The Examiner

By Keri Lemoine

http://acrowamongdoves.tumblr.com/
It never bothered me that I didn’t look like anybody else. No one really looked alike in Gossamer, but this was most apparent in the Dorms. Feathers, scales, smooth skins, shells, two legged, four legged, wing-born and wing-growers, climbers, swimmers, crawlers: every conceivable kind of resident could be found. I gave up long ago trying to remember species names. Still, despite this, we all had two things in common: we’d received our names early and had arrived alone.

Still, it was true that the aquatics usually banded together with other water breathers; those with thick furry coats would groom each other, and the flyers normally would make a point of lounging about on the Dorm roofs, enjoying the feel of the wind. Being so different, we still sought to find something common, to find some even ground to share. Similar biological demands can create common ground; our bodies shape our minds.

But sometimes the opposite can happen.

“Rajiu!” A blue face appeared from atop the large brick wall that separated the Dorms’ courtyard from the streets of the Eastern district. The quills of his cheeks started to vibrate, producing a humming sound. I learned this was a sign he was pleased, his version of smiling.

“Hey stick arms, how’s the dirt taste?” He whistled.

I stuck my tongue out at him, but quickly started to climb. Despite being land bound, I was one of the good climbers. That, and the wall had plenty of gaps in it, great for my long peachy fingers. At the top, Rajiu was still crouched in his usual stance: spiky back bent, long arms tucked to his sides, large feet cupping the wall, tail out and curved like a bow. In the sun, he was blue, but flecks of green winked like fireflies when he shifted. Green eyes with thin slitted pupils stared.

“That was pretty good, Pan. Now you’re only twice as slow as me.”

“Shut up.”

He flashed his needle teeth, trying to imitate my smile. In turn, I stuck my hands near my face and flailed my fingers.

He hummed and I chuckled a bit, but we couldn’t hold the mood. Rajiu returned to the view, the eastern half of Gossamer, solemn.

“They gave me Messenger.”

“Well, that’s good. You’ll get to fly all day and spare us your ugly mug.”

“Says the pink monstrosity.”

I said nothing, instead choosing to share the view. It looked the same as ever. Not perfectly divided, Gossamer was a smattering of lands the Bridgemaker himself that chosen and sewed together.

Directions were given based on cardinal, or main patches. At the north, nested in harsh mountains, spiky rock spires stabbed towards the sky, usually in a bluish white haze of distant snow. To the east, there were squat cottages that grew like mushrooms on rolling hills. Green ivy crawled, devoured almost every wall. To the west, there was the taste of sand and dry heat. Brick houses stood with curling narrow streets. There were also courtyards, some open for weekly markets, others permanent sand gardens with reflection stones for sitting. To the south, a ragged beach ran, dropped into a lake full of caverns. On the surface on one half of the connecting lagoon, huge lily pads created a walk-able surface to enjoy the aquatic gardens of tall bamboo. Sometimes, they’d explode with furry pink petals and flying insects would pervade all of Gossamer for days.

Finally, at its center was the tallest building. It was thin with four large clock faces, but grew out tall like a tree canopy. Instead of leaves, honeycombs pervaded, allowing flyers to come and go at their leisure. They called it the Loft. It was the highest point in Gossamer; you could see the entirety of the city from up there, even a few of the Bridgemaker’s special pocket gardens. It was only a place flyers could reach.

That’s where Rajiu was going. That’s where I couldn’t follow.

It was extremely unfair. I liked this view, but it couldn’t be mine. The day after tomorrow, it would solely belong to Rajiu and I’ll be even less than a guest. I thought it cruel I wasn’t born with wings.

Sighing, I looked up at the sky, swirling pinkish and purple in the dusk. A cloud spiraled in on itself from the south and vanished when it touched the sky to the east. I enjoyed the weight of my legs hanging over the edge and the taste of the wind, sometimes salty sometimes sandy depending on which isle had a stronger gusts.

“I got Examiner.” I said, softly, hating the word.
Raiju said nothing. He knew what it meant.
“...Maybe it won’t be so bad.”
“When you have time off, you can always come see me.” Raiju offered.
Yes, but when would that be? Messengers spent their days riding on the backs of clouds, hardly on the ground for more than a few minutes. They crisscrossed the city, delivering messages or post. Sometimes the more experienced even got to travel Outside with exploring or foraging parties.
“...you might also get to read a lot of books.” Raiju added.
“Yes. About other places I’ll never see.”
One arm uncurled, the flap of a joining skin stretching as he curled his three fingers around my shoulder. Black talons the size of fishing hooks rested against my breastbone, reminding me of a hazy almost forgotten terror.

