



ALTA CHIMERA

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1. Jailed

Death creaked, a wet odious and painful sound. The lament of death was dry as it was repetitive. Cacophonies of torment followed the reiterated tapping of the man.

Tap. Tap.

A sequence of two. A constant frequency. Yet the echoing taps were sometimes accompanied by the metallic ramblings of the man's shackles.

Tap. Tap.

It resembled a heartbeat, a heartbeat that the man didn't seem to have. His constitution was skeletal, with not much meat in his body, but nobody could deny he was alive.

The tapping was interrupted by the squeaking of a creature. The high-pitched sound may lead people to believe that it originated from a rodent, but the creature reeked of death.

It indeed looked like a mouse, but strange protuberances spawned from its head like demonic horns overgrowing its host and gnawing down the flesh. The flesh in question didn't even look alive. It was grey and sickly, decayed. The unhealthy skinny man had more brightness in his skin than whatever that being was.

The rodent approached the captive with a thirst for blood in its eyes and drooling hunger in its mouth. Yet it didn't squeak anymore to find what had been its deadly mistake.

Before the mouse-like creature could indent the man's leg with its visceral teeth, the captive's flesh warped. It happened in a single instant. A prior moment ago, the mouse was ready to feast on the restricted human, yet the following moment, only its dry and pale blood remained.

"Augh..." The man exhaled in a tired sigh. "They taste horrible."

His tongue caressed his teeth in a slow and dazed movement, even though his mouth had been nowhere close to the abomination.

"Yet that is infinitely more entertaining than this." He added in a soft whisper, a dry voice that had never known the touch of water.

The captive's dead eyes focused on the silhouette before him. Tens of twisted yet vertical dark lines.

Bars.

Since the very conception of his consciousness, that's all he had known. Captivity.

Not a single memory of a time before his stay in the cell lingered in his mind. He wholeheartedly believed that was because there wasn't a time before his imprisonment.

Tap. Tap.

He began tapping once more, for it was his only way to tell that time did, indeed, exist. In the lightless prison, where only faint sounds of torture and death were present, it was difficult to keep oneself focused.

For there was nothing else.

* * *

Silence dominated the darkness, everpresent, ever-stressing. It wasn't a good silence. It was filled with muted cries, gelid whispers of the wind, and rugged breaths.

Sometimes, when he opened his eyes, there would be people warding his jail. Though maybe 'people' was too strong of a word.

The brutish and tall creatures appeared human, or at least, humanoid. But to consider them people was too huge of a step. Unlike some of the denizens of the prison, they did possess flesh. White, like ash. They were also incredibly muscular, with throbbing black blood vessels showing underneath the tight skin.

The wardens were disgusting to look at.

They weren't as abominable as the rodents, but there was something off about them. They felt alive, unlike everything else, the problem was, that they weren't.

The man exhaled, his breath turning white thanks to the low temperature.

He was staying awake for too much time now, and there wasn't any critter nearby to consume to recover energy.

The simple act of staying conscious was inducing him a headache.

He tapped the back of his head against the cold rock wall. The gentle touches reverberated through his cranium, bringing him some inner peace. But not much.

Clarity and lucidity were hard to come by.

As the taps weren't enough, he stopped. He didn't know many things, but if he continued to traumatize his head, the headache would only get worse.

He tried drinking a bit of moisture to focus his mind.

Water didn't exist in his cell, and the wardens would certainly not bring it to him if there even was.

No. To hydrate himself, the man had to rub his skin against the small pockets of moisture on the brick of the wall and floor. The best sections were the ones that had become frost because there lay more water hidden in them.

His shackles ground against the stone floor as he moved his right foot to reach for new virgin areas.

Every time he went to sleep, the cell would slowly rehydrate, making it easy for him to 'drink' after waking up. But today, he felt a lot thirstier. His throat was dry, and his lungs burned.

The man didn't even know that burning was a thing until now. He had only known cold and frost, touches of gelid wind. Yet as his lungs pained him, the newfound sensation felt cozy. The heat was... soothing.

Soon enough, he had drained all the moisture of the stone in a one-meter radius. Even as he stretched his legs, popping the bone out of the knee, the shackles impeded him to move beyond that limit.

His eyelids felt incredibly heavy.

It was getting increasingly difficult to keep himself awake, even the warm feeling in his chest couldn't outmatch the tiredness.

The headache got worse.

Sounds became muted, his thoughts a mushy mesh. It was as if his mind was drifting in a sea of mercury. Then he realized he didn't know what all the things he thought of even were.

It happened from time to time, intrinsic knowledge infiltrated his mind, an invader of information. He knew that knowledge shouldn't be there, because he had only known the jail since birth.

There still were remains of his eggshell littered around the cell, though much had been decomposed or gnawed by rodents.

A vague hint of a cough came through his throat. It contained no moisture, only dry and warm air.

The pain in his head got worse. His vision began to falter, colors losing their intensity as everything turned to a greyscale.

He moved his arm upwards trying to grab his head, yet the shackles impeded him to do so.

But the pain was getting worse, maddingly so. It was like drums of war drilling through his head, but there was no sound to speak of.

"Stop..." The man whispered, his head limp, lurching forward. "I can't... Please cease..."

His lucidity and remaining energies were slowly draining, as it was his body heat.

Once more, he tried to bring his hand to the head, but the shackles ground in negation, screeching as the man tried to put the white hand on his red head.

And he pushed. And then some more. The headache was so violent that he no longer cared about his hand's skin being torn by the shackles, he just wanted to soothe the pain.

"Aahh..." He muttered in pain.

His eyes burned. It was as if a fire had burnt them, and the flames lingered. But what were fire and flames?

The poor and ancient metal of the shackles continued screeching as his hand got ever-so-close to patting his head.

Now his forearm burned too. He noticed that it was because the shackles had bruised too hard against them, showing the pink and red flesh under his white skin.

But that burning feeling was infinitely less painful than the one in his head.

The man lurched his head closer to his hand as the shackles prevent his arm from bulging forward. He saw black and sharp silhouettes, claws appearing on his fingertips where his nails had been.

Those weren't straight, but visceral and vorpal, like a mixture of the rodents' fangs and horns.

He didn't care about the logistics and science of that, he just knew that with his claws, he could now cover the remaining distance from his head to the hand. Then he scratched his scalp. The ebony claws parsed through his red blood hair.

"Oh..." He moaned in satisfaction.

The scratches were enough to alleviate the pain, or so he thought. But it only took a moment for the disgusting feeling to return. It was stronger than before. In a way, he knew he wouldn't be able to soothe the pain in his mind by scratching the outside of his head, but he would be damned if he didn't try.

He lurched his other hand to his head, this time was a lot easier than before.

Scratch. Scratch.

With both hands, both sets of claws, he got double the alleviation.

But the pain returned. It was doubled.

His claws grew, longer, sharper, more of them. Three claws per finger, two hands, five fingers each, a total of thirty claws scratched his scalp.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch.

The pain didn't cease. It just got a whole lot worse. Even worse so, it was no longer quantifiable, such complex numbers were beyond his simple mind. Everything burned.

He scratched more, drawing his claws closer to the scalp, hoping the pain would just cease.

It was maddening!

"Stop it, prisoner!" A voice shouted. It was furious.

The man looked up to see one of the wardens looking at him. This was the first time he saw them from the front. They wore dark armor, similar to the ebony claws. But what surprised him were the warden's eyes.

They were empty. Holes where the eyeballs should be. But at the same time, there was something. A spectral light substituting the eyeballs. The mystical light was grey, and it didn't flee from the socket, but stayed in place, as eyes should do.

The warden grunted as the man didn't respond to him and turned back to his previous position.

Why did that get a reaction from him, but my early cries for help did not? The man thought, his mind a bit clearer than before, but not by much. At least thinking was possible now. He no longer felt like a ravaging beast.

Then he noticed the heat. The damp, flowing warmth.

He rolled his eyeballs up to see the trickling red substance. It had a crimson shade, and it was beautiful. The man had never seen something like it before, but he knew the name of the substance: blood.

Wanting to taste it, he licked the trail that was flowing down from his nose.

“Augh...” He said in repulsion. “It tastes like the shackles.”

This ‘blood’ had the same metallic taste of the shackles, maybe even stronger, more concentrated. A drop of blood fell on his naked crotch. He looked at the spot for the first time in his life and felt like something should be there, but there was nothing.

“I said silence!” The warden reiterated in a powerful scream.

His fellow warden gave him a tired look, drowsy as if he wasn’t even on his body. A mind blank of thoughts and will. The slight tilt the other warden gave allowed the man to see its eyes. Unlike the angry warden, the tired warden had black eyes. Well, black light eyes. This one also didn’t have any eyeballs.

The man directly looked into the angry warden’s eyes. His sight was tainted red as blood covered his retinas. It was uncomfortable.

“Why do we have to spend eternity watching over a random mortal?” The angry warden asked the tired one. “We could be torturing corrupted souls or thrashing the world of the living, but nooooo, we must watch over some dude. It would be easier if he was just dead!”

The tired warden gave him a nod of understanding, the movement was so slow and clunky that it looked like more of a spasm than an actual gesture.

“Wait,” the angry warden stopped in realization, “that’s it. We have to kill him. No one will notice the man’s death. And then we would be free!”

The tired warden gave another nod, though this one was more vigorous.

“Oh, I’m a genius!” The warden congratulated himself and reached for the key chain on its belt.

It picked up the single key in the key chain and opened the cell gate. The man looked at it with confusion. The angry warden smiled in diabolical satisfaction as he grabbed with enthusiasm the handle of his war axe.

He turned his head to the tired warden. “You know, now that I think about it. Killing him would be a waste, why don’t we have a little bit of fun first.” He cracked a perverse laugh. “It has been a long eon since I was on the torture wing.”

But before the warden could have its fun, it noticed the protuberances coming out of its neck.

“Wha-“ Its voice stopped as dark yet milky blood came out of his mouth.

The warden looked down to see meter-long claws embedded in its throat, thirty different claws raping his throat. As unlife escaped from its body, the warden couldn’t think of anything.

On the other hand, the man just thought of something else.

“This blood tastes better.”

2. Rampage

The next moment occurred very fast. Everything was happening in slow motion. The man looked at the tired warden whose eyes were shot open. Blood dripped across his claws.

He knew he needed to be fast. He was running low on energy, suffering from dehydration and starvation. The milky blood gave him some energy, pouring into his skin, but he needed to be fast. Faster.

The warden tightened its grasp on the war axe. The man internally cursed as he noticed he didn't have more time remaining. He removed the claws from the neck and dropped the corpse of the other warden to the ground falling at his feet with a drench plop sound.

A new feeling coursed through his veins; it was adrenaline. The new biological substance was enticing; making him think faster, move faster, and ignore all the pain he had accumulated. He could get used to it.

The instant the corpse dropped to the ground, the no-longer-tired warden sprang into action.

It raised its works above its head in a menacing stance. Thankfully enough, the man wasn't dazed enough to remain still and get hit by the falling arc. The warden was strong, it chipped parts of the stone wall with its axe.

The axe remained embedded in the wall for a hot second. And as the warden tried to remove the axe from the wall he looked at the man with a cruel expression, his eyes shining with that grey light.

The man couldn't understand that visage. Because the other guy then tried to kill him, it was just logical that it could be ready to die at any moment. If you intended to kill someone, you should be ready to be killed. It was just meant to be. Or so the red-haired man thought.

So, why was it companion angry? The other warden was ready to die. It shouldn't be angry. The man understood why it had to kill him, but he shouldn't be angry. It just didn't make any sense.

Killed or be killed. That's a logic he could understand. It made more sense that being eternally trapped in this prison.

The bloodied man took a step back as the warden finally retrieved the axe. He didn't know how to fight it was all an instinct. Truth be told, everything he did was an instinct.

The floor was cold and slippery thanks to the milky blood. But he was cautious enough to not sleep on the wet floor. The garden took a moment to think, not wanting to step over its fallen comrade.

But that moment was lesser than a blink and it charged toward him. The man crouched, avoiding the sideways axe swing following his head. The warden was strong and fast, but it wasn't very agile. He didn't even know how he was that agile being trapped for this long. This was the first time he had stretched his body after all.

Maintaining his low crouch, he took two steps back. The possibility of death was very real. The warden only needed one strike, but he would need far more to take it down.

The grieving warden then thrashed its weapon toward him in a fast stockade. To the man's sluggish senses, that may well have been a lightning-fast strike. Dodging wasn't a possibility, he needed to block. He put his left claws before him to try to block the war axe.

And while he succeeded, he had underestimated the warden's strength. But shattered his claws. He felt no pain, but it was dizzying losing parts of his body, his biomass.

The warden smiled at its small victory.

The man felt an itch in his broken claws. He didn't understand it at first, but soon he saw that they were growing back. He stopped the regeneration. He didn't want to waste more biomass. He was running very low on it.

He took another step back.

It quickly became obvious that his only way to win the fight was to use his wit.

He took another step back.

The warden was strong and inhumane looking, but also big, and that put him at a severe disadvantage. The creature couldn't move freely in this small cell, but the man could.

He didn't rush for an attack, though. He needed to wait for the exact, precise moment to strike. To use the low intelligence of his warden against it.

Thankfully enough, the creature didn't notice the man's machinations and it just rushed forward. A shallow smile appeared on the man's visage.

He took another step back. Now he was out of the cell for the first time in his life, but he didn't allow that fact to blind him. He needed every ounce of focus he could gather to concentrate on the fight.

The next fractions of a second passed very slowly. For every two steps the warden took, the man took one backward.

Then the prophesied opportunity came in as the creature aligned itself with the prison's doorway.

The warden raised its war axe to unleash another descending arc. The man could feel the pressure behind the strike as the air distorted. It was a very powerful strike. One hit and he would be certainly dead.

The strike never arrived. The metallic clink filled the endless darkness. The menacing-looking weapon struck the prison bars and there it remained struck.

Now, the man screamed in his mind.

He lurched forward faster than any other creature had moved in this stale and static place. Raising his unbroken right claws, the man aimed for the inhumane creature's neck.

As the warden was too worried about its axe, it didn't notice the lethal weapon coming toward its unprotected neck. Black blood sprayed around. The strike hit true, rampaging through the flesh and coming out of the other end of the neck. Death.

Or it should have been.

The light still fluttered in the warden's eyes.

How is it still alive? The man thought. Then he noticed, he was the one unprotected now. With a vicious and demonic smile, the warden released the grab of the handle of the axe and punched the man with terrifying strength.

His body flew backward for a few meters until it finally impacted a wall, the momentum damaging further.

The man coughed, hints of blood coming out of his mouth.

He stood up, fearing that the warden may come at him once more. But then he looked at the cell. The warden had finally died from its wounds. That last attack had only been the cruelty of a dying creature, Unable to accept that it had lost the fight.

“What bad sportsmanship,” The man said between chuckles caressing his ribs as they deeply hurt.

His body dropped to the ground, not responding to his commands. This was the first time he felt this kind of lethargy. Exhaustion. Between rugged breaths, he looked at his claws. They were soaked with blood. Though that didn't stay for very long as the milky liquid began to be absorbed by his body.

Hmm.

The man inhaled. The liquid gave him energy. An energy he hadn't obtained whilst eating rodents. This substance was packed with far more nutrients than any other creature. Or at least enough energy to soothe his pain.

Suddenly, he felt a warmth in his naked torso. It felt itchy, not an uncomfortable itch but a pleasurable one. He looked down to see that red blood was sprinkling down a wound on his torso. Once more, he had underestimated the power of the wardens. He had not only been flown around by the punch but the fist of the warden was also protected by armor. An armor with spiky protuberances. Those spikes had sickeningly ripped his skin.

But what he felt, wasn't from the pain or the wound. It was something else, something from inside of him. And it beckoned warmth.

Then flames spurted from his torso. They were bright orange and released light. This was a color and a light source that he had never seen. Yet he knew that it was fire.

It didn't burn.

Quite the contrary. It mended his flesh.

As if the flames were a vacuum, the blood trickled back up to the wound, into the flesh, and the skin closed. Any traces of a fight disappeared from his body.

“Oh,” the man whispered. “This is new.”

With a heavy and tired groan, he stood up. The insights of his body still ached, but there were no visible wounds. It was a strange feeling, to say the least.

The red-haired man didn't ponder very much on the mythical apparition and simply approached the corpses of the wardens. With his remaining set of claws, he pierced the dead body, it was a carcass ready for harvest.

Milky black blood flowed upwards from his claws to his arms, finally sinking into his body. The pallid, ashen-like skin of the corpse turned darker as all the blood was drained from it. Then he proceeded to do the same with the other dead warden.

For the first time in his life, the man felt alive, energetic, and ready for more carnage.

3. Ambush

He could feel his body change and mutate, as more and more biomass entered his body. Even if it was only blood, this was the first time he had taken such an amount of biomass in a single consummation.

The man was no longer featherweight, the liters upon liters of blood increased his body weight to unprecedented heights. His body was mostly liquid at this point, and it was disturbing. Most of his total biomass was blood, followed by bones and later the skin. That couldn't be healthy.

His body knew that and already began repurposing the nutrient-rich blood into flesh, but the procedure was too slow for his liking.

"There must be another way..." He looked at his broken left set of claws which had almost regenerated to their pristine state. "Hmm..."

Then he ripped the corpses with both of his claws, opening it in half. The anatomy of the wardens was wrong and nonsensical, but the man didn't ponder on it, what mattered were the contents not the logic behind them.

Most of the wardens' biomass was muscles. Tens upon tens of kilograms of pure and unadulterated muscles. No fat, just good red meat.

The man felt his mouth shift as it became bigger to fit the copious amount of meat he was shoving into his mouth.

It tasted horrible, and it was dry as he had already drunk all the blood that the muscles had once contained. Even then, such trivial things didn't matter to him. Regaining biomass and recovering energy was his current objective, but those objectives themselves were just means to an end. His end goal was to escape from this prison.

As he finished his feast, the last traces of the wardens only being the bones and armor, he noticed he hadn't seen any more wardens. That was both good and bad.

The man didn't know how their patrols or schedule worked, mostly because he lost consciousness far before they switched wardens. And even then, these last two had stayed here for a very long time.

How much was that time, he couldn't say.

There were no methods of measuring time here besides counting, and until now, he hadn't had the brainpower to do so.

He stood up from his squat, flexing his newfound muscles. His body had become burly and big after having consumed the two carcasses. But instead of being twice as big as the wardens, he was currently smaller than what they had once been.

No biomass had been lost on the consumption...

He looked at the ground to see the plentiful amounts of white flesh and dark blood scattered around the floor.

Not MUCH biomass had been lost on the consumption, but the lack of volume was attributed to the control of his body. The wardens' muscles were plentiful, but they weren't as packed as

they could be. After assimilating the two sets of muscles, he compressed them tighter into his muscles, not making him only stronger, but also far tougher.

The man thought about using the wardens' armor but decided against it. Whilst he was around their size, the non-organic armor would severely limit his movements.

With quick and arbitrary calculations, he estimated he now had around twenty times as much strength as before. But not everything was an improvement. His weight had increased tenfold, and with this much biomass and tight muscles, he felt as if he wasn't as agile as before.

In the end, he considered the exchange of attributes worth it.

One couldn't just be the perfect organism. If you wanted something, you had to trade it for something else.

He went into a crouch as he heard a noise. A hint of movement behind the constant whisperings of wind and death. It was difficult to see anything in the dark corridors, with no light sources around, but his eyes had been used to the darkness.

Not enough.

The man thought as his eyes began to wobble. The pupils stretched out and gained more color, hints of blood dripping around the cavities of the eye socket. The shifting wasn't a painless process, especially on a sensitive organ such as the eyeballs.

He reshaped his eyes into ones he had once found. They were from a stealthy creature that was trying to hunt the twisted rodents in his cell. While the creature was an expert hunter, killing the rodents with swift and calculated strikes, it didn't fare well against the man.

The eyes finally settled on a definitive form. Big eyeballs, vertical pupils, and green irises. It would be impossible for other creatures to know the color of their eyes, but for the man, it was instinctual. It was part of his body, how couldn't he know it?

With his improved senses, the man looked down the corridor. There was no movement, but by the second, the noises were getting ever-so-louder.

In a single instant, he thought of a plan.

*

The corridors were endless and silent, ignoring the cries of the damned, of course. After millennia, they couldn't still comprehend the existence of prisons in the underworld. No one could escape, and even if they did, they were still dead.

When dead people traversed over the realm of the dead, they quickly degraded into undead. And most likely than not, mindless undead.

There were no reasons to have cells around. Their only job was to torture the damned until their existence vanished, and they went away. Where did the damned go after they collapsed? That they didn't know. And they didn't care. The torture was enough of a reward.

That's why they always got mad when they took them out of torture duty, especially as simple lookouts.

They craved violence, it was literally written in their very being.

Though he could somewhat understand the existence of cells, some souls were especially weak to solitude. Leave them a few decades in a cell and they would disappear far faster than centuries of torture.

That took a lot of work out of the hands of the wardens, yes, but they loved that dirty and grimy work.

Even then, there was one prisoner that was not like the others. He wasn't dead, but they couldn't say if he was truly alive. The man had never been fed or given water, yet he never died, even after centuries. It was a weird specimen, to say the least.

And that's why they hate it. They were ordered to watch the near-dead mortal for all of eternity, but they didn't allow them to torture him. They didn't know why. Wouldn't it be easier to kill it? To make a damned?

Their thoughts stopped as they saw the dark spurt on the ground. On top of the stone bricks lay copious amounts of bones and blood. Plus two sets of armor.

They instantly raised their guard and looked at their fellow warden on the right, but instead, they saw a black blur.

On top of their mate was a creature of long ebony claws and red mane, glittering green eyes; and it was slicing the head of the warden into chunks.

They raised their axe, intending for a swift strike, but their eyes collided. Green physicality against grey spirituality. The abomination smiled and lurched toward them, claws forward in a menacing posture.

It all happened so fast.

What... That was the first thought they managed to form as their body began to spiral out of control. No. It wasn't their body, it was their head. It had been separated from it as they saw the clean cut on the neck.

Darkness.

*

Zero point three five seven seconds.

That was the time that it took him to descend from the ceiling into the head of the first warden and then use it as a boost to jump at the head of the second one. Only to slice its head clean in a single motion.

The man was happy after his brain finally moved at a decent speed. Reaction time was incredibly important when hunting after all. That is what marks the difference between prey and hunter.

It took a few more minutes to absorb the blood of the newly deceased wardens. This time he didn't consume, the meat as he had reached a singularity point. Intaking more biomass would be detrimental to his current body. His bones would suffer under the pressure and his agility would be reduced even more.

Climbing to the ceiling and maintaining the silence had been complicated with a body this massive and burly.

The man cracked his neck and walked where the wardens came from with the hopes of finding an exit from this dark and gelid prison.

4. Light

Nobody walked through the eternally long halls. They were deserted, the only company the man had was the wind. Solitude never bothered him, so he took it as a good sign.

The corridors were tainted in darkness, with no sources of light in sight whatsoever. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were made of the same type of stone bricks, dark grey. Sometimes, the man could see a cell. They were mostly empty, but once in a while, one was inhabited.

The residents of the prison weren't like him, they were abominations. Rotten bodies that had lost the light in their eyes. Some were more physical, and others... were more like apparitions than real beings. Nonetheless, they remained in their cells, with no need for wardens. They were always looking elsewhere, with the ego out of their eyes. The prisoners were broken and had no wish to escape.

The man found them repulsive.

In his mind, there was nothing more hideous than giving up on life, and these creatures had done so a long time ago.

He didn't bother interacting with them, instead, he continued merging with the shadows, walking on the darkest corners of the unlit corridors.

The lack of activity began to worry him. He had been walking for a long while, enough that five percent of his biomass had been burned away. Fat was a good method to store calories and energy, but muscles were not. And his body was mostly composed of muscles.

If the exit didn't show itself, he would need to find more wardens or he would end up losing all of his biomass. It was still soon, yes, but he didn't like the pattern he had seen so far.

The gelid winds and the muffled cries for help continued to thrash him, but he just ignored them as he had always done. Where did they even come from? The prisoners weren't crying, and he was indoors so no wind could flutter around. This prison became weirder and weirder the more he thought.

Thought.

A capability he had gained after assimilating enough biomass. His previous, decayed body was unable to do so. Or at least in a meaningful way.

Taking into consideration the pressing need to find the exit or more wardens before his biomass ran out, the man shapeshifted his legs into something more appropriate.

The reference frame was of those creatures that hunted rodents. They were weak, scrawny, and fluffy, but also stealthy and agile. He was mostly interested in the shape of their legs. They worked differently than those of him or the wardens.

He couldn't say they were outright better than his, though. They were different. The four-legged hunter's leg was composed of three sections in a zig-zag pattern, unlike his two which were mostly straight. This separation allowed the hunter to jump into a sprint faster, and probably maintain that speed, but it came at a cost. The greater separation made the overall structure weaker. His legs could absorb some hits, but the hunter's legs would be decimated in one strike.

Greater speed for lower defense.

The man didn't know if such speed was more efficient than his current one because what mattered now was reducing the rate at which he was burning biomass.

Only one way to find out.

He sat on the ground, raising his legs to the ceiling. He did this in order to reduce the strain on the legs as he shifted them. Shapeshifting parts of his body was painful and bloody, especially if he did so in a hurried manner.

This time though, he was intelligent about it.

With the raised legs, they were now easier to manipulate than before. Then he found out that if he just left them stretched on the ground as he sat down, then the load would be even lower because the muscles would have to fight against gravity.

The main change was in the skeletal structure of the legs, making new bones where there were none, though the amount of bone remained the same. He had only repurposed it in other locations.

Having said so, the shifting did not only occur on the skeleton. His muscles and blood vessels had to also be shifted in accordance with the new bone structure. The blood vessels were easy, but the muscles had been complicated to move around. He had never had such a colossal amount of anything as he now did with his musculature. It was difficult to move it around as the ligaments were incredibly tense and dense. But sooner than later, he managed.

After a while, he stood up with an energetic inhalation, feeling reinvigorated.

The change wasn't due to the shifting of his body, but the small moment of respite. He hadn't noticed, but his body needed to relax and reduce stress. This was his first time exerting himself, so he didn't know that was a factor.

He pressed into a sprint.

Suddenly, the surrounding corridors became a blur thanks to his newfound speed. He had been walking all this time, but now... he was *running*.

The simple act of moving fast felt exhilarating. Energetic, even if he was burning speed at a higher rate than before. He didn't know that just moving could be... fun. This was his first time doing so after being incarcerated for all his existence.

It was nice.

The man had to watch out for every step as a single misaligned stone brick could make him trip and fall to the ground. At his current speed, that would mean that the impact would break his neck, and whilst that wouldn't outright kill him, it would be painful, nonetheless. And pain was bad.

He had only known pain.

He wanted to learn something besides pain.

He pressed further into his run, the corners of his vision becoming a blur, the air slightly distorting more as he pressed further.

No signs of wardens. He pondered in his trance-like state. His mind was fully focused on his every step, trying to maintain balance with this speed. Considering that in these last minutes he had traversed more distance than his time since his liberation, it was getting distressing.

Why did those two other wardens be nearby his cell, but no more were to be seen? He didn't know many things and never bothered to try to learn them, maybe by speaking with the wardens? Now he wished he had tried to learn. Being ignorant of everything outside of himself was... distressing.

The man's speed decreased as he saw something on the horizon.

A light.

It was dim, but it was certainly light. It took him a few seconds to completely stop his movement. His feet scraped down on the ground as he tried to stop the momentum, but it was a difficult endeavor. It could seem that decelerating was harder than accelerating.

He went down to a crouch, his extremities on the ground as if he was a four-legged creature. That light felt warm, especially in the surrounding darkness. It didn't mean hope, but danger.

The light had a light blue coloration. It felt as gelid as the ever-present wind.

With careful and slow steps, he prayed forward like a hunter. There was something unsettling in that light. But when he got close, he noticed there was no one around. No wardens, no anything.

The light blue hue came from a small hole in the walls of the corridor.

He felt the hairs on his head stand up with every step he took. Was it freedom, what awaited on the other side of the wall, or something else?

Then, carefully crawling under that hole, he slowly raised his head to look beyond it. He didn't find any freedom. He found something worrying.

Before him, there lay a massive hole. Looking down, he only saw darkness, but looking up, darkness also followed. It felt infinite. Up and down both ways. But inside that darkness, there was something else.

A radiance.

It was the light he got seen from the hole in the wall. It wasn't like the light his flames had done, but they appear more like some kind of mist. The light acted as if it was tangible moving around like the wind.

It shouldn't work like that, he thought. *Should it?*

In the infinite darkness, it took him a bit of time to find the pattern along the walls. The hole wasn't a natural formation but a result of the spiraling corridors.

The man noticed how the walls of the hole were actually the other side of the walls of the corridors slowly descending into the hole. The angle of the descent was outrageously slow, maybe kilometers upon kilometers for a single variation of a meter in altitude.

The only positive out of his realization was that he had been walking in the right direction. But considering how slow was the ascent, that wasn't much of a positive.

He couldn't even see the ceiling. So how many hours, days, weeks, or even years would it take him to walk all the way up from the corridors?

Walking wasn't the right answer.

The man shifted the biomass of his body to his right hand, gathering a lot of muscle and bones on the fist. In no time, his right fist was even bigger than his torso. Then he smacked the cracked corridor wall.

The walls partially collapsed. The small hole became wider. Or at least, wide enough for him to step into it.

He jumped into the nothingness.

5. Alta

The man felt the warmth of his body being drained by the infinitely deep hole. Or more accurately, the tangible light that caressed him. That light blue mist was wholly unnatural and chilled him to his very core.

It was easy to keep himself gripped to the walls thanks to his sharp claws but found a problem when trying to climb up. The claws were too long and the resulting posture too awkward to have a solid footing.

Without thinking it twice, the man dislodged his right hand from the wall and hit his claws hard against it. Chunks of ebony keratin flew away from the impact. It hurt a bit, but nothing he hadn't felt before.

The loss of biomass didn't worry him, climbing up with his current weight would prove to be a difficult task.

He repeated the same motion with his left hand until both sets of claws were short enough to make climbing feasible. Then he shapeshifted his human toes into more rodent claws. This way his weight would be equally distributed in four points instead of four.

The man moved his left hand upward and pierced the rock with a swift motion, only when he checked his hand was locked in place, he dislodged his other hand on moved it up on the same level.

Then he noticed his mistake.

That's not how one should climb. The posture was now awkward, his arms and legs extended impeding him from moving his feet up.

"Hmm... This is not optimal." He grunted, staying pinned on the wall as the gelid light caressed him. Now that he pondered on it, it wasn't draining his warmth, but life. "That's troublesome."

He had substituted his problem of running out of nutrients with running out of his very life.

"Oh, well." The man shrugged as he could with his current posture. Then thought about a better method. "Hand, leg. Hand, leg."

He did as he said. Moving first both feet up (with great difficulty) to reset his posture, then he moved his left hand up, followed by his right foot up. The next ones were the remaining hand and foot.

This new method was far more efficient and comfortable than the previous one.

Arm up, leg up. Arm up, leg up. Arm up, leg up.

It took him three series to climb a single corridor. He didn't know if he had even managed to go one level up with his walk, but it was instantly clear that climbing was infinitely more efficient.

Hand up, feet up. Hand up, feet up. Hand up, feet up.

The light-blue light curled against his body like a tentacle, it try to suck more life out of him, but he didn't stop. Climbing was absurdly more dangerous than walking, but he saw something in that dark ceiling. It wasn't a tangible thing, but more of a feeling: hope.

A pleasing feeling.

He pushed forward.

The monotony of the climb felt familiar, it reminded him of his time in the cell when he was shackled. It seemed so distant now, even if logically speaking, not much time had happened since then.

The pain in the muscles told him that it wasn't like that. And the sore feeling on his arms and legs wasn't like the pain he had felt for just existing. It was numbing yes, but it felt rewarding. Something to look forward to.

He climbed with a little more energy behind every push.

It wasn't the most efficient setup, but he didn't know any better. There weren't any climbing creatures around the prison that he could have learned from. Only the hunters, the rodents, and the wardens had he seen. Once he got out, he would definitely look for a creature specialized in climbing.

The man continued climbing.

His body felt warmer and warmer with each series of pulls, but more and more tired. He didn't know if it was because of the exercise itself or the light surrounding him. The glowing mist-like entity slowly but surely drained him. It wasn't painful, and it wasn't uncomfortable, but it was, with utmost certainty, killing him.

Had the dark corridors protected him?

What was this light blue light?

A sound distracted him as if the light itself had giggled. Though there was no sound, only the feeling. The man frowned, looking at both his sides, but there was nothing around him. Neither up nor down.

But he felt observed, watched.

He pushed harder.

Seeking further efficiency, he grew micro-claws on his forearms and legs, giving him a larger surface to support his body on, but also reducing the time he needed to lodge himself into the wall in a tight grip.

Staying in the hole for longer was a bad idea. A very bad one.

Hours passed by. The ascent never ended. The thought that the hole was looping as he moved crossed his mind, but he discarded it as he couldn't see the mark of his claws anywhere else. Though he couldn't deny the fact that the hole could be infinite.

He didn't want to explore that idea. He continued pushing on.

More tendrils spawned out of nowhere, draining his life with an increased impetus. It was getting more and more tiring to climb up. Not only that, as time fled, he was losing biomass. This wasn't sustainable at all.

The only positive outcome of this situation was the brightness.

For the first time ever, he could see the surroundings with perfect clarity. Enough tangible light had gathered to illuminate him. The muted colors drowned by the darkness became more lifeful. If he was going to die, then at least he would have done so after finally seeing his blood-red hair in all its glory. Shining in contrast against the light blue iridescence.

"No." He whispered. "Death won't claim me."

The man continued pushing his body.

His arms and legs cried in pain, yet he didn't stop. That light was messing with his mind, making him think that death was an acceptable outcome.

It was not.

"No, living, being, should, accept, it's death!" He cried between rugged breaths, small trickles of light blue mist infiltrating his inwards.

Then, a pause.

His head collided with something. He looked up and saw nothing. With his free left hand from the last cycle of climbing, he reached up.

Obstacle.

There was something before him. It appeared as nondescript darkness, but it was tangible and cold.

His mind was not bothered by dilemmas about impossibilities or the workings of the darkness. He just shifted biomass into his left arm and punched the ever-living shit out of the entity.

One strike wasn't enough to crack it. Whatever it was, it was hard. So, he continued with a second strike. Then a third. Fourth, fifth, sixth...

Upon the eighth, he felt less resistance. And on the ninth, the darkness finally gave in, cracking in a crystalline pattern. Sharp shards of solidified darkness fell into the void below.

Without even questioning what could lay beyond the darkness, he unlatched his claws and jumped inside.

Darkness.

That's what was inside the darkness. More darkness.

The light blue light refuse to come in, staying on the hole, but its low shine was enough to vaguely illuminate the surroundings. The darkness was made of a cold and vaguely translucent substance. It was also, as noted, very hard.

But beyond the dim light of the mist, he couldn't see anything else. Even in his cell or the corridors, he could see. But here it wasn't the case.

Remembering what happened after his fight with the angry wardens, he cut his chest with his menacingly sharp claws.

Crimson blood flowed out of the colossal wound. Then, it went back in. A shallow flame appeared on the wound healing it and removing the scar from existence, and whilst that was nice, what the man was seeking was the light emitted by the orange flames.

He began cutting his arms intermittently; while one was healing, the other was cut. The flames didn't last long, so he had to light them constantly.

Their light was also dim, even dimmer than that of the tangible light, but at least it could exist beyond the darkness.

The man walked without any direction whatsoever as everything appeared homogeneous, no landmarks or differences in the terrain, just an infinite expanse of darkness on a flat plane.

The most logical idea that came to his mind was to walk beyond the hole he had carved out. Because he had climbed out of the wall, that meant if he continued walking straight from there the darkness should end. Or that's what he hoped.

