

## RECOVERY

Maaya opened her eyes to the bleary gray morning. Even this far inland an ugly fog had rolled in, enough to cover the streets with an extra shadow of gray that made it look even more dilapidated and miserable than it normally did, but not enough to obscure anyone's vision of just how unsightly it all was. Of everything that had changed in the world, this town's ability to lower one's spirits just by looking at it was not one of them.

She blinked.

A cool breeze whipped through the alley where she stood in the privacy of a boarded-up doorway. She shivered. The only clothes she had anymore were an old and worn coat with thinning fabric that did little to keep out the cold, a pair of pants that weren't quite her size, and a single pair of shoes with several holes in each.

Maaya's stomach growled. It was morning, and the vendors would be opening their carts soon. If she was lucky enough, she might be able to beg for breakfast—or get an

opportunity to steal. She hadn't eaten in two days. A few months ago, after taking down the machine, she thought she might never go hungry again. But here she was. What a time that had been... and what an awful place she had returned to.

As she walked, she felt a sense of unease that evolved slowly into anxiety in the pit of her stomach that momentarily made her forget her hunger in place of nausea.

Then it became fear.

She blinked again, then ducked to the left just in time to avoid a rock that had been hurled at her head.

"She's still got reflexes, that's for sure," came a sneering voice. A young man in his early twenties stood nearby, flanked by two older but just as nasty looking men. "Let's see if the witch can dodge so well after both her legs are broken."

Maaya turned and ran, sprinting back down the alley and through nearby streets as the men pursued her. Unfortunately she knew these streets well, and was quick enough on her feet to lose her pursuers. But even after she found temporary safety behind a pile of trash bags, the fear did not leave her.

It took her a moment to regain her bearings and examine her fear. It had been with her for a while now, but she thought she had gotten better at controlling it. Returning to Sark had been the last thing she'd ever wanted to do—and in fact, the thought that she might someday do it hardly ever crossed her mind after she and Adelaide found each other—but life didn't always go according to plan. In Maaya's case, life seemed to take some cruel joy in discovering her plans and then ruining them. First it had been her living friends, and then Saber... and then Adelaide. It had been months since Adelaide had been murdered, but Maaya still hadn't recovered. The loss of the love of her life, combined with the disappearance of Roshan and Styx—which she feared had happened under similar

circumstances, but which she had never been able to confirm—had been too much for Maaya to bear. Now, even months later, she was a shadow of her former self, able to remember her name on a good day and her past on a bad one.

She didn't have any place to go after everything fell apart. The crew of the Windfire had been out at sea on the night of the murder, so there was no one there to help Maaya as Rahu's abductors took her. She had thought they might kill her, but soon discovered Rahu thought it would be great fun to take her back to the town she grew up in and set her loose on the streets once again. From rags to riches to rags again, he jeered, and remarked that the loss of every single person she ever knew and loved was punishment enough. At least until she died a slow death on the cold streets of the town that had always hated her. In retrospect, she thought, they really should have made sure Rahu's cell had been better guarded. It was a pipe dream to think he'd stay there for the rest of his life. Not with how skilled he was at manipulating people.

And there was no help coming, that much she knew. If they could kill Adelaide, they could kill any hopeful rescuers. And it was likely no one even knew where she was to start. The search parties would never make it to Sark, if they even thought of it in the first place or remembered its name—after all, why would Maaya ever go back there?—and eventually everyone would give up, marking it down as another unsolved mystery in a folder or shelf somewhere that would never be looked at again except to be puzzled over for a few moments every few decades as future generations wondered what might have been.

Amidst all the other emotions that had deadened her to the world was self-hatred. How stupid she had been to think that her time with Adelaide would be any different than all the

others. This was the state of the world, at least for her; it gave her hope and then tore it ruthlessly away. Every time she had attempted to pursue some kind of happiness, it had eventually backfired in a manner more cruel than any human deserved. The number of loved ones she had lost totaled more than the number of years she'd been alive. Their names were some of the only things she chose to remember willingly, though even now she occasionally found herself unable to remember a face or a name, the sound of a voice or the touch of an embrace. She still thought about them sometimes. It all felt so long ago and so far away, as though all her friendships and love had been in another world or some beautiful dream. And Maaya was learning again what she should have known all along: dreams always ended.