I don’t remember my Birth name, nor do I remember my birth parents. According to Athena, the Records Keeper, I was barely three feet tall when I arrived, cold and wet. I was also afraid of everyone for a long time. I remember that, a kind of crawling terror that bubbled in my chest.

I was homesick the day I climbed the wall. Raiju nearly scared me clean off it. Afterward I vowed never to go up there again, but he spent two weeks stomping and huffing on the ground until I finally went back up there with him.
We’ve been up there ever since.

II

The market in the West was bustling with movement. Stalls were colored vibrantly, strange fabrics fluttering like flags. Others were far more pungent, focusing on scent to attract those born without eyes. Merchants not only called out their wares, but wove descriptions of exotic places in their propaganda. One, squat faced grizzle-lipped scaly trader claimed his silk had been spun by the worms that lived in the branches of the Great Yggdrasil. Another cloaked female sang that her glass bottles were made with sand from the fabled Sahara, capable of catching any gust of wind or house any gnawing liquid. Another, a long faced biped with six hands reported that his steel knives had been forged in the explosive volcanoes of Shrevalbak. He demonstrated their sharpness by easily cutting up three Yoults at once, a sweet fruit with a tough white rind and pink center. He handed them to the children of prospective buyers.

Sand was a stealthier intruder. It pervaded the streets, slithered around cobbled stones and always found a way of seeping into your shoes. I could already feel it chafing against my toes despite my socks. Sweat trickled from my scalp. I adjusted my rucksack. It now contained everything I owned. I already felt homesick for the Dorms, something I once had thought impossible. I tried to ignore it, keeping pace with my guide, a fiery resident with molten glowing eyes.

He’d come to the Dorms in a dark reddish glow, but when we arrived in the West he’d grown. His flaming skin feasted on the heat. When he took in a long breath through two slits under his thin chin, he’d grown several inches taller. His torso also expanded somehow and his clothes, a baggy amber type of garb, unfurled like a Balloon. His skin went from red to a more golden type of orange. His bare feet left scorch marks on the stones.

“Ah, thiss iss sso much better.” He’d hissed, like a knot of wood snapping in a fireplace, “I hate being cold.”

The crowd withdrew like the tide, trying to escape the sudden onslaught of heat. He didn’t appear to notice as he glided forward. I simply followed behind, trying not to be either too far away or too close.
This was the first time he’d spoke aloud after over an hour of silence.
“...So what are you called?” I asked, tentatively.
“Dijinn… According to the Bridgemaker, it is a combination of the meanings ‘intelligence’ and ‘hiding’ in its own tongue.” He replied, airy.
“You’ve spoken to him? What does he look like?”
“That is a useless question. He appears different to everyone.”
I knew that, but I was still curious anyway. They say he can come and go like the wind, and when he comes he’s always disguised as something else. No one really knows why he does this. It might have to do with Gossemer’s custom of abandoning birth names in favor of our resident names. It is said that his appearance is a sign of what our new futures might hold. Unfortunately, I can’t remember my meeting, so I had no clues as to what my name meant.
Djinn rolled down two streets, slipped in and out of a small alley, and walked adjacent the Loft for a dozen yards. I looked up, hoping to catch sight of Raiju, but never did see him. Finally Djinn stopped at an unremarkable door, scraped down by the wind. A small bit of green paint remained, hidden in the lee of the handle.

The fireball turned, “Pleasse knock.”

I obliged. No one answered. Djinn gestured again. I managed to lean back before he blistered my shoulder and knocked harder. Again, no answer. I lifted my hand for one last try when the door swung open fast.

Physically, the resident that emerged out of the dark was similar. We had two arms, two legs, hands, feet, face, hair. There were small still differences, though. His hair was bleached white and hung at shoulder length and a small beard dapped his chin. Mine was shorter, brown, and my chin was smooth not out of preference. His ears were long. Mine were rounded. His skin was a pale like marble, mine more tanned. He wore a long flowing clothes and baggy pants, bleached white, ending in slip-ons. I still wore the School’s blue vest, white sleeves, and straight cut pants.

But the greatest difference was marked by our eyes. Mine were white like the clouds, a blue ring holding in a dot of black. His were almost entirely black, an eroding ring of gold floating at its center. They flicked over me for a second, stony. He turned to Djinn.

