

# Baste

Stars. That's all I see, here, now, minutes from the end.

There is lots more visible from this window. The rows of brick facades, subtle variations in texture and age and character, stretching off down the street, lit by the comforting glow of streetlights. The towers of downtown Baste across the river, suffusing the atmosphere with radiance. The bright dotted line of Perrin's Bridge, doubled in shifting reflection upon the black waters of the Caron. But I choose to look at the stars.

They're not even real stars. Not in my mind. I cling to the memory of what stars ought to be, cling to the wonder of them, beside which these are but shades in a too-bright sky. Even the light of the streets and the city and the bridge, if they could be mirrored above, would be truer. I don't know what these stars are and I hate them for pretending. But they will have to do.

The pounding continues and I turn to tell Andelie to stop panicking, but she's way ahead of me. Outwardly collected, she catches my nod and heads around to the living room to open the door. We both know who it is and who they've come for, and I don't intend to make a fuss about it. I'll walk out, give Andelie a hug and a kiss if they let me, and turn myself in. They'll probably throw me into a hole in the ground for the rest of time, as long as they don't shoot me on sight. But it's all right. I have a plan.

I just need to think of it.

“You really don’t have to do this,” I tell Andelie in a small voice, the second time she cooks dinner for me. I’m resolutely staring at my plate because I don’t want to look her in the eyes, and also other reasons. The problem is this is making me increasingly hungry because Andelie’s food is *delicious*, and I feel like eating while talking might conflict with the point that I’m trying to make to her. “I got arrested the moment I got here. What happens to you if they figure out I’m here?”

Andelie, who is not about to take a bite until I do, leans forward from the chair where she’s sitting cross-legged. “First of all, I’m not going to kick you out and let you starve, because why would I do that. Really now. Second, no one has any records on you, or clear pictures of your face, or any idea where you got to within the city, right? So it’s going to be a while, if ever, until the police get any kind of lead.

“Third,” and she draws herself up exaggeratedly and adopts such a ridiculous princess voice that I look up involuntarily and burst out giggling, “I am Lady Andelie vi Marand, daughter of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Marand, and that means I know a few good lawyers. What they tell me is, so long as I don’t punch a cop if they come looking for you, I’m not doing anything illegal. I can be guilty of human smuggling or treason or whatever if I harbor a foreign national, but there’s literally no way to trace you back to any country or culture that we know of, so there’s actually no law that covers this. It’s a clever little loophole. All that’s left is technicalities, like they found two people in an apartment with only one coat hook or something, and my friends would happily get me out of those if it came to that.”

I keep looking at her. “I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Andelie bites her lip. “Well, okay. By the same loophole, it’s... not clear you actually count as a person, for many purposes. So if they get you, they don’t have to ask a court, they can just shoot you or lock you up forever and torture you for information, as long as they’ve, uh, ‘made a good-faith effort to determine your status’. But you’re a lot more likely to get caught sneaking around outside, anyway, even with your *magical powers*” – she wiggles her fingers for emphasis – “and it’s no trouble for me, so eat your damn dinner already and don’t even think about running off.”

“Yes, princess,” I say before digging in, earning me a mock-thwack on the head. “So, uh, what’s it mean, that you’re a daughter of the House of Marand? Some sort of hereditary nobility, or...?”

“No, I’m not actually a princess,” she laughs. “It’s meritocratic. I apparently got excellent grades in school, so I got accepted to the House. First one in the family; my parents were so proud. It’s kind of an honor society slash scholarship thing? I don’t know how education works where you come from...” I nod, so she goes on, “but it’s a big deal even after you leave school. People like to put it after their names because it makes them look smart. There’s a whole bunch of Houses, all named after famous people. Marand was this pretty awesome physician dude about three hundred years ago. I’ll have to show you the wiki article on the history of Baste sometime.”

I nod. The food really is wonderful, and I keep feeling like I’ve asked Andelie enough, so I don’t want to brave the waters of conversation again. All the same, after we’ve finished and are cleaning up, I decide to risk one more question.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“That thing about the coat hooks...”

“Don’t worry, it’s not a real law. Our legal system isn’t *that* stupid. Only almost.”

Tonight is the first time I’ve laughed since I ended up here. And Andelie... well. Things. Words. It’s amazing how unimportant the prospect of getting shot seems, here, now, on the second day.

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I open my eyes to a flood of grayscale, hard pavement beneath me and blood pounding inside my skull. It subsides slowly, the image resolving into an alleyway lined with what must be houses, tall and unfamiliar and vaguely threatening, and deep down I know that it worked, that I am now *here* and not *there*, with only a roiling subdued uncertainty in my stomach to suggest that it may have been a mistake.

It is dusk; the last traces of faded orange and violet are vanishing from the sky, and the world is bathed in weary gray, punctuated by streetlight halos. Oddly, I can’t locate the sun; the whole expanse of sky seems uniform but for the half-defined shadows of scudding clouds. It’s bounded by the two rows of buildings on either side of me, their windows gazing at me and past me like grids of eyes. Some are broken; most are shaded; all are dark. The shattered shards of glass glimmer like fallen stars among the alleyway detritus. I shiver unconsciously, not because of the cold. This place is too faceless, too soulless for me.

It's still cold, though, and getting more so, so I gather some trash that looks flammable and mentally call upon it to start a fire. Nothing happens. Frowning, I ask again. No response.

