones.

Again and again, the drum vibrated powerfully, resonating through John’s entire arm with each beat. He thought he recognized a tresillo pattern. One-two-three one-two-three one-two one-two-three one-two-three one-two. It was moving, exciting, even a little sexy. He tried to imagine what it might have sounded like, but soon gave up on this. The imagined sound was vague and distant. It just wasn’t the same as real sound.

Somebody gently grasped his shoulders and directed him to sway with the music. A flame of resentment flared up in John at this. How dare they force him to first hike a mountain while blind, and

then move to music he couldn't hear? It was an insult upon another insult. He wanted to sit still in stubborn defiance, while the rest of them sang and danced and succumbed to the spiritual frenzy. But he did not defy them. Instead, he thought of Sam, and he swayed as directed, though he wore a stubborn scowl.

John tried to lean in to the energy of the ritual, but the truth was that he felt nothing except the same sickening resignation he'd been feeling ever since that insidious handshake. He touched his shins, stroking the smooth indentations in his flesh that the straw mat had made. He rubbed his chapped lips together. Even with the drum's hypnotic vibrations, he was bored as he waited for the ritual to run its course. Bored, and very, very tired.

Some minutes later—how many, John could not guess—the drumming slowed. The beat changed to an even march. Then it stopped. He waited. They were probably making some kind of closing invocation, a prayer of praise or gratitude. John was merely grateful that it was over. Then he remembered what the ritual was meant to accomplish, and he frowned in consternation.

“John? Are you there?”

“Yes.”

“And no one else?”

John tried to quiet his mind, and to search for some voice or presence that was not familiar.

“No. I think your ritual failed.”

“Are you sure? Try harder. Listen for her.”

“Piss off, you mouldy loaf. I am trying. Why would I lie? How could I lie, if it had worked? I told you the ritual would not work without my taking part in it. Give me the antidote, and then try it again, and it will work.”

Illyrio paused. A minute passed. John suspected that Illyrio might be conferring with the locals. He thought he felt a tangible tension in the smoky air, but perhaps he was merely self-conscious. Everyone in the room was surely watching him. Finally, Illyrio's voice rang in his head again.

“We will spend the night here and try again at sunrise. The head priest has some ideas about how the ritual might be improved. We will try those first, and if the ritual still doesn't work, then I'll consider your suggestion, John.”

“Oh for fuck's sake, Illyrio. Would you just admit that I am right and you are wrong?”

“You're guessing based on some vague intuition. You have no more idea about this than I do.”

John felt his cheeks flush. He felt indignant, but he couldn't bring himself to make a snide retort. Perhaps Illyrio was right. He was guessing, after all.

He took the whisper stone out of his ear and dropped it into the pocket of his shorts. He massaged his ear, which was sore from the presence of the stone all day. He wished that he could massage his brain, which felt equally sore from Illyrio's intrusive presence.

~

John tossed about uncomfortably on his straw mat. Even after his wearying hike, he was somehow tired but not sleepy. A rumpled woven blanket lay by his side. The night was warm, even in a cave at a high elevation. In fact, he felt positively hot. Heat was radiating from his skin.

He was too angry to sleep. Whereas he couldn't bring himself to talk back to Illyrio earlier, now a tirade of responses raced through his mind. All the things he wanted to say to Illyrio danced on his lips in the faintest half-whisper. *You say I am incompetent, that I am just guessing. That's not what you were saying when your precious Vashtar crumbled between your clumsy fingers. Haven't you noticed that the harder you try to master me, the higher is the price you ultimately pay? Or will I have to take away everything you love before you learn to fear me?* He wanted to wound Illyrio as deeply as possible. He wanted to dismember him and eat the pieces. He would not eat Illyrio's black and rotten heart, though. He would feed that to the pigs, though maybe even they would not eat it.

John sat up. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead into his eyebrows. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. He was shaking all over with some tremor that emanated from deep within his abdomen. He extended his right hand outward until he felt the wall of the cave. It was cool and smooth, and John felt layers of paint. Desperate to stretch and to feel a breeze on his skin, he grabbed his shoes from beside his mat and slowly crawled forward toward the mouth of the cave. He moved by cautious inches, feeling the ground in front of him with his left hand. Whenever he reached the edge of another straw mat, he carefully worked his way around it.

He reached the mouth of the cave and stood, stretching his stiff muscles. He slipped on his shoes. Then he began walking away from the cave, his right hand brushing the mountainside. It felt good to keep moving. His heart was beating fast, and he didn't know why. He wasn't afraid. He felt energized and alert, as if his body were gearing up for a fight.

He tripped over a rock. He reacted instinctively, extending his hands so that he fell onto the heels of his palms. One of them landed on a brittle plant. He swallowed his pain. He brushed the spindly plant parts out of the wound. Then he picked himself up and continued walking.

He felt an urge to get as high up as possible, like a cat. He wanted to survey the lands below. Of course, he would not be able to see them, but that didn't seem to matter much.

Eventually the wall of the mountain, which he'd been following, sloped downward and disappeared. There was only open space around him now. His steps were cautious but steady. He did not extend his hands in front of him. There would be no obstacles here. The air tasted smokier than ever, but breathing was not painful. The breeze fluttered around him, just cool enough to energize him without being cold. Heat was emanating from a source on his right. He walked toward it. He was penetrating a wall of heat, which hung as thick as cotton. With each footstep his feet searched the ground lightly before stepping on it, in case he encountered the edge of the volcanic crater.

Suddenly, a hand clasped his shoulder. He spun around and extended his right hand toward the person behind him. Rage coursed through his arm and blossomed in his hand, which grew hot. He was holding a fireball in front of the intruder as if it were a loaded gun. Would they run away? Perhaps. But there was no harm in assuming they were still there, cowering in fear.

John spoke, and even though the sounds he made were unfamiliar to him, he understood them perfectly.

"I am Hlapula, the goddess of this mountain. I would speak to the leaders of the Ongontu, and only the leaders of the Ongontu. No planeswalkers, do you understand?"

He lowered his arm, and waited for some tactile response. None came, so he turned back to face the hot crater.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered under his breath.

John felt oddly calm. Or maybe it was Hlapula who felt calm. It was hard to tell where he ended and she began. He knew, however, that it was a false calm. Rage bubbled just beneath his skin like the magma beneath his feet.

He took a few more steps, and then decided that he was as close as he would get. He sat cross-legged, with his back to the mouth of the volcano. It would indeed have been a good place from which to survey his surroundings. The crater behind him, in which lava bubbled eagerly, was embedded in a kind of plateau. Then the side of the volcano careened downward, and the city would be at the foot of its eastern side. Beyond the city lay the vast rainforest. Hlapula knew these things.

His back was growing hotter. Surely it would have been very hot to the touch. If he were a mortal man, he might be worried that it was permanently damaging his skin. He reflected idly how accustomed he was to ignoring his back. It turned out there was a lot of sensory information there that he'd always ignored, under the tyranny of hearing and vision.

Out of the darkness two hands gently, reverently, touched his. His hands were guided to a head that was bowed all the way to the ground in front of him. Then the hands disappeared, and John released the head.

“When you are ready to listen, touch my palm. Do not touch it before you are ready, for I will say my piece only once.” He lay the palm of his right hand face-up on his knee.

John didn’t know how he was able to speak this language. Even Hlapula didn’t really know. It wasn’t her language. It was simply the language spoken by the Ongontu, these people who lived at the bottom of her mountain. It was the language in which they prayed to her, for some reason. She had never asked for their prayers. And she certainly did not regard their prayers as a gift she ought to honor.

Somebody touched John’s palm firmly. He took a deep breath, and this time, he did not cough from the smoke.

“You want to ask why I am angry. Why ask a question to which you already know the answer? Because you seek some clever way out of what you know you must do.

“Planeswalkers have come to Gaibelan. Naturally, they are interested in it for the same reason I am: the po po tree. But they do not love the po po tree as I do. As we do. They would harvest it and exploit it, in order to expand the reach of the Hegemony’s cruel arm. They would modify it, master it, and pervert it into a weapon. They would turn it into an instrument of domination and suffering, rather than one of insight and compassion. The po po tree will not suffer this degradation. I will not allow the Hegemony to desecrate the tree.

“You will convince the planeswalkers to leave Gaibelan forever. If you do not, I will destroy the tree in sacred, cleansing fire. Holy things are better destroyed than ruined. And if your city happens to get in the way of that fire, so be it. I cannot control the lava once it has been unleashed. So you see, there is no need for negotiation and no point to it. Your choice is simple. Flee and save yourselves, or protect the planeswalkers and die with them.”

John relaxed, not having noticed how many muscles he’d been clenching as he’d talked. He waited, though he wasn’t sure what he was waiting for. Smoke clung to his throat, and sweat dripped from his pores.

—Hlapula?— He thought to himself tentatively. She did not respond, but he felt her listening. He reached out to her again.

—You’re willing to kill the Ongontu, maybe all the people of Gaibelan, just to protect the honor of a tree?—

—Don’t interfere in matters you don’t understand.—

He felt her response more than he really heard it. He couldn’t have said what language she was speaking. It was like they were bypassing language, and skipping straight to knowing what the other felt.

—Then help me to understand.— John didn’t know where to begin.— How could it possibly be worth killing all these people just to save a tree? You wouldn’t even be saving the tree, you’d still be killing the tree! You’d just be saving the tree’s... *honor*.—

—Wrong, foolish young man. I will tell you some of the tree’s secrets since I know you hate the planeswalkers, too. The po po is a tree species that grows only on this mountain. And yet it is not a species; it is in fact a single organism.—

An image arose in John’s mind. A vast network of white roots, like a fishing net, extending up and down the mountain and encircling it like a shawl.

