wanderer's journal

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by cloudycats

Summary

There are two plagues in Hallownest.

Notes

this was genuinely written before covid

It was not in the empty wanderer's nature to hesitate.

Its opponent broke form suddenly, agony arching her back, and the wanderer did not wait, did not question, did not *stop*. She was in the way. A dull blade cracked across chitin.

Silk whistled. The hunter of wanderers was gone, red and red in her wake.

The prey that had not fallen put back its nail.

A strange success. Those grew into complications down the line – and that was experience speaking, not nature. It examined the shape that had drifted feather-soft to the ground, a slender, tapered oval shorter than the wanderer's smallest finger. Her blood clung blue-bright to the surface, staining the moss beneath. It bent to retrieve it.

She had left behind a flower petal.

Aside from the Greenpath map, the empty one also bought a thread-tied bundle of silver pins from the tall shopkeeper. The twine was coarser than that which the hunter of wanderers had used with skill, readier to fray and less willing to bend. The empty one tugged at the knot, remembering her sudden flight from the clearing.

It unrolled the new map. The shopkeeper let it jump onto the counter, where it sat and bent in to fill the blank stretches that the humming wanderer's quill had not reached.

Because the empty one carried a nail and wore the tattered wings of a lost sibling, it could reach alcoves the humming wanderer could not. It extended his lines across the page as well as it knew how, then marked with a gleaming pin its unknown sibling's resting place – even though the humming wanderer had already done so in his own way, with three standing stones sketched onto the treated mosscreep skin. And the empty one spent some time looking at those drawings. Looking, only. The sibling’s blank mask had been weathered, stained, roughened to a sandpaper coarseness by the humidity that hung thick in verdant air....

Muted fabric ground against the pin, buffing the gleam to a shine. The wanderer released its cloak's hem, held the map up, tilted it until the marker reflected near as bright as the lumaflies in the room's lone lamp. There.

The tall shopkeeper helped it down after, though the jump was nothing. It did not thank her.

Unrequited, the humming wanderer had told it, *can mean different things, but what it comes down to is knowing what you want and not having it.*

Below the observation deck lay the fading town of Dirtmouth, lay the bold color of the Troupe's encampment, lay Hallownest and Deepnest and the Mantis Village unseen. All the kingdom at its feet, untouchable from where it stood. The empty wanderer examined its own feelings, a child who had never seen a geo sorting the contents of a wallet by worth. It did not know. It could not ask. Was a seed inside of it worming roots into the lungs it was not sure it had? It could not feel them.

It imagined breaking the glass and leaping. Did it want to do that?

Did it want, perhaps, to not do that?

But the blue wanderer was speaking. It turned away.

“I've always thought that the kindest act you can perform for a friend is to teach them how to forget you. Other bugs don't seem to agree with me,” the blue wanderer said. There were no infections between the two transients. The winds were old so high up, older than the the parasites that plagued the kingdom's survivors. All the hollows in stone and hearts were already claimed, leaving no holes for a delicate flower to fill. “But anyone who deserves your love wouldn't want you to be hurt for it.”

Idly: “What an unpleasant legacy to leave.”

The empty one kept a place inside of it for the dreams and wants and fears of those it met. Because it was empty, there was no lack of space for memory. It remembered all that it heard. But none of the flower's victims who it had met talked to it of the others who fed their parasites. The thought hadn't occurred to it that those others might have held opinions on the subject.

The blue wanderer glanced at it. “Well, my friend? I'd like to offer you a more substantial souvenir than just memories. If you're the one responsible for those interesting blast marks, then you certainly have the aptitude to learn. It might prove useful. Not to you, I hope.... Maybe there's someone somewhere in this old kingdom who will appreciate a cure to regret. I haven't found them yet, but we don't cross paths with all the same sorts, you and I.

“Or,” he said, “should I drop the subject? We're surrounded by beauty, and all I can talk about is illness. It's only that something sparked a thought recently, and I haven't been able to take my mind off of it. I shouldn't be such dour company.”

He tilted his head, and for a time they looked at each other, both waiting. Both wanting, perhaps.

It could not say.

The blue wanderer began to speak. He told of the marvels he had seen, the places he planned still to visit, the history of the mountain they stood in and of the miners caught in their tasks like flies in amber. He did not touch on the source of his knowledge, and it did not ask.

Then he taught it how to maim a bug's soul in such a way as to starve a flower in full bloom.

Nail-struck. Acid-worn. Partly eaten. Charred by soulfire. Slathered in orange plasma that still glowed with burning light. Hallownest was populated to the brim with the violent dead and the violently dead.

But this was the first it had found entangled in flowers.

Roots wove in and out through what little remained of the carapace. They grew so tightly layered across each other that hardly any hints of the shell beneath peeked through. The vines had grown into a thorny thicket many times more massive than the husk at their core, deep green twining up the stairs and flooding every hall. Flowers the wanderer had only ever seen individually and slick with blood bloomed a radiant white that lit the room in their dozens. The wanderer did not initially recognize them: typically the flowers took on the color of a host's hemolymph. It had not known the petals were naturally the white of its mask.