“What do you want?” His voice was soft, but there was ice in it. The hairs on the back of my neck rose. It might have been the heat.

“I’ve brought your asssisssstant.” Djinn replied, rolling the word.

“I did not ask for an assistant.” With that, the door started to close.

“You’d disobey the Bridgemaker, the King of Doorss?”

The door froze, but then opened again more slowly this time. His expression now looked bored.

“That is something entirely different. Very well then, I will take him. Just do not expect me to show the same kindness to those that enjoy baiting others.”

Black eyes flashed at me, “Thank him for bringing you here.”

As I lowered my head and murmured thanks, my hopes dropped too. It wasn’t as bad as I imagined. It was going to be far worse.

The Examiner was called Noble Prize.

I thought his name was Sir until Mr. Leszy came in. He was a plant-type, a farmer that had a garden Outside. He mostly sold vegetables, but also brought in specimens for extra spending money.

Inside, past the battered front door, there laid darkness and a stark chemical odor. Once diurnal eyes adjusted, however, then one was able to see the start of a maze of tightly backed shelves. Glass jars sat on narrow shelves, cluttered and covered in a layer of fine dust. Various creatures lurked inside suspicious liquids, staring out with blank dead eyes. Some were disgusting, other pitiable. Some were preserved in alcohol. Others were left to mummify in the trapped air. Some were new, others starting to decay. There seemed to be hundreds.

“This is storage.” Mr. Prize had said. He’d moved swiftly, white clothes billowing in the dark. I followed, praying I wouldn’t bump into anything. After a dozen tight turns, he finally stopped at another plan door. To the right was the open mouth of a kitchen. Left, stairs spiraled upwards. He opened the door first.

“This is my lab.”

Inside, the room was small. Two lit candles flicked in empty glass jars. A tall, thin black table stood at one end of the room with tools laid scattered across it. Many were for cutting, but some were blunted more for probing or collecting fluids. Some were already stained, lying next to a few cream colored pans. There was a vague shape lurking inside, just beyond the rim, but a stark decaying sort of smell suggested something grisly. I didn’t want to get any closer. Above, on a shelf there were a few prized specimens, a couple of dog-eared books, and a few journals. Finally, to the left was a clear box, containing several colorful exotic plants I’d never seen before.

At the top of the stairs, there was another smallish room with more storage shelves. The top shelves of these, thankfully, were not backed with jars but with books. At the bottom, several cardboard boxes sat. Poking around later, I’d find this is where he kept additional supplies: a few of the odder looking tools, some extra specimen bottles, and some of the preserving chemicals.
“This is the Study. However, since you’ll be staying here, I will lend it to you for sleeping quarters. I’ll give you the rest of today to get yourself a futon, but tomorrow you will start with record keeping. You’ll check the specimens in storage each day and report if any become damaged or seals broken. I may also ask for your assistance in a dissection occasionally. You will also sweep, be expected to answer the door when I am working, and procure food for yourself weekly. Am I clear?”

“...yes, Sir.”
He started towards the stairs again, but paused. “What are you called?”
“Peter Pan, Sir.”
He stared for a long minute.
“I see…the Door King really does have a sense of humor.”

IV

The next two months passed according to his schedule. I swept. I kept records. I answered the door, which was not as often as I would have liked. Mostly, it was Mr. Leszy that came. He brought a lot of dead beasts, but sometimes he’d bring a flower or an herb. These would disappear into the lab. More than half never reemerged, but a few were collected.

Mr. Prize spent most of his time in the lab with the door closed. Most days, he’d rise before the sun and not come out until the second moon rose. Living with him was like living with a ghost. He’d appear for minutes, dotted with blood, to fetch a book or a journal, but would walk past without a word or even a look. I think he’d forget about me entirely for days unless he needed something. When he did finally come out for longer periods in the evening, he’d disappear, headed towards the southern sector. I once tried to stay up to see when he’d come back, but ended up falling asleep. Part of me was almost sure he never slept.

Strangers would also come and ask for him at night. All sorts: flyers, burrowers, scale-skins would arrive. Even a water-breather came once, suckling through a filter clamped around his pouting lips. The South was cold at night, almost biting cold; most of his scales had accumulated a layer of frost and he had stood shivering, blinking slitted eyes. When they knocked it was always softly. When they asked for Mr. Prize, it was always with a whisper, as if noise was not permitted in this place.

