

Tropedämmerung

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Read at own risk.

1.

The light was almost blinding white. Mary Sue did not know where exactly she was, but for the moment it felt extremely pleasant. Everything was perfection. She had reached some center of ultimate knowledge, or fulfilled an ultimate quest. She heard epic, majestic, almost cosmic music that alternated between major and minor keys, but mostly major.

But slowly, the whiteness began to fade, like the music did too. The light was still intense, but less so. Like reality instead.

Mary Sue woke up in her bed. The morning sun shone through the curtains.

She felt disappointment.

Yes. There was practically nothing wrong with her life, but she knew she would not reach this kind of epic enlightenment in her mundane reality.

She tried to remember the epic melody she had heard in her dream, but that too, seemed to fade away and evaporate, until she just heard the birds singing outside.

Damn it. She knew she should be content. Yet she could not – at least not fully.

Well. At least she could get up and begin the new day for real.

Like almost every morning, Mary Sue stood up at the mirror beside the bed, and looked at her reflection, sizing herself up.

Was there already some sign of imperfection? Was she getting old?

But no. Not at least today. Her shining light brown hair still cascaded down perfectly (even directly after getting out of the bed) under the influence of the gravity, whose acceleration was still the perfect 9 m/s^2 .

9 m/s^2 - that was intentional. Not 9.81 m/s^2 as was the average on Earth.

Mary Sue did not live on Earth. She lived in the Tropeverse, and here, to allow all movement to be slightly more fluid and epic and cinematic, acceleration due to gravity was 9 m/s^2 instead.

Tropeverse was the realm where tropes, or the building blocks of stories lived. And Mary Sue was one of them. For the lack of a better description, she was practically perfection personified.

She noted that there were yet no wrinkles on her face. The radiant blue of her eyes was deep, yet luminous at the same time. There was no excess anywhere on her form. Just measured perfection.

And that was both a blessing and the curse. How long would she be able to maintain that perfection? Or was it even possible for her to age, or get fat?

To be honest, Mary was not sure. For as long as she remembered, she had been like this.

Mary decided to get dressed at last. The bright white nightgown was replaced by functional, yet stylish garments. Today she settled for a simple grey. Nothing too flashy.

Equally fitting for both visiting town, or scavenging for supplies in some godforsaken place.

Sometimes, Mary meditated deeply – too deeply – on the very concept of perfection. Almost everyone she met seemed to deeply adore her. But at times it felt almost – disturbing? Because, did it mean they were simply programmed to respond to her in that manner, instead of it being genuine?

Mary thought, more so than ever, that she lacked a proper purpose. Like something in her dream, to penetrate a deep mystery, to overcome a great threat that was looming in the world, and come out as the ultimate victor.

But no. It seemed that life had no such grand things in store for her. Just the mundane, dulled repetition that went on from one day to the next.

Mary made herself breakfast.

It was not exactly perfection. She almost burned the porridge on the stove.

But she knew that in a roundabout way, that could be another degree of perfection. To be clumsy in an adorable way. Like almost tripping on something, or messing up something, and then someone else could show their support in a token-like manner, which she of course did not actually need.

Shit. If she thought deeply enough, that felt horrible in the extreme. To always be part of some twisted charade. But this was a rare moment of lucidity, that evaporated just like her dream.

She ate the porridge. It was good – no – perfect enough. Everything felt like normal again. Mary decided to head out of her small cottage, which was situated on the edge of the town called Utopia, to enjoy the warm day, buy something, and perhaps meet some of her friends.

2.

On the way to the market through the town square, Mary sighted her friend. The faux action girl, Kayla.

Kayla was a much more edgier personality than Mary, her hair a raven black, and she often got entangled in various dangerous plots and adventures. She would usually be far over her head, and then be rescued by someone more capable, dangerous and mysterious. A life of constant intrigue.

But now Mary could tell, already from a distance away, that Kayla was unusually agitated. Usually she would recount her adventures in a manner of cynical detachment, but now that seemed unlikely.

“Can you imagine?” Kayla began breathlessly. “I – I was chasing this arms dealer through the city rooftops, in this dress and high heels like usual. He was planning to sell nuclear warheads and bio-weapons to the highest bidder, but I’d managed to feed him a tracking device, so I knew exactly where he’d meet his clients. And I knew I was going way over my head. But I knew this guy – Roy – or the ace as I know him – was tracking the dealer too. And so I arrived at the place of the deal just as this piece of shit was

opening the case with the warheads. And you know how it sounds like when a dozen weapons are cocked in unison?”

Mary shook her head impassively. This was a direction in which Kayla’s stories often went. Some of it had to be exaggeration.

“And then it was – a ton of flying bullets and flashing blades in every direction. And it was just by luck that I wasn’t actually sliced or blown to pieces. I was firing my dual pistols and swinging my dual blades, but it wasn’t to much effect. Like always.”

At this point Mary could sense defeat in Kayla’s voice. That was the thankless part a faux action girl kind of always had to play, but it was nothing new.

“I was totally cornered on the rooftop – but then Roy showed up in a Harrier fighter jet. Hovering above the rooftop, he spun up the cannons. And it was like in slow motion – though in reality it was lightning fast – all of the clients were shredded by the tracer gunfire. And the dealer himself – Roy shot the weapons from his hands, one after another, until he was defenseless, and I had my blade at his throat. It was a total victory. The law enforcement showed up, but thanks to Roy’s security clearance and the favors he was owed, the fact that I was kind of operating outside of the law, and shouldn’t even have been there, was ignored –”

Mary did not understand the feeling of defeat. It sounded like a typical successful mission for Kayla. Evading the law, too. What was the problem exactly?

“And finally me and Roy were alone. Just the two of us. And I’d have expected something. Like the camera orbiting around us as we’d share a victory kiss – but instead –”

Kayla paused, her face in a hard frown.

“Instead nothing happened. Nothing at all. Roy just jumped back into his jet and blasted off, and I was left

standing on the roof, feeling stupid. That just isn't supposed to happen! I tell you, Mary, something isn't right in the world. Something has changed. I can feel it in my bones."

Mary kind of felt sorry for Kayla. If she never could be the actual heroine of her stories, at least she could have consolation in a never-ending stream of handsome guys. But if a guy like Roy was no longer interested, despite the post-action adrenaline and the fact that Kayla could certainly be considered attractive, then Mary could do nothing but to agree.

Something had changed, then?

But maybe that was good. Maybe it meant that from this point on they would have to be the real heroes of their stories, instead of always relying on a man.

Mary thought back to her own adventures. When was the last time she had even experienced something as exciting as Kayla had?

Well, there was the instance when the entire crew of a starship had fallen ill, and she had manned all the stations on her own, alternating between them at almost lightning speed, brokering peace between two (or was it three) different hostile alien races, and yet keeping the involvement of the fleet unknown, by deploying a delayed-action mind-control bomb that would erase all memories of their actions.

To be honest, that had been a clever plan and stratagem, which Mary had executed almost entirely without aid. Afterward she had met the captain of the starship, when he had recovered, but he had basically just congratulated Mary on a job well done. Mary had perhaps expected something more, but maybe it was her perfection that caused people to actually be afraid of her.

And she kind of felt sad at that. To always have that

kind of effect on others. Or maybe she just needed to meet someone who was even more perfect than her. If that was even possible.

“Kayla. I think there will be other adventures. Better than the last one. Where you’ll at last be the heroine of your own story. Maybe you’ll pilot that fighter jet the next time. Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

Mary was not even sure where those words were coming from. Like on cruise control, to always offer encouragement to her peers. But it was in her nature, and there was little she could do to change it. Maybe she did not even mean those words for real, but if others would not find out, then it would not strictly speaking matter.

3.

Kayla left behind for now, Mary reached the town square.

She tried to scan the crowd – many of them personifications of some other tropes – for signs of anything unusual. For something more to have changed.

But it was just a crowd. Everyone minding their own business. Nothing unusual in sight. Therefore she would continue to the market, just like planned. To buy some very healthy food. Fruits and vegetables mostly.

Just as she got on her way, she was startled by a guttural voice from behind. It was not exactly crying, but it seemed to be about some kind of deep anguish.

Mary turned around to see someone sitting on the stone stairs of the city hall building, in almost collapsed position.

It was certainly someone she knew. Jane, the resident damsel in distress. Despite her role, she had the uncanny ability of appearing collected in the most dire of situations. Though when things got serious, it was rare that she would get anything done by herself.

But now Jane appeared far from calm and collected. Her clothes were dirty, as was her golden blond hair that

went way past her shoulders. It was like she had been rolling in the dirt or something.

“Fuuuck,” Jane groaned. “Fuck everything already. I've had enough. And you, what you're staring at? But you're the Miss Perfection, how could you understand? You just go on rails. Like I used to. But not any more.”

It was obvious something was deeply wrong. Mary was reminded of her encounter with Kayla. When things did not work like they used to. Maybe something similar had happened that had shaken Jane even more.

Mary spoke back without any hostility or sarcasm.

“Jane? What is it? Maybe I don't, but you can be sure I'll try.”

Jane's lips curled downward in a spiteful manner. The voice grew even harsher.

“No you don't. You're just saying.”

Usually, there was no situation with people Mary could not fix. But for the first time for long, Mary was unsure how this would unfold.

In retrospect, she felt bad and ashamed of how she had joked about Jane some time ago – that as cars had an odometer, Jane would have one also, for the total distance she had been carried or otherwise transported while being incapacitated, captive, or otherwise out of action. But when she was down like that, or actually not like herself at all, it now felt terribly disrespectful.

Mary spoke in an even voice. “For as long as I've known you, you have been an inspiration. To make people do heroic things. To try their best. If you're thinking that's somehow worthless, let me tell you it's actually far from it.”

“But I'm fucking tired of it!” Jane shouted in a shrill voice, at the top of her lungs.

Mary got a quick look around to see that a crowd was

beginning to gather. She felt angry. Did they not have anything better to do? But she forced herself to calm down. The crowd was second priority, to be ignored.

She inched closer to Jane, extending her hand.

“Hey. Everyone deserves a break. Just forget your role for a while. Come on, let's go to my place. I'll make some tea and we'll get you a change of clothes.”

“Stay the fuck away from me!”

Mary tried not to let it show, but she thought Jane was too far gone. She would need some expert help.

Now Jane's expression changed to a cruel smile.

“You have no idea how I ... like the look in your eyes when I see you have no power to help me. How does it feel, Miss Perfect? And now – watch this.”

It happened almost faster than Mary could see. Like she could interpret it only after the fact. Seemingly from nowhere, Jane produced a surgical scalpel, held it between her teeth and cut both of her wrists.

Blood began to gush and spray out from the wounds at a frightening intensity, soaking Jane's clothes and her face. She seemed to be laughing in pain, reveling in what she had done.

For a few critical seconds Mary just stood transfixed. She could never have expected this. Then she spun around and shouted to the crowd.

“Don't just stand there! Call 911!”

Long ago, that had been agreed to be the number for Tropeverse's emergency services. It was what everyone would remember fastest, like by instinct.

Mary knelt down, almost like diving, trying to keep pressure on Jane's wrists. Even with fading strength, Jane kicked her violently away. Mary avoided hitting her head against the stairs only narrowly.

It seemed like Jane was very determined to die.

Amid the rising panic, Mary felt ... disappointed in herself? She had to find some way to turn this around, to save Jane's life. Maybe she would come to her senses later, if she just lived now.

Mary closed the distance again, crawling forward to stay in balance even if Jane was to lash out again, the hard stone hurting Mary's knees.

Now it appeared the blood loss was finally too great, and Jane did not put up much of a fight. Off in the distance, Mary already heard the ambulance sirens. Hang in there, Mary thought, as she applied pressure on Jane's wrists, as hard as she could.

But Jane's eyes seemed already lifeless, gazing up to the blue sky, her mouth frozen open in the cruel smile she had shown earlier.

Maybe a half minute more, and the paramedics arrived on the scene. Mary had just kept pressing down hard, unsure of what more she could do.

"She slashed her wrists with a surgeon's knife. I couldn't stop her," Mary explained with a trembling voice as the ambulance crew took over.

In almost no time they got emergency tourniquets in place, a transfusion line going in, and injected Jane with something, trying their best in turn. Mary watched all of this almost like from outside her body, and thought that in some other story, Jane would easily have survived.

But it was like she had decided her damndest to die today, and not only that, to also shock Mary in the process in the worst possible way.

As the paramedics finally gave up, put the white blanket over Jane's head and carted her inside their vehicle, Mary felt completely numb and drained. Like nothing would be the same anymore. She could not say Jane had been anywhere close to her best friend – she was not even sure

she had one – but still, this was a very harsh blow. The ambulance crew's commendation to Mary for acting fast and doing her best were like nothing to her now, useless words that were to be forgotten as soon as they were uttered.

Mary also certainly did not feel like shopping now. Not for a long time. She honestly did not know what she was going to do. Acting like a catatonic automaton, she turned away and began walking without an explicit destination.

Still like in a haze, some half hour later she realized to have ended up at her home. Well, that was just fine. To hide away from the cruel world. Mary went straight to her bedroom, shut the curtains and went to sleep with her blood-soaked clothes on.

Though she did not know whether she would get any. Well, she could just lie down catatonically. Hopefully no-one would require her for anything for a long time.

Mary was not sure if she had fallen asleep at some point. But now it seemed to be dark outside. She heard the rain hammering against the cottage roof hard. Then a light flashed through the curtains, and some seconds later an almighty rumble sounded. It was like the heavens were mourning the loss of the Jane as well.

Only now, Mary began to cry silently, as she realized she would never see her again. Never again would she inspire anyone to heroic deeds. The world felt like a lot emptier and a lot colder place.

Let it rain, Mary thought. Maybe it would just wash everything away, and tomorrow the world would be reset in some manner. Maybe even Jane would be alive again.

But deep down Mary knew that was not to happen.

It had felt so final, leading up to an inevitable conclusion. Judging from how disillusioned and not at all

like herself Jane had been, Mary thought that even if by some magic the world would reset, and they would relive the same day once more, then Jane would be behaving just the same, Mary could not help her any better this time either, and it would go down just like before.

This tragedy, and Kayla's tale not going as expected.

They possibly were connected somehow.

Somehow Tropeverse was possibly changing, and not at all in a good way. What would be the next thing to change?

But Mary was too tired and full of sorrow to think in detail for very long. As the rain hammered the roof and windows with ceaseless strength, she started drifting back to sleep. Maybe tomorrow would be a better day, though after what she had witnessed today, it seemed unlikely.

4.

Mary woke up at five, which was on the early side for her. The rain had stopped, but the light outside did not seem bright. A gray day.

It fit the sadness that persisted. One night's sleep would do little to drive it away. Mary had to practically force herself to get up. She did not remember the last time she had to do that.

Thinking that maybe smelling the morning air after the rain would lift her spirits even a bit, Mary headed outside to the porch.

The air was cool and the odor could have been pleasant, but now it mostly did little to her.

Then Mary happened to gaze down on the wood.

Lying on the boards was an odd creature about one meter long. It had to be something living. It even moved a little.

It looked like a translucent worm, with a short head, a long middle, and again a short tail. Mary observed the tail to be a little frayed. Maybe the worm had gotten into a fight with a predator. A large bird or a cat.

Where the head and middle met, was a gray steel band.

Mary knelt down next to the worm. Somehow absurdly she thought that if she could not save Jane, at least she could tend to the worm's wounds, if it was hurt somehow.

She also thought, to what degree, if any, the worm would be sentient? In Tropeverse anything was possible. It was more of a rule that almost anything living could talk. And maybe Mary had a special ability, that she could understand animals others could not.

Mary picked up the worm. It was a bit slick, perhaps a little repulsive, but it could have been worse. It did not protest as she carried it inside and put it down on the living room floor. At least here it was warmer than outside. Maybe the worm would recover faster now.

Mary waited for a while, just looking at the worm. She did not have anything better to do. The worm was not bleeding at least. Soon, it started to move a little more.

When it spoke in a hollow, unearthly voice that seemed to come from somewhere else, Mary was startled.

"Mary Sue. Thank you for bringing me inside."

It knew her name! This was truly unusual.

"Uh, you're welcome. What – or who are you?"

There was a momentary pause, as if the worm was about to tell something epic or even legendary.

"My name is Three-Act-Structure. I examine and chronicle the structures and properties of stories. No matter what, they always come down to the same basic, three-part form. Beginning, middle and end."

Mary felt intrigued all of a sudden. She even forgot about her sadness, at least a little. Maybe this was exactly what she needed. The worm might even be able to explain what had happened with Jane. Though Mary was not sure if she was ready to share the experience with anyone yet. Especially with something she had only just met.

"Like your body, which also has three parts?"

“Indeed. And the ending is the most important in every story, so that’s my head. Most of my brain is in there.”

“Your tail looks a little – damaged. Did you get into a fight? Can I do something to it? Or are you able to grow it back?”

The worm answered in sequence.

“I wish I had. No, you can’t. And unfortunately, not anymore, no.”

Mary felt suddenly bad for asking. What the worm was saying felt fatalistic. Was it already old and dying? Would she only meet dying people or beings from now on?

Almost subconsciously Mary switched to her concerned and most empathetic voice.

“What is it?”

“I’ll go straight to the point. Our world, the Tropeverse, is dying. Or destroying itself. And I – have only one story left in me now. Your story, in fact. As I analyze and chronicle it, my body will dissolve, until we reach the end.”

Mary’s mind was split between two completely opposing viewpoints.

The first was feeling wholly unprepared.

She had guessed right that Three-Act-Structure did not have long to live, and that made her even sadder. Not to even speak of her home world. Would it be up to her to try to do something, to set things right again? She honestly did not want that kind of responsibility.

The other was, that of course she would want to try, to be the heroine. To find a true purpose at last. Trying to prevent the apocalypse would very much be the ultimate quest. Up to par with the feeling in her dream yesterday morning. And as Tropeverse and its inhabitants was all she knew, of course she wanted to do her best for them.

There was also a third option, that Three-Act-Structure had something completely else on its mind.

That Mary was getting too much ahead of things. It was in her nature to do that, if it only meant she would get to shine.

But whatever it was, Mary thought there was much she needed to know. Hopefully the worm could answer.

“How did it start? This destruction?”

“It’s not important. And I don’t even know the answer. Maybe it means that all stories and their permutations have been told. That there’s nothing more for a writer to say, and one by one, the story elements will forget their purpose, or turn against it, and vanish. Like stars in the sky.”

Mary had to ponder for a few seconds, not replying immediately. Explained that way, Jane’s suicide made a lot more sense.

Three-Act-Structure followed with a question of its own. “Now I must ask, do you know your purpose?”

Mary hesitated. She did not want to embarrass herself in front of this thing. If it was a kind of a mentor or a sensei to her now.

“Um – to inspire people with my lack of – flaws? To be a positive force?”

“That’s part of it. But first and foremost, you’re something easy that novice authors can start from. To insert themselves in the story as a flawless version. Often in a work of fanfiction. Then, once they’ve written enough of that, they can graduate to creating better characters, with realistic flaws.”

This was way worse than Mary had expected.

A purpose, alright! She felt insulted and humiliated. To be the creation of bad writers, something that could be conjured without much skill or effort. Mary almost hoped that the lack of purpose would hit her right now and she would rebel in some way or even kill herself.

But as she thought more, the humiliation was replaced with – compassion, even? Every writer had to start from somewhere. And being as perfect as she was, of course Mary could accept that. It was not even the worst fate in the Tropeverse. And maybe she was even uniquely needed right now? Maybe it was her perfection that made her the best possible heroine.

“That makes sense,” Mary answered finally.

“Good.”

Of course Mary had known practically all her life that she and her friends were just story elements. Still, to think of a writer somewhere, in another existence, writing about her, made her mind spun. It was going too deep. And what would it even mean exactly, in this case? If that novice writer in that another world would manage to make the story good enough, would that somehow effect a change here in the Tropeverse, and ensure that the end would be prevented?

Wow. Simply too mind-bending. Keep it simple. It had to be something Mary had to do in this reality.

“I have a question too. If you analyze and chronicle stories, and this is the last one for you – do you know how it’s going to end?”

“No, I don’t. I only know how there must be rising tension, and the turns of the story must be well-measured and placed at proper intervals, but how it will end – there are practically endless possibilities. Of course for the sake of our world, I hope it ends well.”

“And is it my job now to try to save Tropeverse?”

“I don’t know that either. I only know that I can no longer choose another story to follow, since I happened to end up on your porch.”

“I hope to not disappoint.”

“It’s very unlikely you would manage to do that. After

all, you're basically perfection, like you well know. But of course, it doesn't mean your story will be easy. Because, as the Tropeverse continues to die, existence will become more and more bleak. Everything will become empty. Until you might no longer be able to take it."

"Could I be immune to losing my purpose?"

"I don't know that either. I expect you to fare better than many others. But even you might have your limit."

Mary closed her eyes and thought a bit. Of course, she had to imagine the good outcome in advance. That it would be a long journey full of unimaginable dangers, and she would possibly come very close to losing her will, but she would prevail. Tropeverse would be restored. Maybe even Jane could come back to life.

I'm the best candidate for this, Mary thought to herself. Maybe I can do it.

It was just that she had no idea at all from where to start. Would there be some magical item somewhere she had to find? Like a mighty sword that could cut the very fabric of reality. But finding it could be like looking for a needle in the most gigantic haystack ever.

Or would she have to go meet like God himself, and bargain with him to get the end of the world reversed? In that case, what could she possibly offer in return?

One possibility also entered her mind, that she would need to sacrifice herself somehow. Jumping into some great magnetic field that would dissolve her body, and disseminate all the goodness and perfection inside, so that Tropeverse would be rejuvenated? Then everyone would be so very grateful to her, but she would not be around to witness that.

Mary almost felt like tears at that thought.

Or what if it was a fake death, that would have everyone in tears, but then it'd turn out that she did not

need to die at all, and she would get to see the reborn Tropeverse too?

Like, wake up from some gratuitous stone slab that did not have any actual purpose, but she could then joke with the hero of the story (if there was one) of how afraid he had been of her dying, on the scale of 1 to 10?

The possibilities were endless.

And Mary thought she was ready to see how exactly it would go down.

It was perhaps just a bit on the foolish side...

But things could not exactly get worse from here. Tropeverse was dying, and doing nothing would be the worst option.

Mary also thought it was extremely fortunate that she had met this worm, Three-Act-Structure, just this morning. What if she had not gone outside to smell the air? It was almost like everything had happened for a reason. As horrible as it sounded, maybe even Jane's death. It was kind of unfair that someone else had to die just for motivation, but sometimes life was unfair. Even in Tropeverse.

So. No matter where it would take her, she would take this on.

Mary's voice did not even waver much as she spoke.

"I'll do it. I'll search for the way to stop the destruction."

Three-Act-Structure nodded its head.

"That is a worthwhile choice."

Mary was sure of one thing she had to do before starting the adventure for real. To gather any friends or allies she could find, and who just would be willing to join. The quest before her could be just impossibly hard and demoralizing alone.

They'd just need to make their own choice. Mary did not exactly want to persuade anyone, as it could get very

harsh and dangerous, as Three-Act-Structure's words had hinted at. It did not take much to imagine her companions losing their will one by one.

Of course – going with her on a potentially impossible quest, or staying behind in a dying world. Neither option was truly good.

5.

Mary had her cell phone out, and called Kayla. The phone was ringing, it had in fact rang for over a minute, but Kayla was not answering.

Mary began to get worried. What if Kayla had lost her will already, like Jane had? Or was in some other trouble?

Anxiety on her mind, she turned to Three-Act-Structure, who was by now sitting on the living room couch.

“Will you manage, if I go out to the town? I have to find someone first. Do you need to eat?”

“I manage just fine. I could eat, but strictly speaking I do not need to.”

Better that way. It was just a bit icky to think of seeing food traveling inside the worm's translucent form, and getting processed.

“Fine. You can take anything from the fridge if you want. I'll go now, and try to be back soon.”

“Good. Time is of the essence.”

That sounded too dramatic. But it made sense. Every second the destruction of Tropeverse could be advancing. That, combined with Kayla's failure to answer, did not exactly ease Mary's mind. In fact her heart was pounding

already, her breath feeling shallow and constricted. She got outside quick, hopped on her bicycle, and began the ride toward the center of the town.

Mary rode around town practically at random, at times stopping to call Kayla again. No answer, no sightings. It was a quiet, gray Saturday. Nothing out of the ordinary happening. If not for Jane's death, Three-Act-Structure could even have been feeding Mary total bullshit, the upcoming end of the world only in her imagination.

She rode deeper into the town, to the Far-East inspired district. Here the buildings were closer together and there were alleys which provided good hiding places. It would not be a stretch of imagination to think Kayla would be on another sketchy mission here.

Suddenly she heard rapid footsteps on a side street. She turned to look and saw a glimpse of several dark-clothed men, running away as what seemed as a chaotic mass, but was actually highly disciplined action.

The wail of a police siren also pierced the air, explaining why the men were running.

Mary turned toward the side street; one of the narrow alleyways connected it to the wider main street she had been following.

There was a red heap lying in the middle of the alley.

Mary's heart jumped.

Kayla often wore a red dress to fit the nature of her chaotic adventures.

Mary closed the distance and braked to a halt. It was indeed Kayla, lying down and looking badly beaten up. The dress was torn now, and bruises covered her face. A black eye was forming.

But she appeared to be alive. As Mary knelt down next to her, she groaned with a pained but intelligible voice.

“Those shitheads. Low-level Yakuza enforcers. They no longer fight fair, but jumped me, at least four at once.”

Yakuza. That sounded serious. What had Kayla even been doing?

“I was tracking another of those couriers. He had cylinders containing some – nasty engineered virus the Yakuza should not lay their hands on. But – shit happens. You can’t win every day. Yeah. And now I also remember what it’s called. Conservation of ninjutsu. That’s no longer working like it used to.”

“Are you badly hurt?” Mary asked.

She thought she should have been more concerned for her friend, but Kayla had actually produced evidence of one more trope refusing to work. So the destruction was advancing yet again. That was both fascinating and terrifying.

“Well, I must look like shit – but I think I’ll live. I guess I was lucky they didn’t have guns.”

Mary considered. If Kayla had just been beaten up, it did not exactly feel right to try to recruit her right away. Yet the clock was ticking. Mary had forgotten how hard it was to be the heroine. Choices everywhere. Having to choose between ruthless efficiency, and being human.

If she was perfect, she would have to live up to both ideals at once. Therefore, being herself was actually the hardest task of all, though it might seem easy.

“Hey. I have a theory. Or actually I met a – thing that explained it to me. These things no longer working like they used to, it’s all connected. And it’s something quite serious. I could take you home and patch you up, and we could discuss it.”