Panic rises inside me, but I shove it down. Somehow I'd counted on this world working the way I'm used to, but I'm forced to accept that it doesn't, and now I'm completely lost; I don't know how to do anything. As useful as knowing how to walk is when you're stranded in space. Flail your legs around all you want; it won't get you anywhere.

There is one thing I can count on above anything else, though, which is my clothes. I made them when I was thirteen; I purged them myself and filled them with part of me. They grew along with me; they keep themselves clean; they protect me from injury. Everything I could find instructions for in the library. I ask my clothes to keep me warm, and to my immense relief they respond, thickening slightly to insulate better and producing a little of their own heat. The hood wraps down comfortably around my head.

As I make my way down the alley toward the street, I become aware of a piercing shriek ramping up in intensity. Before I can decide what to do I realize it's sirens, two cars that come racing down the street and skid to a stop in front of me, blocking the way out. On instinct I drop back into a loose stance and whip out my bow, glancing behind me. The alley's a dead end, and without the aid of the walls there's no way I'm scaling those buildings. It's not looking good for me. If these are people with power, law enforcement or gang muscle or whatever, resisting will make me a fugitive with slim chances. But whatever they do if they get their way with me might well be worse. Here, now, with not enough time to think, fighting looks an awful lot like the best of limited options.

A figure in uniform jumps out of each car and trains a gun on me. They are two menacing silhouettes backlit by a bewildering whirl of red and blue and yellow – the cars, the streetlamps, the stars. Two more get out on the other side, behind the cars; their weapons are drawn but they're speaking into handheld radios. "Units 379 and 380," I think I hear one of them say. "At the scene of reported explosion, 124 Aimee. No visible damage except broken windows; shelter-in-place in effect. Encountered a woman wearing a mask, medium height, armed with a bow. Consider hostile and dangerous." (So that was me, my arrival that broke those windows? And everyone's hiding inside with the lights off... I guess that makes sense.)

"Freeze!" shouts the man in front. "Drop your weapon and come forward with your hands up. Now!"

I have no intention of obeying. Without warning I roll to the right, pull out an arrow and fire it wildly, praying to the air to guide it. For a moment it seems to work; the arrow shifts and veers toward a true course, and I grasp at that hope with a desperate pang of adrenaline, but it's not enough – my arrow whooshes harmlessly past the man's shoulder, eliciting a startled "Fuck!", and disappears into the far side of the street. The other figure, a woman, doesn't wait for me to pull that again, and fires her gun. I hear a crackling noise, register intense pain for an instant, and black out.

When I come to I discover that I'm in a prison cell. Heavy metal bars line one wall; the other three are concrete. There's a small window high up on the wall behind me, also barred. The cell is clean and bare, rectangular and neutral-colored, not degrading but not comfortable, just utilitarian. I'm not obviously injured, so it must have been some sort of nonlethal –

electrical? – gun that hit me, but I ache all over and my head feels terrible. From the signs posted around the hallway outside I gather that I’m deep in the bowels of a police station, but the guard stationed there isn’t interested in talking to me or answering my questions. My clothes let me know that while I was out the cops took my fingerprints and a blood sample, rifled through my pockets (nothing there but some food) and confiscated my bow, and tried to remove my hood to get a look at my face. They note with some pride that this was unsuccessful.

I lie there for a while, thinking about what I’ve gotten myself into. The police are undoubtedly trying to identify me, to find some records that match. Missing person, wanted criminal, illegal immigrant? They won’t come up with anything. Probably. But then what? I don’t know. It scares me, and I try not to linger on it.

After a bit the guard leaves, turning off the lights and locking the door. I roll over on the cot and ask the walls for help. They say nothing, but I keep trying.

I stay there well into the night, praying, hoping, beseeching. For any hint of a response, any sort of motion that can show I still have power. This is the kind of thing I used to have nightmares about. Trapped in a box of dead stuff, of purged, uninhabited walls. No way out.

But then the bars on the window slip just a little, and my heart leaps; I focus on my task more intently than ever. One by one the bars shift and bend; the concrete crumbles and deforms; soon the opening is wide enough for me to smash the glass behind and pull myself out into the chilly air. Directing my infinite gratitude toward the window behind me, I set off into the night, keeping to the shadows.

I'm mentally worn out and physically exhausted, and it seems like a good idea to find somewhere I can fall over. Wandering the unfriendly streets of an unfamiliar city, the grids of eyes watching me by starlight, I don't know where that might be, but as soon as is feasible I pick a likely-looking apartment building and stumble into the deserted lobby. It's eerie with not a soul in sight, fake plants under fluorescent lighting and the endless rows of mailboxes, and I didn't count on the stairwell being locked, but I rest my hand on the handle and ask it to open, and I'm so grateful to hear the tumblers slide out of the way for me. Small victories.

Inside the stairwell I collapse onto the hard floor, escaping from this nightmare of a world into new nightmares of my own devising, and that's where Andelie finds me when she gets back from the hospital just before dawn and carries the mysterious masked girl up to her apartment, because why wouldn't she do that. Really now.

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"What's a sun?" Andelie replies, perplexed, when I ask her. "The world's flat. It goes on forever. What you're saying doesn't make sense."

"Oh. Where I come from, the world is round," I explain. "Like a sphere. The universe is a lot of empty space, and there are stars floating all around it... each star is a big glowing ball of gas, and some have planets going around them, like mine. That's where day and night come from, is the sun only hits half of the world at a time. We haven't been to many other planets; the problem is there's nothing out there between the stars and planets – no matter, no spirits, nothing – so it's really hard to get a spacecraft to keep working and moving in the right direction. There are some absolutely beautiful pictures that I wish I could show you, though..."

