

A mouse does not rely on just one hole.

-Plautus

Offa was a lovely-looking vulpine character. Dressed in the standard

Meiguilder Sorceress attire –only instead of a gown-like shirt and hooded-cloak, she wore a paper brown-coloured shirt with suspenders. Her orange hair and grey eyes seemed out of place against her black and silver-streaked fur. The vixen was a cook based sorceress* and her talent was laced in all of her foods.

The temple's cooking space was located just behind the Sanctuary and looked no different than the average blacksmith shop that resided in official noble surveyed villages. Loose hay straws littered the ground and cobblestone stoves and furnaces did little to light up the room. A black cauldron boiled in the north-western corner while Offa chopped away at a dragon heart fruit**. Wreaths of garlic and herbs hung from the ceiling; the very sight seemed to suggest that Offa was a potion brewer that concealed her identity as a cook. In all fairness, Offa actually was indeed a substitute brewer as during her learning years she had prioritised her learning years in chemistry, alchemy, and potions –only those which were approved, though she had a few classes on forbidden brews for her safety and awareness.

Offa swished her fluffy tail as a spine-tingling sensation ran through her; the thoughts of the frightening sights of the horrible outcomes remained imprinted on her mind. Personally, she was grateful for the scarring memories, otherwise she would have probably continued her pursuit without consideration of consequences.

The vixen was able to find a different profession that practically required her skills: cooking. The vixen had an impoverished life leading up to before she joined the Meiguild convent and thus, very little when it came to decent food. So one could see why she'd want to pursue the art of food; she always wanted to make sure that every meal she served the diners would be more than pleased, they'd be grateful to have it at all.

So Offa was, preparing yet another meal for all the inhabitants of the monastery and was about to head off in the direction of Atanih –the monastery's official potion brewer who resided on an adjacent wing of the building– just when a white-cloaked figure rushed past the cooking space's entrance, no closer than two inches from her face.

In the blur that was the mysterious figure, the vixen was able to catch a hint of a cream-golden yellow with peach cream and small bits of black scattered amongst them. Offa paused in a brief shock and twitched her ears as quiet whimpers grew distant. Offa had no doubt that Cheera had rushed by and, judging by her sounds, was upset about something.

The cheetah's room, as previously described, was built slightly into Laurel, The Sacred Tree, like the kitchen and thus was located a few feet away from it. She had no sooner passed Offa when the sorceress pivoted, anxiously fiddled with the door, and rushed in, before slamming the door shut behind her and sealing the bolt.

Certain that she was safe, Cheera leaned her back against the door and exhaled shakily. Her furry cheeks had been streaked with tears and now clung painfully to the

flesh beneath them. Loose strands of her brown hair further clouded her already obscure vision that had been fuzzied by her tears.

It's n-not... Fair, Cheera mentally whined, as her tail coiled tightly around her left leg in despair, *It's not... It's not!*

The sorceress began to take a deep breath, and having forgotten she had a passenger, was shocked when what felt like a hairball clogged her oesophagus.

Nex! the cheetah instantly remembered, and stumbled toward her corner desk where she began beating her chest harshly.

After she beat her chest for the third time, Cheera leaned over her desk and coughed out her companion. Nex hit the table roughly. His fur was drenched in the sorceress' saliva while his heart slowly began to calm down its rapid beating. The mouse felt weariness replaced his adrenaline as he said shakily: "Sq-... Squeak...". Cheera brushed the lips of her muzzle with the back of her clothed arm before she returned her attention to the wet bundle of fur on her desk.

"N-N-Nex?!" she inquired with uneasy concern, and began to reach out toward him.

The rodent upon noticing the sorceress' hand approach him recoiled in a newly fueled fear.

"Sqwee eep pip!" he rebuked her, with his green eyes wide with fear.

Swiftly, Nex rolled onto all his fours, flicked his worm-like tail, and scurried across the desk where he hid behind the two-thirds finished candle that rested on top of a stack of notes.

Cheera watched helplessly as the Guardian hurried away from her. She felt her cat-like impulse to snatch the rodent tickle within her that it made her fur perk up. The sorceress didn't give into them though, and just let him slip away from her sight. Cheera felt her tail go limp as did her ears; slowly, the earlier sensation was replaced with familiar pain and emptiness of guilt, sorrow, and self-hatred that plagued the heart. To add onto the feelings, the cheetah remembered her master's facial expression of disappointment which she had seen only a few minutes ago as it spoke what he said at that moment: *Cheera... You're hurting him.*

Cheera whimpered again, this time sounding more painful, and let her legs give in. She would have collapsed on the paved stone floor had she not subconsciously flicked her tail, which shot out a glitterous strand to the chair that was a mere foot or less away, and caused the furniture to slide up behind her just in time to catch her. Cheera crossed her arms onto the desk and flung her head into them as she quietly sobbed to herself.

Time passed a bit; Nex watched silently from his hiding spot and looked with disappointment and a hint of hatred at the cheetah. But as he realised the hateful resentment, the mouse began to feel a bit ashamed of himself. She had done so much for

him, someone who had only just arrived in this world, but even if he was only new to this place it didn't take a genius' guess to argue that risking someone's life wasn't right.

The spotted feline continued to quietly ventilate her feelings in her arms to the point that the mouse just had to do something. Slowly stepping out of his hiding spot, Nex cautiously approached the sorceress and eyed every aspect of her in case she should do anything. His eyes turned to the bite wound on her hand and how almost fully black it was; it appeared like a parasitic infection or fungus roots that continued to expand.

Nex contemplated the risks of drawing near the wound and altered his direction to Cheera's other arm. The rodent forced himself onto his hind legs and leaned on the cloth-covered elbow before he whispered a curious: "Squeep?"

Cheera sniffled and tilted her head slightly to expose her emerald eyes –now a slight red– to the mouse. She exhaled and weakly raised her head into her hands as she looked at Nex with a sympathetic expression.

"I'm so... So sorry, Nex," the cheetah apologised, sniffled again, and twitched her ears and whiskers in unison, "I shouldn't have done that... I just... Just... Panicked... Oh goodness, what's wrong with me?"

She rubbed her forehead against the palm of her hand and groaned tiredly while Nex looked up at her with sorry eyes. The sorceress sighed and returned her attention to the mouse.

"I shouldn't have made that promise," Cheera continued to scrutinise, "I knew that corporeal alternating spells were forbidden, but I had hoped that we'd at least offer you refuge till we can."

"Squeak pip eep," Nex reassured, but flicked his tail in confusion, "Pip sqwee res squeak?"

"Well, it's complicated," Cheera answered, "I'd like to tell you why any other day, but just take 'because' for now."

Cheera shook her head and sighed. Nex coiled his tail nervously and glanced around for anything to start a conversation up again.


"Eek... Pip?" he asked, and looked up with a nervous smile.

"A hug?" the cheetah repeated, and brushed her hair out of her eyes. She snickered and looked at the mouse briefly before bursting into full out laughter for a moment.

Nex's smile fell and his cheeks flared a light scarlet in humility. Cheera slowly began to regain herself when she noticed the mouse's embarrassment.

“Oh, please, don’t take it that way,” she gasped, and flicked her tail humorously, “I’m just amused how quick you go from being upset at me to asking to comfort me despite the current circumstances you’re in.” She sighed. “But to answer your question, yes I’d love a hug.”

Cheera pushed the chair back until it was far enough for her to place the chin of her muzzle on the desk. The feline then trapped the rodent with her arm and pressed him right against her furry cheek. Nex let out a flamboyant squeak as he felt the cheetah’s fur press against him and delightfully nuzzled up against it as he embraced her cheek with his tiny arms; the sorceress responding with happy purrs.

 Thomas had finally reached the adolescent sorceress’ sleeping quarters when he pounded his fist against the bolted door.

“Cheera?” the retriever inquired, and perked his ears attentively for even the slightest sign of life, “It’s just me,” –he didn’t clarify, since he figured that she was familiar with everyone’s voices– “Look, I don’t want to argue, I just came to make sure you get to Atanih and deal with that wound.” He paused for any response, heard nothing, and knocked again. “Cheera?”

Thomas stopped mid-knock when he heard a gentle shuffle from behind the door. He stepped back and waited expectantly, perhaps for too long since at some point he pondered on knocking on the door again. What prevented him was the sound of the bolt being unlocked from the other side and the right emerald eye of Cheera peeped through the slightly opened door.

“Cheera, we’ve talked about slightly opened doors,” Thomas uttered, and looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

Cheera averted her gaze and reluctantly opened the door fully. Thomas sighed and extended his hand and asked: “Your arm?”

Cheera lifted the infected arm and let the canine take it. Thomas slid her gown’s sleeve up to her shoulder to inspect its status; despite it nearly having been bitten over four hours ago, the black markings have only spread just below the cheetah’s elbow, much to the warlock’s relief.

“Well now,” he remarked, and let go of the feline’s arm, “I see no need to debate, just get a move on now. Unless, do you need help to get there?”

