

Just a flicker

Von Calyses

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Kapitel 1: The Girl and the Author

"Is this seat taken?"

Sam stopped reading and looked up. The guy in front of her was sporting a questioning smile.

"No, you may sit here. Just let me..."

She began to shift her luggage around.

He watched a moment as she struggled with a heavy suitcase and helped to put it in the luggage space above their heads.

"I wasn't aware, the train would be so cramped", she said apologetically, as he slumped in the seat beside her. He shrugged.

"It is Saturday and it is the last train. This route is the main lifeline of the valley. What did you expect? Er... forgive me or being so forward, but may I ask what brings you to the valley. I have not seen you before and you have packed for either a very long vacation or you are on the move."

"No Problem, I start a new job on monday, so unfortunately I have to move to the countryside, but on the upside my new home will be by the sea. I love the ocean.", she answered his question, adjusted her glasses slightly and looked at him.

The man tugged an astray strand of his auburn hair, he had otherwise neatly tidied back into a ponytail, behind his ear.

"So it is either Pelican Town or East Scarp I assume?" he asked.

"Very acute, Watson!"

He laughed about her comment. Sam continued:

"I will answer that, but please tell me something about you. The whole questioning is going a bit onesided for me."

"Oh, I am prying again. One of my not so prestine characteristics."

"I don't mind, as long as you're telling me stuff, too. So, you live around Pelican Town?"

He smiled sheepishly.

"It is my humble home for almost two years now." His expression grew a little distant.

"So you seem to like it there?"

"Ah, yes. It was one of my best decisions to move there." A thought crossed his mind.

"If you will work in Pelican Town, there are not many places that offer jobs. Please do not tell me you are going to work for Joja."

"I'd rather be unemployed than working for them!"

"Glad to hear. So, where will you move to and what will you do exactly?"

"Oh no, you go first!"

He looked at her dead serious and pulled a small well worn notebook out of his pocket.

"There is not much to tell about the lonely and uneventful life of an aspiring author."

Sam wasn't sure if it was the statement at that or the manner in which he had told her, but she had to laugh hard:

"Don't be mad, but are you serious right now or are you trying to mess with me?"

He looked shocked, almost hurt even, but before he got the chance to say anything Sam talked again:

"Author? That's one of the most exciting ways of life I can imagine. If you can pull it of, of course. Don't get me wrong. I know it's hard and frustrating, but it's also so

rewarding. How can being an author be uneventful and boring? If you can pull it off you are able to create something to reach other people. To touch their hearts. To create something you can be proud of."

"I think your ideas of being a writer are a bit too fantastical. Most of the time I am sitting in my cabin all alone and write till the day is done, only to throw out everything in the end and to begin anew the next day. And I have deadlines. There is no time for leisure or to meet up with people. It is one of the reasons why I moved to Pelican Town. To deprive me of everything that will steal away my time and pull the attention away from my writing."

"Frustrating..., yes I said so. But self-imposed loneliness? I'm not a fan of that. I think it's a wrong-headed and completely unnecessary mindset."

"What is wrong about that? The lonely author is able to fully concentrate on his work and can bring all his feelings and hardships into his work without being superficial. How should I know how to write about that without experiencing it myself?"

Sam looked at him closely. He showed an honest interest in what she had to say it seemed, despite being hit by her words.

"I won't tell you to stop if this method works for you. After all it's only my opinion, but I think writers who go out to experience things, those who can make and collect memories are more successful and live a happier and healthier life in the long run.

Stories are a vessel to transport feelings, personal experiences, internal and external conflict and interpersonal relationships, so there is so much more, other than loneliness to write about. And if it comes to loneliness and it's really the thing you want to write about, it hits so much harder in contrast to the happy things in life. Almost everybody experiences loneliness at some point in their life. There are so many things one can only work through by oneself that anybody should be able to relate. There is no need to force that feeling onto yourself to cultivate it even further. Am I wrong with that?"

The man was thinking, looking down to the small notebook, shifting it from one hand to the other. A few moments of silence passed before he looked up again. He looked Sam right in the eye and smiled faintly, but said nothing.

It was only then that Sam noticed how exhausted he looked. The charming smile, the twinkle in his green eyes, as he first spoke and his questions about her journey had diverted her attention from the latent fatigue lingering beneath that smile. She held his gaze.

"I hope I haven't overstepped my boundaries here. By no means I meant to hurt you. It's just... it's so much fun to discuss and debate viewpoints with other creatives. It's been a long time I was able to do that and I probably got carried away", she closed her previous statement and waited for a response.

His smile grew a bit wider as he brushed the hair out of his face again, but now she was aware of the worry and maybe some kind of sadness hidden behind it.

"Thank you", he said after a while. His voice more hushed and a bit softer than before.

"I appreciate those honest words, although I have to admit they were quite painful. Between either those who butter me up or those who do not believe in me and belittle my dreams, an honest opinion, a constructive critique is a rare gem. I will take your words into consideration, but I will not promise anything."

"That's okay. I don't expect anything of that sort from a travel acquaintance. A nice conversation, sometimes a bit deeper if the topic is of interest to all parties involved, is all I'm in for." Sam said.

His expression had reverted back to the genuine interest he'd shown, before her

punching him in the gut verbally, as he continued the conversation:

"Okay, but now you have to tell me what your deal is. See it as compensation for the emotional stress you put me through right now. You will stay in Pelican Town?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me. Where will you work, if it is not for Joja. there are not many places left. Stardrop Saloon? Pierre's? Will you be the carpenters apprentice or will you become a farmhand for one of our local farmers or on Marnie's Ranch?"

Sam laughed: "Are you sure you're an author. The questioning rather says reporter. But I've to tell you neither guess is correct, although waitress could be an alternative if my future boss doesn't pay me well enough."

"If that is so, I would have to go more often to the...", his phone began to ring and cut his words short. "I have to take this call", he said after a short glance over the display, his mood changing visibly in the fraction of a moment and not for the better. "Please excuse me. I will be right back." And with this he got up and vanished to some less crowded area at the end of the wagon.

Sam noticed that he had dropped his notebook as he had tried to put it back in his pocket hastily while standing up. She picked it up before someone could step on it. As she looked if the man was coming back she noticed two young adults across the aisle snickering and whispering something, but didn't pay much attention to it. She pushed her glasses back up her nose and opened her book to the part she had been interrupted earlier, when a blonde girl moved across the aisle and sat down beside her.

"Hi, I'm Haley and if I'd heard correctly we will be neighbors soon. May I give you some advice for your stay in Pelican Town...?"

Elliott's day hadn't been the best to begin with. First his editor had torn his new draft to shreds. Then he had almost missed the train and now this worrying phone call from his brother. Sometimes this days he wondered how he was still able to carry on. His deadline was coming nearer and nearer almost crushing the last ounce of creativity left inside him. His ideas started to run dry. If he wasn't able to provide a good draft next time, the publisher would surely end his contract, which meant no income. On top of that his parents were closing in on him. Sometimes he caught himself thinking about how much easier it would be to go back to his old life.

No, he refused to give up.

Maybe that stranger's words were something to think about after all. Yes, he had told her, that her words had been hurting him, but he wasn't going to admit, that they were the most painful thing, he had heard in a long time.

He was sure she meant it as she had said, she hadn't any intention to hurt him. And there was an undeniable truth in her words. He knew he couldn't keep on living and working the way he was now. It had proven to be a dead end. Either way, that woman had piqued his interest. She seemed to know at least a bit about the creative process and wasn't afraid to share her opinions. Maybe she was someone he could talk to more often, after she had finished her move.

He was on his way back to his seat as he spotted the familiar blonde beside the woman.

"Oh, no." He whispered to himself. What was SHE doing there? He slowed down and tried to be as silent as he could as he walked into earshot.

"... and the most important thing: Be careful who you associate with. There are some strange people in town and Mr. 'many a conversation' here is definitely one of them. Want to know about some things he did? We saw him on the cemetery one day..."

Elliott turned and walked back before she reached the end of her story. He knew it was silly, but he hadn't the stomach right now to deal with her. Too much had happened already. This day got better and better... Fortunately the train ride was almost over. In a few minutes it would reach Pelican Town. If he'd leave the train early he could get one of the few taxis waiting, instead of taking the bus with the other townspeople.

As soon as the train stopped and open its doors he was out. To leave without saying at least goodbye left a bad taste in his mouth. Hell, he hadn't even asked her for her name, but he couldn't handle Haley on a bad day like today without snapping.

His ride came to an end. As he was about to pay for the taxi, he discovered that his day had taken a turn for the worst.

"No, no, no, no..." where was his notebook?

Kapitel 2: Magic Talk

Sam laid back in the bed, her hands behind her head, as she was thinking about the day. It wasn't that late, but she was pooped. Too much had happened on her way here and everything was new and exciting. Like her new temporary home. The room she had rented at the boardinghouse was small and cozy, but it was hers and she had made sure to get one with an adjacent bathroom. Her journey to the valley had been long, she had been on the road for almost the whole day. The last leg of the train ride had by far been the most interesting part.

She really could tell she was in the countryside right now. She hadn't even reached her destination and the gossip had already started. She didn't know what to make of it yet, but she felt sorry for the guy, if that's how the people here saw him. He just seems to be a normal, guy with an interesting way of life. Something similar had happen to her once, so she was cautious about things people were telling her about others.

Maybe she could find him and give him back what was his, when she started to explore the town tomorrow.

Sam reached for the notebook she had placed on her nightstand. It wasn't that old, but clearly showed signs of heavy usage and it had been expensive. The leathery cover had some superficial scratches and some of the gold plating on the rim of the pages had lost it's shine. A grassy stain here and there completed the picture.

Someone had written a dedication onto the very first page: "Follow your dreams you big dumbass and find your true happiness. I wish you the best of luck. I believe in you. Love Damian."

She flipped some pages. The next was blank. The rest looked like a diary. There had a date been written in the outer upper corner of every right page used. The handwriting was neat sometimes, sometimes hastily scribbled all over a page.

After reading through a few days and then a few days more, she closed it again and put it back on the nightstand. His writing style seemed nice, but there weren't any clues to his person or whereabouts.

Sam turned of the lights. Envisioning her new life as an adventure she had to master, she slowly drifted to sleep.

"Somethings not quite right. I can't put a pin on it quite now, but I sense a... disturbance. It may effect the barrier. Should we talk with Lady Belinda about that?"

"Magnus, old friend. I think you worry to much. Fluctuations within the magical field are not uncommon. At least in such bustling environment as the valley. It will pass."

Magnus Rasmodius was not convinced. He had learnt to listen to his gut feeling when it came to magic a long time ago.

"Aquatros, could you at least ask Lady Belinda, if she could talk to the mountain spirit for me? My gut tells me to keep watch on the situation."

The balding man twiddled with his blue beard as he thought about it. He put the wineglass he was sipping from away and pulled something out of his lab coat, that looked like a perfectly round, highly polished bluish stone.

"Okay, the evening is young enough so I think I won't wake her up."

With a small whispered spell he brought the sphere in the air right in front of him. It began to glow and after a few moments he began to speak:

"Lady Belinda, may I have a few minutes of your time?"

A few seconds of silence passed, before a deep, rich woman's voice spoke up:

"Aqua my friend. What can I help you with. And I've told you many times now, you don't have to be so formal. Belinda is fine."

"Rasmodius wants me to ask you to contact the mountain spirit for him. He's worried about something disturbing the magic and that it could affect the barriers."

"Oh, Rasmodius is with you. With haircolor does he sport today? Is he still wearing his hat inside?"

"Lady Belinda, please." Aquatros said.