The bug who had once lived here might have been a well-regarded figure from the City of Tears, but that had been in a different time. Its husk had mostly fallen into dust between the roots. The carved frames on the walls hung empty and unlabeled, each and every one, and thorny vines walled off the rooms and everything inside. Except for the parasite that had killed it, any trace of the bug's life had been erased.

Without particularly thinking about the action, the wanderer brought its dream nail down on the closest vine. It held no expectations. The dream nail had yet to pull a response from a plant, and the flower was only that. But perhaps the growth retained some of its former host's consciousness. It would not be a surprise.

Ghosts were excellent at lingering. It was their primary occupation, as the hunter of wanderers well knew.

But the dream nail found nothing after all.

“It's always been a part of the kingdom. From the very beginning, for as long as Hallownest has existed, there are records of bugs taking ill from it.”

The relic seeker's hand hung over a faint shadow of blood strung across the tablet. Much of it had flaked off since the wanderer found it – it did not know how to save its belongings from the regular wear and tear of combat. Still, some smears of blood remained that crumbled to the touch. But the relic seeker was very careful not to touch.

Enough still clung to the stone to find the shape of a petal in.

“It's rare outside,” he muttered without looking up from his newest acquisition, by all appearances talking to himself.

The wanderer was not one to mind. It listened as solemnly as any merchant to its patron's product review. The bugs it met could not know for certain that it heard their words and more than their words. They imagined that it did, or they assumed, or they hoped, but they could not say with certainty, so the doubt must have niggled that they were holding a conversation with something that took their thoughts carelessly.

The relic seeker was only the most honest of these. He did not pretend to expect understanding.

“Usually cures are applied as soon as the symptoms manifest, even if that has to be done by force. If there isn't a cure available, the host is killed, or quarantined and burned once they've passed. Anything to stop seeds from spreading. But Hallownest treated it like every bug behind its borders was already infected. They didn't *care*. They had more than one remedy, but they still left it up to the hosts whether or not to use any of them.”

He sighed – frustrated at the dearth of complete records he had access to, a discreet swing of the dream nail provided. The soldiers mad with the brightness in their blood made for a wall he could not breach. Frustrated, too, with Hallownest's former denizens for how they had taken for granted all the oddest aspects of their culture.

“I accepted the risk when I left.” He reached below his desk and came up with a short stack of oilcloth, which he carefully wrapped the stone tablet in before setting it on the shelf with the other journals. He tapped that newest entry once, lightly; then the aspid skin scroll three oilcloth packages over, the root paper booklet, and another slab of stone. “I doubt the same can be said for every bug who's ever ended up here.”

Each of those journals' writers had taken ill with the flower, though one or way another it was still the plague that had killed them. The parasite worked too slowly to matter.

Even so, it must have pained them.

The wanderer did not understand why anyone would have let it happen back when cures existed. Why a bug, given the choice between hurting for the rest of its markedly shortened life and... *not* hurting....

Something the relic seeker had told it: the flower killed by pain more than wound. There would come a point during the illness when the prospect of breathing became so dreaded that a host made the choice to stop. This happened, evidently, in the face of Hallownest's entire branch of accessible cures.

Whenever the wanderer took a wound, it gathered soul and focused its shell whole. When it dreamed of what would not pass and woke a little less, it got to its feet and hunted down its regrets. It knew other injured bugs bandaged their wounds, then waited as time and salve did what soul for them could not. Few things tolerated pain without protest, since, for one: pain hurt; and, for two: hurting was painful. One could conjure solid arguments for preferring to not constantly retch up blood-wet flower petals. It could not see how the reverse held true.

“But they probably thought it was worth it,” said the relic seeker skeptically. He did not explain further. He did not know either; he had never loved with the expectation of being loved in return.

An absence failed to occur.

Unusually, it was a quantifiable absence, or it would have been had it existed for a bug to notice.

It was an absence of three. The first had not happened when it might have, so the second and third, who otherwise played their roles faultlessly, missed the cue to follow. They did not converge.

The absence passed unnoticed, as the imaginary tend to; time, unconcerned, pattered onwards. Rain fell on an empty plaza. A wanderer did not meet a relic seeker beneath a fountain. No one wondered at a sacrifice Hallownest had not honored, for the vessel once titled the Hollow Knight had been forgotten as completely as the light in its dreams.

Chittering and a spray of earth erupted in the dark. The wanderer heard the new arrival but did not change its pace – it already had three dirtcarvers on its trail, so a fourth could not very well make it run any faster.

A wall loomed out of nowhere. It jumped, hit a ceiling, turned left into – a wall, twirled around to face where the passage hopefully continued –

– no wall, but no ground either. Its feet slipped down with the sediment as the floor crumbled. A thought-quick dash ended well short of the other side of the drop, and a strike downwards slashed through air and falling dirt without harming gravity. No tools. No spells. Nothing to be done. It drew its cloak tight and braced.

Warmth wafted up, then a hazy glow that bloomed.