“You’re not very good hiding your intentions. I think you want me to tag along for some – adventure? And it’s OK. I think I’d be up for it. Anywhere to get away from these

couriers, Yakuza and things that no longer work or make sense.”

Mary extended her hand and got Kayla up from the alley. She stood up somewhat uncoordinated, almost falling against Mary.

“Take it easy. I only have a bicycle, so you have to ride in the back. Think you can handle that?”

“Yeah. Think so.”

Kayla climbed behind Mary and grabbed her sides, and then they were speeding away on the bicycle. Mary looked below and saw the tires were on the flat side for this kind of load, but hopefully they would manage until the end of the ride.

“Imagine, the cops busting you for transporting an adult passenger unlawfully, instead of the Yakuza,” Kayla laughed.

Mary took this as a good sign, that she still had her sense of humor.

Mary pedaled furiously, and soon they were out of the district, about to cross the town square next. Traffic on the square was still minimal, as the lazy Saturday went on. But then, Mary was alerted by an unusual sound from below.

It was a deep rumble, gaining intensity.

By luck she was looking at her left, and saw a crack appear in the stones of the town square. Just a tiny hairline at first.

But then it started to spread wider, and the ground actually began shaking, until Mary had to hold on to the handles firmly to keep her grip.

“Hold on! An earthquake!” Mary shouted to Kayla, and accelerated hard, summoning all her strength. There were screams of panic as the few people on the square began running to safety chaotically.

Another crack appeared to the right, widening quickly, and Mary swerved hard left. She took a look behind and saw a large hole had opened up in the middle of the square, more cracks spreading from it in all directions.

The town of Utopia was burying itself to the ground!

Mary thought of Three-Act-Structure back at her cottage, and her heart raced like never before. If they did not get there quickly enough, she would lose her mentor, possibly the only thing that could help her for real on this quest.

Another gash was opening right in front of them.

“We can’t cross that!” Kayla shouted.

“Not on the bike, no!” Mary shouted back. “Have to dismount!”

They stopped right in front of the gash, and without missing a step or thinking much ahead, Mary threw the bicycle to its far side.

“Then we jump!”

Mary thought briefly of also throwing Kayla past the gash, but it might end up badly. At least she would be hurt more upon landing.

Therefore, they both jumped. Kayla cleared the gash with only a few centimeters to spare, but all that counted was that they were both safely across.

Then they were speeding further away again.

Still chased by the cracks and gashes, but they were slowly being left behind for now. Maybe the cottage was still safe for the time being.

Only now Mary thought of the townspeople. Some certainly had to have fallen below as the quake hit. And a true heroine would have tried to save them all. Thinking of that, Mary certainly felt shitty.

Another impossible choice.

But Mary rationalized that the quicker they would be

back on their quest, the quicker all this destruction would come to an end, and the total casualties would be lower, even if they were leaving people behind now.

6.

Totally out of breath, Mary braked to an abrupt halt in front of her home, so hard that Kayla was slammed against her back.

The cottage was still intact. The earthquake had not extended here.

“Come in,” Mary said. “Things got a bit hurried than I imagined, but we can still pack some clothes for you.”

Kayla followed Mary in a bit warily. Mary went immediately for the living room, to verify Three-Act-Structure was still there.

It was.

“I heard the rumble,” it said. “Goodbye Utopia. That appears in many stories, destruction of your home for motivation. I just hope you have transportation –”

“I was going to ask just that – transportation,” Kayla echoed.

Mary felt suddenly very stupid. She only had her bicycle. On her adventures it was typical for her to pilot some vehicle she had never used before, and do it with absolute skill, but it had never occurred to her to buy a car of her own, even some tiny dirt-cheap hatchback.

“Where exactly are we going? I could call Roy -”

The ace with his Harrier jump jet, Mary remembered. She also knew what she was going to answer, and it was not much better than the total lack of credible transportation.

“I don’t even know exactly. But the idea is to try to save Tropeverse! It’s practically destroying itself, as – all the tropes stop working one by one. This worm-thing, going by the name of Three-Act-Structure, has been advising me!”

Damn. Mary could just imagine how idiotic that sounded. She would not be surprised if Kayla would decide to bolt out of the door and never look back.

“All right. Well, maybe I go clean myself up a bit.”

It was not the worst answer Mary could have expected, though there was clearly some disbelief and dismissal in there.

“That’s fine. We shouldn’t be in an absolute hurry. Or at least I hope so,” Mary said back, and went to her bedroom to pick up a suitable backpack she could stuff Three-Act-Structure into. As well as the most essential supplies she’d need. Like a roll of tape for getting inventive.

She got as far as the bedroom, opening a cupboard where she had last seen the backpack, and another with clothes inside –

As the ground began to rumble again.

“Another earthquake!” Mary shouted. In her thoughts she said that with many curse words added for effect, but she edited them out.

She picked up the backpack hastily, as well as some clothes at random, and bolted back into the living room. The whole cottage was shaking.

Then she felt a lurch in her stomach as it began to fall to the depths, the ground below its foundation simply giving way.

7.

Mary was not sure where she imagined to be going. Except down with the cottage. Still, she tried to stay in control and come up with something. Pick up Three-Act-Structure and into the backpack. Done. Then race up the stairs to the attic...

Kayla followed her just as hurriedly.

“The house is going down!” she shouted.

“And that’s why we have to get higher!”

It was not exactly logical. There was no magic escape route on the attic.

Mary reached the attic window and pushed it open. She certainly did not like heights, but there was no time to hesitate. Gripping the wall for support, she got up to the windowsill.

The attic had a low ceiling compared to the ground floor, so she would only have to pull herself up a short distance to get on the roof. Mary imagined herself as strong and combat ready as possible. Reality might prove her wrong cruelly, but yet she could not stop now.

Just for a second, she also wondered if Kayla was in any condition to do the same stunt after her.

Enough of wondering. Mary reached up to the corrugated sheet metal roof, one foot still on the windowsill and trying to lever her other leg up.

She grunted heavily from the exertion.

For a moment she hung with only her hands on the roof's edge. There was no way in hell she was going to look down.

Instead she looked up, and saw the ground and the trees of her yard somewhere far above. The cottage had already fallen at least ten meters below. Just for the moment it appeared to stay in place.

How the hell were they going to get out of here?

That question filled Mary with anger, anger at herself for allowing the three of them to become trapped in here, and that anger finally gave her strength to pull herself up on the sloped roof.

She caught her breath for a few seconds, then shouted. "Kayla! You have to do the same after me! But I'll help you up here!"

At least Kayla did not have the backpack and a worm to weigh her down. Mary peered down to see her appear through the window frame.

"Remember that I do this shit for breakfast!" Kayla reminded as she began to climb.

Of course, Mary had forgotten that she still was the faux action girl, and might not even need any help, even after getting a beating.

A few seconds later, she had joined Mary on the roof.

"What now, is a very good question," Mary muttered.

Without much warning the ground rumbled again, and the house lurched at least one meter further down. Mary almost lost her balance.

"It's getting nasty," Kayla breathed.

If they only had a rope, they could have tried to lasso a

tree branch, or something like that. But no such thing. Mary imagined time slowing down, as adrenaline took hold and her mind raced to think of any other options. But there appeared to be precisely none.

Then Mary began to hear a whine that seemed out of place, growing louder. A – jet engine?

She looked up and saw a jet fighter hovering above the hole in the ground.

Kayla was looking up as well.

“That’s Roy! I think he followed me!”

What an unexpected turn, but certainly relieving. If he’d just manage to hover next to them without burning them to crisp with the jet engines, that is.

Kayla waved with both of her hands and the fighter began to descend, the engine whine growing intolerably loud.

Mary and Kayla backed further away on the roof as it came closer. Until finally it was roughly at their level.

The helmeted pilot leaned forward, pressing some switch, and the rear part of the cockpit canopy slid open. Mary and Kayla did not need to be told what to do. Almost as one, they climbed up on the right-side wing and hopped in.

The co-pilot seat was extremely cramped for the both of them, but it certainly beat staying in the hole. The pilot pressed another button, and the canopy slid shut. Then he pushed forward on the main thrust lever, and the jet fighter began to rise almost violently.

Mary saw the cottage drop from sight and fall to the unknown depths. She felt sad again, knowing she was never going to set foot inside it again.

Being more familiar with Roy and the fighter jet, Kayla put on the co-pilot’s helmet. She listened to what he was telling, then shouted to Mary’s face over the engine roar.

“Roy’s telling some weird shit! It’s better you hear it yourself.”

By now they were cruising above Utopia, or better put, what remained of it. There were huge cracks and craters everywhere and most of the buildings had sunken below, like Mary’s cottage.

Mary got the helmet from Kayla, and Roy began to explain from the start.

“I was ordered to rescue duty when the first earthquake hit. To guide the rescue units from the air. But the destruction was already too much. There was no sane way to prioritize. And I was sure I was going to shut down mentally. Like, going into a blue screen. Too much death, and I couldn’t do anything. That has happened before, when I lost my wingman. But somehow it didn’t happen this time. It’s as if shutting down no longer exists. So I kept circling, seeing these buildings fall one by one. The damage kept spreading, next it was the houses on the town outskirts. And then, in a hole below ground, I saw a spot of red that I thought familiar. I circled closer and I realized that instead of zero, I could save two. By the way, who are you?”

Mary shouted into the helmet microphone, potentially unnecessarily loud. She did not exactly consider her words before they were already out.

“Mary Sue! And you can make that three, as I have a companion in here. One very important worm, that is possibly going to help us save the world!”

“I think I’ve heard of you,” Roy replied.

Mary was not sure whether to take that as a compliment or not. But for the moment she was very glad that Roy’s particular weakness had stopped working, just in time. Otherwise they would still be on that express elevator to the center of Tropeverse.

“To save the world... Huh. I take it then you know, where to next?”

With the adrenaline dissipating, Mary found it hard to think clearly. Now they had transportation, but without a clear destination, it was not much use. Would they scour the Tropeverse at random, like Mary had done with the bicycle? They’d be wasting precious aviation fuel.

Mary forced her brain into action. The Tropeverse was a mixture of things both modern and old, or even ancient. If the way to save the world would be to find some magical item, it would certainly be –

“Take us to someplace old! And epic.”

Said aloud, that too felt somewhat less intelligent.

“There’s this Wild West town that is not far from here. Will that do? Only about five hundred clicks -”

Roy paused. Was that bad?

“Except that all the hovering has wasted fuel, and we might not make it exactly that far. And with Utopia gone, there’s no place to refuel. But we’ll get close.”

8.

With the fuel gauge in the deep red, and Roy not daring to risk it any further, the Harrier jet touched down next to a large wheat field. A rural road snaked next to it, with about a hundred kilometers left to the Wild West town.

They removed their helmets and climbed down to the ground. Mary finally got a good look at Roy; he had short, spiky dark hair, and what seemed to be a perpetual smirk on his face. Very fitting for an ace pilot, and he could be thought of as very dashing, even if he was already a little older than Mary had imagined.

“So you’ll just leave that there?” Mary asked.

“Without fuel, it isn’t much use to anyone. If someone strips it for parts, then so be it. It’s Utopia’s property anyway. And I’d rather fly something faster.”

“Can I take a look at the backpack?” Kayla asked. “If you had time to pack something more comfortable in. If we’re going to walk for some time now.”

Mary took Three-Act-Structure out and draped it around her shoulders, then handed the backpack to Kayla. She noted that the worm no longer had its tail segment at all. They were past the beginning now.

“Sure. Be my guest.”

Kayla went behind the fighter jet to change. Roy looked behind her with what appeared to be concern.

“She was jumped by the Yakuza. And I took her to my place, only for it to be swallowed by the earth. I kind of feel guilty. But she’s managing OK,” Mary explained.

“Yeah. Me too. I just left when we’d busted the arms dealer. I shouldn’t have done that. But it was like – nothing works anymore like you think it would. My mind just went blank.”

Mary considered. Obviously Roy had been just as dumbfounded as Kayla had been. You never knew ahead of time what would stop working. Being on a quest to save the world was hard enough, but with that on top –

Mary thought to consult the worm on her shoulders.

“Hey, Three-Act-Structure. You’ve been quiet. Could I call you something shorter?”

The hollow voice returned.

“You can call me TAS.”

“TAS it is then. Anyway, is there any way to anticipate what story elements will stop working? To avoid surprises when you’re in trouble?”

“You could think of it as an infection that spreads from one trope to the next, as time goes on. Likely there’s no logic to it. Except –”

The worm paused.

“Maybe the order is such that it will produce the greatest sense of excitement and danger.”

Mary considered again. She did not want to make everything about herself, but –

“You mean, in my story? So can I rely on, that no matter how dangerous things get, I will survive? That I always figure out how to proceed? As it’d be less exciting if the story cuts short before the end.”

There was almost derision in the worm's voice.

"No. Of course not. It's not a given that you will survive. You could have died at any moment already. That is the principle of most excitement."

Mary felt deflated. Or like she had been punched in the face. Well, that was clear then.

Kayla emerged from behind the Harrier, wearing a loose T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. As the day was still rather warm, it was perfectly adequate. The black eye looked a little worse now, as it had developed in full.

Roy turned to her.

"Listen. I'm sorry how I left you after the mission. And now –"

Kayla cut him short as she replied in a voice which managed to be both cold and anguished at the same time.

"I can't handle that now. I don't want your pity. Let's just keep things professional, OK?"

Roy was stunned into silence. To Mary it felt a bit odd, like she had no business to even be witnessing this exchange.

"Right. Let's do that," he replied at last.

And then there was nothing left to do but to begin the long walk toward the Wild West town.

An hour later, their situation regarding transportation had improved again. They were riding in the back of a farmer's flatbed truck.

After all the dangers and narrow escapes, Mary welcomed this rather leisurely pace their journey was proceeding now.

"Did you hear about Jane?" Mary asked Kayla.

"I saw the news on the town message board. Fuck – that was devastating. It was because of that I took the Yakuza mission so quickly, to get something else to think

about. There was a bystander who tried to save her -"

"That was me," Mary replied flatly.

"Oh. So you -"

"I got to hear Jane's last words. She was not at all like herself. Just hatred and spite, and as if she wanted to traumatize me as bad as possible. It was awful."

Kayla was silent for a moment.

"Do you think it will be like that for all of us? That we slash our wrists, shouting in rage, when it's our time to go?"

Mary shook her head. "I have no idea. Hope not."

She hoped that if it came down to that, she would do it in a somehow clean manner, with no-one else around. Like jumping off a cliff to nothingness.

The scary thing was that in her darker moments, Mary could easily imagine herself getting fatally fed up with her perfection. The question was whether that perfection would also shield herself from any true self-destructive impulses, until she reached the adventure's end?

She forced herself to think more in terms of logic. That was safer.

"I'm still trying to figure out what it means exactly when story elements stop working. Like, if Jane represented someone who needs saving. But yet we needed to be saved by Roy from the roof. It worked just like you'd expect. So it doesn't seem completely consistent."

"Maybe it just means that with her gone, no-one else can be the damsel completely. Like, we were also trying to save ourselves first," Kayla answered. "But if conservation of ninjutsu had worked, I likely wouldn't even be here now. I could have been swallowed by the earthquake."

Random chance – or the direction of fate? What forces were truly at play in here? Nothing could be discounted, really. Mary felt her head spinning again, if she thought

about it too much. But she certainly felt glad to have Kayla here at her side. The alternative she did not want to dwell on.

“Not long until the town now,” Roy spoke up from the opposite side of the flatbed. “But we better stay alert. If for example the sheriff no longer works.”

Good point. They could be arriving into a total lawless hellhole. Things could turn dirty fast. For a moment, Mary imagined herself as a Wild West gunslinger. She was not sure how she would manage. Non-violence was preferable, but sometimes it just would not be an option.

9.

The farmer's truck drove into the Wild West town. It was just as familiar and stereotypical as one could imagine, a wide main street with buildings on both sides. As the Saturday was turning to evening, there were even less people around than in Utopia.

"What do we owe you?" Mary asked as they disembarked.

"Nothing," the farmer said and drove away.

So, they were on their own. It was time to start exploring the town. To possibly interview the locals –

Damn. How stupid it would sound? "Excuse me, do you have ideas on how to stop Tropeverse's destruction? Do you perhaps have an abandoned mine which would contain a powerful artifact?"

They needed to do it in a much more low-key manner.

The saloon was a good place to start in any case. Only now Mary realized how hungry and thirsty she was. It looked like it would also have rooms on the second floor. They were probably going to spend some time here.

"We check out the saloon first?" Mary suggested.

"Sure," Roy answered. "As long as we stay cautious. I'd

feel a lot more confident after we get ourselves armed.”

Mary led the way. Three-Act-Structure was safely hidden inside the backpack again. Mary could easily imagine a cowboy mistaking it for a poisonous snake and shooting it.

They entered the dimly lit saloon. A mournful blues voice drifted from the jukebox off to the side. The air was thick with tobacco smoke. At a table near the center, a heavy-set man dressed in blue denim was drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. As he turned to look at the newcomers, Mary saw the star pinned on his chest.

If the sheriff was drunk with whiskey, it did not spell good.

The sheriff smiled and spoke in a low rough voice. “Welcome to Black Rock. We don’t see too many outsiders here. As you can see, we’re taking life easy in here. Let it stay that way.”

Mary considered. It was possible the sheriff was so used to drinking that he could shoot straight while being wasted. But in any case, they were not here to cause trouble. It was just that trouble would often find them. Or at least so it had happened so far.

Mary did not remember precisely the last time she had drunk alcohol. It possibly was a good way to start the investigation, to better get on the townspeople’s level.

Therefore she went to the counter and ordered a beer. The barmaid opened a bottle and gave it to her. Mary paid in cash; she had only some coins left, but it was enough. Kayla and Roy followed.

With beers in hand, the three took a table next to the sheriff. It would have been impolite or even suspicious to try to avoid him.

The beer did not exactly taste good to Mary, but its coldness felt refreshing.

The sheriff spoke.

“We used to have a lot of trouble with the Dalton gang. As well as the bikers, who ride through this town every so often. But last week, we had a meeting with all of them. And we reached an agreement. That no more shooting here, no more criminality. And I won’t arrest them for illegal guns or weed. Seems to work out fine.”

Mary was a bit dumbfounded by this.

Was it just an ordinary negotiation, people becoming wiser, or had the outlaw trope stopped working? Had the gang lost their sense of purpose? But they had not killed themselves, but seemed to be just enjoying life instead...?

What if the death of some tropes could result in some good, too? If the end (if it was even real) did not even need to be stopped? What if she was being fed bullshit?

But no.

Too much horrible things had happened. And Three-Act-Structure had not lied when it said its body was vanishing. Mary had seen it with her own eyes.

But Mary thought she certainly could drink more. After she’d finish the bottle, then she could order a proper meal. And then, possibly more drink.

Meanwhile Kayla and Roy were becoming more talkative.

“Was there ever a moment when you weren’t the ace? Were you ever green, just fumbling your way through?” Kayla asked.

Roy laughed. “You bet I’ve fumbled. And with that kind of hardware, there’s potential for some real damage. It’s best you don’t hear the most of it.”

Kayla grew agitated. “You can’t lead on like that and then refuse to tell!”

“Well. There’s one thing I suppose I can tell. In flying school there’s this thing of buzzing the tower. And that’s

strictly not permitted. Well, one time I misjudged – slightly. I didn't just buzz the tower, but – leveled it. The plane didn't fare much better. To this day I've no idea how I didn't either die or lose my wings. Well, it helped that the tower operators had just enough time to dive clear. I couldn't have lived with myself otherwise."

"Wow."

Mary could only shake her head at that kind of recklessness. It was just stupid, not attractive in the slightest. But it seemed Kayla could relate better. Meanwhile the jukebox was still playing depressive blues about life's complete unfairness.

"Hey. That singer. Don't you think it's unfit for an evening like this. And for tales like that?" Kayla asked.

"You read my mind. I could do something about it. I have an idea –"

Roy stood up and went to the jukebox, and soon the music changed.

Mary did not recognize the artist outright, but there were dual electric guitars playing a melody. It was still a little depressive, in a minor key. Mary would have preferred something in major instead.

Roy bellowed over the song's intro.

"This is to one person sitting over there, who sometimes is a bit of a – ninja."

The vocals started, and Mary was surprised to hear Roy singing along in a nasal tenor voice. It was about someone wanting to know what it was like before, in times of ancient ninja wars, and wanting to stand by the ninja's side.

It was quite obvious he was serenading Kayla. Mary laughed a bit, particularly when Roy appeared to be twirling his imaginary microphone stand around.

Kayla's reaction was not easy to read. It was as if she

was ready to burst into tears. Or then not. When the song ended, the whole bar clapped, the rather intoxicated sheriff included.

Roy returned to the table.

“That was – something,” Kayla said. “Should I interpret what you sang as –”

“Every word,” Roy replied.

“But I’m not an ancient ninja. I’m just someone who can’t really handle – situations.”

“You’re close enough. And that’s not true.”

Mary thought she was getting some kind of sugar overdose from that exchange. She drank more of her beer.

Roy was not even finished.

“Listen, I don’t pity you. But if you’ve been hurt, I want to –”

“Shut up already. I get it. Let’s go dancing or something.”

The jukebox began to play a slow song. Mary finished her beer while she watched Roy and Kayla hold on to each other, rotating slowly around.

For some reason Mary could not stand those two just now. She slammed the bottle to the table with so much force she was afraid it would break.

She stood up and prepared to exit.

“Hey! Mary! Where are you going?” Kayla shouted after her.

But Mary did not even answer. By now she was already past the saloon doors. She was already imagining things ahead, perhaps too far ahead.

If Kayla and Roy could find happiness in the middle of nowhere, while the Tropeverse was eating itself, of course they had the right to that. In fact, in that case Mary would not want to bother them at all, or bring more danger to them, but would just forge her own path.

And she would still have Three-Act-Structure for guidance.

She was not jealous to Kayla. After all Roy was not at all her type in his recklessness, but still Mary could not help comparing herself to the faux action girl. Like so many times in her life, it came down to the curse of perfection, which Kayla did not suffer.

She had her flaws, while Mary did not. She would need someone like Roy to fill the hole in her heart, while Mary had begun to believe, that she had no such hole to begin with. She had her quest, her own purpose, and the solution to Tropeverse's relentless demise waited somewhere, in that absolutely huge haystack.

The sun was beginning to set. Mary did not have much of an idea where she would be going. Where she would be searching next.

But that was fine.

10.

Mary headed uphill away from the town, along a narrow dirt track. Soon it would be dark for real. Mary realized how badly she was under-equipped; not even a flashlight.

What she thought she was going to find?

She thought she had seen a glint of light further ahead. Possibly a fire. But now she had not seen it again for a few minutes.

The track entered a sparse forest. The smell of pine was pleasant, almost out-of-place.

Mary thought she heard something. The rustling of bushes. A predator? Her heart jumped in her throat and she vowed to herself to stay alert. She flattened against a tree trunk, listening intently.

A low human voice spoke, followed by another.

“An intruder? Coming for the stash?”

“Stupid. You’ve alerted him now.”

Two indistinct shadows crept in the woods some twenty meters apart from her. Had to be bandits, possibly even from the Dalton gang. Was it a drug stash they were talking about? Mary was slightly amused to think they’d mistaken her for a man. Though it could mean they would

use more excessive force without hesitation.

Mary waited, staying in place and holding her breath. The two bandits were coming her way. There was still light, once they were closer they'd easily see her gray clothing against the tree. And if Mary was to switch position now, the movement would give her away even better.

Damn.

She did not think of herself as much of a fighter, but she would just need to try. Mary thought her mind became oddly clear, her senses sharpened in expectation of potentially fatal combat.

Mary waited until the men were closer. Almost close enough now for her to leap in an attack. She saw their beards and stetsons and the revolvers on their belts.

Rather old-fashioned, then.

So far they had not drawn their guns yet. It was close to the town; maybe they were honoring the agreement with the sheriff, and would use them as the last resort.

The closer bandit turned his head and for an instant, his eyes locked with Mary's.

Now was the moment.

"Yaaaa!" Mary shouted as she leaped, a shrill piercing scream, which she hoped to confuse the men, at least for one second.

She collided with the man and he lost balance mid-step, so they both went tumbling to the ground.

Only now Mary realized this had not been a wise course of action. The second bandit could easily overpower her from behind. She already imagined, with disgust, how they might use her as a plaything.

The disgust gave her strength, and she went directly for the most damaging attacks she could think of: gouging the bandit's eyes, and kicking his groin.

No sense to hold back now.

The bandit screamed in agony, but the triumph was short-lived; he recovered almost inhumanly fast and slapped Mary across the face, sending her tumbling further away, head spinning.

She clambered to her feet unsteadily. Both bandits approached her in low, combat-ready stances. The one who had not touched Mary yet produced a gleaming knife.

Mary remembered that conservation of ninjutsu had already been lost. These two would not play fair.

It was possible the end was just seconds away.

Summoning strength and creativity from somewhere she did not even understand, Mary turned around and sprinted against the tree she had been hiding against. She leaped into the air and it was almost like time slowed down.

The maneuver confused the knife-wielding bandit, and that was all Mary needed to snatch the knife away from him, twisting in mid-air. Before Mary landed, she had already slashed him across the throat. She saw the blood begin to seep from the wound (it looked black in the dark) and the bandit clutched it in sudden confusion.

But yet was not time to stop.

Yet was not the time to go soft.

She buried the knife deep in the man's stomach, and he grunted and gurgled in further agony. With heavy exertion, Mary used the handle of the knife to turn the bandit around a hundred and eighty degrees, going for his revolver in the holster. Once she had the gun, Mary let go and the man fell with a heavy thud.

Revolvers were pleasantly simple weapons; this she had learned from Kayla some months ago. In an almost continuous motion she cocked the hammer, aimed at the center mass of the other bandit still in the fight, and fired. The gunshot was thunderously loud and the recoil was

heavy; it had to be Magnum caliber. The bandit joined the other on the ground, bleeding heavily.

Both would likely be dead in minutes.

Only now Mary realized the full extent of the brutality she had displayed. But it had been in self-defense, right? Right?

Would she have time to interrogate them? Would it be of any use? To be honest, she was not interested in any stashes of drugs, guns or moonshine. Only preventing the end of Tropeverse. What would be the odds that these brutes would know anything of it?

Well, it potentially would not hurt to try. She tried to think of an angle that made even remotely sense.

“Why did you make the deal with the sheriff? It’s not a normal thing to do!” Mary shouted.

The throat-slashed bandit only gurgled some more; there were no intelligent words coming out. The other tried to get up on his knees.

“He’s in on it. He’s one of us now. And he’s going to skin you alive, bitch,” he spat.

Somehow Mary felt relieved of this. These were just ordinary, dumb crooks. In the few seconds before this answer, she had already formulated some wild theory of the bandits being fully aware of Tropeverse’s demise, possibly using some ritualistic artifacts to keep power to themselves and avoid getting destroyed...