"Just teasing... okay, let me see what I can do. It may take a bit. We need to prepare the ritual. I'll come back to you as soon as we're ready. Do you want to be there in person or should I just go on and do it without you?"

In the later case I will need to know what you want to ask her specifically."

"Her?" Rasmodius asked.

"Oh, you didn't know? I thought you would have met her someday in the past. Anyway I have to go now. I call you later if that's okay."

"It's fine by me." Rasmodius answered. "And I would like to meet the mountain spirit. So tell me in advance and I'll be there. Aquatros, how about you?"

"I'd like to come too, but I'm afraid I've to pass. I'll be out of town for the next weeks. Don't you remember?" The last words were addressed to Rasmodius.

"Oh, I forgot. Maybe I'm getting old."

"You are old my friend." Aquatros answered. Belinda chuckled.

"And you told me not to tease..."

"We thought you had to go." Aquatros and Rasmodius said in unison. All three laughed. Belinda excused herself one last time and ended the call. The stone went dull as the spell ended. Aquatros caught it before it could drop down to the ground and put it back in his pocket.

Rasmodius filled their glasses again.

"So, what's next?"

"The East Scarp situation is becoming kind of a pressing matter. We'll need a solution for that soon." Rasmodius scratched his beard and sighed.

"The Lightkeeper is still doing their work but we can't purely rely on them. I think it will be too much if we don't provide any help in the near future."

"What about Camilla." Aquatros asked. "You always talk so highly about her."

"She's a great witch with a lot of potential. But I'm afraid she has a lot on her plate already with keeping Castle Village safe. I don't know if she will be able to cover another responsibility. I hardly see her these days." He finished and sipped on his drink. The situation wasn't easy. Maybe it could be different if... No, he shouldn't think about that. He couldn't just walk up and talk to her. Not after so many years.

"What about the farmer. Do you have news about them." Aquatros interrupted his train of thoughts.

"... about them? I'm afraid there's nothing to tell you. They just didn't seem to be interested."

"In the valley in general?"

"I wouldn't say that per se. But it seems they definitely haven't any interest in the magic surging through his place." Rasmodius sighed.

"What a pity. Could that be the missing part?"

Both pondered a bit about that question. The disinterested of the farmer in the magic of the valley had definitely angered Rasmodius. After all their grandparents had done so many good things for the valley and he'd hoped, that the farmer would be an heir to their legacy. Over a year they had been a part of the community now, but not much had happened since their arrival. They barely took part in communal activities either. "It's a shame they make themselves so rare, but it is what it is and the valley has been alright and its magic has been stable all the time without them here. So maybe you're right and it is just a flicker in the magic and will pass in a blink." he said. "I hope so my friend. I sure hope so." Aquatros answered.

Kapitel 3: Exploring Pelican Town

Sam looked around her new hometown, if you could refer to Pelican Town that way. It looked more like a rustic small village to her. The roads were paved with cobblestone and barely straight. A few houses were sitting on the verges of these roads leading to the town center. She moved down the road towards a big building hosting the town's doctors office and a small general store called Pierre's. In front of the building a now weathered bulletin board had been installed, sporting requests for help from the town's citizens and a calendar of events. Sam was about to walk into Pierre's as she bumped into a girl prying the door wide open and running out of there. A sword clattered to the ground.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Abigail! Come back this instance."

"Oh shit, my dad. I have to go, bye."

She quickly picked up the weapon and vanished around a corner. As soon as she had come, she was gone. A middle aged man with glasses stepped out of the door and looked left and right. When he noticed Sam still on the ground, rubbing her forehead, he extended a hand to help her up:

"I think I know the answer, but have you seen a violet haired girl with a sword, who just ran out of here?"

Sam nodded.

"Thought so. Name's Pierre and that whirlwind was my daughter Abigail. I'll make sure she'll apologize as soon, as she's back."

"Oh, it's no problem. She already did... kind of."

"No, that's no behavior for a young lady. She has to learn to be a proper adult and not some dream driven child." he sighed.

Sam didn't know what was going on and decided, she didn't want to know right now. So she tried to change the subject:

"Erm... hi I'm Samantha, Sam for short and I'm new here. I'd hoped you might help me with some things right now."

"Excuse me, where are my manners... Welcome to Pelican Town then. How can I help?"

"First of all, would you point me in the direction of the library?"

"Library? You mean the museum? It's kind of merged, but goes by Museum of Pelican Town"

"Then yes. The museum. Gunther Richardson's the curator? Then that would be right."

"Never known his last name, but Gunther is right. You follow the road down here and walk over the bridge. Turn right right after crossing the river and look for the large two story building on the left. Is there anything else you need help with?"

"Actually yes. Two things. First of all I need some supplies. I think you can help with this." She smiled.

Pierre smiled back. A potential customer was always a reason to be happy.

"And the third thing?" he asked

"I'm looking for a man. As tall as me, long auburn hair, green eyes. Do you know someone like this by any chance?"

Pierre ran one hand through his light brown a little peppered hair and looked at Sam curiously.

"That would be Elliott. He's kind of weird, so why are you looking for him?"

"I met him on the train yesterday. He accidentally left something there and I'd like to return it to him... What do you mean by weird?"

"You'll see, just don't talk to him too much. If you like, I can give it to him the next time he's shopping for groceries."

Sam frowned.

"No need for that. I want to take a look around the valley anyway. Eventually, I'll see him." she replied.

Pierre slightly raised an eyebrow, but if he had any objections, he didn't say so. So Sam ignored the slightly adversarial mannerism he suddenly displayed, but didn't ask any further. She hadn't missed the fact, he hadn't told her where she must go.

"Fair enough." he said after a pause and continued with another topic: "So do you like to come in and do some shopping?"

As Sam was stuffing her purchase into her backpack, the bell rang and the door to the general store opened. Pierre greeted the man who had just entered and called him Lewis. Sam turned around. The man looked older than Pierre. Sam estimated him somewhere around seventy years old. He was sporting a big wavy moustache and a flat cap. His face was wrinkly, mostly around his eyes.

"Ah, a new face." he said. "Let me introduce myself. I'm Lewis. I'm the mayor of Pelican Town for over 20 years now and still running. What brings you to our humble village?"

"I'm Samantha, I'll work at the museum from tomorrow on out. Nice to meet you." Sam replied.

"Ah, so you must be Ms. Vaughn, the new assistant Gunther asked for. I've approved of that position."

"Yes, that would be me. I'm looking forward to the job and the opportunities it brings with it."

"How comes someone so hot likes to work with dusty, old books and stuff?" a voice came from between the aisles.

"Sterling, shut up!" Pierre bellowed over the counter in the general direction the voice came from.

"Just stating the truth."

Pierre rolled his eyes.

"Sorry for that. First my daughter, now him... The youth these days..."

Lewis agreed.

Sam snickered. She was flustered by the remark, no doubt but she decided to take it with humor. And to see those middle aged and old men refer to people barely younger than her as youth was quite funny, especially since they spoke to her in a more formal way.

We'll see, as soon as I dye my hair again... she thought. She had decided to stay with her natural color for now, testing the water first and she wasn't looking forward to the dyeing itself. It would take her almost a whole day.

"Please, excuse me. I've got to bring my groceries back home and be on my way right after. There's so much more of Pelican Town and it's surroundings I haven't seen yet."

"I can show you around if you'd like." Lewis replied. "I've to make my round either way."

Sam wasn't so keen about walking around town with the mayor, but she was new and she didn't want to antagonize one of the persons who literally could decide about her

future.

"Sure. I'm staying at the boarding house for now. So let me bring back my things quickly and I will be right back."

"We can start our tour from there. I need to visit Joel anyway."

The day had been exhausting. The old mayor was in much better shape than Sam had expected and to see all of Pelican Town was quite a hike. From the Boarding house they had made their way up into the mountains and visit Robin's carpentry, since it was the nearest destination. Sam remembered the large house nestled in the mountainside from the day before since the train station was just a few hundred meters away.

From there they made their way downhill. The most interesting part of the remaining tour had been the old, abandoned and run down community center. Sam was intrigued by the thought how much she could learn about the valley and it's inhabitants just alone by investigating the building and listening to the stories the older people in town could tell her about it. Mayor Lewis didn't seem to keen about letting anyone sniff around there, though.

The old building clearly was a thorn in his side. So she had to get on his good side to coerce him to let her enter. The alternative was committing a break and entering... Nah, probably not a good idea.

As they had past the community center and made their way back to the town square again they'd continued their path to the southwest next. He showed her a ranch, a small farm and a vineyard sitting on the edge of a wild forest, while clearly stirring away from the crooked tower looming over a part of denser vegetation. On their way back they brushed a well worn footpath to the beach and entered back into the town near a small and weathered graveyard. Lewis had left her, as soon as they had made it back to his house, but had pointed her in the right direction toward the museum. And that's were Sam was right now. Standing in front of the door she hesitated. What if's wandering through her head.

After a bit of pondering she entered. Tomorrow she had to be here either way, so there was nothing that spoke against introducing herself today.

The door opened into a large room with a counter directly opposite to the door and a great opening to her right. Sam looked around the room. Directly to the right was a large open space with a few small tables and simple cushions around them on the floor. Near the counter, on the far side of the open space, there were shelves after shelves filled with books. Next to her on the nearer side of the open space were tables and chairs for research and working with the books. A closed door across the room to the right labeled exhibition let to the museum part of the museum. The air smelled a little bit dusty and of old paper. Sam immediately felt at home.

Behind the counter there was a man sitting dressed all in blue and wearing a hat indoors. He twirled his goatee around a finger while reading something. He looked up for a brief moment while Sam closed the door behind her.

"Welcome to the Stardew Valley Museum.", he said.

Sam walked over to the counter.

"Hi, I'm Samantha Vaughn. I will work here from tomorrow on. May I speak to the curator?"

"That would be me.", the man answered. "Gunther, nice to meet you."

Elliott stayed in bed the whole morning. He had slept miserably and wasn't in the mood to get up. The book - his most valuable collection of scrapes, inspirations and of fractions of chapters - was gone. He had tried to reach out to the rail company as soon as he found out about it missing. Nobody was answering the phone that late in the evening. He had tried again right after waking up. This time he got someone on the phone and was told, the cleaning crew had been on the train as soon as it had reached it's final destination. They had brought everything passengers had left to the lost and found inside of Grampleton Station. He had tried there. His notebook hadn't been among those things, so the chances to ever getting it back were slim to none.

Someone must have taken it or worse thrown it in the garbage. Could it has been Haley? That would probably be the worst of all. He began to imagine what she could do with it. What she could do to him. And all out of spite for a broken smartphone. He rolled around till he was facing the ceiling, sticking his hands behind his head.

Or the new girl, he mused. That would be slightly better, at least she had shown some interest in his writing, but he didn't know her. He didn't even know her name much less her whereabouts. Surely he could go out and ask for her, but there were two problems with that. First of all he had to go out and he'd already decided to keep to himself today and second even if he'd change his mind and tried to find her it surely would add to his reputation. He could almost hear them whispering. Now the weird author guy was running around, stalking a stranger he just met...

"Woe is me", he uttered theatrically, pressing the back of one hand against his forehead. Then he laughed bitterly. He was pathetic. Really pathetic. His editor was right, the new girl was right, even his parents had been right.

He might as well should give up on his dream and come back to reality. Do something useful with his life. Do what his family wants from him...

That thought lingered.

"No, I must not give up", he proclaimed aloud for himself. "I must not let them win." He yawned. The realization, that he was too proud to sink deeper into self pity, to proud to do what the nay-sayers want from him made him feel slightly better. He rolled to his side and yawned again.