It landed hard in gently steaming water. The splash submerged it and sent waves rupturing out from the impact zone. It rose from its crouch, and immediately the wild currents broke its balance. It was lighter than bugs. Once its feet detached from the bottom it could not sink back down. It bobbed beneath its mask as the water settled again to calm.

It was in no rush to correct itself. The water was warm, the room was bright, and someone at the pool's edge was laughing while he wiped his mask-hat dry. “Hello, hello! I'll say, you're not what I expected from that clamor overhead, but this is a welcome surprise. I wouldn't have thought to meet a friendly face in this den of beasts.”

The blue wanderer waded close and held out a hand. The empty one took it. He went still for a second; then his grip tightened, and he took an audible breath and tugged it with him to shore.

“Are you staying?” he asked as he sat with his legs in the water. He dipped his hand in and stretched the fingers out slowly.

The empty wanderer tipped its head back. The powdery light of the soul that percolated through the water didn't reach all the way to the tunnels above: it could not see the hole it had fallen from. The walls were sloped where they weren't loose. Its claw would not carry it up them.

One tunnel yawned dark and thin and hungry at ground level. Another, across from it, opened to a passageway lit by fungi that grew thick along the path before also trailing into darkness.

It decided to take a seat.

The blue wanderer hummed. (He did this often, though not so often as the humming wanderer.) “This place looks very much like the spring just below that dusty town. Deepnest's denizens didn't construct it. But something tells me we don't have Hallownest's king to thank either. No, they wouldn't have set their resources to a hot spring while the tram line failed.”

The empty one did not reply, though it did not know what a tram line was or who might have built a hot spring if not the bugs who lived here nor those in the great kingdom it heard endlessly about. The blue wanderer's words washed over it, acid across a durandoo's ridged shell. It devoured them whole and returned nothing.

“Mysteries on mysteries,” said the blue wanderer, who did not and had never appeared to mind its silence. Perhaps he carried a fondness for the sound of his own voice. Perhaps the empty wanderer did too. It was natural to appreciate what one did not possess. “How many pasts are buried in Hallownest's history? I'll never know the end of the wonders this kingdom holds.”

Soul-bright water cascaded from the masks carved out of the walls. The scrape and rustle of infected bugs sounded from very far away. The empty one had not yet chosen which path to take, but there was no rush. It had nowhere it needed to be and nothing it needed to do. It wandered because the thought of stopping did not occur to it, not because it had a goal at the end of the journey. There was no journey at all. That word implied a distance crossed, but nothing had changed between Deepnest and King's Pass – there was still here, and now, the

nail on its back and the ground beneath its feet. The cloak that had been its sibling's around its shoulders.

It swiped a square of steam-soaked ground dry (or at least less actively wet) and unrolled the map of the Fungal Wastes. After defeating the mantis lords, it had come directly into Deepnest. The corner of the parchment that held the Mantis Village remained unmarked.

The blue wanderer watched as it drew in the village. It did not turn the map to give him a better angle, but neither did it move to block his view.

“Amazing!” he said. “You challenged the mantis lords with your nail after all? I shouldn't have doubted.” His fingers clicked a slow pattern on his nail's hilt. “You must have entered Deepnest by the front, if that's the case. Strange. I'd assumed you'd found a secret path. Do you have a map of Deepnest on you?”

It finished the line it was marking and raised its head. A moment passed, and then the blue wanderer brought out a scroll of his own and spread it beside the empty one's.

“I was lucky enough to find an unguarded way through.” The thick, blotchy contours of the Fungal Wastes gave away to Deepnest's crystal-sharp penmanship, where tiny, unreadable shorthand fought for space in the margins between tunnels. He had entered by a much smaller, much more hidden tunnel and taken a less direct route to the spring. Most of the empty wanderer's route was unmarked.

“You would have come by this way,” he said, tapping the blank area above their location, “so then – ”

His hand slid over the page, following the trail backwards to the Mantis Village. The empty wanderer had taken more than a few detours along the way, but nothing significant enough to correct him over.

He straightened as much as the curve of his shell allowed so that he was no longer leaning over the map. When the empty one looked up as well, he said, “I saw you earlier.”

It could not say the same.

He pointed to a passage west of them, well out of the way of its marked trail. “It was dark, you won’t be surprised to hear, but you had a lantern with you. Made it harder to mistake.”

It had not brought a lantern.

“You turned and left in a hurry when I called out to you. I thought you might have had other things on your mind so I didn't follow. It's something to look out for if you're headed that way,” he finished, and watched without a word as it laid a silver button unpinned on the map for its strange, wary twin.

A conundrum and a new wanderer met it out of the well. The new wanderer was as blue as he was grumpy. But he could not be the new wanderer because he would not be new if they crossed paths again, and he could not be the blue wanderer or the grumpy wanderer because those were different bugs.

He could be... the *grumpiest* wanderer.

Certainly he was very grumpy. He thought the empty one frail, though his words called it strong and Dirtmouth frail instead, and either way at least one bug around him was not worth his time. But maybe he was not grumpier than the grumpy wanderer. If so, then it would have been a misnomer to call him such. An objective scale for grumpiness would have been useful at this juncture. A map, as it were, for the charted geographies of grumpiness.