He continued cutting himself with the razor-sharp claws, blood flowing in and out of his body, flames kindling and dying out in seconds. At that point, he was so numb to the pain that his mind turned it off, as it had done with the cries and laments.

The light blue tangible light no longer made him cold, but the darkness was as cold, if not colder.

As he mindlessly cut himself, something happened. He had cut too deep into his flesh, splashing blood onto the darkness below. Instead of flowing back to his body, the drops of blood stayed on the ground, faintly glowing.

Then they burst into flames.

The fire consumed the blood, using it as fuel. The flames consumed his vision turning everything bright and red.

The flames went out as fast as they came.

Stone.

The man raised his legs and stepped on the ground multiple times. There wasn't any cold darkness touching his feet, but stone bricks. He cut his arms once more to light himself like a torch. Not only the floor had changed, but his whole surroundings.

He was no longer in the darkness but in a small room.

And a statue lay before him.

He approached without fear, cutting deeper wounds to illuminate the big stonework better. It was a creature. He didn't recognize the type of creature. It didn't have a mouth or arms, but it did have claws for legs. It didn't show flesh, but complex creations instead of skin and hair.

Intrinsic knowledge in his mind told him that this creature was: a bird.

He got closer to the 'bird' and felt some warmth coming from it. On its legs was a small inscription on the stone.

"Nikt'auri eyko som'ariane." He read out loud, surprising himself in the act. How could he read the complex hieroglyphs? What even was 'reading'?

More information filled his brain. The insertion of new data didn't feel aggressive, but natural. As if it should have been always there. He tried reading the inscription once more.

"My light, you have finally reached your destination." The first segment read. But the man didn't stop there and continued reading the whole inscription. "The day you were born you were imprisoned by the gods, as they feared your true potential. And they were right. My chimera, my Alta. You were born for greatness."

For some reason, the last sentence shook him. The words contained power, especially after he said them out loud.

"If you are here, it's because you've breached your containment. Once you use the fire you have inherited from me on this dying carcass, the gate to the world of the living will open to you, for we are Aligned to Life itself."

The words not only shook him, but they seemed to permeate reality itself. The words didn't contain the power, they *were* the power.

Only one line remained on the inscription.

"Go forth, take revenge on those who imprisoned you, my Alta. My daughter."

A chill traversed his body as he read the last words.

"Alta, is that my name?" He looked at his hands, and somehow, that felt appropriate. As if it had always been. But more importantly, "Daughter?"

Him? He looked at the empty spot on his crotch. He wasn't sure about it.

Anyways, he cut himself once more, and with the resulting flames touched the statue as the inscription had said to do.

The fire overwhelmed him once more. More powerful, brighter, yet... incredibly comforting. Like the mother's embrace he had never had.

6. Fairy

Icasondra loved to take the scenic route.

People in the village told her that it was foolish, that she was only exposing herself to the dangers beyond the forest, but she thought otherwise. She had been doing this since she was a little pixie, and nothing had happened.

Besides, it was foolish to be content just with the forest. The woods and her village are beautiful, yes, but she wouldn't be satisfied with those sights alone. She needed to search beyond the tall pine trees and the bountiful undergrowth. It didn't matter if the scenery was beautiful or ugly, she took pleasure in looking at new landscapes.

That's what brought her to the Barren Lands.

The name was suiting for the place, if not, fell a bit short. When Icasondra had heard about the Barren Lands, she had thought of a desert, a place where the dirt was coarse and unfertile, where life couldn't sustain itself. And whilst that image wasn't far from the truth, it wasn't what she had expected.

The Barren Lands weren't a dry land where life didn't bloom; it was dead, and life was being actively drained. She had thought of dark brown dirt or yellow sand, but the ground was grey or black, oozing with death.

"Oh." She sighed as she perched on a dead tree.

Icasondra hadn't expected a happy sight from the beginning, but this was far more depressing than she could have imagined.

"Why did the villagers call this place dangerous, if nothing can live here?" Icasondra mused with her melodic, albeit saddened, voice.

Her slim legs hung free in the sky, swinging back and forth, as she stretched her arms. The tree may be dead, but it was strong enough to hold her weight. It was a good tree. Providing service beyond death.

"Laira-laira-la~" But even the dark atmosphere couldn't oppress her natural attitude.

Sure, the sky had an obscure tinge, and the ground was tinged, but still was a new sight to behold. The forest was blooming with life, so it made sense that another place needed to bolster in death.

She expected the Barren Lands to be hot, but that was because she had thought she would find a desert. Truth be told, the air was frigid and was penetrating her flesh, feeling the cold deep in her bones.

Overall, this place was peaceful. Icasondra had never bothered asking superfluous questions like what would await her in death, but this gloomy stillness was certainly fitting. If that's what lay beyond in the afterlife, then dying was that bad. It would only be... boring.

"Yes, boring." Icasondra jumped out of the dead tree's branch. She fluttered in the air, staying in the same spot thanks to her wings. "Death sounds like quite a boring prospect." Even then, her visage was carved with a big smile.

It was difficult to make fairies sad, at the end of the day.

But as she turned over to fly back to the forest, a black shadow loomed over her. Before she could even flutter her wings thrice, the net pinned her to the ground.

“Yes!” A male voice cried in joy. “I’ve captured the critter.”

With heavy steps, a in dirty clothing man approached to pick up the net that was trapping Icasondra.

“I’m no critter!” The fairy protested, fluttering her wings and trying to escape her bindings, but the net was too resilient and the holes too small to fit through.

The man heaved the net up on his shoulders with a grunt. “Oof, the lady here’s heavy.”

“Did you just call me fat!” Icasondra burst in indignation.

“Shut up, fairy!” In response, the human hit her with his open hand. “Prey don’t talk.”

Icasondra wanted to cry. She had never felt this... pain. What would he do to her?

“I’d recommend against capturing wild fae.” Another man suggested. This one was better dressed, though his clothes were of a traveler. A brown coat and big dark brown boots, not fancier, just cleaner and tidier. “Such actions tend to have... unforeseen consequences.”

“You shut up too, merchant!” The man walked toward the merchant. “You have paid us to escort you, not to listen to your ‘bits of advice’.”

“Do as you please.” The merchant shrugged and went inside a cart.

“Free me now!” Icasondra ordered now that the fancy man disappeared.

“And why should I do so.” The dirty man laughed. “You know how expensive you, fairies, can get on the slave market.” He carried the net close to his face. “Especially someone as pretty as you.”

The man caressed Icasondra’s platinum hair with his grimy hands, almost prompting her to puke. The man laughed once more, a disgusting grin on his face.

“Merchant, do you mind if I put this cargo on your cart?” The repugnant man asked the fancy man who had picked up the straps of the horses.

“Absolutely not.” He responded with repulsion. “Keep your wares on yourself, I don’t want to be related to you for the next event.”

“Event?” The soot-covered man raised his brows in confusion.

Then a scream was heard from the back side of the cart.

“Erik, is that you?” The slaver asked. “Did something happen?”

“Boss!” Erik cried, a hint of fear in his voice. “Something came out of the ground!”

The man, his boss apparently, sighed. He muttered something about his coward lackeys and went to the back of the cart. He probably saw a risen zombie or skeleton. Those were the most basic forms of undeath, and their weakness corroborated it.

But as the man saw what had appeared from the ground, he dropped the net with the fairy in surprise.

A demon.

It was the only possibility. Blood red hair, menacing ebony claws, and satyr-like furry legs ending in even more claws. The demonic creature looked at them with a visible thirst. A desire for blood.

In a shaken stupor, and without thinking it twice, Erik unloaded his crossbow bolt on the demon. Even with his unruly aim, the lackey's aim was true. It hit the creature right in its neck.

It didn't do anything.

The bolt exploded into flames and vanished into ashes. The fire lingered on the demon's neck and an instant later the damage done by the shot had disappeared.

The attack only angered the creature more.

Icasondra could smell the reeking smell coming from the Erik man and recognized it as urine. She would also have pissed herself, but she was too scared to even do that.

Her eyes closed as a sudden burst of wind enveloped them. Then, as she opened them, she saw the detached head of the Erik human fall to the ground, his body following soon after.

Yet the demon didn't stop there, his claws even longer than in the previous blink, penetrated the rib cage of her captor. The dying body of the man fell to her feet, crushing them beneath as she was too shocked to move them out of the way.

"Ah..." A scared groan escaped her mouth as she crossed sights with the deadly being.

She looked inside the cat-like eyes of the demon and regretted everything she had said about not being bothered by death.

"Please..." Icasondra's voice came out of her voice with great pain, not unlike speaking underwater. "Don't kill me..." Tears came down her face, and her legs trembled uncontrollably.

The demon looked at her with confusion.

"Why should I do that?" The bloodied creature spoke.

Why should you not kill me? She thought, realizing her plead had been foolish since the very beginning. The ramblings of a soon-dead woman.

The ebony claw came toward her, and she closed her eyes; her heart completely stopped.

Death didn't claim her. Instead, she heard the noise of a fabric being ruptured. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the net had been broken.

"Huh?" The fairy mussitated in a low whisper.

"You don't have enough meat." The demon replied. "It would be a waste. And you are a prey, not a hunter. I prefer hunter's biomass."

Icasondra sighed in relief, hiding traces of hyperventilation in her breathing. She could only be satisfied with her size as a fairy for allowing her to live.

Then the demon proceeded to the front of the cart. Icasandra's heart sank as she noticed the creature would slay the merchant. Whilst the man had allowed the others to capture her, she didn't think he deserved to die.

It took her a lot of strength she didn't have to move the slaver's body out of her legs. Her eyes became watery looking at the purple bruise on her leg, yet she was able to take to the skies.

But as she shakily flew to the front, she found no traces of the man. Only a pair of horses remained, the animals neighed violently upon seeing the demon.

Oh, thank the gods. She prayed. *At least someone has escaped this massacre.* As she thought that, the demon beheaded the two horses, ending their cries of fear.

"Ah." A muted cry escaped her mouth as she remembered where she was. Her butterfly wings lost all strength and she fell to the coarse ground, her eyes feasting on the carnage.

The demon didn't devour the horses, but she could tell she was consuming them somehow. Blood flowed upwards from the tips of its claws into his body. The macabre sight produced her a dazing feeling as if someone had punched her in the gut.

Once it was satisfied, the demon stood up and looked down at her. It didn't speak but stared at her menacingly, shaking her to her very core.

"A-a-are y-you go-going to e-e-ea-eat me?" Her jaw trembled as she peered into the demon's green eyes.

"I already told you that you don't have enough meat. Or would you like to get eaten?" Icasandra vigorously swayed her head from side to side, her mane wildly following around. "Even then, I already have more biomass than I need, I'll probably need to expel some, and also shift my body again. This shape results in instant aggression from other creatures, and I desire to go unnoticed for the time being."

The demon crouched on its knees and got closer to her.

"Tell me, creature." It said, its face close to her. "Where are we now?"

7. Chimera

The flames that enveloped the man quickly died down leaving him trapped. He wasn't standing on top of the statue anymore but buried underground. His body was surrounded by dirt, the coarse substance threatening to lodge into his lungs and drown him.

He pushed hard, trying to shake the dirt off him. Thankfully enough, he didn't find himself buried deep underground, and with a single jump, he was able to come out of his hole.

A warm and violent sensation assaulted him.

The man looked up to the sky to find a ball of fire, not unlike his own, really high up. That ball emitted a lot of light, far more than his flames or the tangible light of the infinite hole.

The powerful light blinded him, but instead of killing him as the light blue light did, this yellow light filled him with warmth and life. He shifted his eyes a bit to be less sensitive to light.

Whilst he was remaking his sight, he heard a scream. It was manly and tried to look at the source but with his unfinished eyeballs, he could only see blurs.

Then pain.

Something impacted and penetrated deeply into his neck. It didn't hit any vital points, and even if it did, he would have died by such a small strike. He could feel the flames surging from his body and healing it, but also incinerating the projectile embedded in his neck.

Once his eyes had finally recovered from the makeshift transformation, he looked forward. There, two figures stood still.

Wardens? The man thought. *No, they are too short and don't have armor. And I don't recognize the weapons they have. The small not-warden seems to have a ranged weapon, and wardens always had melee weapons.*

He took a step forward, launching into the air with a powerful sprint, and decapitated the small not-warden. *Certainly not a warden.* He pondered as he felt the red blood on his hands. *Blood's different. Also weak. Too weak.*

Then the man took a look at the bigger not-warden and thrust his claws into its chest. With a muffled cough, the other not-warden fell to the ground on top of another creature.

This creature didn't look like any other he had seen. It had big yet feeble-looking protuberances on its bag and was also small. Half of the not-wardens, but a third of his size.

The creature groaned once he looked at it. It was scared and it felt more like prey than the rodents ever did. Those critters didn't fear death, yet this creature did.

"Please..." It spoke, "Don't kill me..." Liquid appeared from the creature's eyes. Was it a defense mechanism of some sort? The man didn't know.

"Why should I do that?" The man asked the prey-creature.

Then he ripped the cage that was containing the prey, it would be a waste to leave it to die here only for opportunist scavengers to have a free meal.

"Huh?" It added after a pregnant second of confusion.

“You don’t have enough meat.” He spoke. “It would be a waste. And you are a prey, not a hunter. I prefer hunter’s biomass.”

Prey were always weaker, so it would be better to store the biomass of more powerful creatures.

Tin~

His head twisted looking at the white structure as he heard a noise. With powerful but silent steps, he walked to the front of the structure. But only found two other trapped prey.

Weird. The man thought. *I sensed something else. A hunter, not a prey.*

He looked at the four-legged prey and decided to kill them. With a swift cut, he separated the heads of both prey from their bodies. The brown prey’s biomass was far stronger than that of the not-wardens, it would be a waste not to use it, especially after all the biomass he had lost from the walk, the climb, and the light blue light. How could prey’s biomass be stronger than that of hunters?

“Ah.” He heard the small prey fall to the ground with a light muted sound.

The man didn’t bother to look at it and first drained the four-legged prey out of their blood. It was also red, like his or the not-wardens. With this, he was able to more than recover the lost biomass, but it would take him some time to guess which were the parts richer in biomass of every carcass.

He stood up and looked at the small prey on the ground.

“A-a-are y-you go-going to e-e-ea-eat me?” The scared creature asked.

Was this creature too stupid to understand words? The man thought. *Maybe it only repeats them, instead of actually talking.* Nonetheless, he tried to establish conversation once more.

“I already told you that you don’t have enough meat. Or would you like to get eaten?” The creature swayed its head hard in negation, indicating that it could understand him. “Even then, I already have more biomass than I need, I’ll probably need to expel some, and also shift my body again. This shape results in instant aggression from other creatures, and I desire to go unnoticed for the time being.”

He didn’t know why, but he told the small prey his plan. It felt appropriate to do, even if there was no reason to do so.

The next best set of action would be to get more information, and after having confirmed that the creature was truly sapient, he crouched and got close to it.

“Tell me, creature. Where are we now?” He asked, not recognizing anything in his surroundings.

“T-th-the b-ba-b-bar-re-ren la-a-ands.” It spoke. The scared mussitation was almost unintelligible.

“Prey, talk slower, or I won’t be able to understand what you are saying.” The man explained calmly. But oddly enough, that only made the creature fret more for its life. “Are we clear?” He looked at it severely.

That did the trick as it now remained still, without spasming like before. Though fear still lingered in the prey's eyes.

"We..." The small creature began talking, "Are on the Barren Lands."

"And what does that mean?" The man asked.

"Eep!" The prey suddenly got scared. "I'm sorry!"

"Sorry for what?" He tilted his head in confusion. "I asked you a question, why should you be sorry about that?"

The creature looked at him with its dark blue eyes.

"Oh," it blinked several times, "so you aren't mad?"

"I will be if you continue to refuse to answer me." The man added with the same calm voice, unbothered by the smell and sight of the carnage.

"Yes, sorry!" He scowled at the creature. "Em, we are on the Barren Lands. A place where no one lives and mostly no one goes to because it's touched by Death."

Now that he thought about it, it was true that there was no life around them. The ground was coarse and dry, but unlike the prison, it seemed this place once had hosted life and it had been deprived of it.

"If no one comes here, why were you and the not-wardens here?" The creature's explanation wasn't really solid, it could be trying to fool him.

"Not-wardens?" Prey asked in confusion.

"Not-wardens, the ones who attacked me." He explained.

"Do you mean the humans?" It looked at the dead bodies as it said that; its face contorted in a gruesome manner and its breath became ragged.

"Those creatures at called humans then?"

It looked back at him with moist eyes and partial repulsion. "Yes?"

"And those?" He pointed at the two four-legged dead prey.

"Horses." The small prey explained.

"I see." The man nodded.

He hadn't had any education, sometimes knowledge just appeared in his brain. That's how he had known about the rodents or the 'bird', even the fact that he was 'he'.

Then he remembered the statue's inscription, how it said 'her' name was Alta. The statement about his gender confused him, but the name suited him.

"And you?" Alta asked.

"I'm a Moonlight fairy." The 'fairy' responded as it fluttered the colorful protuberances on its back and slightly flew up.

"How?" Alta tilted his head in confusion.

“How what?” The fairy repeated his motion.

“How are you flying?” He inquired. “Your body is too big for those feeble protuberances to be able to lift you from the ground.”

“Magic?” It added. “And they aren’t called ‘protuberances’. Those are my wings!”

“Wings?” Alta inspected the weird appendages. They were composed of biomass, but they had something more he couldn’t identify.

“Don’t you know what wings are?” The fairy asked.

“I do not.” He replied. “I’ve never seen these ‘wings’ you speak of until now.”

The fairy looked at him with confusion and excitement. A hint of curiosity sparkled in the small creature’s blue eyes.

“Can I ask you something?” The fairy toyed with its fingers, unsure if it should have asked to begin with. Alta simply nodded. “What are you?”

“What do you mean?” Alta asked. “I am me.”

“No, that’s what I meant.” The fairy closed her eyes, thinking of a better choice of words. “I’m a fairy, and those two were humans, so you are of a race. And I don’t think you are a demon.”

“Demon?” Alta’s visage distorted in cold anger. “Do you mean wardens?”

The fairy flew a step backward in fear. “N-no, I don’t know what those are.”

He inspected the creature’s terrorized eyes; it was telling the truth. Then pondered about the fairy’s question. What was he? What was his race?

Once more, his mind went to the strange inscription. *My chimera, my Alta*. It had written on it. The latter was his name, but the former...

“I’m a chimera.” Alta said.

8. Man

“What’s a chimera?” The fairy asked, still fluttering over the ground.

“I don’t know,” Alta responded as a matter of fact.

Forgetting its fear, the fairy frowned its brows and looked at him with doubt. “If you don’t know what a chimera is, then how do you know that you are one?”

“I just know.” The man added with the same impassivity and lack of expression.

That response really irked the fairy for some reason.

“Then what do chimeras do?” The fairy relaxed and tried another approach.

“Eat, breathe, sleep.” Alta said.

“Everyone does that!” The fairy moved aggressively in the air, the fear being a matter of the past, and instead making its anger visible. “I meant what is something chimeras can do better than others.”

Alta tilted his head to the side; he was amazed how this little creature could get this angry before him with just words when it was prey. It was amusing, though.

“I can shift my biomass?” He explained, unsure if it was a valid response. He had yet to see other creatures shift their biomass and bodies, so he assumed it had to be a chimera thing.

“And what does that mean?” The fairy asked for clarification.

Instead of trying to put it into words, Alta decided to show it to the flying creature.

Alta took a look at the dead ‘humans’ and recalled that they looked exactly like he did without any shapeshifting. So, he did that, returning his shifted hunter legs and ebony rodent claws back into the biomass of his body to assemble his prior state. He still kept the hunter’s eyes, though. Those eyeballs were more developed than his, and it would be foolish to undo his augmented senses.

The fairy looked at Alta with a mixture of curiosity and terror as it saw his body shift grossly. At least this time there weren’t any splutters of blood. Alta was slowly getting more used to shapeshifting. He wasn’t able to practice his skill much in the prison as he always was lacking the biomass to do so. Yet in these last hours-slash-days, he had gotten valuable experience and mastery.

It only took him a pair of minutes to undo the changes and return to his default naked glory.

“Oh.” The fairy gasped. But instead of asking questions about his shifting, the fairy asked something he didn’t expect. “Are you a female?”

“No, I’m a man,” Alta replied.

“No, you are a female like me.” But as Alta swayed his head in negation, the fairy pointed at his crotch, its face gaining an unnatural red coloration. “Then what about that?”

“What about it?” He hadn’t understood the question.

“Men have... something there!” The fairy’s red coloration exacerbated. The color contrasted brightly against its blue accents, and its visage was resembling Alta’s hair color more than anything.

“Do they?” In response, the fairy nodded shyly.

Remembering the dead humans, Alta went to check them. They looked male enough.

He crouched before the last one he had killed and ripped the fabrics blocking his sight of the human’s flesh. Alta then noticed that, indeed, the dead body appeared to have another set of organs on its crotch. The fairy had been right, he lacked some critical organs in his body.

Alta inspected the carcass, but instead of consuming it, he shifted a claw back on one finger and pushed deep into the flesh. He had more than enough biomass now, consuming more would make him too heavy, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t learn from other creatures without consuming them.

The organ was quite simple, though he noticed it went further inside of the body than he first had thought. He spent five minutes in silence, except for the silent fluttering of the fairy’s wings, inspecting the organ.

Then it took him less than a minute to recreate it.

He stood up.

“What about now?” Alta asked looking at the fairy. “Am I now a man?”

“Eep!” The creature screeched and put its hands on its eyes. Or rather, put her on her eyes. The fairy had told him she was a female after all. “What are you showing me that?”

“You told me I needed it to be a man.” He replied. “I wanted some confirmation of my status as a man.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” She cried out frenetically. “You are a man, now get it out of my sight!”

“Do you want me to remove it?” Alta asked in confusion.

“Remove it?” Color drained from her visage, gaining an even paler shade. “No! Just... just hide it!”

“How?”

“With clothes, obviously!” She replied as a matter of fact.

“What are ‘clothes’?” Alta asked, unbeknownst of the word.

“Really? You don’t even know that?” He swayed his head. “It’s what I’m wearing and... they had been wearing.”

“Why do you use these clothes?” Alta added. “They seem to restrict mobility and add weight that isn’t part of your biomass.”

“Because it’s indecent otherwise!”

Alta tilted his head to the side. “Indecent?”

"Of course, you wouldn't understand, you would be naked all the time, do you?" He nodded. "It wasn't a qu- aargh, it doesn't matter. Here, let me see if you understand this concept, we use clothes to protect ourselves against the elements, like wind and cold, you understand that, right?"

"Oh, I get it." Alta nodded once more. "It's light armor."

"How do you know about armor but not clothing?" The fairy shouted in exasperation.

"Because I had never seen clothing, but I did see armor?" He couldn't understand the flying creature sometimes.

"Doesn't matter! Just... cover that thing." She tried to point at his new organ. Tried being the keyword as she did so with her eyes closed, failing utterly at her only task.

Alta didn't understand the necessity of covering himself, especially only his crotch. He could feel the cold, but it would not kill him. Either way, just covering that would obstruct his movement and it would make the fairy stop talking about it.

Not really knowing how to wear the clothes, Alta ripped the top part of the dead man's clothing, a beige piece of cloth, and tied it around his hips.

"Is it good now?" He asked the closed-eyed fairy.

She opened them and gave Alta a timid look. "Why didn't you take his pants?"

"The what?"

"I don't know why I even bother." The fairy sighed. "Yes, that's fine. At least far better than having that thing swing around in the open." The last part she added between mutters, but his developed ears were enough to catch her words.

The fairy then flew inside the white structure. Now that Alta inspected it, the top was made of a similar fabric to the clothes of the dead humans. Though he didn't recognize the material at the bottom of the structure. Brown and strong, though not as much as stone.

"What are you doing?" Alta asked the fairy.

"Looting." She responded. "There could be valuables here, and whilst I'm no thief, it would be foolish to leave expensive things or money for other people to take."

Hmm... Alta pondered. Was my analysis wrong? Maybe she isn't a prey, but a scavenger, an opportunist?

"What's 'money'?" He asked entering the structure. The inside was mostly empty except for some boxes.

"You truly don't know anything, do you?"

"I can't know of something I haven't seen or heard about," Alta replied. "Except when I do know."

"What does that even mean?" The fairy swayed her head. "Don't matter, smash these boxes, I can't open them."

“Why?” Even though he asked, he already began shifting biomass into his right arm. It was difficult to say no to smashing things.

“Because there could be nice things inside.”

“Is that money you talked about a nice thing?” Alta asked.

“Yes.” The fairy nodded. “Money is like an object that allows you to exchange it for other things. The more money you have, the more things or better ones you can have.”

“I see.” He didn’t actually understand it, but it felt appropriate to say so. Then he smashed the box to smithereens. “Open.”

The fairy didn’t say anything and rummaged through the contents. “Cloth and hide, nothing expensive, if it were silk, I could take it... Anyways, smash the other three.”

Alta did as told, crushing the other boxes open and then shifting his biomass back to its place.

“More cloth, more hide, some jerky, bah...” The fairy grunted. “Oh, what’s this?”

The flying creature picked a roll of red cloth.

“Jackpot, chimera do you know what this is?” Alta negated with his head. “Silk. And silk is very expensive. I could get a lot of money back in the village with this.” The fairy salivated as she held the silk.

“What’s a ‘village’?” Alta asked after hearing a new word.

“Uh, it’s nothing.” Fear, lies. He could smell them.

“What is a village?” Alta repeated slowly. He had tolerated the presence of the fairy because it gave him useful information, but if it began to lie to him, well... it was no longer useful.

“I-it’s nothing y-you would care about, really.” She avoided his gaze.

Alta took a step forward, and before the fairy could fly one backward, he grabbed her by the face.

“Fairy.” He stated. “What is a village? Do not lie to me or hide the truth from me.”

Water began to slowly pour down from her eyes once more. He also smelled a foul odor coming from her, he recognized that same smell from one of the humans.

“I. Em. I-it’s...” He looked at her sternly. “It’s where the other fairies live!”

Alta peered into her eyes and after a nod, he released her.

“Alright, take me there.” He added with a smile.

The chimera could hear the fairy take a bountiful gulp of saliva.

9. Rebirth

Icasondra was scared for she may have doomed her village. She should have kept her mouth shut. The chimera was smart and decided to not kill her, but she could feel the bloodlust radiating from it. Or rather, he. She cringed a bit, the flashing memory of the creature's manhood. *Oh, it will never go away, will it?*

She took a deep breath.

The chimera was following her as she walked toward the forest. They were still a bit far from the actual forest, but the Barren Lands would soon end its spread and life would bloom anew.

She could feel the green eyes observing her from behind, inspecting her every move. She turned her head back. The chimera had shifted to a human shape, but he still had those cat eyes. And whilst curiosity was gnawing on her mind, Icasondra didn't have the strength of will to ask the creature. He carried the bolt of red silk in his hands, if she didn't die, she would make a good profit from her excursion.

It was only when the green shade of grass made its appearance that the chimera did something. He crouched and inspected the wilting grass, still affected by the touch of Death of the Barren Lands.

"Fairy, what's that?" He asked.

"Grass." At this point, Icasondra could only explain and nod calmly. It was clear that the chimera didn't know anything.

"What's do it do?" The chimera plucked some blades and inspected them on his fingers.

"Um, I don't know? Does it have to do something?" He gave her an inquisitive look. "I mean it! It's just a plant, it just exists!"

"What's a 'plant'?" He added.

I should have expected it. Icasondra sighed.

"A plant is like a life form that lives rooted to the ground? I'm no scholar, so I don't know what the actual definition of a plant is."

"Why do organisms choose to stay still?" The chimera asked in confusion. "That lets the hunter and also prey get them."

"I don't know?" Icasondra replied. She had never asked herself such obvious questions.

"You are useless, fairy." He replied bored.

"I'm sorry for not being an encyclopedia!" She cried. "And I'm not called 'fairy', I have a name you know! I'm Icasondra!"

Then her blood turned cold as she noticed what she had done. She had unleashed her stress on the chimera by shouting at him.

"Alright." He responded, thankfully not choosing to kill her. "But Icasondra, I also have a name of my own. I am Alta."

“Alta the chimera then?” Icasondra said slowly, walking down the metaphorical path with careful steps.

“And you, Icasondra the fairy,” Alta responded.

“Well, technically, I would be Icasondra the Moonlight fairy.” She added, against her better judgment. “There are a lot more types of fairies, so there can be confusion. It’s like calling grass just a plant.”

“But you did not a minute before,” Alta said.

“That’s because you didn’t even know what grass was!” She turned her back toward him. “Follow me, there’s still a long travel before us.”

Alta stood up from her crouch and began walking after her. It was not long before the forest made their presence clear. Tall trees filled their view, the plants themselves stretching out as if they wanted to reach the skies.

“What-“ Alta tried to talk, but Icasondra interjected him.

“Those are trees, and they are another type of plant.”

“Alright.” The chimera nodded, not angry at the interjection, but pleased with the knowledge.

Why do I keep doing this? Icasondra struggled in her mind. Dumb, dumb fairy. You are going to get killed with your stupid tongue!

“They are big.” Alta commented.

“Indeed.” Icasondra added.

“You are small.” He continued.

“Excuse you?” The fairy added.

“Excuse me for what?” He tilted his head in confusion.

“It... it doesn’t matter.” She rolled her eyes. *At least this time he didn’t try to kill me because I didn’t tell him.*

“Where’s this ‘village’ then?” Alta looked at her.

“I... I told you we have a long journey before we arrive.” She wouldn’t that she thought of guiding the chimera on the wrong path, but quickly discarded the idea.

The chimera walked around her, slowly circling her. Even though she was flying, Alta’s eyes looked at her from on top. The chimera, even in his human form, was still three times as tall as her.

After a full rotation and a half, Alta stopped and smiled at her. “Continue.” That was the only word he said, yet Icasondra obeyed without thinking it twice.

She couldn’t comprehend the mind of the shapeshifting creature, it was more akin to an animal than a person, but she could feel him toying with her.

The rest of the travel was spent in silence. Alta would stop from time to time, prompting her to also stop, but the chimera wouldn’t ask her about the things he was looking at.

They didn't stop many times, just three: once for flowers, another when more kinds of trees appeared in the forest, and the last one for a squirrel.

Alta looked the critter right in the eyes and the squirrel replied. There was some sort of understanding between them. He nodded and the critter went on its merry way.

Weird. Icasondra thought. Most people, mainly humans, thought that fairies had an intrinsic connection to nature, but that was only superstition. As a Moonlight fairy, Icasondra could only feel connected to the moon, and even if she had lived all her life in the forest, she could just talk with animals or comprehend them.

The moment she heard the silent woods became more liver, more sounds in the background, Icasondra knew they were getting close to the village. And that scared him. *How will Alta react? Will he kill everyone because I was too cowardly to sacrifice myself?*

She needed to do something.

Once they were close enough to the village, Icasondra landed on the ground and looked at Alta.

"Em... Alta?" She asked, doubtful of her plan. There wasn't one, to begin with.

"Yes, Icasondra?" He replied.

"We have to do something with your looks." The little fairy added with more confidence. "Fairies in the village have seen humans, but you are far too big to look like one, so... you might scare them. And also! Yes, you won't fit in the houses, yes! You need to be smaller if you want to walk around the village!"

It was improvised and she had raised her voice too much to sound confident, yet...

"It makes sense." Alta nodded, scratching his chin. "Should I adopt your form?"

"Can you?" She asked.

Icasondra knew that it was impossible to get Alta out of the village now, but if he decided to take the shape of a fairy, maybe, and just maybe, he would be reticent to kill other fairies.

"I guess so, I just need time." Having said so, Alta sat on the grass and looked at her closely.

The way he was looking at her, inspecting her, felt awful. As if she was raping her with his eyes. But not in a sexual or academic way, but it was as if he was ripping her open with his claws, inspecting her insides like a butcher reading the meat.

Her breathing stopped.

The chimera hadn't moved in any manner, not even a blink, it was all in her mind. Yet she wanted to puke. Her throat itched as if the claws had truly gotten her.

A cold traversed her body.

It was all because of those eyes. That wasn't the sight of a person looking at another, or one of a hunter observing prey, she didn't know what that sight was of. And that scared her.

It dissected her very being, studying her to the most basic components, no longer a fairy, but several organs tied up together.

“Ah...” A painful and terrified escape her mouth.

The chimera didn't mind, opting to keep studying her body. *How can he do this with just his sight?* Acknowledging that fact scared her even further. Alta didn't need menacing and sharp claws or even a towering body, just a single look was enough.

It was getting dizzy, even if she was standing up with her feet on the ground. Her wings fluttered nervously, hoping for the moment the chimera would look away.

She didn't need to wait long.

The very next instant after Alta finally blinked and took his eyes off her, Icasondra fell to her knees, her legs unable to carry her body as they trembled.

“Are you okay?” The chimera asked, unaware of the trial Icasondra had fought in her mind.

“Y-yes.” She responded with a mixture of fear and exhaustion. “Can you transform into me or something?”

“I think I can, I just need a bit more time to shift.”

Then awful noises came from his insides. Icasondra heard the creaks of bone, the snapping of muscles, and the spluttering of blood.

Blood? She looked down and saw the small rivers of blood forming on the chimera's skin. Then she saw the bolt of silk next to him. *The silk!* She screamed inwardly, horrified. She couldn't allow the silk to get drenched by Alta's blood. It was expensive enough to cover all her expenses for months if not years.

Ignoring her exhaustion and fear, she took off from the ground and grabbed the bolt.

“Urgh!” Icasondra grunted, grinding her teeth. The bolt was heavier than it looked, and fairies weren't known for their physical prowess. She had forgotten after the chimera carried it all the way here effortlessly.

Alta didn't mind her antics, too focused on the shifting. Thankfully, Icasondra managed to move the bolt of silk away from the fountain of blood without dirtying it or scratching it.

The fairy panted, catching her breath. Only to then have it taken it away from her.

A figure clawed outside of the body of the chimera, smaller yet sparkling with the energy of a thousand suns.

From Alta's back, a new one emerged. This one had protuberances on the back, shining with an orange tinge. It still had the blood-red hair color, yet now it had more... passion than before. The rebirthed figure was mystical enough to be worthy of being called a fairy.

Alta flew a few feet above the old body, then landed before it. He was smaller, around the same size as Icasondra herself, but instead of having butterfly blue wings, Alta possessed two bright fires in the shape of leaves posing for fairy wings.

The newborn fairy was naked in his bloody glory, his skin tainted with the same color as his hair, but instead of portraying an awful male visage, it was female like Icasondra. All her body.

She's beautiful... The Moonlight fairy's mind was enchanted with the sight.

10. Blossomflame

Fire crackled alive as Alta emerged from the blood.

For him to be able to shift into a fairy, he needed to reduce his biomass by two-thirds, or even more. So instead of slowly ripping off parts of his body, the chimera just shed it away, akin to a metamorphosis.

His old body became dead, and a new one surged alive. This one was smaller but lighter and more responsive. The more biomass he had, the slower the response was between his mind and body. It wasn't much, fractions of milliseconds perhaps, but he could perceive such differences.

With a wet and gut-wrenching noise, Alta removed away from the carcass, using his fairy wings to fly upwards. He didn't have any practice at all, so he was forced to land right away. Blood trickled from his skin, it belonged to his old body.

Alta took a breath, filling his lungs with air, stretching his new shape, and then looked at the other fairy. Icasondra, the Moonlight fairy, had her sights focused on him, looking from below as she was on her knees.

He approached her, but the fairy didn't react, bewildered at him.

"Did it work?" He asked, but Icasondra still had her eyesight unfocused. Alta snapped his fingers. "Icasondra, do I look like a fairy?"

"Oh, yes." She wiped a trace of saliva dripping from her mouth. "But your... manhood disappeared."

At first, he didn't understand what she meant by 'manhood', but after following her gaze, he became aware of the lack of biomass on his crotch.