Maaya put a hand tightly over her mouth as she began to cry. She did that often, mostly in private where no one would see or hear her and try to take advantage. She'd been beaten several times already. It wasn't fair. She had tried so hard. She had found safety and security and love and had finally beaten back all her demons, even though it had cost her almost everything. Didn't she deserve more than this? What had she done to end up deserving to be back here? After traveling the world and risking her life and discovering a whole new kind world of millions... she was here. Back in Sark. A small and isolated town in the middle of nowhere, far from the coasts in the middle of a sea of dead fields, a town of soot and gray and hatred and apathy.

It wasn't fair. She really had tried. Adelaide had tried, too. Even when Maaya opened the door to their home to find her dead, Maaya could tell there had been a struggle. A fight to the last. But it wasn't fair. She knew after her journey was finished that she couldn't do it all again. It had taken too much

of a toll on her. She had thought she would have time to rest and recover. But instead she had been brought back here to where it all began, and this time, she was completely and utterly alone. Her spirit had finally been completely broken. She no longer lived; she only survived, and barely. It was only those hard-wired instincts of self-preservation that prevented her from withering away completely. Otherwise she didn't know why she tried.

It wasn't *fair*. She had made so many memories and friends and loved ones, she had gone through so much, she had gone across the entire *world* and then come *back* again, she had overcome so many trials, she had felt so much pain but kept going anyway, she had found the light at the end of the tunnel, she had finally found a home and someone to share it with forever, she had finally achieved one of the few dreams she'd ever had in her life, and now it was all for nothing and everyone was GONE and she was back where she started and she didn't deserve this and it wasn't FAIR—

“Maaya. Hey, Maaya!”

Maaya whipped around to see where the voice was coming from only to find that her world had gone dark. She was in an unfamiliar place, a room lit only by the faintest glow of the moon, entirely foreign to her. She saw walls and a ceiling she didn't recognize, and was vaguely aware of a weight over her entire body. She was lying down—when had she fallen? Maybe she had fainted. Maybe she had been struck by another rock from her attackers.

She pushed this thought to the side as she felt someone shake her shoulders. Fearing an attack, Maaya gasped and sat up, panting heavily despite having been lying down and possibly unconscious, cold sweat drenching the back of her neck. She was shivering. The figure next to her reached out

again, but Maaya backed up quickly, her arms raised as she curled up defensively.

“D-don’t touch me, please, st-stay away—”

“Maaya, it’s all right, it’s okay! You were having a nightmare again.”

The voice was familiar. Maaya paused, attempting to process this strange memory through her panic. What she was thinking wasn’t possible, but her hope spoke before her doubt could, pulling forth a name she hadn’t said aloud in a long, long time.

“Ade... Adelaide?”

“Yes, love. It’s me. It’s okay. Do you want me to turn on the lights?”

“Lights? What... where is...?”

“Hold on. Just breathe.”

Maaya did, if only because she had no more words to say. She had no idea where she was. Adelaide was long dead, but now Maaya was hearing her voice. And she was definitely not sleeping on the street. But she couldn’t begin to guess where she was; the walls that surrounded her were strange, dark, and foreboding. She knew of no place in Sark like this. Not that she would be allowed into, anyway.

There was a quiet *click*, and a soft glow suddenly filled the room. Maaya looked up to see a figure walking quickly around the bed to a lamp on a desk next to Maaya, and after a moment, that light was on too.

Maaya stared. She was in her flat. In the bedroom, to be specific. The one she shared with Adelaide. She was sitting in the bed she slept in every night. And now, sitting next to her on the bed and taking her hands in her own...

“Maaya. Look at me,” Adelaide said softly, gripping Maaya’s hands tightly. “Talk to me. Are you okay?”

“I-I don’t know,” Maaya admitted with great effort. “I’m home, and... you’re here? And you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, sweetheart. I’m fine. Oh, this was a bad one, wasn’t it?”