I'm aware that I'm babbling at this point, so I make myself shut up. I just can't help feeling that this world is terribly lonely and devoid of beauty, with its day that's just a brightening of the sky and its false stars that can't be billions of vast incandescent furnaces because the shape of this universe just wouldn't support that. I don't know what it is and I hate it for pretending, even though I can't look at Andelie and believe this world is worth nothing. I want to let her see all the things I've seen, show her what a world *should* be, but I can't.

"I wonder what it's like," she says quietly after a while, "to live in that kind of world."

I bite my tongue, and don't answer her.

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"All right, to start from the beginning... well, the beginning is probably the creation of the universe, but that was a long time ago and no one really knows how it happened."

All Andelie's known about me for the first few days, besides that I'm underfed and need rest, are how I escaped from the police and the little "magic tricks" I desperately showed her to prove I'm from another world. I was worried, since I had trouble doing even the smallest things, but it definitely convinced her. I'm glad for that; I wouldn't expect even her to protect someone she thinks is a dangerous criminal. (Though I guess I am, if you think it about it that way.) Right now she wants to know more about where I come from, so I'm telling her the short version.

"My world looks a lot like this. There are mountains and rivers and forests, roads and big cities, tall buildings, streetlights, cars... I lived more out in the country, though, on the outskirts of a city. My parents would take me downtown sometimes and I'd always look forward to it.

“I guess what you want to hear about is the magic. We don’t rely so much on mechanical devices or whatever. In my world, everything, every breeze, every stone, every blade of grass, has a spirit, something you can talk to and ask to do things. If I want to levitate this pencil, I just need to ask the air to bear its weight.”

“Magic,” interjects Andelie.

“Yeah. That’s all magic is, is that you can talk to everything, not only people, and get things to happen just by thinking. See what I’m saying?”

“So all our transportation, our communication, all of that works this way. Most people don’t think about it too much day to day, because usually you just use artifacts that you can control mechanically, and not have to worry about what’s actually going on. It’s like... if you want to travel down a river, you could ask the water to keep you afloat. But you’d have to keep up that mental effort the whole way, plus you’ll still get wet.

“So you could make a raft out of wood and ride it down that way, but you’d still need to talk to the water to steer. Or you could get a crafter to make you a real boat, where all you have to do is point it in the right direction, even against the current, and it knows how to propel itself and not crash into things. The crafter designs it so it talks to the water by itself, kind of.

“I remember when we learned about crafting in school. I was so excited to finally know how it worked! I wanted to try it as soon as I got home, but my parents said it was too dangerous for a little girl like me. Because the problem is the spirits already in the wood are, well, kinda dumb and kinda finicky, and you don’t want to trust them to steer your boat. First

you have to purge the materials of what's already there, and that leaves it empty and dead. Like this whole world seems to be... sorry! Maybe I just don't know how to talk to the spirits here. I don't really know. Anyway, then you have to imbue the artifact with part of your own soul, because that's the only way to get it to do what you want.

"Both of these steps can be really dangerous if you don't have a firm grasp of who you are and what you want to make. But if you get trained as a crafter and everything, you can make really amazing things – like cars, or things that let you fly, or handheld computers that can talk to other computers all over the world."

"Sounds pretty familiar," says Andelie, grinning.

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A few days later I fall asleep on Andelie's shoulder while reading. She's given me her tablet and taught me how to read the wiki on it, and I find it pretty intuitive as long as I stick to following links (and remember that I have to physically interact with it to get it to do anything). I started from the page on Marand, and, frankly, I'm amazed how much better this world's medicine is than mine. You can't just ask fragments of a bone to pop back together or whatever, not while they're part of a living human body, so medicine has to progress along different lines from any other field of research. Crafting surgical tools is an exacting and specialized art, and no one dares craft drugs or anything to be ingested. Those have to be mixed up chemically.

I come back to awareness slowly, feeling the weight of the tablet on my lap, the tide of my breath, and the nearness of Andelie's face. When I open my eyes she's looking at me; she's

set her laptop aside on a table. There's a look in her face I can't read, and I'm sure the same is true for me, but even without speaking we move together; I raise my head and she lowers hers; our eyes close and our lips meet. We stay like that for an unknown period, exploring, playing, tasting each other in body and soul, until finally we part.

"I've been wanting to do that... for a whole week now," Andelie murmurs, and I curl up tighter against her, basking in her many forms of warmth, with a small sigh of every good thing.

Nothing else matters. Here, now, in a timeless instant.

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"Eight hundred and seventy years ago Lord Perrin crossed the river Trom with three caravans of his followers, after he'd been exiled from Staenn in the violent purges preceding the collapse of the Fourth Empire. He took as his domain a little town called Baste at the mouth of the river Caron, and built it into the greatest trading and seafaring power for a thousand miles. Its population swelled every year with refugees from the Stennish wars, and it grew in area until it butted up against the Wild Lands. When Molner the heir of Staenn reclaimed the Violet Throne with the imperial carbine Thunderbringer and reformed the Watchful Alliance against the threat from the north, he accepted the Free City of Baste as one of his chief allies. Ever since, we've helped the Alliance guard the Dragon Marches. See that range of hills?"

I have trouble discerning Andelie's arm in the darkness on the roof of her building, with only starlight from above and precious little lamplight filtering up from the streets below. But when I follow it with my eyes I do make out a jagged line of darkness to the northeast,

silhouetted against the incomplete blackness of the sky. I nod. Shifting to stretch my legs, I lean closer to Andelie as she continues.