“No,” Cheera answered, looking down at her brown ankle boots as she fiddled with her tail, “I can–” She paused and dove her muzzle into her arm as she coughed feverishly into it. “I can make it to her at least that much I’m certain.”

“Very well,” Thomas shrugged, though he knew it probably wasn’t wise to let the sorceress go alone, “but before you go, what’s happened to our rodential friend?”

“He’s fine,” the cheetah responded with a hint of anger, before he glanced over to the retriever, “Why do you ask?”

“Because you stuffed him in your mouth before running away quickly,” he retorted, and wagged his tail matter-of-factly, “Anything could have happened to him.”

“Well I’ve told you now,” Cheera said with a mocking smile, as she flicked her tail triumphantly.

“I see...” the canine said, as he stared long and hard into the feline’s eyes.

Cheera began to head down the hall when Thomas quickly yanked down her cloak’s hood. Much to his suspicion, the retriever managed to catch sight of the mouse behind the locks of the cheetah’s hair and quickly snatched him up just as Cheera was whirling around.

“No!” she shrieked, and reached out toward the hand that clutched Nex to no avail as Thomas used his other arm to hold her back.

“Calm down, Cheera,” Thomas barked, as he struggled to keep his grasp on the squirming vermin in his hand, “I’m just holding onto him for now.”

“And hand him over to Master?” Cheera voiced her speculation, “I don’t think so, Tom! Give him back!”

“And let him witness how potion making is done?” Thomas proposed in his defence, a thought which caused the sorceress to withhold her actions, “Look, I give you my word: he’ll be with me in my quarters and I’ll give him back once you’re done.”

“Swear by Gan Tús,” Cheera practically whispered.

“Pardon?” Thomas asked, and twitched his ears.

“I said swear by Gan Tús,” Cheera demanded, and looked up with a scowl, “I want you to swear by Gan Tús or damned be my life which I chose to throw away since you wouldn’t keep your word!”

Thomas stepped back a bit with unease. His ears drooped back and began to feel his fur dampen from fresh sweat.

“L... I can’t do that, Cheera,” the retriever stuttered, “I’ll invoke any other name, my life, my immortal spirit, even all of my on my body, but not Gan Tús.”

Cheera hissed through clenched teeth but only turned her back on the canine; she understood his reasoning and, like most times, knew he was right. Nex, who had been trapped within the grasp of the canine, managed to poke his snout out the clamped fist to let out a “Pip!”

Cheera’s ears twitched when the sound reached her ears and looked back with a demeanour that made it seem like she was ready to pounce and thrash the retriever. Another cough caused the sensation to escape and Cheera looked back with regret in her eyes.

“At least let me reassure him,” she begged, and twitched her whiskers, “please.”

“..Alright, but hurry once you’re done,” Thomas instructed, as he unfurled his hand, “Every second is precious.”

Nex scurried to the tips of the canine’s fingers and looked up at Cheera hopefully. The sorceress coiled her tail and worked up her courage.

“Nex, I’m...” she began nervously with an averted gaze, before she looked into his eyes and clarified: “I’m going somewhere you can’t follow right now, okay? Please, please understand... Thomas here will keep you safe until I come back... But I promise... I’ll come back to you alright?”

“Squeep...” Nex begged with helpless eyes.

“I’m sorry, truly I am,” the cheetah apologised, and drooped her ears sympathetically, “Just... Just do as I say for now...” She paused, coughed again, and waved to the rodent as she began to head down the hall. “I’ll be back, trust me.”

Nex quickly became desperate to follow Cheera that he almost jumped off Thomas’ hand without considering the casualties. What prevented him was that the canine cupped his hands and brought up his arms to get a closer look at the rodent.

“Well, my squeaky little friend,” the retriever began to converse, as he wagged his tail happily, “while she’s off getting better, why don’t we have time to chat about things?”

Nex looked up with uncertainty and dread at the canine’s granite eyes.

“Sq-squeak?” he inquired, and brushed the back of his ears.

“Oh... I’m afraid I don’t speak Rodentia~~xxx~~,” Thomas confessed, and tilted his ears in embarrassment at the fact he had tried to discuss with someone he couldn’t understand. “But judging by your expression you don’t trust me.” He chuckled. “I wouldn’t either; I’ve

been known to be a crafty bastard that's certain, but for now you might as well trust me."

The warlock stuffed the rodent in his pant pocket much to the latter's discomfort.

"So, Nexus, was it?" the canine questioned, to which Nex squealed angrily back at him, "That's right, she said you went by another name. I'll have to ask her later."

With that, Thomas walked calmly down the hall in the opposite direction of the sorceress.

This section was excerpted from the laypeople publications of this tale to prevent a widespread misuse of potion brewing; it is, however, preserved and kept within the Meiguild Archives, read carefully and temperately, dear reader.

[T]he Temple's Brewing Station was an extended building that had been connected against one of the eight walls of the octagonal structure. It was about half if not a third the size of the Sanctuary. The odd thing about it though was that the entrance was just strands of colourful beads despite how hard the Meiguilders tried to preserve the contents from unworthy eyes.

Cheera stepped gracefully through the beads and into the dark room; a hue of cyan illuminated a corner of the room. The cheetah nervously approached the light source and her nostrils were greeted to the scent of pleasant herbs mixed with the pungent smell of death.

Upon reaching the light source, Cheera's vision was greeted with a big mass of a body, dressed in a large brown reaper robe, it loomed over a big cauldron –similar to the one in the cooking space– filled with a luminous liquid coloured cyan. Cheera shuddered at the sight of the cauldron; she's had a bad and evil history with them, both before and after she had become a sorceress –but that's a story for another time.

"Ah, Cheeranaeth," an old and cackly, grandmother-like voice greeted without looking back, "What is your purpose of being here?"

"It's Cheera!" the cheetah retorted politely, and twitched her ears in agitation.

"Oh, come now," the figure scoffed, "Don't deny your real name, there's no shame in it."

"Atanih," Cheera began, and caressed her arm for comfort, "I need your help."

"Eh, sorry dear," Atanih denied, "I'm busy with a biotics potion right now–"

"It's urgent!" Cheera interrupted, the fear of what could happen had returned to her mind.

“Don’t yell at me, miss!” the figure refuted, and turned away from the cauldron as she started to ask: “What could be so urg-”

The figure paused, shook its cloaked head, and clapped its hands, Candles burst to life melting away the darkness of the room and revealing shelves and chests of potions or ingredients. Immediately, feathery avian hands grasped Cheera’s arm as auburn eyes inspected it.

The feathers were a leaf brown with a similar cream colour as the cheetah’s underbelly at the tips. A curved yellow beak was the only thing that stood out on the owl’s flat face.

Atanih looked with horror at the infected arm and would have fainted had not her motherly instincts and will to protect the sorceress overpowered her consciousness.

“Oh, by my immortal rusty spirit,” the elder avian remarked, and flapped her wings to pump blood through them, “Quickly now, dearest! Haven’t got a moment to lose! Hoot! Not a moment!”

Swiftly, the owl grabbed a pail full of a water-looking liquid beside the cauldron and poured it into the boiling brew. The luminous essence died out and the cyan liquid turned a shade of black◊. Atanih turned the cauldron –that hung by two chains on its side– pouring the liquid out on the stone floor, and heaved it back up before she flew over to her array of potions on the shelves.

“Come, Cheeranaeth!” Atanih instructed, as she scoured through the viles and bottle labelled in Runix, “Search through the supply stash for these three things–”

“Wait a minute!” Cheera interrupted, and hurried to the shelf opposite of the owl filled with jars and baskets great and small that contained ingredients both astounding and vile. “Alright, I’m there! I’m there!”

“Two blue leaves!” Atanih listed, while she grabbed a vile of a sunflower yellow, “An apple’s seeds, and–!”

She paused and whirled toward the cheetah frantically.

“Kræst!” Atanih screeched, “I forgot to ask what caused the wound! A witch?! A spell?! A bogey?!”

“The first! The first!” the sorceress answered, as she replaced a jar of newt tails she had mistaken for leaves. The cheetah had put it back so poorly it began to tip and would have shattered had not her feline senses noticed.

“But what species, Cheeranaeth?!” the owl wheezed, and set the potions on a side table by the cauldron.

“An ocelot!” Cheera answered, and unscrewed the jar of abnormal coloured leaves.

Cheera stopped and turned toward Atanih with wide eyes that matched the former’s mortified face. A part of the recipe to cure wicked infections was that a piece of the species or an object relating to the cause needed to be added. In this instance, the pair required a part of a feline related object, such as a tooth, a fur strand, or bodily fluid; none of which was among the array of supplies.

“I’m doomed...” Cheera proclaimed, and fell to her knees with drooped ears. Her fur perked up at fear of what was to come.

“L...” Atanih began to propose, “I can send someone to get something.”

“It’ll be too late by then!” the feline whimpered, and coiled her tail around her waist in comfort, “By then... I’ll be... I’ll be a-!”