—The trees are merely aerial structures that arise from the roots,— Hlapula continued,— but the roots are the real body of the organism. The trees will die in my fire, but the roots will survive underground. When the time is right, the trees will emerge again through the ashes, and the po po will flourish once more.—

—Still, this doesn’t change the fact that you’re killing thousands or potentially millions of people to save a *tree*. That’s the kind of thing the Hegemony does!—

—How dare you! I have been patient and merciful. I have given the Ongontu people many warnings and chances. They have welcomed the planeswalkers in spite of my warnings.—

—Oh, so all they have to do is politely ask a powerful, immortal sorcerer to bugger off?—

—Two powerful, immortal sorcerers.—

John had questions about this second immortal sorcerer, but Hlapula interrupted his train of thought.

—I know as well as the Ongontu that the planeswalkers probably cannot be persuaded. However, the Ongontu seem determined to stay. They have known for many months that it would be wise to flee, yet they choose to stay.—

—That's not much of a choice.—

—What, flight? It is the privilege of those who have homes to pity the homeless. I have been homeless, and I have managed. They will, too.—

John was at a loss for words. He was beginning to agree that negotiation was pointless, though not for the reasons Hlapula had in mind.

—They have the limited perspective of humans,— Hlapula continued.— They think that the world is created on the day of their birth and that it crumbles on the day of their death. The po po tree, their ancestors, and I all have a longer perspective. We know that their sacrifice today will be rewarded a hundredfold to future generations, not only of humans, but of other beings, too.—

Without thinking, John argued back.

—Maybe you have the limited perspective of a non-human.—

John was expecting Hlapula to get angry, but he felt something like amusement from her.

—What?— he snapped.

—Nothing. You remind me of someone.—

John ignored this, and instead searched furiously for some argument that would shake Hlapula from her bizarre position.

—What's stopping the planeswalkers from taking a bit of the tree and planting it somewhere else?—

—There is only one spot in the multiverse where the po po tree can grow, and that is on my mountain.—

—That can't possibly be true.—

—The po po is no ordinary tree.—

—I'll grant you that.— John continued trying to wrap his head around the situation. He posed another question to her merely by asking it of himself.

—And what if the Ongontu betray us to the planeswalkers in order to save themselves?—

They sat still and silent for a moment. Why hadn't Hlapula thought of it sooner? Of course the Ongontu would hand them over! They'd be crazy not to! Perhaps that had been the purpose of the ritual from the beginning: to get Hlapula into a portable container so that she could be shipped off somewhere.

Hlapula suddenly scrambled to her feet. Without deciding to do so, she tore away in the opposite direction of the crater, towards the edge of the plateau.

—Hlapula! Stop!—

Hlapula raised John's arms and summoned his chaos magic to cast a protective enchantment on herself, and just in time. A moment later, John felt a spell bounce harmlessly off of his back. The ground below his feet abruptly began to slope downward. Hlapula followed it, half running, half sliding, down the mountain.

Another spell glanced off of them. Hlapula turned and, with another wave of the arm, summoned a swarm of small creatures to go after their attackers.

—Hlapula! What are you doing?—

—Fighting for love and justice!—

They collided with an outcropping of rock and tumbled painfully into a dry, spiky bush. They instantly sprung up and turned. Hlapula tried to summon a stampede of creatures, but none came.

—Oh for fuck’s sake. Chaos magic doesn’t fight for love or justice. It fights for madness, and it comes from pain!—

—Then you show me!—

John tossed out a broad net of magical energy that ensnared anyone pursuing him. Then he turned and continued scrambling down the mountain. Hlapula dogged his thoughts.

—You think these planeswalkers will give you what you want because you’ve been good and obedient? They give nothing unless it benefits them to do so. They speak only one language, the language of violence.—

John had to admit, she had a point. More brush clawed viciously at his legs. He could feel it drawing blood.

Hlapula tried to summon something like an enormous, muscular rodent, but this failed. John cast a magical shield between him and his unseen pursuers.

—Stop trying to do magic, Hlapula, you don’t know what you’re doing. You have to work your way up to the big spells.—

—Then stop being gentle with them and help me fight!—

Stumbling on a stretch of loose rocks, they turned and nearly lost their balance. They recovered without falling, and with a surprisingly graceful pirouette, John cast a fan of icy daggers. Then he raised his arms up and down in a slashing motion, and more daggers began to rain from the sky. He could feel more spells hitting him and weakening his shield. They were coming from three sides.

—Hlapula, I don’t think we can win this.—

—Do not say that! Love always wins!—

—Aye, well, love is not used to fighting while deaf and blind.—

—I have never needed eyes nor ears and I do not need them now. You focus on the magic. I know my way around my own mountain.—

“Which is exactly why Illyrio ought to have had a plan,” John muttered to himself.

He thought again of Hlapula’s rodent. In his mind he shrunk it down to the size of a large dog, and then unleashed a pack of them upon his pursuers. He turned and ran on, when something shot into his leg. His calf muscles felt like they were being wrenched and twisted in an iron vise. He summoned a sort of ethereal, magical armor about himself, but it felt as heavy as real steel. He limped downhill, his leg screaming in pain whenever he tried to lean on it.

—Fight, John! You do not know what Nicol Bolas is like!—

—Who?—

—The other planeswalker!—

Images suddenly flashed through John’s mind. A great red dragon blocking out the sun, his devilish horns looking like a sinister crown. People below, screaming, running in terror from the dragon’s fire, which consumed those who were too slow. Their flesh bubbled and melted off their bones like wax off a candle.

John turned to unleash another area-of-effect spell, but his magic stalled. It was growing weak and tired, as he was.

Something hit him like a battering ram to the gut. He flew backwards and collided violently with the sharp, rocky ground.

—A minor setback... — thought Hlapula.

John wanted to respond, but then he’d already forgotten what she said. Sensation and consciousness were slipping away.

~

When John awoke, he was lying on his side. He seemed to be on a primitive bed made of some sort of lumpy packing material. His knees and ankles ached. The air was thick and smelled foul. He

could feel a layer of dirt and grime on his skin as he stirred. His chest and underarms were moist with sweat. He tried to open his eyes, but it felt like someone was holding them shut.

—Don't move. Let them think you're still sleeping. I want to talk to you, John.—

—I don't see what we have to talk about.—

—We cannot let the planeswalkers win.—

—I have to let them win, to get back my vision and hearing. Not to mention my friend.—

—Just help get me back to my mountain, and then you can tell them that you couldn't control your actions. Tell them Hlapula made you do it.—

—No! I'm not going to let you kill all those people just to save a goddamn tree!—

—Do not speak of the po po tree in that way!—

John took a deep breath and tried to keep his face relaxed.

—So the planeswalkers have you in a tight spot— Hlapula pressed.— Are you just going to surrender?—

—I have no choice.—

—No, you are merely unhappy with your choice. There's a difference.—

John twitched a little.

—Easy to talk of fighting when you don't care whose life is at stake. What's so special about this tree that you would kill thousands of people to save it?—

He waited, while Hlapula seemed to hesitate.

—Is this a difficult question?—

—Yes. If I asked you to describe what's so special about your lover, do you think your description could do her justice?—

John recalled Sam lying in the grass, jostling her legs to wiggle her patchwork dress, laughing like a chattering squirrel except for one piggy snort. Then he recalled Kate trying to embrace him in her cloak, accepting his refusal with a bow and a twinkle in her eye.

He swallowed.

—So the tree is your lover?—

—It is as good as. I am faithful to it, and it is faithful to me.—

John thought again of the network of roots embracing the mountain, the roots that would grow nowhere else.

—You know, Hlapula, I've seen a lot of weird things in my lifetime. But a volcano who's in love with a tree, that's definitely a new one.—

—You are young. You still have much to learn.—

—I'm six hundred years old.—

—To me, you are young.—

John sighed faintly, trying to ignore the putrid smell of the room. Of course, as usual, he was either much older or much younger than everyone else. Yet they all expected him to be bolder and braver than he felt.

—This changes nothing, Hlapula. I can't help you.—

A hand patted his cheek roughly. John opened his eyes and shrunk away from it, annoyed. Somebody placed a smooth pebble into his hand. He grimaced and put the whisper stone in his ear.

“I had a feeling you were awake. Am I speaking to John or to Hlapula?” John's head once again filled with the sound of his least favorite voice in the multiverse.

John rolled over onto his back.

“Hlapula and I are, what we might call on earth, a package deal.”

“I am in no mood for your clowning, John. Let me speak to her.”

John glared resentfully at the ceiling he could not see.

“As I said, you are speaking to her,” John said in a hollow monotone.

“Fine,” Illyrio snapped. “This message is for Hlapula. We are prepared to take you anywhere you want to go. Anywhere except...” he hesitated.

“Except Gaibelan. Yes, we know what your precious plane is called.”

“Right. Anywhere except Gaibelan. Any mountain in the multiverse may be yours, Hlapula. If you’d like, we can suggest some particularly majestic ones.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Hlapula said sternly, with John’s voice. “You know I do not want any other mountain.”

Hlapula rose from the bed and stood, walking into the room with one arm extended. John’s dusty shoes fell on soft ground. The floor was padded, or perhaps carpeted. She had not taken two steps before she found a wall, which was soft with little the fibers of unvarnished wood. Evidently the room was very small.

“John—Hlapula—please return to your bed, don’t wander about.”

Hlapula walked a few more steps, one finger lightly following the shaggy wall, until she found a window. At least, it seemed like some sort of window. Instead of glass, it contained two sheets of thick, soft plastic joined by a vertical seam. She slipped her fingers into the seam and pried the plastic sheets apart. A smell like garbage wafted in through the gap.

A hand rested on their shoulder and pulled them gently away from the window and back toward the bed, which was only a couple of feet behind them.

“This is not Gaibelan,” Hlapula remarked.

“That’s correct.”

“Where are we?”

“Never you mind. All you need to think about is where you will go next. Choose, or we will choose for you.”

Somebody was pressing down on John’s shoulders, evidently encouraging him to sit on the bed. Hlapula resisted.

—I have an idea.— she thought.

—You’re going to take one for the team and choose a new mountain?—

—No. There may be a way we could get back to Gaibelan. To my mountain.—

—Come on, Hlapula, just admit you’ve lost.—

—Never!—

A surge of righteous anger rose so powerfully in John that he was momentarily overwhelmed by it. He felt absolutely certain, more certain than he’d ever felt about anything, about what had to be done. He would fight for true love. He would not let tyranny win. He would fight by any means, and at any cost.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the feeling faded.