"Hmm, I guess I also recreated the gender on the shift," Alta said. "This is the first time I've done a full body shifting, so I didn't realize these things could happen. I guess, I'm now a female."

"You aren't bothered by it?" Icasondra asked.

"No, why shouldn't I?" The chimera's wings fluttered slightly.

"Because you were affected before by your lack of... assets," the fairy blushed a bit, "so I thought now you had lost them you would be mad."

"Before, I was a man without the organs of a man," Alta explained. "But now I have shifted into a female with the organs of a female. Why should there be a problem?"

"So, you are telling me you are alright with being a female?" Icasondra asked with much confusion.

"I'm a female, so yes." She explained.

"I... okay, there's no need to inquire more about it." The fairy gave up with a sigh. "But why are you a Blossomflame then? Weren't you going to shift into me?"

"Blossomflame?" Alta asked. "What's that?"

“Alta, look at your wings.” Icasondra pointed at them.

The chimera did as told, and instead of seeing blue fairy wings, she saw two sets of flames acting as wings.

“How curious.” Alta mussitated.

“Don’t you know why you became a Blossomflame fairy instead of a Moonlight like me?”

“No idea at all.” She swayed her head. “Well, perhaps I have some. I tried recreating this ‘magic’ of yours because it would be impossible to fly otherwise with your amount of biomass, so I guess it’s the magic that did this to my body.”

“Magic, huh.” Icasondra said in a pensative tone. “It’s likely because of your alignments.”

“Alignments?” Alta tilted her head to the side, her flame wings fluttering with the same confusion.

“Yes, everyone is Touched by an element. Normally not a lot, but if the levels of affinity to that element are really high, they become Aligned. My guess is that you turned into a Blossomflame fairy because you are Touched or Aligned to certain elements. For example, all Moonlight fairies are at least Touched by Light and Arcane, the Primordial aspects of Moonlight.”

Alta was utterly lost by the words spewed by the fairy, just nodding as if she had understood them. What was Arcane, and what were the Moon and its light? And whilst she could have asked all those questions, only one came to her mind to say aloud.

“What elements am I Aligned to then?”

“Hmm, I have never seen Blossomflame fairies myself, just heard them in stories and you instantly reminded me of them,” Icasondra revealed, “but you can tell the Alignments of fairies by her names. In this case, Blossomflame is a composed word, so two affinities. One related to blossom, and the other to flame. So, if I were to guess them, I’d say Life and Chaos Primordial Alignments.”

Once more, most of the words escaped Alta’s comprehension. She couldn’t understand the concept of chaos, even if some intrinsic knowledge was trying to infiltrate her mind, but she understood Life very well. She felt the energy of the fire coming from her wounds or her back, and that energy was clearly the energy of Life itself.

A desire, an intention, a force that could blossom even surrounded by Death.

“Yes, I’m Life.” Alta acknowledged.

“Well, you aren’t Life, per se. Just Aligned to it.” Icasondra explained. “And even then, we don’t know if you are actually Aligned, you could be simply Touched by it.”

“What’s the difference?” The chimera inquired.

“Em, I don’t know how to explain it...” The Moonlight fairy revealed.

“Useless.” The Blossomflame fairy instantly declared.

“I’m not useless!” Icasondra protested vigorously, her blue wings fluttering rapidly. “I know the difference, but it’s difficult to explain! If I had to say, being Aligned gives you more authority over the element than being Touched.”

Yup, she didn’t understand it.

“And what does this Alignment entail?” Alta was getting more and more confused by the second. If that was the Moonlight fairy’s plan, she had succeeded.

“Besides your race, as it did with your shifting, it affects your magic,” Icasondra explained, finally standing up from her knees. “I don’t know much magic myself, but I can conjure some lights because I’m Touched by Light. And I think your shifting comes from your Alignment. It honestly sounds like something Chaos would do.”

“Chaos, not Life?” Alta said. “I feel more Life than Chaos.”

“I’m no expert in such fields, it would be better to...” Icasondra stopped and gave a scared look at Alta, then continued. “To talk it out with the elder of the village, she most likely will know something about the Primordials.”

“Alright then, what are we waiting for?”

Alta fluttered her wings, trying to lift off the ground but she was too inexperienced to do so.

“Hmm.” The chimera groaned. “How do you fly?”

“You just fly?” Icasondra fluttered her dark blue wings and took to the skies. “If you are a fairy, you know how to fly from birth.” Alta gave her an odious gaze. “Oh, right. Em... I don’t know how to help on this occasion, there’s no ‘fairy flying school’.”

The Blossomflame fairy flayed her wings with more strength, wind gathering up behind her and embers lingering on the air. It wasn’t enough to raise herself from the ground.

How did I do it before? Alta thought. It was... an instinct. Maybe the fairy is right.

Alta stopped moving her wings and took a deep breath. She felt the oxygen flowing through her body, fueling her inner fire, her wings expanding in response. She could feel the magic blossom inside of her.

“Ah.” The fire fairy groaned, flames swaying around as if they had gained a life of their own.

There were no thoughts, only actions.

Alta took to the skies.

She lingered in the air, without moving but flying, nonetheless. The sensation of weightlessness, as if gravity had lost its meaning, was intoxicating.

The wind was dyed by the orange embers, warmth lingering in the surrounding.

That’s what being a Blossomflame means.

Alta felt she was getting closer to understanding what her shifting meant.

The Blossomflame fairy landed after a while, slowly resting her feet on the grass. Her fiery wings decreased in size, no longer fueled by her intention to fly, yet her bloody red hair swayed as if it had become part of the flames.

Flying was tiring, but also incredibly rewarding. She couldn't wait to try her newfound abilities once more.

The Moonlight fairy stood still looking at her once more, though instead of the ground, she lingered suspended in the air. *How does she do it to be immobile in the air? Is this more of the magic she mentioned?*

"Icasondra." Alta said. "Guide me."

The fairy swayed her head slightly. "Of course, please follow me."

Icasondra flew for a few meters as Alta followed her from the ground, but out of nowhere, the fairy stopped and jerked back to the chimera.

"Wait!" She cried in panic. "You are naked! Pick up the cloth you were wearing, we can't have you go around the village naked!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's indecent!"

"And why were you looking at me with such attention before?" Alta asked with true doubts.

"Em... I... Shut up!" Icasondra responded, or failed to do so, with a red visage worthy of a Blossomflame fairy. "Wear the loincloth!"

Alta couldn't understand the inconsistent mind of the Moonlight fairy, but she complied. The chimera took the fabric out of the hips of her old body and tied it up around her torso like a makeshift dress. Being three times as small had made the cloth bigger to her now.

"And help me take the bolt of silk!" Icasondra added behind her.

She turned around to see a blue fairy struggling to pick up the red roll. Alta walked toward her and picked up the bolt, finding it incredibly heavier than before. *That's to be expected, I've lost a lot of biomass.* Nonetheless, she was able to carry the soft fabric on her shoulders without a problem.

"How is it that you can carry the bolt without breaking a sweat if you copied my own body but I can't even drag it?" The Moonlight fairy commented.

In response, the Blossomflame fairy said, "Useless."

11. Village

Icasondra wasn't sure about how she should feel when she was nearby Alta. On one hand, she a graceful fairy that amused her, yet on the other hand, he was a bloodthirsty creature that could kill her in a single heartbeat.

One thing was clear to her, she needed to appeal to her inner fairy, for small and new that may be the feeling to Alta, Icasondra believed that watering those ideas could prevent Alta from massacring everyone in the village.

The chimera in question, or rather, the Blossomflame fairy walked behind her as she was unable to maintain flight for long. Still, she was far stronger than Icasondra, as she was able to move the big bolt of red silk as if it was air.

She felt incredibly nervous, a single misstep could cost her dearly, but hiding her true feeling was the best option. The Moonlight fairy sensed that the chimera could smell the fear in her.

Soon enough, the rays of sunlight became more prevalent as the trees diminished in density. Inside a massive clearing in the forest, the fairy village lay inside. It didn't have a name, not many people visited it, and the inhabitants were few, so there hadn't been any necessity for one.

Even when most of the population was able to fly, walkways connected the houses and the infrastructure of the village. Though instead of cobblestone paths like those of human cities, the pathways of the fairy village were made of tree roots, weaved to give form in the flattest way possible.

Houses weren't that big, as fairies themselves were half the size of a human being. Same with the paths, the houses were made with roots expertly weaved to give a solid structure and an enclosed cottage. Though some fairies disposed of big, hollowed trees for houses instead of handcrafted buildings.

The sight was cozy and familiar, and after the recent events, it filled Icasondra's heart with warmth. Alta didn't share the same enthusiasm, looking neutrally at the village, more of an inspecting gaze than a delighted one. But even then, Icasondra could tell the chimera was somewhat impressed.

"What do you think?" Icasondra asked her, puffing her chest out in pride.

"It beats the prison, that's for sure." Alta nodded.

"Prison?" A frozen shiver traversed Icasondra's back.

"Yes, this place seems more... amicable, though." The chimera didn't elaborate further beyond that statement, but the fairy was elated by the slight compliment.

She needed to take victories where she could, and the fact that Alta wasn't disappointed with the village was a very good sign.

Though the instant the Blossomflame fairy walked toward the center of the village, Icasondra's blood froze.

"Wait!" She shouted. "Follow me."

“Why?” Alta asked a question she couldn’t respond to.

The Moonlight fairy’s mind worked overtime trying to come up with an excuse. She didn’t have the courage to show the chimera to the village yet, she needed a bit more time.

“Em... you... er... your clothes!” Icasondra responded in a flash of inspiration. “We need you to get you better clothing, these rags are awful-looking and will give a bad impression of you to the rest of the fairies. Thankfully for you, my friend is an amazing tailor.” She added with a fake smile. “Come on, follow me!”

“Alright.” The chimera nodded.

Icasondra sighed in relief as she guided Alta through the liminal space between the village and the forest, hiding from possible onlookers. There weren’t any fairies in sight currently, but one could never be sure about who was looking.

Fortunately for her health, the way to her friend’s shop was discrete and fast. No one had seen them, even if the Blossomflame fairy’s wings shone like two torches. She was grateful that the sun had yet to set, and it still overwhelmed the light coming from Alta’s back.

Icasondra knocked on the door nine times, in pulses of three, and soon enough the door opened.

“Icasondra?” A dark-skinned fairy asked. “And who’s she? I don’t recognize her.” The fairy inspected Alta from head to toe.

“It’s kinda a long story, can we enter first though?” The Moonlight fairy explained.

“Of course, I don’t have any clientele, feel yourselves like at home.”

Upon hearing the tailor’s words, Alta let out a slight groan. Icasondra’s heart skipped a beat, then picked up the hand of the chimera and rushed inside her friend’s shop in an attempt to distract the mind of the highly volatile creature.

The door closed behind them, and her friend looked at them. “So what’s this fuzz all about?”

“Aecansomdry, this is Alta,” Icasondra told her friend. “Alta, this is Aecansomdry.”

“Nice to meet you, Alta.” Aecansomdry tended a hand to the chimera as a greeting. Yet she just tilted her head in confusion.

“You are supposed to accept the handshake.” Icasondra whispered to Alta.

“Oh.” The Blossomflame fairy extended her hand and shook hands with her friend. But she didn’t add any presentation and simply nodded.

Well, so far so good. She couldn’t expect everything to go smoothly.

“Alta, Aecansomdry is a Losttime fairy.” Then directed to her friend. “And Alta herself is a Blossomflame fairy.”

“Oh, a Blossomflame!” Aecansomdry undid the handshake and fluttered in excitement, slowly taking off the ground. “We have never had one in the village! And don’t worry about the stories they tell about Losttime fairies, I assure you I’m a good fairy.” The dark-skinned fairy added with a bountiful smile.

“What stories?” Alta asked.

Icasondra stopped breathing for a second and jumped in front of Aecansomdry, putting a hand on her mouth. “Children’s tale, don’t worry about them.”

She couldn’t afford to feed the chimera tales people told about Losttime fairies. Alta would most likely take it as an offense.

“Keep your words to a minimum,” Icasondra whispered to the ears of her friend.

Even without understanding the context, the tailor nodded, trusting her friend’s judgment.

“Well, Aecansomdry,” Icasondra started. “We came here because we need to get Alta a better dress than these drags. Oh, and also undergarments.”

“Undergarments?” The chimera asked.

“I’ll explain to you later.” The Moonlight fairy added. “We have also brought a magnificent bolt of silk, surely it will more than cover for the dress and leave us some money to spare.”

“But of course, I would never send away a customer. Though were did you get t-“
Aecansomdry stopped mid-sentence as she saw Icasondra’s eyes. “Doesn’t matter.”

Then the tailor walked to the bolt of silk, caressed the fabric, and nodded in satisfaction.

“This is good stuff. Sure, I’ll start making the dress this very moment.” The Losttime fairy said. “Though I’ll need to take Alta’s sizes first.”

Icasondra could already feel the Blossomflame fairy tilt her head in confusion.

“Alta, can you take off your clothes...” The next blink the girl was already naked. “...so Aecansomdry can measure your body?”

“Sure.” The naked fairy affirmed.

She’s doing this on purpose, isn’t she? Icasondra thought.

“Oh, what a nice body!” Aecansomdry commented, taking a measuring tape out of nowhere and carefully taking the Blossomflame fairy’s three sizes. “You are incredibly toned, girl.”

“I have strong biomass.” Alta neutrally responded.

“You sure do!” The tailor giggled, not understanding that the chimera was being serious. She also tapped the fairy’s belly. “These are quite serious muscles. I have never seen a fairy with muscles other than on their back.”

“Thanks.” She nodded.

At this point, Icasondra couldn’t tell if the chimera was adapting to the conversation, or if she was truly serious. Then as she saw her friend play with the new-fairy’s body, a doubt sprouted in her mind.

“Isn’t the dress going to burn with those wings?” Icasondra pointed at the leaf-shaped wings blooming into flames.

"I don't think so no," Aecansomdry's responded, not taking her sight away from Alta's body. "I don't know much about Blossomflame fairies, but their wings only should burn if they wish to do so. Much like how Stillwater fairies' wings aren't wet."

That took a weight out of Icasandra's mind as she wouldn't like to have the village set accidentally set on fire after all the troubles she had gone through to keep up the chimera appeased.

"Now, now." The tailor expressed, removing herself from the fairy. "I already have Alta's sizes, so seeing how the silk will be more than enough for materials, I guess I'll have the dress ready for tomorrow morning."

Icasandra's visage turned sour upon hearing her friend, but it was to be expected. One couldn't rush perfection, especially something as important as it was a fairy's dress. At least it wasn't much time at all, so she could hide Alta in her house during that time.

"Alright, I guess I'll take Alta with me and come here tomorrow morning then." The Moonlight fairy replied.

"See you tomorrow!" The tailor added, vanishing on the back shop, already thinking about designs.

"Come on, Alta." Icasandra prompted the red fairy. "Let's go to my home."

"Understood." The chimera did not only follow her commands but also gained some common sense as she wore back the drags.

This will be easier than expected!

12. House

Alta followed the Moonlight fairy through the door. She guided her across the village with a slight feeling of dread as she watched every corner. The curious attitude of the fairy weirded the chimera.

What's she trying to do? Alta pondered. It looks as if she doesn't want more of her fairy comrades to see me, but why? She and the tailor with the weird name said they had never seen a Blossomflame fairy, is that why she is hiding me?

And even if that were to be the case, Alta couldn't comprehend the reasoning behind it.

Icasondra stopped, forcing Alta to do the same. She was looking over a corner and had been doing so for a while, so Alta decided to take a peek. There, over a pond, a fairy was cleaning herself with water. Unlike the previous two other fairies Alta had seen, this one was a male, and he was obviously naked.

Alta's eyes were drawn to the fairy's wings. She hadn't failed to notice that every fairy she had seen had different sets of wings. Icasondra had luminous wings with dark blues and blacks, whilst her wings were leaf-shaped flames oscillating between reds and oranges.

The fairy before them had a waterier touch to his wings. The shape was the same as Icasondra's and the weirdly named fairy, but it had more in common with the former. Unlike herself or the tailor, the male fairy's wings were translucent like Icasondra's. Though his were bordering transparent rather than translucent and had a slight light blue tinge to them.

The other fairy, Aecasomerys, or however she was called, had a more interesting set of wings. With a shape similar to these two, but with more pronounced colors. A bronze-like orange on the borders of the wings flowed like wind, and in the center of each section of the wing lay a deep black that seemed to consume the orange in a spiraling way but never managed to do so.

The Losttime fairy's wings had been interesting, but Alta's were better, of course.

After her extended moment of ponderation, Alta noticed that Icasondra's face had gained a red tinge similar to her Blossomflame wings.

"Why are you spying on that man?" Alta whispered.

"Ah!" Icasondra jumped with a pitched scream. "Don't do that! You scared me."

"Understood." Alta nodded. "Why are you spying on that man?"

The red colors on the Moonlight fairy's face became more accentuated and brighter.

"I'm not spying on him!" She shouted in a whispering tone. "That would be indecent!"

"Then why were you looking at him for so long?" Alta counterattacked.

"Because I'm waiting for him to go away so we can go to my home!" The fairy continued her low shout, making up excuses.

"Wouldn't it be easier to take another route then?" The chimera offered her opinion.

"Oh," Icasondra added with a baffled expression. "Right, yes. That could work..."

That reaction reinforced Alta's theory on whether the Moonlight fairy was spying on the naked fairy or not.

With a hardened (and redder) expression, Icasondra guided the chimera behind a house. The house was bigger than most, but it wasn't their destination as the Moonlight fairy passed by it. Instead, she walked towards a tree and looked up.

"That's my house." Icasondra pointed up, a collection of vines, branches, and even roots gathered in what, indeed, appeared to be a cottage.

"Why is it up on the trees?" It seemed highly impractical to the new-fairy.

"Because I'm a Moonlight fairy, and I need to bathe in the moonlight the most I can." The senior fairy explained.

"By the way, what's moonlight?"

"You'll see it soon enough, don't worry about that. For now, fly up there." She signaled with a slight movement of her head at the house embedded in the tree. "I'll be waiting for you up there!"

Then she flew upwards to her home. Alta frowned her brows as she didn't believe herself capable of flying those distances. The house was well over five meters up on the trees, and she hadn't even elevated a single meter in her previous try.

With a jump, Alta tried to elevate herself to the skies, but her body fell down as usual. The violent fluttering of her wings did slow the fall, but it was barely noticeable.

"Argh!" The Blossomflame grunted, feeling frustration for the first time in her life.

Everything she had done had come to her naturally, even the traits of other species. She could adapt herself to any environment, it was easier when she assimilated the biomass of the inhabitants. But currently, Alta was unable to fly.

And that frustrated her.

Being incapable of replicating the movements of Icasondra, she decided for the easy way out, shifting biomass into her skinny legs, turning them worryingly muscular, and making a jump that shoot her body three meters upwards.

She fell two meters short of the house, but with a fast flapping of her legs, Alta maintained her altitude and slowly directed herself to the tree. The chimera grabbed a branch and climbed on top of it. Then she repeated the same motion.

The next jump was unstable and gave her less high, but barely enough to cling to the house embedded into the tree. She looked down to see the fallen leaves telling the story of her violent jump.

Alta gasped and entered Icasondra's house, not lingering on the disastrous obstacle course she had completed.

The Moonlight's fairy was astonishing, far more than the tailor's house or the outside of the village. It was decorated with vines and leaves on the exterior, but the interior was something else. Multiple pieces of blue fabric in concordance with the fairy's own colors decorated the

place. A myriad of shades of blue, not one truly repeating. Light blue, dark blue, teal, azure, turquoise...

Intrinsic knowledge filled the chimera's mind.

Though in this case, it was more trivial than on other occasions. She wasn't really interested in color theory.

The fairy's house also was decorated with pieces of wood, carved and crafted with a fine hand. Alta didn't know why, but she knew those were some good pieces, fine work.

Icasondra waited in another room, her long-tailed teal dress exchanged for a sleeveless white dressing gown, and she had also tied her long platinum hair into a ponytail.

"What are you doing?" Alta asked the fairy with the guard down.

"Oh, you are already here?" Icasondra slightly turned her head toward Alta but kept her body in place. "I'm cooking, of course."

"What's cooking?"

"Well, I'm doing some fried blueberries." She responded.

"No." Alta swayed her head. "I meant what cooking means?"

"You don't even know that?" The chimera swayed her head once more. The Moonlight fairy sighed. "It means to prepare food, normally by heating it."

"You don't eat it raw?"

"I mean, there are some foods you can eat raw. Nothing will happen if you eat some wild blueberries, but they are certainly more delicious when cooked, especially with my secret recipe." The fairy gave a twirl to the metallic tool in her hands.

"Why does it matter food tastes?" Alta was confused. "Nutrients are nutrients."

"Oh, sweet summer child, haven't you had a good meal in your life?"

"I'm no daughter of any Sweet Summer, but I have never been worried about the taste of my meals." She confessed. "Meals were hard to get on the prison, so I appreciated every single one."

"Oh." This groan wasn't of surprise like the one before but filled with sadness. "Then you'll definitely enjoy what I'm making now!"

Icasondra gave her a smile, which she found warm. Somehow.

"Now, go to the living room." She pointed with her head to the door Alta had come from, already knowing the chimera wouldn't know what living room meant. "I'll come in a while with our dinner, you just take a rest. You deserve it."

13. Moonlight

Alta waited for Icasondra to come with the meal. She didn't feel hungry, she had never truly felt hunger, but she knew that existed. The chimera could only detect the lack of biomass, but she had never been threatened with death by a severe lack of it.

The fairy came over the door with two hot plates in her hands and then left them on top of a slab of wood.

"What are you doing standing up?" Icasondra asked with a frown.

"Waiting?" Alta returned the gesture.

"And why are you waiting on your feet and not in the chair?"

"Because I didn't know?" She tilted her head to the side.

"Augh, you are incorrigible." The Moonlight fairy groaned. "Sit down on the stool and wait for me to also bring the glasses. And don't eat until I come back!" The last part was added after she had already banished through the door.

Alta sat down on the tall and circular carving of wood, or stool as Icasondra had called it. It made sense that she didn't possess any seats with backs, as it would be impossible for a fairy to rest her back.

The chimera looked down at the steaming plate. It was a weird viscous liquid of a blue color. It looked as if someone had beaten one of the rodents to a pulp. *It should taste good then.* She thought.

Icasondra came back an instant later with transparent cylinders and wooden pieces. Alta inspected them with childlike curiosity as the fairy lay them on the slab of wood.

"These are glasses filled with water," Icasondra explained pointing at the cylinders, "and these are spoons." She then pointed at the carved pieces of wood. "They are used to eat."

"Why?" Alta asked. "Why just use your hands?"

"Well, some foods are messy, and this one is hot, so it's better to use tools," Icasondra explained.

As if trying to state a point, Alta put her finger on the blue viscous substances, absorbing the meal into her body. The fairy frowned as she saw the contents of the plate slowly being drained.

"Stop." She spoke. "Do you really eat like that?"

"Yes?" Alta tilted her head, not understanding the question.

"So, you've never used your mouth to eat?" Alta maintained her head tilted and Icasondra sighed. "Look, this is how you eat."

The Moonlight fairy picked up the spoon and dived it down into the plate. Once the spoon was full, she retired it from the plate and blew on it, pushing the steam away. Finally, after the complicated set of motions, she led the food to her mouth and pushed it down her throat.

“Do you get it?” Icasondra asked after having consumed the spoonful.

Alta nodded and repeated the same motions as she did. But this time, as the meal entered the chimera’s mouth, her visage shifted in surprise.

“Is it good?” The fairy asked with a smile on her face.

The Blossomflame nodded vigorously and shoved one more spoonful into her mouth, only then she spoke.

“I... I didn’t know meals could taste... good.” Her words lingered with hints of confusion and amazement at the taste.

“Well, I am a good cook myself, if I say so,” Icasondra added pompously. “So not all meals, specially prepared for other people, will taste as good as mine.”

“I see.” Alta nodded and then led the spoon to the glass.

“Wait, wait, wait.” The Moonlight fairy said in quick succession. “What are you doing?”

“Eating the water?” The Blossomflame fairy responded, now unsure of her actions.

“You don’t eat water, you drink it!” She exclaimed. “Like this.”

She grabbed the glass with her thin and fragile hands and led it to her mouth, where she slowly downed the contents down her throat.

“Have you never water in your life?” Icasondra left the glass on the table.

“No.” Alta swayed her head. “I have absorbed blood a few times, but it has been through my body, never with my mouth.”

“Try it then.” Her smile trembled with a hint of fear and repulsion.

Alta did so and put the glass on her lips, downing the water. She frowned, surprised by the different taste compared to the meal.

“It doesn’t taste like anything.” The chimera said.

“Well, water isn’t supposed to be a meal out and in of itself, but a thing we have to consume to live,” Icasondra explained. “I guess you could add taste to the water with some fruits, or directly make a juice, though.”

Life again. If normal creatures didn’t eat or drink, they would die, but that didn’t happen with Alta. She didn’t understand why she was different. Was it because of her status as a chimera, or was it something else?

The rest of the eating session, or dinner as Icasondra had called it, continued with the fairy telling Alta words she didn’t know. The chimera pointed at an item and Icasondra would respond with the name.

She was actually surprised to find that EVERYTHING had a name. It wasn’t just variations of a name or compositions of two names, but most things had their own name. Why bother with that many words?

Nonetheless, Alta memorized them.

It wasn't a fabric hanging around, it was a curtain. It wasn't a squared piece of ovulated fabric, but a pillow. And it wasn't a slate of wood, but a table.

Learning new words felt like something that should be tedious and draining, yet Alta felt more clear-headed and enthusiastic than ever.

"Hmm, we should get you some clothes," Icaondra commented after they finished eating.

"Hadn't we already done that with that Aecanosomris woman?"

"Aecansomdryes." The fairy corrected. "And well, yes. But I only commissioned her only a dress, meant to be worn outside. I was referring to clothes for indoors, like my gown." She pointed at her white fluffy dress.

"Then why don't we go back to that Aecansomdryes," Alta asked.

"It's too late, I'm afraid," Icaondra responded, Alta herself ignoring why she was always scared of menial things. "The shop will be already closed, and she's already occupied with your dress. But I guess I could lend you a spare dressing gown night. You'll dirty everything with those rags."

"Alright." Alta nodded, though a new thought intruded her head. "What about undergarments?"

"What?" The fairy said by reflex.

"Undergarments." The chimera reiterated. "You said in the shop that we should get some undergarments for me, whatever those are."

"The undergarments!" Icaondra jumped out of the stool in realization, slightly hovering in the air. "I totally forgot about them!"

"What are they, either way?" Alta asked.

"Em... well..." The Moonlight fairy regained the red color more characteristic of a Blossomflame fairy. "Those are the clothes that you wear... well, under your garments."

"Can't you lend me a spare like with the gown then?" Alta suggested.

The red coloration of the woman's visage accentuated even further, flaring like a fire.

"No!" She denied it with a slap to the table.

"Why?" The chimera inquired.

"Be-because that would indecent!" Icaondra led her hands to her face, occulting her visage under the extended palms.

"Then why should I have undergarments, to begin with?" Alta remained with a composed tone.

"Because that would also be indecent!" The fairy protested, raising her hands into the air in exasperation.

"But I have been all this time without undergarments?" The chimera was wholeheartedly confused against the Moonlight fairy arguments.

“Yes, but... it’s like the lesser indecentment.” Icasondra responded unsure of her words.

Alta didn’t know many words, especially complex ones. But she had that instinctual feeling that ‘indecentment’ wasn’t a word. But she couldn’t understand what the fairy had meant by it. *Weird*.

“It doesn’t matter!” Icasondra gave up. “Let’s stop talking about undergarments and let’s focus on something more important.

“And what that may be?” Alta genuinely asked.

“The moons, but of course.” She responded with a smile; the red vanished from her face. “Follow me.”

The fairy guided her through a set of stairs, even if she was flying there and Alta had to walk. Icasondra had taken her to a room with fewer walls and more natural light, yet the room was dark.

That’s when Alta noticed that she could no longer see the colossal ball of fire that was called the sun. The skies had turned black from their light blue, the temperature had decreased, and the ambient light was far lower. She had been so concentrated on their conversation that she hadn’t acknowledged the change before.

The room in question had a circular opening on the ceiling made with a transparent substance, which her brain translated into glass. Then her brain translated opening into window, and finally, into skylight.

In the skylight, vaguely obstructed by leaves that had become as dark as the skies, a series of three dots shone in the sky. They were arranged in a perfect equilateral triangle, and every vertex of the triangle, a moon each, was of a different color. White, light blue, and lilac.

“What do you think?” The Moonlight fairy asked, herself shining all of a sudden as she canalized the three celestial bodies’ lights into her. Her portentous silhouette had shifted into something more majestic, more mystical.

“It’s...” The Blossomflame fairy couldn’t find the right words, but she felt something inside of her. A good feeling. “It’s beautiful.”

It was happiness. Not quenched bloodthirst or satisfied lust for knowledge, but unadulterated happiness as she looked at the three colorful figures shining in the sky.

And it was good.

14. Breakfast

The first rays of sunlight caressed Icasondra's face with a warm touch. That was one of the problems of sleeping in a mostly open bedroom to take in as much moonlight as possible, the sun was ruthless when nighttime was over.

"Aww~" She let out a pleasurable groan as she stretched her arms.

Her body felt sore yet relaxed, yesterday had been the most eventful day in her life. It wasn't surprising at all because in this remote village, who no one had bothered to name, didn't occur many things. And getting kidnapped only to then be saved by a bloodthirsty shapeshifting creature was something unusual, to say the least.

Once she rubbed her eyes out of their sleepiness, she finally opened them, instantly blushing at the sight.

Alta was sleeping at her side, her lent dressing gown mostly removed, revealing her half-naked body. Yet that wasn't what had made Icasondra redden. No, her visage was flushed with blood because the Blossomflame fairy was curled next to her and remembered doing the same.

How can I be so naïve and stupid? She kept the words to herself, fearing she might awaken the chimera. *She's walking catastrophe and I slept at her side!* The Moonlight fairy could only be grateful that she woke up in one piece, or even awakened at all.

Icasondra took another look at the sleeping Alta. The powerful and violent chimera was defenseless in her sleep, but even in that state, Icasondra knew she had no hope of defeating her. Alta would need a single blink to decimate her, just like she had done with the two humans.

And yet, as she remembered the gruesome sight, Icasondra could not help but think of how cute the Blossomflame fairy looked in her sleep.

Cute? She exclaimed alerted.

She's a monster! The fairy discussed with herself.

But a cute monster~ Her mind sang. *Just look at that round face, the long and fiery hair, the peculiar wings unlike most fairies in the village, and those unprotected legs without anything covering them. Not even un-*

"Stop!" Icasondra grabbed her head and thrashed it around. "Bad Icasondra, bad!"

Instants later, the fiery fairy retorted on the bedsheets and raised up with a tired look.

"Oh... sorry." The Moonlight fairy apologized, blushing even harder after making a fool of herself. If fortune was on her side, Alta wouldn't have heard her.

"Night's over?" The chimera asked in a groggily stupor.

"Yes," Icasondra said jumping out of the circular bed. "The sun has come out and a new day is upon us!"

"I see." Alta expressed literally as she looked directly at the sun over the windows.

"You... you should look that close to the sun," Icasondra added doubtfully.

“Why?” The chimera responded with her usual tilt of head.

“Because it can blind you.” The fairy almost rolled her eyes, but then remembered Alta wasn’t aware of that simple fact.

“Oh.” Alta removed her eyes from the star in the skies and blinked repeatedly. “That would be bad.”

“Yes. Yes, it would be.” Icasondra nodded in affirmation.

As the Blossomflame stood up from the bed, the dressing gown barely holding into her body, Icasondra turned her gaze to the side, a hint of embarrassment resurging in her visage.

“Can you go down?” She asked. “I would like to change.”

Alta blinked twice in confusion, but promptly nodded, understating that Icasondra wasn’t comfortable with her looking. *She may tell that she’s a female, but until yesterday she was a male. One can’t just change their gender.* The fairy’s mouth fell a bit, trying to mussitate some words but didn’t. *But Alta can. She can truly shift into anything, even other races’ magic...*

Being deeply invested in her thoughts, Icasondra hadn’t realized that the chimera had already left for the living room. With a sigh, she dropped her dressing gown to the floor and stood inside her closet room.

She didn’t possess many clothes or any other trinkets to wear, but her house was big enough to accommodate luxurious and needless utilities like closet rooms. She donned another dress, identical to the turquoise one she had been wearing yesterday, but cleaner, as this one hadn’t had to undergo the same perils.

Besides her dressing gowns, dresses, and work clothes, only a pair of boots and her undergarments remained in the closet. And she only used the boots when it rained or had to help in the village. Fairies liked to have their feet au nature, as they seldom touched the ground.

She didn’t possess any talents like Aecansomdryes, so she didn’t have a job per se. That’s why she was so enthusiastic to get the bolt of silk to the village. Unlike Stillwater and Rootweaver fairies, she couldn’t help the community. Moonlight fairies could only make illusions, and she wasn’t especially powerful. She did some party tricks and was the organizer for the festivities of the village, but that job wasn’t exactly glamorous or important.

At least I’m not a leech, Icasondra stretched her tense wings, feeding her self-deprecation.

After getting dressed, she picked up the dressing gown and dropped it into the laundry basket with yesterday’s dress. She would have to bring the basket to a Stillwater fairy soon.

Icasondra got down and saw Alta who was sitting down before the table.

“I’ll make ourselves some breakfast and then we’ll go to Aecansomdryes’ shop.”

“What’s breakfast?” Obviously, the chimera didn’t know the word.

“It’s the first food of the day.” *Hmm, no that’s wrong.* “It’s the food you have when the sun has out but it’s still a long while from noon.” She corrected and went to the kitchen.

Icasondra herself loved blueberries and could eat them every single day and meal, but she thought it may be a bit abusive to feed only that to Alta, so she switched with some loaves of bread and jam...

"There's no jam!" She screamed horrified, looking at the empty cupboard.

"Is something wrong?" Alta suddenly appeared from the kitchen door, having rushed after hearing her cries.

"Em, no don't worry about it," Icasondra confessed. "I've just noticed I'm out of ingredients, we'll have to go to buy after picking up your dress. Go back to the table, I'll bring some pieces of fruit."

"Okay." And the chimera disappeared away from the door.

But bringing only a piece of fruit would be lame... The Moonlight fairy was presented with a conundrum, but as she had nothing more than bread and fruits (and you don't mix bread and fresh fruits) she had to do something else. So she cut some oranges and squeezed them into juice. *Still fruit, but with a better presentation.*

She brought to the table a bowl full of emerald-like grapes and two glasses of orange juice, then explained that to Alta.

"Hmm..." The chimera expressed with exuberant delight. "I love the crunchy feeling of these grapes." And as she said that, she pressed another one on her teeth, violently popping.

Brief imagery of the chimera gnawing on teeth flashed through Icasondra's mind, the thought making her ill. But she quickly moved away from such imaginations. She understood that Alta wouldn't kill her now, at least if she maintained the status quo, but the visceral carnage she had committed when she had saved her... it lingered on her mind. And it weighed down on her.

Positive thoughts, Icasondra. Positive thoughts. She told herself. *Aren't you a fairy? Aren't you supposed to be always happy?* That was a superstition the humans commonly believed in, and it wasn't outright wrong, though the ever-happy fae weren't the fairies, but the pixies.

It didn't take the two fairies a lot of time to finish the scarce breakfast. Icasondra was on autopilot, going directly to the outside door, only interrupted when she saw Alta grab her rags.

"What are you doing?" She asked alarmed.

"Wearing my clothes?" Alta tilted her head to the left.

"Those aren't clothes!" Icasondra explained. "Just dirty fabric! For the love of the Lunar Triumvirate, just wear the dressing gown."

"Didn't you say those were inside clothes?" The chimera asked. "And we are going outside."

"Well, yes..." She had said those words... "We can make an exception, I guess. They are far better than those tattered rags."