“I’m so confused, I don’t— I don’t know what just happened, I w-wasn’t here just a minute ago, and—”

Maaya was shaking almost uncontrollably, and she suddenly found she couldn’t speak any more. She wasn’t sure why at first until she felt the tears dripping down her cheeks. Adelaide was there immediately, pulling her into a gentle hug with one arm, running her other hand softly and slowly up and down Maaya’s arm.

“Shhh, it’s all right. Don’t talk now, just let it out. You’re safe and everything’s okay. You’re home with me and everything is fine.”

Maaya didn’t know how long she cried. All she knew is that Adelaide didn’t leave her side for a moment. When Maaya finally pulled away, her crying reduced to sniffles, Adelaide gave her a worried smile.

“Feeling better?”

“A little. My head is clearer. I... I still feel... I think I need to get out of here. I need fresh air.”

“Okay! Here, I’ll get us our robes and slippers and we can go out to the balcony—”

“No, I need... people. I need to see people, and buildings, and... I don’t know. I have to see, I have to be sure.”

Such an explanation might have gotten only blank and confused looks from anyone else, but Adelaide nodded in understanding.

“Gotcha. Give me just a minute, then we’ll take a walk.”

No sooner was Maaya’s robe around her shoulders and her slippers on her feet than she was out in the hallway in front of the door to her flat with Adelaide right beside her. They took

an elevator down to the first floor, walked straight through the lobby, then out into the street. The cold of night struck her, but it was as comforting as it was harsh, and the anxiety that ripped through her insides to the point where she could hardly breathe was, for the moment, diminished. Inside had been stuffy and stifling; here at least she could breathe easier.

Unlike her visions of Sark, the streets of Levien were clear and well lit, both from the many streetlamps that lined the immaculately kept walks and the towering residential and business buildings nearby. In the distance Maaya could make out the city square she had come to spend so much time at, and saw people walking about even in this early hour of the morning. They talked and laughed, and while part of her brain wondered how they could be so calm after what she had just seen, it was this same calmness that helped her. This was her reality—not her terrifying vision from before.

Adelaide didn't say a word until Maaya finally stopped walking, taking a seat on a bench near the square. Then and only then did she speak.

“Maaya? Talk to me, please?”

“Sorry. Sorry, L.. I had to see,” Maaya said, her breathing still somewhat erratic, gesturing around at the city before her. “I had to know this was real. That I'm still here.”

“Of course you are,” Adelaide said, her soothing tone as close to the delicate sunlight of a warm spring day as it was possible for a voice to be. “It was just a bad dream, that's all it was.”

“It was horrible,” Maaya sniffed, defying the tears she knew she still had left. “I don't know why I'm still... ugh.”

“What happened?” Adelaide persisted gently.

“It was... I was in Sark again. It was like nothing had changed, but it was also after everything happened. You were d... you were dead, and so was everyone else, and I was right



back where I started. My whole life just fell to pieces and Rahu was there and it was over for me, no one was coming to help, and I was going to die there after everything. I can't—I can't ever go back there. I can't, I can't. Just saying the name makes me want—I don't know why I'm still thinking of it, I want this to stop, why can't I make it stop!"

She broke off with a choking sob, and Adelaide held her tighter.

"I know, love, I know," Adelaide continued. "I wish I could make it go away. I wish I could make it all go away. But you went through a lot. So much more than any one person should ever have to go through. And now that you're safe and have time to recover from an entire life of horror and misery, this is part of how your brain copes."

"Is this coping? It feels like torture," Maaya said, her voice trembling. "I get them so often, all about the same things. Death and sadness and everything I have now falling apart, losing everything. Why can't my mind understand I'm safe now? Why do I have to be reminded of all the bad things?"

"I wish I could say. But it gets easier over time. It's only been a few weeks. You still have some *physical* wounds that haven't completely healed yet. Some of these more invisible wounds will be with us for much longer. You've talked me down after my fair share of nightmares myself and I haven't been through nearly as much as you."

"How long? How long will this go on, how long will I be afraid to fall asleep at night because of what I might see? How long will I be sent into a total panic over random things that strangers say or do just because they remind me of things that aren't even a threat to me anymore?" Maaya asked desperately. "What is this happiness even for?"