"Sweet, sweet stubbornness. Maybe not everything dad gave me is so bad..." he closed his eyes and drifted into a light sleep.

Later that day he had made a decision. He was sitting at his desk and staring down on an empty sheet of paper and a headache began to form. He put away the fountain pen he had held unused in his hand so far and stood up. His cabin contained a small living and sleeping area with kitchen counter and an adjacent bathroom. A few short steps brought him from the desk to the old up-right piano right in the middle of one of the long walls, that had come with the place. He began to play a few notes. A bit recreational time would do him some good.

The loss of his notebook hit him hard. Not only for his notes. Most of them were fleeting thoughts, caught with a few swift scribbles within a page or two at most. It was a pity to lose them. Some of the ideas were quite interesting, but the book itself had been a gift and it was important to him. On the other hand it might be a sign, he thought. A sign to start a new chapter in his endeavor.

His mind began to wander as he was playing a soft, flowing tune. The music helped him to free his thoughts.

Soon he was enwrapped in his playing. Maybe he really needed to change his approach. Now was the time.

Tomorrow would be a new day. To dwell in his lost anymore than necessary was foolish. He would go out and search for inspiration. There had been a time he almost had called the valley home. It was before the rural community had shunned him an outsider and oddball. Now he had almost forgotten the feeling of being a part of the community. Willy was on an elongated fishing trip so he hadn't anybody to talk while he was at the pier and Leah was visiting her family and wasn't expected to be back until the end of next week. It would have been nice to wander around cinder sap with her, but he couldn't just wish her back, so he had to go alone.

He stopped playing. The faint sound of waves rolling onto the shore was barely hearable, but it had a soothing effect on him. He loved it. It was one of the reasons why he had moved to this specific place.

Elliott walked over to a drawer next to the door leading outside. He shuffled through the content of the top drawer until he found an unused notebook he kept there and a ballpoint pen that was still functioning. He put both in a small messenger bag dangling from a knob on the door.

"I might need it tomorrow." he said to the room in general. Then he walked back to the piano and resumed playing.

Kapitel 4: The first day of work

After a good nights sleep Sam was ready for her first day of work. She had been exhausted, so she had decided against visiting the saloon, the day prior. Today she'd meet Prof. Thomas and she'd get her work schedule. The position was part time for 20 hours, so she'd work four times a week for five hours. Gunther and the Professor would split that time according to their needs. For now Gunther had planned for her to sort through the archive and made a list of all the books missing.

As she bustled around the archive and the main room of the museum she saw the reason for the small tables and cushions on the floor. A lot of children entered the library section of the museum and took seat there. Two young women, one with orange-red hair, rolled up in a bun and a warm yellow shirt and one with long, open-cherry red hair followed and started some sort of class for the youngsters. Some of the children were curious about the new face and asked inquisitive questions before the women could stop them.

Sam drew back to the backroom the archive was located in to not disturb the class any further. The children seem to disappointed as she excused herself. They probably rather kept asking questions than start studying.

Some of the books in the archive were quite old and rare. She definitely could use some of them for her thesis. Gunther had already agreed to let her read through the old volumes, as long as she didn't use her work hours for that.

Sam compared the written inventory to the books actually standing in front of her. It was tedious work that swallowed a lot of her work hours, but it was easy enough to give her some time to think. On her next free day she wanted to visit the abandoned mines. The mayor was reluctant to tell her about them at all, so she was quite curious. She had read about some mining accident and was aware one of its survivors was still living in town. Maybe he'd talk about it and all its consequences if she asked nicely. The towns people she had met so far had been nothing but friendly to her, even when it was on expense of other residents. She wasn't sure what to make of it, but she wouldn't judge until knowing the whole story.

While searching through her list another book caught her eye. "The effects of the ongoing war to our economy." the title was long out of print and not available in the library of the university. Sam had made good progress with her work so far, so she decided to look through the book. There was a chapter about the rural communities of Ferngill. Stardew Valley was mentioned a few times. "Aurora Vineyard... Interesting...", she muttered to herself. The author even interviewed the owners and used this inside for his work. She put the book down on her stash for research and got back to work.

After approximately two hours Gunther checked on her and informed her, that Prof. Thomas was now available and eager to get to know her. He wasn't quite what she expected. He looked young for a esteemed professor and researcher. His curly brown hair fell just beneath his shoulder blades and with the round rimmed glasses and his 5 o'clock shadow he looked quite unruly. Sam introduced herself to him.

"Well, hello. I'm Prof. Thomas, but you may call me Jasper as I'm not in a teaching position right now and I like it better to talk less formal." he answered and continued directly with:

"Let us begin with a small interview. Would you answer me some questions?"

Sam nodded. They walked over to a free table and sat down. He made sure to be out of earshot from the children and their teachers, before he began to talk again, but quieter now:

"Are you familiar with my body of work?"

"Yes, although I have to admit, that my expertise in geology is none."

"Ah, a shame, but we will work on this. Today I want to know a few other things, though. What's your opinion on the arcane in general and especially on magical creatures?"

Here we go, Sam thought. She had heard about the reason Prof. Thomas wasn't teaching anymore, and it seemed, he straight got to the point. She didn't want to jeopardize her job, though, so she decided to go with his shenanigans. As for the questions, she state her truth:

"There are things we can't explain with science and things that seem truly magical to me. So I don't know. Maybe..."

When it comes to magical creatures, I haven't seen any so far. At least I know I ain't one. And if magic exists I surely am as magical as a loaf of white bread." she grinned a little bit when saying the last words.

"Oh, one never knows until one tries", was Jasper's reply. "Many people possess hidden talents. Some never to be found. To help me with my research, you don't need to be magical adapted. I think curiosity and a fair bit of critical thinking will do. Gunther informed me, you're writing an essay about Stardew Valley and that's the main reason you are here. What's the topic of your work?"

"I'll write about the impact the dwindling economy had on the valley in recent history. There are a lot of things here.

I like to investigate. Talk to people, visit sites."

"So, you're of the inquisitive type. That's good. The valley definitely has a lot to offer to curious people and I think we will get along fine. I let you finish your work for today then. Please be there on Thursday 8 o'clock sharp. We'll start with some basic training. I'm looking forward to work with you and do me one favor. Keep asking questions. Most adults stop doing that eventually while growing older." He dismissed Sam, who worked through the rest of her shift before sitting down and looking through her research pile.

She had plans for the next days. Tomorrow it would rain the whole day so she would stay at the museum as long as possible. On Wednesday the mines, the day after, Cindersap...

Elliott was distraught. Why Haley again? The blonde was taking photos in one of his favorite spots and since he had to pass there, she clearly would see him. He couldn't take the risk to be in one of her pictures. He was lucky as it was, that he'd taken the southern route near Fairhaven Farm, so he had noticed her before she'd seen him. What a great start to the day. For a moment he just thought about turning back and going home, but he wanted to bring his new felt determination to fruition, so he considered his options. The library was always worth a try and he hadn't been there for while now.

North to East Scarp was a nice patch of greenery, but the strange goats with their

black fur and the red eyes there set him off everytime he saw them. Alternatively there was a nice secluded patch by the lakeside in the mountains with trees and shrubs surrounding it. Today he wasn't in the mood to walk all that far anymore and for tomorrow the weather forecast said it would rain all day. "Well, Wednesday, then... And today? I will just stay at the beach."

Kapitel 5: Of to the mines... or not?

"Lunch pack, check. Torch, check. Notepad and pen, check." Sam was satisfied. She shouldered her knapsack and marched out the door. She greeted Joel, who was sitting by the reception desk.

The best way to the mines would take her almost up to the station and then east. She had walked the track with Lewis already so she knew where to go. The weather of the early spring day was perfect. The sun just melted the morning chill away and it promised to be moderately warm.

From the boardinghouse she headed to the bus station a bit south of the premise. The old, broken down bus was a remnant of better times. The recession had hit the valley hard, Sam thought. Once again she was musing how to coax Lewis to let her in the community center and if it was only once.

Her steps took her down the road to Calico Desert. Just before she reached the tunnel she turned right and began to climb a flight of wide, steep steps someone had carved into the slope. The path took her underneath the massive support beams of the cable car and along the mountainside. Large evergreen trees narrowed the path. She walked past the carpenter's house. The vegetation grew denser as she neared the mountain lake.

Sam began to stray from the path. The scattered standing trees gradually became a light forest. Fallen leaves from last autumn rustled beneath her feet. Occasionally twigs snapped under her weight. She was in high spirits. It definitely had been the right decision to move here. As she made her way through the undergrowth she started to hum. Little did she know, there were pairs of eyes watching her.

Eventually Sam noticed that someone or something was tuning into her little melody. She stopped and searched the trees with her eyes. Clear, little chirps sounded around her. There must be a bird somewhere, but she couldn't find any, so she continued her way. With half an ear she listened to the chirping around her, as she varied her melody. The chirping adapted and created harmonies. She tried to close in on a particular loud one slowly. Various of the small voices went silent, but the loud one seemed to be oblivious.

Sam was almost sneaking by that point. She noticed something on a branch in front of her. She never had seen anything like that in her life. It looked like an apple ...with tiny legs and arms? And it was... singing? It had closed its small eyes and seemed to be lost in the melody. She held her breath and tried to listen. This small creature had a beautiful voice. As she shifted her weight unconsciously a twig beneath her feet snapped.

Everything went silent. The creature had stopped its singing and looked at Sam in surprise showing its little black beady eyes.

"Hey little one."

Without a warning it jumped down the tree and ran away.

"Wait, I won't harm you. I just want to listen. Your singing is wonderful." without thinking Sam started chasing after it. The creature broke the wood and ran. Over a downtrodden path into the next patch of trees and greenery. Sam was right behind. She didn't want to lose sight and followed between the shrubs without looking where she was going.

"Please wait!", running and shouting wasn't any good for convincing it, she was harmless to be honest, but her thinking failed her in that particular moment. Her feet carried her forward and with a bit of momentum she reached an embankment. Behind it water...

She tried to stop, but the ground beneath her feet was soaked, soft and slippery. It gave way under her as she lost her footing. In panic she reached out to grab something. She got hold of a dead branch. It snapped under her wait, as she pivoted in an attempted to stop.

Lady Belinda waited in the middle of the circle. Eyes closed she concentrated on the faint voices in the wind. Her disciples arranged the items for the ritual around her. Sometimes she would wander to one and shift it a little, her eyes still closed.

Rasmodius was intrigued. To witness a ritual done by a high priestess was a rare treat. She revered to herself as seer and so did her disciples, though. He had wondered about her being inside the summoning circle, but he was told she had decided to act as a conduit. This way they needn't use nearly as much arcane energy than otherwise and the spirit would be able to stay a bit longer.

He watched her finish the preparation. It was almost time. He had suggested to use the brief period between day and night, when the light was not quite gone, as it was the most magical time of the day and the best moment to make contact, but Belinda had advised against that, as they had not enough fighters at hand, to protect the ritual. The Ridge was a dangerous place after nightfall.

Her disciples, an earnest young man, with the hint of a secret, who kept most of his face hidden behind scarf and hood, an outgoing and flirty lady and a young girl with red-golden hair took positions in the north, east and west of the circle. Rasmodius himself was the south. The unseen lines between them formed a cross dividing the circle in perfect quarters. Belinda settled right in the middle. She sank onto her knees, her hands in her lap and started to recite an incantation, reminding Rasmodius of an old poem. Mist started to squirm inside the circle. The wind outside picked up, but left

the inside of the circle untouched.

An eerie light crept into the mist illuminating Belinda's face. She murmured, repeated the poem over and over.