“You’ll be as fresh and cheery as you always are,” a voice that sounded similar to Cheera’s but a little deeper, interrupted.

Offa passed through the beads with a calm smile that felt out of place to the dread that lingered in the air. In her hand was a bracelet made up of various teeth of different shapes and sizes; why she had it remained unknown to anyone but her.

“I think I have a mountain lion’s tooth on here,” the vixen elaborated, and swished her tail hopefully.

“Oh, Offa!” Cheera exclaimed with gratitude, as she got to her feet, “you’re a blessing to have in the darkest of times!”

“Heha!” Offa chuckled, as she began to flip through each tooth, “Consider it a repayment for the incident last month.” She took a carnivorous tooth the size of her first pinky digit. “Goblin...” She grasped another one the size of her palm. “Ogre... Which means...” She passed seven other teeth and seized the eighth. “Mountain lion! Here you are.”

Offa tore the tooth off the necklace and handed it over to Cheera, who embraced the vixen by her waist.

“Offa, I can never thank you enough,” the feline insisted, and squeezed Offa tightly, “How can I ever repay you?”

“Don’t,” Offa answered, and broke free from Cheera’s clutches, “but stop by the cooking space once you’re done; I’ll have something else to give you.”

Offa turned to Atanih –who had been quietly praising Gan Tús for Offa’s intervention–, bid the owl good luck, and exited the room. Cheera immediately turned

back to the supplies and finished acquiring the rest. The sorceress rushed beside Atanih, who equally as fast took the ingredients.

“Now, if I’m remembering correctly,” the owl thought out loud, “there needs to be as much light around as possible for this one, so candles remain lit. Then, we must first put in the ingredients.” She tossed the leaves, seeds, and tooth into the cauldron. “Next, the victim’s wound must be within the cauldron–”

“What?!” Cheera remarked, and looked at the cauldron with dread, “I have to put my arm in it?!”

“Come now, Cheeranaeth,” Atanih dismissed with a wave of her feathered hand, “not all potions can be bottled.”

“No, I-I can’t,” Cheera refused, and swayed her tail like crazy.

Dark images of a past she wished would remain buried returned; images that always sorted the sights of cauldrons of any size underneath the words ‘evil’ and ‘sinister’ that were written in flame against a black backdrop where the muzzle of a fowl beast began to emerge from the shadows with a sinister toothy grin.

“Please, that has to be another way,” the sorceress begged with dilated eyes.

Atanih looked at Cheera with an unimpressed expression and motioned to the cauldron as she stated: “This is the only way, dear... That or else...”

The cheetah tugged at her strands of hair and clenched her teeth, as her thoughts continued to act childishly.

Why me?! she mentally complained, I just was trying to meet a Guardian, not get caught up in this crap show! Oh, Gan Tús, I know You allow only that which is good for us in either subtle or obvious ways, but why me?!

“Come, come, Cheeranaeth!” Atanih said, breaking the feline’s thoughts, “Losing time! We’re losing time!”

With an agonised sigh, Cheera approached the cauldron and set her arm into it.

“Lastly, I have to add this mixture,” –she shook the vile– “with warm water,” the owl stated, “This might hurt, dear.”

Atanih took the empty pail and went over to an iron pump in the corner of the room, pumped out some water, and returned. The owl poured it into the cauldron before re-lighting the flame beneath it. Atanih took a wooden ladle and began to gently stir the water till it began to froth and bubble. Cheera bit her lower lip deeply as the boiling

water began to sting at her open wound, the metal of the cauldron also began to lap at her that the only impulse of thought the cheetah could think was to pull out from the cauldron.

“You’re doing good so far, dear,” Atanih tried to encourage, when she noticed the young Meiguilder’s expression, “just stay as you are for a bit longer.”

The owl flapped her free arm and a yellow glitterous strand exited the tips of her feathers, spiralled around in the air briefly, and imploded onto itself to reveal a leather-wrapped book that was written with an arcanic text. Atanih curled her feathery fingers which caused the floating book to open itself and flip quickly till it reached a certain page.

Cheera’s ears flicked with curiosity but the pain she was already experiencing caused her to quickly forget it and forced her to bite down on her tail. Atanih opened the vile of the sunflower yellow liquid and poured it into the steaming cauldron as she began to recite the text fluently in the writing’s language.

The cheetah looked down into the cauldron and watched as the liquid began to swell and turn with the water. It seemed like a single strand of yellow alone in the dank abyss of the water surrounded by the ingredients that also turned with the water.

Cheera slowly felt herself grow numb and all the painful sensations slowly died away. The cramped room disappeared as did the elder owl and her words. They were replaced with the essence of a fairer time, a calmer memory that soothed all the stress and fear and transformed them into bits of joy and hope. Cheera couldn’t even sense her own fur or movements and simply let the essence engulf her wholly.

The yellow liquid began to spread and blot out all of the water till the cauldron’s contents were nothing but a golden stew. The whirlpool began to turn faster and faster as the sorceress felt her breathing become shorter and shorter.

Is this death? she wondered with closed eyes, and a dreary head bobbed up and down like she was on the brink of falling asleep, *No, no it can’t be... Death is a cold and bitter feeling to which only after you have let it pass over you does such warm and comforting feelings follow. Then am I changing? What is this? Oh, Gan Tús, answer me. Blessed Warrior, who knew me better than anyone, help me!*

Faster and faster the whirlpool went. Quickly, like one had stabbed through her gut with a hot blade, Cheera felt her whole body sting inside and out as the liquid grew brighter by the second that even with closed eyes, the cheetah felt blinded. The sensation and pain overwhelmed her too much; Cheera opened her maw and let out a pain-filled screech until everything was engulfed by the blinding light.

And then, there was nothing. Except silence and its bride, tranquillity.]

Lúnc shut the door to her own quarters and pulled back the hood of her cloak

to expose her blonde hair that was in a bun. The raccoon sighed and looked around her colourful living space. It was basically a mirrored version of Cheera's quarters –the cheetah had always desired to face the side where the moon rose for the first half of the year ♦♦– but instead of leaving the birch wood wall panels as they were, the raccoon had hung personally woven draperies made in rod pocket styles of different colours.

Lúnc had a passion for weaving and fabrics; a passion that started when her mother had given her a lovely knitted quilt when she turned nine, or so she claimed. Lúnc was about to seat herself at her weaving loom for no other reason than to mentally unwind as she worked, when a gentle knock caused her ears to twitch. A smirk crossed the raccoon's muzzle; almost everyone knocked as loudly as they could when they wished to see her, save two. Cheera who would knock rapidly with eager intent, and the other because he was nervous.

“Yes, Thomas?” she answered to the door, and swayed her tail happily.

“I got a friend here, Lúnc,” thomas' voice replied from the other side, trying to sound serious.

Lúnc sat patiently and closed her eyes. Her fur perked up slowly as an aura surrounded her figure. The sorceress waited until her senses picked up the presence of another being and this confirmed the dog's words. Lúnc pulled her hood back up and approached the door. She opened it ajar and glared curiously at the warlock's granite eyes, eyes which altered briefly in a window of nervousness before they regained their collected stance.

“How'd you get him?” the raccoon inquired, and nodded to the mouse in his pocket, “You didn't steal him from her, did you?”

“You can't steal that which isn't already stolen,” Thomas defended with half drooped ears, “he wasn't her's to begin with.”

“Don't get smart with me, Tom!” Lúnc retorted, to which the retriever snapped back: “When am I never?”

“Eeep!” Nex squealed in annoyance from Thomas' pocket, as he clutched and pulled down on his ears to muffle the pair's argument.

“Oh, sorry Nex,” Lúnc apologised.

“You can understand him?” Thomas asked, and looked at the sorceress with hope.

“Who do you think taught Cheera to understand Animica?” she replied, and looked at the canine with a sore winner expression.

“Alright, alright, I get it,” the canine replied with a wave, “May we come in?”

“Are you going to state your purpose first?” the raccoon questioned.

Thomas rolled his eyes, muttered something in that bloody confusing language which made Nex’s snout tickle with curiosity and frustration, before he reached down and grasped the rodent roughly. The Guardian squirmed uneasily in the retriever’s scruffy hand as it slowly raised him to the duo’s eye-level.

“I feel out little guest here would enjoy some form of decency,” the warlock elaborated in an attempted playful voice, “You did wonderful for the gingerbread people last winter solstice.”

Lúnc’s tail swayed eagerly at the memory of her handiwork and her furry cheeks flushed.

“Thomas, you flatter me,” the sorceress uttered, as she tried desperately to regain herself, “Though, I’d loosen my grip if I were you; you’re suffocating the poor bastard.”

Thomas’ eyes darted down toward his hands and quickly opened them. Nex was on his talon-like hands and furry knees, gasping desperately for air.