“That’s the Dragon’s Spine. There aren’t any dragons there. In fact there isn’t much of anything on the other side. No rivers, no forests, not even oil. Just a big desert and the barbarians of the Wild Lands. The wildlings used to attack us all the time, and you couldn’t go twenty years without some sort of war on, but for the past century of the Watchful Peace we’ve been able to hold them at bay past the Spine, and keep the major cities of the Alliance safe. Just in case, though, those hills are full of anti-air batteries, artillery, missile silos, and all sorts of other nasties. Long-range surveillance can tell us if anything’s coming.”

I look down at my hands, uneasy. “You keep saying ‘we’.”

“Yeah?” Andelie glances at me sidelong. “Us. Baste. Staenn. The Alliance.”

“Doesn’t it seem stupid, being ready to go to war all the time?”

“Sure. But what else are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, make peace or something.”

“Can’t.” Andelie shakes her head. “You can’t negotiate with them. We’ve tried.”

“But—“

“Look, we’re all pragmatists here, all right? We have to be. This is how things are, and there’s no use for nice ideas like pacifism if they aren’t going to keep Baste safe. Don’t they have wars where you come from?”

“Not really... I mean, sometimes, small ones. But mostly not anymore.” Andelie’s staring away from me now, out across the expanse of suburban light toward the Spine, and she sounds like she doesn’t want to argue about this, so I switch topics. “I guess it happened when we invented long-distance travel and communication and stuff that could reach anyone on the planet, and satellites – artifacts that travel around the planet, in space. We all realized it wasn’t worth our time to try to blow each other up, or something. How does that work here?”

“This world is flat,” says Andelie, “like I told you before. I still have trouble imagining a world that curves back on itself. There doesn’t seem to be an edge to it, or any kind of measurement that can always tell you where you are. But there’s a sorta ceiling, about nine or ten kilometers up, and you can’t fly above that. It’s invisible and not any sort of material, it just stops you from moving upward. There’s actually a whole bunch of balloons stuck there, I think... anyway, that means it’s pretty easy to shoot down aircraft that get too close, and you can’t put something up in space where it doesn’t need fuel. We’ve mapped a couple thousand kilometers in any direction, and the Alliance shares networks of roads, airports, the internet, whatever, but that’s about it. I don’t see why you’d want anything more, frankly.”

I’m mildly shocked. “Really? Not exploration? Discovering new places and new peoples, and communicating with them? Even... even conquering them, if necessary? It would stop this stupid pointless war, at least.”

Andelie shakes her head again. “We don’t put as much value on that as you do. Not when there’s so much going on – so much to deal with, so much to learn and do – right here.”

I'm silent, there under the false stars, gazing at the Dragon's Spine that has no dragons, and I'm not sure if it's the cold that makes me shiver.

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"I remember when I made these clothes," I tell Andelie. "I was thirteen years old. My parents had gotten me a kid's crafting kit for my birthday a few years before, and I used to play with it whenever I had time, right up until I lost half of it. Oh man, I made this little moving pony doll that was the creepiest thing *ever*. Eventually, I decided I was going to make something real and adult and useful, so I spent months in the library looking up techniques. It's a shame people don't go to libraries anymore to study magic, even if it is that much easier online..."

"Anyway, I took my favorite set of clothes out to my secret place in the woods behind our house and spent a day purging and imbuing them. Then I went back inside and showed my parents – I was especially happy with how they could change shape and color. My mom was *furious*, and chewed me out until my dad stopped her. He was of the opinion that it was a reckless thing to do, but as long as I was careful they shouldn't stop me, and it turned out pretty well in this case. I think secretly they were both proud of me."

Andelie's quiet for a while. "Do you miss your parents?"

"Yeah." I swallow. "Yeah, I do."

"What happened to them? Do they know you're gone?"

"They're fine, as far as I know?" I turn away, my heart and my stomach uneasy. "I don't want to talk about it."

“May I ask why?” persists Andelie. “The one thing you’ve never come close to telling me is what you did to get to this world. How—“

“And why is it any of your business?” I burst out. “I’m never going to tell you what you want, so just drop it. Please. I don’t, I—don’t ask me about it.”

“There are limits to my kindness, you know,” Andelie continues coldly after a moment. “Your refusal to tell me anything about how you got here only makes me suspicious of who you really are. Why are you anatomically human? Why do we speak the same language? Why is the society you describe so similar to ours, except with magic? It’s all too perfect of a coincidence; the pieces don’t add up and it’s not helping your case. Give me one reason I shouldn’t believe you’re just some deluded two-bit illusionist who doesn’t deserve my compassion.”

I jump to my feet and face her, my face hot, but no household objects leap into the air to float menacingly around me, not even for effect. Children are taught never to do that. “You want an explanation? Well, I can’t give you one. There’s a lot I don’t know and the rest is too personal, too private. All I know is I was destined to come here. This is where I’m meant to be right now, and wherever my story leads me, it passes through this apartment, here, now.”

“Destined!” Andelie lets out an astonished laugh. “That’s what you don’t understand! Not everything is a story. Maybe it is back in your world, where everything’s alive and thoughts count for something. Maybe it can be true for you. But not here. Here life is random and cruel and you just have to deal with that. Here most things mean nothing but some things mean everything and you can’t tell until afterward. Here – here, we have to make our own stories.”