—Did you do that?— he asked tentatively.

—I need to smell his breath.—

—What? Whose breath?—

—Illyrio’s.—

—Why?!—

—Just trust me.—

—No! You’re a bloody psychopath!—

—There is much about the tree you don’t know, and even more that you don’t understand. Do you feel, in your heart of hearts, that this is the right thing to do, to passively submit to these planeswalkers? Are they your allies? Do you trust them?—

John was flummoxed.

“Tick tock, Hlapula. I am waiting for your answer.”

“Would you just shut your trap and back off for one bloody minute?” John snapped. He was still standing by the side of the bed. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, frowning.

—His breath, John, please.—

—I don't want to help you!—

—But you do want to hurt him.—

Memories flooded into John's consciousness. The time Illyrio had attempted to perform brain surgery on John when he was a mortal teenager. The time, centuries later, when Illyrio had stranded him on that desert plane with the snake people. The time Illyrio had introduced one of John's sons to opium. John's first love, the girl Illyrio had tricked him into poisoning. Cara. Her name had been Cara.

"Stop it!" he shouted aloud, pressing the heel of his right hand into his forehead as if this would make the memories stop.

—His breath.—

"John? Come on, time's up." Illyrio patted him on the face again. John felt his skin crawl beneath Illyrio's touch. He reached out until he found the embroidered robe, and then he pulled Illyrio in close.

—Good. Get him talking.—

For a moment, John was at a loss. He tried to think of a question to ask.

"You said you were trying to be a better man..." he stalled. "Why..."

He smelled for Illyrio's breath, but no new scent reached his nose.

"You don't care about helping the Ongontu. You only care about the tree."

"I care about the Ongontu, too," Illyrio replied.

John inhaled deeply, but he smelled only the stench coming through the window. Then he thought of a question.

"Why have you never disclosed earth's location to the Hegemony?" he asked, gripping the front of Illyrio's robe tightly. "When I was younger, I thought it must have been because you cared about earth. Maybe you even cared about me. But that can't be it."

He continued clinging to the front of Illyrio's robe as he waited for an answer.

"Of course it's because I care, John," said Illyrio silkily. John caught a warm waft of fruity breath.

—Kill him.—

"Stop lying!" John shrieked.

He pushed Illyrio into the wall. He raised his right arm and then brought it down. Lightning filled the little room. He couldn't see it, but he felt electricity drawing toward his right hand, which was suddenly holding a sword. An ethereal, electric shield materialized on his left arm. He ducked behind it as he brought the sword up and shot a bolt of lightning ahead of him. Then he sent balls of lightning flying out in every direction. An unnaturally icy wind tore through the room. The cold would have been paralyzing, if John had not been radiating heat like a furnace. He swung both arms and sent a wolf charging at Illyrio. Then he followed it. The wolf's tail brushed against John's bare legs as it devoured its prey. John brought one more streak of lightning down on Illyrio, and then he stayed the wolf. He bent down and found Illyrio's body slumped on the ground. The face and neck were soft and oozing warm liquid. Bits of frayed skin dangled here and there.

John withdrew his hand, which was sticky with blood. He grabbed Illyrio's right ear. With a single blow of the lightning sword, he cut through Illyrio's neck and pulled off his head.

He took a deep breath. For a moment, the rotten air tasted cold and pure.

—Good. Now search his things.—

John summoned a rope that snaked around the wrists and ankles of Illyrio's decapitated body. The body twitched and wriggled. John tossed the head behind him over his shoulder, and began to feel the body's belt and pockets. The body struggled in protest, and John pushed aside its groping hands.

—Why doesn't it die?— Hlapula asked.

John found a pouch at Illyrio's belt and rummaged around inside. There were several items that felt like old-fashioned jacks, a couple of small bottles, and something sharp that John narrowly avoided cutting himself on. A nudge from Hlapula told him that whatever she wanted wasn't there.

The body nearly tackled John as he tried to stand. He summoned some kind of lance or harpoon, which penetrated Illyrio's chest and pinned him to the wall. A meager spell from the body knocked the pouch out of John's hand. John summoned a gigantic lump of ice that encased the body. He knew the ice wouldn't last long, but it would give them a least a few moments' peace.

He crossed a few paces to the other side of the room and found a simple wooden chair. On it there was a large cloth bag. He rummaged inside this one, and immediately discerned several soft spheres the size of fists. Fruits.

—That's it! Take them and go!—

John knelt down and magically beckoned the head to roll over to him. A moment later, Illyrio's face was in his hand. He gripped it like a bowling ball and added the head to the cloth bag with the fruits. Then he plucked the whisper stone from the severed head's ear, and its mate from his own ear, and he put both stones in his shorts pocket.

He found the door nearby. Closing it behind him, he left the room and emerged into another room with the same soft flooring as the previous one.

—The body doesn't die because it's immortal— John belatedly answered Hlapula's question as they stood with their back to the door.— The body will try to look for the head. Once we get the head far enough away, the body will give up looking for the old head and will commit to growing a new one. That takes at least an hour or so.—

—You've done this before.—

—Pity it never sticks.—

As John stood on the threshold of the new room, the weight of what he'd just done began to sink in. He'd helped Hlapula again. He hadn't really decided to do it, he'd just been caught up in his hatred for Illyrio and anyone who would try to control him. It had felt so good to rebel. All other considerations had simply faded from his mind. Now he was on his own—well, nearly on his own—in some unknown establishment, on some unknown plane, laden with stolen goods and a severed head. On top of all that, he was still deaf and blind.

—Do not despair. The situation is brighter than it seems.—

Hlapula reached into John's chaos magic and summoned something in a harness and leash. John bent down and investigated it. He stroked a back with short, sleek fur. A dog. He reached up to its face and found a flat snout and whiskers. Wrong. It was an abnormally large cat. John sighed. Hlapula patted the guide cat with loving encouragement, and it began to stride somewhere off to their left.

—Now what?— John was asking himself as much as he was asking Hlapula.

—Now we return to my mountain.—

—Hlapula, we've been through this. I can't help you.—

—You want to get back to your friend on Gaibelan, don't you? So to Gaibelan we must return.

—  
The guide cat seemed to be leading them down a hallway. Hlapula reached into the bag and found a fruit. It was wet with blood from Illyrio's head. She wiped it onto John's shirt.

—Oi, come on, I think this shirt's white!—

—It's already covered with blood.—

John resentfully let her finish cleaning the fruit.

Hlapula halted the cat and brought the fruit to her lips. She did not bite into it, though. She kissed it. Then she merely stood smelling its skin.

—Hey, hey! Hlapula, stop!—

—What now?—

—Could you please just tell me why this fruit is so important?—

Hlapula kept the fruit under her nose. The rind grazed her lips. It felt thick and textured like the rind of a citrus fruit, but the scent was not as sharp as the scent of citrus. It was sweet and subtle, like a sunrise, or an unexpected peck on the cheek.

—The fruit of the po po tree is a gateway to the magical energy that connects the portals. Anyone who consumes it is temporarily endowed with the ability to create their own personal portal that will take them anywhere in the multiverse that they wish to go.—

John's jaw dropped. Hlapula took the opportunity to take a bite of the fruit. She bit straight through the tough, rubbery rind.

—Jesus Christ in heaven, Hlapula!— John thought as he chewed.— Why didn't you mention this earlier? If that's true, then this... this changes everything!—

—Does it?—

—Why didn't you tell me?—

—Oh, I can never tell what you humans will find important.—

As John struggled to process this new piece of information, the guide cat walked forward a few paces, but then stopped. Hlapula brought the fruit to her mouth and bit down, holding it in her teeth. With her free hand, she reached out in front of her and found a solid surface of the same shaggy wood she'd felt earlier. It wiggled slightly when she pressed on it. A door. She searched for some sort of handle by which to open it.

Meanwhile, John sucked back the drops of saliva that threatened to seep out on either side of the fruit in his mouth. The fruit of the po po tree could take you anywhere in the multiverse that you wished to go? He'd never heard of such a thing. There was certainly no legal magic or technology that could truly manipulate the portals, and perhaps even on the black market there was no such technology. Planeswalkers could read the portals' currents and exploit their subtle fluctuations, but they couldn't control them. Nothing could conjure a portal out of thin air. Certainly nothing could do both.

Hlapula gripped a protrusion that ran along the edge of the door. After a few experimental tugs, she slid the shoddy wooden door aside. Sun poured onto their skin. A breeze carrying the smell of garbage hit them like a slap in the face. The source of the stench was clearly outside, where they were headed.

—Is this a good idea, Hlapula?—

—You said we need to take the head away from the body.—

She stepped outside and slid the door shut behind them, lifting it a bit so that it moved smoothly.

—Yes, well, there might be adversaries out here more formidable than Illyrio's headless body.

—

Hlapula took another bite of the fruit, including the bitter rind. The inside of the fruit was gritty and mildly sweet, more like a pear than citrus.

—I am not afraid.—

—Of course you aren't.— John rolled his eyes. He supposed he'd have to pick his battles with Hlapula. He didn't have the energy to fight against her every move.

The ground on which they were walking was uneven. They were stepping on soft items. Plants, maybe. The guide cat seemed to know where they ought to go. That, or it merely shared Hlapula's unshakable confidence.

—Hlapula, this fruit— John began as she took another bite.— If what you say is true, this is a huge discovery! This is like the discovery of horses, or the steam engine! In the hands of the Hegemony... —

Hlapula took a bite from the core of the fruit. She gnawed at the tough sinews, and swallowed the seeds whole.