"Okay." Alta nodded and dropped the dirty fabric to the ground.

"Alright, follow me to Aecansomdry's!" And the Blossomflame obeyed.

Last time they didn't encounter many fairies outside because it was relatively late, now though, the early birds that were the fairies, walked (or rather, flew) across the village.

With great care, she guided Alta away from the eyes of the fairies.

"Why are we hiding?" She asked.

"Em..." It was difficult to answer. She couldn't tell Alta that she wasn't mentally prepared to show her to the village. "Well, we are waiting for you to get your dress, and showing yourself with that gown would be..."

"Indecent?" The chimera completed Icasandra's phrase.

"Exactly!" The Moonlight fairy nodded vehemently, giving the Blossomflame fairy the reason.

I mean, there are far more indecent things, though...

Anyways, Icasandra had hidden them partially with her innate illusions. It wasn't anything powerful, but it would make them harder to stand out. They were so weak that not even the incredibly sensitive chimera seemed to detect them.

In a matter of minutes, they had arrived at Aecansomdry's Perfect Snips, as her friend had lovingly called her shop.

15. Dress

The bell on the door announced their entrance with the tolling.

"Aecansomdry, you there?" Icasandra asked, the door closing behind her.

"Back here!" The tailor cried from the back store. "Give me a minute and I'll be with you, make yourselves comfortable!"

"Well, you heard her, let's take a seat." Alta nodded at her words and the two fairies sat on the stools in the hall of the shop.

The chimera moved her head from side to side, inspecting the mannequins and the exhibited clothes.

"Aecansomdry isn't a tailor for the sake of money, it's her true passion," Icasandra explained to the wondering fairy. "She'll be occupied every single minute of the day sewing, all the clothes of the village come from her."

"What's a Losttime fairy?" Alta asked out of nowhere.

"Where did you get that information from?" The Moonlight fairy responded in a panicked manner.

"Aecansomdry." The Blossomflame fairy said, finally saying her friend's name correctly. "She presented herself as such yesterday."

"Oh, right." Icasandra had forgotten about that.

"Why does that disturb you?" Alta inspected her with inquiring eyes.

"Disturb? No one's disturbed here, I don't know what you mean..." She added a laugh at the end. "Well, the truth is that there are some troubling stories about Losttime fairies, they are not true, by any means, but I didn't want you to have the wrong idea about Aecansomdry."

"What do those stories say?"

"It's better if you don't hear them." In response, Alta looked at her intensely. "Alright, alright!" She gave up instantly. "But they are mostly untrue, whatever comes from my mouth isn't meant to be taken seriously."

"Understood." The chimera nodded.

Icasandra stretched her hanging legs, her turquoise dress falling to the side, and took a deep breath.

"Fairies, as a whole, aren't really destructive." She started. "Most of us are related to Life or Light, so we are rather inclined to creation and protection, but there are some that are born... otherwise."

Her sweet smile was tainted by a hint of pain.

"Aecansomdry is a Losttime fairy, meaning that she's of Void and Time. Whilst Time is neutrally inclined, Void is the most destructive of the Primordial elements. So that makes the combination of her race destructively inclined." The Moonlight fairy narrated with a lethargic

expression. "And even if Aecansomdry is a tailor, a job which is strictly constructive, that destructive stigma of Void will always be present in her life."

Sorrow filled the fairy's expression.

"I'm a Moonlight fairy, of Arcane and Light, I'm constructively inclined. Even if I can't make anything myself..." She let out a dry chuckle. "What I meant to say is that our elements don't matter, we may be Touched or Aligned, but that doesn't define us!"

"I understand." Alta nodded. "But what are the stories about Losttime fairies? I know that you are stalling."

"Well, that was actually the hard part, you needed a bit of context first," Icasondra confessed. "Because Losttime fairies are destructively inclined, other races whisper stories about how they take the time of other people, blaming them for their lapses in memory and the lost hours they cannot recall."

"And?" The Blossomflame fairy tilted her head.

"That's it, I really meant it when I told you you didn't need to know." The Moonlight fairy fluttered her wings and jumped off the stool. "I just hate that people think that Aecansomdry is an evil creature that will steal their lives when she's the sweetest fairy in the world!" She shouted in indignation.

"I see." The chimera's visage remained inexpressive. "Are there stories about Blossomflame fairies?"

Icasondra looked at Alta for a pregnant second. She didn't know if she should be mad or happy about the woman's reaction. On one hand, it was nice she wouldn't judge her friend by senseless superstitions, but on the other hand... she hadn't paid attention to her story, hadn't she?

"Erm, well I suppose." Icasondra acknowledged. "I don't know any stories of them, as there aren't any in the village, I just heard they existed."

"Nothing at all?" Alta inquired. "You must have heard something if you know them."

"Well, it's said that Blossomflame fairies can spurt life out of their flames, but you can never trust stories related to fairies. They will be more fantasy than reality."

"And Moonlight fairies?"

"We are simple fairies, and somewhat common." She explained. "We have minor illusion powers, but we are technically keepers of Order of reality, but that's a title rather than an actual ability. We are on the weaker side of fairies, truth be told. And we aren't that useful..." The last part was spoken from Icasondra's inferiority complex.

"You are useful," Alta told. "I wouldn't know many things if it weren't for you."

"Thanks." She added in an almost unintelligible whisper, her ears gaining a shade of pink.

"Hmm..." The chimera meditated loudly. "How many fairies are even there?"

"I'd say that there's not a limit," Icasondra explained after recovering. "Both Rootweaver and Dreamsong fairies are of Life and Information, so there's no limitation in the reuse of

elements. And besides, when fairies have... children, they will normally be one of either parent's type, but they could birth a completely new fairy type."

"How do fairies have children?" Alta asked with an innocent tone.

"Um, well, you know..." Icasondra's brain short-circuited, steam coming out of her ears, trying to mesh her thoughts into a coherent sentence, yet her imagination was filled with lewd imagery.

"I think she's toying with you, Icasondra." A new voice joined the conversation.

"Really?" The Moonlight fairy looked at the dark-skinned fairy's grinning face and then shifted to look at the inexpressive fiery fairy. "I think she's being serious, Aecansomdry's."

"Truly?" The Losttime fairy also put her eyes on the Blossomflame fairy. "Huh, you may be right. Anyways, this is no time to talk about babymaking. She needs to try her need dress!"

Following her scream, Aecansomdry's showed a one-piece red dress, a smug expression on her face.

"To make this little girl I used a few of the roots the Rootweavers gave me because she's a Blossomflame so I thought given her dress a floral leitmotif."

"Leitmotif, isn't that a musical term?" Icasondra asked in confusion.

"Oh, yeah," Aecansomdry's admitted. "I think I didn't use it correctly. Oh well, I should spend less time around Dreamsongs. But for now, Alta, try it! I want to see you wear this little girl!"

"Understood." Alta stood from her stool and dropped her dressing gown to the ground.

"Oh my." Aecansomdry's gasped.

"Alta!" Icasondra shouted. "You can't do that!"

"But she said I had to wear the dress," Alta replied, her bare glory flaming before the fairies.

"But not before us! That's indecent!" The Moonlight fairy violently stepped on the floor as she spoke.

"Talk about yourself, this is quite a sight." The Losttime fairy chuckled.

"Aecansomdry's!" Icasondra directed her rage at her.

Then instantly blushed as she remembered that Alta's body was a perfect copy of hers. That kicked her brain into overdrive, picking Alta's hand and the new dress and furiously guiding her to one of the dressing rooms in the shop.

"Don't come out until you are changed!"

"Understood." Alta's muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

"By the way, why was she fully naked?" Aecansomdry's asked, resting her head on her palm.

"The undergarments!" Icasondra realized. "Not again!"

"Your brain is lightheaded as always." The tailor laughed. "Alta, wait a minute, don't dress up yet, you need to put on the panties."

“What are panties?” The Blossomflame fairy cried from the dressing room.

“Undergarments, as this lewd fairy calls them.” Having insulted Icasandra, Aecansomdryes went her merry way into the back store.

Me, lewd? The Moonlight fairy was taken aback. *I’m the unlewdest person to ever exist! I’m of Light, I am purity itself!* Though she kept the discussion to herself.

The tailor didn’t even need a minute and brought with herself simple white panties. She opened the door and Alta picked up the piece of clothing.

Fairies needed to protect her private parts, it was only logical because their clothes had to be designed as open as possible thanks to their massive wings, in proportion to their size.

“Done,” Alta said.

“Alright, then show us your style!” Aecansomdryes said with enthusiasm, salivating to see the fairy in her new attire.

And her expectation was justified.

As the door from the dressing room opened, the two fairies were able to see the finally clothed Blossomflame fairy. Her dress was red as her hair, yet the fabric had been adjusted so the ends of the dress took the same leaf-like shape of her wings. Aecansomdryes hadn’t lied about giving floral undertones to the dress, as it was tied to the body with dried roots that only exacerbated the color.

Alta, the Blossomflame fairy, seemed an incarnation of Life, fire, and autumn.

The red dress was slightly swayed by the flapping of Alta’s wings, and whilst the practically newborn fairy was unable to take flight, the wind created by the fluttering swayed her red hair and dress mystically.

Icasandra was reminded of how Alta had shifted into a fairy for the first time yesterday, and she only had the same thought.

“You are gorgeous!” Though her friend stole the words from her mouth.

16. Market

“You are gorgeous!” Aecansomdry, the Losttime fairy shouted and lunged at Alta. “Oh, you are a little precious cute fairy.”

The dark-skinned woman rubbed her face against Alta’s with fervent passion, as if she had been enchanted by her. Meanwhile, Alta’s expression shifted between the thin line of impassivity and uncomfortable.

“You’ve rubbed yourself enough against Alta,” Icasandra shouted and removed the tailor from the chimera. “Look at her, you are annoying her.”

“What do you mean?” Aecansomdry smiled, her white teeth shining in contrast against her skin. “She loves it!”

Then decided to take a look at the Blossomflame fairy. Alta was stuck between a frown and pout, but overall, an expression of disgust.

“Alright, maybe she doesn’t like it. But look at her, she’s so cute when annoyed!”

Alta was confused.

The fairy was overflowing with happiness because she was bothering her. Alta could understand the happiness of a successful hunt or a good meal, but happiness out of bothering others? It was illogical.

Icasandra tried to hide her expression, and whilst she had succeeded, Alta could smell the fear. One thing she had found out, is that the Moonlight fairy scared easily, and also was incredibly indecent by her very own standards.

After a long ponderation, Alta decided to flare the flames on her back. That got a reaction out of the fairies as they backpedaled.

“Okay, no more snuggling. Roger that.” Aecansomdry quickly said. “But on a more serious note, we have to talk about money, Icasandra and I.”

Aecansomdry walked behind the counter and looked at a light brown paper.

“The silk was expensive and of good quality so that already covers any expenses the dress and other clothing may have supposed.” She explained while reading. “But there’s still a quite significant amount of money left, so here you have it.”

The tailor dropped a heavy bag on the counter, impacting with a loud thug followed by several smaller metallic clings. Icasandra flew toward the counter and opened the bag.

“Oh, wow.” Her eyes shot wide open. “This is too much...”

“Nonsense,” Aecansomdry replied. “I’m only paying you the price of the bolt minus expenses; it was just that good. And besides, the dress was quite simple, in comparison, yours gave me headaches to imprint the lunar essence onto the fabric.”

“But it can be this much, no matter how good the silk was...” The Moonlight fairy was truly left speechless.

Alta couldn't comprehend the commotion. She went next to Icasandra and looked inside the bag, but she only saw grey and yellow cylinders inside. *Are they really valuable?* The chimera pondered, not understanding the value of money.

"Nah," Aecansomdry's negated.

For an instant, Alta thought the Losttime fairy had read her mind, but she was only replying to Icasandra's statement.

"You just aren't used to money, girl." The tailor added with a knowing smug. "Now that you finally have some coins under your name, how 'bout you go to the market and buy something? You have to maintain another mouth, haven't you?"

"I... thank you." Icasandra slightly bowed.

This interaction was strange for the Blossomflame fairy. She didn't understand much of the concept of money, but apparently, it was used for equivalent exchanges, so why was Icasandra so thankful, even on the verge of tears, when the exchange had been fair and all associated parties had won?

Truly strange. Alta looked at the dark-skinned orange-winged fairy and the clear-skinned blue-winged fairy with confusion, unable to discern hidden meanings.

"I guess I will take Alta to the market now, then." Icasandra wiped her humid eyes with her arm.

"Sure!" Aecansomdry's smiled at her. "Come back whenever you like. You too, Alta!"

The chimera nodded solemnly, and the not-weeping fairy bowed down.

Once they were out of the shop, Icasandra took a deep breath, almost scaring Alta with the sudden movement. She took more air into her lungs than it should be possible for her petite body, and then took even more time to expel it out.

"Alright," she nodded, "do you want to see the village and other fairies?"

"Sure," Alta repeated the expression the tailor had used, albeit with a lack of the joyful mannerisms of the Losttime fairy.

Icasandra guided Alta straight into the village, no more detours. The Blossomflame fairy followed the flying Moonlight fairy on foot, walking on the uncomfortable root streets. *Why not have just dirt instead of hard roots?* It seemed downright stupid to the chimera. Then she remembered fairies didn't walk much.

Two other fairies passed beside them in a hurry, and whilst they gave Alta a wonderous look, they didn't linger on it and went their way.

"Why did they look at me like that?" Alta asked her guide.

"There are a lot of reasons," Icasandra explained without stopping. "You are a newcomer, you are of a fairy type they have never seen, and you aren't flying."

"Huh," The chimera grunted in realization. "I guess you are right."

The village wasn't very big, certainly not as expansive as the seemingly endless prison, it had around fifty grounded houses like Aecansomdry's shop, and a handful more like Icasondra's tree house.

Alta fluttered her wings, not in order to fly, but to get used to them. Perhaps it was because of the magic she had copied, but she was unable to use the new appendices with the same instant dexterity she had with the hunter's eyes, the rodent's claws, or the warden's muscles.

As she had done with words, she would need to learn to use her wings before flying.

It took them less time than she had expected to go to this 'market'. But it was to be expected as they no longer were hiding from other fairies, instead walking in a straight line, or the most straight these sinuous walkways allowed them.

"What do you do at a market?" Alta asked.

"You exchange products for money," Icasondra replied. "I normally use it to buy food."

"So you don't hunt?"

"Moons, no." She chuckled. "I would not be capable of hurting critters for food, and either way, I mostly eat fruits and vegetables so it would be foraging rather than hunting.

Foraging: hunting the immobile plants on the ground or trees. The chimera thought.

"But where's the fun and thrill of the hunt then?"

"Em..." The fairy stopped in midair. "Well... I eat to survive, not for entertainment, so I'm bothered by the lack of... *fun*."

"I see." It was curious to learn the difference between their lifestyles. Fairies were prey, whilst she was a hunter.

"Anyways..." Icasondra lingered on that word. "Welcome to the market!"

Behind the fairy of dark blue wings, an avenue with plentiful and colorful fabrics lay.

"Follow me, I'm going to buy some jam and other fruits so we have food for the coming days." She explained and the chimera complied.

The market wasn't filled with people, but some fairies sat on stools behind the products they were offering. Some sold wood-based products, like the furniture from Icasondra's house, but in that repertoire, they added other trinkets that the chimera couldn't recognize. They stopped before one fairy that sold fruits and... *Glasses?* Alta thought dumbfounded.

"Oh, if it's you Icasondra!" The male fairy at the stool greeted them. "Who's your accompany?"

"She's Alta, a Blossomflame fairy." She explained.

Alta inspected the male fairy. He was fat and weak looking, not what she would expect from a male of the herd. He wore a green open shirt and brown pants. His wings were also different from the ones Alta had seen before. They were made of the same roots that composed the village's houses and roads. The shape was similar to other fairies, butterfly-shaped as Icasondra had explained to her, but they looked infinitely heavier than the intangible wings of other fairies.

“Akorodei, Rootweaver fairy as you can see, and the best jam-maker of the village.” He offered Alta a hand.

Now she knew what that meant and accepted the handshake.

“Is that what those things are?” Alta pointed at the glasses on display.

“Of course. Tars of the sweetest and most delicious jam.” Akorodei smiled. “Right, Icasandra?”

But the Moonlight fairy didn’t respond, her sights fixated on a figure in the background. Alta instantly recognized the twice-as-tall-than-fairies figure as a human, like the ones she had killed yesterday.

“Something wrong?” The jam-maker asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Icasandra finally responded. “I just thought it was weird to see a human here.”

“Ye, I thought that too,” Akorodei confirmed. “But that bloke is a nice one. A traveling merchant that offered me some human jams, though his accompany was more peculiar.”

“He was with someone?” Icasandra added with surprise.

“Yes, did you know him?”

“Not really, but I have seen that man before...” The words died in her mouth by the end. “How was that company of his?”

“She was colossal!” The man narrated. “I’m talking like three times as tall as a fairy. She could even be three meters tall!”

“Was she also a human?” This time was Alta who asked.

“Impossible.” Akorodei laughed. “Humans don’t grow that large, and besides she was pink. Like a bright pink as skin. And then she had these horrendously long ears. They were bigger than my wings!”

“That sounds like an elf, doesn’t it?” Icasandra added.

“Well, I thought the same thing, but elves aren’t pink, no?”

“I guess not.” The Moonlight fairy shrugged. “How peculiar.”

“Indeed.” The male fairy nodded.

“What are elves?” The Blossomflame fairy asked, tilting her head to the side.

“They are another type of fae,” Icasandra explained. “Besides fairies, the most common fae are pixies, elves, gnomes, and spirits.”

“Hmm.” Alta meditated. “Those are a lot of types.”

“I agree,” Akorodei added with a hearty smile. “I have only seen pixies and spirits in this village, I hope we have more fae someday.”

“Indeed.” The chimera nodded. “I would love to inspect them closely. Especially their magic.” She responded with an even greater smile than the man.

17. Elder

In the end, when Icasondra said that they were going to go shopping, she meant that she would buy everything on the market and leave Alta to carry the products. At least the Moonlight fairy had only bought food, or ingredients as she called them. No trinkets like the plethora that populated the market street.

It also made sense for Alta to be the one carrying everything. She may have copied Icasondra's body, but hers didn't resemble internally to that of the weak and fragile fairy. The chimera's body was made of reused biomass, part of which was of the wardens' muscles. And unlike one may think, the colossal wardens' musculature was more efficient than that of humans and fairies in weight-to-strength ratio.

Alta couldn't imagine Icasondra carrying more than four jars of this jam food. They weren't heavy per se, but cumbersome and heavy enough that it made flying unviable.

Icasondra flew over the market's road whilst Alta followed her on foot, carrying two bags full of products. The Moonlight fairy herself did carry a bit of weight, the bag of money Aecansomdry's had given her. And even though they had gone through several stalls by now, the volume of the bag didn't decrease at all. It neither looked light, judging by the tense ropes holding the bag's opening together.

"I think that's all~" Icasondra sat on a cut tree trunk and stretched her arms upwards, a hint of a yawn in her voice. "Moons, I'm beaten."

Upon hearing those words, Alta couldn't but look at the relaxed fairy with a tired and unexpressive look as she remained with the bags in her hands.

"Em..." The fairy hesitated after looking at the chimera's expression. "Well, we should bring the food home, what do you think?" She added with a nervous chuckle at the end.

"Understood." Alta nodded.

She remembered where the Moonlight fairy's house was, and even if she didn't, it wouldn't take her much time to find her way back there considering the small size of the village.

Icasondra fluttering was heard from behind and the fairy quickly caught up to her from her resting position. She acted as if she needed to guide Alta, the fairy putting herself in front of her, and flying in a straight line to her home.

As soon as they arrived there, a very glaring problem became clear to them.

"How are we supposed to take these bags upwards?" Alta pointed out looking at the tree house.

"Well, I normally don't buy much, so I have more than enough strength to fly anything I bought without problems but now..." The fairy's gaze shifted to the chimera's heavy-looking bags. "Can you fly them up there?"

Alta blinked twice, thinking if she truly had heard what she had heard.

"What do you think?" She responded, not a shed of animosity in her tone.

“Right, right. Dumb question.” Icasandra added with a dry laugh. “Let me leave the coin bag first and I’ll do some rounds to pick each bag.”

“Understood.” Instead of sitting down, Alta remained still like a statue with the bags in her hands.

Icasandra quickly descended from the skies only a few seconds after flying up, her massive silhouette boosted by her fairy wings blocking out the sun.

“Here.” Alta raised one of her arms and dropped the bag on her hand.

“Oof.” The fairy grunted, her altitude decreasing by a few heads. Her wings began hitting the air with more energy, trying to keep her afloat. “Moons, they are heavy! How much did we buy?”

“How much you bought, you mean.”

“Excuse me, I have only bought this much because half of the food is for you!” With a harrumph, she left for her home.

Alta fluttered her wings, trying to take to the skies as the Moonlight fairy did. Alas, she had no practice whatsoever and the increased weight wasn’t helping her either. The Blossomflame fairy sighed, waiting for the only capable fairy to come back. This time she took much longer, closer to a minute. *Is it that difficult and slow to fly with weight?*

“What took you so long?” The chimera asked the panting fairy.

“Uh, you know, I may not, uh, be in good shape,” Icasandra responded between gasps. “How in the elder’s name were you able to carry the bags without breaking a sweat?”

“For once, walking is the better option.” Alta smiled at her. “And besides, fairy’ bodies are not meant to carry weight from a biological standpoint. Anyways, here.” And then she gave the struggling fairy the other bag.

“Urgh.” Icasandra’s arms trembled, truly fighting against the weight of the bag. “Wait for me here.”

And she did. This time the fairy took even longer to come back, most likely to recover her breath. *Maybe the shape of a fairy wasn’t as good as I thought.* The chimera pondered. *If I were able to fly or use their magic it would be of great significance, but as of now, it’s useless besides the good looks.*

Because she couldn’t deny it. After she had seen her reflection in the Losttime fairy’s shop on the furniture piece called a mirror, it felt like a waste to dispose of this shape. At least, this soon.

When Icasandra came back, she had regained her breath and color.

“Alright, follow me!” She ordered, flying back into the village, without any explanation whatsoever.

“Where are we going?” Alta asked, following behind her.

“I thought that it would be a good idea for you to meet the elder of the village,” Icasandra responded. “She’s not only our leader, but also the teacher of young fairies, so maybe she’ll make a better job than I.”

“Well, your job hasn’t been disastrous enough to look for a substitute.” The chimera praised.

The Moonlight fairy turned to look at her, and after inspecting the Blossomflame fairy’s face she was left more dumbfounded.

“Thanks... for the praise?” She added in confusion. “Nonetheless, even if I don’t get replaced by her, I think I will do you good to know her.”

Alta appraised the fairy’s expression and tone and decided that she was being truthful. She truly believed the encounter would do her good. So, Alta nodded in affirmation.

The elder’s home was located next to the market they had visited, inside of a colossal tree, far bigger and wider than the others surrounding the village. Or more accurately, the tree itself was the house.

The chimera looked upwards. She knew that her perspective had been altered by the shift in her size, she was only a third of what she had been at her peak, but the tree appeared incommensurable either way.

There’s something more, though. It didn’t feel like it was the raw size that was overwhelming her, there was something beyond all that altering her senses. *Magic?* The chimera wondered.

“What are you waiting for, come in!” Icasandra incited her from the entrance of the tree, a gate made by an aperture in the bark. The tree itself seemed to be hollow.

Alta took cautious steps forward, ready to enter combat at a moment’s notice. She didn’t feel such pressure since her instance in the prison.

Curiously enough, the way ahead wasn’t straight, both of them had to walk across a series of corridors covered in vines, slowly trekking upwards with slight differences in altitude with each step she took.

The tree wasn’t that big from the outside. Alta realized. *Certainly magic.*

She also became aware of the treacherous path, clearly not something people used day to day. But then again, fairies flew everywhere they went. There was probably an aerial entrance to the tree or maybe they just went through the canopy.

Soon the plentiful vines ended, becoming more sporadically yet not completely disappearing, and sunlight bathed them once more.

On the zenith of the tree, sitting on a throne made of bark, vines, and roots, lay a mystical figure. A mostly naked woman with bountiful assets, perfect curvature, and long hair looked at them amused. But most importantly, her hair and skin were of the most peculiar color. *Green.*

And even if the woman had no wings on her back, Alta instantly knew that she was the elder.

18. Dryad

The elder inspected Alta and Icasondra with confidence as she sat bored on her vine throne. The green woman shifted slightly her posture, her bountiful breasts jiggling copiously and threatening to spill out of her leaf clothes.

“Oh, my~” She sang. “Icasondra, it has been a long while since you visited.”

The Moonlight fairy nodded along with a slight bow. “Greetings, elder.”

“Elder? Please, call me Flrynwydl as always.” The woman added with a seductive yet motherly smile. “Who’s the cute fairy you brought?”

Alta remained impassive before the woman, her feet touching the wood floor of the tree’s canopy. And whilst her face was serious and intimidating, her thoughts were rather lax. *Why does everyone have to have complicated names?* The chimera had difficulties memorizing the myriad of new words, and the fact that every inhabitant of the village had progressively more complicated names didn’t help.

“She’s Alta, a Blossomflame fairy,” Icasondra responded.

“Is she, truly?” The green lady asked.

“Yes, I know that you haven’t known a Blossomflame fairy but she is-“

“That’s not what I meant with my question, Icasondra.” The woman raised her voice, more serious and less amicable than before. “I have lived for fae for eons, and that is no fairy. Tell me, creature, what are you?”

The green lady’s voice turned hostile as she directed toward Alta. The air in the room became stale and the Blossomflame fairy could smell the salty sweat trickling down Icasondra’s nape as she became fearful once again. Alta readied the biomass just in case, and while she admitted that the creature before her wasn’t a prey but a hunter, she knew when a hunt was about to begin. And now it wasn’t the time, or her instincts told her.

“A chimera.” She responded dryly, unbothered by the threats of the elder.

The elder inspected Alta closely, still casually sitting on her throne without a shed of worry. The woman’s eyes were unlike anything Alta had seen. Not corporeal like the ones fairies and humans had, nor spiritual like those of the flames of the wardens. Something in between. A pair of white eyeballs with lime accentuations. No irises whatsoever, only sclera, but the chimera knew she was looking directly into her eyes.

“I have not heard of such race, I’m afraid.” The elder replied, unsure of Alta’s statements.

“If you don’t believe me, that’s your problem.” The Blossomflame-shifted chimera explained, enlivening the flames on her back menacingly. “But what are you then?” Alta continued. “You are not a fairy but feel similar to them.” *To their magic.*

“You are right, chimera.” The elder added with a derogative jab. “I’m a spirit, one of the fae, but not a fairy.”

She stood up, her curvaceous figure being highlighted by the sunlight filtering through the leaves of the canopy behind her. The spirit was massively tall, beyond the three-meter mark, two-thirds of that being her legs alone.

The elder gazed down at Alta, yet it was impossible to intimidate a shape-shifting creature with size, as her own size could shift massively bigger than the green lady.

Seeing that her demonstration of power didn't work out, the elder finally opened her dark green lips.

"I am a dryad, nature spirit, keeper of the Evergreen, and leader of this village."

Alta looked up unamused but satisfied with the information. *But I can also play that game.*

Crunching sounds were heard in the room as out of nowhere the Blossomflame fairy grew taller, her legs extending upwards. For the onlookers, it would have seemed that only her arms shrink, but in reality, her torso was the more affected part, becoming so thin that it was unsuitable for life, yet her fiery red dress covered those details.

In a matter of seconds, she stood up at a height of two meters. Not even close to going toe to toe against the well-dotted dryad, but her statement was made.

"I see." The dryad responded unamused, yet unbothered.

She then sat down on her throne, slowly putting one leg on top of the other, her thighs thicker than the whole body of a fairy. The dryad left the leg on the top pointing upwards.

There was no fight, no hunt. Only two hunters showing their claws and jaws.

"Flynwydl." She stated after a while.

"Alta." The chimera replied.

*

Icasondra held her breath as she looked at the standoff. The situation was tense. Too tense. She wouldn't have brought Alta to Flynwydl if she had known this was going to happen. It was too much for her little heart.

Alta had shifted, moving the biomass, as she called it, from her arms onto her legs and growing taller. Her figure looked sickly, yet now she stood taller after Flynwydl had sat down. They looked at each other with hateful understanding, a shed of respect in their expression.

The dryad tiredly gazed at them, but with a hint of hatred Icasondra had never seen coming from the motherly spirit.

"Icasondra." Flynwydl said, breaking the silence.

"Y-yes?" She responded without hiding the fear in her voice.

"Did you find the chimera in one of your outings?" Even as she lay on her throne, she stood far above the Moonlight fairy. Her authority, not just of the leader of the village, but of raw power, loomed over Icasondra.

"Yes, Flynwydl." The fairy nodded obediently. "I found her on the Barren Lands."

The dryad raised a brow. "Icasondra."

“Yes?” She responded with a more controlled voice, yet her fear only intensified.

“Didn’t I tell you to not go to the Barren Lands?”

“Yes, Flynwydl.” Instead of a nod, Icasondra now looked down.

“Humans are becoming rather aggressive as of late, and the only reason why they haven’t tried any foolish stuff is because the Barren Lands deter them from coming to the Evergreen, but that doesn’t mean they cross the lands from time to time. It’s a dangerous place.” Flynwydl looked at the Moonlight fairy’s expression. “Icasondra.” She called her once more.

“Y-y-yes?” It was getting difficult for her to talk, memories flowing back to her. That had been just yesterday, in the end.

“You found humans, didn’t you?” At this point, Icasondra couldn’t muster any more words, her throat itching and hurting as she had never felt before, yet she nodded at her mentor and mother’s question. Flynwydl sighed. “Oh, you foolish child. Come here.”

The dryad opened her arms and Icasondra rushed onto them, borrowing her small head in the infinitely welcoming bosom of the matron of the village. A warmth embraced the fairy as did the vegetal arms of the dryad, careful not to graze the sensitive wings of the fairy.

“Tell me, what happened?” Flynwydl whispered to her ears as she caressed her long platinum hair.

“I... I’m sorry.” Icasondra finally broke down, tears coming down from her eyes as a monsoon. “I’m so sorry...” She repeated, not truly knowing what she was even saying.

“Do not be sorry, child.” The dryad put one finger below the fairy’s chin and raised her head. Then she wiped her tears with her green hand. “Now, explain it to me.”

Icasondra remembered the fear and blood, the smells and the vivid colors. It all had happened in such a small window of time that she hadn’t truly processed it, rather thinking that it was a cognitive illusion or a bad dream.

Words slowly poured from her mouth, akin to the tears she was shedding.

*

“The humans... they captured me while I was sightseeing.” The children revealed.

It hurt Flynwydl’s hurt seeing Icasondra like this. Her eyes were opaque, no longer shining like the sapphires they usually were.

“They said they were going to sell me as a slave... and do bad things to me.” The Moonlight fairy began crying once more.

Hearing her words made the dryad’s sap burn. She could only caress her children’s hair and comfort her.

“What happened then?” The words may have been cruel, gnawing into the affected fairy’s wound, but Flynwydl’s words were bolstered with Life and comfort. She was the calmness of the forest.

But also its wrath.

“Nothing,” Icasondra whispered dryly, “Alta appeared before them and killed them all.”

Flynwydl looked upon the chimera, who had reverted back into a normal and inoffensive-looking Blossomflame fairy, and wordlessly thanked her. For she would have done the same.

“The blood, the flesh, the bones... it was horrible...” The fairy’s last whisper was almost unintelligible, and she had her on top of her bosom.

Icasondra was pure, too pure. It was surprising considering how she was the only adventurous of all the fairies of the village, the only one who dared to step beyond not only the village but the Evergreen itself. In this case, her bravery was fueled by ignorance rather than courage.

Yet the Moonlight fairy was also the most knowledgeable of the outside, even more than the dryad herself.

But Flynwydl knew deep down that something like this was bound to happen. Icasondra had only been lucky so far, she was destined to have her childish bubble of fantasy popped and get revealed to the gritty reality.

For now, Flynwydl sang until her child fell asleep.

19. Balcony

Alta looked at the duo of blue fairy and green dryad in a mixture of confusion and curiosity. The elder had sang a wordless melody until Icasandra had lost consciousness. The chimera knew they weren't pure words, but the magic she sensed in them was shallow.

Flrynwydl carefully stood up from her throne of vines, bark, and roots, leaving the Moonlight fairy to lie on it. The throne thought for a colossal figure of three meters mostly worked as a bed for the meter-tall fairy.

"She has fallen asleep." The dryad explained, though now she no longer looked at Alta with hostility, yet something else lingered on her visage.

Sadness. The chimera realized. *I'm slowly beginning to understand more of these emotions.* She had never been driven by emotions, only instincts and logic. Though from time to time she indulged in the thrill of the hunt.

Alta recalled the first true emotion she saw. The moment she had killed the first warden, who was trying to kill her in the first place, their comrade was blinded by rage. That time she couldn't understand the reason, but perhaps...

"Follow me," Flrynwydl whispered, interrupting Alta's thoughts as she walked outside of her throne room.

Branches and vines stepped out of the way of the dryad as she strode forward, nature itself obeying her. Parts of the wall undid with her will, opening a door the outside to a balcony with a railing made of branches and roots.

Alta went outside with her.

The dryad looked up to the sky, the sun on its apex. It was 'high noon'. The powerful ball of fire in the skies burned hotter than in any previous moment Alta had experienced. But she could only find the high temperature and the scorching rays soothing.

"I thought fairies could only be engendered by other fairies," Alta commented as the dryad refused to talk. "Yet Icasandra treated you as if you were her mother."

"You are wrong," Flrynwydl responded after a while. "Any fae can theoretically have a spawn of any type, but such occasions are rare. Magic is unpredictable and we are but purely magical beings."

"I see." Alta hadn't comprehended anything she had said. "But you aren't her progenitor, are you?"

"I am not." She nodded, her dark green hair flowing down with the motion. "I am but the guardian and tutor of every fairy in this village. Their matron, yet never their mother."

The chimera could feel another type of sadness in the last statement, one that wasn't related to the issue at hand.

Flrynwydl jumped on top of the feeble-looking railing and sat on it, stretching her legs to the outside world. Alta couldn't understand how the weak branches could withstand the weight of the logs the dryad had for thighs, let alone her whole weight.

The dryad looked vaguely human if one ignored her bleak eyes and skin tone, yet her ratio of legs to height made her totally uncanny. As if there was something wrong, unnatural.

She stretched her green feet into the horizon, her impossibly long legs seeming to even reach their objective but never truly making it, and then she took a deep breath.

"I don't know what you are, chimera." Flynwydl started. "You aren't alive like the forest or the fae, but you saved that child, and for that I'm grateful. You may stay in this village if you wish."

Alta fluttered her wings and jumped on top of the railing as the dryad did. Her fairy legs were short, barely dangling around like the tree-sized ones the elder had.

"You are wrong. I am alive." She replied. "I know I'm not like others, I am more resilient than others, I do not need food or water to sustain myself, and can shapeshift into other beings, but I'm certainly alive."

"Hmm..." The dryad groaned deep in thought. "You are taking the shape of a Blossomflame fairy, and they are aligned to Life and Chaos, I doubt you could replicate that without being yourself alive, but that doesn't answer what you truly are."

"Don't ask me, I don't know."

Alta's hair fluttered with the wind, like flames drifting in a breeze. She stretched her wings, the fire appendices growing bigger with brighter flames for an instant. The sun was undoubtedly soothing.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Flynwydl finally looked at her.

"What I've said," Alta responded. "A statue told me I was a chimera, but it was also wrong once, so maybe it was wrong then too."

"Don't you want to know about your existence and origins?" The dryad's hair also undulated with the wind, though hers appears more like the swaying of leaves and grass.

"Not really." The chimera lightly swayed her head. "All my life I have only had the thought of escaping and being free, but after finally doing so, only a primeval instinct of survival remains. The only thing I know is to shift onto others. In a way, I can't shift into myself."

