

There were far fewer people walking the streets at night as of late.

The pubs were empty. Doors and windows were shuttered. Everyone stayed holed up in their houses. And with the recent sudden increase in people infected with the Black Rose Disease, so too did gossip like this spread:

“I swear, I saw it!... It was horrifying. It was a parade – an *inhuman* parade.”

For some time now, people had been spreading rumors of an eerie parade that appeared out of the fog. The fantastical procession wandered through the dark nights, and those who laid eyes on it were said to be dragged into their fold....



As an officer of the law, Ritz was always ready to serve and protect the people. “Being a police officer is my life’s calling!” she would always say to the members of the Owl Detective Agency, puffed up with pride. Yet at the same time, she was painfully aware of the scorn in people’s gazes, how they would call her the “only female cop in the city” not with pride, but with derision. And unfortunately, with the recent events of the Westpool Auction still fresh in everyone’s minds – specifically, with how she’d received a commendation for her quick response, thereby quelling the panic among the gathered elites – her fellow officers at the station only treated her worse and worse.

“Must be nice to have family up on the food chain. Sure wish *I* had a bigwig police daddy.”

“That no-name detective was the one who actually solved the case. All Li’l Miss Ritz did was help herself to some of the glory.”

The medal she’d received, handed to her directly by a high-ranking official, only served to heighten the level of intrusive questioning and contemptuous mockery she garnered in turn. As she clung to a ladder alone in the station’s storage room looking for “Missing Persons File #56” in the stacks, Ritz let out a quiet sigh. She was looking for clues about the case she’d asked Nick’s help for, but so far she hadn’t found anything in the records that seemed relevant. But she pulled herself together while she still had the chance and reached for the next bulging file. The shelves hadn’t been cleaned in some time; her nose itched from all the dust in the air. The room could never really be called “clean” by any stretch of the imagination, in fact.

Ordinarily she had a tough time even setting foot in storage. Usually if she got close, the chief would ream her out and set her to work on menial tasks instead. She had to take advantage of everyone being away from the station for the time being to conduct her search.

Everyone on the force besides Ritz had their hands full at the moment. The Black Rose Disease was starting to run rampant all throughout the city, and with it came a deluge of Demon-related incidents. From assaults and thefts to full-scale bank robberies complete with weapons and explosives, even once-in-a-lifetime sorts of cases had become commonplace. The entire city was, to pardon the expression, a carnival of crime.

Naturally, every investigator on the force was out rounding up the troublemakers. And naturally, Ritz had been ordered to remain on standby, performing all the miscellaneous odd jobs back at the station.

I'm an officer, too - I'd like to pursue some actual cases myself... Her fingers unconsciously clenched around the file in her hands. She'd weathered all the badmouthing behind her back recently, and now she was being treated like *this*. Anyone would be feeling a little down in her shoes.

But whenever her spirits began to sink, she'd think back to what a certain someone said to her - a certain *informant* she'd recently gotten to know, younger than her and impertinent to boot, one of the oddballs among a cast of characters at a certain detective agency.

"... All right!" Ritz slammed the file closed and raised a determined fist. "Let's try asking the chief one more time to let me join the investigation. I joined the police to *save* people... I refuse to just give up!"

She grabbed the next file and began to peruse, brimming with energy once more.

"We don't need any more people on the investigation. We got plenty of hands on deck already." The second the chief got back, Ritz immediately pounced, and he immediately fired back with a curt dismissal.

Then, out of nowhere, someone burst through the doors. The man was clearly drunk, clearly in a tizzy, and clearly screaming his head off. It was impossible to tell exactly *what* he was screaming, though - he was an incoherent mess.

The chief decided to handle the new arrival by dismissing him out of hand as well. "The police don't have the time to listen to whatever nonsense has you so worked up," he growled.

The drunkard forced his way inside, but he tripped over his own feet and landed in a heap in front of Ritz. She leaned down to lend him a helping hand. He blearily gazed up at her with wild, bloodshot eyes.

"It's the parade!! The parade showed up last night and it got my wife! It took her and now she's gone!"

The Demon Parade. The station was in an uproar in an instant.