The wind howled louder and louder. The mist swallowed her features as it rose and swept above her. The old wizard looked around to see the other three fell in with the chanting. He waited till it was his time to take part to recite the words. Every step was meticulously planned and had to be perfectly timed to work. Belinda was lifted and rose to her full size. Warped in light and mist it looked like she was hovering a few centimeters of the ground. In an unsuspected motion her head jerked back, Her eyelids began to flutter, the eyes rolled back, so that only the white showed, her mouth formed unheard words.

Suddenly the world fell silent.

Wailing emerged from Belinda's throat. In a broken, deep voice she began to speak:

"...magic... Time's... Help...magic... Close... cracks... Help...farmer...intervene..." the voice cracked and faded.

Belinda suddenly shuck. She was thrown back to the edge of the circle, slammed into an invisible barrier holding her inside.

The sky turned gray. Thunder rolled over their heads. The entity possessing her left with a scream and Belinda slumped to the ground unconscious. Rain started to pour...

In affect Rasmodius tried to get to her, but was stopped by the girl with the red-golden hair Belinda had introduced to him as Bliss raised her voice:

"DON'T! The Lady's still in the spirit world. If you sever the connection now she'll be lost. We have to protect her body. The anchorpoints of the circle have to stay intact at all costs. Be aware. They are coming..."

„Fuck, fuck, fuck, Fuck!“ With a loud splash Sam landed in the water, which wasn't that steep on that side of the mountain lake, but it was enough to soak her head to toe.

The creature had made it over the water and seemed to laugh at her, before it vanished into thin air. Sam hit the water in frustration. “Damn!”

She hadn't gotten up again, as someone started to laugh right above her:

“This fae has a very colorful language, but to witness this beautiful pirouette almost made up for that.”, she heard a familiar voice. Without even thinking she grabbed a

handful of mud and threw it at Elliott who had appeared on the brink of the slope.

"I have certainly earned this." he said, still laughing, after he dodged the dirt-missile.

"My lady." He extended his hand to help Sam up. Thankfully she accepted to get out of the cold, muddy water.

"Thank you, you just appeared at the right time, it seems." she said.

"I was here all the time. Admiring the beauty and tranquility of early spring. The question is, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Swimming practice." she answered.

"Oh, really? Fully clothed?"

"It's just early spring. The water's still cold."

They couldn't help it, but both started to laugh about their stupid banter.

"Okay, now, what were you really doing?" Elliott inquired after that. "I was about to enjoy the peace and quiet of the lakeside to spark my creative juices and suddenly you break out of the thicket shouting" he added and showed her a somewhat hidden place between some trees and lesser foliage where he had placed a picnic blanket.

"Haven't you seen the apple thingy?"

"The what?"

"A small green, apple-like creature. It was just here."

Elliott looked at her puzzled. "No, I can not say, I have. And that's why you are here?"

"Actually, I was on my way to the mines. It's my day off and I want to take a look around the valley. That's when I saw the creature."

"The story about the walking apple seems a bit peculiar, but the rest sounds neat. Getting to know your way around here is a smart idea. To go to the mines on the other hand, is rather not."

"Well, not to be rude, but I need to get somewhere warm. Preferably home, to get out of my wet clothes." Sam could feel the cold creeping up her spine. She tried to rub away some goosebumps that had formed on her forearms, ignoring the remark about the mines.

Without saying another word Elliott passed over his jacket.

"I can't, I'll ruin it." Sam responded.

"I insist, you are freezing."

Sam thought about it. Suddenly the wind picked up and send a new shiver through her body.

"Okay, but... just give me one sec." She pulled her wet sweater and t-shirt over her head and dropped it to the ground, before putting on the jacket. As she was done, she could see, that Elliott had turned away and looked in a different direction. Sam wasn't sure, but she thought she could see a little blush around his nose. She couldn't help herself:

"Ah, the beautiful architecture..." she commented.

"What?", Elliott looked puzzled.

"Nothing, it's just a silly insider... Anyway", she thought about something, "Would you like to accompany me home for a cup of tea?" she asked. "I've something I'd like to give back to you."

Elliott's heart took a leap: "Do not say you have what is most precious to me? Have you found my notebook?"

"Yeah, you lost it on the train. It was sitting on the floor right after you left for the phone call. I pocketed it so nobody would step on it. I would have given it back to you right after, but you didn't came back."

"You are brilliant. You saved me. I was sure I had lost it for good." without losing a thought he stepped in and hugged her.

"Hey, stop! What are you doing?"

He released her that instant:

"Oh,... I am sorry", he was blushing again. Now his face was almost matching his hair color. "I was not thinking. I am... I am just so happy. You can not know what this book means to me."

"No harm done. Normally I wouldn't even mind, but I don't know you yet and on top of that, I'm still wet and all I'm wearing is cold and clingy." she shuck water out of one leg of her trousers. "Hm, officially I don't even know your name", she said. "So how about an introduction? I'm Samantha, Sam for short and I moved to the valley just last Saturday."

"I am Elliott and I have been here for the last two years. Nice to met you, Sam. But indulge me. What did you mean by officially you do not know my name?"

"I ran into the Mayor and Pierre on Sunday and since I was looking to give you the notebook back, I asked and they told me."

“Makes sense.” He wondered what the men could have told her.

Rumbling from above let both look up. The sky was darkening quickly.

“That's strange. They didn't forecast any rain for today...,” she pondered. “Let us quickly pick up your things and move. I'm living at the boarding house. It's not far from here, if we walk along the mountain path beneath the cable car.

Elliott nodded. They quickly collected his things and wrapped the picnic blanket around the soaked Sam, too and then made their way down to the boarding house. The sky was getting even darker and soon the first raindrops would fall. By the time they reached their destination Elliott was drenched, too, so he gladly decided to stay for a warm shower and the beforehand offered hot tea.

Kapitel 6: Small Talk

"Ehm,... are you doing this on purpose?" Elliott asked, firmly looking into his teacup, as Sam pulled a shirt out of the trunk and put it on. She looked at him puzzled.

"I mean, are you not embarrassed to be topless around a stranger? I know a lot of women, who are very shy while dressing and you on the other hand act as if I am not even here."

"Oh,...", Sam shrugged, "Sorry, if I put you in an awkward situation. It's just I'm not thirteen anymore and I have brothers. Besides, being in a bra is not topless and if I'm so stupid as to not take my shirt with me, it couldn't be helped anyway." She helped herself to a cup of tea and slumped on the only chair, her room provided, facing her guest.

"Are you not even a bit afraid or cautious, that I could do something to you? You said it yourself. I am a stranger to you, therefore I could be dangerous."

Sam looked at him.

He was sitting on her bed, snuggled in a blanket, sipping on his tea. Sam had given him an old tracksuit, she had snatched from her father, while his wet clothes were draped around the radiator for drying. With the cup clutched in his hands, a towel wrapped around his hair and the slight pink tint around his nose, he looked rather cute than dangerous.

"I'm new in town. How should I get to know people, if I'm too scared to talk to them?" She locked eyes with him:

"And even with the long hair and the slight flamboyant mannerism..."

"Hey, I have really dialed it back since I live here!" he interrupted grinning. "but go on."

"Even with those, I don't think you're a vampire."

He brought one hand up to his chest and sported a theatrically expression:

"Darling, I am offended by this. I am a noble werewolf." He stated as dry as he possibly could, while trying to keep the corners of his mouth down.

"Okay, Mr. Werewolf", Sam snickered, "it's not a full moon night out there, so there's no need to eat me, but if my life would be a horror movie, there would have been ample opportunity to make terrible things happen to me, already. We have been in the woods, alone... That would have been a perfect moment."

"You are mistaken. It is neither night, none of us was naked, nor had we have sex. These are basic requirements."

"If that's what makes the screenwriter happy, we could make up for that next time."

The moment the words left her mouth, Sam realized what she just said. Oh, shit... She clutched a hand in front of her mouth, eyes wide open.

Thinking first, then talking! Thinking first! She repeated mantra-like in her head.

Elliott's jaw dropped while Sam worked on a way to sink into the ground. For a few moments only the hard rain pattering on the window was audible.

"I...I...", Sam was mumbling, her face now red like a tomato and burning hot. "Sorry, I got carried away." She stared very hard into her teacup, not to accidentally lock eyes with him.

The silence carried on. The moment was almost unbearable for Sam as she was contemplating, if she could salvage the situation somehow.

Suddenly Elliott bellowed with laughter:

"I am flattered, but if that is an offer, I have to decline. At the moment I am neither looking for a fling, nor a relationship. Besides..." his expression grew serious. "... I do not think I am a good catch. At least not now. My life is too unstable." He thought about the phone call a few days back.

"I really must finish my book."

Sam was relieved. He could have really taken that worse.

"Now you know one of my flaws. Sometimes my mouth runs without checking with my head first. And I'm neither interested in a relationship nor something similar. I've plan to stay here to write my thesis and after that, I don't even know where my live takes me, but that reminds me, we almost forgot your notebook." Sam got up and shuffled over to her nightstand, glad to change the subject. From the drawer she produced the small book with the worn gilded pages and handed it over.

"Here. You must have it a long time. It's well worn, as far, as I can see. I'm glad I didn't take it with me today. It would be ruined otherwise."

"It was a gift from someone who means a lot to me. He gave it to me, when I left home to become an author. So I am glad to have it back. Not only for the scribbling inside", he sighed in relief.

"You have some pretty good lines in there."

"Oh,..." his voice sounded slightly less warm in an instant. "You read my stuff?"

"In hope to find some clues about your whereabouts, I flipped through the first few pages. When I didn't find anything I tried to stop reading, but I was drawn in. I'm sorry if I've overstepped my boundaries here."

"Thanks again for bringing me the book back, but yes, you have overstepped. I do not appreciate it, if someone is looking through my stuff - especially my writing - without my permission. I know you meant well and your reasoning was sound. So just keep it in mind for the future." There was a hint of grieve and hurt in his voice. Barely audible and easy to miss.

"Point taken, won't happen again." Sam responded, while watching him closely.

"Without arguing or defending your behavior?" Elliott was somehow baffled by the simple acknowledgment.

"I made a mistake... And I think I hurt you with that more than I can fathom. So, I must own up to it." she answered, now herself a bit puzzled why he would ask her such a question.

Elliott relaxed a bit. The bitterness that had crept through his face left almost as quickly as it had come. "That is a relief to hear... You said you liked my writing?" his curiosity for Sam's opinion had won over, so his tone changed almost immediately, as he asked her about his work.

"Yes, your style is pleasant to read. It flows easy and naturally. The way you describe your settings really let me see those places before my inner eye and the snippets of dialog, that I've seen, are witty or really emotional. So I'd really like to read your finished book, when you are done." she answered.

"Tell all these things to my editor. She has a different opinion." he said.

"Well, she's a professional and I've seen only snippets. If you'd like, I would read your draft. Maybe your editor is just a big oaf, but I have to see more of your work to form a sound opinion."

"Ah, it is a ruse to continue reading my stuff." he laughed.

"But a clever one if I end up with your permission." Sam answered smiling cocky.

"Nah", Elliott hold out one hand flat, palm down and tilted it slowly from side to side, "I would not say clever. Quite see-through I would rather say."

Sam laughed. "Okay, you caught me. I would really, really like to read some more. So why not helping you at the same time. I will give you my honest thoughts and opinions."

"I will think about it." Elliott responded. "But in the meanwhile: What do you enjoy to read? Mystery, science fiction or romance even?"