Mr. Prize never turned away any of these nocturnal visitors. He always shut the door firmly behind them when they entered his lab. An hour could pass. Sometimes three. I might have thought he was pickling them, but many came back out, clutching pouches or bottles of powders or liquids. They’d always leave quickly, without a word. Usually they never returned. In the daylight, though, most would turn away sharply, or pretend they didn’t know who I was.

During this time, I went to our wall whenever I could, but Raiju was never there. I always waited as long as possible, hoping. I missed him. My life had become a tomb of silence, one I found I needed to fill.

Questions took up a lot of space. I wondered how he was, what he was doing, and where he might have gone. When that wasn’t enough, I wondered about the jarred death looming around me. Records became monotonous, and I started looking past the glass. I became aware of six other wing structures, all flyers. What kind of lives had those creatures had? What worlds had they been taken from? What other creatures had they hunted or fled from? I went through the books a dozen times, but most were filled with long-winded processes, about preserving and cataloging. Others explained physical structures and how to identify certain biological structures or circulatory systems. Others still were illegible, or written in a language I couldn’t read. None held anything comprehensible about distant lands, or anything about Outside.

V

One morning, Mr. Prize had shook me awake. Regardless, I still stumbled and slept walked until the Lab door opened. A metallic scent screamed, the smell of blood. I woke up fully just as he handed me a white garment.

“Put this on.”

I obeyed. Pulling my head through the collar, I watched as he put a footstool down on the floor. When he gestured, I realized it was for me. Once up there, I saw he’d pinned something down to wax, a large fleshy creature with six stick-like legs and one bulbous green body, sort of like an apple. A large purple plant was growing out of its back. Wordless, he handed me a pen and paper before dawning his gloves and reaching for a blade. My head started to swim.
The knife barely pressed down. The flesh bent-
I blacked out.
When I woke up, Mr. Prize was crouched over me, waving an orange sea sponge under my nose. The smell was spicy, but the odor stung my eyes. I rolled over on the floor and started coughing hard.

When I finally stopped, he simply opened the door, “Dismissed.”

I tried to make up for it. I spent the rest of the day furiously making sure all my records were in order. I didn’t just sweep, but scrubbed the floor to make it spotless. I reorganized all the medical texts (the ones I could read) alphabetically, and put the supply crates in order. I spent a week like that, but he never said anything. I didn’t even see him for several days.

He hated me. I couldn’t blame him. I was useless and taking up space. I decided it would be better if I left. The only problem was I didn’t know how. What exactly happened to those that failed at their positions? I’d never heard of it before. Were you reassigned? Were you killed? Everyone had to work, to contribute in some small way, but what happens if you couldn’t or refused?

I started daydreaming about endless blue skies and oceans of air instead. In my favorite, I’d be cleaning out the study and Raiju would show up with a message from the Bridgemaker himself. It would demand I go with him on a mission Outside. He’d take me to one of the hidden Exits and we emerge in a place with miles and miles of sky, endless clouds, and below us there were rolling green fields, not made of ivy, but grass, with small brightly colored bugs buzzing or fluttering, like foam atop an emerald sea-

It was bound to happen. Dreaming, the large glass jar I was returning to its perch slipped between my fingers and fell past my head. The smash was deafening. Cold liquid seeped into my shoes. Alcohol flushed past my feet, an amber tide. Twisting, not breathing, and I saw the gummy corpse, flap onto the hardwood floor as the glass shot out and slid under the opposite shelf. The smell was acidic, a wave of thick but biting rot.

Worst of all, I heard the lab door rip open.

…and the next thing I knew I was sprinting down the cobbled street. It wasn’t fast enough. I traded speed for distance, never turning back. I didn’t pay attention to anything but the street. I ran so long the air ripped my throat, and even then I kept running. I had no idea where I was going. That was fine because running meant I didn’t need to think about it. Our wall appeared. Without a word, I crawled up the side of it, grasping ivy by the handful. My arms shook with the effort, but I was desperate. When I finally stopped, it was because I had run out of wall.

At the top, the view was the same…but empty. Rajiu was missing. I stared panting. It had been three months now. I’d come here often, but he never appeared. Things couldn’t go back to the way they use to be. I looked up into the sky again, trying to keep my balance as I tilted my head back. The wide blue eye of it stared, but I felt the greedy weight of gravity. It would never let me go.

For a second, I thought about just loosening my grip and letting the drop have me.

Instead, a voice said, “You’ve lost your shoes.”