—Alright Hlapula,— John thought determinedly,— I'm still not on board with killing or displacing the Ongontu people, but I agree that we can't let the Hegemony get this tree.—

—Good. You are beginning to see reason.—

—Reason? More like terror. I mean, with this,— John struggled to comprehend it— With this, the Hegemony could have an ambassador on every uncharted plane tomorrow, couldn't they? Could you imagine if they had orchards of this stuff? If they had enough to supply an army? Their sphere of influence would know no bounds. Every nook and cranny of the multiverse would be exploited, developed, and sold. There would not be an independent square inch anywhere.—

They stepped onto flat, solid ground, and immediately they were nudged by shoulders and elbows on both sides. John tensed, but Hlapula was unperturbed. They continued walking. The people around them all seemed to be moving in one direction. John and Hlapula went along with the crowd. John hoped against hope that their blood-stained clothes would not draw attention. The ground was hard, but not as hard as asphalt or concrete. It was gritty, like a well-traveled dirt road. The stench of garbage was diminishing, though the stench of human body odor was replacing it.

—These people must be poor— Hlapula observed.— Poor people will mind their own business, unless you ask for help. They will not bother us.—

John was not much comforted.

Hlapula ate the last bite of fruit. All that was left was a rubbery nub at the bottom. She chewed it a few times and then swallowed it whole like a pill. She had eaten the entire fruit: rind, seeds, and all. John was grateful that whoever had plucked it had not left a stem.

—I still can't let you go back to your mountain, Hlapula. Not while there's a chance that you might blow up and destroy the Ongontu. But we can't let the Hegemony get the tree. There must be another solution. A way we can kill the tree without hurting the people.—

—Just the aerial structures, you mean.—

—What? Yes, right. The aerial structures. The, er, tree-y parts.—

Suddenly, something wrapped itself tightly around John's torso, pinning his arms to his sides. He instinctively tried to wriggle himself free, but he was stuck. It was not a person, but something hard and cold.

Red-hot rage rose in Hlapula, and John felt her summoning his magic. She was just about to explode through their bonds when John intervened. He flicked his right hand, even as his arm was pinned, and a very large pair of scissors materialized in it. He cut through his bonds with one smooth slice, as if they were a sheet of butcher paper.

He waved and smiled to nowhere in particular, and shouted in Planeswalkiri, "I am sorry, not interested, not today, thank you! Have a nice day!"

Then he shoved his way forward through the crowd at a brisk pace. John felt that Hlapula was a bit affronted, but she did not interfere.

—Do you think they understood you?— she asked.

—No. But they might have recognized the language. Hopefully they're thinking it's not worth getting into a fight with a planeswalker.—

The seconds ticked by, and John felt relieved that no retaliation came. In fact, he felt positively elated. He felt like skipping. To be safe, he continued to put distance between himself and his adversary. He pushed aside the shoulders and elbows that crowded him, and even the guide cat tugged earnestly at its leash. However, John felt quite certain that everything was just fine. Whatever happened, everything would be fine.

—Hlapula... —

Hlapula did not respond. She was feeling happy, too. They were floating through the crowd now, which hugged them lovingly. Every little nudge and bump sent a jolt of giddy delight through John's body. He was hungry for their touches. He was connected to his neighbors and they were connected to him, and the ground and the air supported them all.

—Hlapula.—

—What?—

—You could have mentioned that the po po fruit also gets you high.—

—Are you complaining?—

John could not find it in himself to be angry with Hlapula.

The crowd seemed to come to life. It was one being, a snail inching its way along with patient determination. John felt a surge of affection for this simple creature. He was suddenly above it, petting it, cradling it. He could feel, rather than see, the people pouring out of their hovels like water out of springs, running downhill into streams and tributaries of marching humans, which joined together and flowed into a steel city, a behemoth belching black smoke. Before he could make out the shape of the steel monster, he was distracted by more knowledge.

There was a river to the northwest, and a long mountain range to the east. The tallest peak was seventy-four miles away. To the north was a vast desert that stretched across the continent like a belt. The continent was shaped like a kite, and the desert was the horizontal piece of its frame. The continent was a little toy he could pick up and float on the wind. He had no sense of scale, and yet he understood perfectly, intuitively, where everything stood relative to everything else. He could feel the whole planet lying before him, and yet he also felt his precise position on it. He was like a needle on a globe, only he was both the needle *and* the globe.

He was suddenly snatched from his reverie and returned to his body. Hlapula had turned aside and was wading out of the stream of people. The sensations of the people brushing by him were impossibly magnified. He could feel every hair on their bodies tugging on his own hairs. He felt every little skin cell that sloughed off between them. The guide cat jerked John and Hlapula to one side, and then they were standing somewhere beside the crowd.

Hlapula steadied herself. She took a deep breath, and her chest expanded like a balloon that threatened to drift away. Then she floated her arms out in front of her, palms up. John reflected that they must have looked as if they were expecting manna to rain down from the sky. He smiled as he swayed like a reed on the breeze, waiting for something to happen.

The multiverse unfurled before him like a tapestry. However, he was also *in* the tapestry. The planes danced in complicated orbits around him. The magical currents that connected the portals swirled about him like mist. Those currents had always been so elusive, so mysterious. Now they were as clear as day. Even time was visible. He could see where the currents had been and where they were headed next. Manipulating them was as easy as blowing smoke.

—To Gaibelan, then.—

~

They emerged from their personal portal not at the top of Hlapula's mountain, but at its base. John could not see the mountain, but from the lingering effects of the fruit, he knew that they were approximately twenty-two feet from its base, they were on its southwestern side, and they were about 3,096 feet above sea level.

—All things considered,— John thought cheerfully,— I think our aim was pretty good.

—It was close to perfect, like everything about the po po tree.—

John was momentarily distracted by the gentle breeze rippling his hair and clothes. The air was no longer smoky. Hlapula began walking toward the mountain. She ascended its slope, deftly avoiding rocks and shrubs. She could not see these obstacles, but thanks to the fruit, she knew where they were.

John recalled that Hlapula had said earlier that she knew her mountain so well she didn't need eyes to navigate it. He wondered whether this was how she'd gotten to know it. Perhaps this feeling, this gentle high from the fruit, was how it felt to be in her mountain.

—Not exactly.—

—Huh?—

—This is not exactly how it feels to be in my mountain.—

—Oh.—

—But I do feel the po po tree whispering into my heart at all times. It tells me what I need to know, whether or not I am close.—

—Oh. Uh, that's nice, I suppose.— They ascended a few more feet, slipping on the loose soil. John's sore joints and muscles were activated, but the feeling wasn't unpleasant. It felt like his muscles were just waking up. He was glad to be moving in the fresh air and sunshine.

—Hang on, where are we going?— John suddenly thought.

—We will hike to the cave at the top of the mountain, and there I will leave you and return to my home.—

—Woah, hey, okay. Let's talk about that plan.—

John still couldn't have been angry with Hlapula if he'd wanted to be, thanks to the waning glow of the po po fruit, but he had enough wits about him to realize that this was a bad idea.

—Hlapula, I can't let you... —

—I know, you can't let me hurt the Ongontu people. So, what will you do about it? What were you saying before, about finding another way to destroy the aerial structures of the po po tree?—

John thought for a moment. Images rose to his mind. He was navigating the mountainside by night, felling a tree with a blade of magical energy. Then fire flowed from his hands and he was burning the stump.

—Was that you? That imagery?— he asked.

Hlapula's response was silent and enigmatic.

John sighed. It was a good idea, so he supposed it didn't matter where it came from.

—I'll kill your trees. One by one. Just the above-ground parts.—

—Fine. And if you fail to keep your promise, I will destroy them in a sacred, cleansing fire.—

John shuddered at the thought of that sacred cleansing fire reaching the city at the bottom of the mountain. Then he considered the po po tree in the hands of Hegemony officials, and his resolve hardened. It wouldn't come to Hlapula's fire. He would destroy the trees himself. The Hegemony might still colonize Gaibelan—there was nothing he could do to prevent that—but at least they wouldn't get the tree.

—How long will it take you?— she demanded.

—I dunno, how many po po trees are on this mountain?—

—Four hundred thirty-six.—

John didn't have the faintest idea how long it would take him to kill four hundred thirty-six trees.

—Uhhh, a few months, maybe?—

—A few months! That is far too long. I was thinking a few weeks.—

—I have other things to do besides killing po po trees, Hlapula. First, I have to get back my vision and hearing. Then I have a job, you know. Two jobs, if you ask my friend Kate.—

—One month.—

John considered this. He couldn't afford to underestimate how long the job would take. The Ongontu couldn't afford it.

—Two months.—

—That's too long.— Hlapula snapped.— The planeswalkers can come up with all manner of trickery in two months. Eat the fruit again, and you will find all the trees easily.—

—Six weeks, and that's as low as I'll go.—

There was a pause while John waited for her response.

—Fine. Six weeks. If you have not destroyed all the po po's aerial structures in six weeks, then I will erupt.—

—Splendid!— John thought brightly.— Then we have a deal, your, uh, your goddesship!—

He felt Hlapula's warm internal smile.

They continued walking, and the effects of the fruit continued to fade. John grew tired and his aches and pains grew more bothersome. Illyrio's cloth bag began to feel heavy. He carelessly tossed the severed head down the mountain. He found a leather canteen drank all the water that was in it. Nevertheless, he felt thirsty again a few minutes later. Luckily, he was a magician and easily able to refill it.

—Hlapula?—

—Hmm?—

—If your plan was to go to the sacred cave, why did we land at the *bottom* of the mountain?—

—Because the hike is part of the ritual. It is a sign of respect to the mountain and to the po po tree.—

John heaved a long, heavy sigh.

—Alright, sure, but is it, you know, *necessary*?—

Hlapula did not answer.

John's footsteps became heavy thuds. He kicked up dust that clouded the air.

—The hike is meant to be humbling— Hlapula thought.— It is an old Ongontu ritual. The hike makes them appreciate the magic they will perform at the top. The magic works better when you approach it humbly, and don't take it for granted. We often think that power comes from quick, hot, energy, but the strongest kind of power is the kind that emerges when we slow down.—

John made a sort of grunt that they felt but did not hear.

—The hike teaches the young ones patience. Come to think of it, it teaches the old ones patience, too. For we are all impatient children at heart, aren't we? Most Hitchari are very old, but we are the most impatient and childish of all.—

John remembered that Illyrio had described the Hitchari along similar lines.