The tall shopkeeper did not carry those.

The new, blue, potentially-grumpiest wanderer spun a yellow-green flower in his hand. The empty wanderer noticed this because his hand was at its eye level. It could trace the shaded veins of the petals. Faint as they were, it could pick out the dried flecks of color spotting the surface. They were not the hunter's blue.

Suddenly, he scoffed and closed his fingers. When his hand uncurled, the flower tumbled limp to the ground and lay there crumpled. He did not watch it fall. “What a miserable lot,” he said. “I can hardly believe a bug would waste away in this place when there's adventure close enough to taste.” He narrowed his eyes. The empty one stared back without expression. “You've seen the ruins of mighty Hallownest. Yet you still came up.”

It did not deny this.

His eyes narrowed further. “Maybe I'll run into you below,” he said, and did not wait for the empty one to raise its dream nail before vaulting the well. Truly an inscrutable figure.

The wanderer still had business to attend to: a bench to rest upon, an old villager to hear stories from, charms to buy – but trouble arose as it neared the second item on the list. The old villager was not by the bench.

He might have gone to sleep or to eat or for any number of other reasons. It did not dwell on his absence. But it did listen when the small shopkeeper told it where he lived: in a house farther from the well, nestled among dwellings that had been abandoned for as long as the shopkeeper had lived in Dirtmouth.

“He might appreciate a visit. You're interesting enough to get anyone's mind off their worries. For a little bit, at least,” the shopkeeper commented as he divvied up his newest pile of geo. He did not sound concerned.

The wanderer lifted its lamp and noted how far the light spread. Lumaflies ate moss and mushroom spores. It would have to keep a stock.

The shopkeeper continued, “I'd tell you to not be too surprised if you see him, but I feel like that won't be a problem for you. Anyway, some bug or other must have brought a seed along when they came up the well. It flowered at a ridiculous pace. It seems that he's been safe from it until now because the adventurous types who brave Hallownest don't usually return, but people have been breaking the trend lately.”

He was considering closing the shop for a period, taking up his nail, and heading down himself to poke about for a cure. This seemed a dangerous proposition for such a small bug, but the wanderer kept its own counsel and set more geo on the counter instead. A last mask shard before he left.

Then it was off to the old villager's house.

A welcome mat of petals greeted it past the door. The shopkeeper had not exaggerated.

The murmuring villager was in the room as well, seated at a metal stool beside the bed. She squeaked and ducked her head when their eyes met, pink tinting her cheeks. “Oh!”

The old villager coughed – but that was the wrong word. The motion was something between vomiting and gagging, and the noise – brittle, breaking – like a mask cracking in increments. The other villager patted his back. She kept her hand on his shell until a wet lump finally fell out from between his mandibles and joined the fistful of other blossoms curled atop a towel over the blanket. He took the cup she passed him and sipped like every movement hurt.

She murmured to the floor, “If... if you save any bugs from – ”

“Wait,” the old villager whispered. Quieter than her, but her voice withered beneath his. He turned his head and saw the wanderer, and he straightened barely in his nest of cushions. “Did you... come to see me? Just for that?”

The wanderer trotted closer, the better to bring the dream nail into play. Perhaps he took that for a reply.

“I've never been sure if travelers just forget about me once they're out of sight.”

The empty one, who had never loved anyone well enough to forget them, did not grasp how that could be the case. A wanderer would not willingly give up the experiences it filled itself with. Others were not empty like it was, but neither were they full. That was why they were wanderers, the blue one and the humming one and the grumpy one and the strong one and the armored (*née* new *née* blue *née* grumpy(est)) one with his prickly thoughts.

Between the wanderer and the villager, someone's understanding was lacking. It did not ask whose.

The murmuring villager half-raised a hand. “You should ask if it can....” She darted a glance at the empty one, trailed off, then ducked her head and said, “It found *me*. When no one else did.”

“This one did?”

“I told you about it,” she said with sudden sharpness. She had been ignored again, she thought; but the old villager was scrutinizing the wanderer, struggling to match it to the robust warrior from her story. “It saved me. If anyone can find them” – she looked at it as well, leaning in – “you can, right? You will? The ones Elderbug loves, they're still down there, and you saved me....”

The old villager shook his head. He took another sip of water, and then she took the cup from him and emptied it into a pail half-full of green-tinged water. The root slivers dusting the bottom of the pail swirled briefly into a frenzy.

“No point,” the old villager rasped to the wanderer. The murmuring one froze halfway through wiping the cup clean. “They're definitely gone after all this time. There's too many, anyway. Do you mind keeping an eye out for a cure to this?”

It promised nothing.

“I thought I moved on a long time ago,” he whispered. He was more upset for the flower than for the disease it had planted in him. It could not have taken root; it should not have taken root. He knew better than to want for lost things. He did not want for lost things at all. What had granted reality the right to tell him that his own feelings lay beyond his comprehension?

The murmuring one sighed a little longing sigh for the love story that had dwindled quietly to nothing. She could not abide poor writing – faded descriptions, sad endings, characters who thought their other obligations trumped the happiness of true love – any and all enough to have her close a book without a second thought.