VI

Rajiu’s spot was no longer empty. Instead, another creature with Mr. Prize’s shape stood in his place. His clothes were similar to the Dorm uniform, except he wore a black coat. He appeared completely relaxed with his hands in his pockets. His hair stood in brown tufts, but a large tall and black hat tried to smother them.

There was something wrong about him. It was clear he had absolutely no fear of falling despite having no wings or grasping talons. Instead, he was staring down at the ground thoughtfully.

“Though, I suppose it’s easier to climb up without them.”

“What are you doing up here?!” I shouted, angry. He was standing in Rajiu’s spot. The stranger turned his head, eyebrows raised. He had eyes like mine.

“I was enjoying the view after a very long and grueling trip.” He said, sulking.

I blinked. “You—you went Outside?”

“Yes, and it was a very nasty business.” The stranger said, sitting with a sigh, “I went through two Folkish Isles: miles of woods teeming with carnivorous plants, dangerous predators, and God knows how many paranoid soldiers. I almost ran into the Good Empress twice. She promised she’d cut my head off if we ever met again. I rather like it attached. Though, I suppose I might prefer her over Ro. She at least can’t spit acid at a moment’s notice.”
“Outside of Gossamer?”
The stranger stared for a moment. The smile that appeared a second later was clearer. It screamed friendly. One of his hands shot out towards me.

“Yes. I’m Colbert Webster, by the way. You are…?”

“I’m called Peter Pan.” I looked at the white glove of his hand, warily. Was he asking permission to touch me? He withdrew it, instead tapping on the brick we were sitting on.

“I see. Peter. Why do you look so dejected on such a fine day, Peter?”

Again, I got a sense of that wrongness. He was staring too much, too intently. I felt like he was trying to see me all at once. My skin itched, a little unnerved by the attention.

Worse, though I wanted to lie, the truth ended up crawling up my throat.

“I want to go Outside.” I said.

His eyebrows shot up higher. His eyes never left my face.

“Outside? Really? There’s a war going on out there, you know.” He replied, chatty. He plucked at one of his fingers, “I mean, I’m talking worse than invading Germans. Hitler, at least, couldn’t physically change into Winston Churchill and order the British forces to kill each other. It’s made the Good Folk skittish, more violent. Old friends are suspicious of each other. Fathers are killing their sons and vise versa. It’s bloody terrible…”

Webster sighed, “Trust me kid, I wish I didn’t have to go out there…”

Good Empress? Folk? Germans? I didn’t know what he was talking about. His accent was strange. Still, it all sounded much better than facing Mr. Prize, or rather certain death. Just the thought of that icy soft voice saying, ‘Peter, do you have any idea how difficult this was to procure…?’

“You could send me Out instead.”

Webster froze for a second, staring. It was an empty stare, a hallow pit like the blackness stretched between stars.

But then he threw his head back, roaring with laughter. I blinked.

“‘To die would be an awfully big adventure?’ I think not, brave but silly boy. Not for you, or at least I hope not any time soon…”

Webster went very still and quiet then, almost like a statue. It wasn’t like before, not as cold. The smile remained, strangely fixed, as he stared at the view. We sat side-by-side, mostly because I still didn’t have anywhere else to go. The sky went from bright blue to darker shades of purple. The noise of its inhabitants quieted, and someone started to light the city lamps.

I was trying to decide where else I could go. The Dorms wouldn’t take me back. My professors probably wouldn’t even remember me. I had no idea where Djinn was, or even if he’d help me. Rajiu was missing and didn’t have the money for a Messenger to fetch him…”

“I’d forgotten Webster was there, so I jumped when he said, suddenly, “…But I could arrange a visit outside, when I find somewhere safer. Mortimer always said travel is good for the soul. Yes, I think I will. Peter, would you like to know a secret before I go?”

He leaned forward before I could reply. He spoke in a whisper with deadly seriousness, a phrase that sounded utterly ridiculous:

“If you think lovely, wonderful thoughts, they can lift you into the air.”

I stared at him. He tapped the side of his nose twice, with a clever look.

He was an idiot.

Before I could say so, he smiled and pitched his shoulders to the left. The motion rocked himself clean off the ledge. I froze for a fraction of a second, skin tingling, more stunned than horrified. However, looking over the wall there was no grizzly evidence, no body, nothing.

Nothing but the faint aftertaste of sparks.