The dryad gave her a look she couldn't discern. There were a myriad of feelings in the elder's bleak eyes, but if Alta had to say one that shone beyond the rest, it was that of pity.

"It sounds like quite the past," Flynwydl said.

"Not at all." Alta negated. "I only have the memories of my prison, all the same. So, not much of a past."

"That's not what I meant." The dryad sighed.

She gave Alta another indescribable look and returned her head to the horizon, a never-ending vastness of green. *Blue and green mesh together well.* The chimera thought enjoying the vista, ignoring the conundrums on the dryad's head.

They stood for a while sightseeing, only the occasional bird making a change in the view. Who broke the silence this time was the elder.

“Moonlight fairies are nocturnal.” Flynwydl explained. “Because they partially feed on moonlight, they prefer to be awake at night and enjoy the embrace of the Celestial Triumvirate.”

The dryad’s eyes lingered on a random spot in the sky, but then Alta noticed that place was where the three moons had been this night.

“Icasondra was always an adventurous fairy, craving knowledge and exploration. But it’s difficult to explore and sightsee with the dim light of the moons, so she forwent the Moonlight tradition of being nocturnal so she could explore the outside world with her own eyes.”

“Why are you explaining this to me?” Alta asked genuinely. She couldn’t understand the reason behind it.

“That child looks up to you, or at least I think she does.” The elder responded. “Moonlight fairies are overall the weakest of all and not the most useful for a community. Their light abilities can be useful sometimes, but those occasions are few and far between. That led Icasondra to have an inferiority complex.”

“Aren’t there more Moonlight fairies in the village?” The chimera asked once she noticed the dryad was not going to stop talking.

“There were.” She nodded. “Not anymore. The vast majority of the village is now composed of Rootweaver and Stillwater fairies, though some variations spawn from time to time. If at least there remained a single Moonlight in this place, that child wouldn’t feel so out of place, so inferior.”

Alta was beginning to understand the problem. Icasondra was a weak link in the herd, yet the fae were too goodhearted to exile one of them. This meant that the Moonlight fairy, as she also was one of a kind, alienated herself, drowning in remorse instead of striving forward.

Prey couldn’t be lone hunters after all.

“And why would she look up to me?” The chimera couldn’t comprehend the complex situation fully. “Shouldn’t she look up to you? You are a strong hunter, and she has known you for far longer.”

“Hunter?” The elder looked at the Blossomflame fairy in confusion. “Doesn’t matter. That’s not how the mind works. You saved Icasondra in a moment of weakness, and actions like those remain engraved by fire on the memory. You are a monster, I can know it even if she hasn’t told me, yet she’s forever grateful to you. You saved her from a fate worse than death.”

“I see.” For the first time, she could understand such words. Because she knew of fates worse than death, she had experienced it after all.

A shallow sound came from the throne room, almost unperceivable yet both the chimera and the dryad turned her heads. Alta’s perceptive ears pulsed upon hearing the sound and whilst Flynwydl herself didn’t do anything, the vines around the balcony twisted slightly.

Alta knew if she were to fight the dryad, doing so in her dominion would prove a fight far more difficult than all others combined.

“We’ve talked for a long time.” Flrynwydl put her long legs on the balcony floor and stood up. “As I’ve said, you are welcome to this village, but if you hurt Icasandra in any way, be ready to experience Mother Nature’s unleashed wrath.”

Alta smiled. That hadn’t been a threat, but a promise.

20. Showerthought

Icasondra woke up to see an Alta and a Flrynwydl talking together. *It's nice that they aren't at each other's throats.* Because if that still were the case, this village would hold for much longer.

She rubbed her eyes, warding away her drowsiness and only then she noticed the irritation in her eyes. *Oh, right.* She chuckled remembering her breakdown. *I can't even stay on my two feet...*

"I have given the... Blossomflame permission to stay in the village, child." Flrynwydl explained, having some trouble accepting Alta as a true fae. "I suppose she'll remain in your cottage."

"Yes." Icasondra slowly stood up from the root-throne. Unlike its crude appearance, the seat of the elder was surprisingly comfortable. "She already spent the night with me the day before."

"I see." The dryad expressed an absolute lack of emotion. "You are tired, so for today go home and rest."

"For today?" The Moonlight fairy asked, noticing the odd choice of words.

"I'd like you and Alta to come back tomorrow, or whenever you feel well," Flrynwydl spoke the last part with motherly compassion.

"Tomorrow it is, then." Icasondra smiled weakly, not accepting her compassion and refusing to be treated differently.

Flrynwydl spoke no more words and nodded at her. Alta followed behind her as she walked down the dryad's tree. Icasondra felt tired, she didn't have enough energies or the mood to fly.

When they made their way out she realized the position of the sun, past beyond noon. They had skipped lunch, so she had been asleep for a few hours.

Alta looked at her with curiosity, words lingering in her mouth.

"Ask," Icasondra said. "You have the face of someone who has questions."

"Hmm, you are more sensitive than I thought." The chimera mussitated. "So, you don't have family, then?"

"The village is my family." She responded with a fake smile. Alta looked at her unamused. "I guess you talked about it with Flrynwydl." The fairy sighed, feeling even more tired than before. "You are right, I have no parents and there are no other Moonlights in the village, so I'm the only of my kind."

"What happened?" The interest the chimera showed felt awkward to her. Alta had never bothered with these types of questions. She asked a lot, yes, but they tended to be pragmatic or basic in nature. Only insisting when she felt Icasondra was withholding information from her. Yet now... now she saw interest in those eyes. Not the search for knowledge or understanding of the world, but interest in her.

Icasondra wasn't sure how to react.

"They died." She explained taciturnly.

The Blossomflame fairy looked at her with curiosity and confusion. "In this peaceful village, with a powerful fae as their leader?"

It pained her. But she also saw the eyes of the chimera, she wouldn't take a no for an answer. And what was silence but the greatest negation?

"Moonlight fairies sustain themselves on moonlight." She sat on the ground, the grass caressing her legs. "But it isn't an addition to our meals. We truly need it to survive. Without it..."

Dread settled.

It was easy to ignore death. The great equalizer came for everyone at one point or another, yet for some... for some, it came faster or in more than one way.

"Without the light of the moons, we perish." Her voice was almost drowned by the sob that came after.

"I see." The chimera's expression was a curious one. Understanding and apathy. Upon seeing that visage, Icasondra knew that Alta had comprehended her, unlike plentiful other situations where the chimera had failed to do so, yet she couldn't ignore the apathy.

Alta understood the words, understood the sentiment, but couldn't understand the fear. Her green eyes flickered with a flame of life, unbeknownst to the idea of dying. The chimera knew death because she had brought so much of it. Yet she was beyond it.

"Ah, I wish I were like you."

"What?" As Alta asked, Icasondra noticed she had said her thoughts aloud.

"Nothing!" The Moonlight fairy stood up with an energy she didn't know where she got it out from. "Moons, I'm dirty!" She shook the dirt off her legs and turquoise dress. "I would kill for a shower right now!" She raised her voice, ignoring her internal affairs.

"Shower?" The chimera tilted her head, successfully distracted. "What's that?"

"It's when you clean yourself with water," Icasondra explained with her calm demeanor, or at least she faked so.

She stopped to look at Alta, yet she found no trace of dirt, grime, or blood on her body. Her thin brows frowned. The fairy recalled that this morning when Alta got naked to try her dress, she was also impeccably clean, even though she had been walking all day barefooted and had killed two humans with her hands.

"How are you clean?" She asked.

"What do you mean?" The Blossomflame fairy fluttered her wings, not understanding the question.

"I mean how is your skin free of dirtiness!" Icasondra said with a hint of jealousy. "Your feet should be covered in dirt or even mud, and you have no traces of blood in your body even when you were covered on it yesterday!"

“Matter doesn’t stick to my body unless I wish for it to do so,” Alta explained as a matter of fact.

“That’s...” Icasondra's mouth remained open in sheer amazement and envy. “I wish I could do that.”

Alta could make a lot of things, and Icasondra doubted she had even seen the tip of the iceberg. Especially considering that she could copy the characteristic of any organism. *Can she copy plants?* The question popped into her head. *What about Flrynwyd!* *Can she copy her or does it also her Blossomflame shape already overwrites other possible fae types?*

Icasondra swayed away her head. She shouldn’t elaborate on these questions, much less tell them to Alta. The chimere seemed stable, but she couldn’t truly trust her. And exploring her powers would only make her stronger.

The fairy sighed.

“I’m going to take bath.” She walked absentmindedly towards her home to pick up her bath products.

“What’s a bath?” Alta asked.

“It’s a synonym for shower.” The fairy explained. “Hmm, scratch that. They are different, but both are used to clean yourself. I guess a bath involves more water and it’s more relaxing.”

“Understood.” The chimera responded from her back with her typical tone that revealed she had not understood a single bit.

When Icasondra stood before her tree house, she groaned as she realized she had to fly into it.

“I should add some stairs.” She commented with a sigh.

“I would appreciate that.” The Moonlight fairy rolled her eyes upon hearing the comment of the Blossomflame one.

Icasondra flew into her house slowly as her body was constantly drawn down by gravity far harder than any other day, or so she believed. She went to the bathroom in her room and picked up a bar of soap, a towel, and a clean set of clothes and undergarments. Alta waited for her back down.

“Why have you gone down?” The chimera asked.

“The bath isn’t in my house, it’s outside the village.” She explained and went her way.

“Oh, I see.” And Alta followed her.

Icasondra turned back. “Why are you following me?”

“Why shouldn’t I?” She replied in confusion.

“Because I’m going to take a bath.”

“So am I.”

The Moonlight fairy blinked several times. “Are you suggesting that you are going to take a bath with me?”

“Yes?” Alta tilted her head. “It was quite obvious.”

“That’s indecent!” Icasandra could feel her face turn red at the notion.

“Wouldn’t it be more indecent not to take a bath?” The Blossomflame fairy counterattacked.

“I... um...” The chimera hadn’t realized, but her play with words had totally invalidated the fairy’s argument. She had beaten her without even trying.

“And besides,” Alta continued, “why are you going outside of the village when that male was taking a bath in the middle of the village?”

“I’m no Stillwater fairy!” Icasandra’s voice was a mixture of rage and embarrassment. “I won’t clean myself in front of everyone!”

Then she shot out from her spot outside of the village, her wings guiding her through the forest at high speeds. And yet...

The chimera walked beside her.

Alta ran on her feet at tremendous speeds. With a glance, Icasandra noticed that her legs had shifted slightly in an unnatural shape. The transformed Blossomflame fairy moved on foot at the same speed the Moonlight one flew, yet there was no trace of exertion or exhaustion on her visage. Only impassivity.

“Is it near?” She asked casually.

“Em... yes?” Icasandra responded by reflex, more than anything. The sight was unsettling, to say the least.

21. Clair De Lune

Even at their insane speeds, it took them around a quarter of an hour to reach their destination. For other races, this would have made the travel alone useless, as they would have ended even more dirtied than when they came back. But for innately airborne species like fairies, I didn't matter. The long flight actually made it easier to dry the hair on the way back. Or at least that's how Icasondra justified herself the needlessly far bathing spot.

A random spot in the forest where a lake of considerable size was situated, was her hidden bathing spot. Not that really hidden considering the size of the body of water, but the Evergreen was vast, expanding for days without end. And thanks to Stillwater fairies, the village needed no natural running water like rivers, making it a deserted place where only animals would come to drink.

"What do you think?" Icasondra extended her arms to show the sheer magnificence of the location.

"Big." Alta responded taciturnly.

"Yes!" The Moonlight fairy added excitedly. "I only come to this place because it's like a half-an-hour flight from the village, so it's like a private spot reserved only for me. I even gave it a name." She flew higher up in the air. "Clair de Lune!"

"There doesn't seem to be any moons." The chimera commented.

"Because it's still day, you silly!" She chuckled. "This place is beautiful on the night as the Triumvirate shines upon the surface of the lake. Truly magical."

"Then why have we come in the day then?"

"Because I wanted to bathe now?" Icasondra raised her dirtied feet.

"Fair enough." Alta nodded. "So, how does bathing work?"

The Moonlight fairy gave the Blossomflame a stern frown. "You just clean yourself with water?"

"I see." The chimera expressed without showing any emotion. Then her dress fell to the ground.

"Why?" Icasondra screamed a guttural reaction.

"I need to be naked to wash myself, don't I?"

"Yes!" The fairy admitted in rage. "But you threw the dress on the ground! It's made out of silk and Aecansomdry's has taken a lot of time to do it, you can't just leave it on the dirt!"

"Oh." Alta gasped in surprise.

The chimera picked up the dress, patted it slightly to remove any traces of dirt, and hung it on a nearby branch.

“Better?” She asked for confirmation.

“Yes...” Icasondra sighed. “We’ll have to bring it a Stillwater later.” And got herself naked.

She was too tired to even bother about decency, and Alta was right, they were going to wash themselves. There was a difference between being naked in public like Alta had done or in private or in the bath.

Still flying, Icasondra left her turquoise dress on another tree, not risking getting it any dirtier. She also hung her clean dress in a nearby branch along with the clean undergarments. Then she finally took her used ones and put them in the dirty dress.

In her hands, she had a maroon towel and a bar of soap, the rest of her body deprived of clothing.

She looked at Alta, who tilted her head in realization and also removed her undergarments. *She had forgotten she had been wearing them, hasn’t she?* Icasondra mentally sighed. *If I hadn’t been wary, she would have entered the lake with the undergarments and left them soaked.*

Even though the fairy was too tired and angry to be bothered by her or Alta’s lack of clothing, she rushed into the water as she felt unprotected being exposed to the elements in the middle of the forest.

The water was incredibly cold.

She instantly regretted her decision. Clenching her teeth, she left the towel and soap on the shore as she wouldn’t use them yet and went further into the lake. With a few strides, her body was mostly submerged except for her head and wings. The tip of her Moonlight wings showed off slightly and her platinum hair drifted on the surface as a tentacular mess.

Another misconception other races had, fae included, is that fairies couldn’t have baths. That was because fairies’ wings are incredibly weak, and whilst it’s true, they are also more resilient than they seem.

Icasondra couldn’t fly in the water, the dense liquid making it even harder to flutter them, though she could still move them slightly. Fairy wings could also get wet and therefore become heavier. Depending on the climate, one couldn’t fly during a rainstorm as the pressure, the wind, and the water would be too much to handle.

Wait, what about Blossomflame wings? The Moonlight fairy realized.

Alta slowly entered the water, not without taking one step backward as it was cold, but nonetheless, made her way inside. As she was submerging to Icasondra’s level, the light on her flame wings slowly dimmed, becoming smaller and smaller until the fire almost extinguished, only a vague trace of orange light coming from her back to show that she was indeed a Blossomflame fairy.

What a nice back... Though Icasondra’s thoughts slightly shifted to another subject.

“What are you looking at?” Alta asked, her head barely showing above water as she went even deeper.

“Nothing!” Icasondra instantly responded though she corrected herself after recalling how the chimera didn’t like such responses. “I was just thinking about how your wings worked on the water.”

“Hmm...” Alta tried to twist her neck to see her back, but she fell short. She kept pushing.

“Stop, you are going to hurt yourself.” The fairy warned her.

Then a loud crack was heard as the Blossomflame’s neck deformed like a tree’s trunk in a tempest. The crunching sound almost made Icasondra puke. Yet her dread quickly vanished as she noticed how Alta’s neck elongated. *Oh, right. Shapeshifting.* She thought after taking a deep breath to settle her stomach. *I wish it wasn’t so... crude.*

“Hmm, they have dimmed. How curious.” Alta commented nonchalantly.

The sight was uncanny, chilling Icasondra more than the frigid waters. The chimera twisted her neck, as if it was a tail, to have a better look at her backside.

“I had thought that they would stay aflame because they are magic, not true flames.” Alta shifted her neck back to normal. “Magic is curious.”

You are more curious. Icasondra pondered looking at the shapeshifter. As Alta regained her fairy shape, Icasondra fixated on her. She had been avoiding looking at her, but seeing the Blossomflame’s spotless skin manufactured to perfection, it was difficult to remove the sights from her.

Doesn’t she have my body? The Moonlight fairy felt a heat that irradiated even beyond the water’s temperature. *Thinking about her body this way... Does that make me a narcissist? And if that’s the case... well, that’s a good body to be proud of, no?*

The fairy’s thoughts came to an end as the chimera slowly swam toward her.

“This shape isn’t appropriate to move in the water,” Alta commented as she moved her arms and legs around, splashing all over the place.

She hasn’t noticed I was looking at her, has she?

“Well, fairies are meant to fly,” Icasondra responded with perfect composure. Or the best one could have as they floated naked in a lake. “Even Stillwater fairies that are meant to control water aren’t good swimmers, we aren’t just meant to.”

“Is there life in this body of water?” Alta asked, a hint of lust in her eyes.

“Y-yes?” The fairy responded, terrified upon seeing such emotion displayed.

“One minute.” And the chimera disappeared into the water.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Icasondra screamed, but Alta had already gone too far for her to hear anything.

Icasondra tried looking for her, but the lake was deeper than it appeared. Even as she tucked her head underwater to search for the chimera, the waters were too dark to see anything. *No.* She saw a shallow light, dim but present. *Her wings!* The orange light was really

far, and Icasondra doubted she could reach it. She wasn't the greatest swimmer, to begin with, and she was a worst diver. Lung capacity wasn't a characteristic fairies had plenty of.

The Moonlight fairy swam upwards, her hair and wings now totally drenched. *Well, I would have done so either way.* She looked down once more, now over the surface. She could see the light getting brighter and brighter, so Alta was already coming back.

The Blossomflame fairy jumped out of the water with magnificent grace, her blood-red mane doing a perfect arc with her jump. But what surprised Icasondra was what Alta had in her mouth.

"Is that a fish?" The fairy looked at the small figure whirling around in the mouth of the chimera. "And it's alive! What are you going to do with it?"

"I wanted to see how aquatic creatures moved underwater as it's incredibly inefficient doing so with the only creatures I know of," Alta explained after putting the fish in her hand. "So, they are called fish, huh."

Icasondra looked at Alta's eyes, her vertical pupils dilating, and noticed the same lust as she paid attention to the fish. It was like seeing a cat looking at a mouse or in this case some tuna. *Oh, so it's that kind of lust. Thank the moons.* She sighed alleviated.

"You want?" Alta offered the fish with her open hand.

"What?" The sudden gesture took her aback.

"The fish," Alta added. "Thanks to you, I no longer need to consume biomass to imitate it. So I was thinking that you needed some nutrients. You haven't eaten anything since this morning."

"True." Icasondra mussitated and looked at the sun, it was nearing twilight.

Now that she says it, I'm a bit hungry. But as she looked at the fearful and unknowing eyes of the fish, she couldn't bring it up to eat it. Fairies were omnivorous, yes, but they enjoyed fruits and vegetables more. *And I rather eat meat I haven't seen move beforehand.*

"Thanks, but I don't like fish much." The fairy refused in the politest way she could muster.

"Understood." Alta nodded, then she threw fish into the air and punched directly into the water.

Icasondra blinked thrice. "What was that all about?" Her voice brimming with confusion and rage. "Why did you have to do that to the fish?"

"I sent him where he was." The chimera responded blatantly. "It was the most efficient way."

"You have hurt it!" The fairy fought. "Maybe it's even dead!"

"He is not." Alta negated with complete confidence. "I have inspected his whole body, his not weak enough to perish for a punch simple punch, not even get hurt because of how and where I hit."

“Em...” The sheer confidence in the voice of the chimera left Icasandra speechless. “You still can’t do that!” She replied. “You can’t attack others just because it’s the most efficient way, it’s-“

“Indecent?” Alta interjected.

“What? No!” She negated with her head. “It’s wrong!”

“Wrong... I see.” The chimera responded with her usual tone, though this time Icasandra felt that there was some understanding.

Maybe I can guide her and teach her that violence is bad with these lessons, so she doesn’t do anything wrong in the village. The fairy meditated; her mind still confused by the sudden act of cruelty. *Maybe...*

22. Washed

Alta hated soap.

It was unnatural to depend on another substance to clean yourself. Even the rodents and hunters in the prison used the resources given by their bodies to clean themselves. Alta was a follower of this school of cleaning, as it was easy to wash herself with her chimeric constitution.

And yet, as the Moonlight fairy carefully spread the soap on the dimmed Blossomflame's back, Alta couldn't deny the pleasurable feeling. Icasondra's hands rubbed up and down, spreading the soap, the cold hands against her warm back.

Alta purred.

"What?" The fairy removed her hands in surprise, backpedaling as they were on the shoreline where their feet touched the ground.

"Your caresses are well received," Alta responded with complete and total seriousness.

"That's," Icasondra's visage gained a coloration similar to the dimmed wings, "nice... But look forward. It's easier to wash you that way."

"Understood." The chimera nodded, her wet hair splashing in consequence.

Icasondra was an expert in bathing, or at least, an expert compared to Alta. The chimera understood the basics, but she didn't know the most efficient way to do the cleaning. Even then, the Moonlight fairy wasn't exactly efficient, but it certainly was enjoyable.

With a tap on her arm, Icasondra prompted Alta to raise it. The fairy slowly passed the bar of soap through the chimera's arm and armpits, then she grabbed some handfuls and water and rinsed the skin. She did the same for the chimera's other arm and the rest of her back.

"Em... I don't think we need to do the front side." Icasondra added with nervousness.

"Why not?" Alta turned to look at the naked fairy. "Is this zone not supposed to be cleaned?"

"No, it's not that..." The fairy toyed with the soap on her hands, her arms barely covering her breasts. "It's just..."

"Indecent?" The chimera guessed, which in return made the fairy redden even more.

Icasondra dived under the water, only her eyes and wings poking outside. Her visage was a collage of platinum, beige, red, and blue.

"Blrubub..." She responded in muted mumbles.

"I cannot understand you if you speak underwater," Alta explained as if the fairy herself hadn't noticed she was unintelligible.

"Turn back," Icasondra added with a pout, her mouth barely outside of the water. "I'm going to clean your hair now."

“Understood.” Alta turned and subsequently heard the splashes of water from the emerging fairy.

It was wrong to take a bath together, but cleaning each other, yes? The chimera pondered, not comprehending the seemingly random bursts of indecency. Is this just her concept of indecency, or is it for everyone else? Or maybe it's just the fae? The image of the elder appeared in her mind. But their leader is half-naked and is certainly indecent. Why doesn't she point that out? Is it because of Flrynwydl's hierarchal status?

As more Alta meditated on the definition of indecency, the less she understood the concept.

For now, she just indulged in the soft caresses of the Moonlight fairy as she was cleaning her long hair.

“It's so smooth...” Icasondra whispered. “And it isn't remotely tangled.”

“My hair won't get tangled unless I want it to.” Alta responded, getting a brief ‘eep!’ out of the fairy who hadn't noticed she was thinking aloud.

“I wish I had that control over my body.” She sighed. “It takes a lot of time to get the hair straight in the morning.”

“You did not do such a thing today.” The chimera commented.

“Well, today I have been rather sidetracked, and we had to go to Aecansomdry's shop early in the morning, so there wasn't time...”

“Your hair looks well without any preparations.”

Upon hearing Alta's statement, Icasondra's hands stopped moving for an instant but promptly returned to caring for the chimera's wild mane.

“Thanks...” Alta heard the whisper coming from the fairy's mouth, also noticing a very slight increase in temperature on the hands tangled in her hair.

It took Icasondra a surprisingly long amount of time to wash Alta's hair, far more than her body, she had a lot of hair after all. By the time the fairy was done, the sun already began to set.

“Come on, let's go.” The Moonlight fairy explained. “This place is going to get colder on the night. I wouldn't want to get us sick.” But as she walked towards the shore, Alta grabbed her arm and stop her. “W-what?”

“You haven't washed yourself.” The chimera said.

“I can do that tomorrow...” Icasondra responded without looking at Alta, her eyes on the water.

“No.” Alta strengthened her grip on the fairy and brought her closer to her. “We have come here to wash you, first and foremost. So we are not going to go until we do that.”

“But the cold...” The fairy reasoned, covering her nude body with her free arm.

“I can heat you up,” Alta said as she looked directly at her dark blue eyes.

“No! We can’t do that!” Icasondra refused, pulling her arm out of the grab but ultimately failing.

“Why not?” The chimera tilted her head in confusion.

“Those things aren’t meant to do lightly...” The Moonlight fairy added, her visage was tainted in red.

“What?” Alta raised her voice. “Why shouldn’t I heat you with my wings? Aren’t I a Blossomflame fairy?”

“Oh.” Icasondra’s expression was of pure petrification. “Ooooooh!” Her skin became redder and redder, and her body temperature also increased. “Sure, let me wash myself really fast, then!” She rushed inside the water, avoiding the other fairy. Yet her movements were blocked as her arm was still restrained.

“No.” The red-haired fairy swayed her head. “You washed me, so I’m going to wash you.”

“No, you really don’t have t-“ But her words died in her throat as she looked at the intense green eyes of the chimera, those of a predator. It wasn’t a suggestion, but a statement.

Laggard, Icasondra accepted her fate and gave Alta the bar of soap.

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Alta was serious and washed her. Icasondra couldn’t stop jittering, but at this point, she didn’t know if it was because of the cold or the embarrassment. Anyways, the chimera fulfilled her word and once they were out of the water, she flared her with her Blossomflame wings.

Aecansomdryas was right, she can control the fire. Alta’s wings hadn’t burned anything, even though they had been in contact with a lot of things. They were only warm and illuminated the place like a simple torch. But now, they burned like a fireplace.

Icasondra rubbed her hands, putting them on Alta’s back as the Blossomflame fairy kept her wings in place.

The wings radiated brighter than ever as they flared with intensity. They seemed to burn oxygen like a campfire, unlike how before they were barely an illusion.

The Moonlight fairy turned her head to the sides to see how the fiery wings eclipsed the light of the setting sun. They shone brighter than a forest fire. Yet far from the chaotic and destructive nature of the fires that sometimes assaulted the Evergreen, these wings appeared brimming with life. *Of Life and Chaos*, she recalled. *Maybe it’s more literal than I thought.*

As her body had already regained her heat, Icasondra passed unto her hair, grooming it to get it in a better shape and drying it faster. She was careful to not get her head close enough to the fire to burn it. The damp hair resisted getting dry, so meanwhile she grabbed her maroon towel and tied it around her waist to finally cover her unprotected body.

How have I spent this much time naked? She pondered as she squished more water out of her platinum mane. *I swear she’s corrupting me...*

"You done?" Alta asked, looking straight forward, once she noticed Icasandra had stopped moving.

"Oh, yes." The Moonlight fairy replied and the Blossomflame fairy began to turn. "Wait!" She added. "Stay like that for a moment whilst I get dressed!"

And she rushed toward the tree where she had left her clean dress and undergarments, but without taking an eye from the chimera.

"I don't understand why you have problems with me seeing you dressing up," Alta complained, yet she faithfully kept her head locked on the lake.

"Because it's indecent!" Icasandra shouted as she donned her undergarments.

"And washing ourselves on the lake wasn't?" For most people, that would have been sarcasm, but Icasandra knew that Alta was truly asking a question.

"It was!" The fairy said putting her dress on. "But this is more indecent!"

"So, being clothed is more indecent than being naked? Interesting..." The red-haired fairy chuckled.

Icasandra raised her brows. Before she had sensed authentic confusion, but now she sensed... amusement? *Is she toying with me?*

"Shut up and get yourself dress!"

"Okay." Alta began moving to the tree she left her clothes on, but then stopped and gazed at Icasandra. "Or are you going to look at me while I change?" She added with a predatory smile.

Upon hearing this, Icasandra rapidly fluttered her wings to have her back facing the chimera.

"Would that be indecent?" She continued. "Or not because you are the one doing it?"

"Shut up!" The Moonlight fairy shouted once again, her voice cracking under the strain.

"Yes, yes." The chimera responded and seemed to be... *singing?*

This woman is going to be the death of me. Icasandra sighed as she put her hand on her breast, feeling the ferocious beating of her heart.

23. Morning

Night came and went without any complications. After Alta and Icasondra finished their bathing session, they went back to the village, albeit this time they went with the scenic route and took their time coming back. By the time they finally arrived, night had sifted upon them.

Alta could survive indefinitely without biomass intake, but Icasondra entered her home with a mild degree of starvation. She hadn't eaten anything since the very morning.

For dinner, the Moonlight fairy made a feast. A feast for fairy-sized creatures, that is. She called the meal "steam potatoes" and it was even better than the first meal Alta had. Whereas the blueberry plate Icasondra had made was sweet, this one was salty. And Alta found that she preferred salty tastes better.

Icasondra had been wrong about one thing, though. When the night came, the temperatures didn't drop much, and it was mostly lukewarm. Hot enough for her to not want to sleep clothed like she had done the day before.

The fairy protested a bit, obviously commenting that it was indecent, but Alta persevered through the arguments like a stone wall. "It isn't indecent if you don't look at me." She countered.

Her magnificent silver tongue broke through the fairy's brain, and she decided to lie on the bed rather than keep protesting. Alta did the same, laying on the other side of the wide mattress, and then lowering the intensity of her wings. They didn't give much heat normally, but the night was warm enough that she actively toned it down.

When she woke up, Icasondra was still sleeping even though she had had more sleep than her the previous day. It was remarkable how even after all her protests, the Moonlight fairy had approached Alta in her sleep, her legs intertwined with hers.

As she didn't have anything to do, the chimera remained on the bed for an hour. It was boring, but comfortable. And in the monotony of the bed, she found more entertainment than in the darkness of her cell as she inspected the delicate features of the Moonlight fairy's wing, with some minutes having her sights drifting to the calm visage of the sleeping fae.

The sudden mood changes of the fairy amused the chimera. Yet as she inspected that peaceful expression, she couldn't help herself but also be soothed. *It's as if I'm with her the hunt and survival don't matter anymore.*

And that was true.

In a community large enough like this one, people didn't survive but live. There wasn't any struggle for one's life, so they could afford to just exist. It was a weird concept to the chimera, but fortunately, it was one she could understand and get behind.

As the sun rays coming from the skylight intensified, the face of the fairy contorted in discomfort, and after a few seconds of drowsy mumbling, she woke up.

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"Good morning," Alta whispered beside her. And she was naked.

“Eep!” Icasondra backpedaled in surprise, blankets on hand, and almost falling from the mattress.

The sudden greeting shook her from her stupor, and she recalled the night before. *That’s right, she insisted on sleeping au nature because it was hot.* But that didn’t nullify the heart attack she had gotten when she saw the naked fairy laying on her bed and directly looking at her.

“You need to wear clothes to sleep.” The fairy added, covering herself with the blanket even though she was wearing her nightgown.

“I have always slept naked; you are the one who is forcing your traditions into me.”

“It’s not traditions, it’s about decency!” She instantly responded, but then noticed something in the chimera’s tone she had failed to see before. *Was that sarcasm?*

Alta, laying bare naked on the bed in a comfortable position, looked at her amused. To which Icasondra responded by throwing the blanket at her.

“You are going to have some decency in my house!” The fairy stood up and stormed into the dressing room.

By the time she came out, Alta had already donned her dress, but that ultimately led Icasondra to realize something.

“You are wearing the undergarments from yesterday, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” The Blossomflame fairy responded with her characteristic neutral tone. “Shouldn’t I? I can remove them if it’s wrong.” Then she smiled. “Or indecent.”

“No!” The Moonlight fairy shouted as Alta’s hand moved to her legs. “It’s not wrong nor indecent. It’s just dirty. Undergarments are meant to be changed every day.”

“And how I’m supposed to do that?” Alta asked. “I only have the ones I’m wearing.”

“I know, it’s my fault. I should have thought about that before.” Icasondra sighed and approached the stairs. “After we have breakfast, we are going to go to Aecansomdry’s and buy you some spare undergarments plus any premade dresses she may have. You never know when you may need a change of clothing.”

“Understood.” And the chimera followed her to the living room.

Icasondra heard Alta seating on one of the stools as she went for the kitchen. *Alright.* She told herself. *Today we are going to have a true breakfast.* Yesterday she had been lacking ingredients, but after their trip to the market, her pantry was now overflowing.

She began by cutting two sizeable oranges and making juice with them. The little fairy wasn’t precisely strong, but squeezing fruits was a task more of skill than strength. When she finished with most of the oranges, she left them to rest on the squeezer, drops of juice still coming down, and went to the next task. Icasondra picked a few loaves of bread, jam, and even butter from the pantry. She could have made sandwiches or spread the bread already but decided it was better for Alta to try to do it herself.

Not even five minutes and she went back to the living room with a tray full of a myriad of fruit jams, several loaves of bread, butter, and two glasses of orange juice.

“Do you want me to show you how these are eaten?” Icasondra asked after sitting down and pointed at the tray with a spreading knife in hand.

Alta simply nodded in response.

“Okay,” Icasondra grabbed a loaf, “so this are the jams and this one is the butter.” She pointed at the colorful jars and then a ceramic pot. “I recommend the jams better, especially the blueberry one, but feel free to try the butter. Anyways, with a knife like these ones you spread the contents unto the bread.”

The fairy did as explained, grabbing a scoop of blueberry jam and then spreading it over the loaf of bread.

“Simple as that.” She added. “There’s also orange juicy to drink.”

The chimera grabbed a piece of bread and the other spreading knife and selected the strawberry jam. Red, powerful, sweet, and red. *She hasn’t picked up because it looks like blood, hasn’t she? Please tell me I’m just overthinking it.* Oblivious to the fairy’s conundrum, Alta covered her bread with an unhealthy amount of jam and then took a hearty bite out of it.

“Hmm...” The Blossomflame fairy tasted it without haste, slowly indulging in the savor.

“How does it taste?” The Moonlight fairy asked with a fluttering of her wings.

“Goosh.” Alta tried to speak but her filled mouth presented difficulties to her.

“Eat first. Talk later.” Icasondra recommended.

The chimera viciously chomped the bread and then downed the contents. “I said, good.”

“Oh, I understood you.” The fairy clarified. “But it’s dangerous to talk with your mouth full, you could choke on your food.”

“I doubt it,” Alta added, only then to shove the rest of the bread into her mouth.

Why do I even worry?

“Anyways, let’s finish breakfast, and let’s visit Aecansomdryes.”

Alta ended up having one of each jam and the butter, but none seemed to satisfy her as much as the strawberry one.

When it was time to leave home, the two fairies descended together to the ground. Whilst the Blossomflame fairy was mostly incapable of flight, she was able to glide down without problems. Albeit needing an unnecessary amount of flapping to keep herself from eating the ground.

“I hate flying.” The chimera snickered as they made their way to the tailor.

“You are just sour that you are unable to fly since the very beginning,” Icasondra said as she flew on top of her, looking at Alta from her position of power, moving at the same speed as her walking speed. “Even baby fairies need to learn to fly, and to my knowledge, you are two days old.”

“I’m far older than you.” Alta disregarded. “Even if my time as a fairy has been short.”

“Oh, well. You’ll learn!” Icasondra cheered her on. *Will? Why do I talk as if I want to still be with her? Wasn’t I a hostage, the only one who could help the village?*

The internal dilemma of the Moonlight fairy was cut short as they made their way into the Losttime fairy’s shop. Surprisingly, there was another customer this early in the morning. It was a female fairy with grey translucid butterfly wings. A Stillwater fairy. Icasondra recognized her, it was impossible not to in this small village.”

“Oh, hi Icasondra, hi Alta!” Aecansomdryd saluted with her hands covered in threads and measuring tape. “I’m a bit occupied right now, you can sit down over there or come back later.”

“I think we’ll choose the latter.” Icasondra smiled at her friend. “We were summoned yesterday to meet the elder.”

“Oh, good luck with Flrynwydl then. Salute her for me!”

“Will do!” And before Icasondra finished speaking, the tailor grabbed the arm of the Stillwater fairy and guided her into the dressing room. The kidnapped fairy had a pinkish tone in her expression.