She refilled the cup with clean water and imagined how she would rewrite the story. The flower, she thought, would need to go away first. There was nothing very interesting about an illness that kept important characters too bedridden to proclaim dying declarations of love.

Never mind unrequited. What was love, even? The wanderer understood that it was the trap laid by the hunter of bugs below Deepnest, just as it was the fertile ground that let flowers grow in darkness, but when the last stag ran to answer a bell's call was that love or was that duty or was that all he knew how to do? The dung defender in the waterways had grown no flower for the knight whose grave he guarded, so what was the reason that kept him there at his self-appointed post?

It did not know grief, the empty wanderer. Loss did not strike it as the emotion seemed to other bugs. It dealt in absolutes as sheer as the cliffs of the howling wastes and as sharp as the point of its nail. No guilt for cutting down what remained of its sibling in the Basin, no resentment at the sister who was a hunter of wanderers, no horror at the masks piled a thousand deep in the Abyss. No hesitation at the memory of the mirror-shelled egg, the unfathomable weight of the dead above and below and between, the dust from empty masks

falling into a wanderer's eyes when it looked up. Imagination was not in its nature. These things had happened and would not change. It did not know how to stop for them.

And if it did not know how to miss what was gone, that meant it did not know how to value what was there.

But that was not altogether true. It valued a lantern at eighteen hundred geo, a map of a tiered city at ninety geo, a purer nail at three thousand fifty geo and three deposits of pale ore. It had readily paid three hundred geo to open the gates to a flooded stag station and one hundred fifty to unlock a bench.

The price of its cloak was a sibling's life and the price of its wings a sibling's death. It would never sell them. There was not a bug in Hallownest who could pay their cost.

Still, none of that was love. That was practicality, and if it had learned anything at all since entering Hallownest then it had learned that love was not a practical thing.

Darkness pressed in, all the deeper for the light the wanderer had just left.

It did not notice at first that someone had lit the candles while it lay dreaming, not until it picked itself up off the floor. It was not alone in the Beast's den.

The hunter did not turn her head. The wanderer watched her and did not move, not even to reach for the dream nail. It would have time for that. She did not seem in a hurry to leave. She might have been asleep, the way the quiet husk in the bed behind her no longer was, if only the rise and fall of her chest came a little more slowly.

Presently she tipped her head back with a shallow sigh. She still did not look at it.

There was a hoarseness to her voice, more pronounced than the wanderer had ever heard from her, deeper than the rasp that shadowed the old villager's words even after his flower's death. “Are you waiting on me?”

It did not answer.

“We do not choose our parents,” she said. “Nonetheless.”

Nonetheless.

“Attend to your business, ghost. I will have this moment.”

It did not move.

Now she looked at it, faceted eyes flickering in the candlelight. They did not choose their parents, and they did not choose to love their parents. Might its eyes have grown like hers if the Pale King had chosen differently? It could not say if it loved him, or if it had ever loved him, but it did not need to know how love felt to know that it could not abandon his actions in the past. It wore its sibling's flightless wings. For as long as it lived, the King's choices belonged to it, not to history.

It slid a silk-spun charm from the folds of its cloak and set it on the ground beside the hunter. She took the offering after a moment and held it up. “The threadwork is familiar. I would ask how you acquired it if I thought you would answer. What do you mean by showing it to me?”

She made to return it, but the empty wanderer, like the blue one, only took freely from the dead.

“You will not take it back,” she said. It would have been a question if she had spoken it to anyone else.

She pinned the charm to her collar. Immediately silk flashed into her orbit. The airborne strands clumped into balls, grew legs, and resolved into a trio of living weaverlings who landed on all sixes. When the hunter scooped one into her lap its siblings hurried after it on their own feet, and then she had a small pile of masks nestled in the folds of her skirt.

She did not tell the wanderer to leave again. After some time it sat down also.

Deepnest, while never silent, did hold the potential for quiet. Loose soil rustled under the wanderer's feet whenever a crawler tunneled beneath them, but, even enthralled by infection, Deepnest's citizens did not disturb the Beast's rest. A hurriedly stifled cough escaped the hunter, after which she gave her hand to the weaverlings to nibble the blood clean, but otherwise she made no more sound than the candles burning low. The wanderer prodded her surreptitiously with the dream nail, and that too was quiet. No one had taught it manners.

(Something it did not know: no one had taught the hunter manners either. What she knew of polite society she had puzzled out herself from scattered memories; from her own childhood, fleeting and gossamer-thin, from the midwife in the warrens who was too hungry in the present to linger on the past, from the husks who were shadows and echoes of what had once been. If some force in that moment restored Hallownest and Deepnest and the Hive all to what she remembered them as in her oldest memories, then the hunter would be as a foreigner in her own kingdoms.)

It was just about to stand up when she said, with no real ire, “I *know* you have places to be.”

It did not deny this and left. It could not say why it had stayed at all.

(Later, at the end: It remembered the shape of this mask just as it remembered the shapes of all its siblings' masks. Though this one was larger, now. Fully formed. Fully grown. The wanderer had never seen its like, and it marveled.