“Then let me make mine,” I say quietly. “Let me start a story that has nothing to do with what went before. Let me break free of my past, and remember only that I may not be proud of what I did, but it was the best decision I could have made at the time. Let me live without bringing my past self to trial.”

“It sounds a whole lot like you’re just avoiding thinking about it, whatever the cost,” Andelie replies. “But I won’t force you to. Go ahead, write your story. I hope it ends well.”

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We’ve settled into a routine of sorts: Andelie goes to sleep early in the morning when she gets home from her night shift at the hospital. I can’t sleep well when it’s light out, so I get up in the late morning and make myself lunch, and after Andelie wakes up we do whatever through the afternoon and evening. A few hours after dinner she heads off to work again.

That day we form an unspoken truce. The question still hangs over us – it cannot be dismissed – but neither of us lets it affect any other part of how we feel and act toward each other. She won’t ask, and I won’t tell.

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“The Spine is northeast,” says Andelie, pointing. “Northwest, you can’t really see it from here, but there’s the Trom and on the other side’s Stennish territory. There’s not really anything there, maybe some farms. South is the harbor; there’s an industrial area with a bunch of docks and warehouses opposite us. The harbor opens onto the sea to the west. Then there’s Perrin’s Bridge across the Caron to the east – yeah, it’s silly that this is North Baste when

it's west of the city. Baste proper is very business-y; there are some nice neighborhoods to the south. East Baste is kind of a shitty place to live.

"That really tall building across the river? That's the Monolith." I can barely make out the slender obsidian spire reaching up into the sky. "It's got a bunch of government offices, and shops and restaurants at the bottom. I think it's the tallest building anywhere until you get to the Stennish capital, so it's a pretty obvious target, which is why it has a lot of its own defenses, beyond the ones on the Spine that cover the whole city. That's what my friend Toriel tells me, anyway; he's in the army, and he was on duty the last time someone shot a rocket at the Monolith. According to him, no one's ever managed to hit it.

"The hospital I work at is also pretty close to there, though you probably can't see it."

"What do you do there, anyway?" I ask.

"I'm an apprentice surgeon," she tells me, putting her arm across my shoulder and drawing me closer against the chill of the rooftop. "I've gone through medical school, and I'm now assigned to a hospital where I follow doctors around, observing or helping with procedures. It's really tiring but awesome, and occasionally scary."

"I couldn't imagine screwing around inside someone's body to make them better... I dunno if I already told you, but I'm very impressed by what you do."

"Hah, thanks! Marand actually specializes in medicine – it'll accept all kinds of talented students, but something like forty percent become doctors or medical researchers of some kind. Toriel's one of the other sixty percent."

“Seems like you made all these friends in the House,” I say, and Andelie nods. “It makes me wonder why you live all by yourself here.”

“Work mostly, I guess?” A faraway look comes across her face and she turns away from me, hair trailing in the breeze. I idly play with the air currents around her head. “When you leave school... people have to move different places, and work different hours and stuff. It’s hard to keep the same kinds of relationships going. I guess I was never a... popular or social enough person that it seemed worthwhile to try. We still keep in touch online, though.”

“Aren’t you lonely?”

She smiles. “I can see how you’d think so, coming from your world. But no, it’s fine. I can be happy alone.”

I’m unsure if she really believes that, or just wants to, but I don’t press her. “Actually, I, uh, feel the same way, I think. I used to hate the flood of spirits all around me sometimes; I’d wish there was somewhere I could go where it’d be silent and empty. That was one of the reasons I wanted to be an astronaut for a while, to go to space where there was really truly nothing. My secret place in the woods was purged as far as I could reach, even though my parents said it was dangerous, so I could sit there and close my eyes and pretend. It never lasted, though; there’d always be birds singing or something, and the spirits of the forest would come back to life over weeks and months, so I’d have to keep clearing it.”

“Two loners, then,” murmurs Andelie, as memories and long-absent places drift through my mind. “Two loners who’ve found each other.”

I lean my head against hers. “Something like that,” I reply.

Am I really okay, or am I just running from something I don’t want to admit to myself? I don’t know how to tell, and I don’t know if it matters.

Here, now, forever and a day.

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I brush Andelie’s bangs out of her eyes and smile at her, and we kiss again, deeply, sensuously, hands on each other’s backs pressing us close. After we part, Andelie draws back a little and looks to the side almost abashedly. “Could I ask you something?” she says, playing with her hair. “Would you be willing to... tie me up?”

It takes me a moment. “Oh, you’re into that kind of thing, are you?”

“Yeah.” She smiles at me hesitantly.

“I’m sure I can figure something out.” I grin. “Got any rope?”

Andelie rummages in a drawer and pulls out a bagful of thin rope, sleek and flexible, which she tosses to me before jumping onto the bed and sitting there with her hands in her lap. I follow, settling myself straddling her legs. “You’ll have to give me a moment,” I tell her. “It’s harder when the rope doesn’t help you out.”

In fact, I can’t remember how to make any kind of knot on my own, so I have to concentrate for a minute to reach the spirit of the rope. All I need is for it to move where I tell it to; I’m too impatient to teach it how to be safe. Not that it would *intentionally* strangle Andelie,

it just won't go out of its way not to, so I still have to be careful where I put the knots and loops, what's getting constricted, where the tension is.

At last I succeed, and watch in delight as the rope snakes along Andelie's exposed belly and wraps itself around her back. She shrieks happily and tries to squirm away, but I'm on her legs and the rope isn't going anywhere, so she settles for pulling her arms free and trying to bat the rope away where it tickles her.

