

Wind chimes. Straw roofs. Fur. Skin against grass. The warmth of the sun. The chill of wind.

Their eyes flick back and forth between two open journals - one new, ink drying, the other torn, charred. Above all else, they silently curse themselves for the atrocious handwriting in both.

They squint.

Grip. The taste of metal. Knees buckling. Palms ripping. An end to a biting cold.

Carefully, as if it would shatter at the slightest wrong touch, they close the broken journal, setting away the precious words. They stare at the other for a moment, trying to call anything else onto the pages, before putting both in a roughly sewn rucksack.

Outside, leaning against the wall of a cartographer's shop, they gaze at the faint glow of the sun cresting the flat horizon.

Long ago, they had a home. Years, or months, or days ago, they had a family, interests, ambitions. Now, they could count what they had on one hand. A person had wandered into a remote village, their torn, makeshift clothing a stark contrast to the pristine garment of the locals. Nothing but a wanderer, with a cracked sword and a burnt journal, all held together like a house of cards.

The villagers averted their eyes and glared, spoke in hushed whispers about this strange, scrappy soul invading their home. No one faced them but the local cartographer, who introduced himself as Abraham, invited them inside, and politely asked them to not drop dead in his front yard.

He'd asked their name.

They couldn't find an answer.

The past few days had been spent hunched over a desk, trying to interpret the shattered remnants of words that once meant everything to them, desperately trying to jog the little memory they had left and write it all down. As if the longer they sat, the tighter they'd be able to grasp the few words that came to mind. But again and again, the thoughts would slip through their fingers, lost to time, lost to whatever had brought them to the village, leaving only the scraps of a few seemingly important memories and notes.

They can't stay here forever.

This isn't their home. They stand in the village watching the subtle movement of the world awakening as a puzzle piece atop an already finished puzzle. The word home had felt alien since they first woke up.

Rucksack swung over their shoulder, sword strapped to their back. They give a final parting nod to Abraham, returning home with a stack of paper - wordless, more than enough for him to understand their sentiment - before they begin to walk.

Walking feels like it's all they've ever known. Kicking up rocks in their path, looking to the intermittent tree in case it somehow has the answers they're so desperate for. In case the answers lie anywhere on their long road. The days they walk blur, never quite clear where one day ends and another begins. Walking, eating fish they manage to grab out of ponds and whichever berries look the least deadly, all metallic and sweet, sleeping in trees to avoid the monsters that wander the night. Walking, fish, berries, monsters, trees. Walking...

The monsters always become the most interesting part of the day. Appearing from seemingly nowhere, walking aimlessly, collecting in swarms, dispersing to walk their own ways. Always gone by the time they rise in the morning. In a rare exchange, Abraham warned against them, warned to never go outside at night lest they become the next unlucky soul to be taken by them, but they started questioning if those were all just folk tales. Maybe they'd just been lucky enough to never be spotted. Maybe the berries and fish blood that stained their face and clothes made the monsters just as scared of them.

The grass gradually grows greener, a new, vibrant shade that sends them into unease. Then, the green fades into an off-white. A tiny boat sits, docked, oars buried in sand and one end covered in moss, on the shore. Without thought, without considering consequences, they push it out into the water, struggling to steady themselves and catch ahold of the oars.

As dark clouds begin to fill the sky in the next hours, they spot a tiny chunk of dry land, barely kept dry, with a rusted sword pierced into the ground. Invigorated, filled with a fleeting hope for something they can't quite name, they catch their boat on the edge and leap out. Sword from their back, unsheathed and lined up beside the little island's own.

Nothing. Different shape. Different metal. Different handle. All wrong.

They fall back into the boat and row again as tiny raindrops start to fall from the sky, splashing into the water and beating down on their face, perfectly matching the hot tears beginning to stream down their cheeks, mourning someone or something they had

never known. The rough wood of the oars pinches their skin as they grip tighter and tighter. The wind on the open water, amplified by the water starting to soak through their clothing, prepares to freeze them solid.

It takes a moment to notice, to break out of the mindless autonomy of rowing long enough to see the bow buried in sand of a beach. They push themselves to their feet, step out, wobbling on legs that know nothing but sitting, and look around. Another little village, built on stilts from rope and driftwood. Windows shattered, bird's nests and spiderwebs filling the holes. They turn away, to give the remnants a little private dignity, and continue along the shore, watching one foot land in front of the other in the sand. Maybe, if not for the books held tight, if not for the crumbling sword on their back, they would have entered the village. Looked for a bear, or an elk, or a fox, who knew better than them, and asked them all the questions tearing at their chest. Maybe they'd have had the answer.