There were two plagues in Hallownest. The Black Egg contained them both. An empty wanderer peered up at a knight who was not so empty, whose left eye pulsed orange and radiant and whose right eye could not be seen for the pure white flower that had bloomed to cover the socket. When the knight looked down at it in turn, there might have been recognition in what remained of its gaze. Neither of them could have said.

The wanderer could not have asked. The knight could not have answered. These things did not always come together cleanly. Whatever love was, it was not something they could extend across the lightless gap between them; not then, behind the Pale King's back, and not now, under the shadow of the Pale King's absence. It was not something that would save them. The empty wanderer did not know all the answers and never would, but it knew enough that it did not wait, did not question, and did not stop when it raised its nail to its last Void-born sibling.)

It was not in the empty wanderer's nature to ignore the potential for a detour. The blue wanderer was not there when it circled back to the Teacher's glass coffin, and he had not passed it on the way out, so it reasonably assumed that either the Archives contained a back entrance (if he had left) or a series of undiscovered halls (if he had not). Either way, its map would need filling in.

Clanking and a familiar thoughtful hum drew it to a long closet where pipes and machinery traced the walls. The blue wanderer was green under the glow of the acid. He was tinkering with a set of gauges and did not look up when the empty one trotted through the doorway.

The empty one rustled its cloak. He did not give any sign of hearing.

He turned a dial. From deep within the walls shook an ominous boom, but he seemed to consider that the intended result; he gave the machine a pat while the floor shivered and fizzing acid surged through the tubing. “What would this place have done without you, Uumuu? It's just as the Madam left it.”

He watched the gauges until the rumbling stopped, motionless the way he became when his mind had strayed elsewhere. Then he turned around and immediately startled, hand flying to his nail, before he tilted his head to the side and let out a breathy laugh. “Hello!” He let go of the nail. “Sorry, I'm a little scattered. I thought you would have left.”

He glanced at the walls. He did not seem inclined to meet the other wanderer's gaze. “Perhaps you're curious about what that did. Have you noticed that the Archives are smaller on the inside than they look from the entrance? It's because most of the inner wings are flooded. It

was a preservation method that – we settled on, so that the contents of the Archives would outlast the plague if circumstances devolved to that point. But that should have drained most of it away."

Amicably he added, "I can show you around if you're interested."

The empty one was suddenly ambushed by an image of the hunter offering to show it around the Distant Village, or the Pale King offering to show it around the City of Tears, and the dream nail was already in its hand before it could picture itself offering to show the blue wanderer around the Abyss.

Bugs who were not empty had the ability to change their memories. Not merely to lose them – though they could do that also – or to look back on them with a different understanding, but to affect the actual content of them. This did not seem such a useful skill. The blue wanderer thought so too: he was concerned, even, about the old memories that had begun to bridge the cracks in his past. He could feel the landscape of his mind changing under the weight of strongly-held beliefs that he had not held mere hours ago.

He would have accepted that if not for the fact that, for the majority of the new information, he could not cite a single source. He did not know how much was true, let alone how much was justified. He could recall a dislike for a colleague but not the cause for it. Had they taken bribes to publish tailored studies? Had they cribbed off of others' work? Had they borrowed a book from a blue archivist, forgotten about it, and then given it back untouched a season later? The current him did not care. The bug in question was long gone, and their nebulous crimes could not have been so terrible after all. Nonetheless, he would have liked to know the reason, if only so he could care *less* – he could not filter out the dislike if the dislike was all he had. The memory of their life was worth more than a baseless, half-faded impression of distaste.

His mind was becoming the territory of a person he would not again be. Each thought was a pitfall. From this grew his offer to the other wanderer and his decision to unseal the Archives: he was remapping what had once been familiar. Walking his once-home, coherently explaining his new-old history to an outside party – those were the methods by which he would retrace his past. It had to be done.

But that was not at all true. It did not *have* to be done.

That was, he thought, what made anything worth doing.

(It had taken five swings with the dream nail to hear all this.)

Whatever his misgivings, he had a good sense of the Archives' layout. He pointed out offices, laboratories, record halls filled with aisles of mysteriously labeled acid. Here was the history of Greenpath's relations with Hallownest, here the studies into which nuances of emotion triggered the flower's growth, here travelers' accounts of the lawless wilds around the kingdom's edge.

They came upon an office door. The empty wanderer, who had seen some very impressive doors in its time, could not call this one remarkable in any way, except that in front of this

one the blue wanderer stopped for a while, looking on it with no apparent intention of opening it. The slot where a name placard would fit hung empty; paper would not have survived the acid.

Eventually the blue wanderer said, “This is harder than I expected.” His tone was as conversational as it had ever been. The slight weariness that shaded his voice was a small thing.

If the empty one ignored it, and ignored the openness of his mask now that the Teacher's no longer shielded it, and ignored everything that had happened in the Archives and everything it knew about the blue wanderer, then it could have thought that nothing about him had changed.

It did not ask him who the office had belonged to.

His second mask was gone, but habit had him reaching up to it anyway. When his hand only met air he did not try to pretend that he had meant to do something else. He huffed, then pushed the door open.