Icasondra sighed, ignoring whatever her friend might do at these hours of the day.

“So much for buying you spare clothes.” She told Alta, who remained as inexpressive as always. “Well... Do we go to see what Flrynwydl wanted?”

“Alright.” The Blossomflame nodded, her wings fluttering at the same time like a true fairy.

24. Job

The tree at the center of the village appeared colossal to the little fairies. It wasn't that big, the mountains on the horizon dwarfed it easily, but it was imposing, nonetheless. It was more about its width rather than its height.

Alta followed Icasandra into the tree as they ascended the vine-laden stairs into what could only be called a throne room. Flynwydl, the voluptuous dryad and the leader of the village awaited there, lavishly sat on her throne with her lime eyes mildly open.

The Moonlight fairy approached the unmoving fae with care, walking rather than flying, and tapped nervously the back of the green hand.

"Flynwydl, you there?" Icasandra asked and then took a step backward followed by a yelp once the dryad moved.

"Yes, sonny." She responded slowly. "I was resting, I didn't expect you to come this soon. You should have rested more."

"I more than well!" The fairy boasted, her wings rapidly flapping and her chest raised.

"Let me doubt it, child." The dryad smirked. "But I won't oppose your decisions."

"What were you doing?" Alta, unbothered by their conversation, asked the dryad. "That didn't look like sleeping, but you weren't conscious."

"You are right. Dryads cannot sleep, we are more trees than people." Flynwydl stretched her arms, her hair following the same motion yet moving unnaturally, like leaves that seek the sun.

"So, you are always awake?" The Blossomflame fairy added.

"Hmm, not technically." The dryad separated her long legs from the ground, only now had Alta noticed that they had been lodged into the floor. "But being conscious is tiresome, we just have moments of unconscious to rest. We cannot sleep, yes, but this state is virtually identical to the sleep other species experience. I even have dreams."

Dreams. Even though Alta had never heard the word before, she intrinsically knew what it meant and how they were, for she had dreamt.

Flynwydl stood up from her throne, previously hidden roots by her posture dislodging from her body. "This is not the right place to talk. Follow me."

Wordlessly, the two fairies followed the dryad, and Alta finally noticed why the corridors and the stairs of the tree were this big. The dryad could leave the tree. It was so obvious, yet for some reason, Alta had imagined it couldn't be possible.

As the elder stepped outside of her home, the fairies of the nameless village stopped whatever they were doing and bowed to her. The dryad evoked gratitude, respect, and loyalty in those fairies.

The strides of Flynwydl were so big that Alta had to put an oomph to her walk as a single step of the dryad could cover a whole meter. Meanwhile, Icasandra followed the tall fae without any issues, standing around the same height as she levitated in the air. The chimera grunted, keeping her incommodity to herself.

The trio led walked for a long while, losing themselves in the forest called the Evergreen. And whilst the path of the dryad seemed random, her eyes were focused on what was before her, never turning her head and never doubting.

She senses the forest. Alta realized. *There's some magic around her.* The chimera couldn't define or identify what that magic was, but she knew it was there. A hidden force permeating reality.

"We've arrived." Flynwydl stopped before a different tree from its neighbors.

Instead of having a light-brown bark, the tree had a darker shade, almost black. It was impossibly tall, far more than the tree the dryad called home.

"What's this?" Alta asked.

"One of the village's watchtowers," Icasandra responded and Flynwydl nodded. "We have guards posted on them to watch for dangers."

"How?" The chimera frowned her brows. "It would be impossible to detect a hunter through the canopies of the trees, the foliage is too dense."

"They don't look for wild animals." The dryad explained. "They are more forest rangers than sentinels. They watch for fires produced by lightning storms or smoke columns made by campfires of humans who have entered too deep into the Evergreen."

They wouldn't probably need lookouts for hunters with the dryad here, anyways. Alta couldn't quantify the power of the elder fae, but it was more than enough to act as a deterrent force.

"Why have you brought us here, then?" Alta asked, trying to look at the canopy of the tree but her neck impeded her to do so. "I fear that as a Blossomflame fairy, I'm better at starting fires than putting them out." The two fae looked at the chimera amused. "I used that expression correctly, or did I not? I fear, was it, right?"

"No, it's not about that. You used the idiom correctly." Icasandra affirmed. "It's only that Blossomflame fairies control fire, so they can put them out as easily as starting them."

"Oh, I see." The fiery fairy nodded. "Anyways, it isn't like I can control my innate abilities."

"That wasn't why I brought you here, so you don't need to worry about that." The dryad intervened. "As a new member of the village, you need an occupation. I won't accept freeloaders." The Moonlight fairy tensed as she heard those words.

"What's Icasandra's job?" Alta tilted her head, and the fairy in question tensed even further. "I haven't seen her work in anything these days. Is she a cook?"

"A cook?" Flynwydl laughed. "No, but I'm afraid I hadn't had the opportunity to taste her meals to begin with. No, Icasandra is an... entertainer of sorts. She organizes the festivities of the village. She also explores, but that's more of a hobby than her actual job."

"Festivities? What are those?" The dryad frowned her non-existing brows upon hearing the chimera's question.

"They are special events where people rest and meet together." Icasandra swiftly responded, mostly by reflex than anything.

"I see." Alta nodded, understanding the concept of a communal gathering. "So what job are you offering me then?" She switched to Flynwydl. "I doubt you want me as a simple sentinel."

"You are right." The dryad crossed her arms around her overflowing bosom. "I'm aware of your power so I thought about giving you a job as a warden of sorts."

Alta tensed as she heard the last words of the elder, her visage turning grim and her wings flaring stronger.

"Explain yourself." The Blossomfairy's voice had lost its neutrality and gained an aggressive aspect. She didn't appreciate *that* word.

Sensing the hostility, Flynwydl trod with care. "I mean that I want you to overlook the village from outside dangers and protect the fairies.

"Oh, I see." The darkness inside the chimera's eyes vanished. "Yes, no problem. I accept."

The dryad frowned but didn't elaborate or pursue answers.

"Anyways... Your job as a... guard," she chose her words carefully, "is to simply defend the village."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to be in the village instead of here?" Alta pointed at the tree with her head.

"Are you implying I cannot protect my own village?" Flynwydl said with her eyes half-closed, staring directly at the Blossomflame fairy.

"I imply nothing." She looked back with a lacking expression. "I was making a suggestion and asking a question."

The dryad sternly fixated on the chimera, yet the shorter creature didn't bulge nor react to the intimidation.

"I-I think she's being serious, Flynwydl," Icasandra explained to the matron. "She was just asking."

"Oh." The hard expression vanished from the dryad's face, now substituted by a warm and motherly look. "It's hard to get a read on this chimera, my little children are so expressive and readable that I had forgotten what words could entail."

Flynwydl dismissed it as a joke, calming down the Moonlight fairy, but Alta knew better. She revealed that she couldn't read her, but the truth is, the opposite was also true. The Blossomflame fairy didn't know what to make out of the fae without irises.

"As I was saying," Flynwydl continued with a smile on her face, "I want you on this outpost because there have been sightings of humans in the Evergreen as of late on this sector."

"But that isn't bad, no?" Icasandra asked. "I mean... I don't have the best experience with humans myself, but there was a human yesterday on the market, it isn't like we don't interact with them."

"Yes, child." The dryad nodded, her foliage-like hair falling with the gesture. "It isn't bad or strange for some humans to be on the Evergreen, but I have been made aware that the state of affairs on the human kingdoms is rather unstable lately, so I expect them to not be as friendly as they have been on prior visits."

“So that’s why you want to put Alta on the front line.” The Moonlight fairy recognized.

“Yes,” Flynwydl admitted. “I expect humans to be violent these coming years, and what better to fight violence with more violence? Without any intention of offending you, Alta.”

“I’m not offended.” The chimera dismissed. “I’m good with violence.” She accepted it as a fact.

“That’s the problem,” Icasandra revealed.

“Why?” The dryad led her hand to her cheek in ponderation, her other arm still holding her bountiful breasts.

“Alta... well...” The fairy lingered on the silence, not sure of what to say. “Let’s say I’m worried about the fate of the humans if the first encounter they have with the fae is her.”

“Oh, that only makes it better,” Flynwydl responded with an unnatural smile, the corners of her raising beyond the height of her eyes. “*That whole race deserves to suffer for even laying a finger on you.* Don’t you agree, Alta?”

“Of course.” The chimera wasn’t as vocal with her hatred, if she had any, yet her eyes brimmed with bloodlust.

Icasandra sighed. “I fear this isn’t the best of ideas.”

25. Watch

“Are you the sentinel?” Alta asked the black-winged fairy. The patterns of the wings were complex and hard to look at, sometimes spots gleamed with purple shines.

“That would be me yes.” The fairy turned to look at her, his eyes glittering in black. “I suppose you are the new recruit.”

“Yes.” The chimera nodded. “What type of fairy are you?”

“I’m an Abyssbrain fairy, the only one in the village.” The male fairy nodded multiple times, the void in his eyes absorbed the surrounding light, yet when he blinked the effect disappeared momentarily. “What about you? I have never seen a fairy related to fire.”

Alta slightly fluttered her wings. “I’m a Blossomflame fairy.”

“Alright, though I still doubt why Flrynwydl would send a random woman to be the eyes of the villages.” The Abyssbrain fairy sighed.

“I fail to see what gender has to do with it.” The red-haired fairy tilted her head.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that!” The man raised her arms in panic. “I don’t have any problems with you being a woman, it’s only that you are new to the village, and we don’t know anything about you.”

“I see.” Alta could understand the lack of trust in the male fairy. “It was Flrynwydl who sent me here, so if you have any problems, you should talk with her.” She added with honesty.

“No, no, no.” He swayed his head and fluttered his wings wildly, a bead of sweat coming down from his forehead. “There’s absolutely no need to talk with Flrynwydl. Though, one question. Are you able to defend yourself in case of an attack?”

“I could kill you in a fraction of a blink if that’s what you are asking.” The chimera affirmed.

“Yeah, good joke.” Then he looked at the Blossomflame fairy. “You are joking, right?”

Alta stood there motionless on the watchtower. Unblinking, unbothered.

“Ye, a curious sense of humor. Ha, ha.” The man chuckled to himself. “Anyways... I’m going to show you the ropes of the job, don’t worry it’s pretty simple. Before I forget,” he extended a hand forward, “I’m Coralarodys.”

“Alta.” The woman responded taciturnly, accepting the handshake.

“Alright, Alta. I don’t know how Blossomflame magic work, but as an Abyssbrain, I work differently than other fairies.”

“How so?” The chimera inquired.

“We, Abyssbrain, have the capability to sense and interact with other people’s minds.”

Like this. A voice resonated in her mind.

A few days ago, Alta would have separated the head from the body of the fairy for that intrusion without thinking twice, but now that she had learned about magic, she detected the weakness of the voice.

It wasn't as powerful as the magic Flynwydl exuded by just existing, and the intrusion was so feeble she could push the fairy out with her mind easily.

"Don't do that," Alta added emotionless.

But that didn't mean she liked the feeling.

"Fair," The Abyssbrain fairy replied. "But those are the extent of my abilities. In theory, Abyssbrain can manipulate people's minds and drive them insane, but I'm only strong enough to message people telepathically. Though my strength lays elsewhere."

"You sense other minds." Alta guessed.

"Exactly!" Coralarodys smiled. "It's an invaluable ability for a lookout because it allows me to sense other people no matter if it's day or night, or if I have my eyes closed or open. If someone is nearby, I will know it."

"How does it work?" *It would be an interesting skill to possess.*

"It just does?" The man frowned, his fully black eyes turning even darker. "That's the same with all fairy magic. We just do it. There's no explanation or learning involved, it's innate. I wouldn't be able to use your Blossomflame magic if I wanted."

It isn't like I can use it myself.

"Shame," Alta replied.

"Well," Coralarodys continued. "That's the entirety of the job. In my case, I'm able to send a telepathic message to the elder in case something is wrong, but I don't know how it will work for you. I have been translocated to the watchtower on the east, so this one is for you and Anofareda."

"Anofareda?"

"Yup, the other guard." He spoke. "This tower needs to be manned the whole day, we cannot afford to have it unattended. Because Anofareda is a Rootweaver fairy, she will come in the morning and noon as they are strongest whilst the forest is awake, and you will tend the watchtower during the evening and night. I guess you'll have it easier than a Rootweaver with your flaming wings."

"Is that all?" Alta asked after the fairy stopped talking.

"That would be it, yes." Coralarodys nodded. "Your first turn will begin this evening, so you can go back home, have lunch, and then come back here."

"No, I don't think I will." She responded. "I want to experience how a sentinel works; the experience will be valuable."

"I recommend you against it." The man sighed. "The job is as simple as I described it, and you need to be awake and sharp during your whole turn, which is half of the day. You should eat, get some rest, and be ready to shift your sleeping schedule."

"I'm not hungry and don't worry about me getting drowsy." The Blossomflame fairy expressed neutrally. "I'll worry about my sleep yesterday."

The Abyssbrain fairy raised his brows, but otherwise, remained silent.

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you." Coralarodys shrugged. "The next hours are going to be boring, and they will get worse once you are alone. Being a sentinel is a thankless job."

"I'm not doing this to be thanked," Alta responded.

"Sure." The fairy smirked. "Anyways, keep your eyes forward, unlike me, you are going to have to use them."

*

Coralarodys hadn't lied, the job was boring and uneventful. But then, even after the male fairy had left her alone, the solitude of the Evergreen was comforting, unlike the oppressive and violent silence of her cell. She had totally forgotten that the cacophony of the souls had never stopped, her brain had just filtered it out.

Though the fact that the activity on her mind remained as uneventful as that of the forest, didn't mean Alta stayed still.

She was still furious because she was unable to fly, so during her whole time alone she flapped her wings furiously in order to fly. Yet her endeavor was rewarded with no success.

That made the fairy even more frustrated.

"How am I supposed to even watch out for dangers?" Alta sat on the floor of the watcher's nest on the tall tree. "There's no line of sight. The spot for the village is not defensible. There's no use for lookouts."

Her voice maintained total neutrality, yet the frustration in her words was obvious. Even then, Alta kept her eyes forward.

"Are you talking to yourself now?" A voice asked from behind. Alta turned to see Icasandra with a basket in her hands. "Have you gone insane in less than a single day?"

"How have you come here?" The chimera asked, unbothered by the fairy's taunt.

"Flying?" The platinum-haired fairy grinned.

"It would seem I have worded my question incorrectly. Why have you come here?" Alta corrected.

"Well, it was getting boring being alone in my home..." Icasandra responded as she sat on the floor. "Especially after having company for these last days. And because you skipped lunch, I thought I could bring you some sandwiches." She opened the lid of the basket to reveal a plethora of perfectly cut sandwiches.

"Not needed," Alta added.

"Are you not going to eat them?" The fairy closed the lid.

"I didn't say that." The chimera lurched forward.

“That’s what I thought.” Icasondra sounded amused. “Come on, eat. I’ll hang with you. This job cannot be easy on the mind, spending half the day alone and of that...”

If you only knew.

*

The sandwiches didn’t last long. Perhaps if Alta was the only one to eat, she could have saved them past midnight, but with the inclusion of Icasondra, who seemingly didn’t have had lunch either, the basket was quickly emptied.

“Yeee...” The Moonlight fairy grunted. “This is bo-ring.”

Icasondra sat at the entrance of the nest, on top of the flimsy ladder that Alta had used to get up here. The chimera kept looking forward, doing as instructed, but she knew the fairy was swaying her legs back and forth as they sometimes impacted the trunk of the tree, very gently swaying the leaves of the canopy.

“How long until we can go?” The fairy groaned, laying her back on the floor.

“You can go at any moment you want,” Alta stated.

“I’m not going to leave you alone!” She instantly responded, kicking herself up.

“I see.” The chimera responded without looking at the probably distressed fairy. “Then we have at least around ten hours remaining.” She said, judging by the darkness of the sky and rising moons.

“Ten hours?” Icasondra screamed in surprise. “That’s a lot of time!”

“You came here not that long ago since Coralarodys left. So yes, we have most of my shift before us.”

“Coralarodys?” She asked.

“The Abyssbrain fairy,” Alta responded.

“Oh, him.” Icasondra sat next to her. “I have never talked to him, so I didn’t even know her brain.”

“Didn’t you say before that you knew everyone in the village because it’s so small?”

“That was an expression, Alta.” She responded. “I didn’t mean it seriously. Though it wouldn’t be hard to know every single one. There shouldn’t be more than fifty fairies in the village. At least since the last time I checked.”

“I see.” The chimera slightly turned her head to have a better sight of the fairy.

The Moonlight fairy’s platinum hair shone with the dim light of the Celestial Triumvirate, reflecting light like a mirror. Her wings did the complete opposite. They absorbed the multifaceted light of the three moons, energy gathering on her butterfly wings, a fraction of it emitted in bioluminescence.

Icasondra noticed the looks Alta was giving her as they locked sights, her face turned slightly red, then she broke their connection and looked forward like the chimera was doing.

“That’s Nux!” The Moonlight fairy pointed out of nowhere at the white moon. “She’s the little sister of the Celestial Sisters.”

“Celestial Sisters?” Alta asked, looking at the smaller, white rock in the night sky.

“Yeah, that’s what some people call the Triumvirate. They like to gentrify them, but to be honest, it’s a bit stupid.” Icasandra explained. “Huh, it kinda sounds heretical coming from the mouth of Moonlight fairy, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps.” The chimera didn’t understand the concept of heresy.

“Well, continuing with my explanation... The next one is Shatel, the middle daughter,” she pointed at the light blue moon, “she’s referred to as the curious sister.”

The light blue moon had a turquoise accentuation, not that dissimilar from the dress of the Moonlight fairy, which also shone in the moonlight.

“Oh, that reminds me that I haven’t mentioned the personality of Nux. All sisters have a ‘personality’,” Icasandra quoted with her fingers, “Nux, the young one, is brilliance. An intelligent, yet young person. Shatel is the curious, as I have said. The middle sister, yet unbothered by stigmas. Then, we have the biggest moon, Ori.” She pointed at the lilac moon. “She’s called the seductress, as the oldest one, she’s the most aligned with concepts like... well, adult concepts. You get it with the name.”

“I see.” The chimera nodded, flooding her eyes with the glamour of the three sisters.

Alta then turned to Icasandra, and she could see the reflection of every moon on her physicalized. Her platinum hair was Nux. Her wings, eyes, and even the dress represented Shatel. As for Ori, her body didn’t have any lilac, yet Alta could see some shades of the violet-like color hidden on the Moonlight fairy’s irises.

“Which one is your favorite?” Alta asked, however, she didn’t even know where the question came from, but it felt appropriate.

“Um...” Icasandra dubitated, taking the question incredibly seriously. “I’d say... Shatel? It’s the one I feel most identified with. She’s the curious one and I like to explore, so... yeah.”

The two stayed there all night looking at the white, turquoise, and lilac sisters together until the sun made them go away. Alta enjoyed her sentinel duty that night.

26. Organization

Days quickly passed by as Alta observed the forest. She was used to watching the same spot for hours without end, but at least now the landscape was beautiful and entertaining. Slowly but surely, she was able to recognize more and more species of different birds flying on top of the Evergreen.

It was a shame that her duty was on the night, as it difficulted to see even with her enhanced eyes, and most birds were sleeping by that time. The best time for sightseeing was the beginning of her shift in the evening.

Though birds weren't the only thing Alta observed. Sometimes, bugs would crawl up or fly to the top of the tree watchtower. The little creatures worked differently than most moving creatures, but after eating a bunch, the chimera noticed how efficient the bugs were. If she wanted full efficiency, taking the approach of the little creatures was the best one. But maybe slight modifications were required as being that small was detrimental for a hunt.

Alta also discovered that she could shift into *any* organic creature. She had intuited it was possible but had never had the time to try it. And it wasn't that useful. Yes, she could grow leaves and fruits from her body, but that wouldn't help on a hunt. And making fruits for others wasn't a viable option as she would lose her valuable biomass. The bark of the trees was a useful defensive tool, nonetheless.

Icasondra had come to visit her every day since she started with her sentinel duty, but the frail fairy didn't stay until long like the first day. Unlike the Blossomflame fairy, the Moonlight needed to eat and sleep.

"That reminds me... Icasondra hasn't come today." Alta talked to herself; a thing she was doing more as of late. In the prison, she had barely done that, mainly as a way to preserve as much energy and biomass as possible, she kept her thoughts to herself.

It was already past midnight and the three sisters, Nux, Shatel, and Ori illuminated the forest with their myriad lights, but the fairy hadn't made an apparition yet. For some reason, that worried Alta. She had come for multiple days to visit her, yet today she didn't come.

"Maybe she got bored?" The chimera thought. "But how? She doesn't do much. Actually, how do fairies pass the time? I should have asked that."

Even after living in the village for more days than she could count with the fingers in her hands, the chimera lacked a lot of answers, but the problem was that she didn't even know the questions, to begin with.

For more than she meditated, no answers would come to her, so Alta let that be and just looked into the Evergreen for abnormalities.

There were none.

And even if there were, it was impossible to see them. The chimera had shifted her eyes and ears, trying to make them the most possibly sensitive within reason, but she was high in the sky at night looking over a sea of green. No enhanced senses would help her. Even her wings outshined the three moons.

“Giving a Blossomflame this job wasn’t the most sensible choice.” She fluttered her wings in boredom. “A bright fire in a sea of darkness...”

The night went by as she continued peering into the horizon, no answers came to her.

*

Icasondra was stressed.

She always was this time of the year. Or more accurately, when it was A time of the year. For it was time for her to do her only job, and she couldn’t allow herself to fail.

The nights had begun becoming warmer and warmer, slowly but surely announcing the arrival of the Midsommar. And because it was a celebration really important to the fae, especially the Rootweaver fairies, it meant they enjoyed celebrating the event in the village.

And the responsibility of the whole organization of the event fell in the hands of a single fairy, Icasondra.

“What I’m going to do? What I’m going to do?” The fairy presented a curious show, walking back and forth in circles with her own feet. She was so stressed, that she had forgotten to even fly.

“Doing what?” A voice questioned.

“What?” Icasondra’s face snapped to the origin of the voice to find the Blossomflame fairy. “Alta! What are you doing here, shouldn’t you be working?”

“It’s already morning.” She stated, pointing at the skylight where the sun shone through.

“Morning?” The Moonlight fairy shouted in desperation. “I haven’t slept at all, ah~ What I’m going to do!”

“Do what?” Alta reiterated.

“The Midsommar festival!” She extended her arms into the air with frustration. “Oh, sorry. You don’t know what Midsommar is.” The chimera swayed her head. “Midsommar is the half-point of the year, so fairies in the village gather together to celebrate it. It’s a really popular celebration between the Rootweavers because on that day nature becomes stronger, and they are basically plant fairies.”

“I see.” The Blossomflame nodded. “So, what’s the problem? Didn’t Flynwydl say that you are the one who organizes the festivities? You must have done this before, haven’t you?”

“Well... I have but...” The Moonlight looked at her feet, the fingers twitching nervously.

“But... what?” Alta inquired.

“Em... it’s stressful...” Icasondra responded in an almost inaudible whisper, even to herself.

“What’s stress?” The chimera asked having understood the fairy perfectly.

“Eep!” Icasondra’s visage invertedly turned red at having her musitations being heard. “It’s a bad feeling that makes you feel awful, tired, sick, and without the will to do anything and leave it all behind... to curb yourself into a ball and forget the outside world, ignored it until the

problems have either disappeared or you do... Or so I have heard!" She added with a forced smile, trying to dissipate the darkness in her eyes.

"Then why do you do it then?" Alta asked, sitting on the mattress on the floor. The bed sheets were perfectly placed as if they had had no use.

"Do what?" The fairy said nervously.

"The organization." The chimera responded. "If you truly feel like you described, then why bother doing it?"

"Y-you, you can't be," *serious...* The last word died before reaching Icasondra's lips. But she didn't need to look at Alta to know that she was, indeed, talking seriously. "Even if I wanted, which I do not... This is my responsibility in the village. You've heard Flynwydl when she gave you the job. She doesn't want freeloaders in this village. And this is the only thing I have. Otherwise... otherwise I'm nothing."

"That's not true." The Blossomflame said.

No. Stated.

"There's a lot of things you do, like teaching me or cooking for me. You also have that exploration thing."

"But that doesn't help the village as a whole. All fairies should do that!" Icasondra ran to the nearest window, gripping the corners with strength. "If I don't do that, I won't be like them... I will be a leech, not a fairy! I'll... I'll disappoint Flynwydl..."

"I doubt that." Alta stood up and slowly walked toward the window, with no hurry nor tension on her step. Perfect passivity. "I think that when Flynwydl said that about the freeloaders she was joking."

"What?" Icasondra turned to look at the faux fairy. She could feel her face spasm with rage and sadness.

"I think she cares too much about the fairies, especially you, to push them around." She explained, her eyes fixated on the village beyond the window. "She was being truthful about wanting me to be at the watchtower though. I don't know if she truly fears an attack or if she wants me to have me controlled and watched, but I'm not there because the dryad is worried about lazy fairies."

"You knew?" The words escaped Icasondra's mouth as did the tears from her eyes. "Were you aware the whole time about the intent of Flynwydl?"

"Of course." She stated. "It's easier for me to read hunters than prey." Her voice brimmed with pride.

"Then you do not know anything about me! I'm just a prey!" Icasondra's face instantly palled as she said those words. *Why did I say that?*

The fairy expected a strike, a swift execution to take her out of her nightmare, to be back in control of her life when she wouldn't have to worry about a simple event, but even after a few seconds, nothing came.

“Hmm...” Alta pondered. “I’m worse at reading prey, but that doesn't mean I’m not able to do so. I’m a prey myself currently, or at least shifted into one. The chimera inside knows how Flrynwydl thinks, but the fairy outside knows how **you** think.”

Icasondra looked directly at the chimera’s eyes, and she saw a shine in the green irises, behind the vertical pupils. It shone red like fire.

“And,” Alta continued, “I think that Flrynwydl would totally understand if you do not organize this event. I’m not fully aware why, but the first time we met her she gave you time to relax, advising you to rest. Yet you haven’t done that.” The Blossomflame fairy looked at the tidy bed. “It would seem that you didn’t even sleep today. Maybe I should tell the dryad myself that you are not in conditions to organize anything.”

“No!” Before Alta could turn, Icasondra latched into her locking her into an embrace and impeding her to move. “Don’t tell this to her!”

“This reaction shows me that I should do otherwise.” She said with an eerie lacking emotion, yet that same absence was oddly comfortable.

“Please, don’t.” The Moonlight fairy dove her head into the Blossomflame’s breasts, which in a manner were hers. “I can do this. Please, let me do this. I know I can do it. I have done this before. I need to do this!”

Even though Icasondra’s eyes were closed and buried in Alta’s chest, she could feel her warm eyes locking into her. She looked up. The eyes didn’t judge her. Icasondra didn’t know if the chimera was capable of judgment in the first place.

“Please...” The plead escaped her lips, her mouth faltering as her face trembled.

“Understood,” Alta answered with a familiar nod. Then she grabbed Icasondra by the chin. “But I don’t want you to see like this again, do you understand?”

“Uh...” The fairy didn’t know if to feel comforted or scared by the chimera’s actions. But in the end, she gave up. “Understood.”

This time it wasn’t Alta who was imitating Icasondra, but the opposite.

27. Wood

Alta had become aware of other types of damage. Until now she only knew about physical damage, mostly visible and always affecting the body. But as she spent more time with Icasandra, she learned that there were more types of damages she didn't know of. In this case, psychological damage.

She couldn't fully understand it, but she acknowledged that it was still damaged. A wound not visible that didn't affect the body, but the mind. As more she thought about it, the more sense it made. The brain could be hurt after all.

The problem was that she didn't know how it was possible that kind of damage.

Considering how Icasandra didn't want her to talk with Flynwydl, Alta had to go with the second and last choice for her inquiries.

"So, you are saying that Icasandra has brain damage?" Aecansomdry's responded with an expression of bountiful doubt, her black wings flowed with brass as they flapped.

"Something along those lines, yes." Alta nodded.

"What happened?" Even though the tailor didn't fully believe the chimera, she was worried for her friend, nonetheless.

"Hmm..." The Blossomflame fairy pondered. "I don't know exactly... Has she always been like this?"

"Icasandra has always been a bit gloom, but she's equally as cheerful." The Losttime fairy explained. "She's not the most 'fairy' of the fairies, but I'll admit she seemed a bit absentminded as of late. It began with your arrival..."

"I haven't done anything," Alta added.

"I have not said so." Aecansomdry's slowly blinked.

"You have implied so." The chimera stated. "And you believe it."

"Alright, I may have implied that your presence has affected Icasandra, but I honestly feel it's something else." The tailor admitted. "She wouldn't keep you as close as she's doing if she felt you were a menace to her and actively hurting her. I even heard you sleep together!"

"What should that have to do with the issue at hand?"

"For starters, you don't invite someone to your bed easily." The Losttime fairy nodded, agreeing with herself.

"Yet you seem to do that," Alta stated plainly. "You reek of mating, and with multiple partners at that."

The dark-skinned fairy's visage shifted to five shades of pink before opening her mouth.

"How?" The question was simple and filled with curiosity.

"I'm sensitive." The chimera pointed at her nose. "I have detected the hormonal exchanges since the first time I met you."

“You haven’t told Icasandra, have you?” Aecansomdry’s tone turned borderline hostile.

“No,” Alta admitted, “should I have done so?”

“Elders, no!” The woman cursed. “You did well keeping your mouth shut. Icasandra doesn’t deal well with such... affairs. The only fairy in the village that isn’t well-versed in... well you know. I mean, just look at Flrynwydl, she’s the face of the village, and that isn’t certainly a decent sight to behold.”

The tailor sat on a stool, her wings slightly fluttering. The pattern on her wings constantly changed at vertiginous speeds, the brass sand flowing in a sea of black sludge.

“Where were we?” She asked after taking a deep breath.

“We were talking about Icasandra’s mental state.” Alta reminded her.

“Oh, right.” The fairy stretched her dark arms. “You shouldn’t worry about it. She’s stronger than she looks.”

“She looks feeble and brittle.” The chimera explained. “All fairies do.”

“I’m talking about her psyche, you silly!” Aecansomdry’s approached Alta and nudged her arm. “Her mind is strong, I can assure you that. Even if she likes to think otherwise.”

“Not so sure about that.” Alta stayed still, unphased by Aecansomdry’s touches. “The festival organization seems to be taking a toll on her.”

“The Midsommar festival? She organizes that every year! It’s impossible that’s distressing her, at this point it must be an autopilot thing for her.” The Losttime fairy said as her finger circled up and down on the Blossomflame’s arm. “Either way, the distraction will do her better than worse. About that, I’m one hundred percent sure.”

“I see.” Alta stood out with a blank expression. “You haven’t been useful, but I’ll remember your words.” Then she walked toward the door.

“Wait!” Aecansomdry stood up from her stool.

The chimera maintained her lacking visage, her face seemed to show even less emotions than before. “Your approaches are lacking and obvious, you should work on that.”

Alta closed the door behind her.

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By the time Icasandra woke up, Alta was already gone.

The Blossomflame fairy had helped her with some preparations before forcing her to go to bed. The only good outcome of this situation is that she didn’t cry herself to sleep and just passed out of exhaustion.

With an energetic jump and an active dissipation of her darkest thoughts, Icasandra went down to the village. A few fairies had already begun readying the simple details, but they lacked cohesion. A cohesion Icasandra could bring with her experience.

“There you are!” A voice called to her. It was Akorodei, the Rootweaver merchant. “We’ve started doing our things, but without you, we couldn’t move forward.”

"Yeah. Sorry, Akorodei. I had been a bit distracted as of late." Icasondra responded with a smile. "I'll try to get everything ready before noon so we can start the Midsommar celebration in the evening as always."

"That's the spirit, lad!" The Rootweaver pat her on the head, which got a furious pout out of her.

"Don't do that!" The Moonlight fairy screamed and then sighed. "Are all the materials ready? I guess you have already gathered everything, no?"

"Em... about that," Akorodei added with shame.

"Really? Bad news already?" That made Icasondra question why she even woke up today.

"I'm afraid so, yes." The man nodded. "We have had problems with our stocks of dry wood and Stillwater fairies, so basically we don't have wood for the campfire."

"No." She refused to believe it. "The campfire it's the biggest event! Even bigger than the feast!"

"I know I know." Akorodei sighed. "But we can't do nothing, our reserves are completely botched."

"The whole stockpile?" He nodded at Icasondra's question. "How did that even happen?"

"You better not know, I got myself angry when I heard that. Better if you just let it slide."

"I'll follow your advice." She said leading her hand to her forehead. "Can't we use green wood or some Rootweaver magic?"

"Can't do that, lad," Akorodei explained. "Green wood burns badly, and even if we manage to make it burn for a campfire that large, we run the danger of a forest fire, as green wood is more violent than dried one. And as for our magic... I'm sorry, all Rootweaver wood is green, we cannot make something unalive."

"What about Stillwater fairies?" Icasondra suggested. "Can't they suck the moisture out of the wood?"

"They can, and I've already suggested that,"

"But." The Moonlight fairy interjected, smelling the word a world away.

"But the process is rather intrusive and weakens the wood." He continued. "The wood becomes too brittle, so it isn't doable for a campfire. It's too big and the thing will collapse on itself not even a minute in."

"Can't... can't we do the campfire smaller?" Icasondra rubbed her temples, having run out of options.

"I guess that's our only option, there's still a bit of dry wood, it isn't like 'all all' has been botched. But it will not be the same."

"Yeah, it's a shame." *I want to cry.* The fairy thought, her façade intact. *Why do I even try? Everything goes wrong. No matter what I do...*

“What’s a shame?” A new voice added to the conversation, it was totally neutral and devoid of opinion. The Blossomflame fairy popped into her vision, her glorious flamboyant wings shining down on her.

“Hey, Akorodei.” The Moonlight fairy directed to the Rootweaver. “Would it be possible to dry them naturally?”

“What do you... Oh.” The merchant gasped in realization. “Yes, but of course, it should be a better job than those Stillwater may do.”

“Do what?” Alta asked, but before she could get her answers, Icasondra kidnapped her.

*

Alta had not expected to be a glorified dry rack. She hadn’t expected it to work, for starters. But her increased comprehension of the magic of fairies allowed her to do things that weren’t possible before.

“That’s good! Keep at it!” Icasondra cheered her from her back. “At this pace, we will have the logs dried in a matter of hours.”

The chimera’s expression became petrified as she heard those words.

“Are you telling me that I have to be with my back at this pile of wood for hours?” Alta herself was surprised at the emotion in her voice.

“Well, duh!” The Moonlight fairy laughed. “Do you see any other fairy to dry this wood?”

“Can’t you set a fire to dry them?” The Blossomflame fairy suggested.

“With what wood? The one you are drying?” Alta couldn’t deny that Icasondra spoke hard facts. “And besides, if that were possible, which may or may not be, we would burn the wood. And burnt wood doesn’t burn very much.”

“And that’s why I’m the only one who can do it?” She inquired.

“Exactly!” Icasondra flew into her vision. “Your Blossomflame wings are made of fire, but they don’t burn, they only heat. That’s very good because you’ll dry the wood faster than the sun.”

“I see.” The chimera couldn’t protest, she saw the logic in the fairy’s words.

“Now, I’ll go,” Icasondra said as she flew higher, ready to take off. “I need to order more people around, you stay here until the wood is dry enough, then we’ll see each other at the festival!”

“But,” Alta’s words fell on deaf ears as the fairy had flown away. “I have to work.”

28. Festival

“You won’t go to the Midsommar?” Anofareda, the other sentinel on the watchtower, asked Alta.

The fairy was a female Rootweaver, and Alta highly doubted why she had this job. Fairies were already incredibly physically deficient, but females were even worse. Alta wasn’t affected by that because she had modified her musculature and had better biomass than the fairy before her, otherwise, she would have shifted her gender a long time ago.

