nightly ritual

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by tangential

Something was wrong with Ragatha. Something was really, really wrong with her, but she couldn’t bring herself to look inward and acknowledge it.

Of course, nothing was ever quite right in their digitization, always finding a new way to unravel or show its weak underbelly to dare someone to sink their claws into, only to be rebounded into a new fresh type of hell. She’s witnessed a number of people seek to take it down and only to end up in the cellar, trapped amongst the rest of them like sick dogs quarantined.
But Ragatha was better than that, or atleast, she should be. She’s dependable, always a face to count on when in need, a shoulder to lean on and a smile in the dark-- something that can be taken, used when needed, and shelved without issue when not. A good dolly. She knows that’s all she amounts to, and that she doesn’t deserve the attention and care others do, she’ll handle herself.
She knows she has a problem, but she’s handling it herself. That’s all. She doesn’t need others to worry. She doesn’t need others to notice. She doesn’t need anything.
She knows its not subtle how her seam branches in ways not structural, and how it adds day by day by day... Arm trailed with thin lines that barely hide the thread scattered across her arms (and thighs, and abdomen, and neck, and…) in too symmetrical and even patterns to be accidental, and even if it were, despite being tossed around and taking it like she has to, it wouldn’t cover half of the frequency.
But nobody needs to worry about her. She has it under control. She can stop any time she wants, when she’s finally paid the price of being alive and the toll of all of her mistakes that keep piling and piling. When she can finally go through a day without making some sort of misstep or discomfort in another, she’ll consider putting it down. Stepping away, letting her skin heal at all from the torment she puts it through.

But not tonight.

No, her transgressions have gone unanswered and they require something real, something she’ll actually feel despite the nothingness and ephemerality everything here holds. Despite how incongruent her avatar is from anything sensible, it keeps its nerve endings somewhat intuitive to a human despite the stuffing and cloth. Subdued and contextual, but present. She learned not to dwell on the rules since they change on a moments notice with no rhyme or reason. She’s never certain if anything she says or does is entirely autonomous, or if it’s altered and influenced because it’d make a more interesting adventure, but she tries to hope he’s not that desperate. Not yet, anyway. She only has so much to give.

Well, atleast she knows this behavior is solely originating from herself. Caine could never find out about this. It’d have disastrous aftershocks, not only on her but on the circus’ residents as a whole. She couldn’t bear the thought, an ultimate pitfall… It’d simply be too much, it would spell out doom for the tense peace they’ve pretended to have carved out.

So she keeps it to herself. She has to.

Nobody can know about the blades. The seam ripper. The number of times she’s laid back on the floor, broadcloth (or, her skin, she supposes) split in two in a sharp V, stuffing spilling like its not entirely sure what to do, begging that it’d maybe finally be enough to get her out of

this nightmare. Abstract, die, rot away when inevitably nobody checks on her- whatever it takes. How long she spends pleading with nobody on the other side to listen; no companion, no higher power, no malevolent entity, and certainly no God. Just herself, alone in the dark perpetually. How long it takes for her admit it won't work, no matter how many times she tries it, and sew herself back together. How she, sometimes, will deliberately mess up a stitch just to prolong the sting. Just to make it a little more noticeable, like some sort of trophy or sign.

She's not sure if she wants people to mention they notice, or if it to just remain that open secret you don't talk about. Or, there's the secret option that nobody has noticed because nobody is paying that much attention to her. That nobody cares enough to spare a glance her way. That they all hate her so vehemently, they do the most radically cruel thing they can: spare nothing but apathy.

These thoughts are usually the ones that make her hands itch. To rectify what could be.

But she knows that's not true! It can't be; Pomni speaks to her… sometimes, when there's no better options. Gangle is shy but not outwardly annoyed with her, just… indifferent. Zooble is kind when they do speak, but mostly keeps to themself. Kinger grows more incoherent and disconnected by the day. Jax… is an… outlier, to put it cleanly.

…

They don't care at all, do they? None of them do. If Ragatha abstracted tonight, it would take days for her to be found, and only by coincidence.

Would she be fearful in the face of death? Cower with her tail between her legs like the good doormat she knows she is. Even in her last moments, taking up as little space at possible, desperate to prove herself good.Would she be vengeful? Attack and barrel through everything in her path, lash out at them all for the injustice she's faced both at their hands and unrelated. Throw the tantrum she never could've dared to.Or simply be taken away like the others, plucked like a misbehaving specimen, and dropped into the cellar with the rest of the weak-willed.

The thought almost makes her laugh, then cry, then guffaw at the thought. Truly, she ends up doing nothing. Just stare at her wall like it might grow teeth and tear her limb from limb, or maybe just give her an answer to everything.