A small room. A desk, a chair, tinted glass boxes lined up against the back. “Those are mine,” he said of a row of boxes; then he indicated the other and continued, “The Madam's. She never kept an office of her own. No, that isn't right... the Archives were her office.” Softer now, distant; the empty wanderer thought of a ceiling lost to mist, ash from a time forgotten shivering underfoot and falling, still falling. A legacy that had not been meant for it. “She was always going somewhere, even when she wasn't. Her things ended up wherever she happened to be when she finished using them.”

He brushed a drifting uoma aside with the flat of his nail and pried open one of the cases he had claimed. The empty one jumped to see over the rim. Books, mostly, packed with hardly a wing's width of space to spare. Smaller boxes that were not glass. At the top a folded paper maskfly, pressed flat, which the blue wanderer picked up and fanned out between his hands. It looked very strange that way, placid and caught. The empty one did not know if a real maskfly could ever sit so still or so alone. “Hmm.”

The blue wanderer resealed the case without delving deeper and moved on to the next. A string-tied scroll sat at the top of this one, dense enough that there had to be several sheets of paper wrapped in it.

The blue wanderer brought it out and closed the box. “A letter I wrote for myself.” He glanced at the empty one. “This will take me a while. You don't have to stay.” A pause. “But you don't have to leave, either.”

It did not move while he tugged the knot loose. Once he'd spread the pages flat on the lid of the case and set his nail down as a paperweight to stop them from curling, he looked over again and said, “If you're staying, can I ask something of you? ...The Madam left something, too, but I don't think I can look through her things yet. It should be in acid. Though I could be wrong about that.”

It went to look. Behind it, the crinkle of pages.

It patted around the sides of one crate until it found the switch that sealed the container airtight. The blue wanderer probably did not mean for it to break anything, so it proceeded to spend a good while locked in conflict with the lid.

It tried to open it while standing on it. It tried to open it while not standing on it. Flight got involved. Progress was unsatisfactory. Here loomed the greatest challenge it could face: an obstacle it could not hit.

Eventually it got the box open. It did not see anything inside obviously meant for the blue wanderer, no notes or labels or clearly placed scrolls – there was an inexplicable contraption of wires and copper discs, and there was something bubbling orange encased tightly in glass that the wanderer recognized after a moment of bafflement as an ooma's core, after which it resealed the box without looking any further. The next case contained nothing as exciting as that, and by the time it managed to wrangle open the third the blue wanderer had come over, letters rolled back up under his arm.

The empty wanderer straightened up where it stood balanced on the brim, an acid-filled glass bead held in its hand.

“That's it,” said the blue wanderer.

He took the bead, and then something else inside the case caught the empty wanderer's attention. It shifted things aside until it could pull out a dictionary. The book itself was plain, but there was a faint green glow fading out from somewhere between the pages.

“Oh,” the blue wanderer breathed. The empty one looked up. It had never heard him sound genuinely surprised. “Can you – ?”

It passed the book over. He opened it to the source of the light: a few loose sheets of yellowed paper in the center, between which was wedged a long-dried flower that glowed with less vigor out of the darkness. He moved the papers away without touching it.

“It didn't used to be morbid to keep these,” he said. “People who'd had a loved one pass away sometimes let it take root so they could give one as a grave offering. It can't be cured from the outside before it blooms, but you really have to let it get it *very* far after that to suffer lasting damage.”

For a long, long time then, he did not move and did not speak. Acid no longer filled the room, but it seemed almost as if glass did instead: time shattered in on itself, each moment splintering under the weight of the next, irreparable. (The empty wanderer was not being dramatic. That was not in its nature.) The Teacher had been the last of three Dreamers. The lock was broken. All that was needed was to turn the key, and one way or another the stasis that held Hallownest eternal would end.

But things did not seem that way. They seemed the other way around. Everything which had until now only known how to remain in motion – all of it seemed to be learning again how to *stop*. Inertia giving way to purpose.

The blue wanderer closed the book and set it back. Before he could move away the empty wanderer pushed its own hand over his, pressing it against the cover.

“What?”

The empty one did not answer.

He scratched his cheek. “The flower?”

It was not asking about the flower.

“Well, it was a long time ago,” said the blue wanderer anyway. He sounded bemused. He was not; he was pretending to be in an effort to get through the topic quickly. “She grew it for me, actually.”

She must have missed him after he left. There was a trend.

“It wasn't....” He trailed off thoughtfully. “It meant something, but... it didn't mean as *much*. Nearly everyone had a few throughout their lives. It was never a death sentence. There were children who had it for crushes. Parents who had it for children that moved out and forgot to write. It doesn't have to mean anything. This might sound strange, but it was a different climate then. I'm only surprised that the Madam kept it. She wasn't sentimental.”

The empty one did not understand. He made it sound like she had grown the flower before he left, but it could not see how. She could not have missed him when he was still there.

“It doesn't happen as much now, does it. Not for those reasons. Too many ghosts about to worry over the living.”