“Someone has to man the tower, or not?” Alta inquired.

“I mean yes, but aren’t you new to the village? You can’t just lose your first Midsommar festival!” Anofareda protested.

“Are you going to stay here then?” Suddenly, the enthusiasm of the Rootweaver died out and avoided the Blossomflame’s gaze. “That’s what I thought. Leave.”

Anofareda didn’t protest anymore, leaving the watchtower with her root wings that seemed too heavy to even flap, let alone fly.

The sun was beginning to set, twilight lurching on the horizon. *I guess they will now light the campfire.* Alta didn’t lament that she couldn’t participate in the Midsommar festival, but she didn’t like the lost knowledge. She didn’t know how the event was, and now she wouldn’t know.

The fairy observed the horizon, admiring the oranges, pinks, and violets of twilight as she waited for the Celestial Triumvirate to come out.

*

The festival was going well.

That’s all Icasandra needed to know, a weight lifted from her shoulders. Fairies talked and indulged in the feast, some even trying meat. The village didn’t have any cattle or even performed animal husbandry, so any meat had to be hunted or purchased from the occasional merchant. It was a luxury that not many people indulged in. Icasandra herself was satisfied with a bunch of blueberries and cider.

It’s so strange that you can make alcohol out of APPLES. The Moonlight fairy took a sip of her mug, the beverage refreshing her mouth yet paradoxically making her throat burn. She saw Aecansomdryes talk with a female Stillwater fairy, but she couldn’t recognize it. *Hmm, it feels as if something is lacking.*

But her thoughts were interrupted by the apparition of Flynwydl. The colossal dryad, three times as tall as the tallest fairy, appeared between the vines of her tree carrying a fire that burned blue.

The magic radiated from the flame.

The fairies, no matter if they were the Life-aligned Rootweavers or the Death-aligned Stillwater, bowed down to the elder. It was nothing fancy, more than a nod than an outright bow, but the respect was felt from their gestures. Icasandra did the same.

“Are you having fun?” Flrynwydl asked with a bountiful smile.

“Yes!” The voices of the fairies shouted together at the same time as if they were a hivemind, the sounds mixing together in a cacophony.

“What do you want?” The dryad raised the light blue torch to the skies.

“The pyre!” Everyone shouted.

“And when do you want it?” The elder asked, raising her voice even higher to accommodate it to that of the villagers.

“Now! Now! Now!” They chanted.

“Then so be it!” And with that, Flrynwydl threw the torch in a perfect arc, landing directly inside the pile of dried wood.

That reminds me... Icasondra thought as her vision was tainted in a flash of blue as the pyre came to life. *Where’s Alta?*

The Moonlight fairy walked across the tumult, looking for the chimera, yet she didn’t sight her iconic fiery wings. It was difficult seeing anything, as the blue flames of the campfire tainted everything with its hue. Icasondra flew high up but to no further success.

Crying her name wouldn’t work. First, it would disturb the celebrations, and she didn’t want that. Second, it was impossible to do so. The band of Dreamsong fairies dominated the sound, quite literally. Only the songs produced by the musical fairies could be heard.

Being unable to find any fairy amidst the visually and audibly overloaded scene, powerful blue tones and harmonic notes, Icasondra flew to Flrynwydl. The tall dryad was the only figure she could distinguish.

“Hello, Icasondra.” She stated colloquially, the sound magically distorting around her as her voice was crystal clear.

“Hi, Flrynwydl.” The fairy saluted the elder. “Have you seen Alta, by any chance?”

“Alta? I don’t believe so, no.” The dryad responded. “But she should be on the watchtower by now.”

“The watchtower?” Icasondra’s voice glistened in offense. “Are you saying that she’s working on the biggest celebration of the village?”

“More people are working, child,” Flrynwydl said. “There are more sentinels placed around the Evergreen to guarantee the security and success of the Midsommar, not everyone can join in the fun.”

“I understand that... but this is Alta’s first Midsommar, it’s not good that she just loses it because she has to work.”

“Those are the rules.” The elder stated firmly. “And the chimera accepted them.”

Icasondra understood that no matter what she told Flrynwydl, she wouldn’t change her stance. Her job as a matron and a leader collided a lot, and she didn’t want to be around the dryad when that happened.

With a sigh, Icasondra flew away. She would have to be the voice of the Midsommar then.

*

The dark veil of night shifted to blue.

Alta still watched the horizon, looking for potential danger, but she repurposed part of her biomass and shifted one of her eyes to her back. The sight was dizzy and disorientating, but it allowed her to see the festival from afar.

A column of blue smoke raised over where the village was. Even though the fire was a long walk from the watchtower, the lights were visible at night even without her increased senses. The green forest gained a turquoise color as the blue light showered it.

The chimera couldn't help but identify an eerie similarity between the light of the fire they had lit on the village and the tangible light that seeped life in the prison. The color was the same, yet the... *magic* was different. She couldn't exactly point out why.

But the cool color shone even brighter than Shatel, the moon of blue. It gave a different feeling to the forest, more mystical.

"How can colors do that?" Alta asked herself. "Changing the entire ambiance of a landscape with a slight brush of light..."

She stopped her ponderations and shifted her eye back to her face. The sight was distracting her, and distractions could be lethal. The mixture of black, blue, and green was what mostly populated her vision.

"Boredom." She stated the current state of affairs.

"Then why don't go to the festival?" A voice was accompanied by the fluttering of wings.

Alta turned her head to see Icasondra, who had flown into the watchtower nest.

"Someone has to watch for dangers." The chimera explained returning her vision to the empty horizon.

"Is that more important than losing the best event our village has to offer?" The fairy sat next to her.

The Blossomflame fairy turned to look at the Moonlight. Icasondra's eyes shone with expectation, yet Alta's were drowned in tiredness.

"You are too complacent. In the wild, a hunter can capitalize on every mistake, in every distraction."

"We are not in the wild!" She negated, but Alta pointed with her eyes to the ever-expanding forest. "Alright, we may be in the middle of the Evergreen, but that's not dangerous. We are on Flrynwyd's domain!"

"And yet Flrynwyd told you not too long ago that this was dangerous." Alta lectured. "Why wouldn't you hear to your pack leader?"

"She's exaggerating!" Icasondra denied as she sway her head. *There's something more.* The chimera thought. *Hidden in those words and movements.*

"She feared the humans." The Blossomflame added. "And those were the ones who captured you. Why don't you fear them?"

Suddenly, Icasandra's eyes lost their glint. Even the light of the three moons wasn't capable of lighting the darkened expression.

"I see." Alta comprehended. "You do fear them. You are just hiding, camouflaging your fear. Perhaps you are more of a hunter than I thought."

"I... I don't fear them." The Moonlight fairy said with words she didn't even believe herself.

"You should go back and stay with your peers." The chimera explained.

"No!" The fairy shouted. "You are also one of us! So, if you don't go to the village, I'll stay here and celebrate the Midsommar with you!" She raised a plate with fruits.

One of us... Those words resounded in Alta's head.

"How is it that Flynwydl, basically your mother, rejects my existence and shifting nature, yet you embrace it?"

"I... well..." Icasandra's words vanished into nothingness. Her eyes went back and forth as she looked for the correct words. "I guess that-" But even when she finally found them, Alta could no longer hear them as her eyes detected something on the horizon.

"Can you see that?" The sentinel pointed at the distortion in the night sky, interrupting the fairy's words.

"See what?" Icasandra appeared to be unable to distinguish the subtle changes and deformations in color. It was truly dark after all.

But Alta saw it.

Smoke.

29. Bolt

Without thinking twice, Alta jumped down off the watchtower and into the forest.

Her body rapidly shifted to not only mitigate the fall but accelerate her airborne state. Her skin transformed, growing bigger as her bone and muscle biomass decreased. Pouches of skin clashed against the wind, slowing her fall and allowing her to maintain her airtime for longer. She had learned this tactic from a group of brown critters in the forest during her job.

The Blossomflame wings also fluttered vigorously, though they were incapable of gaining any height, only reducing her falling speed even more.

“What are you doing?” Icasandra flew beside her, already having caught up to her even if she had jumped out before. This only showed how limited and atrocious Alta’s flying form was.

“Investigating for dangers.” Alta briefly stated, her focus placed on maintaining her altitude. She judged that even with perfect posture and control, she wouldn’t reach her destination before landing. Not that she thought of landing directly on the smoke pillar, that would give away her position.

Position... Alta realized that her current shape wasn’t the stealthiest, as her wings illuminated the skies like a torch. The Blossomflame diminished the intensity of her wings, like how they were on the lake.

The embers she now had for wings were insufficient for cohesive flapping, so she stopped using them even if that meant losing altitude faster.

Alta turned her head to see Icasandra, her face died in worry. But what mattered to the chimera were the fairy’s wings. *They are bright, but not too bright.* The Moonlight fairy’s wings only reflected the light of the Celestial Triumvirate, and on this dark night that meant they lost most of their potency.

“Tell me!” Icasandra spoke once again.

“Look before you,” Alta responded. “There’s a smoke pillar over there.”

“Smoke? I don’t see any smoke. I can’t even see the Evergreen, for the sister’s sake!”

“Doesn’t matter if you see it or not, you know what it means.” The chimera remained impassive, even when the fairy raised her voice.

Icasandra’s eyes shot wide open. “Humans...”

“Most likely, yes,” Alta added. “There’s no chance the fire is natural, there has not been a thunderstorm for days, so someone must have lighted it.”

The Moonlight fairy’s visage lost color, resembling more the white light of Nux, the youngest sister of the moons, than the beige color of skin.

“Turn back.” The Blossomflame reasoned. “Having prey in a hunt will end badly.”

“...No.” She spoke weakly, the fast winds of the night mostly covering her voice.

“What?” Alta asked, not having fully understood Icasandra.

“No, I won’t back away!” The fairy’s irises trembled. “You don’t know anything about humans, if our first encounter is to be trusted, you massacred them before talking!”

“They attacked first!” The chimera responded, not believing the words coming out of her mouth. “And if I hadn’t done so, they would have gotten you!”

Icasondra closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. That’s when Alta realized that the fairy didn’t even know what she was saying. She didn’t care about reason, but only about her instincts. And her instincts told her to push forward.

Alta could understand that. She was also guided by instincts.

“Can you dim the light of your wings?” The chimera asked.

“What?” Icasondra opened her eyes, not understanding Alta’s intentions.

“Can you dim the light of your wings?” The chimera reiterated, though instead of a neutral voice, now she screamed in a commanding tone.

“Y-yes!” The fairy instantly responded, a hint of fear in her voice.

“Do so then!” Alta commanded.

Knowing better than responding, Icasondra dimmed the light of wings. Before they were a fourth moon on the sky, now though, they shone even fainter than a firefly. A name Alta considered inappropriate as they weren’t made out of fire like her Blossomflame shape was.

“Do you now see the smoke?” The chimera pointed with her eyes as her arms were occupied working as impromptu gliders to sustain her flight.

“Em... I think so?” The fairy responded with uncertainty.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Alta dismissed her. “Follow me, I’m losing too much altitude, I’m going to land in a few seconds.”

The Blossomflame didn’t wait for the Moonlight to respond to her and instantly dived into the forest. She guided her arms into her body, her shape now without gliders nor wings descended fast. The wind sang in her ears, the violent whistling drowning any potential complaints Icasondra may have.

Her current altitude was so low, that she didn’t even need to shift biomass to make her landing smoother. Alta stepped on the ground, dirt and grass being forcefully displaced and her knees crying in protest, but otherwise uninjured. She had been silent, unlike the fluttering fairy that followed her wake.

“Step on the ground and stop flying,” Alta commanded.

“But I’m barefoot...” Icasondra protested.

“Step on the ground!” The chimera reiterated, not raising her voice much now that they were nearing the source of the smoke.

“Alright, alright.” The dim wings of the fairy stopped moving and her feet landed graciously on the ground.

“Follow me.”

*

Icasondra was scared.

It was her fault, she understood that, but this commanding Alta reminded her of the chimera she had met a week ago on the Barren Lands. A ruthless predator that had a clear vision.

A clear vision to destroy anything on her path.

The chimera crouched, seeking something Icasondra herself couldn't see. Intimidated by peer pressure, the fairy followed her steps, going into a crouch even if the chimera herself didn't order her to do so.

Both fairies had luminescent wings yet now they were dimmer than the scarce light that filtered through the foliage of the Evergreen. Icasondra wouldn't have believed Alta was still a Blossomflame fairy if it weren't for the barren embers on her back, shadows of what the deflagrations they used to be.

Trekking across the forest ground was a difficult activity the fairy wasn't used to, she always opted for flying in every situation. She knew how to walk, but that was different from using her feet correctly. For fairies, walking was a sluggish act, only reserved for interiors and very short distances, not a long and stealthy journey across the forest.

How's she able to traverse the Evergreen this efficiently? She didn't know much of the chimera's origins, but she certainly hadn't stepped into a forest before their first encounter.

The instant Icasondra saw a shimmering light on the horizon, Alta did a gesture with her hand pushing it down, indicating to the fairy to go lower.

This time, Icasondra didn't question her. She now knew that something pried in that light.

It was difficult to move her body lower, the Moonlight fairy had difficulties walking even if they had only been on for five minutes. Her legs protested, her knees gritted, but she did her best moving in her crouched position.

She also kept her wings stuck together to each other, reducing her overall area. This wasn't an advanced stealth tactic that had poured into her head magically, but the fear speaking. It was normal to flutter one's wings when they were happy, even if they weren't flying. The opposite happened when a fairy was scared. She couldn't bring herself to flap them, and neither she wanted.

Alta hid after a tree and then pointed to another before her. Icasondra nodded and moved behind the other tree, trying to see what the source of the smoke was.

It was obviously a campfire.

But what worried the fairy was what was next to the fire.

Humans.

Icasondra's heart sunk, thoughts of doubt and fear overwhelming her mind, asking herself why she came here in the first place. The fear, the blood, the despair. The trauma. She swayed her head to dissipate, or at least tried to do, her afflictions.

There were a bunch of humans. A lot. More than she had ever seen.

She counted ten, and they wore armor of leather and iron. Those weren't like the guards of the merchant cart that Alta had killed. No, the ones here knew battle. Their armor was muddied and dirty as if they had never seen a bath.

Deserters? Icasondra thought as she inspected the worn armor and weapons. They don't have any coats of arms, maybe mercenaries? She wasn't well-versed on human warfare, or warfare at all, but it would seem that Flynwyd had been right. These humans weren't part of a military or an expedition, but an off-product of a battle. And they didn't look like nice people.

Scared, Icasondra approached Alta who was a tree away, but her movements were stopped by a crunching sound. With dread, the fairy looked down at her feet to find a stick snapped in two.

By the time she raised her head back up, she felt the pain in her neck. The warmth. She was unable to turn her head down, something stopping her from doing so.

Alta looked at her with eyes wide open.

Icasondra looked to the fire just to see a human with a crossbow in his hands. The shooting contraption was unsprang.

The Moonlight fairy's eyes wandered down to see the bolt embedded in her neck.

Her sight wavered.

Her body fell to the ground.

30. Abomination

It all happened in an instant. Icasondra took a single step forward, and in the next instant, her body was falling to the ground.

Alta rushed toward her, ignoring the now alert humans.

“Just two fairies, nothing to worry about.” Announced the man who had shot the projectile.

“Yeah, and you just killed her.” Spoke a human Alta could no longer recognize as her eyes centered on Icasondra. The human’s voice lacked any sympathy, but even worse, he sounded *amused*.

The Blossomflame fairy crouched to the Moonlight, looking at her fearful eyes. They were rapidly losing color at the same rate Icasondra’s neck lost blood. Alta led her hands to the wound, but she immediately comprehended the lethality of the attack.

Icasondra opened her lips as if to talk, but out of them only came a rugged exhalation and a whisp of blood.

Time was against her.

Alta flared her wings, going from extinguished embers to a blaze in a matter of fractions of a second.

But that did nothing.

She guided her finger to her mouth and bit it viciously without a shed of hesitation, pulling it out in a brutal and hurried state. Flames spurted from the torn phalanx, just as it had done when she was a chimera in the prison.

“Fuck, what’s she doing?” Another man questioned. The chimera couldn’t even focus on the words being spoken, let alone look at who said it.

Alta put the burning finger on Icasondra’s neck, but it only healed her wound, not the one of the fairy.

Why? She questioned in exasperation. *Aren’t Blossomflame supposed to heal with their flames? Why can’t I heal her?* Alta thought of removing the projectile from the neck, but her instinctive understanding of organic creatures told her that would only accelerate Icasondra’s death.

Alta put her arms under Icasondra’s neck and looked at her straight in the eyes, they were... *so dim...* The fairy tried to speak once again, but this time not even air came out of her mouth, just heaps of blood.

“Stop,” Alta whispered. “Don’t talk.”

Icasondra looked at her, the fairy’s eyes wavering as if she could no longer see her. She raised her arm with great lethargy, and by a miracle alone, the feeble and cold hand landed on Alta’s cheek.

An instant later, Icasondra’s arm fell to the ground. The next one, no more light shone on her eyes.

Alta knew too much about how living organisms worked. The coldness, the lack of breath, the loss of blood, the dilatation of the pupils, the discoloration of the skin, the unmoving heart... there were unlimited ways to determine it, but she found herself unable to accept the death of the fairy.

It felt like an eternity ago since the last time the chimera had seen death.

She was born on blood and darkness and excelled in it, yet these last days in the peaceful fairy village, where not even animals were hurt for sustenance, had made something to her.

Not weaker, she refused to believe so. In a way, that knowledge and understanding made her stronger than before.

Icasondra had taught her the value of life.

Yet she now lay dead on the ground.

It all happened in an instant.

*

“Fuck, what’s she doing?” The man screamed in repulsion as the fairy tore one of her fingers apart.

“Probably some witch doctor magic or something, I don’t know.” Another shrugged. “There’s nothing she can do though, that fairy is already dead, she hasn’t even noticed. By the way, thanks for that Bjorn.”

“What?” Bjorn, the man with the crossbow responded. “Was I supposed to let a fucking feral animal pounce on us? You should praise me that I managed to hit the bull’s eye in a fucking blink.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The man shrugged once more. “We can’t go back to the battlefield, but surely this fairy will sell well. I heard that the fairy dust you get from squeezing their wings is a powerful aphrodisiac.”

“Bah, bullshit.” A taller man told. “Fairy tales, literally. But some noble pervert will pay a hefty coin for the fairy. Maybe even a priest, those are crazy for children.”

The coarse humor of the man induced a wave of laughter around the campfire.

“Go and get her, Bjorn.” The tall man ordered after the laughs died out. “And don’t kill this one.”

“Fuck you, Ivar.” The crossbowman replied with dissidence, but nonetheless, complied.

Bjorn approached the fairy of the flaming wings and was surprised by her stillness. No tears of sadness, no tantrums or wailing. Just perfect silence except for small crunching sounds. That made the crossbowman alert but continued. He would be drowned in insults if the rest saw that he feared a little fairy.

“Hey fairy, come here with us.” The man put a hand on her shoulders and turned her weak body to have a better look at her.

The fairy's eyes weren't bloodshot, as one may expect from the tearless eyes, but bloodthirsty and perfectly calm. Bjorn took a step but upon seeing the visceral expression. Those weren't the eyes of a fairy who had lost a companion but of a predator stalking its prey.

If he hadn't been so distracted, Bjorn would have noticed the raised arm of the fairy and the claw she inserted into his arm.

"What?" That was all he managed to say before his body was punctured by a thousand black needles, all coming from his inwards.

The surroundings exploded in gore.

Instant death.

He was not even able to feel pain before his consciousness vanished into nothingness.

Ivar looked at the sight in confusion as Bjorn was obliterated, his insides outside. And the fairy, no longer flames spurted from her back, but terrifying black protuberances like the legs of a spider.

The monster gorged on Bjorn's corpse, and before the body touched the ground, only the bones remained. They were pristine as ivory, with not a trace of muscle or blood. All of those had been consumed already.

It didn't even take a blink for the whole squadron to withdraw their weapons, yet in that single blink, the monstrosity had rushed to the nearest person, that being Hakon. The pikeman had been mutilated. Ivar couldn't even see what happened to him as the blood lingered in the air, more gas than liquid.

He looked at the other men. Two had fallen, but eight remained, including him.

The eyes of the soldier knew it. Escaping wasn't an option, the creature was too fast, far faster than them. If they wanted to survive, they would need to slay the monstrosity.

The next one to fall was Gunvor.

In the split-second Ivar had taken to think, Gunvor had already died. The man's shield had been splintered instantly and his head flew through the forest.

Ivar charged, alongside the six other men.

By the time he took seven steps and blinked once, the monstrosity had changed. It no longer had the beige color of the fairy's skin, but a red chitin armor resembling that of a ladybug. But instead of innocent, this one was far more menacing-looking.

He saw a bolt flying through the air. It was shot by Einar, the other crossbowman.

Ivar should have learned from his mistakes, as that distraction ended up with the death of another of his men. In this case, Olaf the berserker.

The moment he finally swung his sword at the monstrosity, two other men had died. He didn't even recognize them, their bodies and clothes torn apart as needles came out of their bodies, like how it had happened with Bjorn.

His sword finally collided with the chitin plate of the monstrosity, and after such a display of overwhelming violence, he expected his sword to bounce away. Instead, the sword penetrated easily as if it were flesh.

He couldn't afford any more distractions, so he hacked his weapon once more, not pondering on the strange phenomena.

On his third swing, Ivar saw the flames coming. Fire spurted out of the first wound, flesh mending together, undoing the damage in a matter of fractions of a second.

The next instant, he felt the monstrosity's gaze on his neck.

He didn't have a second instant to react.

Death.

*

The dryad ran through the forest as fast as her long legs allowed her to. As she celebrated the Midsommar in the village, the Evergreen began to cry for her help.

Her hasty departure evoked some concern in the villagers, but she couldn't care less about it. The forest seldom demanded anything, yet now it was pledging for help in a visceral scream.

She wasn't surprised when she heard that the screams were coming from the watchtower where Alta was situated. But what truly stole her breath wasn't the mad dash, but the sight.

On a random forest clearing in the middle of the night, the only source of light was an almost extinguished campfire.

There was only one word to describe the sight: Gore.

Flesh and bones littered the ground, blood was sprayed everywhere and with such violence that it lingered in the air as if it had forgotten that it had been once a liquid. Flynwydl wouldn't have believed this scene was of real death if it weren't for the tainted weapons and clothes on the ground. There were not any discernable individuals that could have worn them nearby.

Instead, a figure stood in the middle of the clearing.

It was nauseating and unnatural. It stood only a couple of meters high, yet it expanded widely. Flesh, muscles, blood, bones, chitin, fur, hair, hide, leather... every single component a living organism could have was present on the abomination.

Yet Flynwydl's fears came true as she saw what was below the abomination, a white body in blue clothing.

"Ica.." She quickly covered her mouth, alas it was too late. The abomination saw her.

As she readied for battle, ready to unleash the Evergreen's wrath... nothing came. The dryad inspected the abomination once more and saw the embers spurring out of her legs and the long blood-red mane on the front.

"Alta?" Flynwydl said, but the chimera didn't respond, she kept moving her extremities doing something to Icasandra's corpse.

The dryad took careful and slow steps with great condolence, the lifeless body of her daughter becoming more visible to her. She gritted her teeth hard, they sounded like wood being splintered.

It was only once she was a step away that she noticed what the chimera was doing. Fire cradled Alta's hands alongside bags of blood and flesh. The fire didn't sear the Moonlight fairy's flesh, but it also didn't heal her. Not even the transfusions of blood from the bags helped her recover the color.

It was obvious what the chimera was doing. And even more so how she had utterly failed.

"It won't do anything, Alta." The dryad explained, the words coming from her mouth pained her. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't. Her lime and soulless eyes were focused on the deceased fairy.

"What?" A cacophony of voices asked as multiple mouths opened. Most were soaked in blood.

"Her soul has passed away." Flrynwydl bit her lips, sap flowing out of them. "It doesn't matter how many times you heal her body, without her soul you won't be able to revive her."

"I see." The myriad of voices responded with a grim understanding.

The frail hands of the abomination stopped glowing in flames and they picked up Icasandra's cold body.

"What are you doing?" The fear was obvious in the dryad's voice, and the chimera knew that as a thousand eyes looked at her. But even then, she couldn't allow the remains of her daughter to go away as her life did. "Alta! What are you doing?"

The chimera's response was short but powerful. A statement.

"Kill Death."

31. Underworld

The dark sky shattered.

Pieces of impossible crystal fractured and rained down into infinity. The chimera grappled into the wall with ease, their everchanging body allowing for maximum efficiency. Optimal solutions.

They didn't know how to go back to the prison, they had been teleported out of it by the bird statue into the soil of the place the fairies called the Barren Lands.

They, unfortunately, noticed this when they arrived at the spot where they had excavated to freedom, only to find more dirt below. No sight of the prison.

But they felt it.

They felt the Death lingering on the Barren Lands. The prison had to be close.

Shifting their body into a perfected tracker, the chimera looked for Death.

Death was a curious thing. They had only known death since the very beginning, but at the same time, they were incapable of it. Death, much like Life, was tangible, detectable.

At vertiginous speeds, the chimera sped across the Barren Lands. In her wake decimating the local fauna adapted to the extreme conditions to get more knowledge on their surprising biomass.

Their thoughts were vague but direct. Their actions were fast but precise.

The moons couldn't even equal them in speed as they rushed for the vortex of Death, hidden in a commonplace location for the Barren Lands, and entered without a shred of hesitation.

They broke through the prison's darkened ceiling.

Alta breathed as their memories finally caught up with their thoughts. The chimera finally understood what it meant to assimilate multiple shapes into one, to turn their body into an abomination.

Ruthless efficiency at the cost of straight thought.

A worthy cost.

They thought as their body throbbed like a heart. Sustaining this much biomass was complicated, especially since it hadn't been completely assimilated into their body.

With a thousand eyes, Alta looked at the prison. It remained the same as it did since they left. Then a few eyes twisted to look at the dark sky the prison had for a ceiling. Even if they had just broken it with overwhelming force, it was already healed.

It didn't take much for the tangible blue light to make its appearance as Alta gathered her thoughts.

Their mind fell like an endless ocean of sludge, every coherent thought requiring a lot of energy. They trod slowly, every step with care so as to not distract themselves into mindlessness.

It was difficult.

Alta would have never thought that maintaining her own lucidity could take this much work. They slowly descended along the prison walls searching for their objective.

The chimera had to go up to escape from the prison, so it was obvious they had to go down to meet the warden of wardens. The being that ruled over the undead legion.

Death.

Their arthropod legs clawed on the prison's stone wall with a solid grip. The chimera descended in a vertical walk, one step at a time.

As more time happened, more and more light blue light gathered around them. Yet they descended, nonetheless. Unlike before, they weren't starving. Now they were filled to the brim with biomass, having more than enough to waste to stave off the warmth-leeching light.

With their claws, they cut the palm of one of their many hands, blood spilling out with high pressure. It didn't take long for the fire to appear, healing the wound but most importantly, threatening the light.

Alta's red flames were of Life.

The light blue tangible light was of Death.

They didn't know how they knew that, or even how they comprehended it, but they knew. It was instinctual. Two forces that didn't necessarily clash, but also didn't respect each other.

The chimera continued cutting her arms as her legs pounced deeper. The fire kept the light away, but even then, they felt their warmth seeping away. The light stole their life, yes, but now it wasn't the light that was threatening their body temperature.

They were deep down, far more than they had once been. Even if the dark void before them showed no end, it felt less infinite than before. But most importantly, it was colder.

The light wasn't currently able to leech her warmth, it was the decreasing temperatures of the prison. That told Alta a very important piece of information, she was getting closer.

At one point, the stone walls became rougher. They lost their bricked pattern and changed into a more cavern-like structure. Their legs dug without difficulty. Even in their scaled-up proportions, insect body parts were incredibly efficient. Their legs were composed of a handful of them, too many for their afflicted mind to count, and they didn't even know most of their names to remember them.

Alta began hearing noises. Not of their crumbling body, nor of the cacophony of tormented souls.

No. The heavy sounds were familiar and hateful. Those were the steps of wardens. A lot of them. Far more than they had ever heard.

And they were close.

Clink.

An almost metallic sound resounded on the cavern as her chitin-covered leg impacted with something. Not the wall, but a floor.

It was all dark. They hadn't even noticed they already were at the bottom of the abyss. With a jump, they separated from the wall like a loaded spring, flying tens of meters away in a single movement.

When their body landed, it was met by a cushioned fall and a wet sound. With the eyes on their belly, Alta looked below them. There the corpse of a mutilated warden lay unmoving. A moment later the darkness surrounding them became less oppressive and revealed the horizon.

A blue light tainted the ceiling as if it were a fake sky. But that didn't matter. An army awaited them.

Hundreds, if not thousands stood before them, weapons drawn and ready for battle.

The chimera's myriad mouths curved into a smile.

It wasn't a killing squad to hunt them down.

It was a field blooming with biomass ready to be reaped.

The wardens didn't allow Alta the first move, as they charged into the tens toward them. Unlike the humans who formed their body, the wardens were faster, stronger, and infinitely more numerous.

The first two wardens got a hit on the chimera, but having learned from their mistakes, their chitin armor now worked properly and rebounded the undead's weapons.

The rest of the attackers of the first wave fell as Alta's claws penetrated them. A single claw, that's all that it took. The ebony protuberance infiltrated their bodies, growing and assimilating their biomass into the chimera, and ultimately exploding in a thousand needles.

Exploding... The visceral image gave the abomination an idea.

They raised eight corpses of the wardens they had impaled. They were unmoving, having died twice already, and covered in more needles than a hedgehog. That's where it ended, they would either retire the bodies or absorb them into their biomass.

But upon seeing the endless army, they came up with a better plan.

The chimera threw the eight corpses up high into the fake sky by cutting the claws that connected them to them.

Then, as the wardens reached the zenith of their flight, their corpses busted into gore, the needles they contained being shot everywhere.

The cries of pain were instantaneous, and the chimera rejoiced on it.

That didn't mean the "living" wardens stayed still, on the contrary, now they charged with renewed vigor. Foolishly dotting them with more biomass and weapons.

More and more came in endless waves.

The undead soldiers' axes impacted the chimera's insect armor, and whilst most rebounded and promptly killed, some managed to penetrate into the legs.

But cutting one out wasn't enough to take the multilegged behemoth down. Flames spurted off the wounds, incinerating the closest wardens, the cacophony of the souls muted by the painful screams of the soldiers.

By the time a new body made its way to Alta, they had already regenerated their leg, and it became ever-so-tougher.

The dead didn't stop coming.

It didn't matter how many the chimera slaughtered or consumed; the prey continued throwing to their jaws. Infinite biomass, yet the army managed their job, keeping the chimera away from their objective.

Their hunt.

Alta took a step forward, and the sound of unnumerable bodies crunched bodies under their legs reached their ears.

Every step was hard fought as they didn't stop coming. But Alta didn't stop. Not moving, not losing their consciousness to the bloodshed and carnage.

More and more biomass were assimilated into their body and unconscious and instinctive action. Yet the body didn't grow any longer, control and mastery were slowly being achieved.

As more death littered the underworld, more Alta became acquainted with the whisper of Life.

A blade cut shallowly on their underbelly.

In a blind rage, the chimera threw that warden into the sky and a giant maw shifted on top of them where they ate it alive. Eating was a quicker way to assimilate biomass. And a more ruthless way to kill.

Alta inspected inside their body where Icasandra's dead body rested. The body was warm as the chimera had inserted blood vessels to keep the heart pumping to avoid any necrotic decay. But what mattered most was that it was unscathed. The wild swing hadn't hurt her.

With steeled determination, the chimera massacred forward. Advancing ever-so-slowly towards Death itself.

32. Winter

The underworld had been painted white.

The milky substance the wardens had for blood tainted the landscape. Only four colors survived the carnage. White for blood. Black for darkness. Blue for light. And red. Red for hair.

Alta couldn't even guess how much time had happened. It could be an hour, or maybe a month. They only knew that everyone lay dead. Sounds other than the souls could be heard, maybe some had survived, but they were too frightened to approach the chimera.

Their body was weighted down by the mass of a thousand soldiers, even if their volume had stopped increasing a long time ago. Their steps echoed through the infinite cavern, powerful and heavy. The fake sky made it seem as if they were in the open, yet they knew better.

There was only one way now. To seek Death itself.

With every subsequent step, Alta felt their mind clear up. The battlefield was silent except for their steps. A thousand sounds. Some were fast and light, others slow and heavy. A thousand legs, every single one with their own weight and pace, their own speed and sound.

Unstoppable force.

Their body slowly shifted, becoming ever-so-efficient. There was strength in numbers, yes, but they no longer needed. Not that kind of strength, at least.

The chimera's body had but become a cradle for something even greater. The words etched on the bird's statue resounded in their brain.

My chimera, my Alta. You were born for greatness.

They were of no one, but they finally understood what the last part entailed. What being a chimera meant, and how that was related to greatness.

The temperature began to decrease, and at the same time, the tangible light blue light became brighter. The essence of Death wasn't detectable, but outright solid.

On the horizon, something awaited them.

A tree.

Not of Life and wood, but of Death and light. It was far bigger than any other they had seen. The dryad or the watchtower's tree looked like ants in comparison. It was far bigger than the mountains Alta had seen on the horizon back on the Evergreen.

The branches of the homogenous light blue tree expanded into the fake sky as if they were holding the weight of the whole cavern alone.

A fearful sight, but not the one Alta looked at.

At the base of the luminescent tree, a dark figure rested.

It was occluded by the radiance of the tangible light behind, but Alta knew what they were.

Death.

Something moved on the horizon, near Death. A figure, completely dark, and around the current size of the chimera.

It rushed forward at a speed the body of the chimera was unable to recreate.

A blink later, hundreds of meters of distance had been erased.

Enough time.

A blink later, the creature lunged on top of Alta.

The creature was canine in aspect. Two-headed and colossal, the dog-like monstrosity had powerful jaws and claws. The chimera readied their own.

A blink later, the dog bit them.

The sizeable jaws allowed it to seize a bite big enough to threaten the integrity of their body. But the canine didn't have any more chances to attack.

The mound of flesh that had separated from Alta's body shifted at vertiginous speeds, far quicker than any previous shift. Blood sprayed everywhere as the shifting was imperfect, forced. Nonetheless, it was completed.

Flesh transformed into chitin, and the chitin became claws. The claws became thinner, and they penetrated the dog's mouth cavity relentlessly.

Alta didn't stop there.

They raised tens of arms and legs, all covered in sharp claws, some even holding the weapons of the deceased wardens, and they all hacked into the creature's fur. Again and again.

The remaining head howled in pain, surprisingly still managing to cling to its undeath.

The dog clawed with its front legs the chimera's body, and whilst it managed to damage it, the onslaught was far less intense than the first attack. Flames spurted from the claw marks, not only healing but also damaging.

"Awooooo..." The dog howled again, yet this time it felt more guttural, more primal. And weaker.

Picking up the defeated creature with their uncountable arms, the chimera threw them hard towards the fake sky. Air rippled as the dog flew and the sound exploded once it impacted against the ceiling. It remained there, stuck in place as a thousand needles pinned it to the sky.

The chimera doubted they could easily kill the dog, it was tougher than it looked like. Just like them. Opposite, but equal.

Silence lingered. This far away, the laments of the two-headed creature couldn't be heard, and at some point, the chorus of the souls had ended. Yet...

Clapping.

A series of slow, dramatic claps tore the silence apart.

Alta looked forward to finally see the responsible for that. In the base of the tree of light blue light, sitting on a throne of stone, a figure clapped.

A woman.

Death incarnated was but a woman. She wore a black dress that heavily contrasted against her pallid skin. She slowly clapped as Alta walked forward, unphased. Strands of golden hair fell from her motion, her eyes shone with a light blue light.

A woman of impossible, objective beauty. Or at least, that was half of it.