Mysterious rumors about such a parade had started floating around the city recently. The police had been receiving an unusual number of reports of women going missing, and they only seemed to grow more frequent with time, but they'd concluded that these disappearances were also linked to the Demon problem... which was a far cry from what the public thought. For who knows how long now, the people had been whispering what basically amounted to a ghost story to each other about a "parade that appears from within the fog and spirits young girls away."

"I'm Davies," said the man. "I live 'round the lower side of town, y'know, 'round where the Black Rose Disease popped up outta nowhere... and y'know, the missus's been kinda off lately. Used to be she'd never talk back to me, but since she started goin' to this meeting thing, she's been goin' on and on about women's rights and whatnot... and she's been gettin' into all these weird fads."

"A meeting about women's rights? I *had* heard about such a gathering in town lately, but from what I'd heard, it's a perfectly civil assembly meant for discussing just and proper rights for housewives...." Ritz trailed off, noticing the cold stares from not just Davies but several other officers present. Assemblies on women's rights and the like were generally viewed as "unseemly"

by the people, but *especially* by the feudalistic police force. To them, the whole concept was downright absurd. Her voice grew quiet as she continued, "Um, so may I ask... what connection it has to the parade...?"

"Ever since the missus started goin' to those things, she's been goin' against me! Just last night she said she was goin' out and rushed right out the damn door... so I went after her, and before I knew it everything was all gray and foggy and this - this carriage came outta the fog, leading the parade...!" The man's eyes flicked every which way, close to panicking. "It scared the hell out of me - whatever that was, it wasn't *human*. The Demon, she was in all black, wearin' this mask like she was goin' to a ball, and she and the missus both just up and disappeared! Please, you gotta find her!"

The chief rolled his eyes, but then he suddenly smiled and pointed at the drunkard. "This is perfect, actually. Ritz, you take this guy's case. It's linked to all this womanly stuff - fits you like a glove, don't you think?"

The other officers eyed their chief with wide grins. They were sending her out to hunt down a fairy tale.

"... Understood." In a flash of inspiration, Ritz added, "And once I settle this matter, I ask that you let me participate in the Demon incidents as well!"

The chief's lip curled. "Don't be stupid. There's no way a *woman* can handle a proper investigation."

The color drained from Ritz's face. Just one sentence, and in an instant her single-minded determination flickered. Traces of ice-cold despair trickled down her spine.

Her feet unconsciously turned away, and she all but fled the station, her superior's words stabbing at her psyche like freshly sharpened swords. She ran, and ran, until finally she ran out of breath in the station's courtyard. A thin sheen of sweat coated her entire body. Her heart beat a wild staccato against her ribcage. Yet her face was bloodless, pale as snow.

"Um... are you all right?"

The question came from a voice barely above a whisper, but Ritz still jumped. She whirled around to find a young man standing there, his brows delicately furrowed. He had on a three-piece suit embroidered with gold - an upper-class outfit if Ritz had ever seen one - but he was hunched in on himself, peering at her timidly with blue-gray eyes.

"If you're feeling ill... hm...?" The young man's nose suddenly twitched, and he craned his neck just a bit closer to Ritz.

Ritz pulled back, startled. "U-Um, do you need something?"

The young man's expression went flat and blank, as cleanly as if it had been wiped off with a cloth.

"Are you perhaps acquainted with a certain detective?" he asked.

"Huh? Detective?"

"Yes, a younger man, violet eyes...."

Ah. Ritz knew who he was referring to. "You mean Detective Owl, yes? Are you familiar with him as well?" If he did, that would certainly ease the conversation along. "I happen to be on good terms with him and his associates. I often drop by his agency, and...."

The young man's cheeks twitched, so quickly that it was hardly noticeable. A wide, brilliant smile slowly spread across his face. "Ahh, I thought so! I thought I had seen you somewhere before - that must be it!"

“Huh?” Ritz took a closer look at his face. Had she met him somewhere before? No, she didn’t think so – he was unfamiliar to her.

“You must be the outstanding young officer who received a commendation for the auction case. My name is Low – I’m Sir Mastema’s secretary. Um, I apologize if this is too forward, but please allow me to treat you to some tea – it’s just that you look so pale, I think you ought to take a short rest.... Perhaps I can be of some assistance.”