You know what? he mentally remarked to himself, as his tail weakly unwound itself, *Perhaps I would have fared better being torn apart and devoured by that cat than slowly being killed by a bunch of buffoons.*

Lúnc opened her door all the way and swiftly shuffled to her cabinets of tailoring supplies. Thomas stepped in and was about to shut the door until Lúnc rebuked him and said that it should remain open. The sorceress turned back to her scouring and finally stood up with a rolled-up measuring tape, no wider than half-a-centimeter.

“Set him down on my desk,” the talented sorceress instructed.

“While you’re at it,” Thomas said, once he had set the flummoxed rodent down, “you mind asking him whether or not he can tell us what happened leading up to now?”

“Sure, I’ll try,” Lúnc answered, as she took her seat at the desk, “but that’s up to his choice if he wants to.”

The raccoon looked at Nex and gently smiled at him. The rodent looked back with a hint of dread, especially since almost every person he had encountered when he awoke

had in some manner harmed him; Nex could only wonder what this new person was going to do.

“Alright, Nex,” Lúnc began, as she unrolled the tape measurer, “I’m going to need you to stay still a bit. But as I take measurements, do you mind telling me everything you can remember up until now?”

While the sorceress wrapped her tiny strand of measurements around the Guardian’s belly, Nex huffed and figured he had nothing better to do. So the rodent recited –and Lúnc translated– all he could remember; how he woke up in the boat in the middle of nowhere, how he ‘discovered’ land, his encounter with a talking cat, how the cat had tricked him and transformed him, how he met Cheera, and was just getting to the part when Cheera returned to the temple when Thomas interrupted.

“Thanks, Nex,” the retriever began, and swished his tail, “Did he say anything about what Cheera did to protect him from the witch?”

“Squeep?” Nex repeated, unsure of what the warlock was referring to.

“The cat, Nex, he means the cat,” Lúnc clarified, as she finished measuring the collar of his neck, “the cat was witch in an altered form.”

“Ep, Peep squeak sqwee eek pip,” Nex answered, and flicked his wormy tail.

“He says that he only last saw the witch about to pounce on him before he passed out,” the raccoon said, and wagged her tail eagerly as she jotted down the measurements.

“I see…” Thomas sighed, and looked at his boots in disappointment, “So… You were a canine originally, huh, Nex?”

“Squeak,” the rodent confirmed with a nod.

A smirk crossed Thomas’ muzzle and he looked up with a triumphant gaze as he uttered: “Well, I am delighted to aid you back to normal when we can.

“Are you finished?” he asked, and turned toward Lúnc.

“No, I’ve only started!” she rebuked, and looked back at him with a confused and agitated glare, “That’s asking a painter who only just started his job on your portrait if he’s even nearly close to completion. It takes time, Tom, for goodness sake!”

“I meant with him,” Thomas clarified, as he pointed at Nex.

“Oh,” Lúnc remarked with humiliated tail sways, “Yes, yes I am.”

“Very well,” the retriever said, and started to approach the desk, “Thank you for your time, hope you get it done sometime soon, but Nex and I must be going.”

“Ah, ah,” the raccoon exclaimed, and gently snatched the rodent up before Thomas could, “I’ll carry him to wherever you need to go, thank you very much.”

“What? Why?” Thomas questioned, and moved his arms to match his speech, “What did I do?”

Lúnc looked at the canine with a raised eyebrow that said: *Do you really want to know?* She fluttered her ears and looked down at the rodent in her hands.

“What do you think, Nex?” she asked him, “Would you like to have a migraine all day, or would you prefer me to help you there nicely?”

“Oh come on, I’m not that harsh with you, Nex,” Thomas scoffed, but looked at him for clarification, “Right?”

Nex turned toward the canine and seethed nervously and shrugged with sympathetic eyes. Lúnc chuckled while Thomas crossed his arms and huffed.

“Don’t take it personally, Tom,” the sorceress encouraged, as she placed the rodent on her shoulder, “he just wants to not get sick is all.”

“Lies,” Thomas jested, and exited the raccoon’s quarters, “You’re all nothing but liars. I’m surrounded by liars.”


Lúnc rolled her eyes, shut her door, and looked at the canine expectantly.

“Where to?” she asked.

“My space,” the warlock answered, and led the way with heavy steps.

“Don’t worry about him,” Lúnc whispered to the Guardian, and followed the canine’s steps, “He might appear to be rage-filled, but he doesn’t do anything really.”

Nex forced a smile, though he personally was not comforted in the slightest at the fact. He was, however, grateful that he wasn’t gonna get motion sick this trip.

arkness. That was all Cheera could see. Or so she thought until her senses came to. She groaned, huddled into a foetal position, and finally tried to open her eyes. She blinked and winced as the light of the candles stung her vision. Slowly but surely, the

cheetah's vision began to come back into focus. Her eyes landed on a blurred blob that loomed over her which eventually became texturised with the familiar face of an owl.

"Ah, splendid, dear," Atanih said with a cheerful smile, "You handled that quite well. Hm... That recoil, however... Do you feel fine, love?"

"Ugh..." Cheera groaned, and answered: "Chirp..."

"I take that as a yes," the owl stated, as grabbed the sorceress by her shoulders.

Atanih heaved the feline up to her feet. Cheera rubbed her head and tried to look around at the room. Her vision was still a tad blurry and could make out certain objects; for the most part the room seemed intact.

"Did we do it?" she asked groggily.

"You can still see, right?" Atanih inquired, and added after the cheetah had nodded: "Take a look at your arm and tell me what you think."

Cheera lifted her right arm and inspected it. The only black texture she could see on it was her spots. She looked at her hand next and much to her relief there was no sign of the wound.

"So it worked," Cheera said, and smiled gratefully.

"Yes, indeed, it worked," Atanih boasted, and clapped her hands triumphantly, "It worked indeed. Not a doubt. I had not a doubt it would be alright."

The cheetah chuckled and swished her tail with enthusiasm at the owl's excitement. Suddenly, the fear that she was missing out on something or just simply lacking something returned to her. It didn't take long to deduce what it was.

"Ah, thank you ever so much, Atanih," Cheera said, and hugged the owl kindly, "but I'm afraid I have other matters to attend to now." She twitched her ears and fiddled with her whiskers. "If you require me to help with anything else though, I'd be glad to."

"Oh, nothing comes to my mind now, sweetie," Atanih replied, and glanced around the room, "Everything seems to be in order, nothing ruined or broken. Hm... I will have to clean out the cauldron... But alas, you've been through a lot and could use a rest, which actually I more that highly suggest you need, you must have a rest. Go now, dear, I'll be fine, go go, tata!"

Cheera, again thanked the elder owl for her pains, and swiftly exited the room. The feline was certain that she was cured as her adventurous nature that merged with her cat-like curiosity urged her to run like a lunatic. What prevented her from doing so

was the sight of a familiar face that stood waiting down the hall and caused her to halt. Aritot stood expectantly with a collective face that neither frowned nor smiled and his orange eyes were a plain emotionless expression.

Cheera's fur perked up and her tail flicked in annoyance. The cheetah quickly turned around and calmly walked away from the otter.

No, I refuse, not now, she mentally denied, and quietly wished her teacher wouldn't follow her.

Just as she rounded a corner, the sorceress was met with the impossible sight of Aritot's back; the otter still in the stance he had when she had last seen him. Cheera heaved a heavy sigh and extended her talons in frustration. She hated it when the arch-warlock would 'force you to face the music', which to him meant putting the person he wished to see in a loop trick that no matter which direction you took you'd walk back toward him.

Cheera flicked her tail one more time, turned around again, and walked till she was face-to-face with her teacher.

"Well, I'm here," Cheera said after a while, and still not a word had passed between them, "You gonna ramble on about how spoiled I am?"

The otter remained silent.

"Or perhaps you'll try to convince me with some greater knowledge I lack?" she continued to inquire, in subtle frustration. Still no response.

"No?" the feline mocked, and crossed her arms expectantly, "Two can play at being a brick wall, Master."

Silence followed as the cheetah mocked the otter's silence. Aritot still remained expressionless and would continue to remain expressionless until he heard, not what he wanted to hear, but what he needed to hear. Cheera continued to mock her teacher's stance but her uncontrollable agitation caused her tail to flaunt to-and-fro; the elder arch-warlock's remained as steady as a newly hammered nail.

Finally Cheera's hard demeanour fell along with her head and ears, but not her frown. The cheetah slowly let the bad and bitter feelings subside and forced the guile that clogged her throat to let an apology through.

"I'm..." she started to say, and kept her gaze on the ground, "I'm sorry..."

"For?" Aritot finally spoke.

"For..." Cheera clarified, and heaved her head up to look into the faded blue eyes, "For being spoiled, petty, selfish, and not willing to humble myself properly."

The sorceress again averted her gaze. The otter sighed and placed his hands on his student's shoulders firmly.

"Cheera..." the arch-warlock said, not trying to sound critical nor overly comforting but forgiving, "Cheera... look at me will you?" She did. "I don't pretend to know but trust me when I say I understand; I truly do.