"Well, we can't have that," I say, leaning over her. "Stop this nonsense." I grab her hands and hold them on the bed behind her so she's propped up on her arms. She smirks at me and sticks out her tongue, but all of a sudden both her arms go limp and give way beside her, and she tumbles back onto the sheets with a startled yelp.

"What did you do?!"

"Nothing! I don't know!" I'm hastily clearing the rope off her body just in case, but my mind's racing ahead. Oh, no. No no no. "I told your arms to stop moving, and they did. That can't happen. It's impossible."

"Because you can't speak to part of someone who's alive. The whole thing with medicine in your world."

"Right."

Andelie nods and sighs, turning her eyes to the ceiling from her awkward position. "Look, there's something I maybe should have told you. About me."

There's an odd hole in the pit of my stomach. "Yeah?"

"I have robotic arms."

"What?"

"Cybernetic. Mechanical. I'd show you if they weren't... useless right now." She shifts her torso a bit, uncomfortably. "I had to get them for medical school; biological arms aren't nearly steady or precise enough for modern surgery. And these are pretty fancy ones; they have a bunch of tools built in."

There's a buzzing in my ears and I can't focus on anything; I'm shocked and disgusted, or maybe I only feel like I ought to be. I really can't tell anymore. "That's... that's horrible! You let them cut your *limbs* off, so you could be better at your *job*?!"

She exhales frustratedly. "Yeah, I did, alright? It's not like I lost anything. Anything my arms could do before, these can do too. It's not as bad as the military versions, anyway."

"But they're unnatural." I won't look at her. "They're inhuman."

"They are *tools*. And they are part of me, like your clothing. It shouldn't have made any difference to you."

"Don't even compare the two! They are *nothing* alike." I'm hissing through clenched teeth at this point. I can't think straight. "The body is supposed to be sacred, it's supposed to be a unified whole! Not some fucking machine that you can swap the gears out of. These aren't even part of you anymore!"

“According to your world!”

“Well, obviously it’s true here too!”

Pause.

“All right, so,” Andelie says, “do you want to have sex, or are you just gonna leave me helpless like this?” And I sigh and give in, because with the look on her face and the look of her body, here, now, in a timeless moment whose inevitable end I will not allow to worry me, there’s no way I can say no.

“You have a point,” I concede. The argument can wait for another day.

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Afterward we figure out that turning the arms off and on again resets them well enough, which is a huge relief because I’m not sure how I could have fixed them otherwise. I find myself going about my day almost buoyant with contentment, full with energy and memory and possibility from what we two showed each other. There is still a lingering resentment over what Andelie did to herself and hid from me, but I don’t want to bring that up again and ruin what I’ve come so far for. From what I see, Andelie feels similarly in all respects. Someday there may be a reckoning; someday I may have to clear the air and risk losing the only good thing I’ve found. But I will not worry about that day, not until it comes. Destiny has led me here, to a joy I cling to like salvation for as long as fate lets me, and I won’t let myself destroy my happiness through my own fucking mistakes.

There is still curiosity, though, as dangerous as it can be.

“You mentioned something about military versions?” I ask Andelie. “What’s that about?”

She turns to look at me. “Are you sure? You’re not going to like this.” When I nod, she continues. “Remember my friend Toriel, in the army? After Lundir he got deployed to the Wild Lands as part of the Alliance counterstrike. We were all so worried about him, since it was the first time anyone we knew from Marand was going into actual combat. We stayed up late watching news from the front, listening to reporters and generals discussing how the war was going. And when the wildlings fell back across the desert, and our troops came home victorious, well, we had to celebrate, of course. What happened at that party stayed at that party.

“Here’s some of the pictures we saw, though.” She passes me her tablet, and on it I see row upon row of glass-walled capsules, lined up like walls of cubbyholes, lit only by dim fluorescents and blinking indicator lights. In each capsule lies a human body, no limbs, just buzz-cut head and uniform leotard, eyes closed in artificially-induced sleep. Technicians patrol the aisles, examining vital signs and checking for indications of trouble. Posters on the walls shout “REMEMBER LUNDIR” and “FOR THE ALLIANCE”. Then there’s a series of photos of the same bodies – the same soldiers – now installed into war machines, with four or six massive insectoid legs, armor over the body and head, retinal heads-up displays, and arms that are mostly cannons. It’s uncanny, it’s terrifying, but I can’t stop looking.

“This is the First Dragoon Legion,” says Andelie tonelessly. “The technology had been under development for years, but it first saw action after the attack on Lundir. These soldiers were all volunteers. Including Toriel. They have their biological limbs removed, and a variety of

robotic ones can be swapped in for maximum effectiveness in combat. Both physically and psychologically. You see a giant man-spider coming for you with rocket launchers, you might just shit yourself and run. There are even experimental models for underwater and air combat.

“It’s mentally excruciating, though. Not only do you have to deal with losing your limbs, and all the stress of combat and killing, you have to learn how to walk and move all over again. At the hospital we’ve gotten some veterans of the program who just couldn’t take it. It’s not pretty.

“So we all thought Toriel was crazy for signing up for this. But to him, it was just part of defending his city, and that was all there was to it. He’d do whatever it took. And as long as he leaves the army honorably, whether it’s retirement or discharge, he gets to keep the top-of-the-line civilian limbs he’s issued. For most purposes, you wouldn’t even be able to tell.”

I shake my head, still staring. “I couldn’t imagine going that far, for anything.”