And Low tilted his head with a quiet, polite smile.

■■■■■■■■■■

“Rumors about a parade of Demons?”

Nick didn’t even glance up from Owl’s letter. “Yup, I heard about it. ~ The regulars down at the pub were talking about it.... *Everyone’s* talking about it, actually.”

Nick was currently on the sofa in the detective agency. A meow sounded from the direction of the window, as if in response.

“They were all saying stuff like, ‘If you get snatched away you’ll never return! ~ Scaary!’ And apparently only cute girls are getting taken, so I gotta be careful, too. ☆ Since, y’know, *I’m* so cute. ~”

Ritz scowled. She strode forward and poked her finger into his chest. “This isn’t funny! More and more people are getting infected by the Black Rose Disease every day.... Plus, I....”

Nick finally tore his eyes away from the letter to glance up at her.

She changed tack mid-sentence. “... Owl and the others won’t be back for a while yet, right?”

“Hard to say, based on what he wrote here. Sounds like a lot happened on the island. But never mind that, what’s up with you, Ritz? Did you find out anything about that case you brought by the other day?”

“No, nothing yet. I tried looking for a list of missing persons and disappearances, but I couldn’t find anything that lined up with the current circumstances.”

“Oh, geez... even after all that looking, *no* clues at all? This case is way tougher than I thought. ~”

“A servant with unrequited feelings for a duke’s daughter stole her away. I absolutely can’t forgive using such force against a lady! I do hope she’s unharmed....”

“... Yeah, same. We gotta find *some* kind of clue before the others get back. ~ I gotta, as a brilliant assistant *and* informant!” Nick pounded his chest with a silly grin.

He was clearly joking around, but Ritz’s mood didn’t lighten in the slightest. “You’re amazing, Nick,” she said. “For Owl to entrust you with a case without him.”

“... Hey, Ritz. Are you actually looking for that midnight parade? Did something happen with the other policemen?”

“... Yes, yesterday. Ah, but it wasn’t anything major!”

Nick frowned. “Y’know, you’re helping me with my investigation. If there’s anything I can do to help -”

“Thank you. Let me... no, never mind. I’ll come by again if and when the police decide to mobilize on the issue.” Ritz paused for a moment. “... I actually got my hands on a good bit of information, and I can’t rely on you and Owl and the others forever!”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to look into it by yourself...? Eh? Wait, Ritz! Ooooo!... Aaand she’s gone. Is she gonna be all right...?”

Nick was left with a vague sense of foreboding as Ritz left, and even after the door shut behind her he stared at it for some time, lost in thought.



Ritz walked on for some time after leaving the agency, but presently she glanced back over her shoulder at the building, Low’s words ringing in her mind.

“Sir Mastema thinks quite highly of you,” he’d said. *“He believes that the time is coming for women to stand alongside men as equals. Your commendation was one such step toward that very goal – clearly the government agrees with him.”*

Low had brought her to a shop he frequented. He’d recommended the rose hip tea. Ritz had taken one sip of the vivid red liquid, and the rich sweetness melted on her tongue and seeped into her very soul.

Someone out there had noticed her efforts. Someone had *recognized* her.

As she drank, she thought back to her meeting with Mastema at the auction hall, and the sweetness only grew. Ritz felt relaxed, for the first time in a very long while. So relaxed, in fact, that she ended up telling Low all about what had happened at the station.

And quite unexpectedly, Low had provided her with crucial information.

“When I went to the station earlier, it was actually for reasons related to your case, Miss Ritz. Truthfully....”

His information had nothing to do with the parade. No, he had information on the women’s assembly. He’d gone to the station specifically to ask them to not crack down on their activities too harshly – the assembly was secretly at the heart of the government and those aligned with the church and had received staunch support from the ruling class. Low was one of the leaders of the assembly and was therefore aware of several locations where they met.

“Among our number is a man by the name of Krinos, who has opened a salon dedicated to hosting ladies who have been treated unfairly by our society. Every meeting place receives independent backing – even the owner of this lovely establishment received such backing in the past. I thought I might volunteer at one of the meeting halls next time.