"Oh, I'm a sucker for a nice piece of humorous fantasy, preferably with a good amount of social and economical criticism weaved masterfully into an intriguing story with love- and hate-able characters, to get you start thinking. Ironic and sarcastic, but warmhearted at the center..."

"Let me stop you right there. I get the feeling, you have a very specific book or book series in mind."

"Yeah, and I still postpone to read the last book." she lowered her voice and looked away while saying the last part.

"Why, though?"

"My favorite author died a few years back and if I read the last book, than it's over. I can't bring myself to do it."

"Then it is time for you to find a new favorite author." Elliott grinned, his eyes glittering cheekily. "But you will not find me writing anything related to comedy soon." He added. "It is the highest form of literature if pulled of the right way and I know my limits in this capacity."

"Fair point. I've read my share of not so good books in this genre, I've to admit. But, does that mean I've got the permission to read your draft?" She smiled at him cheekily, too.

"I have brought that on myself, have I not?" he asked.

"Yes, you have. Do you have any suggestions on what we could do now. The rain doesn't seem to stop anytime soon and your clothes are still soaked." Sam asked.

"How about you tell me a bit more about you? You said, you are writing your thesis? Is it why you are here? Where do you work? And I would die to know why you wanted to go to the mines. Why I have found you in the mountain lake, you already explained, although I do not know if I should believe it." He took the chance to ask more questions.

"I finished my last semester at university and have only the thesis left to write. I want to write about the valley and what impacts the more recent historical and economical developments had on it's small communities and their inhabitants up until now. Therefore I decided to move here to do my research at the source. And to be able to do that, I have to work at least a half-time job. I got lucky that there was an opening at the museum. The curator and librarian there – Gunther – let me use the library in my spare time. I'm also exploring the valley bit by bit to link my experiences with the things I read. I think that explains why I wanted to go to the mines. I was told there had been an accident that caused one of the residents to end up in a wheelchair. Afterwards the mines were abandoned and only explorers and adventurers go there now. So I wanted to take a look myself."

"So you hired a guide and where supposed to meet up with them today?"

"No, why should I? The mines are stabilized now, as far as I know."

"Alone? That is stupid and dangerous! Do you want to get hurt or worst?" Elliott proclaimed a tad louder than necessary. Sam was startled by his outburst.

"But, the mines are open to the public and I think the most dangerous parts are closed off." She tried to explain.

"There are things down there! I thought every new member of the town is told that. You should not go there alone." He became agitated even more.

"I can handle myself. Thank you very much." Sam got defensive.

Elliott bit his tongue. He had gotten loud again. He could see the flicker of anger in her face. Now he had done it again. The first person in ages don't looking at him funny, while they were talking and he ruined it.

"I am sorry", he said. "I did not mean that you are incapable. It is just... have you been to the mountain path behind the train station?"

"No, I haven't." Sam answered, still sour.

"It is lined with graves. All of so called adventurous who had gotten too self-assured. Too confident for their own good. So, please forgive me for losing my temper. The mayor should really close the mines or at least there should be signs warning about the dangers deep down. But nothing..."

Sam's features grew softer. She could clearly see that most of his anger stemmed from worry.

"Hey, don't worry. I'll be cautious and if it makes you feel better, I won't go alone. By the way I wouldn't call this little outburst losing your temper. I think you overreact slightly, that's all." Sam sported a reassuring smile.

Elliott sighed and took a deep breath: "No, when I get irate I get loud and I do not like it." It reminded him to much of his father, a truth he liked to ignore. "Especially if I get loud with a person the anger is not really directed at. I am – excuse my colorful language here – pissed at Lewis, the adventurers guild and whoever is responsible for making the mines look safer than they are." he scratched the back of his neck and downed the rest of his tea.

Sam motioned to the kettle and he acknowledged the unspoken question with a small nod. As she poured she spoke:

"As compensation for your little anger management problem." she winked. "you could answer me a question."

Elliott shrugged. "Sure, as long as you do not want me to do the mine diving with you. I hate the thought of meters and meters of suffocating stone above my head."

"No, it's about something else."

Elliott got suspicious. As far as he had figured Sam was nobody to beat around the bush. Now she hesitated quite a bit.

"Out with it or have you grown shy over the last few minutes?" he teased.

"So, there was this girl on the train. She really wanted to talk about you, when you left. And not necessarily in a good way."

He raised an eyebrow. Sooner or later it had to come to this.

"So you want to know about what happened in the graveyard and the other strange stuff she probably told you about, I assume?"

"Yeah, I'd really like to hear your side of the story. Some of the villagers seem to be not on the best foot with you."

"Figures", he paused. "It is a rather embarrassing story and those spread quickly and stick for a long time. I would rather like for the memory to fade into the mists of time." He paused again. He pondered, if he really should tell her. After a brief second he decided to credit her trust.

"I told you my lecturer did not like my draft. It was not the first one to get shredded. I had been to a meeting and it was devastating. The following days my mind was enwrapped in doubt. The thought of failure barely let me sleep. I tried to figure out where I went wrong and how to fix it, but my head was a pure mess, ready to crumble away under the pressure I felt myself in.

The cold grasp of winter had already taken hold and sunk its claws deep into the valley. After a sleepless night, filled with fruitless attempts to write something new, I decided to get out. I left the cabin of mine to clear my head. It was still dark, with only a hint of sunrise when I left. The cold and crisp morning air and the glittering stillness of that particular morning hushed the valley and helped me to collect my thoughts. The sun came up, while my steps took me to the graveyard. I have been there many a times, when I needed peace."

He took a moment to continue.

"You have seen the graveyard, I assume?"

Sam nodded

"For a town so small it is quite big and has some impressive graves and headstones on it. Some old, crumbly statues, either. There is one grave in particular I like to visit. Have you been to the graveyard or just walked past?"

"I've taken a look, the day I made my rounds with the mayor."

"Have you seen the one with the weathered and worn down stone angel, looking like it is about to spread its wings and enwrap the poor soul laying beneath?"

"The one with all the floral motifs around the sides?"

"Yes, that one. It is my favorite among the old graves. I made a very dumb decision that day. I do not tell you this to justify my behavior, just to make it a bit more understandable. I was weary, worn out and deprived of sleep, the cold air made me sleepy and suddenly it looked like a good idea to sit down and rest a bit."

"On the grave?" Sam interjected

"Yes, like I said. Not the brightest or most glamorous idea I ever had. So, I sat on the stone plate and leaned against the angel. My thoughts trailed off and the next thing I remember is Haley laughing and filming me."

"You had fallen asleep on a grave, in the dead of winter?"

"I have to admit, yes. I know it can be dangerous, but luckily I was only out for maybe half an hour before being awakened by that woman. I came away with a cold anyway."

"What happened then? There's more to the story I assume?" Sam asked.

"Unfortunately, yes... I do not like to be filmed or photographed without my permission. She also made comments about me being a drunkard. So I told her to stop and delete the video. She ignored my pleas and just laughed.

In an attempt to stop her, I might have broken her phone. Now she is telling everybody, I am a lunatic and that I have attacked her."

He paused. The story clearly was hard for him to tell.

"Ah, that's why I've been warned about you. But you didn't?"

"Actually I kind of did." He swallowed the lump forming in his throat, "After she ignored my pleading to stop, I tried to snatch the phone from her hands to delete the recording myself. That is when it dropped.

I apologized and paid her for a new one, but the damage was done." He painfully remembered the large dent it had left in his finances and the looks the other villagers had shot him, after the word got round.

"Yeah, I can see that. The whole thing wasn't cool... from neither of you."

Elliott nodded silently.

"So now you know."

Silent fell upon them. Elliott watched Sam closely, while he was waiting for a response.

"I feel you. You put yourself into a really difficult situation there."

"Yeah, I feel like everybody is watching me now, whenever I am in town, so I avoid

being around people much, since.”

“Do you think it's really that bad? I mean I've been told that you are kinda weird, but nobody deemed you violent or outright dangerous. And you have at least a few friends or acquaintances here, don't you? Anyone who knows you better than stupid rumors?”

“There are a few. Leah, my artist friend from university, who lives on the edge of Cindersap Forest and Willy the old fisherman, but both are away from the valley right now.

I consider Harvey somewhere between friend and acquaintance. And Gunther of course. When I first came here I spent a lot of time in the museum. But do me a favor. Let us change the subject. I do not wanna talk about it anymore.”

Sam nodded. It wasn't surprising after what she'd heard.

“How about you tell me about your time before you came to the valley?” She asked.

“Oh no. I think I should ask you something first, before answering another of your questions. What was it back on the train...? You said I am the nosy one?”

Sam snickered.

“You are right. Ask away then.”

Elliott thought about his question.

“Okay you know about my most embarrassing moment now. So tell me yours.”

“Fair. I've to think about it for a bit though. I've a few to select from.”

Elliott raised an eyebrow.

“What have you done?”

“When I was in University, I lived in an old dorm with showers and kitchen outside on the floor.”

“I know these. Fortunately I had the luxury to live in a more fancy apartment with a tiny bathroom and a small stove. “

“Do you mean the apartments with the whole bathroom made out of a tub of icky plastic, that doubles as a shower?”

“Exactly.”

Both had to laugh.

"Anyway, I managed to lock myself out of my room, while showering. So I had to ask around for help with only a towel wrapped around me. Another time I somehow threw my bra out of the open window instead of my laundry basket and I had to fetch it as stealthy as I could manage. Safe to say: It didn't work. I was the laughing stock of my peers the next few days.

One of my teachers saw my shortened name and mistook me for a guy, so I became Mr. Vaughn at some point. Took a time for me to realize I was meant. Mr. Vaughn please. Is Mr. Vaughn in today?

And a thing I'm very proud of ", she winked, "happened when I tried to dye my hair for the first time. Do you know what happens when you hop into a pool of chlorinated water with fresh bleached hair?"

"No, it is nothing I ever tried."

"The hair turns green."

Elliott chuckled, picturing Sam with green hair.

"I told everybody that I dyed my hair green on purpose. It was so embarrassing." Sam chuckled too.

"Should I go on?"

"No need. You are a little magnet for chaos, are you not?"

"You can say so. One learns to live with that, but it makes for hilarious stories."

Now Elliott was laughing hard.

"You are hilarious, you know."

Sam couldn't help, but laugh herself.

"You say, you dye your hair? It does not look like that."

It's not at the moment. I was unsure how the townspeople might react and since I need the job here to fund my endeavor, I thought playing it safe was my best option. Now I wait for the colors to arrive."

"Lewis and Pierre can be a bit conservative at times. I give you that. I myself am not a huge fan of dyed hair either. I prefer natural colors."

"Easy for you to say with that gorgeous red mane. You see my hair. It's the most boring shade of muddy brownish blonde anyone could come up with. And growing it out it gets all thin and fuzzy. "

"The undercut suits you, though."

"Thanks"

For a moment they sat in silence, enjoying the warm tea, until Sam remembered something.

"You said you lived in a dorm, so you studied at university, too?"

"Yes, I was enrolled at ZCU."

"Oh, you, too? Let me guess. Linguistics?"

"No, not at all. I hold a masters degree in economics. Was not by choice, though." his thoughts trailed off.

"I never would have guessed, but that's brilliant. I think we can help each other out. Just tell me, what do you mean with 'not by choice'."

"My parents have a small business, so they made me, because: 'All comes down to economics, son.'. It was not that bad though. To stick with it and see it through was my own choice."

"And now you're doing something entirely different.", Sam laughed. "I thought, I am studying a subject with no use for my future."

"Well, what is the use of staying in a carrier you are unhappy with?"

"Exactly, but tell that to my parents."

Elliott rolled his eyes. He could feel that very well.