VII

If you think lovely, wonderful thoughts…

The sun had gone down and the first moon had risen as yellow as fossilized amber. I’d been up there for hours. I was shaking from the strain of keeping my balance and the cold bite of the wind. It was stupid nonsense. You needed wings to fly.
Regardless, it kept looping in my head, over and over. It turned my mind strange. I looked up into the stars. It occurred to me they stayed up fine without wings. So did the clouds for that matter. Perhaps wings were overrated. Maybe I didn’t need them to fly.

Perhaps, flight was just an act of sheer will…?

“PETER!”

The thought popped like a soap bubble. I knew that voice. In the murky navy of the twilight, his white clothes were deluded to pale blue. Adrenaline slammed into my veins. I turned and started to swing myself into the twenty-foot drop into the Dorm’s courtyard—

“DON’T MOVE!”

And just like that I froze like a complete coward. The smear moved and started to ascend. It was torture, waiting. I could hear muttering, the annoyed kind, drifting underneath the sound of shaking ivy leaves. After an eon, he stopped just below my ankles. Panting, he turned his face up—

I blurted out, “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! My hands slipped and—!”

“Not. Now.” His voice was tense. My mouth slammed shut.

He took a slow careful breath, face pinched, “Swing your legs down onto this branch and grasp the vine to your left…”

I obeyed. I didn’t dare tell him I already knew how to get back down. He sounded like he was grinding his teeth with every direction. I reached the bottom before he did, which turned out to be lucky. He was a very clumsy climber. His footing finally slipped three feet from the ground. There was no way to keep him upright from where I was, but I tried anyway, grabbing at his back. He caught hold of a vine and froze.

“Are you alright—?”

“Let go.” He snarled.

I backed up a dozen steps, but didn’t run. Even though it didn’t look like it, he was shaking. I considered the wall again. It wasn’t a long climb up, or at least nothing that should have made him that exhausted. He could still lift specimen jars that I couldn’t even push across the floor. What was—?

Back on the ground, he asked, voice vibrating, “…Have you sustained any injuries?”

I shook my head. He nodded, maybe more to himself before letting go of the vines. He started dusting off his clothes, but I saw how his legs wobbled.

He was. He was afraid of heights.

“Good…Please don’t do that again.” He pulled his sleeves back down, then he brushed the hair out of his face. The gesture was more nervous than casual. He caught me staring.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’m sorry.”

Mr. Prize blinked, but collected himself, “It’s quite alright. It wasn’t a very rare specimen. I can easily procure another. Shall we go back?”

That’s not what I was apologizing for, but I nodded anyway.

VIII

For the next few days, the same routine transgressed. The same schedule, the same tasks, but now I had a new question: why was Mr. Prize so afraid of heights? I suppose it was reasonable for a land bound. I remember being afraid, but I shrugged off my first fall pretty quickly. Mr. Prize didn’t. Instead, once we’d gotten back into the house, he told me to go to sleep and proceeded to restlessly rearrange his entire collection of specimens for half the night.

I was never going to get an answer to that question. I chewed on it, regardless.

It gave me a strange dream. I dreamt I was Rajiu on the day I climbed the wall. Feet cradling the warm brick, I watched myself, a spindly bony pink thing clumsily climbing. Every movement was awkward, but there was a dogged nature to it.

When the figure reached the top, however, it was Mr. Prize poking his head up, not me. The sound of laughter seeping out from the stairwell woke me. It sounded familiar, but it wasn’t Mr. Prize’s. Glancing at the clock, I found it was about three in the morning.

The door to the lab had been left open ajar.

“…don’t know why you have to disturb me at this hour.” Mr. Prize was saying in his usual icy tone.