“Plus... please keep this a secret, but there are more and more cases of those being persecuted for having the Black Rose Disease, and even the church is having difficulty finding any permanent housing or families willing to take on such women without any living relatives, so we’ve mutually decided to offer each other aid.”

Low pulled a miniature notebook from his breast pocket and scribbled several addresses down before tearing the page out and handing it to Ritz.

“I hope this will help you in some way.”

Ritz pulled the note from Low out of her pocket and kept walking as she glanced at it, eventually ending up along the banks of the Thames. The water had grown filthy over the years, and a pervasive stench hung over the area. Nowadays the river was a gathering place for foreign merchants and people of unknown origin.

All of the meeting places were in areas she'd usually never set foot in, where the long arm of the law had trouble reaching. Many of them were in back alleys and slums. This was likely a conscious decision on the part of the organizers to avoid detection. And one such place was here, near the disgusting river Thames.

Ritz was worried that Nick would try and come after her at the last minute. She knew, though, that if she didn't do this alone, she'd be proving everything the chief said about her right, and she couldn't stand that sort of failure.

The sun was already starting to dip below the horizon, but most of these meetings took place after nightfall, so she had no choice but to stay out and about. She peered down at the note, where portraits of the women who vanished with the strange parade stood interspersed between the words. Perhaps it was the location, or perhaps it was the situation at hand, but to Ritz's eyes, their faces looked awfully somber.

There was a road facing out on the river near London Bridge. When she turned down a side street along that road, her surroundings suddenly changed dramatically. She hadn't even been walking ten minutes before she realized that her clothes were horribly unsuitable for this particular location, but it was too late to go back and change. Her official uniform stuck out like a sore thumb amid the sea of working-class men, and their curiosity only grew when they realized she was female on top of that.

The narrow alley remained dim even during the daytime, with foreign spice merchants lined up along the sides and drunkards lying prone next to carts piled high with roasted geese. The Black Rose Disease hadn't really hit this area yet, but she couldn't let her guard down, in any sense of the word.

She mostly hid in the shadows of fruit stalls and carriages to avoid people's eyes as she walked along looking for the meeting place, but the path quickly grew complicated and messy, and soon she had no idea what street she was even on. She pulled the note out again and glanced around.

Just then, a man selling flowers in the shadows of an old brick building gave a shout, his voice cutting through the air. It sounded like he was locked in an argument with a young lady trying to sell him her stock, and they were in a disagreement over prices. "I won't pay more'n a hundred pence for the case," he was arguing. "Look, these ones're all wilted."

"These were freshly picked this morning!" the woman shot back. "I won't accept any less than one-twenty! If you don't like it, I'll just go somewhere else... hey, that hurts! Let go!"

The man's arms, thick and strong enough to lift barrels with ease, locked around the woman's wrist. She tried to shake him off, but hit him in the face in the process. Enraged, the flower vendor bodily tossed her away, sending her reeling directly into the nearby barrel and scattering flowers everywhere.

Ritz cut in at once. "Excuse me, I'm a police officer! What's all the commotion over here?"

The flower vendor froze for a split second, but he soon relaxed and smiled unpleasantly when he realized Ritz was alone, his language purposely growing coarser. "... Well now, what a *cute* li'l officer we got here. Sorry, missy, but you better clear out. If you're lookin' for someone, ask again later." He turned his attention back to the fallen woman, ignoring Ritz entirely. "... Oi, you better beat it. I know we've known each other a long time an' all that, but the deal's off, got it? If you can't set decent prices, then you better close up shop and start doin' housework or somethin' instead. For your own good, ya hear?"

"Excuse me?! How long do you think I've been selling here -"

TWEEET! A sharp whistle sliced through the conversation as cleanly as a knife and echoing in the confines of the alley.

"... I called for backup." Ritz stepped up, glaring daggers at the man. "Would you be so kind as to continue this conversation with the police?"

The flower vendor instantly gave up in the face of such a forceful display, and though he glared daggers right back at Ritz with eyes full of loathing, he did eventually pull his cart away and retreat.

"Are you all right?"