"Don't get me wrong. My parents are supportive and all, but they use every opportunity to nag, if they're not 100% on board with my choices."

I wish I could say the same, Elliott thought, but only said "Parents." and shrugged. "So you said, my studies may help you? How so?"

"You can put my findings about the economics of the valley into perspective. From a professional point of view, I mean. So I thought, "I can help you with your writing and you can help me with my research."

He thought about the proposition.

"I will consider it."

"Cool, let me give you my number then. It's fun to run into you by chance, but for us maybe working together, I've rather a way to contact you on purpose, with less water involved."

"My pleasure, my lady." Elliott quickly fetched his phone and typed in the number Sam

gave him.

"By the way, I plan to visit Aurora Vineyard, an old, abandoned property in the woods southwest of Pelican Town this Friday. Would you like to accompany me there?" Sam asked while Elliott called here.

"An old, abandoned vineyard in the depths of the forest? I am intrigued. Count me in."

"I work until around 14.00. Where should we meet?"

"I will come and get you. I have not been to the museum for a while, so I can use the opportunity to talk to Gunther for a bit."

"Sounds good. What should we do now? The rain doesn't seem to stop soon?"

... **AQUARE INFINITI!** Rasmodius bellowed. He hold his breath moments before the ball of water engulfed him. He could feel the heat of the flame surging towards him, but the water kept him save.

The eyeless sockets gleamed dark red, as the beast shuck his massive skull, looking angrily for a new target. It tried to grab the warrior next to it, but he jumped in a swift motion on it and jabbed his sword in the place right between the sockets. The creature screamed and tried to shack it's opponent off. The warrior held on. The creature rose one of it's enormous hands and brought it down on it's own snout, but the warrior was gone, He had jump off right in time. The creature slammed the warriors sword even deeper through it's thick skin. It howled in agony before keeling over to it's side and drawing it's last breath. The warrior took his sword from the corps, turning to the next monster.

The other warrior was surrounded by spirits known to Rasmodius as wraiths. Dreadful spirits of swirling smoke, able to breath green fire balls. She held off four of them with well timed swings of her sword. The enchantments on these weapons are impressive, the wizard thought.

He dissolved the water and sent it as waves of sharp shards of ice into a new oncoming line of enemies.

"WHAT HAPPENED HERE? WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CREATURES OF WRATH?", he screamed at the top of his lungs, as the monsters fell. One of the warriors landed beside him.

"Act now, talk later!", he said calm, but firmly and was gone again.

The wizard pondered his next move. They need something bigger or their efforts would prove futile in the end.

"By the light of a thousand suns! It's worse than at night time! ", the warrior fighting off the wraiths exclaimed.

"Just a little bit. Belinda is coming to!" the girl named Bliss was shouting.

LIGHT! That's it! Rasmodius knew what to do:

"Close your eyes, quick!", he shouted. Without waiting for a response he conjured his spell:

"CLARA LUX!"

The wave of light was merciless. In an instant the harsh brightness had swallowed all in it's way. Monsters dissolved screeching with wails of agony. In a blink of an eye it was over. Rasmodius slumped to his knees, breathing heavily. He had to put his all into that spell.

The warriors made short with the few remaining beasts and brought their attention back to Lady Belinda, who now was surly coming around. It took a few more minutes before she was able to sit without support not to mention talking in straight sentences again. One of the warriors hold up a waterskin.

"Thanks, Jio." She took a sip.

"Let's get back to base." she was referring to the wooden house on the other side of the moat. "I've to tell you something."

"We've a problem. I couldn't get hold of the mountain spirit. She tried to reach out to me, but something powerful was blocking her from me."

"Someone spoke through you, my lady." Bliss said. "If it wasn't the mountain spirit, who was it?"

"Oh? I don't know. What was it, the conjured spirit said? I can't remember something using me as vessel."

"It was a warning. Something about helping the magic. Helping the farmer to intervene something." Jo provided.

"The farmer? I'm not sure of that." Rasmodius mused. "They haven't shown any interest in the magic of the valley." Belinda thought about that.

"Please try to exactly repeat to me, what I said and how I said it."

Elliott turned around and looked back. He wasn't sure when he last had met someone acting so nonchalantly around him. It was kinda refreshing. Nonetheless there had been a few awkward situations, but it had been a fun afternoon and talking had been so easy. He had back his most precious belonging, too. No matter how much he had tried to fool himself into thinking, that losing it wasn't a big deal, his thoughts had lingered on his loss far to often. A smile formed on his face, as he started walking down the path to Pelican town. Sam had given him a few things to think about. He wasn't quite sure what to make of her, yet, but he could feel ideas and inspiration coming back to him as he made his way home. Could that be the spark he was missing? A trivial talk full of dumb ideas and nothingness, to free his mind from the shackles he had restricted himself with? The next days surely would tell.

Museum, she had said. Maybe he should leave his abode more often to pay Gunther a visit once in a while...

Kapitel 7: Some thoughts

Sam thought about the day. It had unfold in a totally different way than she'd first planned, but it might had been a successful day nonetheless.

She hadn't been honest with Elliott entirely. She knew how he felt. What he was going through right now from first hand experience, so her most embarrassing, the most painful memory she had, she kept neatly tucked away for nobody to know except her. It was a little white lie or was it even? Holding back a few things while telling the truth otherwise didn't count as lying, did it?

Sam never had it easy to make friends. Her way of talking had often thrown people off. She was painfully aware of that. It had gotten even worse since... She dreaded to think about that day.

When she had left her home for university it had made things easier. New faces, nobody to judge her on her mistakes from the youth. People who were on a similar wavelength as her. And then, shadows from her past had appeared and with them the stories, the exaggerations, the rumors. People she'd deemed as friends had turned and left her.

She'd tried to explain all the wrong accusations away, but the hard truth was, she'd been part of that stupid dare. That, she couldn't explain away. Stardew Valley was sort of a new beginning. No one except her parents knew where she went and for the valley being on the opposite side of the country, chances were slim for her old "friends" to show up.

So keeping that story to herself for a bit wouldn't hurt, would it? Get to know people, establish some trust and choose the timing carefully on her own accord. That had to be the way. And till then, nobody should be involved in her stupidity. She had to postpone the mines, but she would go down there and the only one she'd endanger would be herself.

The trip to Aurora Vineyard on Friday seemed (was?) innocent enough to keep some company around. What possibly could go wrong?

Kapitel 8: Adventures in the Cindersap

The next two workdays went by uneventful. Jasper was working on restoring the gem collection of the museum, so he had Sam sorting all available stones and tried to teach her how to prospect minerals. His expertise was apparent, but Sam had a hard time to recognize some of the more subtle differences between similar looking gems and minerals.

"Give it time. It will work out." Jasper told her when she began to get frustrated.

"Yeah, I know, but I can't help it. When I learn new things and don't get them right in a short amount of time I'm disappointed in myself. It was all so easy when I was younger, but it seems that if lost that touch since." she sighed

"You know it's the same for all of us?" Jasper answered.

Sam raised an eyebrow.

"I've heard, but it feels differently."

"That's because most of the things you will learn in live are outside of your comfort zone or completely new to you. By nature they are more difficult to learn. And most of the time you see and compare to others who already know what they are doing. You don't see them struggles with the stuff because they already have and have left that stage behind. So please, don't be so hard on yourself." he threw her a smile.

"Thanks." she said and both continued her training.

When her workday drew to an end Elliott arrived. Sam waved him over.

"Woah, that is definitely a choice." He reacted to seeing her. "I see your dyes have arrived."

"Yes, yesterday." She said grinning mischievously.

"And now she looks like she's fallen into a rainbow." Gunther had come over, a mug of coffee in his hand, to greet his friend.

"Gunther, how are you? It has been a while since I have been here." Elliott responded, "And I see you have a new colleague?" he pointed to the professor, who introduced himself.

He talked a bit with the other men, while Sam collected her things. As soon as she was ready both left and walked their way to cindersap forest.

"A whole rainbow?" Elliott ask. Sam snickered again.

"Yeah, I like it colorful."

"I cannot say I like it, but I do not have to wear it. So you do you."

"You will get used to it. In the main time show me, where you live."

Elliott complied, since it was more or less on the way anyway and Sam couldn't deny a little envy about the location.

When they entered the forest she tried to remember what Lewis had told her. To their right fences kept docile animals from walking into the woods. Sam stopped.

"Marnie's Ranch..." she muttered.

"What is it?" Elliott asked.

"Nothing, I just try to remember what the mayor told me on our tour here."

"Ah, so you were here already?"

"Yes, but only once and for a very short period of time. The mayor has a quick step.

"I would think so. Do you know he delivers the mail around pelican town, too?"

"No, he hadn't told me. He just showed me a few important buildings and locations I'm not supposed to be."

"Like?"

"The old community center. It appears to be a thorn in his side and I think he doesn't want me to snoop around." But I'll get him to let me, she thought.

"Maybe you can change his mind. You need some good arguments, though."

To their left a little house snuggled on the riverbank.

"Here lives my best friend." Elliott said. "She is not here right now, but she will be back shortly. Here name is Leah and she is an artist. You should meet her. I think you two will get along great."

They continued to walk along the river, past a bridge leading to a little patch of farmland with a run down farmhouse next to it. The owner had named it Fairhaven. Strawberries were planted there.

"Do you have something in mind or do you just want to wander around for a bit?" Elliott asked while they made their way further west.

"I've read something interesting about a vineyard deeper in the western forest, called Aurora Vineyard. The owners tried their best to keep their business running as long as possible in spite of the declining economy."

Sam told him.

"Never heard of it. But I have not been that deep in the woods. Normally nobody ventures beyond that crooked tower over there on the cliff." He pointed to the building looming over the lake."

"Why? It's lovely here."

"Dunno, maybe some superstition? You forgot. I am not from here either."

"Right, let's prove the people's fear wrong then."

They walked around the northern edge of the lake. A brightly colored traveling cart in a reddish purple with a green roof was parked under some trees. A massive purple colored pig was laying in the shadows and snoring the day away. Out of a hatch in the middle of the cart a turquoise haired woman greeted smiling and waved them over.

"Hello there, name's Suki. I'm a traveling merchant. Can I interest you in some of my goods?"

Sam and Elliott looked at each other. This was a strange place for a shop to pop up. Sam shrugged and walked up to the cart. She was curious.

"I'd like to see your wares, but may I ask, why made you camp her and not in the town square?"

"My companion", the lady pointed to the big pig in front of the cart, "doesn't like to be stuck on pavement the whole day. Here is much more comfortable." She left it at that. Sam started to browse her wares. Elliott joined in after a moment.

"Have you seen all the gotoran things? I bet that's the reason she's not coming to town directly." Sam snickered.

"No, what for example?" Elliott was curious.

"The plates. The decor is unmistakable gotoran. And some of the sweets maybe."

"How do you know?"

"A friend of mine is archaeologist. You learn to date and classify a lot of old ceramic during your studies. We made fun of it by trying to date modern mugs and plates. It became sort of a hob..."

"Shh...", Elliott motioned her to be silent and pointed between the trees in front and slightly left to them. They had passed the crooked tower and were walking through the thicket beyond the commonly known paths and to the west now. A sturdy old man, robed in black, with a black, pointy hat and green hair and beard stood beyond the trees in a clearing and was chanting something, they couldn't understand.

"Who is this?" Sam whispered under her breath.

"I do not, let us sneak past him." Elliott suggested.

They turned northwest and moved as quietly as they possibly could away from the man. The forest grew denser. Soon a fallen tree trunk blocked their way completely.