Still, if they were telling the truth, this was not a good place to stay. Mary would need to alert Kayla and Roy. They would also be in danger as soon as the bodies would be discovered. It was likely the gunshot had been heard.

Mary hesitated just for a moment, as she remembered the possible fire further away. Was it more bandits? Or something else? Well, at least now she could arm herself with everything she could find.

They were still barely alive, as Mary began to rummage through their pockets. A second revolver and more bullets. A flashlight. A second knife she was not going to need. Some cash – it felt somewhat dirty to take it, but why not?

Mary considered the philosophical implications, that like herself, these were not really people, but story elements, so killing them was more OK. Nothing really mattered in Tropeverse, if you thought about it too deep.

Damn. That felt like a dangerously nihilistic line of thinking to settle upon. Still, in Tropeverse they were individuals, with thoughts and feelings like anyone. So, yes. It should never have come to this. Mary had failed her principles. But the actions could not be taken back anymore.

When Mary was finished, the men no longer breathed.

Still keeping alert, she began to move further into the woods, to the direction of the light.

She had not covered that much distance, maybe a hundred meters, when she found out to not have stayed alert enough.

Her left foot hit something, which she too late realized to be a loop of rope on the ground, and with a swift yanking motion, the loop tightened and she flew upward into the air, having fallen prey to a classic trap.

She hung upside down from a tree branch, completely helpless for the moment. She reached for the knife to cut herself down.

This she managed just fine, landing somewhat painfully back on the ground.

But next she noted herself to be surrounded by at least five pairs of feet, covered in leather. Five against one was something Mary knew that even with her perfection, and even with the revolvers, she was not going to come out on top.

And only now she thought of Three-Act-Structure, still there in her backpack. Had she managed to squish it under her weight as she fell?

11.

As Mary regained her senses a little more, she understood that the five were oldschool Native Americans, with feather headgear, tomahawks and bows.

She had been disarmed, as well as relieved of her backpack, and was now marched along the forest path. This went on for endless minutes, and Mary could not deny being afraid. Any attempt of escape or violence would result in an arrow through her body. Her captors were being completely silent for now.

They emerged from the forest into the wilderness, the path climbing even higher. Mary could see the town of Black Rock far below in the opposite direction.

At last, after which must have been twenty minutes or more of marching, they arrived into a village, with several tents of various sizes.

Mary was ushered in front of a campfire, to meet a man with a more impressive headgear than the rest. Had to be the village chief. She was motioned to sit down, and the chief sat as well.

At least this was some welcome rest after the marching. As well as the fight. And the other exertions of the day.

Mary knew better than to speak first. Therefore, there was a long silence. That too, did not bother her at least just now, though in some other situation it could have.

“I’m Eagle’s Talon. The chief. My scouts tell you are a killer,” the chief spoke at last.

Way to remind her of her uncharacteristic brutality again. Or maybe Mary was exactly that at heart, behind the facade of compassion and perfection?

What could she even answer to that?

“But those were bad men,” the chief went on.

Mary felt relief. The chief approved. She dared to speak at last.

“I like to say I’m more of an adventurer. But it was a bad situation that came up fast.”

The chief nodded in understanding.

“So, adventurer, what are you searching for?”

Mary thought she could speak directly with the chief. There was no need to hide the mythical aspects of her quest.

“I’ve been told that our world is destroying itself. I’m searching for the way to prevent that.”

The chief appeared thoughtful.

“And who told you that?”

“My – power animal. Can I show it to you? It’s in my backpack.”

This was potentially a mistake. Power animals were supposed to be spiritual, not actual physical beings. But Mary thought the chief would be impressed with a sentient translucent worm. If it only was still alive.

The chief nodded, and one of the scouts handed the backpack to Mary.

This was the moment of truth. Would she dig up just a squished Three-Act-Structure, its translucent internal organs splattered against the insides of the backpack?

The worm still felt like last time, a little bit slick. Mary dug it out and laid it at her feet. It appeared to be intact. Mary sighed in relief.

In the warmth of the campfire, the worm soon began to twitch a bit.

“This is Three-Act-Structure, or TAS. It guides my journey.”

“Mhm,” the chief vocalized.

The worm’s hollow voice piped in.

“Mary Sue is a great hero,” it said. “Though she also has a lot to learn.”

Mary thought the remark soured her mood a little. On second thoughts, the worm was exactly right. If she had just circled away from the bandits, she could still have met the Native Americans, but without unnecessary death.

“Learning is what you do over time. But what you spoke of, concerns us right now. The world destroying itself. That is serious. I have consulted the spirits. As has White Hawk, the medicine man. We have seen what hints to the same. Yet we have not told many in the tribe, to not cause unnecessary fear.”

This sounded even surprisingly modern. Like how the Tropeverse’s official government would operate.

“Humans or animals alike no longer knowing their purpose. Losing their will to live. The balance disturbed, the path forked infinitely, but most of the paths leading to nowhere,” the chief went on.

“Do you know what needs to be done?” Mary asked.

“Unfortunately, no. The visions of the young scouts have been indecisive. As well as White Hawk’s. But if you are a great hero —”

The chief paused, looking around him. The five scouts’ mouths were frowned in disapproval. Mary thought where this was possibly leading to. The chief wanted her to

undertake the vision quest as well. For a female outsider, it would be a degree of double blasphemy. But ultimately the chief's word would be law.

"You could search for the vision as well. Then you might see what needs to be done, to restore the path."

Some scouts vocalized their disapproval as almost angry mutters. Still no-one wanted to protest the chief outright.

"I will summon White Hawk. He will guide. Seeing you already have your power animal, and as the need is dire, you may begin at the end. It requires fortitude."

"I'm tired. Could it wait for the morning?" Mary asked.

"Being tired, your spirit is less present in the material world, and more present in the spiritual. But let us eat first."

Mary had forgotten how hungry she actually was, having just drank the beer before storming out of the saloon. So this was something extremely welcome.

They were brought soup.

After they had finished eating, the chief stood up, and went inside a tent some distance away. A minute or a two passed. Mary thought she was growing even more tired, with her stomach full. So would that be even better then, for getting a glimpse of the spirit realm?

Finally, the chief emerged back outside was joined by an older, almost haggard-looking man. White Hawk. Mary was not sure what the traditions were supposed to be, so she simply bowed her head to pay respect.

"Mary – Sue. Follow me," the medicine man said.

Mary stood up, almost tripping over the campfire. Thankfully she was able to correct at the last second. White Hawk led her to the edge of the village, where stood a different-looking, low dome-shaped hut, covered with animal skins.

"This is where we sweat. And if luck is with you, you will

travel with the eye of your mind, and see what needs to be done. Wait first as I prepare the fire.”

12.

Mary sat in the darkness of the hut, with rocks in the middle heated by a fire. She understood the smoke was being ventilated only partially, and part of the otherworldly effect of the ceremony was inhaling it. She hoped she would not actually die of it, or suffer other serious harmful effects.

White Hawk was chanting a low, repeating melody. It felt soothing, like it was reaching to her soul and even healing it, but Mary knew better than to attempt to join it. Therefore she only waited for the effect to take hold.

Slowly Mary felt like she was drifting to some another world that was not really here.

She was descending into a black fog. The sense of falling and vertigo was intense, like she was going to vomit. She fought the urge to the maximum, as throwing up would no doubt be a sign of maximum amateur disrespect. Thankfully the ill feeling passed finally, as Mary sank even deeper.

Then there was a clap of thunder and a flash of light, and Mary was suddenly transported elsewhere.

She was running down a stone corridor. Something told

her of danger. She noted to be armed with a bow, which she had never used in her life.

From the left, she heard a rush of air. By pure reflex, she dived forward and to the right, as a circular blade came out from a hole in the wall.

She almost lost balance, then corrected, and ran further into the corridor.

But the next blade took her by surprise. It came from the floor, and cut deep into her vital organs. Oddly, she observed a complete lack of pain, but her vision turned blood red.

Had she failed the test already? What did it even mean, dying during the vision quest?

The environment changed. The sky was gray, and a cold wind blew snow in her face as Mary was climbing some inhospitable mountain. She felt very alone, but knew the ultimate objective was near.

Somehow Mary knew she was too near to the end. It would make no sense to her, before she knew the previous steps to take.

But how could she change the scenery again?

She thought there was at least one way. To suicide in a vision – maybe it was failure, or bringing bad karma, but just for the moment she could not think of anything else. She took one last deep breath, then jumped off the mountain path to nothingness.

Wind rushed past her.

The rocky ground below approached.

Damn, it would possibly hurt –

An almighty heavy crunch overwhelmed her senses. The crunch of her own breaking bones. Her vision went black abruptly.

The blackness persisted for several seconds. Had the second death been already final? No more visions? Mary

was quite sure that no scout would dare to behave like this at the conclusion of his own vision quest.

But finally Mary saw the light returning. It was accompanied by a searing heat. Somehow Mary thought of hellfire and damnation.

Had she woken up in Hell?

But as her eyesight cleared up further, Mary understood she was in the desert, at midday. She was traveling toward a cave that contained something secret, possibly evil.

The cave would at least offer protection from the relentless sun.

Finally, by a sudden jump or even teleportation, Mary reached the cave opening, through a layer of fog.

A low, raspy, deep breath sounded from the cave, somewhat threatening. Yet Mary knew he needed to venture further.

The cave was momentarily illuminated by a jet of flame. And Mary was quite sure of what she would find. She rounded a corner and they became visible. Dark red, scaly skin.

Dragons.

Mary's first thought was of boundless wisdom. If there was a creature that possessed enough wisdom to tell how to prevent Tropeverse's destruction, a dragon would be it.

Now she knew where she had to aim for.

Too bad she did not recognize the desert or the cave outright. She still had to find them again in the physical world.

Mary's vision began to fade into black. The dragons' slow raspy breathing was left behind.

Then she woke up to reality with a lurch, gasping for air. White Hawk was still chanting. Seeing Mary return to consciousness, he stopped.

“What did you see?” the medicine man asked slowly.

“Dragons,” Mary breathed. “They might be the key.”

“Mhm,” the medicine man said, nodding.

Mary could not read whether it was approval or disapproval. The right or wrong answer. Well, it did not matter. As long as Mary knew her own goal.

Finally the sweat ritual was at its end. Mary emerged outside to the fresh air. Her head felt heavy. No doubt she had inhaled some smoke. Now she certainly needed to sleep. She only hoped that she would not forget about the dragons, or what the desert and cave had vaguely looked like.

13.

Mary woke up as the sun shone brightly in from the hole in the tent's ceiling. She observed to have a minor lingering headache from the ritual. Her muscles felt a little sore. But mentally, she felt refreshed, as if last day's adventures and violence had never happened.

If the first day of her quest had been like that, what would the second day hold in store? Mary was almost scared of the thought.

She knew she needed to remember something. From the ritual.

Damn! Had she forgotten already? Then the ritual would have been wasted. She forced herself to calm down. To not try to force things. She would remember in time.

What was it... Some animals?

And then it all came back to her, like another flash of lightning. Desert. Cave. Dragons.

She needed to find dragons. All right, then.

Mary emerged from the tent, to be greeted by Eagle's Talon again.

"You know what you need to do now?" he asked.

“Yes.”

To find dragons. She did not want to say that aloud.

Whether that would succeed, was very hypothetical. A long shot if there ever was one. But the tribe had certainly helped her. She wanted to thank them in some manner.

“What do I owe you, by the way?” Mary asked.

“That you give your best, to make your vision come true. Nothing else.”

“Thank you,” Mary said and bowed her head again.

Finally she was given her weapons back, and escorted out of the village. Suddenly Mary felt kind of alone now, or even lost. Now she would need to make good of her promise to the chief, but they would not help her on the way past this point.

Rather, she needed to find Kayla and Roy again. She would certainly need their help. Damn! Mary had almost forgotten how they could be in trouble, even fatally. Was the sheriff really in cooperation with the bandits? Was the whole town crooked? Was that the secret to their “peaceful” living?

Mary just needed to get back to town in double time.

In bright sunlight, the forest path looked much less dangerous. There was no way for a bandit to surprise her now. Still, Mary kept scanning the ground, to make sure she would not step into any more traps, possibly laid by the crooks instead.

Mary reached the final downhill stretch, leading back to the town. It was Sunday, and the town should be even more quiet now.

Unless there was trouble brewing already.

From in between the buildings, Mary thought she saw several people gathered. That looked unusual. Mary accelerated her steps. A crowd, indeed.

A little bit closer, and Mary saw a wooden structure that had been erected in the middle of the street.

Damn. A gallows. They were going to hang someone.

Mary thought of the worst possible scenarios. That meant either Roy or Kayla. And unlike her, they were not even guilty of anything, except awkward slow dancing.

Mary was coming up from behind of the saloon building. She rounded the corner, and bumped into someone, almost falling to the ground.

It was Kayla. Right now she appeared very agitated.

“Where were you? It’s the sheriff! He’s going to hang Roy. He knows Roy’s innocent, but is going to do it anyway. They came for us in the morning. I managed to get away, but Roy stayed behind to buy time.”

Mary felt an instant wave of cold fear, but forced it to the background. The fight with the bandits and the ritual had strengthened her mind, and what she was about to say sounded like a perfectly normal thing. Just another day’s work.

“We’ll save him. Of course. It’s about the bandits, right? They found the bodies? I killed them. I have their guns now. Here, you take the other. It’s just like you said, they’re very easy to use.”

Mary handed the second revolver with its holster to Kayla.

“It’s loaded. Six shots, and I have more.”

“Six should be enough. We’ll cut the rope, right?”

Mary was not sure if she shared Kayla’s enthusiasm in that respect. It sounded like one hell of a trick shot. Would there be another way? Like attacking the sheriff’s men as they were bringing Roy to the gallows? But maybe interrupting the hanging itself was still the best way to surprise them all, followed by a quick escape. Otherwise they could have a very nasty fight on their hands.

“We should have something to escape with. If they’re all waiting for the hanging, we might be able to steal a car,” Mary said.

“Right.”

They moved low behind the buildings, searching for anything suitable. Something old preferably.

“You know how to hot-wire a car?” Mary asked.

“I take that as an insult,” Kayla shot back.

“One with an immobilizer too?”

“I’d need tools for that. Let’s keep it oldschool.”

Behind two of the buildings, there was an old, rusty station wagon in faded green. Kayla dug into her purse and took out a wooden wedge and a metal rod.

She slid the wedge through the top side the driver’s door, until it was slightly ajar, then pushed the metal rod through to pop open the oldschool locking button.

After just a few seconds, the door was open.

“OK. Now I just need to deal with the ignition. Take a look at how it’s going, will you?”

As Mary crept forward to get a good look at the main street, she thought Kayla sounded suddenly very professional, despite the life of her very new love at the stake.

Even from the distance, Mary could see the heavy-built sheriff in the front. She also saw Roy being brought out by two other burly men, and get marched up the steps to the gallows pole.

“They just brought out Roy! Don’t take too much time,” Mary hissed.

Kayla was crouched below the steering wheel.

“I’m done – now! Or think I am. The power’s coming on, but I don’t dare to start the engine yet!”

That was not exactly encouraging. But they had to live with it. Now they just needed to stop the hanging.

Trying to not raise suspicion, Mary and Kayla pushed themselves through the crowd. One of the burly men put a black hood over his head to act as the executioner.

The sheriff spoke, or more like shouted, in a voice that was much harsher than what Mary had last heard.

“Citizens! We’ve gathered to execute this criminal, who has been found guilty of two murders in the first degree. Murdering two of us! And the only sentence that the law allows in this case, is death!”

There was an indistinct shout of approval (for the punishment) and disapproval (for the perpetrator) from the crowd. There was no doubt the people of Black Rock were taking this very seriously. If Mary and Kayla did not intervene, Roy was sure to lose his life.

Mary was right in the middle of the crowd. She thought it was close enough to make the shot. There would be a slight delay from reaction time, a slight window of opportunity before the crowd would be on to them, but it very much hinged on Roy understanding that he had to make a run for it.

“Can you signal Roy?” Mary asked Kayla.

Immediately she understood her request was stupid. Roy was blindfolded. The only way would be to shout to him, and that would give away too much.

Therefore everything pretty much hinged on improvisation.

“Forget it. I’ll take the shot. Or we both can. Better chance of success.”

Kayla nodded, her gaze had become hard. It looked she was perfectly determined to do whatever necessary to save Roy. That was admirable.

And of course, Mary would do likewise, to ensure the safety of those two. Only somewhere in the corner of her mind she remembered, that they had dragons to catch.

But that was far in the future. Only this mattered now.

Concealed in the crowd, Mary went for the revolver. She saw Kayla to do the same.

The executioner put the noose around Roy's neck, tightening it. Mary saw the lever off to the side, and the executioner began to turn. Mary thought the sheriff would still want to say something pompous –

Or perhaps not. They could not take the chance.

For a split second, Mary thought of the worst way to blow this. To shoot Roy in the face instead. So aim high instead. She glanced at Kayla, and saw she had the gun at hand too.

"On three," Mary whispered.

No-one around them suspected anything, so far.

"One."

Again, time appeared to slow down. Or even to stretch into infinite slowness. Mary cocked the hammer.

"Two."

Slowing down even further. Mary could not bring the revolver up and align the sights early, as she would draw attention. This made the shot much harder.

"Three."

Gun up. The front and rear sight came together, forming the picture. The rope in the middle, which seemed very narrow from this distance.

Mary drew back the trigger, and the gun barked.

Next to her, Kayla fired too.

Almost as one, the crowd turned to look at them. The sheriff opened his mouth to shout. Mary squinted her eyes to look at the rope.

She thought it had been cut.

Success!

But they still needed to get away. Mary thought the best course of action was still to rush forward, onto the

gallows. To not count on Roy understanding the situation on his own. And besides, the crowd could converge on them fast, performing a citizen's arrest by overwhelming numbers.

Mary broke into a run, and Kayla did not need to be told to follow. They both had guns up.

"That's the accomplice!" the sheriff shouted. "Nail them!"

The sheriff was also going for his own gun. Lead poisoning in the immediate near future was very likely. Mary fired in his general direction, then jumped and made it up on the platform, followed by Kayla just a few seconds behind.

In horror, Mary made a realization.

The rope was still tight, just a bit frayed. The executioner was just about to pull the hatch lever.

"Kayla, grab him! The rope -" Mary shouted.

There came a wooden shriek as the gallows' mechanism came to life, and Roy would have fallen through if it was not for Kayla holding on to him with all her strength. Mary got the bandit's knife in her hand and leaped up, slashing at the rope. The first try was not enough, but the second was. The rope was severed now, and Roy and Kayla both fell through the hole.

A heavy gunshot sounded, and Mary felt the bullet whistle close to her ear. Without further hesitation, she also dropped down through the hatch.

Just for the moment, they all were safe. But they would not be for long.

"You OK? You alive?" Kayla asked Roy.

Roy gave a somewhat weak thumbs-up, which was understandable after nearly getting hanged. There was no time to remove the noose from his neck; they would just have to make a run for it.

Circling from underneath the platform, the three ran in a low crouch, Mary in the lead. It was maybe forty meters to the car. They reached behind the row of buildings, everyone's legs pumping for maximum speed.

Though danger was not over, it was rare for Mary to feel this much alive. They had made the rescue, and no one even had to die. Now to just leave this dusty town behind forever, and continue the quest.

The dragons waited, wherever they were.

It was then another heavy gunshot rang from a distance away. Mary saw Roy jerk abruptly and fall to his knees.

14.

It was cruel how everything could go south in an instant. So much for feeling alive. Still, instinct took over, and Mary did not want to get shot next, so she dived to the side, while trying to also see who had fired.

The wide shape of the sheriff emerged from behind a corner. Against the sun he was hard to see in detail, but Mary could imagine him grinning with sadism. The revolver he held had an extra-long barrel.

She knew which kind of response this demanded. This time she would not feel sorry in any way, except for Roy.

But before she could take aim, Kayla was already firing, in a wide stance that exuded absolute hatred. The look on her face was so grim that Mary thought it would remain forever burned in her mind.

Kayla emptied the revolver, and as far as Mary could tell each shot was a hit. The sheriff staggered with each hit, until he fell like a sack.

Then Kayla collapsed on her knees as well, next to Roy's prone figure, and took his head in her arms. Mary could see the red spreading from the wide exit wound in his chest. Shot through the heart, Mary guessed.

Roy spoke, each word taking much effort.

“Kayla – dear – you’ll have to go on. I’m now – the wingman you lose. I know it will hurt, but I also promise it’ll get easier. Just finish whatever you’re going to do with Mary. Kick – the world’s ass – back into gear.”

Then he spoke no more, going unresponsive.

It looked like Kayla would unleash a prolonged scream, gazing up to the heavens, but there was no sound. She just stayed in place, her mouth open and trembling.

But that did not matter. Mary understood the danger was far from over. She could hear the footsteps and angry sounds of the approaching crowd.

She scooped Kayla up on her feet and forced her on the run toward the station wagon. Roy’s lifeless body would be left there, for the townspeople to do as they pleased, but that could not be helped.

More gunshots rang out, just as Mary and Kayla reached the old car. Apparently, they had just avoided getting hit. Mary shoved Kayla in through the driver’s door to the passenger seat, then crouched under the wheel. There were wires hanging loose, but Mary did not know what to connect.

“Kayla? How do I start this?”

For a moment Mary was afraid Kayla would be too catatonic to respond, and they’d remain sitting ducks. It was only a few seconds before she answered in a detached, almost robotic voice, but it felt much longer.

“Red and black together.”

Mary did this, and the red lights lit up on the dashboard.

“Then yellow and red.”

Mary remembered. This was the part that had not been tried yet. Well, if they failed, hopefully death would be a quick one through gunfire.

She connected the wires, and the starter motor turned. It sounded weak and pathetic. Not enough juice in the battery. But as it persisted long enough, finally the engine started.

Mary pulled the driver door shut violently and put the car in reverse. She twisted the wheel to the extreme, and the car performed a sharp turn behind the saloon building, raising a cloud of dust.

Still more gunshots came, and the rear window was shattered.

“Keep down!” Mary shouted as she put the gear in forward. Then she floored the accelerator, crouching madly in the driver’s seat. She did not really see where she was going.

The old car appeared powerful enough. Maybe they would outrun the crowd. Though Mary could imagine them having powerful all-wheel drive trucks or similar, those bastards.

As no more gunshots rang, Mary finally took a look at Kayla. She was obviously not handling this well. Who could? Mary knew she was responsible for Roy’s death. She should never have left the two just because she could not tolerate their little cute moment. Well - she had received the vision, but the price had been extremely high.

“Kayla. I’m sorry. I know I can’t make this right,” Mary said, voice barely above the engine noise.

“We tried. It’s better than nothing. And I got to –”

Kayla could not finish the sentence. And Mary felt like closing her eyes and just crying too. But she needed to keep her eyes on the road. The escape was not over yet.

As there was no immediate pursuit, Mary let her mind wander while she drove.

She thought back to how decisively Kayla had acted

when trying to save Roy, and especially when shooting the sheriff.

Was it possible that Kayla no longer was the faux action girl? But what she would be then? If she had lost her purpose or identity, would she try to kill herself at some point like Jane, especially when combined with the grief she was going through?

Mary hoped to hell it would not be the case. She would just need to keep a close watch on her. And support her as much as she could. That was the least Mary could do to make things even a tiny bit right.

Oddly, Mary also considered whether she was herself any more. She had failed to shoot the rope, so was that proof that her perfection had been lost?

But of course she had failed things also before. Small things like that. At least she was not feeling any loss of purpose yet.

Finally Mary wondered, at what point she could even tell Kayla she had seen dragons, and that they had to search for them. Talking of the quest just felt so grossly inappropriate now.

Mary drove for several hours without stopping, still occasionally paranoid that they would be chased by the Black Rock townspeople.

But there were no sightings of pursuers whatsoever.

The fields gave way to an arid desert, with odd-shaped mountains, almost looking like some threatening animals in the distance on both sides of the road.

For the most part, silence reigned inside the station wagon. Mary kept looking at the steady fall of the fuel gauge. It had been halfway when they had started the escape, now it was down to less than quarter, soon to reach the red.

Mary knew that at the next settlement, they'd need to stop and refuel.

"Where are we going?" Kayla asked finally.

"This may sound like it doesn't make any sense. But after I had killed the bandits, I was captured by some Indians. In the end, they weren't hostile – the chief wanted me to sweat with the medicine man, to receive a vision. And I saw – dragons."

Kayla was shaking her head slowly.

“Well. So little matters any more. So we might as well chase dragons.”

The defeat in her voice was evident. And it was contagious, too. How would they know where to go? Mary tried to remember what the desert had looked in the vision, where she had found the cave, but it seemed to disappear into the fog of her mind.

If saving Tropeverse truly hinged on this, they might not have hope.

But well, at least the two of them were still alive. It probably was a trope as well, when two women were on the run after killing some people. It was about some kind of reckless excitement and liberation. But Mary could not really enjoy the idea now. She could easily have taken back the last day and a half. Thinking that way, she could gladly trade not receiving the vision to Roy being alive.

They might have found some another way.

But of course, now it was just useless speculation.

The road began to climb, sloping slowly around a mountain, until on the right side there was a high drop. They also passed some decrepit shacks. Maybe some kind of community was coming up.

Mary wondered whether it would be as hostile as Black Rock had turned out to be. Or even worse? After driving through the hot midday, Mary felt herself cramped and tired already. If she would have to fight again, it might not go well.

The left side of the road finally opened up into a small community, or village, some of the houses built on the mountain side.

“Now to find gas,” Mary said.

She guided the car off the road and into the village. Mary kept her eyes peeled for anything resembling a service station or a fuel pump.

Finally she found one, higher on the mountain slope, and turned the station wagon toward it.

From up close, it looked worse than from distance. Another shack, with a single rusty pump in front of it. It looked like it had not even been used for some time.

Mary loosened the red and black wires to stop the engine, and they disembarked. Mary led the way inside the shack.

Charitably speaking, it could be said to be a store. There was a dim light bulb in the ceiling, and a tall, plump woman with her brown hair tied to a bun was manning the cash register. She wore an apron which had clear blood stains on it. So was she a butcher as well?

“Hello. Is there gas in the pump?” Mary asked.

“That’s what everyone asks. Hasn’t been for years, as the pump broke down,” the woman replied in a rough voice. “Traders come here occasionally, and you might get lucky then. You may need to wait for some days.”

“Great,” Kayla said.

“Is there a place we can stay?” Mary continued.

“Not really. But you can put your tent up anywhere where it’s not in the way of the locals. I take it you’re from far away? I don’t recommend pissing the locals off.”

“Does this place have a name?”

“Lost Hope.”

Rather fitting. Perhaps it was not a good idea to compliment the shopkeeper on the name though.