—You don't seem childish to me, Hlapula.—

—If that is so, it is thanks to the po po tree. The tree reminds me of the vastness, the connectedness, and the eternal beauty of the multiverse. The mere thought of the tree makes me a little wiser.—

A warm breeze brought the smell of vegetation and fresh flowers. John thought he even detected the faintest trace of the scent of the po po fruit.

—As I said, the hike teaches patience. When you are walking up a mountain, you don't doubt whether you will make it to the top. You *know* you will make it to the top. Perhaps you won't make it to the top that day, or even that year. You might feel tired or hungry or hot, but you do not worry, because you know that if you just keep going, one day, when you are ready, you'll make it. The top will always be there, waiting for you. Ready to accept you.—

At these words, John suddenly remembered the purple people with a pang in his heart. He remembered what Illyrio had said about them. *The Hitchari do not ascend until they are ready to ascend and the Kothkari are ready to receive.* John's heart ached. Even in spite of the lovely tropical breeze and the scented air, he felt a deep sense of melancholy. He thought of how old Hlapula must be, and how old he might be before he ever saw the Kothkari again.

—Patience, my friend,— Hlapula thought, not unkindly.

—Speaking of patience... —

They were suddenly on sloping ground. They must have strayed from the path. The fruit's magic having largely worn off, John took a few steps backwards, trying not to panic that he was getting lost. He turned and walked uphill until he felt he was back on hard, flat ground. He conjured a walking stick and continued up the path.

—You're not supposed to do magic on the ritual hike.—

—Aye, well, the ritual hike wasn't designed for deaf and blind blokes, was it?—

Hlapula considered this.

—I suppose one tiny bit of magic won't hurt.—

They walked on.

—Do you miss them, Hlapula? The Kothkari?—

They passed under a large tree and John stopped for a moment to savor the cool shade. Strong, sweet perfume emanated from the branches above him. His chest heaved, and he held his hands on his hips. Hlapula answered slowly.

—Yes, I do miss them, sometimes. Like you, I remember the ecstasy of being with the Kothkari. I also remember being rejected by them. I was very, very angry for many centuries. You have to understand, I *was* my anger. There was little to me besides my anger. I occupied many things—water kettles, industrial boilers, campfires. Eventually I moved on to wildfires and volcanoes. I liked volcanoes best because they allowed me to express my rage. I would erupt and destroy everything around me. I reveled in destruction. Then I would move on to another volcano because, well, what was the point of lingering when there was nothing left to destroy?—

John did not answer. He got the feeling that Hlapula had never told anyone this story before.

—Then I came to this mountain. I simmered in my anger, for a while, and then I erupted, as I always did. In a matter of days, though, some of the trees had already begun to grow back. This made me angry. I erupted again, certain that I would destroy the little saplings. I did destroy them, but again, a few days later, they grew back. Again and again I erupted. Again and again the trees grew back. Finally, I erupted the last of my magma. I watched eagerly to see if the trees came back, for I had emptied myself in my attempt to destroy them. After that day, though, they did not grow back. I had gotten my wish. I had finally defeated the po po tree, yet I felt hollow and utterly alone.

—I grew ashamed of what I had done, and of what I had become. I had been so angry at being rejected by the Kothkari that I had rejected the one thing in the multiverse that had reached out to me. This innocent little tree had kept trusting me enough to grow back, betting its own safety on the conviction that I would not erupt again. It believed in me, in spite of everything. I realized that I did not want to move on to another volcano. I wanted to stay, and see if the little trees would ever return.

—Many years passed. My magma was replenished, but I did not erupt. I waited for my friend, the tree. I was certain, deep in my core, that it was still alive.

—More time passed, and I began to lose hope. The Ongontu people settled the land at the foot of my mountain. They are a good and virtuous people, but they could never love me as the tree did, and I could never love them as I loved the tree. Eventually, I concluded that I had really killed the tree. I decided to leave Gaibelan, for there was nothing left for me here. But I gave it one more day. Tomorrow, I decided. Tomorrow, I will leave this plane.

—The next day, the sun shone brightly on the mountain, and it revealed that the little saplings had returned. They had waited until my darkest hour, when I had all but given up hope, to show themselves. And so they taught me that I could be more than my anger. I could be patient and calm, and I could even love. Even when I was at my most hopeless—no, especially when I was at my most hopeless—the tree appeared, listening to me, teaching me. From then on, I knew I would never give up on the po po tree, and it would never give up on me.

—I am still angry that the Kothkari rejected me, but everything that came after that was my own fault. I brought those centuries of rage and misery upon myself. I wallowed in the pain of rejection, because that was more comfortable than the pain of moving on and opening myself up to new possibilities.

—I do not dwell in my anger now as much as I used to. The tree reminds me that good things emerge on their own time. It is better that way, for if I always got what I wanted, I would still be the same angry child that I was a thousand years ago.—

John suddenly felt a great sadness welling up from his heart, into his throat and his face. He had thought Hlapula was insane for loving a tree. Now, he felt he understood. In fact, he even found himself a little envious.

—Yes, I know you scorned my love for a non-human thing,— she thought gently.— And yet I think you humans are strange, looking for love in other flawed, self-interested humans!—

—Actually, on that point, we agree,— John thought bitterly.— I don't look for love in humans, either.—

The sun's rays bore down on them as they emerged from the pleasant shade. John walked onward, picking his way around the rocks, and he thought he felt Hlapula picking around his memories.

—I think I understand.—

—Understand what?—

—Why you push people away.—

—Oh, don't you start with this, too. Please don't tell me that I'm lonely and I need to make friends.—

—Does this have to do with what you said earlier, that chaos magic comes from pain?—

John frowned in consternation. He didn't understand why she was bringing that up. He concentrated on the familiar, steady rhythm of the walk.

—Why are you so afraid to hope?—

—Would you just leave off?!—

He was feeling distinctly irritated. Why was she poking and prodding at him? He'd appreciated her little story, but he didn't see what it had to do with him.

—I did not mean to upset you. I simply feel your sadness, young Hitchri. You are frightened at the thought of living a long life, but I am telling you that hope is the key. Hope is the mother of patience.—

John swallowed. He didn't want to talk about hope. It was all well and good to talk about hope, but it didn't change the fact that thinking about the future gave him vertigo, like looking down from a tightrope. He was not cheered by the thought that he might one day be very much like Hlapula, able to love big, abstract things but utterly alienated from human morality. If that was what hope looked like, he didn't want it.

They walked on. Occasionally, John tapped the ground with the stick as he walked, making sure they were on the firm, packed ground of the trail. He felt drained and anxious. He thought of Illyrio coming to his senses on that other plane at any moment. He thought of Sam, and wondered whether she was safe, or scared. Nevertheless, he did not ask Hlapula again whether the hike was necessary.

—Hlapula?—

—Yes?—

—Who is the other planeswalker? Nicol Bolas?—

Hlapula's antipathy passed over his heart like a cloud. John felt a little frightened at the sudden change in her mood.

—He is an evil person. A very old and powerful sorcerer.—

—He can't be worse than Illyrio, can he?—

—He is much worse. That is why the Hegemony rely on him so heavily. He can be trusted to do even the most vile job, as long as he is paid well. When the Hegemony has a rebellion that needs quashing, they call him.—

Another image appeared in John's mind. A tall white man in a red robe stood over a squadron of soldiers in gray armor. The soldiers were aiming sleek silver guns at a group of trembling peasants. Behind the peasants was a large ditch full of contorted corpses of men, women, and children—bloody, torn, and frozen in the eerie stillness of death. Beside the group of trembling peasants ran a long line of more soldiers, guarding more peasants who were awaiting their turn to die.

—Stop! Please stop!—

—Very well. Bolas has also 'discovered' more uncharted planes than anyone. They say that he has unmatched powers of movement, that he can appear on any plane, at any time. They say he has the

entire multiverse mapped out, and he is merely feeding the uncharted planes to the Hegemony slowly, one by one.—

—Why would he do that?—

—I'm sure he has his reasons.—

—So he's here, on Gaibelan? Trying to... what is he trying to do, exactly?—

—To get the tree for the Hegemony, of course. He has been taking some pieces of it away somewhere. I am sure he and his henchmen are trying to grow it on other planes. As I said, they will fail. At least, so I think. So I hope.—

John's stomach turned. There was a monster on the loose somewhere around here. And he still had no idea how he was going to find Sam.

~

—Can you feel it? We are very close now.—

John could have guessed that they were close to the sacred cave based on his level of exhaustion alone. His knees and ankles creaked. His swollen feet stretched his shoes. He felt unsteady, but he dared not stop and sit, lest he be unable to get up again. At least the sun no longer shone on him like a hot spotlight. They had to be close.

—No, it is more than that. There is magic in the air.—

John tried to sense the magic in the air. He thought he did detect a certain electricity that crawled along his skin and made the hairs on his neck stand up, though that may have been mere foreboding.

A few weary minutes later, John was not leaning so heavily on his walking stick. The ground was leveling out. At a nudge from Hlapula, he slowed down. Cool air crept in from his right side. More than that, that flighty energy of earlier—either magic or foreboding—was coming from his right side, too.

—We are here.—

John turned toward his right and approached the sacred cave. With an upwelling of relief, he basked in the fact that he had finished the hike. He would be able to sit and rest. If the ground were softer, he would have collapsed onto it in a heap.

He had not shuffled more than two steps into the cool space of the cave before he met a hand. It appeared out of thin air like a ghost, resting lightly on his upper arm. John jumped, but he did not cast any magic. He knew that gentle touch.

“Sam?” he croaked into the darkness.

Sam threw her arms around him. John returned her embrace, stroking the curtain of long hair that draped down her back. At the same time, he knitted his brows in confusion. Was this a trap? Was this the real Sam? She had slipped out of Illyrio's clutches once. Had she done so again? He held her thin frame tightly. His happiness was poisoned with fear. The more he relished Sam's presence, the greater was his mounting sense of dread.