They can't help but look back every so often, considering, trying to spot any sign of movement in the distance, weighing the option in either hand. Nothing. They turn back to walking, and look up from the sand just long enough to spot smoke billowing out of the forest ahead. A sight that stops them dead in their tracks, forces them to instinctively draw their sword, tenses their hands, almost knocks them back onto the sand. Hesitantly, as they try to slow their breathing, they continue on, breaking through the treeline.

The sound of laughter rings out, burns their ears. The flame of a high pitched, "Hey!"

A small girl locks eyes with them, stares, fascinated, for a moment, before running back to where she came. They take a few careful steps following her, the crack of twigs under the dense canopy that holds them so securely making them jump every time.

As they break through the treeline again, the sound of laughter and chatter threatens to deafen them. An old couple holding hands on a rock porch. A half dozen children chasing each other through a patch of dandelions. A campfire, surrounded by people sitting on logs, a woman laughing so hard she had to lean against the other woman beside her for support. The repeated, high pitched "Hey!" drags them back to reality; the little girl stands before them again, now with a young adult woman whose sleeve she tugs on. Black hair pinned back, rosy cheeks, a dozen pouches strapped to her belt, clothing expertly hand sewn, the spitting image of the little girl, only neater. They don't have time to gather much else before she rushes to their side.

"Oh, dear, what happened to you?" she says, leaning around, surveying them. A judgement, but not the same judgement that the first village held. Eyes that don't shy away from letting themselves be seen, that don't burn, but warm.

"Come on, let me patch you up."

They should argue. Something in them begs them to run, begs them to leave before something awful happens. But that woman, all-knowing, with her pouches and forwardness, had already convinced them to stay - for now. Just to rest. Just to collect themselves, then they'll be off again, heading home.

"Honestly, it's a miracle you're even alive," the woman, who'd introduced herself as Aspen, the town's apothecary, says as she wraps their arms and legs in bandages. They hadn't been able to offer her the same courtesy of a proper introduction. "I haven't seen someone so hurt in years. And I haven't seen someone just walk off such a heavy head wound in even longer." She brushes her thumb over their forehead, sending a sharp pain through their head. They wince, and she offers them a sheepish smile before wrapping another strip of gauze around their head.

"Orchid thought you were a monster, reanimated, when she first saw you," she chuckles.

"You look funny," the young Orchid comments from her spot on the floor with a doll in each hand.

"I'm just some wanderer. I think we all look like this," they shrug softly.

"Of course you are. Nobody but an adventurer would manage to slice their hand open twice in the same spot," Aspen comments. She rotates their hand held in hers to trace a scratchy scar, and the long, jagged scrape under it. "Quit overdoing it, wanderer."

Her words, though understandably harsh and commanding, feel more like honey to the wanderer than the bitter herbs they may be coming from someone else.

"Stay here awhile, will you? At least until you can build your own house in town," she offers, straightening herself up and packing away the rest of the bandages, aside from one roll that she slips in their rucksack. "At the very least, to monitor that head injury and make sure you don't pass in your sleep."

They stutter a moment before answering - Aspen hadn't asked where they came from, where they planned on going next. "It's old enough, I'll be fine. There's not really much you could do anyways if I-" She shoots them a stern look. "...But I guess staying one night won't hurt. If it'll help quell your worries."

The three sit together in front of the home's fireplace as the sun slowly melts past the horizon outside. The wanderer holds a cup of hot tea in their lap, herbal and soaked in flavors of sugar and honey, too warm against their freshly discovered injuries to hold in their hands for long. Orchid sits in her mother's lap, telling both about the grand story she's come up with for her dolls. They listen closely, engaged by her tale of an adventurer girl and her best friend's travels.

They rise early the next morning, pushing away the plush sheets of the spare room Aspen had set them up with, strapping their sword in place and grabbing their bag, opening the front door.

"You're leaving already?"

Aspen leans against the wall, carrying her work bag. They should've expected this.