“It seems a lot less scary,” says Andelie after a moment, “than putting part of your soul out into the world.”

“Huh? You mean crafting? Oh, that’s not as bad as I might have made it sound. The point of imbuing is just to make a form, or a mold... once the spirits reinhabit the artifact, the piece of you is free to come back to you. It was just there to teach the spirits what to do. But the artifact is still shaped like you wanted, metaphorically, so it keeps doing what you designed it to do... see what I mean? At least for a while, depending on how good you are.”

“So it’s temporary, but if you make too many things too quickly...”

“Then you can hurt yourself, yeah. Or if you’re not skilled enough or make a mistake – or do it on purpose – you can end up trapping the piece of soul inside the artifact, and then it’s really hard to get it to come back to you.

“To tell the truth, um, that’s... what I did to my clothes. I filled them with part of me, and then I didn’t let it come back. It made them smarter and much more resilient, but it was like... it was like walking around with a hole in my heart. Every second I could feel the absence of what used to be there, but was now somewhere else. I never told my parents, because it’s not the kind of thing you *do*, not unless you’re an expert crafter and have a very good reason. And eventually I got used to it, to going through life with a piece of my soul missing. Even if it was always right there next to my heart.” I run my hand across the familiar fabric, deep in memory. Things that brought joy; things that hurt; things that I’ll never see again. Things I had to leave, because stuff and words and reasons.

Andelie is quiet for a while. “I still think it’s scarier to lose part of your soul, than part of your body. Bodies can be replaced. Souls can’t.”

“But to have something so dead and empty and – and material, as part of you... at least the missing pieces of me are still out there, and I can touch them and talk to them.”

“These arms are still as much me as anything else is,” Andelie says. “I guess... in the end, we both did what we had to. Like Toriel.”

“What we had to,” I echo.

“This world could use more ghosts,” I say to Andelie on the roof, the breeze whipping at our hair, the sunless sky sinking into uniform shades of purple. Andelie has a thick blanket and I’m stilling the air around our bodies, keeping it warm. But we both want to feel the wind on our faces, here, now, as day turns to night.

“I think it has plenty of ghosts already,” replies Andelie, gazing out at the Monolith.

“I meant—“

“I know what you meant. But all the people who’ve lived here over thousands of years, teachers and traders and fighters, who’ve shaped what Baste is today? They left their ghosts behind. Whether they’re famous people like Perrin and Marand, or the anonymous systems of society that made sure House membership is biased toward the rich, and rumors of torture keep coming out of the military prisons, and there can never be peace with the wildlings... they’re all ghosts of Baste. We just don’t pay them any attention, most of the time.”

“Those aren’t real ghosts, though!” I exclaim, frustrated. “What use are they if they stay quietly in the background and you can ignore them forever? I’m talking about ghosts that let you know they’re there. That every time you trip over a rock there’s a spirit inside it that you can talk to. That every artifact reminds you there was a crafter once who made it, and put part of themselves into it, and if the thing is old enough then you know that person’s dead now. That every space you try to make just your own and no one else’s, the world seeps in through the cracks and fills it before you’ve gotten a chance to enjoy the quiet. The world here is empty and dead; it has no history or depth. It’s just *things*, things in a flat present.”

Andelie looks at me steadily. “I won’t deny those are valuable things. But like I said, we’re all pragmatists here. There isn’t much room for worrying about what used to be and what could have been.”

“Now who’s avoiding thinking about things that bother you?” I mutter, maybe too softly to be heard. “Now who’s running from something you don’t want to admit?” But Andelie is looking across the river again, an unreadable expression on her windswept face.

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Andelie finds me staring forlornly at something in my hands, and I know she can tell there’s something wrong. She comes around to kneel in front of me, and gently brushes my hair back to caress the line of my jaw. There are no tear tracks down my cheeks, only a pensive and resigned expression. She waits for me to speak.

“I figured out why it’s so difficult to connect with the spirits here,” I say eventually. “I thought it might have been because I don’t speak their language, or they don’t understand or recognize or trust me, whatever. All I knew for sure was it took a long time to do things that should have been easy back home, and it always tired me out more than I expected.

“I don’t think there are any spirits here at all, Andelie. I think I was right, this whole world is dead and empty except for the people in it. For whom I’m grateful,” and I smile at her, “but it just... seems so sad and *lonely* and shallow. I don’t know.

“So every time I thought I had managed to communicate, every time I succeeded in making something move or get warmer, I was really imbuing it with myself. I was really putting

part of me into it so that I could ask it to listen. There was never anything there to start with. All the magic I've managed here is just fragments of me talking to each other.

"I tried crafting something for you," I say to my hands, a thin weariness suffusing my body. "It was going to be a gift. I started with some clay and I made it into a ball, and then I purged it. Nothing seemed to happen, which I didn't think much of at the time.

"But when I went to imbue it, it felt exactly the same as when I'd levitate something, or make a breeze. Harder than talking to a spirit should be, but easier than imbuing should be. And then I realized it *was* exactly the same. There was nothing there in the first place, and the piece of me I gave it was just filling a void.

"I don't know how much of my soul I've put out there. I don't think it's a lot, yet. But none of it's coming back, because there aren't any spirits to take its place. The fragment I mistakenly trapped in here isn't ever getting out. That means I can't keep this up, not as long as I stay in this world. Eventually I'll run out of soul to give, and long before then I'll stop being someone you want to keep around. And I don't know if I could stand keeping myself away from magic. It's like... well, it'd be like cutting off my own arm, and not getting a replacement."