“Can we buy a tent?”

The woman disappeared into a storage room on the back wall of the shack, then reappeared some seconds later.

“You’re in luck. There’s exactly one left. But you must pay in cash.”

Mary thought it was fortunate she had taken everything

the bandits had possessed. She began to dig out the notes and coins, and laid them on the counter.

“That’s not enough,” the shopkeeper said.

Damn. It sounded like robbery. The tent had to be quite rubbish anyway.

“I’m hungry. Let’s spend those on food instead,” Kayla said.

Actually she made very much sense. Mary had eaten a very light breakfast in the Native Americans’ village, but nothing after that.

Mary collected the money and they left the shack without saying another word. They had to circle the settlement on foot for some minutes, until they found another shack that could be a restaurant, also charitably speaking.

This one had just a fireplace in the back illuminating it. There were people inside, sitting at long wooden tables, talking roughly and probably already drunk. The atmosphere felt somewhat hostile.

The owner of the place looked at them from behind the counter. He was a bald man with a disturbed, angry look in his eyes.

“What do you want?” he almost shouted.

“We’d like to eat,” Mary said simply, summoning self-assurance.

The man did not reply, but pointed to the menu written in chalk on a blackboard above the counter.

A steak with fried potatoes would cost \$10. That did not sound too bad. They’d have plenty left for buying some minor supplies afterward.

“I’ll take the steak,” Mary said. “What about you?”

“The same,” Kayla replied.

Mary ordered, and they went to a vacant end of one of the long tables and sat down.

It felt like the escape had properly ended only now. Mary thought her head was spinning. It was rough to be on a quest to save the world, particularly when disaster and death and hostility seemed to follow you everywhere you went.

“How are you doing?” Mary asked Kayla.

“Well. Nothing will bring Roy back, so that taken into account... OK I guess.”

Mary knew this was Kayla’s tougher and sarcastic side. It was as if she was holding back her emotions.

“Like, I don’t want to break down either. Because I know it doesn’t help.”

“OK,” Mary replied simply. “Remember you can always talk to me.”

“Yeah. Or to that worm. Though better we don’t show it here. The locals would probably eat it.”

If Kayla was strong enough for some degree of humor, it felt like a good sign. Mary thought that maybe the quest could take an upward turn from here. They would get their stomachs full again, the car would be good enough for sleeping through the night, and maybe some trader with fuel would even make an appearance. Though – it was unlikely they would accept a credit card. So what could they trade? The weapons and ammunition, of course. At least one of the revolvers.

Finally the owner brought their dishes.

“I’d also take a beer,” Mary said.

“I’d like tequila,” Kayla said instead.

The owner grunted in a somewhat unfriendly manner, but brought the drinks as well. Mary began to eat; the food was nothing to write home about, burned very crispy. But it just served its purpose. The beer was actually better, a raw flavor that did not remind of the civilized society at all, but something more primitive instead.

Like they were on their way to dragon territory.

Mary ate and drank slowly, and Kayla did not seem to be in a hurry either.

“Fuck. Those missions in Utopia, they feel like a lifetime ago,” Kayla said in between drinks of tequila. “But they were just play-acting, if you think about it. This is at least something real. I get to see the world at last. And what a shitty place it is. But – real.”

“Right. I too have witnessed things I wouldn’t have believed a few days ago. If it all could just have happened without all the death,” Mary replied.

“If the world is really ending, you kind of can’t avoid it.”

One of the other patrons, a young man with long black hair, turned to them. Damn! He had heard the conversation. Mary steeled herself for the worst.

“The world’s always ending. But it’s such a place of shit, that you want to accelerate it. There’s one song that describes what I feel perfectly. Give me my fucking Armageddon! That’s the way I want to go. Like, when the mushroom clouds light up the horizon. And the pressure wave rips the flesh from your bones. And then you feel or see nothing at all any more. Just – peace at last.”

The guy possibly did not have all screws left. But in the field of music – Mary knew there were eccentric personalities. Some of it was just acting too.

Thankfully he left them alone after that.

Finally Mary paid for both of them, and they stepped outside the restaurant shack. The sun was beginning to set, and looking down from the mountain side, across the distance and into the drop below, was just magnificent. The air was just pleasantly warm now.

“Fuck. I wish Roy could have seen this. Well, he probably flew into sunsets like that one, so it’s nothing new to him,” Kayla said, more emotional now.

Mary did not even know how long they had known each other. For how many of Kayla's missions as the faux action girl.

"But – I still think of how it's weird when these things stop working. Like we couldn't have that big dramatic kiss. But we could have one that was very tender instead. And when he died – I just wanted to scream No! in a really prolonged way, but nothing came out."

"If we manage to save the world, I hope all those things come back," Mary said. "If we only stop it from proceeding further, but they stay lost, then it's sort of not worth it. The world will be left so much poorer."

Kayla nodded. "Yeah."

Mary opened the backpack.

"Hey. TAS. What do you think, will the tropes come back if we succeed?"

"It depends," the hollow voice answered. "It depends on the solution you find. Will the world be reset, or only the destruction stopped? I'm not qualified to guess which one is more likely. But just for the record, I prefer the first one too. So that all stories are possible again. It may just mean that everything gets reshuffled. That you will forget who you are, and what you have experienced. As everything starts anew."

Mary thought back to the idea of sacrifice. Sacrificing your memories or self was another way how it could go down, instead of just dying. But – it would be for a good cause. Maybe in the next incarnation, or whatever, she would not be as perfect. But that would be fine too.

"And if Tropeverse would reset, would it then stay good? Or will the destruction start again sometime later?"

"I don't think that will concern you. As that would happen long after you're gone."

"Going into the deep end," Kayla remarked.

Mary smiled back at her. Yes, it certainly was.

Satisfied with the philosophical discussion for now, she shut the backpack again. It was slightly cruel to leave Three-Act-Structure in the dark, but it had said it did not require food or drink in any case. And that was better for its safety in a place like this.

“Let’s check the car,” Mary said. It was good to get back into more mundane things, to see it was still in one piece.

They walked back to the store, where the station wagon still stood undisturbed. The Lost Hope community was rather quiet at this time, and seemingly, not criminal.

“We could call it a day soon,” Mary continued. “Maybe explore this place a little.”

“Ask around of dragons.”

Mary was not sure if that was a good idea. But eventually they would have to start inquiring, if that was the next step of the quest.

Some two hours later Mary thought she had certainly had enough for the day. They had met the black-haired guy again, as he was about to go inside his tent. Mary recalled the conversation.

“Hey, you’ve ever heard of dragons?”

“Like for real? No. I’m not fucking crazy. But there are fucking good songs about them. Like taking the journey of a shaman, and riding a dragon right through the fucking gates of Hell! You know the band?”

Mary had to confess, that no, she did not. But this bore some odd similarity to her experience, the sweat ritual with White Hawk. It could be interpreted as a journey of a shaman. She had seen dragons, and if only the vision had not been interrupted, she might have also ridden them. And earlier, when she died twice in the dream, that was similar to entering the gates of Hell.

Kayla was ready to go to sleep as well, so they entered the station wagon. Kayla went to the back seat, while Mary stayed in the front. She took Three-Act-Structure out from the backpack and into the passenger foot well, then positioned the backpack as a pillow.

“Just so that I don’t accidentally squish you,” Mary said to the worm.

“Very thoughtful.”

Actually getting sleep was another matter, as Kayla snored rather heavily. Mary almost cursed aloud, turning restlessly in the driver seat.

Then she happened to look at Kayla and felt a profoundly odd sensation – like, ordinarily she could be described as beautiful, and now when she was asleep, her expression was rather innocent-looking, in theory enhancing the impression. But for some reason Mary could not stand her sight now. It was not like Mary actually imagined maggots crawling over her skin, or anything like that. It was just extremely hard to explain. So Mary decided to not look at the sleeping Kayla again, to just try to mentally blank out the snoring, and finally she fell asleep too.

In the very early morning, Mary woke up with a lurch. She listened intently. Had her subconscious sensed danger? It seemed very quiet, but that could be deceiving. Kayla only breathed lightly now, not snoring any more.

Mary felt an unexplainable, sudden urge to go outside. She exited the car and walked through the cool morning air, through the settlement that was devoid of all movement, until she reached the road and the cliff edge. At this hour the sun was only a small red glimmer on the horizon.

It was almost like sleepwalking. What am I doing? Mary thought to herself.

Was she losing her will and purpose now? Was a part of her mind urging her to throw herself into the abyss? Thankfully there was at least a low, rusty railing, so it could not happen completely by accident.

Mary listened to her thoughts intently, but could not find any traces of actual self-destructive thinking. But something must have disturbed her, right?

Then she noticed an odd glow to her left. There was something sitting on the railing. Another translucent worm, like Three-Act-Structure, just slightly different. Its form was a four-part zigzag. Or it could also be thought of as a chair lying at a forty-five degree angle. Mary had no idea what it exactly was. But it moved slightly, so it had to be a living thing just like TAS.

Then it began to speak in a low voice, very featureless, almost resembling a sine wave, which Mary remembered from science classes (in which she had excelled), where a signal generator had been hooked to an oscilloscope, or alternatively, to an audio speaker.

“I’ve – had enough. Yes. Enough! I took pride in trying to resist as long as I could. As I’m only a collection of forces, and the laws of physics should not be tampered with. But now I realize, every moment I still exist is wrong! It was bad enough to be cheaply invoked by unimaginative writers or artists. But I never could have imagined how I’d be used in some absolutely absurd ways. In commercials! That’s the absolute low point. The absolute horror! But no more. With my death I relieve the world of a great weight, and that is for the best.”

This did not seem to make any sense to Mary.

“Who or what are you exactly? That sounds awfully final. There always is another way. There has to be. Please, talk to me!”

The reply was as harsh as the sine-wave voice allowed.

“No more talk.”

The worm began to gather momentum for the jump. Mary lunged forward and tried to grab it with her hands, but it appeared to slip straight through.

In the next instant it jumped, falling down to the abyss.

And Mary was just left standing there. The worm had not revealed what it represented, but she certainly felt sad. Tropeverse had been robbed of one living part yet again.

Damn! What was behind all this destruction? Was there an evil overlord or demon somewhere, gloating on a throne? Or was it just a nameless, faceless disease, spreading from one trope to the next?

Mary was pretty sure she would not get any more sleep during the rest of the night.

Mary woke up to a cacophony of noises from outside the car. She must have slept some small intervals from time to time. At some point Kayla had been having a nightmare, reliving Roy's hanging and death, and Mary had woken her up.

Now Mary felt cold and stiff and zombielike. Yet there could be something important happening right outside. Maybe the traders were here. Mary realized it was Monday now, so maybe the settlement would see more action.

"Look. It's a black Cadillac," Kayla pointed at the window.

Mary turned her head wearily, and saw it just at the edge of her head's motion range. Indeed, a black, very handsome-looking convertible. What was it doing in this godforsaken place?

There was also another vehicle, a truck that looked like it had been put together from scavenged parts. Maybe that was the trader.

"We better check the scene out," Mary said, though she would rather have wanted to sleep some hours more.

Mary forced her stiff body to obey and pushed open the driver door. She felt also hungry again. Which meant having to spend more of the precious cash on food. It was not easy to be an adventurer this far outside of Tropeverse's more organized side.

Kayla exited too, and first they spotted the person who just had to be the trader. A wiry, medium-height man wearing pilot's goggles over his eyes, a patchwork-like dirty cloak over him, and just as dirty boots and trousers.

There was a group of three gathered at him already.

They all were dressed in black denim and leather, but otherwise they varied. There was one rather tall guy, long red hair, another shorter, but blond, and finally the one who was just for now talking to the trader. A bald man with a large bush of beard.

"Rockers," Kayla said.

Probably buying more gas for their fuel-hungry car. Damn. Mary hoped they wouldn't take everything the trader had.

Mary and Kayla headed closer to eavesdrop on the deal being made.

"We have some gear in the trunk. Musical instruments which we don't think we'll need," the bearded man said. "Keyboards."

The blond guy looked somehow distressed by this. Were they selling his instruments?

The trader looked puzzled, scratching his chin. Mary guessed he was used to dealing in supplies, tools, maybe weapons. Musical instruments might only have sentimental worth here.

"I have to calculate. How much gas did you exactly want?"

"Hundred gallons. It's a long trip."

"That's a lot, you understand?"

Mary usually did not want to invade in the deals of strangers, but this could be an exception. She had a weird hunch, that if these musicians were taking this long trip in the middle of nowhere, it was possibly for a more important purpose than just sightseeing, inspiration for their new record or such.

She walked toward the men.

“Excuse me, can I ask where are you going?”

The bearded man turned, just a bit dumbfounded, but not directly hostile. Sometimes it helped to be Mary Sue. Otherwise the response could have been much more unwelcoming.

“We’re doing – a bit of searching around. And excuse me if I don’t want to talk about it to strangers.”

The redhead guy turned to Mary.

“Owen has kind of lost his voice. He believes it he could get – dragons – to teach him how to restore it.”

Mary almost thought her heart would jump right out through her throat.

“Fuck you Micke! Well, now the cat’s out of the bag. Or the dragon.”

The trader looked on like a quiet angel of death, especially with the goggles on. This was obviously nothing that interested him in any way, he just wanted to know if the men could pay.

“Can we return to the deal later?” Owen the singer asked the trader, motioning for them all to move aside.

“Don’t take all day. The gas might be gone by then.”

They walked away from the trader’s truck, and the singer began to explain.

“See. I believe that only an extreme rasp is worth singing. The metal scream, as I call it. It was one week ago, we were doing a show, and right in the middle of a song I found I couldn’t do it anymore! It was just a pathetic wail.

Are you a singer too? You look like you could be one.” Owen asked Mary.

“Well, I kind of am,” Mary replied. She had never practiced for real, but many had complimented her voice.

“So. Try to sing a high note with as much aggression and rasp you can. Let’s see if it’s just me.”

Mary was not sure how it would go. She took a deep breath and prepared to unleash auditory hell.

“WAAAAAA -”

The note was high and clean. Too clean. There was no aggression to it.

“Yeah. Like I thought. You can’t do it either. It’s weird.”

Micke piped in. “Is that the same thing, when Johan stopped being funny? Like we used to laugh ourselves half-dead when he’d blow up a toilet, or piss while walking – but suddenly, it just didn’t work any more.”

Mary took another look at the blond guy, Johan. And he looked very embarrassed right now. Mary kind of felt sympathy for him already. So he was a keyboardist who blew up toilets for fun – except it was no longer fun.

“I can explain all that,” Mary said. “The world is dying. It’s emptying itself of all things that can happen, one by one.”

“You’re bullshitting us,” Micke said.

“You can’t for example, give anyone a big damn kiss. It just doesn’t work,” Kayla said.

Micke went to test this immediately on Owen, throwing arms around him and homing in at his lips like a heatseeker missile.

But it was like there was an invisible force field in between. He managed to kiss Owen in the end, but there was nothing dramatic or big in it.

“Fuck. That’s so weird,” Micke said, looking at Kayla. “But you’re right.”

Owen did not reply anything. Johan looked like he was suppressing a laugh. Maybe this was something perfectly normal to happen in their band.

“The world is dying, huh. That makes one good concept album, but isn’t exactly a pleasure to be in the middle of,” Owen said. “What’s in it for you?”

“I’m trying to stop or reverse it,” Mary said, trying to keep as calm and straight-faced as possible.

There was a collective disbelief reaction. The band was just staring at her for a moment.

“Believe it or not, we’re also trying to find dragons. They might be the key, or at least the next step. So I suggest we pool our resources. If your car can seat five.”

“It does,” Owen said.

“We have guns. Ammunition. They’re probably worth more to the trader than your instruments.”

Now Mary observed Johan’s face to light up. Another potential good deed, even. It was of course a risk, to be left without the means for violent defense, but she still felt bad about the whole Black Rock adventure. It could have played out much better, with Roy still alive. Maybe selling the revolvers would be a way to win back some karma. Not that Mary exactly believed in that. There was enough supernatural in Tropeverse’s death already.

“Sure that’s wise to give them away?” Kayla asked. “Don’t think that trouble is going to end.”

Mary remembered her spur-of-the-moment words to Roy, to take them to a place that was old and epic. The idea still rang true to her.

“It’s a gut feeling. That we’ll travel on to more ancient places. The key is there if it even exists. In places like those, guns won’t do you much good.”

“Uh – you’re not sure of what you’re doing? Just following a gut feeling?” Owen asked.

“We’re just as sure as you are,” Mary shot back.
“That’s perfectly sure then. Let’s go get that gas.”

No revolvers any more, but one hundred gallons of sweet gasoline. Mary thought it was a good deal. They had also eaten at Lost Hope before leaving the place behind for good.

Owen drove the Cadillac. It was another hot day. Mary and Kayla sat with Johan on the back seat.

“So what is your style exactly?” Mary asked.

“When we played the last show, it was more of our metal side. But this trip could result in a genre change. Like desert action rock. Diesel post-punk. Stoner metal. Or space opera rock. The possibilities are quite endless.”

Kayla lowered her voice to a whisper. “But they were ready to sell your keyboards? Isn’t that an asshole thing to do?”

Johan shrugged his shoulders. “Well. It was a desperate situation. Thanks, by the way. You smoke? Dope, I mean?”

Mary was not sure if this was headed into a good direction at all. Winners don’t use drugs, wasn’t it?

Without waiting for an answer, Johan began to roll a joint for himself. Mary tried to stall for time, pointing at Micke on the front passenger seat.

“Micke, what does he play?”

“Guitar.”

“And don’t you need a bass player and a drummer too? Why didn’t they join you on this trip?”

Johan’s face suddenly appeared thoughtful.

“We – tried to get in touch with them after the show. No answer. I actually don’t know whether they want to be in the band any more.”

Mary immediately thought of something far more sinister. That bassists and drummers had simply ceased to exist. And again, the world would be getting emptier. More meaningless. Rhythm was after all what you danced to.

Johan was finished with the joint and lit it up. The very recognizable odor reached Mary’s nostrils. She’d get some degree of dose from this passive use anyway. And how bad it could be...? As far as Mary understood, if you wanted to do some drug, cannabis would have the least harmful effects.

“Can you roll one for me too?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Mary began to think that it would also be appropriate for setting the mood to searching for (and possibly meeting) the dragons. Maybe just a bit similar to White Hawk’s ceremony.

What am I doing? The other half of her brain protested.

But it could also be a way to shed her excess perfection. Now that Mary thought of it, Johan was not even afraid of her in the same manner as the starship captain had been, for instance. Maybe this could yet develop into a profound friendship.

Kayla asked the musicians in the front. “How do you know where you’re driving? You said you’re perfectly sure.”

Owen began to explain.

“I have analyzed all the lyrics I could find of dragons. As well as books. They most likely dwell in a cave —”

Mary bolted into attention. Owen’s method did not appear very credible, yet it fit her vision.

“- and we need to find a fog. A cave surrounded by deep, endless fog. In a large valley.”

“But there’s no fog in this hot wasteland,” Kayla said.

“We just need to get far enough, so that we find the valley.”

Mary remembered a small detail from the vision quest. She appeared to jump forward in space or time when entering the dragons’ cave. So it was not necessarily a contradiction. They probably needed to leave the desert behind now as well.

Johan was ready with her joint now. He offered the lighter too, and soon Mary was taking in the smoke, cautiously at first, then with all caution abandoned.

The day had been long. And hot. And filled with smoke. Mary had honestly lost count of the joints. Now they were holed up for the night in a seemingly abandoned, two-storey house, which nevertheless had electricity.

Mary remembered Kayla being very anxious for the proper owners returning, and them not having firearms, while she had not been anxious at all. Kayla had also reprimanded her for acting so irresponsible, but Mary though she had a right to relax for once. Besides, should they return, it would be better to explain to the owners that the five of them had stopped while on a long journey, to apologize and leave, rather than having the possibility to shoot them dead.

Mary sat on the floor in a corner room, the pleasant relaxed feeling from the dope lingering. She was listening Johan play the keyboards through small monitor speakers.

He was conjuring haunting melodies, using many different sounds that alternated between harsh buzzing, ululating sine waves, choir and organ sounds, and everything in between. Mary could not be absolutely sure whether it was just the effect of dope, but the guy seemed to have serious talent. Almost like he was taking Mary on a trip through space and time. There were no exact words to describe it.

Mary felt somehow very happy that she was here to share this moment, to listen to this music being created live, that might not ever get recorded anywhere. She knew her mouth was stuck in a smile that could be interpreted as silly. But she did not care.

Mary had also observed Kayla to be apprehensive to her spending practically all the day in Johan's company. Similar to how Mary had left the saloon back then.

Why do we waste time on negativity? Mary had thought. Particularly when each day could be the last to see anyone of them ever again.

"I think – you don't need to blow up toilets or anything. Your music speaks for itself," Mary said.

Johan looked at her, somewhat self-consciously.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

He continued playing, going into a weird spiral of different minor key melodies, that increased the tension, until a major chord finally resolved it. Mary thought that this was some proper shit. It was odd for her to use the word "shit" to describe anything. But a melody like that could be about finding the key to Tropeverse's salvation at last.

"What is this song about?" she had to ask.

Johan looked embarrassed to answer. Mary thought it was just a little bit cute. He continued playing the chords in a more subdued manner, as he finally began to explain.

“It’s space opera shit. For a possible concept album. A space hero – traveling a huge distance across galaxies. And for years, he has fought this galactic tentacle-lord and its huge army, but he actually doesn’t give a shit of that. He’s really hoping – to see again this girl he had to leave behind a long ago. But she’s been corrupted by the tentacle-lord, and the question is will the hero find a way to reverse that, or will he jump over to the tentacle-lord’s side just so that he can be with her again.”

Mary had to admire that Johan got the whole story out, and it even seemed to make sense in its own way. “That’s – very traditional. But cute.”

“And there’s probably some another meta-level to it where there’s a writer somewhere angsting over the story. He drives a ten-speed bicycle – maybe.”

“Now you’re just shitting me.”

“That’s from Owen. He insists that there always has to be the meta-level.”

The chords faded out, until there was just a single-note melody, then the composition finally ended.

“Hey Johan, thanks that I got to experience this.”

“No need. I imagine most would be bored, listening only to the keyboards.”

Suddenly Mary felt like she was going to break into a long monologue. She had a nagging doubt that it was not wholly appropriate when directed to someone she had known only for one day, but the force of the monologue was too great. She had to let it out.

“I’m not bored. And thanks, that you haven’t been afraid of me. Of my – perfection, I guess. I’m not called Mary Sue for nothing. When ... I wanted to try smoking a joint, it was so that I could break out of my role. To become a little less perfect at least for a moment. Because ... Fuck, I don’t know if you even want to listen to

this. But sometimes, it's just so hard to try to relate ... I suppose – to anyone less perfect. Fuck. That must sound horrible. Like what am I even complaining about? And I struggle to do just that, to relate, but most of the time I believe I don't succeed. And then some generic shit comes out of my mouth, and I don't know if I really mean it, or if it's almost like – programmed into me, somehow. But people react like it's the most perfect thing they've ever heard. It's so odd, that sometimes I just begin to question the nature of reality. Like if they're programmed too, and it's only revolving around me. And that's of course another horrible thing to think of. But now, I'm on this quest – and I don't even know if it's real or not either. Well I suppose that's at least proven to be real, that things just stop working one by one. But whether I can actually do anything about it – I don't know. And I have this –”

Mary paused just for a second, to dig into her backpack, and she got Three-Act-Structure out. She noticed that its long middle section was almost down to half now.

“- sentient worm to assist me. Like a mentor. But I suppose it isn't going to say anything very helpful. At least it hasn't done that so far. So I'm mostly on my own. And of course that's how it's supposed to go, if I'm perfect. Then of course I'm supposed to solve anything and everything thrown at me. But I don't really know –”

Only now Mary observed that at some point Johan had put his arms around her. It felt peaceful and comforting, and when Mary looked at his face, there wasn't any trace of judgment, despite of what she had just unloaded.

“I can't really begin to imagine what it's like to be you. But it sounded like you needed a hug.”

Mary laughed. “At least that's still working.”

Johan let go at last. Then his expression turned more serious.

“Do you think that absolutely everything will stop working? If you don’t succeed, I mean. Emotions and all? That we become just walking empty shells?”

Mary’s voice was serious too as she answered.

“Possibly, yes. If we’re still alive at that point.”

“It’s scary to think of.”

“Now you at least know what’s coming. Though I’m not sure if it’s better to know, or to not know.”

Johan stared off to the distance for a moment.

“At least – I wouldn’t want to trade away meeting you. That’s a little bit cheesy, I know.”

“It’s OK. Better be cheesy now when you still can. That probably came out gloomier than I intended.”

“My life’s gloom anyway. Each day I wonder if the band even exists on the next, or if I’m in it any more.”

“If you mean Owen and Micke wouldn’t want you around, then they’d be stupid. Making a big mistake.”

Johan did not answer anything to that. Maybe the topic was too sensitive. But Mary thought she was finally beginning to feel tired for real, instead of just relaxed.

“Hey. If I fall asleep now, one thing. I very much recommend you don’t look at me. Because that too, doesn’t work like it used to -”

“No worry. I hate that song anyway.”

Mary knew that despite being well-versed on music in general, there were many artists and songs she did not know. But that there was a song of practically almost every trope – that kind of was both surprising and not surprising. What was interesting that the songs did not automatically fade away from existence, along with the tropes themselves.

Mary woke up from the floor to shouting. It sounded very urgent – she just felt groggy and confused, not understanding the urgency at all.

She recognized the voice as Owen.

“The fog is here!” he shouted. “We have to get going now!”

Johan appeared to be in a deep sleep still. His keyboard equipment was lying on the floor, just where Mary had last seen it. She went to shake him awake.

Finally he darted up in horror, mistaking Mary for possibly a dragon already.

“Calm down. It’s just me,” Mary said, trying to stay calm herself. In her current state of mind, the keyboardist’s panic was almost contagious.

“Oh... right.”

“We have to get your gear back to the car. If you don’t want to leave it behind.”

“We’re leaving now? In the middle of the night?”

“That’s what Owen insists.”

“Right – he’s the boss. Always.”

As Mary and Johan scooped up the equipment and

hailed them through the yard to the trunk of the Cadillac, Mary considered whether a shift in space and time was happening now. If the house even acted as a sort of teleport? Well, in that case it was lucky that the car was still here too.

Finally everyone was seated, and Owen pressed down on the accelerator. The car sped into the deepening fog.

“Hey. I was kind of grumpy yesterday,” Kayla said. “For nothing, really.”

“No worry,” Mary replied. “I got my fun afternoon. Connection to the universe. And to hear Johan play.”

Micke shot a look backward. “That space opera stuff? Oh man... That again.”