Adelaide gently ran her fingers through Maaya's hair and brushed away a few stray tears that were falling again.

“What we’ve been through... what *you* have been through in particular... that hits hard. Harder than I can describe. No one would come out of what we did feeling fine. We have to grieve, to process loss, we have so many things to do and so little understanding of how it’s done. We have invisible scars, sure. But it gets better with time. You need to adjust. We have a new life now, one that’s so drastically different from our old lives that it will take time. Let’s not mince words: what we went through was traumatic. We lost loved ones, we were hurt in all sorts of ways, we flew by the seat of our pants and put the burden of saving the world on our shoulders and we were scared to death the whole time. I mean... people our age are worrying about going on dates and getting good jobs and worrying about performance reviews at work. We met our limits and then got pushed past them—not by choice, but because we had no other.”

Maaya didn’t reply. By now she was feeling calmer and more certain of herself, the last emotions of her nightmare fading away as consciousness won over. Her memories had come back to her, and she knew all was well. Here she was in the city she loved so much with the girl of her best dreams at her side.

Part of Maaya knew this struggle would come, even if the rest of her hoped against hope that it wouldn’t. She’d hoped that she’d be able to stop glancing over her shoulder to search for danger. She’d thought she might stop feeling afraid whenever someone laid eyes on her, or that she would stop feeling anxious whenever she saw a price tag or stepped into a store, worried that someone would realize she had no money and drive her away, calling her a thief. She even thought the lingering guilt would leave her be. But until a few months ago, that had been all she knew. Such things were hard to get rid of.

The dreams didn’t always take her back to Sark. Some-

times she was back out at sea in the midst of the smoke and fire, reliving the disappearance of her best friend or watching her captain fall into the tumultuous waters. Sometimes she was on the river with Styx where she'd seen the first ghost that had made her lose consciousness. Sometimes it was on the night she'd fought the ghosts, the night she'd watched her friends get killed before her eyes. Sometimes she was even out in the desolation of Krethus where there was no life at all, back where she'd destroyed the machine. Only her dreams killed her, and Adelaide too.

Sometimes they weren't even dreams. Sometimes a swell of panic would overtake her whenever she heard the right words in the right order, or when someone spoke too loudly or angrily. She would become afraid before she knew why, before she realized that even the smallest reminders of the most painful parts of her past were all it took to take her right back. The guilt, which she'd hoped would leave her be, only seemed to intensify at first. Maybe it was her fault Kim, Sovaan, and Kalil were dead. Maybe there was a way she could have saved Saber after all. Maybe it was her fault so many Krethans had died, considering the machine had activated after she brought Saber out of the gem that had trapped her inside.

But it wasn't only Maaya who was forced to confront her horrors. More than once Maaya had calmed Adelaide down from nightmares of her own, ones that were sometimes similar and sometimes different, but terrifying nonetheless. Adelaide often dreamed of their battle at sea against the Selenthian navy that had almost killed her, and would wake in tears, utterly convinced she was back out there on the dark ocean again. She dreamed of the tension between her and her family, her brother who had been killed by the ghosts years before, the one she hadn't been able to save. She dreamed of the missions and close calls of her past and all

the death she'd witnessed. She dreamed of her every anxiety over her struggles communicating with others, and her insecurities, many of which involved losing Maaya. Adelaide would admit it to no one else, but she too was feeling the weight of her past — one she often tried to keep buried — and now that things were settling, it was hitting her hard, too.

To see such a strong woman reduced to tears and confusion was heartbreaking, but Maaya knew how to soothe her like no one else did. They'd spent many nights by the fire, recovering from a particularly horrible dream with hot chocolate and happy stories, fighting away horror with laughter until they felt safe to return to bed once again. Adelaide's mind didn't work in the same way Maaya's did, and sometimes it still took getting used to, but through all the fear and the hurt, they made their way through it together.

"Oh, and don't apologize," Adelaide continued with a knowing smile. "I'm completely happy to spend this time with you until you feel okay again. I'll do anything for you, you know that."

"I can't argue, but only because I would do the same for you," Maaya answered, finally managing a smile of her own. "I... hope I didn't scare you."