The other half was hideous, a rooting corpse that only Death could love. How someone could even think she was attractive as a whole just remarked how impossible was the beauty of her living side.

“You shouldn’t play with other people’s pets without asking before the owners.” The voice was silky and captivating. Yet impossibly cold. Frigid. Uncaring.

Alta shifted. Their inwards turned into a form, no longer shapeless. This wouldn’t be the job for an abomination.

The chimera’s legs were bent and their body fell to the ground. The body began palpating like a heart, an organ. Because that’s what it was. From the flames and flesh, an opening formed to reveal a humanoid shape, naked.

This was the job for a man.

Alta walked away from the mound of flesh, it pulsed alive, yet it no longer had a host. His new body was identical to the one he originally had, yet now he had the rightful male genitally and a healthy constitution, not the skinny one festered by imprisonment.

“Oh, my.” Death sang, amused and unamused at the same time.

He took a few steps more until he finally stopped at ten meters from the half-corpse lady.

“Would you mind explaining to me why you interrupted in the domain of one of the Queens of the Underworld?” The woman stated after ending her clapping. She hid her skeletal hand behind her dark dress.

“You know that.” The man stated calmly, yet powerfully.

“As a matter of fact, I do not.” She responded. “Contrary to popular belief, we are not omniscient. That right is reserved for a single being in all of Existence. But I’d suppose you come here for vengeance, chimera. For you Mother.”

The chimera nodded. “You are right in one thing, but wrong in two.”

“How’s that?” The light of the Queen’s eyes shone dangerously. “Please, illuminate me, Mutation.”

“First, my name is Alta, not chimera nor Mutation.” The woman slightly smiled at that explanation. “And second, I do not come in vengeance for someone I didn’t know, but someone I saw die.”

The discarded body of the chimera began to emit crunchy and wet noises, overall repugnant sounding. A new hole tore open in the flesh and little creatures spurted out. They carried a corpse. The dead body of the fairy was in perfect condition, not single a scratch on her skin nor any internal wounds. Even blood and grime refused to latch onto her dress.

"I see." The lady caressed her living cheek with her healthy arm. "Now you've piqued my interest, *Alta*." She added with a hint of venom as she spoke his name.

The Queen stood up, her golden hair flowing down graciously as her meticulously crafted dress did the same. She stood tall, less than the man, but not by much. Her figure was even more accentuated now that she was on her foot. But that also made her dead side of the body more visible.

"Then let's get the presentation, over with." Light flooded out of the woman's eyes. "You stand before one of the Queens of the Underworld, Winter!"

Then, reality was painted blue.

33. Soul

Alta was blinded by the omnipresent light. The light blue color was everything he could see, but Winter failed to comprehend the chimera possessed a myriad more of senses. Enhanced ones at that.

He took a step to the left, an instant later he felt the air warping to his right. A potent attack, whatever it may be.

Smelling was out of the question; the half-dead half-alive woman didn't possess any scent. He was being guided by his sense of hearing, touch (as he read the fluctuations in the air), and most importantly, his innate ability to sense death.

The chimera already began reforming his eyes, but judging by the previous pace with the pet, the master wouldn't lack in speed. The few seconds he would need to regenerate his eyes would be hard-fought. And that didn't solve the problem. Winter could use the same trick again and he would still be unprotected. Alta couldn't just heal his eyes, but also make them resistant to the Queen's light.

"Interesting." Winter said, his voice coming from the right.

Alta turned to face her and backpedaled a few steps.

The cold stone ground vibrated, indicating the chimera that the undead had began moving. This time, the direction of the attack had been more concealed, less telegraphed. He put his leg muscles to work, and with the slightest compression of his knees, Alta was able to jump tens of meters into the air.

Twirling in the air with absolute control, he landed behind where Winter should be.

The Queen of the Underworld was getting stealthier and stealthier with each subsequent attack. He needed to get his eyes back. The best course of action became obvious to him.

"What's so interesting?" It was foolish to talk in a hunt as many things could go wrong, but he needed the time.

No.

In a fight. The power Winter exuded wasn't that of a simple hunter. *She's the ruler of the place, the zenith of power. She's an apex predator.*

"Your form, I suppose." She responded unsurely. "A master of shifting shapes, yet you remain with the simplest of them all. The first one you showed me made far more sense."

"Humans are, unfortunately, an incredibly efficient shape." The chimera said. "Surprising adaptive capabilities, great stamina, and considerable strength."

"I guess that's why life always defaults to them in many different worlds." The Queen dismissed.

"What?" Alta felt that comment was very important.

"That you should pay more attention!" As Winter cried, he felt the air curving, signaling an attack, but he had been too distracted by his own maneuver.

Coldness penetrated him.

The man could feel the blurry light seep the warmth on his abdomen. Touching the light was always weird, simultaneously a gas and a solid. The gelid tendrils lingered on his flesh as he forcefully removed them with his hand.

Warm blood flew back to the wound as the flames healed him.

“Flames, huh.” The half-corpse sounded amused. “Just like your mother.”

Something in the woman’s tone told Alta that she wouldn’t answer any questions related to this mother of his. That she was only entertaining him because he hadn’t because of her but instead for Icasandra.

Flames. Mother. Chimera. That made Alta think of his magic.

He evaded to the right as another tendril of light came to assault him.

What’s the magic of chimera? Alta deflected another tendril with his hands. The light crashed on the rock floor with a strenuous sound. The shapeshifting? The appropriation of magic? The sensing of death? Or something else?

The battlefield became silent. That worried Alta. But the time had finally come, he opened his eyes. Before him, Winter stood still, observing him as she was surrounded by a maelstrom of mist-like light.

“Finally deigning yourself to look?” The Queen taunted, but he wasn’t one to fall on meaningless words. Winter was unamused by his lack of reaction. “I see.”

She snapped her fingers and the world became blue once again. Yet this time, in the absolute blueness, Alta was able to see. Blinded no more.

Insects prove to be superior one more time.

Readying his feet and lowering his hips, Alta shoot from her sprinting positions, and in less than a blink he had moved next to Winter. The woman slowly reacted with her eyes wide open as the chimera grabbed her head.

Alta led Winter’s head to the ground.

Hard.

The cavern floor was instantly destroyed as the undead’s cranium impacted against it, a sonic wave far bigger than when he had thrown the dog into ceiling.

He raised his arm, his hand still clutching the woman’s head, and drove it to the ground once more.

The second strike made the rocks crumble into pieces, making Alta’s footing unstable, but he managed to stay upright. Just to continue with his onslaught.

Again.

The sheer force made the pebbles grind into sand.

And again.

By this time, no floor remained. Only a pool of dust remained under him.

The man undid his grip and stood up, looking at the unmoving golden mess of hairs intertwining with the fine powdered dust.

And then...

He heard laughter.

"Hahahaha..." It was Winter's. "You amuse me, chimera." And she was unphased.

Her undead body undid into tendrils of light that flowed away like snakes and rapidly trod back to the tree. On the throne, the light blue light swirled and ebbed together into the coherent shape of the Queen of the Underworld.

"Spring was right with her pure soul. Things are getting interesting in the Afterlife."

Alta looked at the woman as his chest heaved up and down. The force he unleashed was enough to decimate mountain, yet the Queen of the Underworld was only... amused.

Only now Alta noticed the wounds in his arm as it spurted into flames out of nowhere. He had broken several ligaments and blood vessels with his raw and uncontrolled strength. In a way, the exchange had hurt him more than her.

"Let's stop this farse. I think you will have already figured out by now." Winter hid her corpse-side of the face with her lustrous golden hair, yet the powerful light blue glint of her eye was still visible through the strands. "Mutation, I cannot die. But at the same time, I do not have the power to kill you, someone that close to Life."

The green and lifeful eyes of the man clashed against the blue and dead eyes of the woman. She was speaking the truth.

"Having said so," she continued, "it would be quite bothersome to engage in an eternal battle. My sisters and I are quite permissive, no matter what the mortals may say, so I will follow Spring's steps."

The Queen of the Underworld extended her pallid yet living hand with her palm open. Light from the tree behind started making tendrils and directing to the open hand. The light spiraled into a crescent light, getting brighter and brighter, until it ceased.

The light transformed into an incorporeal entity.

A soul.

It shone white and grey, with vague hints of blue. It was obvious who's soul was.

Icasondra's.

With great difficulty, Alta opened his mouth. "That's it? Are you going to give her to me just like that?"

"What? Are you refusing my blessing?" Winter's eyes turned a shade darker and the fingers holding the soul got tighter, ever-so-slightly. "I know your kind, chimera."

"It's Alta, *Winter*." The man boldly interjected.

“Alta,” She announced with scorn, “I know your kind. You won’t stop, no matter the consequences, or the time. And that’s a problem. Because we are both eternal. It’s far better if we let all hate aside and come to a mutually beneficial agreement. You get the fairy back to the world of the living, and I get to be alone again. Sweet, sweet loneliness.”

For a brief moment, Alta thought Winter was being sarcastic. But no, she was totally serious. Solitude is the only thing she wished for.

“I see.” The chimera took a step forward. “I’ll accept your blessing then.”

“A pleasure doing business with you.” The undead Queen handed him the fairy’s soul with a smile on her face. It was unreadable, but it certainly didn’t portray happiness.

As the petite soul landed on Alta’s hand, he instantly knew what he had to do. The man enveloped the soul with both his hand, treating it like the most fragile thing in the world, and walked back to the unmoving body of Icasondra.

He kneeled down and placed his hands on the fairy’s chest. A moment later, he opened them, allowing the incorporeal entity to fall into her rightful body.

“You should go, and fast.” Winter added as terrifying smile drew on her visage. The corners of her lips going far upwards than it should be humanly possible. “Mortals cannot survive in the Afterlife, if she awakes whilst still here, she will die for true this time.”

The Queen’s words filled Alta with dread.

“Run, Mutation. Run.” She laughed.

He had been tricked.

But he didn’t have time to lament or feel angry.

Only one thing mattered now.

He had to get out of here as soon as possible.

34. Phoenix

Alta pushed his legs hard as he held Icasandra's inert body in his arms. With every stride, tens of meters were skipped, though the homogenous landscape of the underworld didn't allow for precise metrics. Only the endless corpses of the wardens highlighted any meaningful change.

The chimera's heart beat at a pace never seen before. It wasn't because of his physical exertion but of fear. The fear of what would happen if Icasandra awakened.

Winter hadn't lied.

The Queen of the Underworld's words rung with truth. If Icasandra woke up in the prison, she would remain dead forever.

Before the man noticed, he had already reached the bottom of the abyss. A clearing free of white blood or the corpses of the undead.

Alta looked upwards, seeing the impossible long climb. The ascent would be far harder than the descent.

The fairy's eyes twitched.

The chimera skipped a heartbeat.

There's no time. Dread settled on his mind. How can I do this? Even shifting all my biomass to my legs and jumping, I won't be able to reach the top. And even if I did, the crystal ceiling remains. I would have to break it...

He faced too many problems and didn't have enough time to answer them.

A fugue light appeared before him.

A flashing image.

It was all in his mind, but the statue of the bird intruded on his thoughts. The statue of her mother. *A symbol of origin.*

Alta comprehended it.

He was a chimera, an ever-shifting creature. But he had progenitors. Progenitors who weren't chimeras. Yet their blood ran on him.

The transformation was sudden but swift.

Fire grew out of his skin as feathers. Bones stretched far longer than it should be possible with his current volume, but Alta knew he was far denser than he appeared. Arms shifted into colossal wings, yet he didn't allow Icasandra's waking body to fall. His embrace was tight.

Most remarkably, Alta's nature changed once more.

Soon, she evoked a figure far bigger than her previous abomination shape. She didn't know the name, but she recognized the flames.

Those had always been there, healing her.

Alta put Icasondra on her back, shifting her flame feathers around her to tie her in a makeshift harness. Then she extended her wings.

She flapped them.

Unlike the failed fluttering attempts of her Blossomflame shape, she now gained air. And that with a single flap.

The next one shot her through the prison.

As she tore the underworld across with her mythical speed, Alta finally understood what Icasondra had meant with flight. It was incredibly efficient, incredibly fast, but also, incredibly fun.

A screech came out of her beak, dissipating the distractions of her mind and she pressed on, flapping her wings with even more intensity. She wouldn't allow Icasondra to die. Again. Especially after she had finally managed to fly.

Alta wanted to show the fairy her flight.

The flames became redder.

Her vision narrowed by the seconds, the speed too high to process. The fogginess of distance disappeared and instead got substituted by the dark ceiling of the prison. She was going to collide against it in a few instants, but before that, fire gathered in her throat.

This new shape gave Alta an unprecedented mastery over fire, it was even greater than an instinctual feeling.

She was the fire itself.

The chimera opened her beak and a swirling ball of fire came out of it, shooting at even faster speeds. Before, Alta had broken the crystalline sky with brute force. Now, she obliterated it with fire.

As she flew beyond the fabricated darkness, reality warped, space shifting as her body did. This fact was more than enough evidence to comprehend that the underworld – or Afterlife as Winter had called it – was beyond the world of the mortals. How did Alta even manage to enter it was a question beyond her comprehension and current worries.

Only one thing mattered now.

The starred sky filled the chimera with hope.

They had escaped.

Alta flew higher, her blazing figure soaring upwards in the night sky.

Icasondra had been saved.

Once she had passed well beyond the clouds, she twisted her neck to look at the sleeping fairy. Her wings shone with overwhelming light, far brighter than those of the fiery bird, the close light of the three moons powering them.

Her eyelids twitched.

*

Icasondra opened her eyes, rubbing them groggily. It took a few seconds for her to notice the bird in flames before her.

"Em... Alta is that you?" The Moonlight fairy's tone was charged with confusion.

"Yes, Icasondra." She spoke affectionally, the voice didn't match the face of the bird. "It's me."

"Oh, ok." Icasondra dismissed it, her mind feeling incredibly foggy. She led her hand to her head. "I just had the strangest dream... Or rather, a nightmare."

"Yes, a nightmare." The chimera admitted, heaving her head up and down.

The response alerted the fairy as realization struck her, memories becoming clearer.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?" She asked.

Alta didn't answer.

"What happened? Please tell me!" Icasondra pleaded, the lapse in her memory looming, as another more terrifying feeling did.

"Nothing to worry about," Alta responded with a smile, somehow. Icasondra didn't know beaks could perform such gestures, but once again, she was a chimera, not a bird.

For more than she was worried, the dismissal allowed the fairy to become aware of her surroundings. The stars, the moons, the sky...

The sky?

"Alta you are flying!" Icasondra shouted.

To which the chimera simply nodded. "I'm indeed flying, yes." Alta's face was brimming with satisfaction, but above all, happiness.

"I told you, didn't I?" The fairy said. "Flying is fun."

"You were right. I feel at peace in the skies." The nightly breeze swept, loading the air with embers from Alta's fiery feather and carrying them into the horizon.

The sight was mystical.

Icasondra separated from the chimera's embrace, dislodging herself from the tight feathers, and flying on her own. *Oh, we are high. Very high.* The moons were close and the clouds closer. The Evergreen only seemed like a smudge on a canvas. The fairy flew backward, taking a better view of the bird. *She's so big... It looks more like a winged dragon than a bird.*

Her brain put two and two together.

Is she a...

"Alta, are you a phoenix?" Icasondra asked, the chimera flapping her sizeable wingspan casually to stay at the same altitude.

"I do not know that word. But if you ask about my current form... that name seems appropriate."

By the moons! She exclaimed in her mind. *She's truly adopted the shape of the mythical bird of rebirth! Was that how she... revived me?*

“Now,” the phoenix interrupted her thoughts, “we should get going. Frynwydl will be worried about you, and I doubt this cold is good for your health. You should rest.”

“Wait, Frynwydl? What does she have...?” The Moonlight fairy’s eyes darkened. “Did she see me? Before I...”

“Yes,” Alta admitted.

“Oh.” Her lacking expression was filled with sorrow for what she made the dryad behold.

“Latch on to me.” The chimera said, unbeknownst to Icasandra’s struggle. “It will be better if I do the flying. I do not know how well your body has taken in the recent events.”

“Okay.” Icasandra accepted in defeat, hugging the mythical bird’s warm back.

Alta’s winged shape graciously soared through the sky with a familiarity it shouldn’t be possible for someone who had just learned how to fly. *It’s like she was born to do this.*

The cold air caressed Icasandra’s platinum mane. It wasn’t freezing as Alta said, the fairy enjoyed the cold touch. It made her feel... alive. Icasandra buried her face in the soft feathers. *Warmth. Warmth is better.*

*

The fairy slightly moved around on Alta’s back. She could feel Icasandra’s nervousness through the small motions.

The chimera looked below to the Evergreen, but quickly found herself cornered.

“We have a problem, Icasandra,” Alta said. “I don’t see the village.”

“Hmm.” The fairy stood up on her back, her naked feet gracing her feathers. “Me neither. Well, I guess if you didn’t see it, I wouldn’t be able to. The Midsommar must have ended if there’s no pyre. I do see the lake, land there and we can fly the way back on the ground.”

“Understood.” The phoenix nodded and began her descent.

The lake that Icasandra had called Clair De Lune, was massive. Yet Alta managed to find the exact spot where the Moonlight fairy had brought her a week ago.

She landed carefully on the bay, so as not to distress her passenger. Icasandra didn’t land herself, choosing the fairy way of sprouting directly into flight.

Alta undid her shapeshift, suddenly finding himself in the body of a man.

Icasandra looked at him, the small flying fairy barely floated above the ground, so the colossal figure of the man was at her full display.

“Em... Alta?” The fairy said as her face gained a pink coloration. “Could you shift back into a Blossomflame?”

“Of course.” Answered the voice of a man, his original voice back in the prison, and not the one he had gained upon becoming a female fairy.

The shift was swift, far more than any previous ones. She was getting more and more used to it. No pain this time.

But it wasn't wholly successful. She had adopted her Blossomflame shape, yes, but she had an extra pair of wings, those of the phoenix. Unlike in her phoenix shape, they didn't sprout from her arms, but from her back. She used the extra wings to envelop her naked body, to be more decent.

*

Alta had transformed back into a Blossomflame instantaneously, she didn't bloom out of the human body like she had done the first time. Icasondra appreciated that a lot.

But there was something different.

Her leaf-like Blossomflame wings remained, but now an extra pair grew below them. These were composed of feathers. The phoenix wings resembled more than that of angels as Alta flapped them. Then she curved them around her body into an impromptu dress. Curiously enough, it reminded Icasondra of the dress Alta already had.

"Alta, can you come here?" Icasondra asked.

"Sure." The Blossomflame fairy separated from the ground, taking into flight and fluttering her wings toward her. Alta's progress was surprising.

Icasondra looked the chimera in the eyes. They were green, but unlike before, they were no longer impassive to the outside world, but she saw a spark there. Happiness.

A bad idea coursed through the Moonlight fairy's mind, but she couldn't help herself.

Icasondra lunged on Alta's lips. Mouths connected.

The Blossomflame fairy opened her eyes in surprise, yet she didn't push Icasondra out. Instead, she grabbed her hips and locked them into an embrace, her tongue pushing against hers.

Ah~ Icasondra lingered on her thoughts. *Is this the right choice?* But truth was, she didn't care.

Icasondra enjoyed the moment.

34.5. Flesh

Icasondra separated her lips from Alta's, the Moonlight fairy heavily panted as the silver bridge between their mouths collapsed.

The sight of the exhausted and small fairy captivated the chimera. Alta didn't fail to notice the reflection of the three moons in Icasondra's eyes, the lilac color prevailing above all of them.

She recalled what Icasondra had told her about the Celestial Triumvirate. Lilac was the color of the biggest satellite, the big sister. Also known as the seductress. That title fitted the Moonlight fairy perfectly now.

Alta guided her hand on Icasondra's cheeks, soft and warm. Her body was no longer affected by the cold touch of Death, instead, she was hot. But a nice type of hot.

The Blossomflame fairy was the one who initiated the next kiss. Their tongues intertwined with passion, Icasondra was as excited as her. Still, with her lips connected, Alta moved her hand to the top of Icasondra's dress, which prompted a surprised moan from the fairy.

"I... I don't know if we should do that." Icasondra said after undoing their kiss.

Alta didn't respond, instead, she opened the phoenix wings that had been covering her body. She exposed her naked body to the woman before her.

"Um..." The fairy words died in her mouth as she became redder and redder.

The chimera picked Icasondra's hand and guided it to her breast. Icasondra didn't add any words, simply reacting with her hands as she grabbed the lumps of flesh. Alta moved closer to her as she toyed with her left breast and whispered behind the fairy's ear.

"Shouldn't we~?" Her playful tone awakened something in the timid fairy.

Icasondra threw Alta to the ground, and a grin popped on the chimera's face. Icasondra opened her mouth again, her lips flirtatious, but instead of going for another kiss, she enclosed them around Alta's nipple.

"Ah~" The Blossomflame fairy moaned in surprise.

This... this is a sensation, indeed... Alta exhaled as she thought. The moment Icasondra started using her tongue, she could feel her crotch itch. *I shouldn't be the only one to get this feeling...*

"Eep!" A cute sound escaped Icasondra's mouth after Alta suddenly stood up and grabbed her by the arms. She guided the fairy to the ground and painfully slowly, she removed her turquoise dress. "I..." Icasondra whispered as she covered her pert breast with her arms.

The Blossomflame fixated on the lower part of the Moonlight's body. She wore a simple pair of white undergarments, and somehow, the last piece of clothing made the fairy far sexier than imagining her naked.

That didn't stop Alta from pulling away the cloth, though.

"Ah!" Icasondra covered her face with her hands in shame as rivers of wetness trickled down her crotch.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about." Alta comforted her.

Then she dove for the fairy's crotch. Alta licked the wet contours of the fairy's vagina in a slow and circular motion.

"Ah~" Unlike the previous shameful moan, this one was coquettish. "Ah, Alta~" Icasondra sang, which only made the chimera only more excited, not satisfied with the outside, she pushed inwards with her tongue. "Ah!" The fairy moaned as her bottoms raised and her back arched for an instant, then dropped heavily on the ground.

Alta grabbed Icasondra's modest thighs with her arms and spread them to have a better licking position.

"No, please, stop..." The fairy moaned with difficulty, her forearm in front of her arm as she tried to dissimulate the moans. She utterly failed. "Please, I'm going to... Ah..." Her words cut as Alta shifted her tongue and pushed further in with a dexterous and sly movement. "Oh, Moons! Moons! I'm gonna! I'm gonna! I'm coming!"

Icasondra's body spasmed as her vagina overflowed with sweet nectar, Alta's visage being drowned in the explosion. The chimera removed herself from the fairy's opening and with her still shapeshifted long tongue, she licked the ejaculation out of her face.

"Mmm..." Alta moaned. "This could be better than blood."

The Moonlight fairy didn't seem to hear her as her chest heaved up and down in exhaustion, her arms and legs limp on the ground, much like her body.

"That... that was the first time I ever came..." She muttered.

"And how was it?" Alta asked with a smile.

Icasondra raised her head from the dirt and became red as the Blossomflame's mane.

"Em... it was..." She twisted her head to the sight, avoiding direct contact. "...good."

"I see." The chimera nodded in understanding. "Should we end here? You have died, after all, this much exercise might not be good for your body."

As Alta stood up, she was stopped by the lightning-fast grab of the fairy.

"No," Icasondra responded. Then her blush intensified. "I want to continue, I want..." She continued talking, but her words became lower and lower until they were an unintelligible mess even for the chimera's heightened hearing senses.

"What?" Alta earnestly asked.

She hadn't expected the next words that came from the innocent fairy's mouth.

"I want you to fuck me with your cock!"

Alta stood still in shock. But before she had even noticed, her body had shifted into his true form. A tall male human. *How?* The chimera thought. Icasondra's words had been so passionate, so *indecent* that they outright made him shift his shape unconsciously.

"Um.." Icasondra looked to the side. Alta couldn't know if it was a reaction to her dirty words or the fact she had a penis in front of her face. And it was erect.

“Oh.” Alta looked at his awakened genitalia and then at the petite fairy. There was a slight problem. “I can make myself of fairy size if you think you cannot take it.”

The fairy grabbed her platinum hair and bit it. Then she responded. Obviously, didn't get a single word of the Moonlight's mumbling.

“What?”

“I said no...” She replied removing her hair from her mouth. “It's... it's good with that size.”

Considering his manhood was as thick as the fairy's forearm, Alta very much saw a problem. But if Icasondra wanted it, he wouldn't deny her the pleasure.

“I'm going in,” Alta said even if both knew it, yet it felt appropriate to alert his companion.

“Mhmm,” Icasondra muttered with her mouth closed.

The rubbed the tip of his girth against the fairy's lower lips. A shock traversed Alta's spine as the damp opening drenched his member. Simultaneously warm and cool. He unconsciously gasped.

Icasondra looked at him with expectation, her eyes sparkling in lustful lilac. Alta vaguely pushed forward, not even the entirety of the tip in. The fairy's eyes shot wide open, yet they still welcomed him.

Alta went slowly, so as to not hurt the petite fairy. Even then, he doubted he could go faster. Icasondra was incredibly wet, but the walls of her womanhood pressed hard against Alta's rod.

The fairy's visage was tainted by a mixture of pain and lust, with hints of fear and expectation. He stopped for a second to let her recover, but Icasondra would have none of it and slightly pushed her butt forward, making him go deeper into her.

“Don't stop,” she spoke between rugged breaths, “you can go faster.”

With the spoken Moonlight's words, the chimera could feel as if all his neurons activated at the same time. He did a massive push.

“Aaaah!” Icasondra screamed in genuine pain.

“I can...” Alta tried to argue, but Icasondra promptly interjected.

“Don't. Stop.” She said as tears fell down her eyes.

Alta couldn't understand the fairy, she was the one suffering, yet she wanted to continue. He took a deep breath and continued.

There wasn't much more space to penetrate. He hadn't even managed to put his whole cock on Icasondra's cunt until he found the end of it. The little fairy couldn't take the entirety of a human's dick, especially one as large as Alta's.

The fairy herself closed her eyes and mumbled with her mouth closed as she bit her lips. Alta looked down to see the dripping blood of the torn hymen.

Icasondra had been deflowered.

She almost seemed to faint as her body became limp, Alta was quick with his hands and grabbed her by the back before she could hurt herself.

"Are you okay?" He asked worried.

"Yes..." She added with exhaustion, then she opened her eyes. They were vaguely bloodshot and teary, but above all else, they shone in passion. "I'm... fine."

"Maybe we should stop..." But as before, the chimera's suggestions angered the fairy, now she locked his torso by embracing it with her legs.

"No." It was a statement. Icasondra looked Alta directly in the eyes and then kissed him. Both of the fairy's mouths were comfortably warm. "Alta."

"Yes?"

"I want you to fuck me." She spoke with that exciting indecent tone again. "I want you to pound me hard!"

Before she had even finished talking, Alta was already swaying his hips. The courage of the fairy instantly disappeared as he penetrated her once more, his cock violently rubbing against her vaginal walls. The confidence in Icasondra's eyes was dyed with pain, but no longer fear. Only pure and unadulterated expectation.

Alta buckled his hips once more, this time harder.

"Mmm~" The moans escaped the fairy's sealed mouth, her back arcing in a fusion of pain and ecstasy.

The chimera opened the Moonlight's lips by force by connecting them with his. Alta's tongue infiltrated Icasondra's mouth and played with her tongue. The fairy's eyes were gaining a playful look.

Then he pushed once more.

"Ooh~" The jolt surprised Icasondra, making her undo the kiss and a powerful moan escaped her. "Alta, stop. I'm going to..."

He recognized the lack of sincerity in those words. Icasondra didn't want him to stop, no. In any case, she wanted him to be rougher. Alta continued pounding her, the fairy's round ass bumping into the man's thighs.

"I-I!" She screamed incoherently.

An instant later, she slumped into his body as she came.

The fairy's modest breasts grazed against the man's chest. Icasondra breathed heavily but with satisfied exhaustion.

"Oh, moons..." Icasondra muttered as she lay on top of him. "It has been certainly an experience."

"Has? You are wrong." Alta whispered.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Icasondra, I haven't come yet."

The fairy separated from his chest, her eyes opening like plates as she heard the man's words. "Alta, wait! I've just come!"

Alta didn't wait.

Epilogue

Alta, back in her Blossomflame shape, observed the shining fairy wash herself on the lake. The sun threatened with coming out on the horizon.

“Don’t you want to come in?” Icasondra invited her.

Where does she get the energy from? The chimera pondered. *She has recently died but has the mood to take a relaxing bath before going to the village.*

“I don’t need it.” She taciturnly responded.

“Alright, alright.” The fairy nodded to herself playfully and hummed as she washed her body.

It was difficult to say if death had traumatized her or healed her. There was a dissonance between her current self and the one before dying. Alta liked the current Icasondra, but she couldn’t know if that was good or bad.

“Oh, it’s cold!” Icasondra walked out of the water hugging herself.

“It’s early in the morning and you just took a bath outdoors, what did you expect?” And though Alta protested, she went next to Moonlight fairy and dried her with fire that spawned from her hands.

“Cozy~” The fairy replied as if she was going to melt.

Alta didn’t understand why, but she found herself able to use the abilities of her phoenix self without shifting into its shape. That was impossible to do with other shapes, not that she had more magical shapes besides the Blossomflame, but it was still curious to her.

She shaped the flames around Icasondra’s body as if they were extensions of her body. Fire followed different rules from biomass, but she still had no problems whatsoever understanding them.

They truly were her body.

It didn’t take Alta more than a couple of minutes to dry the wet fairy by controlling the temperature of the flames. Not hot enough to burn, but strong enough to dry Icasondra’s long hair without ruining it.

“Hmm!” The Moonlight fairy nodded in satisfaction and was quick to cover her naked body. Even after going to hell and back, her turquoise dress shone with pristine and undirtied light. “Well, shall we go?”

Alta nodded and took flight fluttering her leaf-like flame wings. Icasondra smiled upon seeing her, she flew next to her.

*

The village was silent in the early morning. Icasondra could only be thankful that the villagers didn’t appear to have made a funeral for her, meaning they wouldn’t know of her demise.

Coming back to life is... weird. Her careless death should have ruined her nefarious mental state, yet as she flew next to the Blossomflame fairy, Icasondra found herself unable to worry about anything. *She’s a torch that ignites the skies. A sun of my own.*

She felt invincible next to Alta as if nothing could kill her whilst she was next to her. The feeling was paradoxical and downright stupid because that's how she had died in the first place, but she found herself unable to *not* think like that.

Alta had defied Icasandra's death. Her death. Death.

She didn't understand much about legends or magic, but defying death was a thing that people did to negate their own ending, not others. With her basic comprehension, she understood it was far harder to take another person back to the world of the living.

In a way, it scared her to ask about the specifics, something told her if she knew, she would be sad again. And she didn't want to be sad. She wanted to be strong and shine like the Celestial Triumvirate. Akin a flame she knew.

And she's a phoenix! She exclaimed to herself. *It isn't that surprising that she could revive me! They are known for being truly immortal, the bird of rebirth and fire!*

But that didn't matter to her now. What bothered her was the tree the in the middle of the village... the house of the elder.

She stopped mid-flight, scared to see Flynwydl again. According to Alta, she had seen her dead. That's an image she would have loved to spare her. Icasandra gave a look to Alta at her side, the Blossomflame tilted her head in confusion but ultimately smiled at her.

Moons... Icasandra was unable to decipher how a simple and innocent smile could be such a force to be reckoned with.

The fairy took a deep breath and the two of them entered the dryad's abode. This time not by the gate at the trunk, but the fairy way. They flew inside from the balcony.

There, on her throne of vines and roots, Flynwydl sat.

But before Icasandra was able to say a word, the dryad jolted away from her seat and pounced her.

"Oh, Icasandra!" Flynwydl locked her into an embrace. "My Icasandra!" It was constricting and painful, but she found herself unwilling to separate from the dryad, instead keeping her closer as she returned the hug.

"Hi... Mom," Icasandra responded with a weak smile. She had selfishly floated away in death, unbothered by the details of the mortals. Yet the dryad had been lamenting the death of her daughter alone. "It's good to see you."

"Yes. Yes, it is." After a while, the colossal dryad who outsized the fairy threefold, liberated her from the embrace. Icasandra saw the hints of diluted sap coursing from her visage. "Oh, chimera, I cannot thank you enough for your gift. For bringing me back my daughter. You've truly kept your word."

"No," Alta denied. "I've told you I would slay Death, but I didn't do that. It wasn't a hard-fought battle either, but I didn't keep my true word. I did manage her to give me Icasandra back though."

"You've... you truly fought Death?" For the first time ever, Icasandra saw her mother show fear.

It was inconceivable. She was a powerful fae, an age-long dryad, the sole protector of the Evergreen. A fragment of Nature itself, yet she was scared.

"I finally understand." Flrynwydl bowed down to Alta, her knee on the floor. "I'm elated to meet you, Incarnation."

Alta looked at the dryad impassively. Her face was totally neutral like she had been when Icasandra had met her. The Moonlight fairy was unable to discern the thoughts going through the chimera's mind, but she finally nodded.

It would seem Alta was more than just a chimera.

*

A few after coming back from the dead, Icasandra had finally made her decision.

She waited next to the tree below her house as Alta carried down some bags. The chimera defied logic being able to lift colossal objects when flying in a fairy's body. It shouldn't be possible, by any means, but Icasandra wouldn't deny it was useful.

"Are you really going to go?" Aecansomdryes, the dark-skinned Losttime fairy, asked.

The tailor hadn't known about her friend's death as Flrynwydl had kept it to herself, hoping Alta would stay true to her word.

"Yes," Icasandra affirmed. "I think I need some time away from the village, a long time. And I've talked about it with Alta, and she agrees that we could benefit from exploring the world."

"We?" Aecansomdryes quipped, not believing the Moonlight fairy's words.

"Okay, mostly me," she admitted, "but she agrees with me. Alta does not know about the outside world, and I want to show it to her. Besides, she's kind of an orphan and I hope we may be able to find her parents in our travels."

"You haven't told the last part to her, haven't you?" The Moonlight fairy smiled and the Losttime rolled her eyes. "Never change Icasandra, never change."

They stopped talking after the subject in question descended with the final bag. They were three in total, not many for a long journey, but overwhelming for two little fairies. But Aecansomdryes didn't know Alta wasn't just a fairy.

Icasandra didn't normally give her goodbyes when she went to explore, even if sometimes she disappeared for weeks. Though this time she would be gone for much longer.

Aecansomdryes herself was here because she brought them a new set of dresses for Icasandra and Alta. One couldn't know where the feeble garments of a fairy may give up. She also told her to add some human clothes the tailor had lying around. The Losttime would think they would use them for spare clothing or even blankets, but the truth was that Icasandra planned for them to visit the human kingdoms, and a human Alta would make things easier.

The dresses took a few days to make with the tailor's full attention, that was one of the reasons they stayed in the village for this long. The other was that Icasandra didn't want to leave Flrynwydl alone yet.

The dryad appeared once Alta loaded the bags around her body, the Blossomflame looking more like a mule than a fairy. Alta lent one of the smaller bags, a satchel to Icasandra which she gladly accepted.

Aecansomdrys went away the moment she saw Flrynwydl, giving her a respectful bow.

Icasandra looked at the dryad.

"I guess we won't see for a long time." It was the elder fae who talked.

"We won't." The fairy admitted. "But I'll be safe."

"I'm sure about that, my daughter." Flrynwydl smiled as she looked at the Blossomflame fairy.

"Thanks, Mom." And she hugged the dryad.

"Fare well in your travels." The mother told on the embrace.

"I will." The daughter undid the embrace and moved next to her companion. "We'll try to visit!"

"I'm sure." Icasandra waved energetically and Flrynwydl waved calmly back.

Icasandra looked at Alta who smiled at her. She grabbed her hand.

The two of them fluttered her wings at the same time and took to the skies.

Alta the Chimera and Icasandra the Moonlight fairy began their travels across the world together.

The end.