The guitarist did not seem to appreciate it then. Well, their loss. Mary thought that Johan might be wasting his talent in the band, if his ideas were not taken seriously despite their obvious quality.

But now it was time to leave that aside. For more important things waited. Shit, Mary thought, and her pulse quickened. They were possibly going to meet dragons for real.

“Hey. Did something happen?” Kayla whispered suddenly to Mary’s ear. Mary thought that kind of interest was beneath them now, when dragons waited. But it seemed Kayla could not help herself. Mary bumped her shoulder to shut her up.

The ride turned bumpy almost on cue. They had left the road.

Something was coming up. The fog was clearing up just a bit. It was also later in the morning, so the amount of light was greater. They saw craggy rock faces on both sides of the car, looking inhospitable. Mary thought they almost resembled dragons in themselves.

They drove on for another hour.

Finally there was just a rock wall in front of them. Rock in all directions. A dead end.

“What now?” Micke asked. “What do the lyrics say of this? Wasn’t there supposed to be a valley?”

Owen stopped the engine. He either was contemplating in silence, or gathering anger, that would boil over without warning.

Meanwhile Mary just listened. Did she hear the raspy breathing like in the vision? Very faint – but there?

No, she thought. It was just her imagination.

But then she began to hear something. The ground rumbling. Faintly at first, but growing all the time. Would it be a ground-swallowing earthquake again, like in Utopia? But this time there was no escape. No Harrier jet. Just the Cadillac.

Well – maybe they could make some crazy jumps with it. But it was rather clumsy for that. Much clumsier than just being on your feet. Or riding a bicycle.

Then everything began to happen too fast. The car was a sitting duck at the dead end. The shaking rose to a furious crescendo, hurting Mary’s ears, and the mountain faces all around them began to descend, while the car stayed in place.

Mary looked on in astonishment, as the chaos went on for a full minute.

Finally the movement stopped. What had been a dead end, was now a downward-sloping path –

Into a huge fogged valley. Due to the fog it was hard to estimate its size clearly, right now it extended as far as they could see. And it was almost too much to believe. This had to mean they were exactly in the right place.

Owen started up the engine again.

“Yes,” he answered Micke forcefully. Mary thought the

word already had a slight quality of rasp.

Could it be that this valley would actually restore – heal – tropes? Was the metal scream already coming back? Through the influence of dragons? Would Mary just ask them to heal everything, the whole Tropeverse, and it would be that simple?

Well, maybe they would see soon. Mary thought her heart was beating even faster now, her breath short.

Owen drove the car along the path, using the engine to brake to avoid them going too fast. There were rocks on the path that were certainly best dodged.

No-one spoke a word now.

The moment was just too epic, and possibly about to get even more epic.

They were now at the bottom of the valley. Mary saw the similar inhospitable rock formations, extending to the distance, with higher mountain peaks on the far sides. It looked like there also were stretches of deep jungles, as well as rivers crossing the valley. But the fog was deceptive; it looked like it would fade, but then it would always return again.

But finally it looked like there was an opening ahead. A dark cave entrance.

“That’s it. The dragons’ den,” Owen said with reverence. “Silence fills the shrine...”

“That’s the song which also goes, forever lost,” Johan remarked.

“Don’t be a killjoy,” Micke said. “If we die, we die epically. It beats growing old and no longer being able to play fast, no longer getting it up -”

“We should be cautious,” Mary said. “No use risking ourselves unnecessarily. I saw the cave in my vision. When we go in, we should hear the dragons breathing.”

Owen drove up to the opening. The Cadillac was too wide to fit inside, so they needed to go on foot.

The singer killed the engine.

Mary walked slowly, trying to peer into the shadows, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

The opening gave way to a curving, wide rock corridor, complete with stalactites and stalagmites. So far there appeared to be no danger. And Mary did not hear dragon breathing yet.

As soon as everyone had left the car, they began the trek down the corridor. Mary let Owen take the lead, since the trip was his idea, his research.

Somewhat cynically, it would be so that whatever danger lurked further in, would hit him first. Owen and Micke both had flashlights, whose powerful beams now illuminated the gray rock face.

Mary strained her mind to try to remember how it had gone down in the vision. There would be the breathing first – then a jet of flame.

“Owen. Listen closely. If you begin to hear breathing noises, slow down,” she said.

“Right.”

Perhaps a minute passed. Going slow, deeper into the corridor. Here the light from the outside reached them only barely, but thanks to the flashlights, they would manage.

Round a corner, and Mary thought she heard something.

“Rraahh...”

“Watch out everyone. Stay low,” Mary whispered.

“...hhrrraahh...”

That was clearly a rhythm of breathing.

They advanced further, with very, very slow steps. Until Owen stepped onto more uneven ground, a pile of rocks.

In the next instant a hellish rumble started and the rocks just gave way under them, becoming a deep slope.

Mary realized too late that the breathing had been a trap. To divert their attention from the true danger, the ground that would collapse underneath.

“Fuck!” she cursed aloud, along with the others screaming and cursing as they fell.

They fell perhaps a four – five meters total into something semi-soft. It hurt, but possibly not seriously. Mary was startled as she saw a skull right in front of her, lying in a layer of mud and entrails, illuminated by the flashlight that had fallen out of Owen’s hand. There was an overpowering smell of rotting, and Mary understood that these were the remains of some partially eaten – things.

In the next instant, a huge jet of flame passed over them, illuminating the cave momentarily with a yellow-red glow.

The flame went out, and it was dark again. Mary stared ahead into the blackness. She began to see vague, dark shapes. They weren't particularly large. But they weren't human, that much was clear.

Owen and Micke got the flashlights back into their hands, and aimed them at the shapes. They were red, lizard-like creatures. Dragons, alright.

But instead of majestic wings, they had just small stumps. There were two of them at the back of the cave, yellow eyes with evil vertical slits staring at the intruders.

The other of the dragons came forward.

"I see – five of you. But I remember – only one announcing their appearance beforehand."

Mary's blood went cold. This had to be about her spirit-walking to this place. While the rest had not –

She looked around the cave, looking for a way for the rest to escape. But the only way seemed to be to climb back the way they had come, along an almost vertical rock face.

"State your business here!" the dragon roared.

Owen stepped valiantly forward.

“I lost my voice. The metal scream. I wish to be freed from my affliction, for it to be-”

Ka-chunk!

With an improbably fast motion, the dragon lunged forward with its neck and ate Owen’s head in one bite. The headless body fell to its knees and then to the ground, while the neck sprayed blood like a fountain, until the heart became still at last.

In a way, Owen had been freed from his affliction. Just in an extremely cruel way. Mary felt sick, like she would throw up any moment now. The rest stood with their mouths open, just as transfixed.

They had no weapons, except –

The knife from the bandit. Mary knew she could throw it, maybe hit the dragon’s eye. But there was still the second of them, which would maul them for sure.

“Who is the next to state their business?” the dragon asked in a low raspy grunt.

No-one spoke. No-one even dared to breathe.

Maybe Mary just had to. If she was here with permission. She just tried to be respectful.

“I’m here to look for your wisdom in stopping the destruction of Tropeverse.”

The dragon sized Mary up intensely.

“I know. You were chosen by the three-part worm. And it was a good choice. Our wisdom is: you must continue seeking. We are not the way to salvation. We are just stunted shadows of ourselves now. Tropes well past their prime.”

Mary stood in silence, waiting for what the dragon still had on its mind. It felt like an anticlimax, to get all the way here, then return empty-handed. And with one of them killed.

Well, at least they had confirmed that dragons did exist.

The dragon frowned, its head slightly closer.

“We have nothing more to say. Now go! All of you! Before we decide to eat the rest of you!”

Mary took another look at the rock face behind them. There appeared to be cracks one could use as hand- and footholds.

“Come on! Up the way we came!” she shouted, pointing the way.

Mary got to the wall first, testing her theory. It appeared to be just about possible to scale the wall.

As the rest were also clambering up, Micke just shook his head in sadness, looking at Owen’s decapitated body. Finally he followed too.

Halfway up, Mary began to hear the dragons’ heavy footsteps, as they both gathered around the corpse. Mary guessed what was going to happen, and there was no way in hell she was going to take a look.

Ignoring the pain and the bleeding of her fingers, Mary finally reached the top, and began to help the others up. Kayla first, followed by Johan, and finally Micke. The guitarist's blank stare was painful to look at, it was really as if he had rather wanted to be eaten alongside with his vocalist.

But there they were, safe from the dragons for now, catching their breath.

"We can't stop, let's head out of the cave," Mary urged them on, and then it was time to run again. Micke had lost the flashlight, so it was dark, but they remembered the curves of the corridor from the initial trip.

The light began to grow stronger, until finally they reached the Cadillac just outside the cave.

Mary thought her head felt heavy. Another life lost. Though it was some consolation that Owen had been dead-set to reach the dragons himself, and had practically brought his own doom by presenting his issue ambiguously.

But what now? The lead dragon's rough voice echoed in Mary's head. "You must continue seeking."

They had come all the way here, only to be told that!

Mary took a few steps away from the cave wall, as the others were still just panting hard against the car, glad to have gotten out with their lives.

It looked like the fog was clearing.

Mary saw more of the valley now. Possibly all the way to its other end. All the jungles, the cliffs, the waterfalls, and -

There was a dark, brooding-looking mountain with a curious flat top, and even some structures high up that looked man-made.

Mary understood it was a volcano. A volcano fortress...?

That would easily be the next place for her to check out. Though getting there could easily be a day's trek. Or even two. The car would certainly get stuck at some point, so it needed to be done on foot.

But...

Mary had guessed right that as the journey went on, the places would become more old, even ancient. The danger would also grow. She had no idea what dangers waited in the jungle below. Or in the volcano.

Could she honestly ask Kayla, Johan and Micke risk their lives any more? Mary thought that if she'd just ask, Kayla would surely go. But would it be right?

Mary took a deep breath and spoke.

"Listen everyone. It's possible this is only the beginning of the quest. I don't know what dangers are still ahead. You have done so much, sacrificed so much that we'd get up to this point. And I don't think it's right that I ask anyone of you to follow any more. You still have the car, and enough gas to get you back. I think you should leave me at this point. At this point I have no clear plan to follow. I only know I have to keep going. But I think I'm able to do it better, if I don't have to worry of you as well."

Kayla opened her mouth in protest.

“But what we’d do then? The world is ending. I don’t think there’s anywhere to go, really.”

“I’m sure you can think of something. You can still do good elsewhere. If you find something or someone on the edge, help them out. Maybe you can save them, better than me. Or just enjoy life. Nothing wrong with that. You could join the band –”

Kayla looked around at Johan and Micke, who looked very demoralized now. She shook her head in disbelief.

“Remember, in the unlikely case that I succeed, the end will be stopped. Then you can go anywhere, do anything,” Mary finished. She was not sure if she believed her own words. It was hard to imagine such a future at this point.

“If this is goodbye, we better get on with it,” Johan said. “Fuck. Just that you know, I’d go with you if you asked. But I know I’m not worth shit where you’re going. I just write songs of the shit you do for real.”

Mary had to close her eyes, as she felt a little emotional. Johan, the toilet-blowing keyboardist. Who had listened to her monologue without judging her. If this had been any other kind of adventure, Mary would have been glad to have him along. But she could just as easily imagine him dead, impaled by spikes in a pit, mauled by predators, or any other way of the thousands of possible ways to die.

Yes. She rather wanted to think of him alive, maybe writing a song about her.

For some reason Mary could even think how it would go. It would use a harpsichord sound, starting in D minor, then A# major, C major and D minor again, a pedal point melody repeating.

Of course she could not say that to Johan. It would be seriously weird. “Write a song like this about me...”

But she thought of one thing she could ask.

Something practical.

“Johan. Could I have your lighter? If I need to make a fire. I’m not really up to snuff with my survival skills.”

Johan dug into his pants pocket.

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

With this taken care of, Mary thought she had everything. They could go their separate ways now. She went to hug Kayla.

“Take care of yourself,” Mary said, feeling very emotional again. Between the two of them, it had been a trip she could never have imagined. It was just the Black Rock episode she would want to rewind and rewrite.

“Likewise.”

“And Micke, I don’t know what to say. Except, sorry.”

The guitarist’s face finally lit up a bit. “Owen lived for his voice, for his stage presence. I think – the dragons couldn’t have restored it even if they wanted. So they did what they could. Took away his pain.”

Mary understood. It was just a very brutal solution.

Finally the three climbed to the Cadillac, and Johan started the engine. Kayla had the back seat all to her now. The car turned around in a clumsy manner owing to its length, then it began the journey uphill.

Mary watched it go, waving her hand. Finally it disappeared behind a turn, and Mary shifted her gaze at the valley sprawling all around her, and at the looming volcano.

Now there was nothing else to do but get on with the quest. Tropeverse’s future still rested on her shoulders.

But with only her own life to take care of (in addition to Three-Act-Structure, but it was very low-maintenance as long as she did not lose the backpack), it felt much more manageable.

22.

Mary descended downhill, and then she was in the jungle. Foreign sounds of birds and insects filled her ears. She thought all life was potentially hostile here. If she was wrong, no harm done. But better to stay alert.

There was a stifling warmth in the air. Mary knew she had not washed herself for days, but the gray outfit still felt comfortable enough. Maybe she could wash and change clothes later, if she came across a body of water devoid of hazards.

Mary stopped to drink at a narrow stream. She knew hunger also was not far away. That meant either collecting something edible (and not poisonous), or hunting for food.

Here, the canopy of trees almost blotted out the sunlight. It was still early in the day, so Mary could still make a lot of headway. It just paid to not lose sight of the direction of the volcano. Otherwise she could easily circle around aimlessly.

Mary forged her path ahead.

Until she finally came across a deep gorge. It was easily ten metres across, so jumping was out of the question. Next to her, there was a tree that was easily long enough

to cover the gap. But how the hell could she make it fall? Hacking at it with the knife could easily take years.

Mary turned to her right, heading down a slight slope. The gorge continued to both directions, so crossing it would not succeed from here either.

Suddenly, behind some bushes, she saw something that seemed out of place. She sprinted closer and found it was an ancient scroll, already faded but still legible.

There was writing in characters she did not understand. Nevertheless, she put the scroll in her backpack. Maybe she would learn the meaning of the writing later.

Mary went further down the slope, until she came across a rock face opposite the gorge, and another cave opening. Since the last cave had contained lethal dragons, she certainly felt apprehensive. But the options were not many.

As she neared the opening, a large flock of bats flew out, and Mary ducked out of the way by reflex, her heart beating rapidly from the unwelcome surprise.

But then, the cave looked clear to enter.

It was only a small cave, which opened up to a seemingly man-made, rectangular structure carved into the stone.

It looked like – a temple?

There were several candelabras on and around which looked like an altar. Mary thought of whether she was desecrating the place. If it belonged to a religion she did not understand.

But – she had a tool she could use. With Johan's lighter, she lit the first candles, then used them to light the rest. Soon the temple was illuminated by an orange glow that was rather pleasant.

Mary thought of whether she would receive another vision here. Or something – else?

She thought of the scroll she had just found. Maybe it and the temple were connected somehow. Mary took the scroll out, then knelt down on the mat in front of the altar.

It was almost like Mary was now reaching back through time to a body of ancient knowledge. She tried to relax her mind, her eyes upon the scroll.

And – she thought something began to change.

Understanding came from somewhere she did not exactly understand. The scroll described one of the disciplines known as the nine symbolic cuts, or Kuji-In.

She understood the discipline in question was KYO – direction of energy.

She meditated further on the sentences on the scroll; there was a mantra she could recite. A hand gesture was described as well. This took some practice – Mary had to extend her index fingers and bend her middle fingers over her index fingers so that the tips of her thumbs were touching the tips of her middle fingers. Then she interlaced all other fingers with their tips touching. Once she got the hang of it, it was not that hard.

Then the mantra – Mary began with a soft voice at first, as if she did not want to disturb the spirits within the temple too much.

“On isha naya in tara ya sowaka.”

She repeated the mantra, her voice gaining intensity.

Finally, it was like a flash of insight, and she understood what direction of energy meant. If she directed energy well enough, she could topple the tree and make herself a way across the gorge.

She knew also how.

To kick the tree with a flying kick, using her spiritual eye to find the best point of impact. Of course, she had not actually practiced budo arts –

But she would try.

Encouraged, she blew out the candles and left the temple, heading back uphill until she reached the tree.

“KYO,” Mary thought, still going over the mantra once again. About ten metres away, she gathered inner strength, leaning back.

Then she sprang into action, and as the tree was just ahead, she leaped and the flying kick connected.

She felt the impact, almost as a clap of thunder, and landed.

But the tree was still intact.

What had Mary imagined would happen?

She was almost ready to start belittling herself for believing in ancient scrolls and mantras, when a crack sounded from within the tree trunk.

It began to fall, breaking apart from where Mary had kicked it. Then with a heavy noise of crashing wood and leaves, it settled over the gorge.

“Wow...” Mary breathed.

She had a bridge across now. She also made a decision to never disbelieve Kuji-In again.

Once past the gorge, Mary soon reached a field hidden within the jungle. The crops were yellow and withered; there was a lingering atmosphere of doom here. Mary thought of the music Johan might have composed for this place if he were here – it would certainly be almost all minor chords, starting in H minor. A haunting flute melody would play over it.

As Mary was too deeply lost in thoughts, she at first did not notice to be alone. A vicious hiss alerted her.

From behind the long withered stalks, a pack of black panthers appeared. Mary froze in place, terror threatening to creep in.

She had to stay calm. Otherwise death could come

quick. Mary slipped the knife in her right hand, and reminded herself that the panthers would certainly not obey the lost conservation of ninjutsu either.

The panthers charged, almost as one.

And Mary felt something weird, almost as if she was not in control of her own movements. She ducked low and swept with her feet, and the first of the pack was thrown off balance. Next Mary was already leaping into the air, her knife-hand extended downward. The knife met the neck of the fallen panther, and Mary twisted savagely as blood began to pour out.

The next two came at her, both from the left and the right. From the corner of her eye, Mary noticed a severed tree branch just a meter or two away, and jumped at it.

She picked it up just as one of the panthers almost managed to scratch her. Still crouched low, she swung the heavy branch in a wide arc, managing to hit both of them. They hissed with anger and agony, but were not out of the fight yet.

Next the fight became just all-out chaos, and Mary could no longer keep track of it. The large cats managed to topple her, scratching her all over, and she responded with repeated knife slashes.

Finally she got lethal blows in, blood from the panthers' arteries soaking her. Weakly, she pushed them away and made to stand up, hurting all over.

Still one panther remained.

But noticing the fate the rest in the pack had met, it turned around and ran into the field, soon vanishing.

Mary inspected her wounds. Nothing life-threatening, but she would have to tie them up. The trouble was, she had nothing with which to do it, except her clothes. I

Somewhat cruelly, Mary thought that the problem of food had been solved for the time being. She returned to

the panther that she had killed first, and began to drag it with her.

Past the field, Mary arrived in an abandoned village. A few of the buildings were partially set in the rock face, resembling the Lost Hope settlement. There was also a pond which looked clear enough. Behind the village, the volcano loomed large – Mary had not lost direction yet.

Mary washed herself in the pond, tied her wounds to the best of her ability with the ripped gray fabric, and finally changed into fresh clothes from the backpack, khaki-colored shirt and pants that would make it easier to blending in to the jungle.

By then she was very much hungry, so it was time to start working on the panther. Mary knew it would get disgusting, and it was something she had never done before.

But finally, an hour later, having come close to vomiting a few times, she had a fire lit up, the skinned panther on a skewer, and utensils borrowed from the abandoned houses.

As Mary ate, she found the panther meat bitter and hardy, but it filled her stomach well enough.

After all that, Mary was more than tired. The light was also beginning to fade. Mary put out the fire and thought she could sleep in any of the buildings. Possibly she would be disturbing some more ancient spirits, but as long as they stayed quiet, Mary was not too bothered by the idea.

23.

Mary woke up as the sun shone from between the clouds inside the hut she was sleeping in. As far as she could remember, there had been no supernatural visitations during the night.

The wounds still hurt, though. Some blood and fluid had leaked through the ties. Well, it was to be expected. If they would not leak more from this on, then she would be well on the way to recovery.

She felt a bit like having a minor fever, but still she knew she would have to press on through the day, to penetrate the secrets of the volcano.

Before she would set on the more arduous jungle path again, she decided to search the village thoroughly, for any clues or anything useful.

The third building she visited contained a curious wall; the floor area was less than what the building suggested from the outside.

Mary knocked the wall, and indeed, it sounded hollow. She tried crashing with her weight against it, but it would not budge.

Then she thought – direction of energy. She would

repeat what she did with the tree. She took a step back, and unleashed another flying kick. The wall broke apart on impact, revealing another scroll behind.

Mary found her head spinning. Exertion would not do her good now. But would she have much of a choice? To get something else to think about, she picked up the scroll and studied it. Even that seemed to come with difficulty.

Mary could tell that the symbols were different. Unfamiliar again. Not Kuji-In. On the top of the scroll there were three vertical lines. The ones on the top and bottom were solid, while the one in the middle had been split in two.

Nevertheless, she stored the scroll in her backpack. Maybe it would make sense later.

Mary spent some more time looking for a temple, like in the cave before the gorge. But there appeared to be none. Therefore it was time to head out of the village and toward the volcano again.

After one hour of trekking, Mary thought she felt better. The fever appeared to be gone for now. Though it could yet return.

The volcano was closer now, looking imposing against the cloudy sky. There was no mistaking the direction at this point. The day was warm, but the sun could no longer be seen. Instead, soon a steady drizzle began. Thankfully it too was warm, but it was not fun to get soaked.

Mary saw the structures on the top of the volcano clearer now. It was like a fortress, indeed. Or even a palace. There was stone, and metal – possibly bronze. In the sun it would no doubt glimmer magnificently.

Who or what lived there? Or was it abandoned too?

Mary steeled herself for the possibility that whatever lived there would be hostile. Like the dragons. Or worse.

As Mary began to feel hungry again, she ate the panther meat she had taken with her.

She crossed a river, drinking from it. Ahead of her she saw at last the slope of the volcano itself. The final climb would begin, and there would likely be no more water for a while.

There appeared to be a path rising along the slope in a shallow angle. That was good, for Mary knew that as long as the wounds from the panther fight bothered her, she was in no condition for actual mountain climbing. And besides, she had no proper gear.

Mary was climbing the volcano slope now. The jungle canopy was left behind, and she got an almost dizzying view of the valley.

Her limbs were aching from the long trek, but yet was not time to stop. Mary wondered whether she would reach the top before nightfall. If she found an empty cave, she could rest before entering the volcano fortress itself. Entering it tired might prove very fatal.

An hour more, and the sky was turning dark again. Mary noted the shallow path to end. Going up was possible only through a much steeper, much more treacherous route. Mary tried, but set loose some rocks and avoided barely losing her balance and tumbling back down.

With darkness falling, she would be stuck here for the night. The drizzle still went on, and it was about to be turning into a heavier rain, so she would get thoroughly soaked.

Pondering this, Mary walked back down just for a moment. She noticed a narrow cave opening she had missed while climbing. That at least would be shelter from the rain. Maybe even a route up.

It just appeared to be completely dark inside, after she got in the first few meters and rounded the first corner. She would be proceeding by guesswork.

Mary knew she had the lighter from Johan, but its gas would not last endlessly, and the small light it gave might not be enough for forming a coherent mental map of the cave, in case there were forks.

Stay calm, Mary urged herself. Nothing was as bad as it seemed at first.

Mary advanced cautiously, using her hands to feel that the wall next to her was still solid.

This went on for minutes, and Mary began to feel claustrophobia sinking in. Like the walls were closing in and she could not breathe.

Snap out of it! she commanded. The air was fine, so far.

Suddenly she almost fell. There was a stone step ahead of her. She snapped the lighter flame on.

In its light, Mary saw that she had found another temple. The candelabras were similar, and she went to light them quickly. Again, there was the pleasant orange light all around her. The altar and the mat were just the same as the last temple.

Presumably, she could learn the second scroll here. She dug it out.

As she looked at the symbols and meditated on them, their meaning slowly became clear to her.

“LI - the clinging. An eternal source of light, even in the darkest of dark.”

This was not Kuji-In, but something different. Yet, Mary felt the wisdom and knowledge from the scroll merge into her consciousness.

But what did it mean in actuality? An eternal source of light -

Mary turned around to head out of the temple back

into the cave. The glow of the candles was left behind, yet it was no longer dark. Everywhere she went, she could see the cave walls illuminated by a purple glow. Faint, but still enough to navigate.

Mary understood that she had passed a fork without knowing. That, possibly, was the shortcut route up to the volcano fortress.

Things started suddenly looking a lot more hopeful. Mary returned to the temple and put out the candles out of respect. Then it was time to navigate the path beyond the fork.

24.

As soon as the cave passageway started going upward, Mary knew the route was right. Now she only had to choose the fork going up at each intersection.

The air became colder as she climbed. She even felt a slight wind blowing through the passage now. The upper exit had to be near.

She knew she was getting more tired by the minute, and she really should have stopped back at the temple to rest for the night, but the mystery of the volcano fortress had taken a hold on her.

Mary had to see it now.

She told herself that she only needed to see it from up close. Then, if it looked too fearsome, she would rest before actually trying to enter.

The exit came up almost as a total surprise. Mary rounded the final corner, and there, the night sky was in front of her. If she had not stopped in time, she might have stumbled and fallen a long way down.

Mary stepped outside cautiously and saw a steep path going up to the volcano's rim. From this angle, she could not see the actual fortress. It was a bit like going in blind.

Mary turned up on the path. It was manageable, as long as she avoided the loose rocks. The ache in her legs was even worse now, but she forced herself onward.

Finally she was level with the volcano's rim. She thought there could be lookouts – whether human or not, and crouched down low.

As she had learned the art of seeing in the dark, it would be wise to assume that whoever lived here, might possess the same skill. Though Mary's clothes fit well for blending in to the jungle, here the light color would stick out badly. Damn.

But she had to risk peering out if she wanted to see the actual fortress. She inched upward very slowly.

There was an ominous reddish light coming from inside the volcano. Lava? Was it actually active?

Now Mary finally saw the structures up close. A low-built palace would be an apt description. The design was certainly Far Eastern. There was a slightly higher building in the middle, which could be the ruler's (if there was one) residence, or perhaps a temple, and then lower, wide buildings to both left and right.

To get inside, Mary understood she would have to walk along the rim. Exposed.

OK, now you have seen the fortress, Mary told herself. Now back out and rest.

But as she urged herself to get on the move, she got a sudden feeling she was not alone.

"Intruder! How dare you to approach this fortress?" a low male voice demanded.

Mary turned around, and saw a tall, armored warrior silhouetted against the night sky, standing on the volcano's rim. He must have crept up to her while she had looked at the buildings.