"Not as much as before. I knew it was a bad dream. It's just hard in those moments where I'm trying to get you back to reality. You're so terrified and I can't stand to see you so scared and hurt," Adelaide said, and now she sounded like it was her turn to fight back tears. "I just love you so much and I can only imagine what kind of horrible things you're seeing. Things I can't protect you from."

"Hey, you're always there to pull me out of it and to take care of me until I feel better," Maaya smiled, and she planted a kiss on Adelaide's cheek. "I never like waking up in the

middle of the night like this, but... having you there makes it worth it.”

“Always. Always, always,” Adelaide said, softly kissing Maaya’s forehead. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay, I think,” Maaya said hesitantly. “Though... I think there are some things from the dream that are still making me nervous.”

“Like what?” Adelaide asked, shifting where she sat to face Maaya directly.

“Well... the whole thing about this dream was that Rahu escaped and came looking for revenge. He... he was the one who had you killed, and then he took me away back to Sark. And I know that’s not likely, but I guess I’m really afraid that he’ll get out someday and come back into my life.”

“Not likely indeed. The town’s not under his hold anymore, and too much of an opposition rose up against him for him to worm his way back into power, especially from inside a single cell hardly anyone looks at. Still, I know what I can do to help.” At Maaya’s inquiring look, Adelaide continued, “When we get back to the flat, I’ll send a bird to one of my officers. I’ll have some of our guys get over to Sark to discreetly check on him and make sure everything’s still fine, then see if they recommend upping any security here or there. Long story short, we’ll make sure that man never harms anyone else, including us, ever again.”

“That... would actually help,” Maaya said, letting out a breath of relief. “I guess I’m just so happy now, you know? I never thought I could be this happy. And every other time in my life I *was* happy it was taken from me somehow, so I... I’m afraid that...”

“I know,” Adelaide said, shifting again so that she could lean her head on Maaya’s shoulder. “But you won’t lose this. I know it’s hard to believe after a lifetime of what you lived,

but... you've won. You've made it. You got the life you worked hard for, and it's not going anywhere. I'm not saying there won't be hardship at all, but if hardship has been paying attention to what we've accomplished together, it'll know to think twice before messing with us. There is nothing we can't do."

"What have I done to deserve you?" Maaya asked. Tears were streaming down her cheeks again, but this time they were tears of happiness. As much as Maaya hated crying, she could accept this.

"Be you as you are. That's all! You are a wonderful, gorgeous, kindhearted, strong, and caring girl. I'm lucky to have you in my life. And this isn't a fluke; this is your life now. The one you had before wasn't fair to you, but that's over now. You're never going back. Okay?"

"Okay," Maaya agreed softly, then burst out in giggles and squirmed as Adelaide suddenly pulled her closer and kissed her repeatedly from her cheeks down to the nape of her neck.

"There now, that's a better look than tears," Adelaide said approvingly, looking thoroughly pleased with herself. "What do you think? Ready to head back in?"

Maaya thought for a moment. It was nice out, but the chill was beginning to get to her even through her warm robe and pajamas. The fear that lingered after her nightmare had all but dissipated, and if she forced herself to think practically, it was probably best they get back to sleep so they wouldn't spend all of the next day in bed — not that she would entirely mind that. Those days she and Adelaide had off and free of responsibility where they could doze together for hours into the afternoon with absolutely no guilt whatsoever were already some of her favorite memories.

"I think I'm ready," Maaya said with a smile, getting lightly to her feet. "And... listen, I know you said not to say sorry but—"

“And I’m still saying it, so hush. I’m not doing you a favor, I’m just doing what any loved one would when you need help. *And* you’ve done it for me. So again, hush.” Adelaide finished by placing her pointer finger over Maaya’s lips. Maaya, who had been about to reply, glared instead. “Oh!” Adelaide exclaimed suddenly, looking over at the square. “Let’s get some treats from the bakery over there. We deserve it after a rough night.”

“In our sleepwear?” Maaya asked, raising an eyebrow. “Sitting out here I could understand, but...”

“My dear, it’s three in the morning. They’ll probably be glad we’re coming in with any clothes on at all,” Adelaide snorted. “Let’s do it! Then when we get back inside I’ll make us some hot chocolate.”