“Any time would be a disturbance to you.” The other voice replied, lightly. It belonged to Webster. I was a bit surprised. I didn’t know Mr. Prize and Webster even knew each other.
Mr. Prize didn’t reply.
Webster asked, “Why don’t you sit down?”
“That would not be proper for a-
“But it would for a chat between friends.” Webster cut in, sweetly. There was a lull. He added, “I need advice in a delicate matter.”
“Ask the Council.”
“I can’t. I need your advice, Noble.”
There was more silence. Finally, Webster sighed, exasperated.
“Fine, don’t sit. It’s in regard to the Good Empress. She’s made an interesting proposition, but I’m not sure how…trustworthy she is. I know you personally never met her, but I thought-”
“I’m a Folk, so I’d know something.” Mr. Prize replied, bitter.
“No,” Webster said, “Well, somewhat. You’ve gained some distance in the past three years, so you can be more objective with your memory. There’s that too, you have a very objective mindset-”
“What’s the nature of this proposition?” Mr. Prize asked.
“She’s…offering a decent amount of land in exchange for a task.”
“What task?”
Webster hesitated, “…she wants me to capture someone…”
Silence. It was a cutting silence, Mr. Prize’s “I really disapprove” type of silence. Webster sighed.
“This is why I hate politics. On one hand, I could do as I originally intended and not get involved. We have claim to twenty isles, which was plenty when I started about ten years ago, but now our population is too big. We won’t be able to sustain ourselves in another two or three years. The land in both Dumakia and Froith needs to rest. Worse, the Humans on Earth’s isle have gotten extremely paranoid about their trash as of late. They call it ‘recycling’, but in reality they’re just focusing their energy on where it is or where it’s going.
“I’ve also been looking in uninhabited isles but haven’t found anything suitable. It’s either wasteland or swarming with predators. The fact that I’ve been looking for the past three months and still haven’t found anything makes me anxious.”
“However” Webster continued, conversationally, “Say I do decide to capture this Ro fellow and the Empress keeps her word. Even if the Land doesn’t have any natural produce, we could try growing something. I’m sure you’d have a good idea what kind of things could grow there…
…but that would be at the cost of Ro’s followers. They’d scatter like sheep before wolves. I wouldn’t be able to find them all nor would we have the resources to take care of them. I’d be killing God knows how many people, people that might actually be innocent.
“I can’t tell if they’re being misled or not. While it’s true his tactics are vicious, the Eater of Worlds doesn’t really live up to his name. He doesn’t wipe out the inhabitants of the lands he takes. Instead, his game is to only take places already under Folkish control, like a little kid stealing back toys from a bully…if he wasn’t so heartless, I might have admired him…”
“What land is she offering you?” Mr. Prize asked, blunt.
“Something I can’t pronounce. I memorized the characters though. Let me write it down…”
There was movement and the sound of rustling paper. I tried not the flinch. If I moved now, they might notice I was there. After a minute, Mr. Prize said softly,
“She’s bluffing.”
“How can you tell?”
“That land is sacred. It is one of the isles we take our dead to be ‘reborn’.”
“Reborn?” Webster sounded confused.
“When we die…”
Mr. Prize stopped. When his voice came back it was stoner,
“…Our bodies finally succumb to the spores living inside our flesh. We are ‘reborn’ into a slender white tree. We call them Renatoshou. They blossom annually; somewhat similar to the chrysanthemum specimen you presented me several years ago, but more rounded and far more toxic.
“When the blossoms die, they secrete an air born poison that kills everything within ten yards, to ensure its seeds will survive germination. Even if she gave you the land-which she won’t-you wouldn’t be able grow anything.”
There was another lull of silence. Mr. Prize continued, his voice still flat,
“Sporing, at its earliest, occurs twelve hours after death. I’ve already given several individuals explicit instructions on how to burn my body to ensure that won’t happen-”