He was armed with an extremely long katana. The

armor included wide shoulder pads, and a helmet that made his head resemble almost that of a dragon.

Mary wondered whether her usual effect on people would do any good here. She thought to just be honest. If the warrior showed aggression, she could just try to bolt away, back into the cave.

“I’m Mary Sue. An adventurer.”

“Have you come to steal the treasures within the fortress? Or to kill me?”

“No!” Mary shouted. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“I am Lord Darkness, the Warlord of the volcano.”

That sounded impressive. Or alternatively, pretentious. Though if the warlord had learned even more of those scrolls, maybe he had the ability to read thoughts? Mary tried to erase her thoughts, but it was possibly too late already.

“Do you surrender? Or do you wish to test your skills against me?” the warlord asked.

Mary did not exactly like the idea of surrendering. Would she be a prisoner, then? But certainly, she would stand no chance fighting, being tired and wounded.

“I – surrender.”

“Good.”

Mary was possibly more tired than she had realized. Because it appeared as if the warlord almost transported instantaneously next to her, and pulled a hood over her head.

“You are tired. And wounded,” the warlord observed.

Mary was not sure how the warlord was able to see that in the darkness. Again, it pointed into abilities like the Kuji-In.

The next thing also happened too fast for Mary to protest. The warlord lifted her up on his shoulder, turned around, and began to carry her, apparently along the

volcano rim. Mary was just relieved that she did not need to walk the treacherous path on her own while blinded, but got to rest at last.

Though in the corner of her mind, she was well aware that being the warlord's captive could end badly. In the very least it was likely not going to help her complete the quest at all.

Perhaps a minute of slow, deliberate walking, and Mary sensed the lighting increase even through the hood.

They were inside the fortress now.

But Mary did not exactly know how the journey ended, because at some point she fell deep asleep.

Mary woke up inside a rectangular wooden room with a low ceiling, on a low bed which was nothing flashy, just plain white sheets, but comfortable enough. Light was coming in from small rectangular windows near the ceiling.

Right now Mary felt oddly rested. The ache in her wounds was only minor now.

Then, in a degree of sudden panic as her brain engaged fully, Mary tried to remember how she had gotten here. When she tried hard, she recalled the nocturnal meeting with the armored warlord.

She still had her clothes on, but her shoes had been taken off and put beside the bed. The bandages had been changed; now there was no blood on them.

As the very next thing, she thought of her backpack and Three-Act-Structure. This sent her mind racing yet more. Had the warlord taken it away?

Mary turned her head far enough and saw the backpack. She reached out to it and opened it.

The familiar hollow voice came from the inside, and Mary was very much relieved.

“Good. You are making progress.”

“But to where? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, getting myself captured.”

“Just follow your instinct.”

That was like some vague self-help talk, which Mary honestly did not appreciate. She would have wanted more concrete guidance.

Essentially she was still on her own. Like so far.

But now there was no more time to ponder, as Mary heard the wooden door creak open. She shut the backpack quickly, hoping whoever was coming in had not heard her talking.

It was the warlord, carrying a tray of food.

This was surprising. She was being served breakfast. She would honestly have expected far more callous treatment.

Mary also could take in the Warlord’s appearance in more detail. Instead of armor, now he wore simple black garments. Like a kimono. In contrast, the belt had a golden color.

He could not be much older than Mary, with a gaunt face, a pronounced nose, and black hair roughly to the shoulders. A barely visible vertical scar ran across his right cheek.

“Morning,” the warlord said. “I took the liberty of applying a healing ointment on your wounds.”

“I feel – much better than yesterday. Thanks.”

Mary was not sure if it exactly made sense to thank her captor, but it could be a good strategy. To confuse him, make him drop his guard...

The warlord placed the tray next to the bed. There was a cup of rice and some fruits.

“Eat now. Then, I would appreciate if you would join me in the great hall.”

Only now it clicked in Mary’s head. Serving food should

be clearly beneath a warlord. He should have servants. A whole court.

“Why did you bring me food personally?”

The warlord looked Mary deep in the eyes.

“Because I rule this fortress alone. There is no-one else. They all have left – or died.”

Having said this, the warlord turned and left the room. Mary felt uneasy, as her mind made the obvious connection – Tropeverse’s destruction must have reached into here as well. This fortress had to have stationed hundreds in its prime, but now it was almost devoid of life.

The analytical side of her mind thought that this could be used to a further advantage – the warlord could not have eyes in his back. But it possibly would not hurt to listen to him first. His story, the downfall of the volcano fortress, could bring up vital clues.

Mary began to eat. It was much of an improvement to the bitter-tasting panther meat.

After finishing, she took a look around in the room. A wardrobe was set in one of the walls. Mary opened it and found kimonos similar to the warlord had worn. It was potentially absurd to respect her captor by putting them on, but again, it could be part of the escape strategy. To make it look like she was not going anywhere.

Mary settled on white, with a white belt, which was proper in case the belt represented budo skill. Then she took the tray with her and left the room in search of the great hall, and the warlord.

Mary’s footsteps echoed on the wooden floor of the vast hall. There were large, wall-high windows on each side, showing a magnificent view of the volcano and the surroundings. Bonsai trees in rectangular pots had been placed along the walls at regular intervals.

At the far wall, which was all windows, the warlord was sitting near a low table.

Before heading at him, Mary spotted a door branching off to what looked enough like a kitchen. It too was large, Mary guessed it had been used for an almost industrial-level preparation of food for the warlord's army. She left the tray there.

As she walked, Mary felt oddly peaceful. As if this place was the source of the Kuji-In, and she could learn a lot just by observing. Though she reminded herself that a warlord certainly did not rule nicely, but through fear and death.

Finally Mary sat opposite the warlord.

"I descend from the ancient Akuma battle-clan," the warlord began. "Like Lord Shadow, my father who ruled before me, I was raised from a small child for the singular role of the Warlord. At this point, the valley thrived, with Lord Shadow keeping absolute order."

Mary could not help that hearing this already made her feel sympathy. That your place in the world was chosen before you had any say in the matter, and you had no opportunity to experience a childhood without total dedication to the martial.

"That sounds harsh."

"You would be right." The warlord pointed to the scar on his face. "This – I got at the age of thirteen, when honing the art of sword. But I take great pride in how I was raised, how I persevered at every step. When this principle no longer worked, things started to fall down."

Mary concentrated. This would probably be about a trope breaking down.

"First it was the new lieutenants who were a few years younger than me. I remember watching, as they just laughed, shrugging off the harsh training. They refused to fight each other, refused to learn the art of strategy! And

Lord Shadow was placed before an impossible dilemma. These were the brightest students he had. He could have executed them all for the insubordination – but what then? There would be no further escalation possible. So he had them all thrown in the dungeon to come to their senses. From there, it went worse.”

The warlord paused, frowning. His brown eyes almost seemed to burn. The memory was obviously painful.

“The jailers joined the mutiny, followed by the soldiers. This was the gesture of ultimate disrespect. They all fled, leaving the gates open, pillaging the countryside as they went. And when insubordination happens to this degree, the ruler is ultimately powerless. Even the skills of the Kuji-In are not enough. When Lord Shadow learned of the extent of the betrayal, he performed seppuku. And I buried him according to tradition. At this point, I had inherited the fortress, with only the aging, most loyal servants. This was three years ago. As several of them died from old age and demoralization, I then let the rest go. At this point order and society had been extinguished from the whole valley. And so, I rule a domain of emptiness, alone.”

Mary felt almost overwhelmed by the amount of tragedy. Only by thinking logically, of the connection to Tropeverse’s ongoing demise, she prevented herself from breaking down to tears.

The footsoldiers – or mooks – refusing to obey their role. This was possibly even similar to the bandits in Black Rock, who had made the odd alliance with the sheriff. And emptiness and destruction would result in the end. The breakdown of society. It did not take much to imagine this repeating everywhere in Tropeverse, even when ignoring the more dramatic occurrences, like whole towns being swallowed by the earth.

This part of the story was clear. But Mary thought of what else she wanted to know about. Of her journey through the jungle –

“I’m sorry for all your loss,” Mary said. “It’s a pattern I’ve seen repeating on my travels. But as I traversed the valley, I came across two kinds of scrolls. The first kind was obviously Kuji-In. But the second, has symbols consisting of three lines, either broken or not.”

“Kuji-In comes from the battle-clans. On its highest levels, it claims to give its user the ability to alter space and time, as well as complete enlightenment.”

Mary noted the word “claims” - as if the warlord did not believe in it fully. Or maybe he wanted to keep his true power a secret.

“Have you mastered it to the highest level?”

The warlord frowned in displeasure, and Mary understood to have interrupted him.

“I have learned the gestures, and the mantras. But they have to be understood in a mundane way. You will gain inner strength that will benefit your life, but you do not become an all-powerful sorcerer. As for the second kind of scrolls – these are the trigrams. From the elders who lived in the valley before the age of the battle-clans. These also serve a similar purpose, to strengthen your mind for hardships, when working on the fields.”

What the warlord told was somewhat in conflict with what Mary had experienced. She had learned to flying kick a tree down, and to see in the dark. Well, maybe because of being Mary Sue, they did work differently for her.

But now Mary began to ponder if she had made a mistake somewhere along the way. She should have been thinking of her eventual escape, but had instead told much of her adventure already. Well, at least she had not outright revealed to be on a quest to save the world.

“What happens now?” Mary asked.

“You are free to go. You now know the history of the fortress, and what became of the Akuma clan. May this bring understanding and humility to you. I will obviously watch you go, to make sure you do not try to enter anywhere you are not supposed to.”

This was sort of an unexpected turn.

“Thank you.”

Mary made to stand up –

But then she thought, if she was not a prisoner after all and would not need to think of an escape, why not reveal her real purpose?

Mary found her voice somewhat unsure, as she went on.

“To tell the truth – I’m not just traveling. I’m trying to find how to put a stop to the destruction. Things and people losing their purpose. Or actually –”

This would go to the deepest level. But Mary thought the warlord might possibly understand.

“We all are just story elements. And some of us rebel against our purpose, bringing disorder and destruction.”

The warlord stared down, looking thoughtful.

“That makes sense. We all have our role. We may think there are rulers and the ruled, but we all just serve our place in what – you could speak of as the story. This is how I have made sense of the world ever since I was young. And the warlord’s place is strictly limited. Just like the top of the volcano is narrower than the base.”

Mary though he was taking it much better than expected. She felt almost excited now. The words were out of her mouth quick, again. Maybe not exactly wise.

“As you’re alone here now – I think the fortress would not mind, if you came along with me. Would you want to join me in trying to save the world?”

The warlord shook his head in the negative.

“Unfortunately, this is impossible. Honoring the Akumacian’s legacy binds me. But I can show you the armory. You may find equipment that will bring you greater success on your quest. Please follow me.”

Mary felt a bit of disappointment. Yet this was still better than just being forced to leave. Which was in turn much better than being thrown in the dungeon. She stood up and followed the warlord.

The armory could only be described as impressive. There were statues and suits of armor looking just like the warlord when he had ambushed Mary at the volcano rim, and so many kinds of blades and other weapons that she just lost count.

Most of the armor would be just much too heavy, Mary knew. She had never trained for combat, or moving armored.

“Is there anything light?” Mary asked.

The warlord guided her to the back of the room.

“The ninja’s suit would be the lightest,” he explained. “But it also offers no real protection. You must move out of the way to avoid getting hit. But the Akuma-clan devised an intermediate form of armor for our warrior-scouts, some of whom were female.”

Mary took a look at the lighter, shorter suits. There still was a helmet, shoulder pads, and some plating to cover the most vital areas. The color was blue-black, evoking the sense of striking lethally, then vanishing back to the darkness.

“That could fit me.”

The warlord helped Mary put the armor on, and she looked at her image in the mirror. The transformation was huge, almost like she was a warrior for real.

Mary tried moving around. Certainly, she felt the weight, but possibly it would not be unmanageable. Mary thought she would get used to it, growing stronger in the process.

“You also need a weapon,” the warlord said.

Mary felt kind of lost among all the blades she was unfamiliar with. To get proficient would require years of practice. Maybe a little less for her. But still, Tropeverse’s destruction would not exactly wait.

She thought back to her adventure so far – and the vision. There were still parts she had not experienced in reality – the snowy mountain for instance.

And the trap corridor, where she had died.

In there she had been armed with a bow. Mary turned to look at another corner of the armory, and there, on a rack, were bows of several shapes and sizes.

But was it exactly a good idea to try to mimic a vision where you perished? Archery was also a skill that took years. Still, it was not the bow specifically that had gotten her killed, but not paying attention to the traps from every direction.

If direct contact was not her forte, the bow would at least allow to hit from a distance. Besides, the warlord would not be around to see her fumble with the arrows. She could practice on her own after leaving.

“If I wanted to take a bow, and I’m not particularly skilled, what would you recommend?” Mary asked.

“In that case, you will fail equally with all of them.”

Not very encouraging. But at least honest.

Mary took several of the bows in her hands, testing how hard it was to draw back the string. The largest ones

were certainly off limits to her. But the medium-small ones, she could manage. Finally she picked one at almost random.

Mary looked at her image in the mirror again. A hunter clad in armor, looking very believable apart from the fact that she had never shot an arrow in her life.

“There is the range, where you can test it.”

“Sure...”

Mary did not exactly want to reveal her lack of skill.

“From the way you hold the bow, I take it you truly are an amateur. But there is no shame in it. I could get you started,” the warlord said.

Mary thought she was growing red in the face. But the warlord had been surprisingly friendly so far. Maybe she could accept. Then, if and when she would face actual danger, maybe she would have slightly better chances.

The warlord took a quiver of arrows from the wall, and pushed open a door that led to the archery practice range. It had been built on the volcano’s rim, with the far end actually suspended over the hole, but the construction looked sturdy enough.

Mary was not quite sure what to think when they began working on how to hold the bow and arrow properly. It was perhaps a bit unsettling to have the warlord that close to her. He was patient enough, though there was an intensity to him that Mary thought to come from a lifetime of dedication into the martial arts.

Having him around on the adventure would have been a formidable aid. But that was not going to happen. Mary would just have to learn from him as much as she could.

“Now you are beginning to get it right,” the warlord observed.

Mary drew back the bowstring, and unleashed the arrow on the circular target about twenty meters away.

Well, at least she hit the target. On its very edge, but still a hit. Encouraged by this, Mary shot more arrows, and her aim began to improve a little. Naturally these were only stationary targets, and rather close, but she had to start from somewhere.

The warlord was satisfied. "I will retreat to the great hall to meditate. You can practice for as long as you wish."

Mary felt just a bit of disappointment. Despite feeling uncomfortable initially, she thought she had begun to enjoy the warlord's company.

This was only a temporary stop, Mary reminded herself. The rest of the adventure waited.

"I will come to see you before I go," Mary said.

"That is fine," the warlord replied and went back inside.

Mary knew that she would inevitably have to cross the great hall when returning from the range and the armory. So she could not enter those treasure chambers, or whatever, without being seen by the warlord. Not that she even entertained the thought.

Finally Mary thought she had practiced enough. Darkness was slowly falling. Mary returned to the armory and took a second quiver of arrows too, so that she would have enough ammunition for even taking out multiple foes.

She returned to the hall to say goodbye to the warlord.

He was deep in meditation, reciting mantras Mary did not recognize. He turned as he heard the noises her armor inevitably made.

"Where are you going?" the warlord asked.

"Past the volcano, first. Then I'm not sure, where exactly. I have seen a vision, in which I climb a snowy mountain. But I'm not completely sure if it's real or not. I also saw – a stone corridor, filled with traps."

The warlord's gaze hardened.

“That sounds like the corridor below the dungeons. It is a secret escape route, trapped to deter intruders.”

Mary thought to leave out that she had died to the traps in her vision. But this was extremely curious. An escape route. Why would she need to use that –

Mary thought she felt the floor vibrate. Just for a second. Then, for three more seconds, everything was still again.

As the vibration repeated, the warlord noticed it too.

“That is not good,” he said. “The volcano may be waking up. If that is the case, the fortress is no longer safe. I will get my armor.”

This felt oddly similar to the rocky path transforming itself when Mary and the band had been closing in on the dragons. Or even the sudden destruction of Utopia.

And Mary guessed the trap-filled corridor would follow, being the only viable escape route in case the volcano started to erupt.

This time she would just not afford to die.

In his dragon helmet and the rest of the armor, the warlord looked more unsettling again, Mary thought.

But it fit – with the rumbling and the vibration intensifying, the whole fortress was unsettling as well. Mary and the warlord descended a circular staircase into the fortress dungeons.

They advanced a torchlit corridor, cells on both sides. Mary peered into the cells, expecting to see skulls or skeletons, but they were empty.

“The escape route is left unlit. We have to take torches with us,” the warlord said.

Mary could have revealed already that she saw in the dark. But she did not mention it for now. When dodging traps, torchlight would be better than the faint purple glow anyway.

Torches at hand, they advanced down another staircase. The stone was rougher here.

The staircase ended at a dead end.

Suddenly the stairs tilted crazily. Mary almost lost her balance. There was a huge, all-encompassing noise, like the earth itself was shouting at them.

“The volcano is erupting,” the warlord said sharply. He pushed in a smaller stone tile, and a hidden, rectangular doorway began to open.

“The escape route begins here. As do the traps.”

Torches still held close, the two stepped through the doorway. There was another heavy rumble, and Mary fell against the warlord, just managing to keep the torch away from him.

“Sorry,” she said.

“You did not do that on purpose.”

This amused Mary a little. As she could imagine – in another, less dangerous situation, she just might have done it on purpose. And that reminded her – the warlord was not afraid of Mary and her perfection either. He conducted himself very businesslike. Or maybe – was being businesslike the sign of being afraid?

Damn, Mary thought. Why was she even considering such things in the face of deadly danger?

“Follow me for the proper route. Do not stray from it,” the warlord said.

This was already different from Mary’s vision. She had not seen the warlord then, only running down the corridor on her own. Or maybe he would be the first to die?

They started down the corridor.

“The first trap will be on the left. Stay on the right side.”

Just then, the floor shook for the third time. This was the heaviest yet. This time Mary could do nothing, and fell. The warlord lost balance as well. The corridor ceiling cracked open, and a stream of water came rushing through, extinguishing both of the torches.

Darkness fell.

But as Mary’s eyes adjusted, the familiar faint purple glow returned. The LI trigram was still working!

The warlord uttered words Mary could not understand.

She guessed it was cursing.

“We’re not done for yet. I can see in the dark,” Mary said and grabbed his hand.

In the faint light, Mary could see the apprehension and lack of understanding on his face. But in the end, he accepted, and they both stood up.

“The trigram of light – is it working literally for you?” the warlord asked.

“Yes.”

“Then we are in luck. Like I said, the first trap is on the left. Do you see a narrow slit in the wall?”

“Yes.”

They walked past it, keeping to the right, as the circular blade came out, just like in the vision.

Mary still held the warlord’s hand. She thought of keeping him safe, and it was just a bit endearing, the mighty warlord actually needing her help.

“The next will be in the very center, coming from below. We must keep tight to either side.”

The corridor shook even more, the harsh rumbling now becoming almost constant.

“The eruption is upon us!” the warlord snapped. “We need to pick up speed.”

Past the second blade, hugging the wall.

“The next comes from the ceiling. It crosses the entire length of the corridor, so we must keep low. But we can not stop running!”

Mary thought she saw light increasing from behind. Was it lava already chasing them? She could not really stop to confirm.

Finally they were outside. After a lot of dodging and running. It was another irregular cave opening. They were on the far slope of the volcano. Mary looked up and behind, and saw the yellow lava come falling slowly. The sky above was a roiling mass of black smoke and flames. It was a pity to not have seen the eruption itself better.

“So much for the fortress of the Akuma-clan. It falls to the nature, like everything,” the warlord said with finality.

Mary did not quite know what to reply at first. Then – she returned to something potentially selfish.

“What will you do now?”

“Strictly speaking, there is no place for me anymore.”

That sounded bad. In the worst case, Mary could imagine the warlord throwing himself on his huge katana.

“Could you join me on my adventure?”

The warlord considered for a moment.

“I suppose I could.”

Mary could not help smiling at the warlord. It was odd how the situation changed so fast. Just last night she had felt what she thought of as maximum fear when first meeting him.

“That is a pretty smile. And it is rare to meet an adventurer like you.”

Mary thought the warlord was honest with the compliment. Sometimes people were so complex, always having some hidden meaning with words, whereas he was much more direct instead.

“Thanks.”

Now they were out of the escape tunnel, but they still needed to outrun the lava. There was a sloping path similar to the other side Mary had climbed.

She broke into a run, and the warlord followed.

Mary thought of an epic movie she had once seen. Where a warrior freed a thief from chains, and then they began an epic run toward a city. This felt somehow similar – despite the lava chasing them, and the destruction of the volcano fortress, it felt like the adventure was only beginning.

Of course, Mary understood it could get harsh.

The snow mountain of her vision had seemed extremely inhospitable. Untold dangers possibly still lie in wait, and there would be numerous ways for either her or the warlord to die, leaving the remaining one to push onward in sorrow.

Going downward was faster, as long as they watched their step. But certainly tiresome in its own way. The slope ended at last, as Mary and the warlord entered the jungle again. The eruption had been a minor one, it appeared, the lava on the slope already cooling down. But the fortress was certainly lost.

It was long past midnight now.

Rain began to fall, bringing with it volcanic ash and dirtying their armor. It could also be an advantage, to make them blend in better.

Mary listened to the sounds of the jungle again. They seemed more uninviting now, the buzzing of insects almost harsh and unnatural.

“Something is not right,” the warlord muttered.

They pushed onward with caution. Mary had the bow ready, an arrow in hand. The warlord likewise gripped the large katana with both hands.

“What is that called?” Mary asked.

“It is a dai-katana.”

Mary nodded in understanding. They would hopefully be a good fighting team, with Mary being able to pick off enemies at a distance, while the warlord would slay anything coming up close.

Of course, that assumed Mary could hit anything to begin with. Well, she still had the bandit’s knife for backup.

They came to another wide gorge. This one had a rope bridge crossing it, a little frayed, but still in one piece. So they would not need to improvise.

“Wait,” the warlord said, and Mary halted.

Right in the middle of the gorge, the night air appeared to shimmer. Mary saw it mostly as the purple night-vision glow.

It was as if the air was turning into little square-shaped pieces that pulsed. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the odd effect vanished.

“I don’t know what that was, but we should cross now. Before it returns,” Mary said.

The warlord did not protest, and they sprinted across the bridge. It swayed a little, but they were not in danger of falling.

Past the gorge, the path continued deeper into the jungle. Mary thought the buzzing of insects was joined by a harsh, artificial sound.

What the hell was going on here?

Out of nowhere, another pack of panthers attacked, three of them. They blended against the tree trunks so well that Mary could not honestly have seen them earlier.

But they were somehow different. On their hides, Mary saw the same kind of square-like distortions as in the air, which appeared to pulse in size. The movements of the panthers seemed almost – mechanical? Their hisses and roars sounded distorted too.

Mary loosed off an arrow, but it broke in two on impact with the first panther's head. She understood it was going to become ugly close combat, and switched to the knife.

The panther charged and its teeth stuck Mary's chest plating.

She was very glad to be armored.

But the joy was short-lived, as she saw that for a moment, the armor began to exhibit the same square distortions too.

Mary shuddered as she thought of her skin and organs also becoming distorted. Almost if it was an infection. Was she now seeing the true nature of the tropes' destruction? Was it that square distortion that was spreading? But she had not seen it before.

In any case, this battle had to be ended as soon as possible. Mary slashed with the knife, aiming for the panther's neck. She thought she heard the clash of steel against steel. Were these robots then...? What the hell? It was as if the laws of reality did not exactly hold.

Finally, as the panther was still trying to bite her, she got the blade wedged in properly, and twisted.

The panther's head came loose, and it fell to the ground lifelessly. Mary glanced to her side and saw the warlord fighting the remaining two panthers simultaneously.

"Aim for their necks!" Mary shouted. She also charged, knife held high.

Before Mary could reach either of them, one of the panthers managed to bite the warlord's hand. It went wildly distorted, and the warlord grunted in agony.

Enraged by this, Mary lunged at the panther, slashing at its neck laterally.

Steel clashed, without effect. But Mary struck again, and this time managed to wedge the blade in once more. A twist, and the head separated.

Meanwhile the warlord's hand had returned to normal, and he chopped the last panther in two. Silence fell, as he and Mary both panted in exhaustion.

"Are you OK?" Mary asked the warlord.

"I believe so. It hurt, but the damage did not last."

Possibly, if they did not manage to get multiple hits in, the distortion would still heal.

Mary observed the panthers' bodies to have dissolved to a degree. They had left behind some odd mechanical parts, black shining metal.

Mary went to examine one of them, still being very cautious in case she might catch the square-distortion just by touch. This one looked a bit like a large battery.

Mary touched it with the knife blade first, and she saw the square artifacts appear on the blade.

Next, she tried the same with an arrow from her quivers. The same effect repeated.

Possibly, it would enhance their weapons. To make them distort and dissolve their enemies. It did not feel like a good idea to mess with the nature of reality, but if their enemies would do the same, then they would be at a disadvantage if they did not play dirty too.

Mary got one further idea. She was just a little scared, as this would involve touching the part with her fingers. There was no way around it -

Thankfully, nothing happened.

No searing pain, and her fingers did not turn to squares. The part would only react to metal. Therefore, she took a roll of tape from her backpack and taped the foreign part to her bow.

She tried putting an arrow in place and drew back the string. The arrowhead began to pulse and distort, square-like, exactly like Mary had hoped for.

“That looks like sorcery to me,” the warlord said. “But there is also the age-old principle – fight the enemy with their own weapons.”

“Right.”

Mary considered if the battery – if it could be called that – could run out of juice. To be as prepared as she could, she collected more of them from the remains of the other panthers.

One hour later Mary and the warlord were settled in a cave for the night. The warlord had shown what fruits and berries were safe to collect, and they had their stomachs relatively full again.

“I know almost nothing of you,” the warlord said. “Except your name, and that you are saving the world.”

Mary considered how to begin.

“Well, I’m really just an ordinary girl. I lived in my hometown, in a small cottage, until one of my friends died. Jane was her name. She killed herself, as she felt she had lost her purpose. Though she was the one to always inspire others. Then the town sunk to the ground, and I got on my way. Apparently it had lost its will to exist too.”

“Like the fortress,” the warlord noted.

“Precisely. But before the town sunk into the ground, there was a heavy rain. And this – had washed on my doorstep.”

Mary took Three-Act-Structure out from the backpack.

“This is Three-Act-Structure, a worm that can speak. It led me on this quest in the first place. It says it chronicles the structure of stories. And this is its last story – mine.”

The length of the worm was a little over one third now. Just a little bit remained of the long middle part, and then the head, which was still fully intact. To be honest, TAS looked rather pitiful now.