“I didn’t bring my money with me! I was too concerned with getting outside,” Maaya protested.

“You know I always plan for the possibility of food,” Adelaide answered brightly.

Half an hour later, they found themselves on one of the plush sofas in their living room, munching on warm baked treats and sipping their hot chocolate. Once they’d returned home, Maaya changed the sheets on the bed and took a short shower to wash away the cold sweat of her dream while Adelaide made their drinks. And then they’d settled in, content to relax in the dim light as they let tiredness return.

“You know... I was so happy to put the past behind me and to finally be done with it all,” Maaya said quietly during a lull in conversation. “After losing so many loved ones and risking our lives on the machine, and *then* going back to Sark, I was so ready to be done with it. But... I guess I can expect my past to keep coming back for a while anyway.”

Adelaide leaned closer to Maaya, staring out the glass balcony doors at the dark sea beyond.

“Well, that’s the thing. Our pasts will always be there because we’re the ones who lived them. We can’t escape them that way. But we *can* recover. And we’ll get there someday. It’s going to be rough for a while, don’t get me wrong. We’ll have many more nights like this, whether it’s you waking up in a panic or me. But it *will* get better. And until it does, we’ll be right here for each other.”

“Time heals all wounds, right?” Maaya asked almost pleadingly.

Adelaide looked uncertain.

“I don’t think so. Most things, maybe. But some of these things we’ll keep forever. Scars don’t heal, but we learn to live with them. It’ll be the same with all this.”

“I just don’t like feeling broken, I guess,” Maaya continued. “I used to wander the streets at night to take care of ghosts, and we fought the machine together, and I did so many things, and now I’m just... this. A little girl living a comfortable life and still waking up with nightmares.”

“You’re not broken, or weak, or anything like that. And those things you did, while brave, were also *horrible* experiences. Not to mention things that should have been unnecessary for any person to live through. You only did those things because you had to. Your brain needs to heal just like the rest of you, and since that was basically your whole life, it has a lot of healing to do.”

“Well... talking about this with you definitely helps,” Maaya said warmly.

“It does! And for me, too. Honestly, I’ve been scared of all sorts of things all my life. I learned how to avoid showing it sometimes like you did, but I’ve always been scared. And when I wake up crying from a nightmare I feel like the world is ending. But... knowing you’re here with me has helped more than anything else ever has. I really want you to know that. Do



you remember what you said the night we first had dinner with my parents? That how you feel about yourself when you're around someone is just as important as how you feel about them? I've had plenty of time to think since then, and honestly... I've never felt better in my life. I know I don't work the same way most other people do, and it's given me a lot of trouble, but when you're here I feel like it's okay and that everything will turn out all right."

"You're going to make me cry again you sap," Maaya laughed, clasping Adelaide's hands in her own. "That means a lot. I'll always do my best for you. I love you so, so much."

"I love you too."

They shared a gentle kiss, and then another. Maaya could believe this. As real as her dreams seemed, they always faded eventually. But this—her happiness, her growing optimism, and her love that knew no equal—never did. The fear would come and go, but Adelaide and the rest of what was now her life would always be there. With that in mind, Maaya thought, maybe recovering from the ordeals of her past wasn't as impossible as she thought.

The girls soon got up, and Adelaide sent one of her mechanical birds out into the night as Maaya prepared for bed. She felt better already knowing that, even as she slept, her friends and Adelaide's contacts would be working to make sure they were safe.

As she walked toward the bedroom again, she felt a lingering unease, as though the residual fear of her nightmare was like a foul odor that had yet to be fully aired out of the room. She stood hesitantly in the doorway, unsure if she were actually ready to try to sleep again just yet.

But then she felt a hand at her waist, and as Maaya let Adelaide guide her to bed, she knew the rest of the night would give her peace.

They snuggled into bed together and turned the lights off. The dark didn't seem so frightening anymore. Adelaide pulled herself up behind Maaya and put a protective arm over her, and Maaya nestled farther down within their pile of soft comforters and pillows. And this time, when Maaya drifted off to sleep again, her dreams were sweet.