She reaches over with a blind hand, pawing for the drawer and pulling it open, taking grip on a medium-sized kitchen knife. It was from a recent adventure, *The Crunchy Bunchy of*… something or other. Unimportant. It ended up lodged in her chest, as Caine's adventures were rather prone to impaling her, and she just didn't take it out. Turns out if you get stabbed, you can keep the knife. Who knew? She knew, she has a number of them, but this one was sharp. Far sharper than she'd ever thought Caine would allow.

She found herself staring down at it for a few moments, expression stormy and unreadable even in the distorted reflection. She failed to parse anything meaningful from the encounter other than that she was absolutely pathetic and felt nothing but a coiling dread in the pit of

her stomach, layering so tight it was hard to breathe. She quickly reminds herself she doesn't need to.

She was disgusting. Everyone was suffering all the time, and all she could think about was herself. They were all trapped here against their will, against any sense, and all she could think was me, me, me. As expected of someone so selfish. She needed to atone for it, relinquish herself in the basking heat of something tangible.

The tip of the blade found where her wrist would be, and quickly but firmly slashed down her arm in one vertical sweep. The broadcloth and various stitches over the… months, weeks, years, she's not sure it matters anymore, snapped instantaneously, giving way to the spill of her cotton. Whatever she was digitally, it wasn't sure how to handle what was her 'blood', even after all of the practice. It didn't flow exactly like blood, since it was cotton, but it couldn't remain stagnant either. Instead, it results in a slow, steady seep pushing past the shredded seam like churning chunks... which was somehow worse.
But more importantly, it burned and was something real. Instantly put in agony, she barely swallowed a startled yelp, replaced with a low, strangled groan. Her breath grew shallow but with heavy repetition, tears spilling down her cheek. Her closed hand trembled on the handle as her injured arm grew slack against her sheets, losing the stiffness or control to keep it up. Her teeth grit as her trembling hand pulled the knife back up again, sending the wound deeper and deeper. Paradoxically to her goal, it was difficult to stay attached, feeling a blade sift through what she subconsciously intuits should be layers of tender flesh hesitant to give way, but instead soft cotton spreading like butter. Despite however long she's spend in the circus, she still finds it hard in moments like these to remember, this is her body. She is the one piloting, she can clench her fist or tug on her hair and it'll register because it is her body. But sometimes, when she's watching in third person and actions obscured… She's not quite sure.
Eventually, the knife found the other end, the upper half, of her arm, cloth pierced easily. It felt surreal, not helping her at all with retaining sense of autonomy. Even after a certain point, the pain faded away into a dull ache she could ignore. The cotton littering her sheets, draping from both sides, didn't register as hers. Just the remnants of a doll.

… Just why was she doing this, anyway? What purpose does it serve to cut into herself?
She withdraws her knife, dropping it to her side with a clatter.

This is stupid. She's stupid. Everyone is gonna know something is wrong with her, something has been boiling inside of her and is ready to explode at a moments notice, and they're all gonna ask why she did that to herself and she's not gonna have a good answer and… And…

She needs to close this up. Even if everyone didn't notice the damage prior, they'll definitely notice an open hole in her arm.
One arm out of commission for the moment, she reached over to the sewing kit on the nightstand, withdrawing the needle and thread- tying them together with careful teeth. She pushed as much of the stuffing as she could back in, bringing the needle to the edges of her torn cloth to meet the other end, in what feels like a colossal distance to cross. She always found herself too numb in the first few stitches to really feel much of anything other than the slightest burn when the thread drags through her cloth. Hardly anything to write home about. Proceeding with minimal issue as the cloth slowly was dragged back into something taut, she

tied off and repeated the process. Restuff as much as feasible, re-thread, and fix her mistakes. Again. Pretend like she’s worth even the thread used to patch herself. Pretend like she doesn’t think about letting all of her stuffing fall out of her and see if it’ll maybe put her out of her misery.

The last stitch usually hurts the most. Today, as it was 'day' now as she noted by the distant footsteps in the hallway, she just found herself working like a machine on autopilot with one objective. With the task completed… there was no need for the rest of it. She put her tools back and set the sewing kit off to the side, knife being returned to the drawer, as movement slowly returned to her arm. She… didn’t entirely understand how it worked, but it was like firm pressure drawing her to contract what would be a muscle, building throughout her arm until it reached the tips of her hand. It was almost always uncomfortable, contracting in ways not quite painful, but dissipating into just a dull ache around the site itself when she flexed a few times- fully dexterous again. As much as she had with mitten hands, anyway.

She blinked firmly once, twice. Her tears must have stopped at some point, face finding itself incredibly dry and static. She glanced at her closed door, the light spilling underneath. Not only was it day, it must be reaching breakfast time.

She pushed herself off her bed, dusting off and plucking the stray stragglers of cotton and loose threads that clung to her skin, plastering on a characteristic smile of someone able to be a functioning person who does not ritually tear and repair themselves, as she reaches the door. She should go greet everyone, see how their nights were, ensure the day goes smoothly.

Be a good dolly.

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