The woman ignored Ritz's helping hand and stood up herself. She was, oddly enough, wearing clothes befitting a hunter. Her face, devoid of any makeup, looked rather like a boy's at first. Long black curls hung in a ponytail. She looked to be about Ritz's age.

The woman was clearly wary around a police officer. She kept one eye on Ritz as she glanced around. "... Where's your backup?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You said you called backup, right?"

Ritz glanced away with a faint grimace. "Ah, that... was a lie," she mumbled. "I just have business down here... so I'm here alone."

The woman unconsciously relaxed with a laugh. "Ha! Not bad, for a cop. Thanks for the save."

"I-I don't always lie like that, you know! It's just, recently I had someone tell me that if I don't use everything at my disposal, I won't be helping everyone I *could* be. So I just... used some of my influence."

"That sorta thing doesn't count as a lie, but hey, either way you're a real lifesaver. My husband died just last month from that disease going around. We used to run our business together, but the second he was gone and it was just me left, everyone started treating me like dirt. What a world we live in, eh?"

"... I'm sorry. That sounds rough."

"Hey, no, none of that. *You're* a cop - a *woman* cop. That's pretty amazing, you know?" The woman smiled. "My name's Ollie, and I run my business around these parts. Now listen, you did me a good turn, so take my advice - once you're done with your errand or whatever, don't stick around, you hear? Especially if you're alone. Lots of folks around here don't really like cops, to put it mildly. Who knows what they'll do if they find you."

"... To tell you the truth, I'm looking for a certain place, and I'm afraid I've gotten myself lost... you wouldn't by any chance know where this is, would you?"

Ritz rattled off the address. Ollie's expression instantly shuttered. "... Why d'you wanna go there?"

"I can't get into specifics since it involves an ongoing investigation, but I'm looking for someone who's gone missing."

“A missing person?” echoed Ollie. “I didn’t think cops would come all the way here just for some no-name nobody... and that ain’t the sorta place that’ll welcome you law types with open arms. You probably shouldn’t go, for both our sakes.”

“...! So you’re saying you know where it is?! I don’t want to interrupt any of their goings-on, I just want to ask if the missing individual has been coming or going. I’d like to know if this person disappeared of their own volition, or if they were caught up in an incident.”

Ollie turned her back on Ritz, muttering, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I don’t judge anyone who takes part in these meetings – there are government officials who approve of their actions,” Ritz stressed. “I became a police officer because I believe that everyone has the right to decide how they choose to live, regardless of their sex.”

Ollie paid her no mind. She stepped away, ready to leave the whole conversation behind.

“Then at the very least, if you could at least tell me if you’re at all familiar with the midnight parade....”

... Ollie’s legs ground to a halt as if she were a puppet yanked back by its strings. The air grew tense, heavy. Neither could get their next words out.

Finally, wordlessly, Ollie gathered up her scattered flowers and placed them on her cart, then plucked a single bloom from the pile and handed it to Ritz. “A rudbeckia, as thanks for your help. Its meaning fits you to a T.”

“Er... um?”

“It was a woman who disappeared, right? Then she left of her own free will. The parade doesn’t take people by force – at least, it didn’t for me.”

“... Huh?”

“Tonight, midnight. Wapping High Street.” Ollie turned, and this time she didn’t turn back as she walked away.



The light of the gas lamps faded out further down the street, one by one.

One, by one, by one, as if swallowed by the gigantic shadow of an invisible monster, they vanished into the darkness.

The street, lined with port facilities, was already cleared out. And eventually, the bewitching fog closed in and blanketed the stillness of the night.

As silvery wisps obscured the field of view, a black carriage rolled up from the distance, its wheels seeming to almost slide across the cobblestones.

It was a hearse bearing a luxurious angel sculpture. A box in the shape of a coffin rested on the pedestal above it, and it was that box from which the fog emanated. Even more strangely, another sculpture had been placed above that mysterious hearse, one which looked rather like a lily with its petals spread wide.

The carriage proceeded along at a leisurely pace, trailed by a group of ladies dressed up in extravagant costumes. With fans and umbrellas, their hair pinned up, masks covering their faces, they wouldn't look out of place at a masquerade ball in a foreign country. It was impossible to tell how far they'd progress through the thick fog.