“The story is nearing its conclusion,” the worm spoke, just a little ominously. “Mary has done well. But yet no-one of us can know how it will end.”

“Hm. I would not exactly trust it,” the warlord said.

“I heard that. That’s not very nice,” TAS remarked.

“It has been helpful. At least in keeping me company,” Mary said.

The worm spoke no more, so Mary put it back in the backpack. For the moment it occurred to her, that how could it chronicle her story, if it was in the dark for the most part? But if Mary could see in the dark, maybe it could see through the backpack fabric.

“It looks like you have been chosen. You had little choice,” the warlord said. “Like myself.”

“Well, I suppose I could have said no. But that would have left me in a dying world.”

Mary knew she had better go sleep soon. The day had been even longer than the previous. Still, there was something she wanted to say.

“It’s almost funny, how little time it is since us meeting. And how it began with me as your prisoner. Yet it’s like could almost say – Hello Darkness, my old friend.”

The warlord was a little perplexed.

“That is actually from a song. But do you have any other names? Or are you just Lord Darkness, the Warlord?”

“My full name is Lord Raven Darkness, but it is usually abbreviated.”

“Could I call you just Raven?”

“You can. It fits now even better, with ash covering my armor. Like dirty black feathers.”

“It's settled then. Good night, Raven.”

Mary found it hard to keep a straight face while saying this. Yet she kind of liked the name. Shorter than either Lord Darkness or just Warlord.

Sleeping with the armor on would not be the most comfortable. But at least it would keep her warm.

As Mary exited the cave, she almost shouted in surprise. The landscape had changed again. More smaller rock formations now punctuated the jungle just a kilometer or two away.

And far in the distance, there appeared to be even higher mountain peaks, covered in snow. Mary thought that somewhere there would lay the final location from her vision.

She felt trepidation thinking about it, as she remembered how cold and lost and alone she had felt climbing it.

Mary considered something odd – were the distortions in the landscape and the nature of reality following her?

No. It could not be all about her.

But before they would reach the snow-covered mountains, there was a lot of the jungle remaining to cross.

Raven emerged from the cave. Mary thought the name made him more relatable. Not just a warlord to be feared.

“Look. Those peaks were not there before. I believe they are the final place I saw in my vision.”

Raven looked up ahead and saw them too.

“So it would appear the worm was right. That your story could be coming at its end.”

“But I have no idea what I will find there. What is the exact deed I need to do, to stop the destruction? It’s almost like I would need another vision to know.”

“The Akuma clan kept knowledge of hallucinogenic potions. Sometimes they were used for purposes of divination, or to figure out a battle strategy. But I can not say that the results were very reliable. Also, the ready-made potions were lost with the fortress. I would have to harvest the raw ingredients from the jungle, and I might get the formulas wrong. You might end up very ill.”

Mary did not like the idea exactly. The joints had been bad enough. Or not that bad, but not exactly beneficial either.

“Maybe it’s better we don’t try that. We can also climb up there and see what comes up.”

“That does not sound certain either. An army could not be commanded that way. You could be sending men marching to a cold death, and completely in vain. But now it is just the two of us.”

Mary knew what Raven left unsaid. The two of them on a desperate quest, both with their homes destroyed. The quest was all they had.

It was both horrible and awe-inspiring.

Mary remembered how she had hoped for a true purpose. Sometimes wishes would come true in a terrible way.

And two adventurers, fighting their way through unimaginable danger, that also had to be a trope. Mary just did not remember if it had an official name.

“Right. We are free to risk our lives. Maybe we just better get going,” Mary said.

The jungle began to turn into marshlands, with fog blanketing the sky once more, and insects were all over them now.

Thankfully most of them were harmless.

But then, they ran into a much larger variety, with a wingspan of almost half a meter. And again, they had the square-like glitches and distortions.

The harsh metallic buzz was almost deafening, as the insects came from all directions.

And Mary felt almost like detaching from her body, as she sunk into a rhythm of taking another arrow, drawing the string and aiming, and then firing.

Augmented by the “battery,” the arrows were now fearsomely effective. The insects would vanish into larger squares, screaming mechanically.

But the assault of the swarm was relentless. Raven swung his dai-katana, slicing at times into multiple insects at once. But their metal skin proved resistant, requiring several blows.

Mary tossed a battery and the tape at him, urging him to do the same as she had done with the bow.

Raven appeared reluctant.

“We can’t win this otherwise,” Mary shouted over the buzz.

At last Raven began taping the battery to the blade. Meanwhile Mary fended off the insects trying to attack him. She just realized she would not have an endless supply of arrows.

With the battery part connected, the change was awesome to behold. Now the entire length of the dai-katana rippled with the distorted squares.

“Excellent!” Mary shouted, as Raven took the first swing, taking down an insect with one swipe.

He seemed to descend into a berzerk rage now, the

blade swinging ceaselessly. Mary had to keep well clear of him, dodging the insects and loosening more arrows whenever she had a shot.

After what must have been minutes, the swarm was finally done for. Mary was exhausted to the bone, and she also saw that under his helmet, Raven's face was dripping with sweat. She gave him a thumbs-up.

Mary imagined the opposition that waited at the snowy mountains. If it was already this bad here, it certainly had to be worse there.

It could also be a sign they were headed to the right direction. If these glitched creatures represented the destruction resisting their effort to stop it.

Mary recalled her earlier thoughts – was there an evil overlord or demon somewhere, gloating on a throne?

“Raven, do you have like, a demon of destruction in your mythology? Something that would want the whole world ruined?”

“That is not a part of our traditions.”

Well, that was settled then. Not that it even mattered much, what was behind everything. As long as the destruction would be stopped.

Mary and Raven advanced through the fog and the swamp. Now it was hard again to judge the progress toward the mountains.

Ahead the swamp water was turning black. It looked actively harmful. Like it was septic or something. Mary and Raven circled to the side, until they were off the water, walking through tall grass instead.

“Black water. It's coming from ahead,” Mary mused.

They pushed on, until the body of water widened into an actual lake. The blackness was thicker here. The fog cleared just a bit, and then Mary saw them.

She thought her sanity would drain to nothing.

On the far shore, there were large creatures, several meters tall, that were absolutely impossible to describe precisely. They had tentacles, like squids, but the tentacles seemed to curve around themselves in utterly impossible ways. They had multiple mouths, and numerous eyes – It was pure madness.

Worst of all, the creatures were vomiting thick black ooze into the water as a steady stream. So that was the source. Just watching the vomiting made Mary feel ill. The creatures were also emitting a low, droning, ululating sound, that was extremely depressive. Like pure distilled lack of hope.

“What in the world are those?” Raven asked.

The weirdest part was, that Mary even knew the answer. They were abominations.

“Eldritch abominations,” Mary replied.

They had not reached the snowy peaks yet, but this too, in addition to the distortion-glitches, could actually be the source of the world’s destruction. Maybe this black ooze was trickling everywhere, contaminating the whole of Tropeverse?

Where the ooze hit the water, it would momentarily distort into the pulsing squares. So the effects were somehow connected.

“Maybe – this water needs to be cleansed. Or these creatures killed,” Mary said slowly.

She did not like the idea of killing as a solution, but if these creatures were the source, was there any choice?

“But we have not reached the mountains yet,” Raven said.

“Maybe the vision was misleading. Maybe the mountains aren’t important at all.”

Mary still had a few arrows left.

She took aim at one of the creatures and shot.

For a moment, the distortion-effect rippled on the tentacles, then it vanished. The abomination had absorbed the damage. The arrows would not be the answer.

Mary thought of something more effective. What would it possibly be...?

The word that came to her mind was sacrifice. The scenario she had imagined already when first meeting Three-Act-Purpose.

If she waded into the black water, would she be able to cleanse it? At the cost of her life, potentially?

Maybe this was what she had been made for.

It did not hurt to try. If she was wrong, she would just get her armor dirty, no harm done. But first Mary took off the backpack. TAS did not need to go down with her.

“Mary, what are you doing?” Raven asked.

“My arrows don’t have any effect. I will try to cleanse the water myself.”

“No! Do not do that. You do not know whether it is poisonous.”

Mary worked fatalistic defiance into her voice. It was true she did not really want to do this either, but options were running out.

“That’s kind of the idea.”

For a moment Mary and Raven just stood, looking into the other’s eyes. Mary knew that Raven could easily have stopped her by force, yet he did not. He respected her choice.

Mary also laid all her weapons on the shore – they were not going to do her any good. She collected strength just for a moment, then started wading into the black water.

It was cold.

As if the coldness was eating its way directly into her soul. And not just that, it felt like her life energy itself was

draining away. Mary rationalized that it was possibly just imagination, psyching yourself up a certain way.

But as she waded deeper, she thought the water started to clean up. Just a little. The abominations' voice changed too. It rose higher, becoming almost desperate.

This possibly meant she was doing exactly what she was supposed to. They were resisting, but she would prevail. Even at the cost of her own life.

Mary was now in the middle of the lake, and she felt very tired. The creatures vomited less now, as if they were already becoming lifeless. Mary imagined it as a struggle of life force – who would run out first?

Mary willed herself to stay. The coldness was all-consuming. There was no coming back now. She had her purpose to fulfill.

One of the abominations stopped vomiting and vocalizing completely, and toppled into the water with a huge splash.

At that point Mary also went under, and then there was just blackness.

A cold wind swept through the dojo courtyard. The lone ninja had a purpose to fulfill. To ring all the four bells to open up the secret chamber containing the lost Kuji-In scrolls.

She had fought long. Finding the dojo itself had been a long shot. It was on the top of a skyscraper, in this macabre techno noir nightmare city, governed by money and ruled by crimson, endless violence.

Only laser beams directed to the sky, and the pulsing lights of the neon billboards broke the eternal blackness up here.

The ninja heard a helicopter approaching. Sliding down a rope, several black-clad mercenaries landed on the courtyard, automatic weapons already up and ready to fire.

The ninja got up on the move and drew her katana. She somersaulted high into the air as the first mercenary fired, then lunged downward.

The mercenary never saw the attack coming, and the courtyard was splattered with crimson.

Ninjas were not supposed to use firearms. Yet she knew

she should use any means available to thin out the opposition. To fight the enemy with their own weapons. Before the mercenary fell all the way down, she grabbed him as a human shield, and sprayed the magazine empty on full auto, as return fire smacked into the lifeless body.

The ninja saw only one more of her enemies go down – spraying was never particularly effective. But she remained unharmed to continue the fight, and only that mattered. She dropped the machine pistol and broke into a run again. It was like a ritualistic dance of death, one where the most patient mind would win.

She reached one corner of the courtyard, jumped into the air to reach the rope, and managed to ring the first bell.

The rhythmic tolling would hopefully disturb the mercenaries. There were still two up and firing at her, and she already saw the second helicopter closing in.

To confuse the enemies, she leaped against the courtyard wall and levered herself up on the low side roof of the dojo. She sprinted up the angled roof, and bullets struck sparks very close. The enemies were not very confused.

But this way, she managed to cover the distance to the second bell. She jumped down from the roof onto the rope, and another bell joined the chorus, the rhythm already chaotic.

Now she had no choice but to deal with the two mercenaries, before reinforcements came in.

Guns came to life directly in front of her as she landed. Her katana flashed once more, and there was one living soul less on the courtyard. But she also felt the hot stab of pain in her side; at least one bullet had hit home.

Her vision was going red, but the ninja knew she just had to push forward.

Right now, this meant literally. She stabbed forward with the katana, through the throat of the last mercenary from the first wave. There was a satisfying crunch of cartilage, and he went down choking on blood.

The ninja picked up the firearms of both mercenaries, and fired them upward, akimbo-style, as the second helicopter began to disgorge men.

Most of them fell down dead.

Then, the ninja had time to run for the third bell. Now it was a cacophony of three bells ringing at different pitches.

She turned to look back at the courtyard center. The enemy she had not managed to kill brandished a minigun that should be too heavy for any man to carry in battle.

It spun to life as the ninja somersaulted high up in the air again, her katana spinning.

The stream of bullets struck against the blade as she parried them ceaselessly. Then she landed at last, and the fight became a total chaotic blur, both circling each other at extremely close distance, trying to get the final, fatal attack in.

The katana sliced into the last mercenary's chest, almost like Zorro making his trademark sign. But much deeper instead, reaching his heart.

Too late the ninja realized the minigun was also almost perfectly aligned, and the enemy still had enough fight in him to keep the trigger pressed down.

A stream of bullets cut across the ninja's abdomen.

"Gaaaaa-" she cried out.

The minigun fell from the dead mercenary's hands at last. But the ninja's lifeblood was trickling down on the dojo courtyard too. With strength fading fast, she limped to the last rope and rung the last bell.

At first it looked like nothing would happen.

But then a square-shaped trapdoor began to open right

in the middle of the courtyard, with stone stairs leading down. The sound was heavy and ominous, like that of a crypt opening. The ninja had just enough strength to descend the stairs into the small, dimly lit chamber.

Nine scrolls hung on the walls.

The ninja went for the fourth one, which was the most important right now. Unless she wanted to start this from the beginning once more.

SHA – healing of self and others.

Kayla observed the ninja was almost out of health. She had only little time left to twist the DualShock controller to the correct orientation and press the correct buttons. This represented learning the scroll.

The screen flashed green just in time, and the ninja's health began to refill.

Kayla threw the controller to the motel room floor in relief. She had stayed up playing this game far too long. In contrast Micke and Johan had been drinking all evening, but at least they were already asleep.

It was strange, returning to civilization and wasting time on this video game console they had found from the motel lobby. Kayla rather longed to be a ninja in reality, even if it included the possibility of dying for real.

She thought of Mary. How was she doing now? Had she already managed to stop the end? Or was she even alive at this point?

31.

A blur of images, dream-sequences and perhaps memories. All incoherent, all fading in and out. None of them staying in focus for long.

Was she really on a windswept dojo courtyard, fighting for her life? Or somewhere else? Still sinking into the depths of the black water?

But in some odd way Mary was also at peace. If this was dying, then it did not feel as bad as she could have imagined. She only hoped that if this was to go on for long, the endless jumping from one dream to another would stop.

She dreamed of Kuji-In, of twisting her hands to the overcomplicated positions, and reciting all of the mantras. She was not sure where all the knowledge was coming to her, but the full set of the nine cuts were:

RIN – strength of mind and body

KYO – direction of energy

TOH – harmony with the universe

SHA – healing of self and others

KAI – premonition of danger

JIN – knowing the thoughts of others

RETSU – mastery of time and space

ZAI – control of the elements of nature

ZEN – enlightenment

Had she somehow mastered them all now? But if she was no longer alive, what use would she have for them? Or could she use them to return from the dead?

But slowly, Mary thought to become aware of entirely physical sensations. A hard floor, on which she was possibly lying. Memories of very physical and very unpleasant events. The all-encompassing cold entering also her lungs and making them hurt like never before, then something forcing itself down her throat – and – sucking the cold out?

Mary thought she felt very weak now. She thought she wanted to go back to where these physical things, or where feeling weak, did not exist at all.

And just as slowly, Mary drifted back asleep.

A blurred face came slowly into focus as Mary strained her eyes to see. She almost remembered the name –

Suddenly it came back to her. Raven. The warlord.

“You are awake,” the face said.

Mary was not sure if she had the strength to reply anything. Raven’s hand stroked her forehead a bit, as if to tell it was perfectly OK for her to not reply anything.

She observed to be inside a simple village hut again, under a blanket.

“It was something I had never seen,” Raven began to tell in a calm voice. “You disappeared under the surface, and these creatures began to wither and fall into the lake, one by one. You certainly were doing something to them, and to the water. I dived after you, certain that you were lost. But the water was not deep, so it was not hard to find you. I dragged you on the shore, and you were completely lifeless. Honestly, I had no idea what to do. But the worm knew it better than me. I believe it sucked the black water from your lungs, and you began to breathe again. At this point I was much relieved. But as you would not wake up, I knew I had to find you shelter.”

Mary was listening, as intently as she could. It seemed to make sense, mostly. So she had – killed – the creatures just by her presence in the water? Did this mean the destruction had come to its end? Was Tropeverse saved already?

“But every time I tried to pick up in my arms, you slipped right through. It made no sense. It was not you being too heavy, it was as if the laws of nature were broken. I dragged you some distance, until I realized that using my shoulder was safe as well. Like the first time.”

In some far corner of her mind, this too made sense to Mary. She recalled the conversation – a rather one-sided one with the zigzag worm in Lost Hope. Because carrying someone two-handed could be used badly for romantic effect, it had decided to deny itself for everyone.

Though that also reminded of the fortress soldiers no longer wanting to serve. And they, Mary thought, had every right to choose. Where was the line?

“I saw it kill itself,” Mary said slowly. “That’s why it no longer works.”

Raven did not even seem to question the logic. Mary thought he was already so used to his world crumbling piece by piece. But Mary also knew her task was far from over. It would not be over until everything would be restored. No matter if it was something unnecessarily cute, or being misused.

“Before I forget – thank you for getting me out. For taking care of me. But what I did in the water – wasn’t the solution. We have to push on,” Mary continued.

“You have to recover.”

Mary decided to try to rise up to sitting. She had to start the recovery from somewhere. Almost right after her head protested, feeling very heavy, and she was falling back down. But Raven was there to catch her in his lap.

“At least now you did not slip through,” he said.

There was a bit of humor in his voice. Mary liked that, to be able to find the bright side in a world of gloom. Just now it was also a very comfortable place to stay.

“But in seriousness, that you came back – I can not think of a happier moment.”

Coming from the warlord himself, that was a confession. Mary just smiled quietly. She could easily imagine – a lifetime of rigid military discipline, where the only momentary happiness would come from crushing your enemies.

Mary had been out cold more than a whole day. Almost two. But after eating again, and moving around a bit, she found her strength coming back quick.

The village was a very well hidden one, close to the swamp. They scavenged through the buildings, and soon Mary had two full quivers of arrows again. She thought the journey could continue, once more.

It was understandable, and a bit funny that Raven would not let her out of his sight now.

“You know, it's not like I vanish in thin air if you look the other way,” Mary said as they were back in the hut, the evening getting darker.

“I know.”

Naturally, Raven was a man of violence – taught by a rigid code of cruelty from birth, but he had also shown his other, very caring side. Mary thought back once more to Black Rock, of leaving the town on her own to the woods above. When she had wondered if she did not even have a place in her heart for anyone to fill.

Now that appeared not true at all.

But yet, Mary felt conflicted. Like that one half of her wanted to be close to him, but the other half wanted to

only concentrate on the path still ahead, and not do anything to compromise that. That they were a good team in combat, and cared of each other's well-being, but it was best left at that.

Still, death could come for them at any moment. And the world was emptying itself every passing second. When would emotions themselves stop working?

“What is it?” Raven asked.

Probably he saw the conflict on her face. But how could Mary even explain? It was possible Raven had not even considered anything like that. He just did what he did, according to his own code of honor.

But then, some words nevertheless appeared to find their way out. Mary was not sure if they were the right ones, but it felt better to let them out, than to bottle everything up.

“If we go out tomorrow, and we're nearing the end – Shit. Can I just be close to you again?”

Raven did not protest, and they sat down on the floor of the hut, and Mary pressed herself as close to him as she could.

“Are you afraid?” he asked. “Of what is still ahead?”

“Yes, and no.”

“That is a wise answer. Fear can give you an edge, if you do not let it consume you.”

Mary found her voice a little irritated. Or desperate, even. “Can we not talk about fear? Or what gives one the edge in warfare?”

“That is fine.”

It appeared Raven was very content with just sitting in silence, Mary in her lap again. But she felt as if she was jumping up a bit with each heartbeat.

Raven seemed to notice that too. “Something is still bothering you.”

“You mean, I won't be at my best –”

“In warfare? No, not that. But that if you are not at ease, then neither am I. Can I do something?”

That was kind of him again. Mary hesitated just one moment more. But then she knew it would not make any sense to continue that route. She would just be holding back far too much.

“I'd wish you to kiss me. But you have to do it slow, because it has stopped working otherwise.”

Said aloud, for someone not knowing their reality, it was like the height of stupid. But it looked like Raven took it dead seriously, as he moved closer at extremely slow pace. Mary could not help smiling, until she finally had to force herself serious too.

Lord Raven Darkness, Warlord of the volcano.

The highest mountain peaks loomed ahead. Mary thought she could keep the pace fine. In the morning, she had tested the bow; the “battery” appeared to have run out, as it no longer produced the distortion on the arrowhead. A fresh one from her backpack solved that.

The one taped to Raven's katana was still working.

Mary's backpack was as full of food as they managed to collect. It would easily be days until they would reach the snowy heights.

Now Mary kept looking at Raven in turn. Was it possible she had seen something pained in his eyes? Even from behind the dragon helmet? Mary thought she was just mistaken, and was imagining things.

In the very least she hoped it was not because of her.

Mary thought her mind and her heart were more at ease now, and she hoped Raven felt the same. Of course – the closer you got to someone, the more it could hurt to lose them. But now Mary thought she could dedicate herself to the art of war maximally, until the two of them would reach the highest peak.

She remembered the trope name now.

Battle couple. Mary almost giggled.

And that better not stop working, or there would be hell to pay.

A cold wind began to blow from up ahead as the jungle was left behind for good, and Mary shielded her face with a left-over strip of her gray clothing. She kept her eyes peeled for more of the distorted creatures, either flying or not, but so far they were undisturbed.

False security, Mary thought. Once they were too complacent, or perhaps numbed by the cold, some horrible onslaught would come from nowhere.

But here the enemies would have less hiding spots. Just the rocky ground, and a few trees here and there, most even dead.

Mary considered: if the peaks ahead would be the most inhospitable place in Tropeverse she had seen so far, a place possibly completely devoid of life, would it make sense for them to be the true source of the destruction?

And again, what would she do once there?

Would she somehow need to create life from nowhere?

That sounded like god-level activity, above even her so-called perfection.

Mary thought that the whole concept of her apparent perfection was much of an illusion. Possibly it just had to do with how she looked like. People would always pay too much attention to that.

Even Raven had fallen prey to that to a degree. As if she was some pretty, frail being to be handled with care. No matter that she would also be kicking ass left and right, even ignoring self-preservation.

Past midday, they stopped to eat, sheltered from the biting wind behind a large boulder.

Raven had his helmet off, and now there was no mistaking the pained look on his face.

“Raven. What’s wrong?”

There was no immediate answer.

“Nothing. Just the cold.”

That was not very convincing, Mary thought.

“If you’re lying to me, you have to do better than that.”

Raven’s gaze turned hard. Like he was having real trouble telling. And Mary tried to look as understanding as possible. Especially from now on he should always be able to open up to her.

“I am hearing voices. Pained screams, of things that are – trapped.”

Mary found it odd that she had not heard or seen anything like that. Of course, these were Raven’s home grounds, so he could be attuned to some ancient spirits roaming in here, much better than she could be.

“But do not worry. I can still go on and fight.”

Raven was putting on a brave face, naturally. And Mary wished to not be as powerless to help as she was. Of course there were gestures of encouragement, but Mary hoped for something that was an actual help. Like just exorcising those things away.

Mary hugged him, though the armors of them both were in the way.

“Of course. And tell me right away if it gets worse.”

Raven nodded.

As night was close, the enemies came at last, on a barren moonlit plain leading upward. These were not panthers, but wolves, unnaturally large, their eyes gleaming red.

Their hides were full of the distorted squares, blinking in and out in a more frantic pulse than Mary had seen before. Was that because of nearing the source? Of the

distortion. Or the destruction. Maybe they were one and the same.

Mary assumed their teeth and claws would hurt a lot more, and tried her utmost to keep the distance. The first one, she shot with an arrow before it even got close.

But the second had circled behind her, jumped, and managed to bite her past the armor plate. Mary watched in horror a large part of her left side begin to distort into the pulsating squares.

This was accompanied with a burning agony.

Yet she bit her mouth to keep the scream from escaping and leaped backward, until she had just enough space to shoot the attacker in the face.

It dissolved.

Meanwhile Raven had his hands full with two more.

Running closer to them to get a better line of sight, Mary hazarded a look below. The distortion was still there, but slowly going away, along with the pain. Next time she might not get as lucky.

Again, the battle went on for minutes, as the wolf pack seemed endless. For a moment Mary and Raven were actually fighting back to back, despite the completely different weapons. Mary would try to pick them from far away, while Raven would show no mercy to any of them getting close.

This worked well, for a time.

Then, by luck a wolf jumped past Raven's katana, and bit his right arm with full force. The armor did not help. The dai-katana fell, and Raven clutched the pulsing, square mess of a wound in throes of massive pain. Mary was not sure if he would ever wield a weapon again.

And she did what she could: she dropped the bow and dived for the sword, even as another wolf was right on her tail. On her knees, Mary swung the heavy katana in a

three-hundred sixty degree arc, almost hitting the prone Raven instead of the wolves.

She screamed with fury.

When the katana impacted with the closest wolf, it was so sudden and brutal that Mary almost dropped it. But now she knew she had to keep a stronger grip, summoning all the strength she could.

And she struck again.

And again.

Another bite, into her leg, and red hot pain filled her consciousness again. Mary knew she was not going to get up before either all of the enemies – or she – would be done for.

But she could see the wolves were down to only three.

She struck some more, rolling between the blows.

Down to two.

Mary thought the pain was dissolving again – the leg wound either would not be permanent, despite the initially frightening nature of the distortion.

A kick, which did not do much, followed by a full-strength diagonal swing, and only the final wolf remained. But it was leaping already, straight at Mary's head –

Until an arrow pierced its neck and it dissolved rapidly.

Mary turned to see Raven on one knee, the bow in his hands. His right arm still rippled with the distortion, but his aim had been true despite that.

Mary rolled and crawled to him and enclosed him in her arms. They had prevailed, and no words were even necessary. Finally, when the distorted wounds on both of them had vanished completely, they got up.

The exhaustion from swinging the katana hung heavily on Mary's shoulders. Raven was certainly tired, too. Mary wondered how many more such battles they could last, if each would be more brutal than the previous?

They headed up the plain. Night had fallen, but they could not rest before finding some proper shelter.

Finally, there was an opening in a nearby cliff face. Not a proper cave, but deep enough to stay protected from the relentless wind.

Mary and Raven made a fire and sat down. They just had to risk the light attracting more enemies, as during night they might freeze to death otherwise.

“Are the voices still bothering you?” Mary asked.

“Yes. They are still there.”

“Getting stronger, or not?”

“The same, I think.”

Mary had no idea how bad exactly Raven was having it. In addition to the cold and traveling and fighting. She wished that she could hear half of the screams, so that Raven's burden would only be a half in turn, but naturally that was impossible.

“Can I do something?”

“If you keep talking to me, or if you sing, it might help.”

Mary understood. To have something to distract. But to sing? What did she even know the full lyrics to?