He wiggled his fingers; the empty wanderer was still holding them down. He could have pulled away if he had wanted – the empty one was not very strong, physically – but he did not try to. “None of that answered your question? I can keep talking until you hear what you're after; though – fair warning – it might take a while. I don't know what you're looking for. And I don't remember what I was saying when you stopped me. What was it again? Hmm....

“You know, this probably isn't what you wanted to hear, but it's my first time seeing this side of you. You're usually very quiet.” The empty wanderer said nothing to that. “No, quiet's not it. Reserved? Anyway, I wasn't really expecting to ever see you ask a question. It's nice to be wrong.”

The empty one did not know about *nice*. Opinions were a strange land. Emotions were unseen and heavy with murk. Words could bring clarity to what was by nature muddy, but the empty wanderer could not use them and the blue one, in that moment, would not.

Why did wanderers speak? Why did empty things give of what filled them? It had thought the answer known. Other wanderers talked to it long past the point when they learned that they would not be receiving in kind, and all that changed for them afterwards was that

someone had heard them. That was a reason it knew. That was a reason it sometimes shared when it contained enough soul for a particular spell.

But ever since the Teacher had died, the blue wanderer had been speaking like he did not want to be heard.

Across from the empty wanderer was only a bug who no longer wore two masks. There was nothing to be changed, nothing to be cured.

It let go and watched while the blue one rubbed the back of his hand, treating it as if he had just pulled it from out of a frozen ashdrift. “Somehow I don't think *that* was the answer you were looking for. Well, as I said, I can keep trying. Unless you're in a rush, in which case I wouldn't like to keep you from that.”

He closed the box, started towards the door with the documents he'd come to collect tucked away. “I'm going to seal the Archives back up before I leave. I'll show you how to drain it in case you have reason to come here, but it's not the best idea to keep draining and flooding it repeatedly. It puts a lot of pressure on the pipes. And Uumuu won't be able to keep things running anymore. I won't be coming back.”

The empty one did not ask where else he might go. He was a wanderer; the question was not worth asking.

They headed back the way they had come, the drip and fizzle of acid a backdrop to his voice. He kept talking. About the flower, frequently – he thought that was what the empty one had stopped him for – but it seemed that he could always find something new to say about the Archives too. The institution held a long history; though only as long, now, as the blue wanderer's faded memories.

He showed it the knobs and dials that controlled the building's acid flow, pointed out the relevant ones, explained to it how to read the gauges and how to stop the process if the measurements they showed became problematic.

Then he flooded the building, and part of his reason for returning to Hallownest with it.

Neither of them was the sort to say goodbye. But – and the empty one had never quite noticed this before, not until it stood outside the Archives with the last of three seals broken behind it – the blue one *was* the sort to never leave a meeting first. When the empty one did not budge from its spot, he sat on the ground and leaned back against the gate. The empty wanderer sat as well after a longer delay, legs folding underneath it.

They might not cross paths again. That had always been a possibility in this sprawling kingdom, but not one that had ever seemed a concern to the empty wanderer before.

It did not know what had changed, or when, but it seemed that something had regardless.

There were words that should not be left unheard.

After a while, the blue one suddenly sat up. “Oh! You were asking about me!”

There had been no one else in the room at the time.

“It would explain some things. And in hindsight, I can see how....” He cocked his head, then looked over at it again. “It wasn't my intention to worry you. If that is what happened. I didn't think about how this all would come across from your side.”

He sighed. “I am alright. I will *be* alright. There are ways to process grief that won't bring the flower down on my head.” He held up two fingers. “The flower needs two conditions to be true to germinate: the host has to believe that they're not loved, and the host has to want to be loved. So I can try to pretend that she isn't gone in all the ways that matter – that her spirit lingers in Hallownest somehow, somewhere, that it's conscious enough for emotion” – which they both knew to be untrue on all counts – “or I can pretend that her being gone isn't completely a terrible thing.” That had not helped the old villager.

“It requires some mental gymnastics, but I can manage the second one reliably.” He laughed without much feeling. “Coughing flowers tends to get a bug burned at the stake in other parts of the world. There's been motivation to get it right. You don't need to worry about me.”

He hummed. “We'll be alright,” he said, with such casual conviction that the empty one could do nothing else but believe him.

Into the quiet that fell, it did not say that it was an empty thing that did not know how to stop. It moved, and it would move, and it would move on, and when Hallownest finally came to a rest it would have left the kingdom behind and only dust and memory in its wake. It was not loved well enough to be forgotten.

It did not say that it understood why the Teacher had sent the blue wanderer out of Hallownest to be erased and remade. It did not agree, but it thought it understood. He had not had a flower to cure, so she had found another way to let him forget.

It did not say that it marked the turning of time by the bugs it met and not the distance it traveled because, for all the places its sibling's cloak had carried it to and for all the maps it had drawn, a part of it had never left the Abyss. It remembered each and every wayward encounter along the neglected old roads of the kingdom. When it had met the blue wanderer in Deepnest, it was his voice that had told it the cave it had tripped into was safe. The hot spring and the warm light and the bench had only come after.

It did not say that when it was gone, it would not mind if he forgot about it.

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