"I was young once," he continued, and chuckled, "I know. Me Young? What a novelty." Cheera snickered but still tried to not smile. "I know that when you're young, you're full of an adventurous desire. You demand much of this world and become upset when you aren't given it."

"Yes, yes," the sorceress agreed impatiently –she really wanted to reunite with the mouse–, "you've told me this many times before; I could ask myself why are my demands refuted, what do they mean, and what I should realise about them."

"Well?" Aritot inquired with a raised eyebrow, "What do you think today's preventions mean?"

Cheera shut her eyes and tried to think hard, She shook her head in response.

"I don't know," the cheetah answered, and opened her eyes, "Maybe I'm too weak... Or maybe Gan Tús is telling me to step aside and let more wiser minds handle it."

"Or..." the otter proposed with a grin, "Perhaps Gan Tús is testing you, encouraging you to help despite what others say, to see if you'll work with others to reach a solution."

Cheera's eyes lit up. She had thought out all rational possibilities about what a force pushing against her could mean that the thought of it furthering her seemed ludicrous. A sly smirk seeped across the feline's muzzle and she tilted her head confusedly.

"Are you trying to flatter me?" Cheera questioned, and twitched her whiskers in doubt, "Or make me feel good?"

"Cheera!" Aritot hissed, and frowned deeply, "I speak only what need be spake, even if I appear to be an officious prick that doesn't understand their feelings!"

The feline's ears fell against her head and her short-lived smile followed suit. The otter released his grasp on the cheetah and heaved a heavy sigh.

"Ah, I failed once again," he said nonchalantly, looked over to his frightened pupil, and proposed: "How about we walk?"

Cheera nodded nervously, too startled to deny the arch-warlock's request. The pair strolled quietly down the halls side-by-side, not bothering to look at each other for a while. The candle flames whipped softly and the clamps of their steps were all the pair heard.

"It's..." Cheera noticed, and looked around the temple suspiciously, "Awfully empty, don't you think?"

Aritot puckered the lips of his muzzle and twirled his fingers through his whiskers. Cheera had always been comforted at the latter fact; she always got called out for twirling the ends of the locks of her hair whenever she was in contemplation, at least she wasn't the only one.

"Indeed," the otter remarked, and looked at the sorceress with a smirk, "perhaps because supper's been prepared."

"Oh," the cheetah emitted, and looked at her boot-covered feet in embarrassment.

"Stop that, apprentice," Aritot instructed, "You've been doing that too much for one day. My goodness, if you don't dislodge your head from doing it that'd be a blessing."

"Sorry, Master," Cheera replied, and raised her head quickly.

"And please, don't apologise for every minor critic I say," Aritot added, and flicked his ears in tiredness, "I already have too much to worry about."

Cheera began to open her maw to apologise once again only for her subconscious to force her tail to clog it before she made a sound. The sorceress bit into her tail and felt herself grow warm once more in shame.

"Oh, for pete's sake, forget what I said," the otter huffed, and facepalmed himself, "I can never win with you."

Cheera released her tail and thanked her teacher again. They were quiet again. By this time, neither knew how long they had been walking but it had felt like eternity; yet they hadn't even made it halfway around the temple.

"Master?" the cheetah called, and halted her motion.

"Yes, pupil of mine?" Aritot replied, and turned to face the feline.

"Do you ever feel like..." she began to ask, and drooped her ears, "Feel like that your very existence... Is to be nothing but a nuisance to people?"

“What did that infection do to you?” the elder mammal asked rhetorically, and took the sorceress’ hands in his, “Cheera... You’re not a nuisance?”

“You’re lying, Master,” Cheera retorted, and looked at Aritot with a disappointed glare. Her sense had picked upon the deceit that was mixed in his words. “I don’t want to hear lies... I want to know the truth, master...”

It was Aritot’s turn to avert his gaze. He bit his lip and wondered how he was going to explain to the cheetah what he thought.

“Well...” the otter began, “Sure, you’ve certainly caused some damage here and there in our temple... But, I’ve also seen how pure of heart and helpful you’ve been out in the world... Might I add, you’ve also made life, shall we say, more adventurous.

“Ah, and another thing,” he added, and swished his tail cheerfully, “there’s at least one person whose absolutely grateful for your actions.”

“Who?” Cheera questioned, and perked her ears up in curiosity.

Aritot released his student’s hands and moved toward one of the doors built into the corridor. He knocked and a groggily voice replied: “Yes, who is it?”

“I daresay, former pupil of mine,” Aritot answered in a playful tone, “I believe you have company in there with you already.”

The sound of the bolt being unlocked creaked from the opposite side. The voice invited: “Come in, Master Aritot.” to which the otter happily did. Aritot opened the door wide and exposed the living quarters that was almost completely shrouded in shadow. A little candle light exposed very little of the texts and stacks of books strewn about the room; it did, however, make the scruffy face of Thomas visible. The canine was sitting at a writing desk, with a couple leather-bound books and scrolls littered across it, that was set just a little ways from the door and situated in a way that the retriever had to turn to his right in order to face the door. Thomas’ expression didn’t appear too eager to see the pair but neither was it upset at their presence. The only other being in the room though made it clear he was more than excited at their appearance.

“Squeak!” Nex squealed, and impatiently scurried to the edge of Thomas’ desk with joy.

“Nex!” Cheera equally called with excitement, that the cheetah politely slipped past her teacher and toward the rodent.

Thomas’ fur perked up and his hand quickly dove for the Guardian. Unfortunately, the warlock hadn’t accounted that the mouse would leap off his desk. Cheera snatched up the energetic rodent and brought her hands up to her face. Nex

looked back into her enormous eyes with happiness; finally, someone he could trust to keep him safe at all costs.

“Sorry I took so long,” Cheera said, and swayed her tail like crazy, “I hope nothing unfortunate happened in my absence.”

“Eee...” he answered, and shrugged his tiny arms, “Pip sqwee imp fwee tsk sque.”

“I know, I know,” the sorceress chuckled, “I’m starving too...”

Thomas looked past the sorceress to the otter, who had been watching the scene unfold from the doorway. Aritot looked back with a gaze that seemed to reflect a similar thought as the warlock’s.

The retriever nodded, picked up the writing feather which he had left its tip heating in the candle light, and grabbed an empty jar from a shelf over the desk that was hidden in shadows. Thomas carefully proceeded to stab six holes in the lid. While the warlock busied himself with such a task, Aritot quietly walked up beside his student and looked at the Guardian in her hands with interest.

“May I get a better look at him?” he asked, and extended his hand to the cheetah.

Cheera eyed at the otter’s hand with scepticism; Nex equally glared at his hand with distrust.

“Please?” Aritot added

Slowly, the sorceress moved her hands toward the arch-warlock’s. The rodent looked around in confusion. Was he seriously being handed over to the very person which had caused Cheera to nearly devour him?

Aritot gently took the mouse in his dry furred and wrinkly hands. Nex looked up nervously at the otter and felt a kind of unease. Aritot simply beamed and twitched his whiskers.

“Hello, uh...” he started to greet, only to blank as his wise ancient mind tried to recall the rodent’s name.

“Nex,” Cheera helped.

“Hello, Nex,” the otter quickly corrected himself, “I suppose things feel very frightening for you presently.”

“Peep,” Nex agreed, and started to let his paranoid assumptions about the otter go.

“Well, I’m glad we can offer you some safety,” Aritot said, and quickly passed the mouse to Thomas.

Thomas swiftly took the Guardian, dropped him into a jar, and screwed the newly pierced lid back on.

“Hey!” Cheera started to protest, but stopped when she realised the warlock had already trapped the rodent.

“Here you are, Cheera,” Thomas said, and offered the jar with triumphant tail wags, “just remember to keep him in there at all times except when it’s time to let him eat.”

“Sqwee eek pip!” Nex protested, and hopelessly clawed against the glass in hopes of escape. When the fact that his attempt was futile, the mouse decided to plead instead: “Squeak meep eek!”

Cheera looked down at the glass prison in her hands and frowned while Nex continued to voice his uncomfortability.

“Is this necessary?” she asked, and looked at her peers with begging eyes.

“Cheera, Cheera, Cheera,” Thomas uttered, shaking his head, “how many times must we tell you? He. Can. Not. Be. Uh. Loud. To. Roam. On. His. Own. In. The. Temp. Pull.”

“Thomas...” Aritot hushed calmly, and turned back to the feline, “He’s right, Cheera... Either you can keep him contained, or he’ll have to stay with someone more trustworthy.”

Cheera sighed and looked back down sympathetically at the helpless rodent.

“Master?” the retriever whispered.

“Eh?” the otter remarked, and twitched his ears to hear better, “What?”

“I, uh, need to talk with you,” Thomas clarified, shot a glance at the sorceress, and added: “In private.”

“Oh, oh yes,” Aritot agreed, and looked back at his student, “Cheera? You’re good to go now. Make sure you get some rest.” The cheetah nodded, bid both the warlock’s farewell, and started to turn when the otter added: “And Cheera... Please, keep him contained.”