I look up, but the despair in my eyes is not mirrored in Andelie's. "So go back to your own world," she says. "You came here somehow. Can you find a way to—"

But I'm shaking my head, no no no, because that's the one place I will not go. I had to leave, it doesn't matter why or how, but I can't go back. I can't, not ever. Not even faced with the prospect of a life without magic. I don't say any of this out loud but Andelie gets my

meaning, and I drop my creation beside me and hug her violently, because she's the only thing standing against the loneliness. Here, now, at the final fading of my hope that maybe this world could be like mine, if only I tried hard enough.

When we finally break apart, I give Andelie a little smile and she returns it. She gestures at the clay ball. "So what is it that you made for me?"

I pick it up and show it to her. It's a smooth sphere of clay, sculpted as finely as I could remember (which is not very) to the contours of my home world. I didn't have to use clumsy tools to carve out the features by hand; I merely imposed them on the clay in the process of crafting. There are continents covered with green and brown, tiny mountain ranges and tinier rivers, islands scattered at random across the glistening oceans because no way was I going to remember where all of them were. It has scudding white clouds that sometimes gather into swirling storms. It floats above your hand and slowly rotates; it won't squish or shatter if you drop it. Half of it is lit up as if by the sun as it turns, a second to an hour, half an hour to a season, and the other half shows artificial constellations in the night, the glow of humanity from far above, modeled on half-remembered satellite pictures from my youth.

I've spent days on it, and I was almost done when I realized what it meant. It is my gift to Andelie, maybe the last one I will ever get to craft.

She sets it aside to savor later, and enfolds me in another fierce hug. I truly don't know what to feel, but it doesn't seem to matter.

I don't know how they found me. It doesn't seem to matter. All that matters is the squad of black-clad men at the door, their arm-guns trained on Andelie and me, faceless and undifferentiated beneath their helmets; the one last desperate sensual kiss I share with her before their eyes, and the feeling of her tightly grasping fingers on the back of my neck falling away, leaving only cold skin in their wake; the click of the handcuffs that lock my arms roughly behind me. Andelie's face as they shut the door behind me, two staying behind to question her.

The agent who handcuffed me leads me down the stairs, saying nothing. The rest form up in front and behind, watching me as we descend. I could get the handcuffs off but I'd have no chance against their weapons. There's nowhere to run. That's fine; I have no intention of running. Nor do I intend to let myself rot in prison. I finally have a plan, and it seems a fitting ending. Here, now, at the close of my story.

When we get to the street there's a black truck waiting for me, there in the lamplight beneath the false stars. My heart is pounding and adrenaline is scrambling my insides, but I force myself to walk steadily until I can pretend to trip on the curb and fall to my hands and knees on the pavement. I feel rather than see the guns track me with heightened vigilance, for my eyes are squeezed tight, my body tense, and my entire self focused on what I need to do. I tell my clothing to heat up, and give part of myself to the oxygen that surrounds me. At the same time I pour myself into the ground, every last drop that remains in my soul, imbuing the earth with everything I have.

My clothes catch fire, feeding on pure oxygen torn from the air and the grim determination in my final intentions. My body becomes a brilliant blue pyre, a vortex of flame

that drives the police back and peels the paint on their truck. It consumes me and then is gone, leaving only scattered ash as evidence that a person from another world ever came to Baste.

But I have sunk into the earth, spreading far in its spiritless vacuum, exulting in the emptiness to fill. I know its deepness and thickness, its hidden crevices and proud peaks; I know its shape and its nature; I am it. That the earth is vast does not matter, not in this vacant world, for it is all one, a single whole thing, and I have no rivals in my claiming of it.

The earth awakes, and it is I.

Here. Now. Until I am not.

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“I saw you from my window,” says Andelie to me, “and I understand what you did. I think I also understand why you did it. Perhaps you wished to give this land some ghosts. Your kind of ghosts. If so, I have no doubt you’ll start letting us know you’re there soon enough. And maybe you can grant us the magic and the spirits that you found so lacking here.

“But I think the real ghosts were inside you all along. The one thing you would never speak of, the question of how you got here. The missing parts deep within you. I never pressed you about those, not since the one night we argued over them, because I’m a pragmatist and they aren’t things that matter to me. But I knew you were running from them, always running. They haunted you. They still haunt you. And that means they haunt our world, now. You’ve given us ghosts, perhaps, but they’re your ghosts. Our world has a history, but it’s your history. Full of cracks and missing pieces and everything that makes you you.

“There’s basically no record that you ever existed, so the police let me go. Don’t worry about me. I’ll keep going about my life, and I can be happy alone. Though maybe I won’t really be alone anymore.

“I guess this planet you gave me has a piece of you in it, so I can talk to it if I want. I don’t know how yet, but I hope I can figure it out. Other random things in this apartment, too. And, if I understood you right... then there’s some of you in these arms of mine, too. So you’ll be very close to me, for a long time.

“You came, because you had to, and you couldn’t stay forever but it didn’t matter, and in the end you wrote your own story. I wonder what you’re thinking, down there where most of you is. I wonder what it’s like for you.”

Andelie sets the planet on a table, where it spins on, lit by an absent sun and wreathed in shifting clouds, and walks to the window. If my passing has left more within her changed than she will admit to herself, her face does not betray it. She clasps her hands against her lips and gazes up at the stars, which tonight seem deeper and truer than they have ever been.

Here. Now.