John released Sam and plunged a hand into his shorts pocket. He pulled out the whisper stones and put one into his ear. His hand trembled slightly as it held out the other stone.

The other stone was plucked from his proffered hand. With trepidation, John waited for an explanation.

Instead of an explanation, he received another hand. It was much larger than Sam's, and it snaked across his upper back. John felt a sudden jolt of nausea, and felt as if something were trying to leap into his throat and out of his mouth. An instant later, everything changed.

He was floating up off the ground. He had no sense of space. He didn't even know where his limbs were. He struggled to right himself, or at least to discern right from left, or up from down. He had never felt so disoriented in all his time being blind and deaf.

Then he was standing on solid ground again, and he was very, very cold. His skin crawled as an icy wind bore down on him. Cold air pierced his lungs. He lurched forward. The ground was fluffy under his feet. He was walking on snow.

Panic coursed through him, and his muscles tensed. Of course it had been a trap! He cursed himself for letting his guard down. He focused on grounding himself and centering his magical energies. He would not be beaten again. Not now, now that he and Hlapula had finally come to a satisfactory agreement. Six weeks. Four hundred thirty-six trees.

“I’m sorry to do this, Hlapula, really I am.”

The voice that resonated in John’s head through the whisper stone was neither Sam’s nor Illyrio’s. It was a man’s voice, and, to John’s astonishment, it was speaking English.

“We offered you your choice of mountain, but you would not choose. So I have chosen for you. Mount Yunut on Tzelkador. The summit is a bit chilly, but it’s a beautiful mountain. I’m sure it’s been painted more times than it’s been climbed.”

“No! I will fight you to my last breath!” Hlapula shouted.

“Let’s not make this any harder than it has to be. The Ongontu performed the ritual that bound you to John. Now I will bind you to this mountain.”

“We’ll both fight you to our last breath,” John whispered through the stone. He brought his numb, trembling hands close to his face and balled them into fists, like a fighter preparing for a boxing match. He summoned a flame about each fist. The flames tickled his hands and his face, filling him with warmth and courage.

Nicol Bolas sighed. “Please don’t try to fight me, John. You can’t win. And none of us wants Sam getting hurt.”

John froze. Doubt wrenched at his intestines. He was prepared to fight to the bitter end—but his end, not Sam’s. What would they do with her? Where were they keeping her?

“John?”

Sam’s voice resounded through the stone. It was uncharacteristically tremulous.

“Please... I’m sorry, but whatever they’re asking you to do, could you please just do it?”

The cold air that snaked down John’s windpipe seemed to be paralyzing him from the inside out. His courage was draining out of him. It was like that moment on the spaceship all over again, when he’d wanted to attack Illyrio, but he couldn’t risk hitting Sam.

He hadn’t considered what he would do if it came to this. They would make him choose. Would he hand over Hlapula and the tree, just to save one teenager? Or would he sacrifice Sam to escape with Hlapula and prioritize the tree? He could be the hero the multiverse needed, or he could be the hero that Sam needed. He could not be both.

“John.” Nicol Bolas had evidently taken back the stone.

“No one’s asking you to play politics. This is not your war. Do what you must to get home safely. No one can fault you for that.”

John thought of Hlapula, bound to this cold wasteland and separated from her tree. She did not deserve that desolate fate. But that didn’t mean that Sam deserved to die! Yet there was no way he could fight Nicol Bolas without hurting Sam, whom Bolas was probably using as a human shield at that very moment!

—Patience, young Hitchri.—

—Patience?!— John wanted to scream.— *Something* very important is about to be destroyed in one minute, and I have to decide what it is, and you’re telling me to have patience?!—

—Yes. These are the moments when it is most important to be patient.—

John closed his eyes, and his eyelids stung from the cold.

—Hlapula... I want to fight him, but I can’t hurt her... —

—What does chaos magic teach you to do, when faced with an impossible adversary?—

John took a cold, deep breath that burned his throat.

—Chaos magic teaches us that there is always another way. A solution that we never thought was possible.—

—That sounds very hopeful, considering that chaos magic does not fight for love or justice, and that it comes from pain.—

Irritation flared up in him. Every time Hlapula talked about chaos magic, it made him angry. She didn't understand it at all.

—It is hopeful,— he retorted,— just not by wishing for some people or trees to come and save us. Real hope comes from realizing that everything abandons us sooner or later. The only thing that will *always* be there is uncertainty itself. That's why our power come from pain, because it is painful to admit that nothing is reliable, but the fact that nothing is reliable means that anything is possible!—

—So all you have to do see how unreliable your reality is.—

—Yes! Precisely!—

—You have to be proven wrong.—

—Sure, yes.—

—Made a fool of.—

—Well, there's a little more to it than that.—

—Let me help you.—

—Hlapula... —

—This will hurt.—

—Hlapula, don't!—

John's muscles tightened, as he prepared himself to fight against whatever magic Hlapula was preparing to cast. But she did not take control of his body. Instead, she merely went on thinking.

—You are a fool, John Hennessy. You think your pain is what makes you powerful, so you cling to your own pain, because you think you need it. You dwell in the past, in your victimhood and your resentments, and you push away the people who want to help you today, much as I tried to push away the po po tree. Deep down, you crave the pain of loneliness, because you think that it keeps you strong and safe. Nobody forced you to teach at Hogwarts, among the witches and wizards you so despise. Nobody forced you to walk with Illyrio, and nobody forced you to decline to walk with Sam! You chose to do all of those things. You chose to embrace the people who hate you, and to reject the people who love you. You tell yourself you don't deserve to be happy, and that you can't be happy, because people are unreliable. But all of this is just a conspiracy to nurture a comfortable kind of pain!—

—Stop it! Stop it, Hlapula! These are my memories! You don't understand what you're talking about!—

—That is always the problem, isn't it, John? That no one understands? But is it really that they don't understand? Or are you just looking for ways that they don't understand, and ignoring the ways that they do? Because you can't tolerate the thought that they actually understand you better than you understand yourself!—

—Stop it!—

—There you go again, trying to block out the truth, to keep yourself blind and deaf to it. I am telling you now, if you want to save the things you care about, *feel your pain*. Not the comfortable pain that you've manufactured, which you wear like a badge of pride. I mean the grief, John! Grief for all the opportunities at happiness that you've denied yourself! Grief for the fact that you insist on isolating yourself and you don't understand why you do it! The truth is that you are not alone, not special, not the only one!—

“GET OUT!” he shrieked aloud, and sank to his bare knees in the frigid snow, which was so cold that it burned.

—You say that chaos magic is a force for disruption and change. But you won't let it change you! Let it change you now! Let me, your friend, teach you that you deserve love, and more importantly, that you need it!—

The flames in his hands had died out. An internal heat was rising in his face and into his eyes. He was shaking all over. She was right. He hated her for it, and that only further proved her point. Chaos magic was supposed to be about defiance and rebellion, but rebellion against Illyrio was safe and comfortable for him. Hope, love, friendship—these things terrified him. These were the true rebellions, the battles that he'd been afraid to fight.

The absurdity of the situation closed in around him. Hlapula, ordinarily so removed from humanity, could see him with piercing clarity. Bolas was still there, apparently patiently waiting for John to crack. They were on a picturesque summit that John could not see, in some corner of the multiverse John had never heard of, and God only knew how much time was passing on earth as John reflected that if he'd only let Kate tag along invisibly, he would not be in this predicament at all.

Suddenly, the icy wind stopped. Everything stopped.

He was hugging Sam. His fingers were no longer stiff. Her skin was hot to the touch. John stepped back, shocked and confused. He continued holding Sam by the shoulders. But these shoulders were tall and broad. They couldn't be Sam's. This woman's hair was thick and coarse. Her thin dress did not hide her curves from John's hands.

The woman leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead. Then she was gone.

John was clutching thin air. He stood with his empty hands in front of him, utterly bewildered. He stood dumbly, too stunned to think.

Dirt grated under his feet as someone leapt onto him. He was being embraced by a slender body that smelled faintly of cinnamon. Sam. John pulled away from her and, slowly coming to his senses, he took stock of his surroundings. There was no snow or icy wind now, just cool air in front of him and warm air grazing his back. Aside from the scent of Sam and his own considerable body odor, he detected the familiar musty scent of cold, damp rock. He was back in the sacred cave.

He patted the pocket of his shorts. There were two whisper stones there. He was about to pull them out, when he suddenly had a better idea.

He pulled Sam behind him and cast a concealment spell into the cave. Smoke filled his nose and lungs. Then he cast another concealment spell that would make an awful racket. He couldn't hear it, but he was quite sure he had unleashed the bedlam of Circe and the Argonauts.

With Sam behind him, he backed away, blasting one spell after another into the cave. Bolts of arcane energy, fans of flame, and a pack of dogs charged out from him. His magic flowed as freely as it ever had. As he backed into the cleaner, warmer air of the outside world, he lined the edge of the cave with traps, and then he summoned an avalanche of rock. The ground shook violently, and Sam grabbed one of his arms with both hands.

When the shaking stopped, John waved both arms in front of him as if he were trying to get the cave's attention. In fact, he was magically sealing the wall of rock he'd just created. The best way to prevent Nicol Bolas from getting out of the cave would have been a proper ritual, but John was not prepared for that, so his battle magic would have to do. If it was possible to seal Bolas inside the cave, John had done so.

"Come on."

He took Sam by the hand and began striding up the mountain, towards the volcanic crater at the top. He might have just as easily walked down the mountain as up, for he wasn't going anywhere in particular. Just away.

He pulled the two stones from his pocket. He held them in his hand as he tried to process exactly what had happened. The mystery woman in his arms can only have been Hlapula. But how? —Hlapula?—

No response. She was gone.

John was stunned. One moment he'd been on icy Mount Yunut, and the next he'd been back in the cave. Perhaps Bolas had sent him back, as he'd sent him off initially. But that transition had been unmistakably disorienting. This one had been smooth and instantaneous. Even smoother than the

smoothest portal. And the stones! The fact that he had returned to Gaibelan did not vex him nearly as much as the fact that the stones had returned to his pocket. Had he conjured them? Or had he... Surely not. He felt absurd considering it. It was not possible. It would explain everything, if not for the fact that it was impossible.