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“Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?”
“It isn’t pertinent—”
“It bloody well is!” Webster snarled, “You don’t need to cremate yourself. I could bury you somewhere nice—”
“DON’T INSULT ME!” Mr. Prize roared suddenly, causing me to jump, “Don’t you DARE insult my intelligence by assuming I’d believe that fairy tale nonsense! When I die, I will cease to be. Nothing needs follow me to my grave. My body will be burned, do you understand?”
Webster didn’t reply. Mr. Prize added, in a whisper, “…please just do as I say. Promise me.”
“(…)I disagree, but I’ll do as you ask.” Webster replied. He paused, “Have you explained any of this to the boy?”
The hairs on the back of my arms rose. When Mr. Prize finally responded, he sounded bored once again. Mostly bored, but I could still hear the exasperation vibrating just underneath, straining.
“(…)Not yet. I realized he will most likely be the one to find me, but I feel he’s too young. Currently, he is unstable and needs more time to adjust. Besides, unless I come down with an illness, which is unlikely, I still have three or four decades left. There will be time to explain particulars to him.”
More paper rustled. Perhaps Webster’s note was being folded back up.
“Maybe you should explain things sooner rather than later, Noble.”
“Am I to take that as an order?” Mr. Prize asked in his usual deadpan.
“No. It’s just some friendly advice from someone that happens to know humans very well. They are sociable creatures. They need a certain amount of interaction to keep their veracious mental appetite in check. They can have lovely, wonderful though—”
“Are you sure you’re still referring to humans and not yourself, Door King?” Mr. Prize asked, irritated.
My blood suddenly ran cold. I couldn’t move.
“Please don’t call me that!” Webster whined, “Why do people have to call me that? I don’t make those kinds of decisions. That’s the Council’s job—”
There was a scent. It made the usual mustiness vanish. Was I imagining it?
“And yet you come here, asking me about negotiating with the Empress?”
“That’s real-estate! I’m just a landlord! I just pick tenants—”
“No, you presume to give us new lives and new names,” Mr. Prize hissed, “as ridiculous as they may be. I don’t care that my name is one of your jokes, that I am Noble Prize, or rather a haughty aristocrat—”
The scent grew stronger, tasting like sparks. A chiming started, like bells.
“That’s not what I-!” Webster sputtered, but Mr. Prize continued, his voice cutting like a blade,
“My pride exists in my work. Even with this dismal poor excuse of a lab, I can be content. There is a human phrase I’ve come to like. They say, “If you can’t fly, then stay close to the birds”. Here, I am close to the birds. I will never be honored for my work, but I still serve a King—”
“NO! No No no!” Webster said, alarmed, “Noble, you’re confused. It’s expected. You’ve lived your whole life under a monarchy. I can understand that-anybody could!- but-but I’m not a King. I don’t want to be a King. Kings do terrible things. I mean, the Empress—”
Mr. Prize spoke, his voice amused, but also black,
“You are not like the Empress. She does not care for life. She sentenced me to death for refusing to seek new isles like the others. We have seven different types of execution. The Fall is considered one of the more pleasant ones. It is a five hundred foot drop onto jagged rock. I only fell half the distance, but that was enough to leave a scar. Even now, I can barely climb to the second floor of this building without shaking. But ever time I do, I remember how precious life is. You too deem life, all life, as precious. You would not have plucked me out of the sky, otherwise.”
The chiming grew louder, to a high pitch. Despite the dark, I could see it was the glass jars, only the jars rattling against each other, humming. Some were starting to whine louder than others. My teeth started to ache—
Webster spoke, fast, voice trembling at the same frantic consistency of the glass,
“Okay, okay, yes, but that doesn’t make me a King. I wouldn’t be a good King. Trust me. You don’t want a King. Has it ever crossed your mind that maybe I’m just selfish? Maybe I saved you just so I could use you. Maybe I’m using all of you. I could be worse than Ro. Think about it, have I ever shown you my true face? No. Why not? Because I’m tricking you. I’m positively wicked—”
“You’re a terrible liar, Door King.”
Webster finally exploded,
“I’M NOT A KING! I WILL NEVER BE A KING! I’M THE LANDLORD!”
The whine kicked up three notches and the jars reached their shrieking peak. Instead of breaking, however, it all ended in a loud *pop*.
Before I could move, Mr. Prize came out in a gush of sweet and sour tang of metal, snarling to himself.
“Sogenia petor gami…!”
He saw me. I saw black eyes widen. I tried to bolt, but he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. The smell was thicker, but other than that the room was empty.
Mr. Prize growled, “How much did you hear?”
I couldn’t say anything. This was it. I was going to die. He had a death grip on both my arms. I couldn’t escape. Mr. Prize continued to glare for several more seconds. I continued breathing. Eventually, the grip loosened to a hold. I watched his face fall, going from anger to a bored mask. Somehow, that was scarier.
He finally let go and withdrew a few feet. He adjusted his cuffs, muttering to himself,
“…Veracious mental appetite…roubasta …” He pulled out the little footstool and pointed at it, “Sit.” I obeyed. He walked out of the room. I didn’t think about running this time. I wasn’t thinking about anything really. When he came back, he threaded a warm mug between my fingers. It was tea.
I stared at it. Would he poison me to keep me quiet…?
“Drink that. It should help calm your nerves.”
I continued to just hold it. I couldn’t look him in the eye.
“It’s not poison.” He replied, as if reading my mind. Still, I didn’t move. I couldn’t move. Mr. Prize sighed,
“Alright then. Let’s... chat. I’m sure you have questions-”
I shook my head violently no. I did have questions, but I had no intention of asking them when my mentor was on the edge of a murderous rampage and blocking the only exit.
Mr. Prize smiled. It was the first time I saw him smile. It wasn’t pretty.
“You’re also a terrible liar. Ask me something. It will make me less angry.”