Cheera nodded and exited the dark quarters into the tad brighter halls. Both of the men’s tails swayed patiently till they felt that not a spirit could pick up on their speech.

“So, what’ve you been thinking?” Aritot asked.

“I thought you’d–” Thomas began, as he took a seat only for the otter to dismiss him with a wave.

“Hold that thought, shall you?” he commanded, and hurried to the doorway. Cheera was almost about to round a corner and out of sight when Aritot called: “Oh, Cheera?” Her emerald eyes reappeared. “Remember to stop by Offa first.” She nodded and went out of sight again.

“Right,” Aritot said upon reentrance, “you were saying?”

“I thought you would have already known,” the canine said, and raised an interested eyebrow as he leaned into the seat. “Do you not see everything that happens in here?”

“Oh, pish posh,” Aritot scoffed, and twitched his whiskers in mild annoyance, “I can know everything that happens. For example, I know you and our guest stopped by Lúnc’s quarters to take measurements, I know that afterward you came here started to graze over texts about mystical creatures, But I don’t know what people think and personally, I’m grateful for that. I mean, imagine if I could know what that mouse thought, he'd probably have fanciful thoughts of Cheera.”

“He’s not interested in her like that, sir,” Thomas refuted, and crossed his arms as if he was about to lecture the otter, “Certainly, I can see the two have a bond with each other, but it’s purely a friendship. This I know, for when Lúnc and I were on our way to here she teased Nex about perhaps taking Cheera out to mess hall for supper as a romantic moment. The mouse broke down in uncontrollable laughter at the thought and not once showed a sign of embarrassment, nervousness, or interest about it becoming possible. This shocked Lúnc, who certainly saw that he meant something to Cheera since the latter was desperate not to lose him, that she berated him an onslaught of questions about what he thought of her; all came back that he simply thinks she’s a friend and nothing more.”

“Interesting,” Aritot remarked, and once again fondled his whiskers in contemplation, “But let us digress from the subject. Tell me, what do you have in mind for our guest and what should be done with him?”

“Well,” Thomas began, and motioned his hands to match his speech, “It’s gonna be a few months till the Autumn solstice, so he needs to only be cared for that window of time. But we can’t just leave him with any rational person in case he starts to show signs of decay♦♦. And again, with classes coming up, the only Meiguilders that will be around are the shamriests who don’t handle these kinds of issues.

“Thus I determined that he’ll most likely have to reside with some mystical species,” the canine continued, as he scooted his chair closer to his desk. He paused, wagged his tail curiously, and looked toward his superior with a curious expression. “Did you inform Offa to–”

“I did,” the otter answered, without waiting for the warlock to finish his question, “I made sure she put in the right amount, so our guest should be fine for a month. I’m also gonna ask her to make him a cheese block to sustain the following months, that is if he only eats a nibble a day.”

“That’s good,” Thomas remarked, and turned back to the texts on his desk, “Back to the point, there aren’t that many rational beasts out there; in fact, very few to be truthful. To add to that, even most of those few would probably see him as a snack rather than a person in need. So I’ve been going back and forth, mentally checking off what species wouldn’t work, and have narrowed it down to only one option.”

“Which is?” Aritot questioned.

Thomas gulped and looked up at the arch-warlock with conflicted eyes as he responded: “I don’t think they’re the best option, but they’re the least we can deal with in as far as we make sure that the one’s he resides with aren’t likely to put him in or leave him in danger.”

“Are you... Saying-?” Aritot began to question in disbelief, only for Thomas to nod.

The retriever brushed the sweat from his furry brow and with a sigh uttered a single word: “Faeries.”

Nex sat with his back against the sides of the jar with his talon hands grasping the furry portions of his arms. The mouse jostled lightly with every step Cheera took.

Oh, if only I could be granted a fortune everytime my altered form has brought me nothing but hardships, the rodent began to wittingly remark in his mind, I’d be a very rich mouse, if not the richest.

Nex looked up and tried to see through the small breathing holes in the lid at the cheetah. Cheera had been walking mindlessly while she kept her thoughts in verbal contemplation that she failed to pick up the sound of bustling movement that grew louder and louder with every step.

Poor Nex, the cheetah thought with a swish of her tail, he’s been through so much already and has to put up with this too. Surely, it couldn’t harm to let him out for a little? Alas, Master will still somehow find out... Perhaps I should just not bother myself too much with-

She didn't get to finish her thoughts as a hooded figure in an outfit no different than Thomas' –except that their tunic was more mud brown and their poncho cloak a navy blue– stepped out from the mess hall of the temple and right into the mentally preoccupied feline. Cheera bounced off the figure with an “Oof!” and lost her footing. Her hold on the jar also was lost as it flew up into the air as her back hit the temple's floor.

No! was all her mind screamed, as she flung her arms out to catch it.

The jar flipped in midair and began to fall back down to the earth when a hand reached out and caught it. There was no fur on the hand but it wasn't talon-like as Nex's was. Cheera heaved a sigh of relief which was followed by an equally deep inhale, in which she also picked a thicker rodent scent but in a manner different from the Guardian's.

“For everything that Vimtră SeLumo brings forth with her passionate light,” a squeaky, tenor pitched voice remarked, as the figure offered a hand to the cheetah, “you gotta stop losing yourself in your thoughts, Chee. I swear it will be the death of us all.”

Cheera looked into the figure's hood; a mouse-like snout structure poked out from the darkness that hid a pair of brown eyes and jagged blonde hair, special made holes were made so that the warlock could let his round ears stick out while also still being concealed by special earcoverings woven into the hood.

“Phil?” Cheera uttered, and flicked her tail in surprise.

“The one and only,” the figure replied, and grunted with discontent, “Could you... Could you please take my hand? It's beginning to ache.”

Cheera quickly took the rat's –for it would be obvious that he was a rat if he were to stand beside that of a mouse person– hand, and the warlock heaved her up with no issue.

“Who's this pip squeak?” Phil asked, as he shook the jar like a fancy drink glass without concern of harming the being inside.

“Phil, stop that, please,” the sorceress insisted, and motioned for the rat to hand the jar over.

Phil chuckled with delight at the feline's concern but proceeded to surrender the jar over to her regardless.

“Thank you,” Cheera said, with a hint of annoyance, “When did you get back?”

The rat scrunched up his snout in confusion upon hearing the question, and looked at Cheera with a concerned glance.

“What, have the last few days been harsh upon your memory?” he asked rhetorically, and then answered: “I’ve been back for three weeks now and have since had plenty of encounters with you.”

“I have?” she questioned, and drooped her ears in confusion.

“Aye, you have,” Phil insisted, and slithered his tail in wonder, “About six and half-a-day ago you pleaded me to recount my events during my journey out to the south-eastern ridges... Surely, you’ve always been the attentive cat, Cheera; is something wrong?”

“I’m not a cat, Phil,” Cheera seethed, and frowned deeply.

The cheetah’s forefinger slowly was raised up beside her head and began to twirl in a singular motion with her semi-curly locks while she pondered.

He’s right... she reasoned, and began to feel uncertainty pang her heart, I’ve always been attentive, always. I usually even remember the most minor of details. Yet even now, as I gaze on the storage of events kept in my mind they appear muddled and unclear... Must be an aftereffect that follows the expulsion of a wicked infection.

“Cheera?” Phil said, and gently shook the sorceress, “Hey, is everything all right?”

All right? Cheera repeated, as she mindlessly gazed into the rat’s brown eyes, When has one dared ask me if I have been in such a state? Oh goodness, what is wrong with me? My body feels a chill, for I can feel my fur prickle at an icy cold sensation, yet my mind is clouded and swelling in a sauna of overheating.

“I’ve...” the cheetah finally responded, and tried to smile so that the rat’s fears could be put at ease, “I’ve just had a long day today, Phil. I... I just need to lie down...”

Phil eyed Cheera with suspicion, but nonetheless accepted her words with reluctance.

“Well, you still haven’t answered my first question,” the rat said, and turned to the jar in her hands, “Who’s that with you?”

“Oh,” the sorceress muttered, and followed the warlock’s gaze. Nex sat flat against the bottom of the jar and gripped it tightly in shock. “This is... A newly arrived Guardian.”

“A Guardian?!” Phil repeated in surprise, and twitched his ears with agitation, “Why wasn’t I informed about this? I would’ve gladly...” He paused and looked back with confusion at the jar. “Uhm... Is Gan Tús struggling to find virtuous people from the

life-before, or is there some information that I don't have yet? Was he always that size? I need answers, Cheera, otherwise I'm gonna have to accuse you of lying to me."

"Please spare me the inquiries, Phil," Cheera groaned, as she rubbed her throbbing brow with her hand, "Find Thomas, I'm sure he can tell you the whole story."

"Cheera!" Offa's voice cried out in joy, as the vixen emerged from the noisy mess hall, "Wow, you look horrible."

"Hey thanks, Offa, you seem gorgeous too," the cheetah replied sarcastically.