"I'm sorry," they start, "I can't stay forever. I have to go..." They try to find a word to finish the sentence, but any one place that could fit escapes them.

Aspen replies before they can fumble much longer. "You don't have to apologize. You don't owe me an explanation."

They glance at the door again. "I guess this is just goodbye then?"

"Oh absolutely not," she laughs, "'Goodbye' implies we'll never meet again. I'll see you soon, wanderer. If not soon, then someday."

A lingering look, that falls into a nod.

One foot in front of the other in the grass. The gradual fade of the town's morning chatter.

Another day of aimless walking. Another night in a tree. Another morning, just like all the others. Until they glance down at the ground.

A figure stands, facing away, staring at the colorful drops of sunrise making their way through the trees. They slip out of the tree, careful not to make a noise, and sneak towards the figure, sword already in hand, adrenaline ignoring the sting. It turns.

Monstrous but human, adjacent and not quite correct either way, just inches from clawing its way to normal. A young man.

As he shifts closer, with too-wide eyes staring, the wanderer's legs threaten to give out. In some desperate attempt, if they let it happen purposefully in the first place, a gently echoed word slips past their lips. "Hey."

The monster in front of them seems more like a deer caught on a path than a mountain lion ready to attack. Deep cracks cover the horns atop his head, the tips jagged. Off-colored blood drips from his hands and trails along the rips on his legs. "Are you hurt?" the wanderer murmurs.

He looks down at his shaking hands before nodding ever so slightly. "Fell."

They sheath their sword and reach into their bag to grab the bandages. Looking back up to him, they offer a hand that he hesitantly puts his into, and they start wrapping bandages around, just as Aspen had done to them.

"Uh- where are you from?" the wanderer asks, trying to fill the silence.

"Nowhere," the monster replies, short, without needing to hesitate.

They chuckle quietly, filled with an instant solidarity.

Taking a step back, the wanderer surveys the loose, poorly fastened gauze and suddenly realizes just how medically untrained they are.

"I have a person - a friend, I guess - who could do a better job at that. Back at this town. It's not too far, and the people are nice."

They hold out their hand to guide him along, and with a slow step forward he takes it, careful not to upset the bandages of either.

The pair make their way to the village as the moon begins to rise and the sun says its last goodbyes, the shared injuries not slowing their journey down too much.

"Wanderer!" a shout rings out as they make their way along the rock-lined town paths. Aspen, full sprint towards them, collides with the wanderer in a hug that threatens to suffocate them.

"Sorry! Forgot about the injuries," she says, carefully patting their shoulder instead. "You made a friend?"

The wanderer looks to the monster for input, who immediately nods.

"At least what you lack in medical skills you make up for in social skills. Come on, let me fix those and you two can stay the night. ...Or maybe longer, if you feel inclined."

Within days, Aspen stands atop a hill, handing the wanderer beams of wood to hammer into place. The monster sits on the edge of an unfinished wall. Orchid runs in and out of the house of logs and straw and stone to intermittently update the three on her attempts to tame a stray village cat.

"Too energetic. It's skittish. You have to be careful with it," the monster comments.

"How do you know?"

“An adventurer knows everything.”

Orchid nods, his presumed proficiency enough to trust, and starts to dart back out before slowing herself down to a sneak.

“I’ll have to be off for the night. I have some work to finish before I can sleep; Orchid knows to head home on her own once she’s done playing. Remember to come get some rest soon,” Aspen says, setting down an extra plank on the grass.

They exchange farewells and Aspen walks off down the hill. The monster begins to stand to hand the wanderer a nail when a shout from outside interrupts.

“Remember not to move too much! If you rip a stitch I’ll make you fix it yourself!”

He laughs softly, falling back into his seat, and the wanderer meets him to take the nail. Their fingers linger where they meet for a moment, and the monster looks up to give them a soft smile.

“It looks nice. You done for the night?”

The wanderer’s hammer hits the wall one final time. “Yeah, I think this is good for now.” They sit beside the monster on the wall, bandaged shoulder to bandaged shoulder. They take a moment to just listen to the night, the goodnight calls of parting townsfolk, the quiet coaxing of Orchid with her cat behind the house, the sound of wind chimes now audible in the quiet town.

The monster stares up at the sky illuminated by a pattern of stars, while the wanderer rummages to pull their journal out again, and scribbles down a word at the bottom of the list.

Home.