Had he gone back in time?

He was jostled back to reality when one of the stones was picked from his hand. He put the other stone in his ear. He whispered with apprehension.

“Dear God, please be Sam.”

“I’m flattered, Professor, but there’s no need to call me God.”

John smiled despite the urgency of their climb.

“I was going to ask if you’re the real Sam, but I suppose I’ve got my answer.”

“Then you’re no beetlebrain after all. Are you the real John Hennessy?”

“About a thousand times more real than you bargained for, when you asked me to dance to Joan Jett.”

They panted as they climbed up to the top of the mountain. Finding himself back in the cave with Hlapula in his arms had felt like a dream. Now the dreamy feeling was receding. Where was she now? Had she returned to her mountain? Perhaps it didn’t matter. If Hlapula was lost, she was lost. He was hardly in a position to rescue her. He’d only narrowly managed to escape with Sam.

He needed to plan his next steps. He still had Illyrio’s cloth bag with the po po fruits. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he pulled one out. He stroked its textured rind with his thumb. He had Sam, he had the fruit, and, assuming Hlapula was back in her mountain, he had six weeks to kill every living po po tree. The most sensible course of action was obvious. He had to get Sam to safety. He would go back to Hogwarts, wash and rest, arm himself with adequate tools and spells, and enlist Kate’s help. The fact that this was the right thing to do did not change the fact that it would be one of the hardest things he’d ever done.

On they walked, and the ground beneath their feet leveled out. They had reached the plateau.

“Bloody hell! This mountain is a volcano!”

“Aye. Don’t worry, she’s friendly,” John said distractedly.

He fidgeted with the fruit in his hand, and bit his lip. He didn’t have any more time to hesitate. If he really had gone back in time and Bolas was in the cave, then Bolas might break through his barriers at any moment.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re about to cry.”

“Huh? Oh. Nothing’s wrong.” John felt hot tears welling up in his eyes. “We’re going home,” he said decisively. Then he took a bite of the fruit.

“Uhhh,” Sam hesitated. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

John chewed on the bitter, rubbery rind and swallowed roughly.

“I didn’t forget,” he snapped. A tear burst forth and slid down his cheek. He brushed it aside, hoping that Sam hadn’t seen it. He took another bite.

“Professor... John... we can’t leave without getting your vision and hearing back, can we?”

John tried to hold back more tears as he chewed, but they fought their way out. He brushed them aside, trying desperately to look more composed than he felt.

“John! Talk to me!”

“Yes, Sam, we can leave without getting my vision and hearing back! That’s what we’re doing! You think I want to leave like this? We have to, alright? We’re lucky to be getting away at all!” John shook with emotion as he spoke. A floodgate somewhere inside him had burst, and all his despair and frustration was pouring out of him.

“If I stay, they’re just going to restart the whole bloody process again until they get what they want! And I can’t let them get what they want, do you understand?” He grimaced as he took another bite. “Maybe I’ll hire someone to steal Illyrio’s antidote. Or maybe I’ll try to make my own. Or maybe

it'll all fail and I'll be blind and deaf for the rest of my life. But you know what? I'll figure it out! I can still... touch things. Maybe I'll make art that people can... touch. I still have magic. Maybe that's enough. I mean, hell, look at Hlapula! She doesn't have eyes, or ears, or a body, or any friends at all, and she's happier than I am! Because she has something I've never had—hope!”

“John?”

“Maybe this is just the price I have to pay to learn my lesson about interacting with Illyrio. I shouldn't have given him the time of day. I should have attacked him the moment I saw him. Instead, I shook his bloody hand! Why? Why do I keep giving him chances? I'll tell you why, it's because I feel lonely, and desperate, and miserable, and every time I see him I think, 'Maybe he's changed. Maybe he'll act like a real father this time.' But I know he's not going to change. I'm just torturing myself, because that's what I do.”

“John!”

“And you know something, Sam, I didn't reject you because you're sixteen, or because you're a student and it's against the rules. I rejected you because you I like you, a lot. And you like me, and I think we could be happy together, and that terrifies me. I'm afraid to be happy, because I'll just end up feeling like our happiness is a lie, or that it won't last, or that I don't deserve it. One way or another, I'll find a way to sabotage my own happiness and decide that I'm better off alone.”

His chest was heaving as he gulped the warm air. He felt spent and exhausted, but for the first time in a long time, he did not feel confused.

“John.”

John froze. The voice that emanated from the stone into his head was not Sam's.

“John, I just want to talk.”

John squeezed the half-eaten po po fruit. Despair dropped into his stomach like a stone. He smiled a wide, false smile.

“Alright, Bolas, you want to go again? Sure. We can go again. And again, and again, until I get it right. Only this time, let's stay away from Mount Yunut. I'm really not dressed for the cold.”

Bolas said nothing. A breeze carried the heat from the volcanic crater onto John's back. John silently began calling on all the forces of magic that had proven loyal to him so far that evening. He felt magical energy rising up from his toes and settling beside him, like a hound prepared to defend its master.

“Come on, Bolas. Just give me a reason.”

“I don't want to fight you, John. Please...”

“Oh, fancy that!” cried John in mock delight. “The monster says his please's and thank you's!”

“If you would just—”

“If I would just go on my merry way, then? Haha! No planeswalker ever said 'please' without a dagger behind his back.”

“I'm not trying to trick you.”

“Ah! Well, then I'll just be on my merry way!” John picked up the fruit and took another bite.

“Stop!”

“No! Either stop me or get out of my way! I'm tired of trying to reason with you people, who wouldn't understand common decency if it jumped up and bit you on the arse!”

“Would you just take the bloody antidote!”

Something was thrust into John's free hand. It was a tiny, corked vial. John was momentarily stunned. All the magical defenses he'd been preparing suddenly melted off of him.

“And if you wouldn't mind,” Bolas continued exasperatedly, “I would appreciate the opportunity to apologize.”

John laughed a nervous, humorless laugh. He shook his head.

“No. No. This is some kind of trick.”

“It's no trick.”

“You *just* tried to trick me ten minutes ago!”

Bolas sighed. “Fair enough. I led Sam here because I wanted to catch you and because I really, really wanted to get Hlapula out of the way. But I’m telling you, I’m not Illyrio. Just because I am his colleague does not mean I operate by his methods.”

John weighed the two items in his hands. In his right, juice from the half-eaten po po fruit snaked between his fingers. In his left, the vial was cool and surprisingly heavy. He struggled to cling to his rage as the fruit began to make him feel light and expansive. Subtle awareness of his location in spacetime crept up on him. He could feel himself beyond himself, looking down on the three of them.

“Where’s Sam?”

He felt her nearby. She was close, and she was moving.

“She’s here. She’s taking a walk. I think she was a little shaken by your... outburst.”

John could feel her presence, thanks to the fruit. She was circling the crater.

“Please, John, just take the antidote. If I wanted to poison you, I could have easily done it by now.”

“Says who?” John asked belligerently, but he stroked the little vial with interest. His rage and tension were diffusing. The effects of the half-eaten fruit were weaker now than when he’d eaten the entire fruit earlier, but he was still finding it difficult to be angry with Bolas. He dropped the remains of the fruit from his sticky right hand. He had more po po fruits in his bag if he needed them.

“By the way, you don’t have to eat the rind or the seeds,” Bolas ventured. “Just the flesh will do.”

“Where’s Hlapula?”

“She is in her mountain,” Bolas answered with a note of surprise. “I thought you put her there.”

John frowned. As the soothing serenity of the fruit washed over him, he asked the po po whether Hlapula was really in her mountain. He could feel the mountain from a thousand feet above them. He looked down on it and felt its beating heart. Hlapula was there, the fruit told him. She was home, and she was waiting. Six weeks. Four hundred thirty-six trees.

“Hmm.” John was basking in the glow of the fruit. He felt light, physically and emotionally. He felt that same hunger for closeness, for merging with all things, that he’d felt on the smelly plane.

“You don’t seem evil,” he said to Bolas thoughtfully.

“Oh. Thanks.”

He uncorked the vial. Maybe Hlapula had been wrong about Bolas. Besides, if Bolas and Illyrio were really determined to overpower him, they would do so sooner or later. He couldn’t fight them off forever. In any case, John felt sure that, one way or another, everything would be fine.

He drank the contents of the vial. Then he waited. All he detected was the sensation of his own steady breathing, and the sound of Bolas’ breathing through the whisper stone.

“For what it’s worth,” Bolas said, “When Illyrio showed up with you in your damaged state, and Sam on your arm, I was furious. But then he pointed out that giving you back your senses would not have made you any less angry with us. It would’ve only made you more powerful. I didn’t like the plan, but I allowed it. I see now that that was a mistake. We went too far. I just wanted that damned tree so badly.”

“Why? From what I hear, you don’t even need it.”

“Not particularly, but the Hegemony wants it.”

“Right, of course. And you’re their little lapdog,” John sneered. A headache was developing behind his eyes. He began to doubt his decision to drink from the vial.

“I work for them,” Bolas replied flatly. “That doesn’t mean that my heart bleeds for the Hegemony cause. It is a job. I do it well, and in return they give me things that ease the pain of being what I am. Of being... special.”

John raised an eyebrow. His head was beginning to throb. He may have been imagining it, but he thought he could detect shades of gray in his field of vision.

"If I really believed in the Hegemony cause," Bolas continued, "I would have disclosed the locations of earth and Aezeroth to my superiors long ago. Instead, I have withheld that information, and I've seen to it that Illyrio does the same."

"Why?"

"Because of you, John."

John shook his aching head. He looked down at the hand that held the empty vial. He could see something there. It was fuzzy and colorless, but he definitely saw a shape where his hand ought to be.

"You've held back the locations of two planes, denying yourself a generous finder's fee, because of me?" John asked skeptically. "Why? You don't even know me."

"True, but I know that you are special. I have known that ever since an obscure researcher named Illyrio told the magical scientific community about his remarkable little boy."