The clock had struck midnight at Wapping High Street.

Ritz had changed her clothes so she wouldn't stand out after her previous experiences in the back alleys, but the sudden appearance of such a fantastical group of people left her too shocked to even try and hide. The faint rustling of however many tens of dresses entranced her completely. So bizarre was the sight before her that it bound her limbs, leaving her frozen to the spot.

The carriage abruptly squealed to a halt, and the parade paused right by Ritz.

A single woman wearing a rabbit mask detached herself from the entourage and walked right up to where Ritz was standing still as a statue. The silver fog glittered and eddied around her feet with every step. *How pretty*, Ritz thought to herself, yet it sounded distant in her head, as though she were observing through a stranger's eyes.

The masked woman halted in front of Ritz and lowered the fan she'd been holding, revealing a perfectly curved smile. "Good evening," she said. "Quite a lovely night tonight."

It took the woman speaking for Ritz to finally comprehend what she was seeing. This wasn't a strange ghost story - these were regular humans. "Y-You're, the rumored Demon...!"

"Demon, you say?" the woman tittered. "Yes, I'm well aware of those rumors... ah, please forgive my late introduction. We are simply a group who calls out to women in the dark of the night with no place to go. I was one such woman myself, once - I had fallen so ill I could barely stand, and I found myself wandering the streets when I was saved. Perhaps you, too, find yourself troubled on this night?"

"You were... saved? Not 'snatched away?' I'd been told the parade kidnapped people... I'm looking for an acquaintance who's gone missing." Ritz pulled out the sketch of her target's profile and held it out to the masked woman. "Would you know her, by chance?"

"... I'm sorry, but no, I'm afraid I don't. But perhaps if you ask around the salon, someone will know - there are many there with similar circumstances.... And there is someone there who will answer all your questions. That person will forgive you and guide you along the road of salvation, in every sense of the word."

The woman pointed with a single pale hand.

"... So is it entirely up to you, whether you choose to take this hand."

Ritz paused. But eventually, she reached out and lowered the other's hand and spoke with a voice clear and free of hesitation. "I would like to ask about this person's whereabouts. Could I ask you to guide me to this place?"

The masked woman raised her fan again and waved her hand to the parade.

"Then I bid you welcome to the Midnight Parade. You shall surely find what it is you truly desire." With a light bow, she urged Ritz forward, and the officer fell in step with the rest of the parade.



It was impossible to tell how far they'd gone or how they'd gotten there through the thick fog, but eventually they came upon a sizable old building with an arched gateway out front. "... What an impressive structure," Ritz commented.

"The building has quite the history, I hear," said her companion. "It was originally built for a person of noble standing, but then the church purchased it and used it as a hospital, or some such.... Please, follow me."

As Ritz trailed after the masked woman through the archway, she glanced back, only to find that the parade had gone off without them, leaving not a trace behind.

A fresh wave of fear washed over Ritz at this latest almost supernatural incident, but she couldn't turn back now after she'd come this far. She paused only to take one deep breath and to glower at the building before her before plunging inside.

A long hallway stood on the other side of the door. Strangely enough, a slightly sweet scent drifted around her as she strode along until she eventually reached the end. The second she opened the door to the hall beyond, the thick, cloying smell of flowers overwhelmed her senses. A frankly dizzying amount of white lilies decorated the edges of the room, forming a sort of floral enclosure.

"Incredible..." murmured Ritz without thinking.

"Yes, it *is* rather surprising the first time you see it, isn't it?"

Ritz jumped and whirled around. Standing there in a sleek pants suit was a slender, gorgeous person. Languid green eyes gazed quietly at Ritz. Their voice was neither high nor low, and while they seemed to be a young man at first glance, it was hard to tell their gender. All Ritz could really tell, in fact, was that there was a single noble lily blooming there. A golden design of - of course - a lily stretched across the Puritan white shade of their clothes all the way across their chest. Platinum blonde hair hung in loose coils around white lily earrings.

"Um... please forgive my sudden intrusion," stammered Ritz. "I'm, er, looking for someone...."