"Let us turn back.", Elliott suggested while they examined the obstacle, a hint of worry in his voice.

"Why?" Sam, asked. "We can, easily climbed over it."

"I do not know about this. Nobody goes into this part of the forest."

"But it's just wood..." Sam couldn't fathom why he was hesitant all of a sudden. "I think we just have to walk a bit along the path and turn southwest as soon, as we can, to reach the vineyard. It couldn't be that far from here."

"I have a, bad feeling, about, this. Look how dense and dark the woods grow behind, the log?" he added. Sam thought about it.

"Okay, we can turn back and wait for the weird man to leave." She answered downhearted after a few moments. She was about to turn, as she glimpsed something. A tiny, apple-like creature broke out of the undergrowth and ran down the trail.

"Do you see it!" she nugged Elliott.

"Y-yes... What is this?" he watched the bright golden-colored orb hubble away on it's tiny legs, as fast as it could.

"One of the creatures, that made me taking a bath in the mountain lake. Let's go after it and look what it's up to." With that she was over the log before Elliott could stop her.

"Stop! Oh, great..." what had he gotten himself into. Hesitant he followed her, the feeling of unease growing as he ventured into the unknown part of the woods.

This time Sam was a lot more silent and tried to follow the creature without being noticed. It didn't take long for Elliott to catch up to her.

"What are you doing?" He whispered.

"Following the little guy. It hasn't noticed us, yet. And it seems to be quite in a hurry. I'd like to know more about this creatures." She answered him under her breath.

The path in front of them opened up into a small clearing, with a little pond fed by a small waterfall on the northern side, where a small creek flew over the led not even as high as Sam was tall. The golden creature hurried right into the open and bumped into one of six green slimy balls with glowy red eyes. It was knocked back a little and revealed a even smaller apple creature encircled by the slimes and trying to escape. The arrival of their new opponent baffled the slimes a bit, but they soon began to coordinate their attacks accordingly. One would attack the big creature, another from the opposite side the small one. The big one tumbled and fell. The slimes closed in and tried to separate it from the small one.

"Oh, no, they are loosing." Sam whispered. "Let's help!"

"No! It is to dangerous!" Elliott replied under his breath.

"You stay here then. I will help!" Sam didn't wait for an answer this time.

She took the first heavy branch she could come by off the ground and stepped into the clearing.

"Wait! You can't!" Elliott tried to stop her.

But it was to late. Sam had already hit the first slime and send it flying into a nearby bush. The slime wailed in a high pitch tone unlike anything Sam or Elliott ever had heard.

She didn't loose a beat to go after the next one. And she was hitting hard. It flew into the bushes, too. The apple-creatures watched in shock.

"Run! I make an opening for you!" Sam shouted.

The big creature reacted first. It appeared to shake its head, pushed itself up on its feet again and nudged the small one to move. Unnoticed of both another slime crept nearer.

Elliott stepped up and kicked it away. He wasn't sure, but it seemed the walking apples waved both Sam and him a goodbye before vanishing down the path, they had come.

Sam and Elliott began to made their way back, too, when suddenly a whole bunch of the green blobs blocked there way forward. The slimes from behind closing in, the narrow path back to the tree trunk was the perfect bottleneck, Elliott and Sam had

been caught in. The surrounding slimes started to attack immediately. Sam tried to use her improvised weapon to block. The speed of the charging slimes caught her off guard. She couldn't parry.

"Ouch!" One had hit her thigh.

"These things hurt. Run!" She screamed, as another bumped into her with high speed. She tumbled.

Elliott caught her, before she could fall. Therefore he couldn't evade the next attack. He took a hit right in his gut. The impact took the air out of his lungs. He was gasping. Another slime prepared to jump him.

Sam caught sight of it. She stepped in the jump line, but could barely brace herself. Velocity and force of that thing were enough to push her into Elliott. The momentum of the tumbling woman pushed him back. His foot caught in a tree root. Losing his balance he fell to the ground. In reflex, he tried to soften the fall with his hands. He winced as a sudden pain shot through his right arm.

But there was no time. He needed to get up and quickly. The slimes had them trapped. Sam took a stance right over him, holding on as many creatures as she could - with the branch, with her body... With every hit she took, her motions became more sluggish, more unsteady. Only desperation kept her going, it seemed. She reached for Elliott without looking.

"Get up! We have to get out of here. You must make a run for it. I'll be right behind you!" She tried to sound confident. He grabbed her hand and pulled himself up.

"You can barely stand on your own. I am not leaving you alone."

They backed away as far as the trees would allow. How should they get out? The slimes had them cornered. Aggressive with red glowing eyes they crept nearer. The first contracted, making themselves ready to attack. With her last strength Sam waved around the branch. The slimes weren't impressed. Like springs they released their stored power and jumped...

Suddenly a storm rose. Lightning and thunder tore the sky. A booming voice shouted:

"BEGONE!"

The strong wind carried some of the Slimes away. The others turned as quick as they could.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

The voice now targeted Sam and Elliott. In fear they stayed silent.

"EXPLAIN YOURSELF! NOW!" the voice boomed even louder. Thunder echoed over their heads.

A shivering, exhausted Sam stepped up.

"It's my fault. There were these golden creatures, like apples, one tiny, one bigger, and the slimy, green ones and the green ones attacked the the small golden one. I tried to help, but we were swarmed by the slimy creatures."

She looked at Elliott, who was holding his injured hand.

"I got my friend hurt. Could we please leave? He needs a doctor."

"IN THAT CASE..." the storm diffused as soon as it had come. The green haired man from before stepped out of the shadows. A little golden apple sitting on his shoulder.

"Come with me. You have to leave this part of the woods. You don't belong here."

As told Sam and Elliott followed the strange man. After the first few steps Sam stumbled and fell. Heavily breathing she pushed herself up again. The man stopped: "You need a doctor yourself dearie. Don't underestimate those small creatures. They can do a lot of damage and it seems they got you good. That's what you get for invading their space..."

But on behalf of my friend here," He motioned to the little golden apple," I have to thank you for saving it."

They followed the man all the way back to the fallen tree trunk.

"I've to sit down for a bit." Sam said and used the log as seat.

The man raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Elliott reached in his messenger bag and pulled out a bottle of water. He drank a bit himself, then handed it to Sam. She took it gladly and drank, too.

"I'm sorry." She said after quenching her thirst, looking at Elliott. "I should have listen to you. I brought us into a dangerous situation and now you're injured because of me."

"I could have stayed back." He shrugged. "But I am glad I did not. I do not want to think about, what could have happen..."

"So", The green haired man interrupted them. "How exactly did you get into this part of the forest?"

Sam and Elliott both looked puzzled.

"We... just climbed over this log...", Sam provided as answer. The man laughed. He didn't seemed satisfied:

"...just... climbed... over here. How were you ABLE TO DO SO?" His voice grew louder until he was almost screaming.

"Like, with the use of our hands and feet?" Sam was taken aback by his sudden outbreak. Elliott stood by her, putting his intact hand on her shoulder reassuringly.:

"I can even do it with one hand? Should I demonstrate?" He hold the other mans stare. The bearded man shook his head.

"I apologize. I shouldn't have gotten loud. My point is: These trunks mark borders. Points where people normally turn around, because they just don't want to take a step further."

Sam wanted to ask how, but bit her tongue. Don't irate the strange man any further, she thought.

"I felt a little uneasy." Elliott admitted.

"A little uneasy, but the concern for a little unknown creature and a mere acquaintance was enough to shake the feeling off?", The man laughed again. "I truly messed up..."

Sam and Elliott looked him, then at each other. Elliott shrugged.

"Sir, can we leave or is there something you still want to know from us?" Sam asked. "We must see the doctor."

"Just one thing. Listen to your guts next time and keep away from places you're not supposed to be. They are off limits for a reason. Now, begone! I've got things to do."

As they went the little golden apple chirped and waved a goodbye.

Rasmodius watched while the young people went back to town.

"Simply climbed over the log... feeling a little uneasy..." he'd just renewed the barrier, so how were they even able to see through it? Unless he'd made a mistake. Had he lost his touch? Or was their situation this dire already? He felt for the magic around him. Nothing seems to be out of the ordinary.

The little apple chirped something in his ear.

"And you should be more careful, too, little one." Rasmodius lectured it without responding to what it had said.

"I hate to admit it, but if those two hadn't interfered, you'd be gone. And now off to your family."

It chirped again.

"Maybe,... time will tell. I'll keep my eye on them."

Elliott and Sam walked back to town in silence. Elliott glanced over to her. She stumbled, but caught herself before falling. Mucus had stained her partially torn clothes. Dirt and scrapes told the tale of their fight. He presumed he didn't look any better. The silence was welcome, he wasn't in the mood for talking.

His wrist started to hurt slightly and he was barely able to move his hand. That wasn't a good sign. In front of this strange man he'd played it down, but he was furious. Furious with himself for agreeing to such a stupidity and furious with her for being so reckless to get them both almost killed. If it wasn't for Sam being a heap of misery herself right now, she'd already gotten an earful. Instead he clenched his left hand to a fist, grinding his teeth together, trying to stay composed.

He looked at her again. Her footing had gotten even unstabler. She could barely walk in a straight line, even though she tried. Without thinking he closed in and steadied her, before she could fall over her own feet.

"Thank you... and it's okay, you know." Sam spoke in an almost silent voice, broken and barely audible. "You being angry I mean. Me acting without thinking got you hurt, maybe badly. I don't dare thinking what could have happened, if it hadn't been for that strange old man. I don't know if I'll be able to apologize ever enough for today, so scream at me, be angry, be loud..."

With a short gesture he silence her:

"I am angry, but I will not yell. Please, do not talk to me right now. I have to make sense of this whole, excuse me for that - shit - first. Little walking apples, monsters in the woods... Your blatant disregard for my concerns, that put us in that mess to begin with. I just hope, this", he held up his injured arm, "is only a very bad bruising."

Kapitel 9: Harvey

"It's broken", the brown haired man with the moustache and glasses said, while looking at the X-ray. He adjusted his glasses slightly and turned to Elliott and Sam.

"What do you mean broken? It can not be. It must not be. I need my hand." Elliott answered

Harvey looked apologetic as he repeated:

"Your wrist is broken. Nothing's gonna change it. You won't be able to use your hand for at least 6 weeks. And you are lucky you don't need an operation. The fracture is clean and smooth, so a cast will do."

Sam swallowed hard. She could see the defiance in Elliott slowly vanish as the words reached him and the realizations of what they meant dawned on him.

"Six weeks..."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't tell you anything more positive."

"No, no. It is fine. I am fine. I will see the time as vacation."

He got up and walked around the room.

"Can I do something for you?" Sam asked cautiously.

Elliott turned to look at her. She froze. The expression in his eyes frightened her. She shrunk into the bed she was sitting on.

"No", he said in a quiet and dangerously calm tone. That simple word expressed so much anger and pain, it hurt more than any yelling could ever do.

Harvey watched both of them and made a decision.

"Miss Vaughn, would you please wait here, while we move to the next room for the cast. I'll be right back, after I've taken care of his arm."

Sam was caught off guard and wanted to object at first, but the firm look on Harvey's face let her change her mind and she obliged.

After they had arrived in the privacy of the other room, Harvey addressed Elliott again.

"So, what's the story here? You haven't told me everything, have you?"

With a sigh Elliott began to tell Harvey some details they had left out prior, while the doctor prepared and fitted the cast.

"So all of this could have been prevented, if that girl hadn't acted so impulsively. Now she's in shambles and you're mad at her."

"Yes and no. I am mad at myself. I do not know. I just do not know what to do..."