John closed his eyes and swallowed. Sharp, prickling pain was surging through his head.

"Believe me, John, I understand that loneliness you spoke of, a few moments ago," Bolas said gently. "With all due respect, I may understand it even better than you do."

John opened his eyes and tried to look at Bolas. He saw what looked like a man-shaped figure, but he struggled to place it firmly in his blurred and patchy field of vision. If he tried to focus on one thing for too long, he lost it.

"People like us are rare, John. One of a kind. You can't know how excited I am by the mere possibility of friendship with someone like you. I mean, with someone like me. It's worth far more to me than my friendship with Illyrio. It's worth more to me than two planes. Perhaps it's worth even more to me than the po po tree, though I am coming around to this realization belatedly. I am a patient man, John. You want to be left alone for now. I can respect that. But a day may come when you are tired of fighting off the Hegemony, and you may begin to wonder what the Hegemony can offer you. What I can offer you."

John scoffed.

"I'm nothing like you. You think I would ever align myself with the Hegemony? Over my dead body."

"I don't understand. That can easily be arranged."

John was about to explain the idiom, when his train of thought was suddenly interrupted. A sound penetrated his brain and filled his heart. He could hear birds. It was soft and dull, as if he were hearing it through thick walls, but still, he heard it. Their chirps and squawks and whistles shook him with more force than any symphony he'd ever heard in the world's most venerable concert halls.

"Listen, John. I think you misunderstand me. I'm not trying to recruit you, or to change you. I'm simply extending an olive branch. And I will keep extending it until you decide to pick it up."

John looked around for Sam. She was there, on the other side of the crater. She was still wearing one of Illyrio's robes. It looked brown, or red, or it may have even been green. John squinted. He couldn't tell whether she was facing him or facing the valley below.

"Is there anything I can do to repay you for this fiasco?" Bolas asked. "I can punish Illyrio if you'd like."

John grimaced.

"No. That won't solve anything. Trust me, he never learns."

He took the stone from his ear. A flicker of movement drew his attention, and he saw that Bolas was doing the same. Bolas' image was becoming clearer. He looked very much like he had in Hlapula's vision. He was tall and light-skinned, clean-shaven, with dark hair and a scarlet robe. There was something around his head, like a halo or a helmet. It was thin, and transparent like a bubble. John struggled to make sense of it with his mediocre vision.

Again, John turned back to Sam and tried to discern whether she was facing him. A few shadows and a dash of red lips told him that she was. He waved, a little uncertainly.

"She's a nice girl," Bolas mused. "I am sorry that we put her through all this."

John wheeled on Bolas.

“What do you mean, ‘she’s a nice girl?’” he snarled. “You haven’t been talking to her, have you?”

“Yes. Just a bit of chatting.”

As John focused on Bolas’ face, he realized that Bolas’ lips were not syncing with his words. He must have been using some magic to translate in real time. Perhaps the bubble around his head was doing it.

“I was curious, and she was bored,” Bolas continued. Watching Bolas’ face was like watching a foreign movie that had been dubbed in English.

“Funny, I would have thought she’d be terrified. But she mostly just seemed bored. She must be either very brave or very foolish. Or perhaps a bit of both.”

John narrowed his eyes at Bolas.

“Frankly, she is a little young for my taste, but,” Bolas shrugged. “To each his own.”

“You... ” John growled.

“I made a lot of mistakes in this whole debacle. I failed in more ways than one. I put both of you through hell, and for what? *Politics*,” Bolas waved a hand disdainfully. “There are more important things in life than politics. Things like love, and friendship. I was so wrapped up in my political goals that I forgot that.”

John looked at him with furrowed brows. Bolas was right, he was not Illyrio. Both of them had made overtures of friendship, but there was something different about Bolas’ approach. Bolas lacked the repulsive silkiness that Illyrio wore like a sweet cologne.

John suddenly felt deeply confused and angry. Perhaps it was merely the chunk of po po fruit wearing off. He’d been wrong to trust Illyrio, and he’d be damned if he’d make the same mistake trusting Bolas now. The two were cut from the same cloth. Bolas had switched a little too quickly from adversary to friend. He was a man of favors, punishments, and fragile friendships. John was not so special, nor so lonely, that he couldn’t find love and friendship on earth.

He heard Sam’s approaching footsteps, and he lowered his voice.

“I don’t know exactly what game you’re playing here, but I’m not falling for it,” he spat. “You’re acting nice to me because it suits you. And you’ll turn against me as soon as it suits you.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me, John. In fact, I’d be disappointed with you if you did. But we are both immortal and many things possible, in time. Just remember that if you ever need a friend or a favor from within the Hegemony, I am indebted to you.”

“Piss off. If you or Illyrio ever set foot on earth or Aezeroth, I’ll consider it an act of war.”

Sam came up beside John, watching the two of them warily.

“Nevertheless, my olive branch still stands,” Bolas replied, straightening up. “Goodbye, John.” He bowed. “I think we have both learned a valuable lesson today.”

“What lesson is that?” John demanded.

Bolas turned to Sam. He bowed and took her hand respectfully in his, as if she were a genteel noblewoman. He kissed her hand, then released it.

“Not to pick our fruit before it is ripe,” he replied softly. Then he turned and walked away, toward the edge of the plateau.

John swallowed. He remembered the vision of Bolas that Hlapula had shared with him. It was a relief to see the sorcerer’s back, and not just because seeing was in itself a relief. Bolas and Hlapula were both wild, both killers, both forces of nature, but somehow Hlapula’s actions were more forgivable. She was naive, distant, out of touch. Bolas knew exactly what he was doing. He freely admitted that he did despicable things for material gain. John knew that he would never call on Bolas’ favor, no matter how desperate he might be.

John gazed at the ground, overwhelmed by the sudden deluge of both sensory and emotional information. A loud flapping made him look up, and a sudden wind made him squint. When he focused

his eyes, he saw an enormous red dragon taking flight off the edge of the plateau. It momentarily blocked out the setting sun. Then it shrank and became a stain on the horizon.

He looked at Sam. Her face was still slightly blurred, but it was the first good look he'd had at her since their conversation in the empty classroom. She had a bit of dirt on her forehead and a few flyaway hairs sticking out, but otherwise she was unharmed.

"So," he began awkwardly. "You're, uh, alright, then?"

"Yeah. I'm alright. Have you got your senses back?"

"More or less. Is it true that you were talking to Bolas?"

She nodded.

"What did he want to talk about?"

She shrugged. "Nothing special. Mostly he just asked a lot of questions. What I like to do, whether I like school, what I want to be when I grow up."

John frowned. He couldn't see what Bolas was up to, but it had to be something sinister.

"You ready to go home?"

She looked down and shrugged.

"Yeah. Sure," she said.

Something was off. Perhaps Sam was just shaken by the shock of everything, but John felt there something between them that needed to be resolved.

"Sam, listen..."

"It's alright, Professor."

"No, please. I just want to say... well, obviously I'm sorry for everything I've put you through. I mean, the stuff here with Illyrio and the planeswalking was an unfortunate accident, but the stuff at school... I'm sorry about that, too. First I let you in, and then I pushed you away. That was unfair of me. You were right, you weren't asking much. Just a walk and some conversation. I said that I was afraid of wounding you, but the truth is... I was afraid of getting wounded myself."

She looked up at him, and he looked steadily into those familiar blue eyes.

"I just want to say, that if you do want to spend some time together, I'm open to that. I don't want to toy with you anymore. I don't think a relationship between us would necessarily wound you, not if we go about it in the right way, and for the right reasons."

He looked away as he waited for a response. She didn't give one. He reached into his bag and counted the fruits. He would need at least one to get back to Gaibelan and destroy the four hundred thirty-six trees, as promised. He pulled one out and jostled it in his hand.

"Funny," he mumbled as he looked at it. "They're green. I imagined them as sort of pink. They tasted pink, somehow."

Sam's chest heaved out of the corner of his eye. He looked up at her.

"I think we should break up," she said decisively.

John laughed.

"Sam, we're not even..." he trailed off as she watched him steadily.

"Right. Okay. Sure. That's fine with me."

He began peeling off bits of the po po rind. In spite of his resentments toward Bolas, he was grateful for that particular tip about the fruit. He watched Sam out of the corner of his eye. She was watching the sprawling rainforest below, which was splashed pink in the light of the sunset. Her hair glistened with pink light, too.

"Can't imagine what made you change your mind about me," he said with a hint of a smile.

"Oh, it's been on my mind for a while," Sam replied, clearly not interpreting the question to be rhetorical. "I was already thinking about it before today."

John nodded, continuing to peel the fruit.

"Is it because I'm a space alien?"

"No. I mean, I dunno. Maybe that's part of it."

She paused. John was a little disappointed at her rejection, but he was far from devastated. It simplified matters greatly. He'd put her through enough of a roller coaster ride. He pried out a wedge of the fruit, which it turned out was actually sectioned like citrus.

"Your mate Nicol Bolas was a right friendly bloke. I think it was during my time with him that I decided I could do better."

She crossed her arms.

"Like, a lot better."

"Aye, point taken."

"And don't worry, I won't tell anyone you're a space alien. Though I think half the school already suspects it."

"Only half? Well then, I'm in pretty good shape."

They continued to stand in silence, looking outward and avoiding each others' gazes. John ate the gritty flesh of the po po fruit and waited for the familiar lift. There was so much they could talk about now, so much each of them could recount and explain, yet neither spoke. Urgency melted away as John watched the sunset. Brilliant reds and purples streaked across the sky like watercolors, and the crest of a ruby sun kissed the horizon. He sighed with relief. He could see and hear again. They were going home. Everything had worked out, after all. Even Bolas' oddly genial behavior was disturbing him less and less.

He floated above the mountain, first finding himself in two places at once, then in all places at once. He lifted his hands, and the multiverse danced at his fingertips. Before he began to manipulate the magical currents, though, he turned around to the crater behind him. The crater was calm and no longer smoking. He waved to it.

"Who are you waving at?" Sam asked.

John smiled serenely as he replied.

"A friend."