"You, too, hold a wish in your heart - you, and all who pass through these halls," the person interrupted. "I am Krinos. Now, please, follow me."

His voice was not particularly loud, not particularly forceful, and yet Ritz's mouth seemingly glued itself shut as she followed his directions and walked after him.

They passed through the reception and straight down a hallway that split off in four directions until they reached Krinos' room, a gorgeous place of uniform white and pale green furnished with Rococo-style furniture lined with gold. And this room, like the others, was full to bursting with white lilies.

At Krinos' prompting, Ritz sat in a wisteria-colored chair in the center of the room, oriented such that she was facing him. He passed her a cup of tea. "Please, drink this," he urged.

"Ah, this - this is the same kind from that shop in the city...." It was, indeed, the same crimson tea Low had recommended to her - same shade, same floral scent. She took a sip. Same outrageously sweet flavor, too. The taste easily invaded the tiniest cracks in her heart, until she felt as though she was melting. "Mr. Krinos, I've come here in search of someone."

“Your questions and your doubts shall be answered,” he replied. “But before that, I would like to speak with you. Those who find themselves capable of taking part in the parade are possessed of a certain attribute – namely, heartache. You have experienced hardships, I take it? Anyone who holds secrets so closely to their chests is intimately familiar with that pain. This place exists to liberate those from their hurt.”

Krinos’ voice wavered in the air, soft and gentle as could be, and that very voice suddenly called forth a memory in Ritz, a vision of a time long ago when she was still young, still innocent.

“Now, please, let me hear the true you you’ve been hiding away.”

His brilliant green eyes, clear and bright and beautiful, pierced Ritz through. For some reason, she felt like crying.

“Mama, you know, I -”

“... Perhaps... it *has* been... difficult. I wanted... to be like my father. And yet, it felt like everything around me was trying to get in my way.... I thought that perhaps I wasn’t putting in enough effort, even though I was working so hard.”

“I wanna protect the city, when I grow up.”

“The things people said about me behind my back.... How women should stay behind the desk, pushing papers. And it wasn’t just my coworkers, people in the streets would say that to me, over and over. ‘What can a *woman* do, I want a man to handle this,’ and such.”

“I’ll be a great , and I’ll get an award like Father.”

“But I was fine with all of that, as long as I could protect everyone.... Because I took pride in what I did.”

“... Because -”

“But, I still think it’s not fair. I can’t change the fact that I’m a woman. I don’t want to turn out like that just because I was dealt a bad hand....”

“- I don’t want to be -”

“... A ‘proper investigation?’... Haha. AHAHA! How stupid, right? They’re just clinging to the fact that *they* got dealt the good hand, the *male* hand.”

“- I don’t want to be like Mama.”

“Well, I’m not having it! I won’t waste my whole life away tending to a home and a family like Mama did for Papa!”

As the last notes of her scream faded in the air, Ritz came back to herself with a start and glanced up, rapidly paling. “I... no, that’s a lie! That’s -”

Krinos reached out and gently gripped her trembling fingers. He had at some point kneeled in front of her and was now peering into her eyes with a quiet, kind smile. “Without a doubt, that,

too, is your true self. A part of it, at least. Yet if you yourself do not accept it, who will? If it is unforgivable to focus only on the beautiful and turn your eyes away from the hatred and ugliness buried underneath, then you would not even care if the world fell to ruin. Ritz, Heaven will surely forgive you.”

“No, it couldn’t possibly....”

“Be still and listen, O beloved child.”

It was then Ritz noticed the tears spilling from her eyes and over Krinos’ fingers. Even she couldn’t tell whether they were tears of sorrow, joy, or something else entirely; all she knew was that they showed no sign of stopping anytime soon.

“In this place you are free to hate or resent as you please, even if the world outside will not grant you pardon.”

“... Is that... really true?”

“It is. Everyone within these walls may release the emnity overflowing in their hearts as they see fit. Now, Ritz, please, enlighten me - what is the world to you?”

“Can you - promise me?”

“... Yes. I promise.”

For a while, Ritz was silent, her head hung low, her expression obscured from sight. But eventually, her shoulders started to tremble...

... with laughter.

“Put simply... a giant *pain in my ass*.”