"Hux-derlevl, Phil," the vixen added with a sway of her tail, upon noticing the warlock, "are you pestering poor CheeChee here?"

"She's acting odd, Offa," Phil defended, "And I mean odd in the fact that she's not herself, not that she isn't normally odd."

"Give her a break, you wandering warlock," Offa retorted, and playfully shoved his arm, "she's been through a lot and just had to get a wicked infection cured."

"Is that so?" the rat uttered, and twitched his whiskers with new interest, "What happened that caused you to—"

"I said let her be, Phil," Offa shunned, and took the young sorceress by the shoulder, "I've got to speak with her in private, so you go dilly-dally in your own profession."

"Fine," Phil huffed, as the pair walked away, "but I'll continue this conversation another time, Cheeranaeth."

Offa chuckled and turned to her companion expecting a similar reaction. The vixen's cheery atmosphere slowly dwindled, however, as the cheetah wore a blank expression of defeat as she glared at the jar in her hands.

"Hm..." the vixen remarked, as she brought the barely self-aware feline into the dark cooking space opposite of the mess hall, "Did something happen during the curing session?"

"Huh?" Cheera remarked, as if she had been broken from a deep trance, "Oh... N-no, everything went accordingly... Thank you again for helping."

"I said don't mention it," Offa refuted as she turned back to her messy counter, "I'm just confused... And I'm starting to think Phil might be right. You're acting weird, Cheera, weirder than you tend to be... It's like if you were yourself except you lacked any of that positive charm about you that tends to get you into the most bizarre and adventurous of problems."

“I’m just feeling feverish, Offa,” the cheetah insisted, and tried her best to seem optimistic, “The sun shall always shine tomorrow.”

Offa’s fur perked up and her ears drooped in the deepest of concern. She looked at the sorceress like an abnormal object one did not know how to handle.

“Cheera...” the vixen said, and let her bushy tail dangle lifelessly behind her, “you’ve always hated that expression... you’d always retort by saying: ‘But what if Gan Tús willed that tomorrow the sun shall not shine, hence it would be wiser today to say: What a wonderful day today is, for Gan Tús willed that it should be.’”

“Oh...” Cheera uttered, and felt herself deflate inside, “Look, Offa... If I knew what was the issue, I’d handle it. Please, just give me what you want to give me so that I can go lie down.”

“Right, right,” Offa nodded, and took a wrapped plaid napkin from the counter, “Here. I figured you’d be hungry afterward. Are you still feeling hungry?”

“Kinda,” Cheera shrugged, and flicked her tail, “though I feel feverish, I’m starving nonetheless.”

“Very well,” the vixen said, and handed the bundled napkin over to the sorceress, “Today was Jagif noodles and sauce, but I figured you couldn’t stomach that tonight. So I made another favourite dish of yours just for you.

Cheera struggled as she tried to handle both the jar and napkin. It was slightly damp on the bottom of the cloth and steam emitted out through the tiny openings. The feline’s nostrils flared, taking in the smells of some kind of bread mixed with auras of spicy herbs and a hint of cinnamon that was disguised by the overbearing scent of a kind of cheese. Her emerald eyes lit up and a genuine smile crossed her face at the recognition of what it could be.

“Offa...” she uttered with joy, and swayed her tail like crazy, “Oh, you spoil me.”

“Ha!” Offa scoffed, and swished her tail with satisfaction, “There’s the bright young sorceress that we know.” She glanced over to the jar where the figure of a mouse stood against the glass looking up curiously. “Oh, and I made one fit for your companion. Now Cheera, I need you to listen to me because this is very important: make sure he eats all of his fill and no less.”

“Why?” Cheera questioned.

Offa didn’t reply and simply looked into the feline’s eyes as if to say: *You know why*. Cheera shuddered at the thought.

“Well, uh...” the cheetah said nervously, and began to back out of the cooking space, “I thank you for everything, Offa, and I wish you a well rest. Till we see each other again, whether in this world or the next.”

“And I respond with similar regards,” the vixen said, and waved Cheera farewell.

Cheera paced quickly down the rounded corridors till she found her quarters. She began to extend her hand when she realised that both were full. The sorceress sighed and left her arm extended as she shut her eyes. Her hand that held the bundled napkin began to glow white and the door began to open on its own.

Nex watched in awe at the spectacle and his ears tilted in wonder of how powerful his rescuer was. With the door wide open, Cheera slipped inside her quarters, set both the jar and napkin down on her side table, before she went back to bolt the door.

Funny, the altered Guardian remarked, as he tried to see through his glass prison, It didn't seem too long ago I was at this same place and could feel safe. Now, here I am in a container, and yet I feel nothing but an undermining dread that has yet to reveal itself.

Cheera reappeared from around the corner. She fiddled with her cloak and pulled it off before setting it back on the rack. Her wavy hair flowed down, no longer contained by the hood. The cheetah shook her head to let her hair expand naturally.

“Squeak!” the muffled pleas of the rodent cried, and drew the sorceress’ attention, “Pip meep!”

“I’ll let you out in a moment, Nex,” Cheera responded, before she turned her attention to a chest beneath her hammock, “I just need to change first.”

She approached the chest and started to reach down to her waist. The sorceress halted herself; naturally she would have gladly cast away nearly almost everything she wore at the end of the day –save her undergarments and the corset she used to sleep in– but this was always done with the thought that no one was present.

Cheera snapped her neck in the direction of the jar; from the little her candlelight showed, the rodent had pivoted himself so that only his back faced the feline. Cheera sighed with relief. Though the Guardian had displayed a lack of manners, he at least knew dignity. Nex tried his hardest to not look back and moved his eyes around to anything, anything at all that would keep his attention away.

The air was silent, too silent for the rodent. Nex slowly looked over his shoulder to see if the sorceress had finished, only to briefly see the cheetah sitting on the chest, with her snout leaning upon her cupped hands, and waiting to see what he would do. Upon noticing the mouse’s glance, Cheera raised an eyebrow and cast a taunting glance in reaction. Nex quickly snapped his head back forward and felt his whole body grow warm in humiliation that his tail squirmed with guilt.

Please, please no! he mentally tried to deny, as the sounds of the cheetah's pawsteps grew louder and nearer, *Don't think anything of it, please Cheera! I didn't mean to! I'm not like that! I don't see you like that! We're just friends, I promise! Please, Cheera, please!*

A shadow fell over him, and sweat began to drench his fur. The cheetah's hand took hold of the jar with a firm grip that Nex could see the textures of paw pads on the hand. The sound of the lid being unscrewed was all that he could hear until a light *pop* ended it. The jar slowly turned on its side. Nex at first huddled away from the exit, afraid of what might happen should he leave the confines of the jar.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Nex, come on," Cheera insisted, her tone a bit impatient.

The rodent slowly crept toward the end of the jar, poked his snout slightly, picked up the scent of the napkins contents which caused his hunger to overpower his reason yet again, and finally hopped out of the jar.

"Thank you for being respectful," Cheera uttered, as she set the jar aside.

Nex nervously giggled and began to open his snout to speak only for the feline to tell him: "And don't worry, I didn't take our glance as anything but respectful." She softly snickered. "You're too easy to make nervous, Nex; you'll have to get a hold of that eventually.

"Now then," Cheera exclaimed with a clap, and started to rub her hands anxiously, "let us see what supper is."

Her fingers graced the knot with spider-like alacrity. The napkin slowly unfolded to reveal a knot-shaped pastry, no longer than a forearm, covered in melted cheese that contained small herbs. Nex felt his mouth flood with saliva and his tail coil in hunger at the sight. Beside the gargantuan bread was a similar looking pastry, except it was about the size of a pinky.

"Nex," Cheera said slyly, and looked at the rodent with a playful accused glare, "I appreciate it if you could at least try to be mannerful."

The mouse looked up at the sorceress confused. What was he doing that was disrespectful? And why did the side of his bottom jaw... Feel... Wet? Quickly, Nex's hand touched his cheek and felt the liquid-like substance. He then brought his whale arm up and brushed the drool off before he swallowed the rest of his saliva.

"That's better," Cheera congratulated, before she covered her eyes with her hands, "Give me a moment, will you?" She sighed and began to utter beneath her breathe: "Thank you, Offa, for preparing this meal for me. Thank you the farmer, who plowed and

produced the wheat which was used in this pastry. Thank you most of all, Gan Tús, for you had ultimately designed such wheat to be milled into this meal. May all ye that I have shown gratitude be prosperous and successful.”

Cheera uncovered her eyes. Nex had been patrolling around the pastries with impatience and looked up with a raised eyebrow when the towering feline had uncovered her eyes.

“Yes, nex,” she sighed, and swayed her tail in feigned agitation, “we may eat now.”

“Epp!” he squealed with delight, and scurried over to his meal.

Cheera watched with amusement as the rodent took hold of the small sized pastry, contemplated its size, and broke it in half. Cheera did so likewise, and broke the slightly soggy but damn-well delicious pastry into two before she started with one half.

