

*CLANG!*

Went the can, kicked down the street. The concrete jungle surrounded me, echoing back the sounds of my loneliness.

*CLANG!*

Today, the grey of the city's pavement was stained with my blood. After school, under the iron sky, no sun shined on me as my three tormentors punched, kicked, and clawed at me. Clad in black, they attacked me for looking at one of their sisters the wrong way.

*CLANG!*

She sat next to me in class, beautiful as could be. A sun-bronzed face, framed by inky locks that tumbled over her shoulders. She's always been nice to me, but I could never get close enough with her brother being who he is.

*CLANG!*

I know the exact moment she reported to him. In our geometry class, I was staring out the window, right above her, but my eyes must have slid down without me knowing. The first sight to greet me after my daydreams was her, giving me a questioning eyebrow raise. I shook myself out, mumbled something about nothing, and kept my eyes dutifully on the teacher.

*CLANG!*

I kicked the can with all my might, sending it thudding into a tree.

"You should throw that out where it belongs." A voice suggested. I jerked my head up to see a woman in a jungle green dress sitting on a thick branch. The dark green she wore stood in contrast to her milky skin, which served to bring out her deep brown eyes. She had a book resting against a knee, a huge leather tome that I couldn't hope to read. I shouldered my backpack under her imposing stare and shuffled before snatching up my can.

“What’s your name?” She asked.

“Raphael?” I replied. She simply nodded, not offering her name in return, so I asked.

“Gaia, of course.” She blessed me with a smile bright as the sun, and said, “You’re not alone Raphael—not when you’re well read.” She patted the pages before her and turned back to the book, caressing it with care.

“I don’t think I need more things jumbling up my brain, miss.” I said. She giggled at that, doing little more than bouncing her shoulders.

“You only call it jumbled because you have no way of making sense of it, I bet. These stories, *any* story, can help with that, Raphael.” She looked up, thinking for a moment, then said, “Tell me a story—one that you think would hold no value—and let me tell you just how it can help.”

The request was odd, but I thought about all the genres I could, wondering which one may be pointless. Finding one, I thought on it, wondering if I was missing something that she may obviously come up with. Thinking of no argument, I presented it to her.

“Fantasy.”

Her eyes grew wide at the statement, but she took the time to think, tapping her chin with one finger. She smirked to herself, closed her book, and swung her legs over the side of the branch, sitting on it like a bench. I realized just how long her dress was, as the branch was taller than me, and the blouse came down to my knees.

“We all have dragons, Raphael. We have these demonic... things in us that burn us, hoard our happiness, and jealously guard it. They keep us from our happiness with words of hate; to ourselves, to the world, to those we are supposed to love. How are we supposed to know that we can overcome those odds, if we never hear the stories of heroes being pulled from their lives

and rising to the challenge, never to return to where they once were? *That* is what fantasy is for, Raphael. It shows us that dragons, demons, and darkness *can* be fought, and that it *will* lose.”

I let out a deep exhale, remembering my blood on the concrete, and my three dragons. A quiet thought entered my head as I thought of them, though.

*They probably have dragons too.*

“What do you recommend, Gaia?” I asked, trying to push back the sting in my eyes. Without breaking eye contact with me, she passed me the tome she was reading. It had no title, just an image of a grand tree etched into the leather.

“Enjoy, Raphael.” She said. She brought her legs back to the branch, closing her eyes and relaxing in the breeze. I walked off, studying the book, flipping through all its pages forwards, backwards. I realized I never said thank you, but when I turned around, the tree was... gone. I realized that my can was gone as well. All that was left of my conversation with Gaia was the book she gave me, and the lessons learned.