"You will figure something out. You are a smart guy and quite crafty." Harvey tried to reassure him.

"Easier said than done." Elliott replied. He looked down at his hand. "It does not hurt that bad. How could it be broken?"

"You're still in shock and under a light effect of poisoning from the slimes. Believe me, the pain will be there. And the x-ray doesn't lie."

"You are a natural in giving your patients hope."

"I won't lie to you to make you feel better."

"Fair, but not very uplifting."

"I'm your doctor after all. I provide you with healing as far as it's within my possibilities, but I can't do magic. What I can do is to make it easier on you with a few pieces of advice... and you should follow them."

Elliott nodded.

"How's your nausea by the way? When what you told me is right, she'd taken most of the hits during your encounter?"

"She put herself in front of me, so yes, the things did not get me that often. I feel a bit fuzzy and my head hurts, but I can walk in a straight line."

"I've some medicine against the effects of the slimes. Drink it right away and there are some painkillers for later. Take them when you need to and keep the hand rested high to prevent it from swelling more. Rest a lot. Trying to rush things won't do you any good. When the swelling has gone back we can fit you a new cast."

Elliott nodded. He wasn't in the mood to say much more. And he had a lot to think about. So he took his leave after a few more minutes. He heard some sniffing, so he stopped and tried to peek into the other room while passing, but couldn't see anything.

Sam had tried to wait patiently, but as soon as the shock subsided even slightly, the tears welled up. Sam had rolled on her side, facing the wall. Her thoughts raced. She had done it again. Again someone was hurt because of her. Would she never learn?

Her hands searched for something to hold on. She grabbed the blanket hard with both hands until her knuckles went white and bit into it, to muffle her crying. It would be Clearwater all over again.

She didn't know how long she had been laying there till her tears started to dry up. Nearing footsteps echoed through the hallway, stopped for a bit and continued away soon after. Not long after Harvey entered the room.

"Miss Vaughn, is everything okay?" He asked

"Nothing... is okay!" Sam answered him with a broken voice. She turned to him, her face botched, the eyes red from crying. Light lines showed where the tears had been running down her still dirty face.

"I see, there's more to heal, than just scrapes and the poisoning. You can tell me, if you want. I'm a doctor. Everything you tell me here is confidential. How about starting with what happened in the woods from your perspective. I've got the feeling you left out some important details the first time."

Sam looked at Harvey and began to talk. The doctor listened closely to catch anything that differed from Elliott's version. Sometimes he nodded. Sometimes it seemed like he was taking mental notes.

By the time Sam came to the end of her story she was in tears again:

"I didn't want that to happen. I hurt someone...again. It should have been me..." the words became mumbling and barely audible.

Harvey stayed silent for a while. He'd learned long ago that listening was the best he could do in times like that. He had put some extra stress on her, but he felt like having the full picture of the accident now and "again" hadn't escaped him, he must tread cautious, though. He let Sam calm down a bit before talking himself:

"I see. You had good intentions, but you have to consider the consequences of your actions. Especially if they can affect others. You haven't done that in the heat of the moment and something went wrong. It may sounds like a worn out, empty phrase, but sometimes these things happen. Don't bury yourself in guilt. It won't help either of you. Take away the right lessons from the incident. Learn from it. Take precautions for the next time or simply listen when someone speaks their concerns."

Sam looked shaken. Harvey wasn't sure, his words had reached her. He waited for her to say something.

"But it's my fault and now I've lost the first friend I've found here. I must do something. I must apologize. I must..."

"Stop! Hold it right there. First of all you have to get better. Make sure you'll be okay. You've got beaten up quite hard and it affects your perception and your thinking. It's a miracle you were able to stand straight, let alone walk and it had taken a huge toll on you to make it here all the way from the Cindersap.

How does your body feel? The antidote must have taken effect by now." Harvey had decided to not ask further on the incident right now, to not further upset her, but he made a mental note to provide council anytime she might need it.

Sam was glad he had changed the subject. She was not ready to face her past.

"Not as nauseous any more. And the legs are less wobbly." She replied.

"That's good. I've some more medicine for you just in case. Slimes shouldn't be underestimated and the effects of a direct hit lasts a while. They are poisonous to touch and their mucus soaks through fabric. So, next time, take off your clothes if possible and wash them before putting them on again. With the symptoms you show I'd say three units will do."

He produced a box of vials filled with a pinkish liquid and handed three over to Sam.

"One now, the other two tomorrow and the day after. Drink it. You'll feel better soon."

Sam did as she was told and put away the rest.

"When you're healed up and rested everything will look better. Have a little faith.

And for Elliott. He said he doesn't want to talk and doesn't want to see you, right? But he stayed with you all the way to the clinic. Give him time. He will get over it. He's strong and reasonable. He forgets that at times, though. And six weeks may seem long, but they are not the end of the world and it could have been a lot worse..."

Six weeks...

That was half the time. He desperately needed something to show for, when he had his next appointment in Zuzu City.

Elliott lay in bed and was either staring at his cast or the ceiling. A rough weekend lay almost behind him. His wrist was swollen and hurting like hell and he could barely move his fingertips. There was no thinking of writing anything. He had tried. Worst of all, when he had calmed down after the events the ideas came rushing in. His thoughts circled on how to go on.

He had been furious. Furious with Sam for dragging him into that mess, Furious with himself for not stopping her and going along with her dangerous nonsense. When the anger had subsided a good deal, he thought about what had happened that day. At least they were able to save that thing. But what good had that done him?

How should he make his deadline now? The throwback could literally mean the end of his career. The end of the life he dreamed of. With that thought the misery came and lingered. It overpowered every other thought and emotion till it was anything that was left inside him.

And then the messages from Sam came. They were simple and straightforward:

“Hey, how are you? Is there anything you need help with?” and “I'm worried.”

How could he tell her, she'd almost certainly ruined his life? He almost had done so at the clinic. Now he was glad, he hadn't acted on that impulse. It wouldn't have been fair to put all the blame solely on her, since he just could have stayed back.

He liked Sam, but her recklessness meant trouble.

At least she had the decency to apologize. If she hadn't, he wouldn't even consider talking to her again. But every word she'd said was sincere. He knew the difference between an honest apology and a phony one all too well.

Well, but as honest as an apology could be, it wouldn't help with his problem.

He took his phone and opened the calendar. He'd marked the day in bright red. Three months from now, fate would decide if he could make it. Or was it decided already? Maybe he should call his editor and tell them he couldn't make the deadline. That would mean a breach of contract though.

He opened the messenger app and tipped on a contact. Typing the short text took an eternity with only one hand:

“Are you at home? I need you. Could you come over?”

Kapitel 10:

"DON'T DO THAT EVER AGAIN!", the face of the red haired woman storming the museum was twisted in anger, as she screamed right into Sam's face. "I WILL HUNT YOU DOWN AND MAKE YOU REGRET COMING HERE, IF YOU PULL SUCH A STUPID STUNT EVER AGAIN!"

Sam almost dropped the books she was carrying. Penny, Flor and the children were looking in shock at the scene unfolding right before them.

"Excuse me...", Gunther stepped in. "...this is a public space. Would you please keep it down."

The redhead glared at him: "Zip it! I've got a bone to pick with this one", She pointed at Sam, who looked bewildered, not understanding what was happening, "and you'll let me!"

"Nobody will stop you." Jasper had come over from the exhibition section as soon as the commotion had started, "but let's move the conversation to our backroom. There are less children there.

And then you may tell us what all the fuss is about. Mrs Vaughn seems a little lost as well.

The woman glared first at him, then at Sam. After a swift glance to the improvised class, she nodded and followed Jasper down the aisle that led to the storage room. Sam was right behind them. Gunther apologized to Penny, Flor and the children for the noise before stepping through and closing the door behind him, giving them some privacy.

"The fuss", the woman began, while throwing her long braid behind her back, "is about that one", she pointed at Sam again, "almost killing my best friend." It finally clicked for Sam.

"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING, RUNNING RIGHT INTO THE FORBIDDEN PART OF THE FOREST TRYING TO FIGHT THOSE THINGS?"

Both men exchanged glances, nodded to each other and slipped quietly out of the room, as the woman continued her tirade.

"This man is my best friend. I love him and I won't let him get hurt because of your stupidity. So keep your distance or... or... I... I..." the anger subsided slightly after her outburst, making way for sorrow and tears as the woman began to falter, "...I don't want to think about what could have happened..."

"You must be Leah." Sam said softly. "I know, it's no consolation to you, but please believe me, I didn't want any of that to happen."

"Didn't want any of that to happen... Do you realize what you've done to him?" Leah asked, still glaring.

"I... I... actually don't." she stammered after a bit. "He hadn't talked to me since we've been to Harvey. Breaking his wrist certainly is bad, but I'm glad the fracture isn't complicated and doesn't need fixing with an operation. It'll heal in a few weeks' time, as far as Harvey said."

Leah inhaled sharply: "He doesn't have that kind of time. You may have ruined his career, even his life with your little stunt. He certainly hasn't told you, but he's on the clock. He could lose his contract, if he doesn't deliver on time. It wasn't looking good before the accident. Now it's even worse."

Sam's eyes grew wide.

"Oh no... That's horrible! I just wanted him to find inspiration. Is there something I can do to help?" She asked worriedly. Leah hesitated a moment due to the honest concern, before answering:

"Stay away from him. Leave him be. He is distraught enough as it is. He doesn't need a stranger snooping around, distracting him from his work and reminding him of this disaster altogether. Also he doesn't want to see you."

"No, I can't do this!" Sam stated firmly, straitening herself, putting her chin out. "I've made a grave mistake and Elliott is suffering from it. I have to help him somehow. And if that means acting against his will right now. I will find a way to help him through this, even if I have to write every word he says down, myself."

"Stubborn as a mule. Okay, go and try to talk to him. I won't stop you making a fool out of yourself, but heed my warning. If you hurt him anymore, I'll make you pay."

Hearing that made Sam even more defensive.

"I'm sure of it, but it won't come to this. I promise."

Leah watched her carefully: "We will see."

Without another word she turned around and left. Sam was alone in the storage room. As soon as the tension subsided, her knees went wobbly. She leaned back against a shelf and let herself slide down, till she was sitting on the floor. She had ruined another person's life due to her egotistical behavior, again. What to do? Her head was spinning, she couldn't think clearly. Tears started to form and run down her face. That's how Jasper found her, when he entered the room a fair bit later with a cup of steaming hot tea.

"I'll be right back at work... as soon as my legs... work again properly." She told him unasked, in between a few sobs.

"Take your time, the books won't run and there will be enough opportunity to make

up for the missed time later." He handed her the tea while talking. "Here, for you. I figured you may need it."

"Thank you." Sam tried to smile and drank a hearty sip. Jasper sat down beside her.

"What happened? Do you need someone to talk to?"

"Certainly, but I'm not sure. You are one of my bosses."

"I see myself more as a mentor and I know when it's important to listen, besides, do you know anybody else yet? So, if you decide to pour your heart out, come up to my rooms whenever you feel it. I will talk to Gunther, so you needn't worry about work today. By the way I've got hot cacao and blueberry tart waiting in the kitchen."

He got up: "I'll leave you be for now. Clear your head and decide in peace."

"Thank you", Sam drank another sip and watched him close the door behind him.

Gunther approached Jasper as soon as he left the room: "What did she say? How did she end up in the secret forest?"

"I haven't asked. She looks utterly devastated right now. We'll talk later today. I'm sure of it. I told her to come to my kitchen when she's ready. Make sure she can finish her shores another time, so that's no problem. I've a feeling it will be a long talk... "