Now to describe how such a piece of sustenance tasted would be like trying to describe that which isn’t material yet exists nonetheless; you may apply similes and metaphors to them but you truly could never know what they’re like unless you actually have the chance to encounter one. Still, it was enough to subdue their taste buds.

At least it did for Cheera, who, still wanting to savor the taste, licked her fingers of the grease. Nex, on the other hand, had barely nibbled on his second half before he determined he was satisfied.

“Come on, Nex,” the sorceress encouraged, “don’t let that go to waste.”

“Peep,” he protested, but offered the remainder of the pastry to her, “Sqwee imp.”

“Oh, um...” Cheera stuttered, and averted her gaze nervously, “I’d gladly take it, Nex, but Offa said you had to eat it all.”

“Sque?” Nex asked, and twitched his whiskers in curiosity.

“Well...” Cheera began, and instead assumed a commanding attitude, “I don’t have to tell you everything, Nex, okay? Just please, eat the rest; it’s for your benefit.”

My benefit?! the mouse mentally scoffed, So, was shoving me in your maw for my benefit too? Is me being fat a benefit? Look, spotted-cat lady –he knew not what species the sorceress was yet–, I like you a lot, and would gladly consider you a friend, but I’m not about to stuff myself beyond capacity.

“Pip!” Nex vocally protested, and set the pastry down before he turned his back on the cheetah.

Oh, Nex, Cheera mentally huffed, as she took hold of the small pastry, why must things always be complicated for us.

In flash, the cheetah snatched the arrogant rodent, gently squeezed his neck which in turn caused him to let out a shrill 'squeak!', and shoved the last bit into his maw. With her thumb and forefinger, the sorceress pinched the Guardian's snout shut, while he waved his arms frantically in protest.

Once certain he had swallowed it, Cheera let go of her grip on the mouse. Nex collapsed onto his back and groaned in agony as his stomach complained loudly.

"I'm sorry, Nex," Cheera remarked, as she gently lifted the rodent up and into the jar again, "today has just not been a good day for you." She smiled and stood up after she had replaced the lid back on. "But, we draw nigh to bid this day farewell and perhaps for a better one tomorrow."

She paused and looked back; Nex sat leaning against the wall of the jar with his talon-like hands on his swell stomach with a pained expression. He could barely even raise his head to meet her gaze.

"I'm getting changed now," she clarified, and waited patiently as the rodent caught on to what she inferred.

The mouse merely rolled over to his side and curled into a foetal position. Satisfied to a degree, Cheera slowly slipped out of her attire, donned her corset and a new pair of pants. With that, the cheetah heaved herself onto the overhanging hammock, cat stretched, and laid into it. She glanced one last time at the jar, the rodent still remained as he last saw him, smiled and bid him goodnight before she snapped her fingers and the candlelight went out.

Not even a moment later, did her ears perk up at the weak sound of the rodent's voice calling out to her: "Squechee?"

"Huh?" Cheera replied groggily, and tried to locate the jar in the darkness, "What is it, Nex?"

"Pip squeak?"

"What species am I?" she repeated, and let her head collapse into the hammock, "I'm a... I'm a cheetah, Nex... A cheetah... don't you know wha-... N-nevermind... Just... Just rest, Nex... Just rest till morning..."

Cheera slowly dozed off while her tail dangled over the side of the hammock. Nex could barely hear all of her speech but managed to pick up the word cheetah. Cheetah sounded fitting, she looked like a cheetah. How did he know what a cheetah was? How did he know what a mouse was? The mouse brushed these thoughts aside, and slowly let his eyes conceal all that he could perceive.

Slowly, slowly, slowly... His mind drifted into a deep slumber. Likewise, a vision formed amongst the darkness of his inner eyelids. It was circular at first, but quickly

began to take form. It was pink, fluffy. They were clouds, floating overhead with a pink hue that reflected the setting or rising sun hidden beyond the circular boundaries of the Guardian's vision.

Where am I? he wondered, and continued to gaze at the circle, Is this a tunnel? Is that the entrance? An aching pain in his collar hinted what direction he actually was facing. Ah, I'm looking upward... But then I am in a pit of some sorts... How did I get here?

Nex began to bring his head down when he awoke with a start and bumped off the side of his jar, moving it slightly. He took shaky breath after shaky breath and let his heart slowly return to a steady pace. It was all a dream. An odd dream. Why did he dream that? Such was the question that caused the rodent to ponder on what could have inspired such a dream in the first place. He exhaled again only this time, the glass of the jar fogged up.

Nex paused. Inhaled. Then exhaled, and watched as clouds flared from his nostrils. The realisation of the cold atmosphere pounced upon the mouse as his fur perked up in a cold sensation. The Guardian crossed his arms from warmth as he shuddered helplessly. He couldn't know how long he had been asleep but almost everything around him was pitch black. His worm-like tail coiled around him now while he paced around the ice-cold glass of his jar to keep his blood pumping.

Oh, what I would give for a quilt, Nex remarked in his mind, as his efforts became less and less helpful.

He paused yet again; this time for a new reason. His cold ears barely picked up the sound of something. Something big. Something that deftly paced across the stone floor that was shrouded in darkness.

Tung!

The sound almost made the mouse die of fright had not the cold already been harming enough. He looked around and saw the familiar textures of paw pads on the side of the jar. Sure enough, the sound of the lid being undone followed. Nex could only watch and hope for the best. As the lid was lifted and vanished into the darkness, which granted the cold air a more breezeway to fill the jar that the mouse sensed like a wave, the blurry and grey vision of a familiar snout emerged from the abyss and pressed itself against the lid of the jar.

Hot –and to be truthful, smelly– air filled the jar and fogged up nearly everything as the lips of the muzzle opened to exhale it. Nex shuddered as the warmth encased him briefly until the muzzle inhaled, taking all the warm air with it. It exhaled again before it pulled back and vanished into the darkness again.

Slowly, the cold air began to return. Nex kept his gaze upward through; he could sense her's. Cheera. Her emerald eyes were somewhere in that abyss, looking down on him like a kind of omni-present god.

“You know...” hissed her voice from out of the darkness, she clearly had been interrupted from her slumber by her tone, “For a little mouse...” The voice paused and was replaced by a yawn briefly. “Ah... You are quite noisy.”

Nex opened his maw, flinched at how much pain followed when his lips parted, and barely managed to reply: “Sq-squeak...”

“Yes...” Cheera’s voice agreed, “It is quite cold.”

Nex felt the jar shift as he began to slide toward the hole. He braced himself for the worst only to land gently in the soft palm of the shrouded feline. The mouse nuzzled against it and swore he heard a soft chuckle somewhere. He felt himself sway with the hand while the feline moved through her room. The movement stopped briefly and resumed shortly after. It stopped again. Nex watched as the sight of the chest which contained the feline’s clothes came into view. The hand turned and dropped the mouse on top of the wooden container.

The sound of something rustling followed and then a bright white bundle appeared beside the rodent; who was once again taken into the clutches of a hand only to be dropped onto the white bundle. Upon making contact with it, the furry texture became familiar to Nex. It was her cloak. He looked around for a crevice or opening of some kind, found one, and huddled himself into it.

A creaking sound came from overhead as the titanic image of the sorceress’ tail came quickly into view, just barely missed the Guardian, and swayed back into the abyss. Nex slowly felt the warmth of the cloak surround him and he let out a relieved: “Squeak...” which prompted the cheetah to groan.

“Please... Nex...” her voice pleaded weakly, “Abstain from making a sound... And don’t go anywhere in the morning either... R-r-rest w-w-we-...”

There was silence. Nex shrugged and let his eyes fall shut once again as he slowly drifted to sleep; he did not dream again the rest of the night..

TO BE CONCEALED.

*-Refer to ‘Meiguilid Ranks & Professions’ in Meiguilid handbook; Page 473-8

**-a fruit similar to that of a tomato but ever more spicy; name gained from how much it looked like the truff of the foul beast

⌘-when one harnesses their mystical skills, gifted from above, their lifespan is a thousand years plus the age they are upon harnessing it. Though Cheera appeared to be twenty plus five years of age, she in reality was ninety-nine, hence making her the youngest out of all those in the temple.

⌘⌘-altered victims, when transformed into a normal beast, can only speak through the sounds that the creature they reflect tends to emit. However, unlike them the victims emit the sounds in such a way that if dissected they appear to have a sense of morphology to their sounds.

◇-vinegar, when added to the process of a brew, renders it harmless in spoiled, making it nor more lethal than water.

◇◇-refer to the section on the syzygy of Grossheim in ‘O, How The Stars Align: A Study Of Our World’ by Professor Lukop

◆-as stated above, though Rodentia is only one genus of the whole kinds of languages spoken amongst altered victims, this word being the title generally applied to confine all languages.

◆◆-refer to section ‘On The Matter Of Decay’ in ‘The Ethics Of Transformation’ by Jacous of Animus