She thought she would just invent something on the fly. The melody also came from somewhere Mary did not exactly know. With Raven's head resting against her, she began.

“Battle has begun, I'm no close to a victory

My heart is torn apart

Make me a sinner, make me a sinner

Or make me find the way...”

The night had not been restful. Too much cold, too little sleep. Trying to keep the fire lit, and also worrying how Raven was doing. Mary could tell he was on the edge, as they made to continue the journey in the morning.

Mary thought it possible that his pain would not be eased until they managed to stop the destruction. If all of it was tied together.

One possibility would have been to send him away. If the tormenting voices only started once they began closing in on the snow peaks.

But Mary was certain that if she had faced the wolves alone, she would have been dead multiple times over.

They climbed ever higher now.

In silence, weapons ready.

The sun was yet visible, but clouds started soon gathering. And they were heavier and darker than Mary had seen before. Not long, and it started snowing.

Yet they could not stop.

“Stop!” Raven shouted suddenly.

And Mary halted. Were the screams finally too much? She thought of what she could possibly do now. They had

come so far, it would not do good to turn around at this point. The only way was forward, and more suffering.

“I hear them. And now I also see them – inside of you.”

Mary felt her blood grow cold. What on earth was he talking about? Inside of her?

She turned to get a good look. Raven was bent down, hands on his knees, the pain obviously much greater now than before. Even from behind the helmet Mary could see how heavily his forehead was frowned.

“I tried to hold it in – to ignore it – But I can not. It has always been you. And only now I realize how foolish I have been. You bring destruction wherever you go. Then you collect the life essence. The spirits. Or whatever you know them as. But their voices continue to scream inside of you.”

The accusation was terrible. Mary would never do such a thing, even if she knew how. She was only here to save the only world she knew, as many tropes as she could!

How could Raven say those things to her? Was he going mad somehow? And since how long? Had her touch been poisonous somehow? Or was it the black water? Had it contaminated him already at the swamp lake?

Thinking of the abominations vomiting the thick ooze, it was not a stretch. At least it was better than the idea of Raven being truthful and completely himself now.

But again, what could Mary do?

She knew this could actually get dangerous.

As if on cue, Raven's voice turned into an angry growl.

“The voices are begging me to set them free. And there is only one way possible. I – must strike you down.”

Mary could not believe what he was saying. It was happening far too fast! Let either of us be killed by those distorting insects or wolves, but do not make me fight you, Mary thought.

At least the thought had no effect. Not that Mary even believed in telepathy. Instead, Raven raised his katana. Powered by the battery, it rippled with distortion.

“Raven! Listen to yourself! You're not making any sense! You must have been infected by the water! By the black ooze those things were vomiting! But we'll find a way to cure you!”

Slowly, Raven began to march forward.

And with reluctance, with the terrible finality of a threshold being crossed that should never be crossed, Mary took the bow in her hands.

“Don't make me do this!” she shouted.

Then a long, animalistic war cry erupted from Raven's throat and he began to rush toward her.

Even the odds, Mary thought. She did not have many seconds, but she took aim at the base of Raven's blade, where the battery had been taped.

Almost immediately, she knew it was a bad idea. An impossible shot to take, with Raven swinging the dai-katana wildly as he ran.

Still, she would try. She drew back the string, and as Raven got ever closer, she let the arrow loose.

It arced through the air and hit the center of the blade.

The glitches and distortions spread, until they reached the tape that was holding the battery in place. Soon the tape no longer held, and the foreign part fell to the snow.

It had been a lucky shot. But this meant that from this point on, Raven's sword would just slice her flesh instead of distorting it. At least that was more predictable, and maybe he would even be more reluctant to harm her in the traditional way.

But that was a wrong guess. Raven was on him now, swinging the blade from above his head. Mary dodged only barely, and got off into a sprint.

“Keep running, but you cannot defeat me!” Raven roared.

Mary rolled, turning around fast and taking a new arrow from the quiver. It was insane to think what she would be forced to do.

Raven was some twenty meters away now, a good distance for a shot.

“Last warning! You know what these arrows do!” Mary shouted.

Raven charged in response, and Mary shot.

The arrow closed the distance fast, hitting him in the center of his chest armor. The distortions began to spread, and Raven stumbled in agony.

Yet he kept going, and Mary had no choice but to prepare another arrow. He was almost at her as she let loose again.

Another hit, higher this time, close to Raven's neck.

Ignoring the wound, the ever-spreading square glitches, Raven swung at her, and sliced her left arm, just below the shoulder pad.

Mary knew she had been hit, but just for the moment there was no pain.

Raven stumbled again, worse this time, and Mary had a moment to retreat. She felt her hand shaking as she reached for the quiver. Now it certainly hurt. The arrow fell, and Mary fumbled on the ground to get it.

She knew this was the last arrow she was going to get off. Despite the spreading distortion, Raven kept charging, the katana raised above his head once more. He shouted, and the shout became distorted, just like the panthers or the insects.

Maybe that made it slightly easier for Mary. As if he was not himself at all any more.

She drew back the bowstring and let go.

For a moment Mary thought her aim was too hasty. Too high. But at the last moment Raven leaped up in preparation to strike down at her, and the arrow passed through the slit of his helmet.

Mary rolled to her left as the dai-katana struck the ground. And she watched in horror as the distortions consumed Raven's head within the helmet.

Then he fell to the ground motionless, the disturbing squares pulsing on his chest and head.

On the ground, Mary stared at Raven's body, her arm still dripping blood, as the distortions began to subside and vanish. But Raven's life did not come back; the damage done had been permanent.

She remembered the song she had sung to him just last night, and it was something she would never have wanted to recall. But as she did, the tears began to fall from her eyes without cease.

The victory was not even close.

Her heart was torn apart.

Though her hand had been forced, what else she was now but a sinner?

She had certainly not found the way.

No, now more than ever, she had completely lost it. And there should have been no reason at all to go on from this point.

Except that no matter how much Mary wanted to get to that state of mind, she could not. She could not have her own blue screen of death. At some point her tears also ran dry, just like her wound had congealed. She also knew she was feeling colder than ever so far on this trip.

She had a choice to make.

Would she want to freeze to death here, for merciful oblivion to collect her not many hours from now, or would she get up on her feet and perhaps freeze to death later?

And not only that –

She still had the other companion she had almost forgotten. Three-Act-Structure.

How would it respond now to Raven's accusations? Was there even a shred of truth to them, or had he just been insane? Had it been his turn to lose his purpose, and it had finally happened in this absolutely cruel manner?

Mary reached for the backpack. It was hard to get open now with her semi-frozen fingers.

Immediately she noticed, that the worm now only had its head left. The third and final part. They had reached the ending.

And what a bitter ending it was.

Mary could never have imagined how it would turn out, from first invading the volcano rim, up to here. Alone in this frozen wasteland, with only the worm head to keep her company.

“I have questions,” Mary said severely.

“That is good,” the worm replied, the hollow voice just the same as always. Or maybe more – enthusiastic? How could it be enthusiastic at a moment like this?

“Raven told of hearing voices. Of things, or spirits – trapped inside me. Was he insane, or what?”

There was an odd pause, that went on for longer than it should. Mary thought back to what Raven had said – that he did not trust the worm. This allegation should have been easy to deny, if it was just a madman's ramblings.

But what if –

“Let us use the accurate word instead. Not spirits. Tropes.”

Mary's mouth hung open. What? She could only think of one word. Betrayal.

The worm had been keeping her in the dark from the beginning. It had never said anything of this. Only that it would chronicle her story. And using her pride, it had led on the quest to save Tropeverse. How deep did it go?

“I have lived for long. For many human ages. And my burden was to know that the destruction of Tropeverse would eventually be coming. But I also was aware of the its cyclical nature. Destruction, and then re-creation. And I took it as my task to collect and chronicle as many stories as possible, so that Tropeverse's next cycle would be the best one yet. But my memory capability is finite, and as the destruction accelerated, I understood there were still story permutations and elements that needed to happen, needed to be collected and fine-tuned, for the picture to

be complete. Therefore, I was in extreme luck that I met you. Because as you are frankly the most perfect character that exists, capable of anything, I could offload storing the rest of the information to you. Therefore certain tropes now exist inside of you. You may have noticed a heaviness of your head whenever new data was stored. I apologize for the inconvenience. Let me tell you that your adventure has been most inspiring. Beyond my wildest imagination. You have suffered loss and heartbreak, but the stories that yours will seed in the next cycle will be nothing short of phenomenal. Now, ask yourself, if you would have known all that from the beginning, would you still have gone on this journey?"

Mary considered hard. Instead of a heroine, a savior forging her own path in the face of unknown, she had been needed to act as – a glorified memory stick?

Part of what Three-Act-Structure was saying was still flattering, and the idea of Tropeverse being re-created as the best version yet, sounded promising.

But still the worm had lied, at least by omission. Mary was not sure if she could forgive that.

"What do we still need to do?" she asked.

"Climbing to the highest peak is the correct direction. It is from there the next cycle will be triggered from. When the moment hits, we need to be there to release the knowledge we have within us. It is close already. The distortions will increase as we get closer."

"And what if we fail? If I die along the way?"

"Then the cycle will begin again nevertheless, but much poorer."

That was somehow comforting. To know that the world would begin again in some form, even if she failed.

But Mary thought the picture was not yet complete. For her to store knowledge, had it required destruction?

Was it like Raven had said?

“When Utopia fell below, or the volcano erupted, was it me – my presence – that actually caused it?”

“I had to offload the capability for you to store tropes in a hasty, regrettable way. Yes, it resulted in the destruction speeding up wherever you were traveling.”

“Damn you.”

“Remember, the alternative is that the new cycle would be much poorer.”

“And when Jane died, was it somehow my doing? Or yours? Or what?”

“Ah. The inciting incident. That is always needed. At that point I had been observing. It was only a small nudge, a whisper in her ear, that was needed to push her over the edge, and in turn, get you invested. Now, before you get angry, imagine all of it undone, your whole journey, just because you weren't at the right place at the right time. Or if Jane had been satisfied in her role instead.”

Mary was fuming inside. She fought an overwhelming impulse to take the worm head and throw it as far as she could, or crush it under her foot.

Yet, she knew she had to go on – or die trying. The highest peak waited. Then the next cycle would begin, and both that lying worm, and her apparent perfection would be dismantled to atoms and repurposed, if she understood right. She imagined merging with all the other tropes in some blinding white light of creation. Maybe she would even be reunited with Raven in some manner.

But first, the practical things. She went back to Raven's lifeless body, picked up his dai-katana, and taped the last remaining battery to it.

The pulsing distortion returned. The katana was heavy and she was weakened, but yet she vowed to be ready for whatever waited on the path ahead. She would fight not

just to reach the end, but to honor Raven's memory, the good side of him she remembered.

The snowfall turned into a proper blizzard. The gray sky and the mountain slope seemed to merge as one. And yet Mary marched onward, trying to ignore the soreness and fatigue. She had long since lost track of time.

Let it become dark, Mary thought. She thought she would no longer make camp. The grueling march would keep her warm.

She passed creatures frozen solid. The same distortion squares, but like crystals, no longer pulsing. Some of them canine- or feline-like, but others were totally indescribable. Not quite dragons, but not far either.

As the creatures came to life, almost predictably, Mary welcomed the fight. Welcomed the possible death.

The dai-katana was manageable, as she swung it. Mary drew strength from somewhere she did not know. Like the song to Raven.

When hit, the creatures shattered to more of the crystalline squares.

But that was not even the end. Some of the squares converged back into swarms that would chase Mary. She was in the risk of being overwhelmed, so she had to break

into a run. Finally, it appeared the crystal swarms would get bored with the chase, and give up.

Mary still climbed, sure this mountain path matched her vision. The feeling was even the same, her ultimate goal being near. But there was little elation in the thought.

The blizzard itself began to glitch, turning into small pulsing squares. On contact with exposed skin, they caused Mary's skin to distort for a moment, feeling like hot needles.

For a moment Mary was alerted. But as it turned out that no lasting damage would result, she soldiered on, ignoring the hurt.

Another wave of the frozen creatures assaulted her.

And now she knew to just deal with those directly in her path. To save her strength. It was almost as if fighting had come second nature. She no longer had to consciously think of the tactics she was utilizing. She thought to even be one with the dai-katana, no matter that it was heavy, and that her weariness only grew as time passed.

As she struck the last creature ahead, a dragon with tentacles, Mary observed the blade to stop rippling. The last battery had run out, so it was just an ordinary large katana again. She quickly checked her bow and arrows, and no distortion either. It was like the mountain itself was sapping their strength.

She hoped that this had indeed been the last fight. As some of the squares still chased her, she broke into a slow run, or tried to.

She stumbled and fell from exhaustion, and to her horror she saw the snowy ground itself begin to pulse, full of small squares. Her jaw was touching the ground as the ripples passed, and she bolted up with agony.

It became a desperate struggle to not stay where the snow was unsafe, to try to predict the pattern.

Mary knew she could not keep this up throughout the night. And failure was so inviting. If she was to die, the world would still be reborn.

But she wanted to bring justice to the tropes she carried within her. They deserved to exist again.

Darkness began to fall.

And she found it was like sinking into a trance – like reaching peak proficiency in combat, Mary could now also predict the oncoming waves of distortion in the snow. She planned her routes as to save energy maximally. She thought that only the constant glitch-blizzard kept her awake. The pain was her true companion.

Finally Mary saw the ground ahead her begin to slope down. Had she already reached the highest peak? It felt almost like an anticlimax.

But even so, she would be glad if it was over now. She was about to collapse any moment from now.

Now Mary was alerted by an odd motion. It was her backpack, or rather, Three-Act-Structure within it. It was wanting to come out.

Exhaustion was so complete, and her fingers so frozen, that only Mary barely managed to open it. But as she did, the head of the worm levitated out. It had never done that before.

Mary pondered, whether to be concerned or not?

Maybe that meant it was preparing for the world's reset cycle. Like it was powering up.

The blizzard and the glitching of the snow stopped completely, and just for a few moments it was extremely peaceful. Mary thought she could fall to the ground and rest, at last.

But the illusion was short-lived.

The silence was replaced by the huge rumble Mary had

heard many times before. The fall of Utopia, the path to the dragons changing itself.

Being so tired, the horror and panic never could take a proper hold on her, so Mary was just astonished to see the mountain start sinking down all around her, except the very top she was standing on.

The crashing noise must have been deafening, but it was almost just like a tiny buzz to Mary now. She could barely think. Did the reset require her and Three-Act-Structure be standing just on a very small spot of land?

Then something else happened. A wall of red text began to blink all around her, some fifty meters away perhaps, repeated four times. North, east, south, west.

Though the text was large, Mary had to strain her tired eyes, and only then she understood it:

EXCLUSION ZONE

What was that? What did it mean?

Finally horror began to make its way in. Mary could understand this in only one way. She was being excluded from Tropeverse's rebirth. She, and everything she was carrying with her.

A double betrayal! Even through these last moments, the worm had led her to believe something else than what its true intentions were.

There its head hovered, only a few meters away from Mary.

"I'm disappointed," she said to it wearily.

"In yourself? In a way, you should be. You were very easy to lead on. This was your ultimate purpose, which I of course could not reveal early on. Something that is perfect should not exist. And as the Tropeverse's next cycle starts, you will finally be purged for good, along with a few other

tropes no-one will miss. The zone can not be increased in size, so it had to be somewhere very remote. But again, I must congratulate you on playing your part so well.”

Mary could not describe the vast anger that was coursing through her.

But it was all useless, joined by the absolute certainty of her failure. How her naive determination had made it possible in the first place, falling prey to the worm's schemes without ever questioning, without ever playing it smart.

Even getting killed at any point before would have been better! Then she could at least have been part of the next cycle. But now she would truly meet her end.

Mary considered jumping, like in her vision, but the blinking walls were too far. She would never be able to make it outside the zone.

“I can understand why me, but why them?”

Mary was not even completely sure, which exactly of her dead companions she had within her.

Three-Act-Structure spoke with final disdain.

“No-one will miss a volcano fortress, a utopian small town, or a reckless ace. Or any of the others. They all are completely overused.”

“And one more thing. That thing about your body vanishing. Was it just faking it to get my sympathy?”

The worm head bounced in the air, as if nodding.

“Very good. I only need my head. As well as the link. But now I'm afraid it is finally time to say goodbye. The moment is at hand.”

The head accelerated away, past the barrier, and Mary saw everything around her begin to ripple and glitch and distort. Both the air and the ground. But this was different. It was all turning to pure black, to complete nonexistence.

Standing on the mountain peak as the blackness closed in, Mary had perhaps only seconds left of her existence. And still, something in her mind refused to give up. It raced into overdrive, trying to come up with some far-fetched solution.

What could she call upon?

Mary imagined time slowing down to almost infinity. But the wall of nonexistence approached, and in the next instant it would be her turn.

Suddenly she felt sick and heavy like never before.

Something was traveling up from her stomach. Or was it even from there? It felt like it was coming from her every cell instead.

Her spine arched back, and she felt like she was lifted off her feet.

And she began to vomit up into the air, which was something utterly impossible in the first place. It was ethereal, gray matter, which spun around her, keeping the wall of destruction at bay just for a few seconds more.

It was then Mary realized – she was vomiting out the ethereal forms of the tropes inside her.

The gray matter fought the disintegration, parts of it glitching into nonexistence. Mary knew it would lose in the end, but it had bought her some more time.

But what could she do with that time?

Watching the roiling ethereal mass was almost beautiful in its own horrible way, but obviously that would do nothing to help Mary get out of this situation.

What would, then?

Finally understanding began to dawn. Mary still saw time as slowed down, as the gray mass began to take form before her eyes.

There were wings, a body or tail divided to four sections in a zigzag form, and three fierce-looking heads. And tentacles all over it.

Mary's mouth hung open, almost in worship, as she realized what it was.

A huge, gray, ethereal dragon.

The three heads turned toward her, and Mary thought her heart would stop. Each of them was enlarged and distorted compared to its mortal counterpart.

There was clearly Roy, eyes fierce as if he was engaging in an unending dogfight.

Owen, mouth open in a permanent metal scream.

And finally Raven, controlled and calm, but violence just underneath the facade. Like he was ready to command an army of any size to an unending war.

And Mary knew what she had to do.

She would jump on its back and ride the dragon. The journey of the shaman. This was going to be her path out of the destruction, onward to Tropeverse's rebirth.

Mary wasted no more time, and jumped forward just as the dragon's wings flapped down. On them, Mary saw countless miniature buildings as indentations. And she understood they were the town of Utopia, as well as the

volcano fortress. Mary caught the edge of the right wing and climbed on it.

“Steer higher!” Mary shouted to the dragon, not sure if it would understand or obey.

Above, Mary saw the fifth red-blinking wall of the exclusion zone. If they got past it, they would be safe.

The ripples of black nonexistence closed in as the dragon banked wildly. The wingtips were torn into nothingness, and the dragon screamed in pain on all possible audible frequencies.

By now Mary was already climbing on the dragon’s back, lying down to help her maintain balance.

A final wall of the black ripples loomed ahead, but the dragon climbed up until they were clear, outside the exclusion zone.

Mary breathed in relief.

She and the dragon would persist to Tropeverse’s next cycle. But yet, Mary could not let her mind rest. Somewhere ahead of them, the worm head was flying away. Mary did not want to believe in violence and revenge excessively, but something had to be done.

Mary remembered one curious word it had said. “Link.” What was that about? A link to the Tropeverse itself? Considering the worm’s double treachery, that link was best severed, Mary thought.

The dragon flapped its wings, and they flew forward with tremendous speed through the dark skies. The onrushing wind was almost blinding Mary.

“Dragon! Can you spot the worm head flying somewhere ahead of us?” Mary shouted again.

The dragon began to turn to its left. Maybe it saw something that Mary could not. She thought to be just along for the ride, as the cold winter air rushed past.

Mary shrieked as the dragon plunged downwards. Suddenly she noticed the droplets of blood in the air. She sensed the pain the dragon was feeling as its wings had been damaged. She could also hear a quiet whimper.

“Dragon! Are you alright?”

The dragon began to descend to a clearing in the forest beneath them. They gained speed as they began spiraling down. Mary held on to him for her dear life.

“Dragon!” she cried desperately.

There was no answer. Maybe the ethereal form was becoming lifeless already, having expended all of its energy. But at least Mary could still hold on to its back.

The spiral continued.

Now Mary saw the worm head against the snowy plain. Just a tiny speck, but closing in fast. It was possibly celebrating its victory far too early, thinking that Mary had perished in the exclusion zone.

Mary saw it bob up and down, turning to face them, and then the worm head was going to take into flight again. It had noticed.

Mary also saw the glitches of Tropeverse’s rebirth closing in, both in the air and on the ground. She would no longer be annihilated, but if she got caught by it, the battle would still be over. Her revenge would be left incomplete.

Then the snowy ground was already upon them, and the dragon began to plow into it, sending snow flying all around.

Mary hit the ground, thrown off the dragon’s back. She grunted heavily, but mentally, she thanked the dragon for everything it had done for her.

Ahead of her, Three-Act-Structure was taking to flight.

And Mary knew she had only one shot. She took the bow in her hands for the last time, and the final arrow from her quiver.

It was just steel. No distortion-effect.

But it had to be enough.

The adrenaline of the escape flight kept Mary's complete exhaustion at bay just enough for her to draw back the string, to take aim –

The worm head was gaining altitude, so Mary adjusted the aim upward.

Then the moment was here. No more time to hesitate.

Mary almost imagined that she herself was willing time to slow down, as she finally let the arrow loose.

It flew through the air –

Mary saw the glitches and distortions getting ever closer. She could not wait to see if it was a hit or not. She broke into her final sprint, chasing the arrow.

And to her horror, she saw it to be a miss.

She had wasted her last and only chance.

But yet, she did not – was not capable of – to let desperation consume her. The worm head was hovering in place, having halted its motion to dodge her arrow.

And that was everything Mary needed. She leaped forward, reaching at the worm head with both of her hands.

She hit the ground.

The wall of distortions and glitches was just a few meters away.

For a moment Mary thought to have missed again, but as her fingers were so frozen, she had not felt the slightly slimy skin of the worm head at first.

But there it was. It was almost pathetic now, held under her weight.

"You lose," Mary said.

That was almost unnecessary. Mary wanted to be above taunting her enemies. But maybe it served the worm just right now.

She saw the dull gray steel band at the very bottom of the head. Was that the mythical link?

And how could she get it loose?

The glitch-wall was closing in. Mary's remaining time ticked toward the absolute, final zero point. No more second chances now. But she had one tool she could yet use.

Johan's lighter. It was time to let it burn.

The flame just had to light up on the first attempt. Mary dug into her pocket and got the lighter out. Time slowed down to infinity for the final time.

Mary pushed down the lighter button.

And like a gift from the heavens, the yellow flame rose up. Mary felt like she could fall on her knees and thank all the powers above, but instead she knew she still needed to guide the flame against the worm's skin.

It made contact.

Three-Act-Structure squirmed, and it was enough for the steel band to come loose. Mary almost wanted to say sorry to it, despite all the treachery it had shown to be capable of.

The link.

What would Mary do with it now?

There was one obvious solution - she wriggled it on her hand just as the wall of distortion reached her.

The boundless agony Mary felt at that moment made her consciousness just leave her body outright. Or that was at least what she thought to happen.

In a split second, everything faded to blinding white.

Mary floated in the whiteness. The pain had ended, just like the chase and the adrenaline were also just history.

She had reached the end of the story. She did not know exactly how it was going to end, but the struggle was over. She could rest now. She even could imagine the majestic melody she had heard in her dream, which now felt like a lifetime ago.

Mary saw her form was ethereal now. She still had the armor on, but like her skin, it was turning into the distorting squares.

But there was no pain accompanying that. Mary understood she was somewhere in between the physical and ethereal, or spiritual, whatever it was.

She saw vague shapes all around her. She thought they were the other tropes on their own journey, preparing to Tropeverse's regeneration.

She was not sure what she felt now. Possibly just very empty. All the energy had been expended. She recalled the warlord Raven, how she had been forced to kill her, and thought she could shed a tear now once more –

But did it matter now? Everything would begin anew.

What, if anything, mattered anymore? Mary thought everything was on rails from this point onward.

But something made Mary focus.

She realized she still had the metal band on her hand. It appeared much less ethereal than her own skin. Like it was perfectly solid even in this intermediate-realm.

Mary realized it had writing on it. Somehow her vision was now much clearer, and the words were easy to read.

TROPEVERSE ADMINISTRATIVE SENTINEL

TAS. Compared to Three-Act-Structure, the initials were just the same. But what this did now mean? Was she now going to be –

Some kind of administrator? That held power over the whole Tropeverse? Mary was not sure if she was up to the task. But of one thing she was certain. Whatever it would entail, she would do a much better job than the lying worm had done.

Mary thought to be falling down. Some of the shapes were falling faster than her, some slower. Possibly, when they reached the very bottom, they would move on to Tropeverse's next cycle.

Ahead of her, Mary saw another definitely human-like shape. Possibly even someone familiar. Mary put her arms ahead of her, forming a wedge to accelerate.

As she got closer, she saw the shape had a suit of armor on. A helmet, resembling a dragon head.

Could that be Raven?

This was something more than Mary could ever have hoped for. She felt like crying in joy. She had killed him, the other half of their battle couple – and who she could even have thought of as her love –

And now she was possibly going to see him again?

Before the next cycle of Tropeverse would begin.

But then, Mary's thoughts turned darker. Would anything be the same between them? It had been a bloody duel to the end. Would it be just cold indifference, or something even worse?

Mary thought to brake her descent, to spread-eagle herself to avoid meeting the armored shape at all.

But no. She could face him. To get some degree of closure. Then she could reincarnate in peace.

Mary swept through the white emptiness, until she was almost at the armor-clad figure. If she had a heart at this point, it might have raced into overdrive. But she seriously thought the ethereal form did not even have one.

The shape was now close enough so that Mary was sure it was Raven. He tumbled around in the nothingness one more time, then their eyes met.

For some time they just stared at each other while they both fell.

"Raven," Mary got out the first word.

"Mary –" Raven replied. "Can you forgive me? Can – you believe it was not really me?"

Once more, this was much more than Mary could have hoped for. Mary drifted closer and closed him in an embrace, as much as her ethereal form and the armors of them both allowed for.

Mary's voice wavered heavily. She could barely get the words out.

"I killed you. It's me who should be asking for forgiveness."

They tumbled further down, separating finally.

"What is happening now?" Raven asked.

"The Tropeverse is being reborn."

"Did you reach the end?"

Mary felt her mind confused. A hundred words wanted

to get out, and she tried her best to judge what were the most important before they would run out of time.

“Yes. I did. Listen, you were right. I shouldn’t have trusted the worm. It tried to betray me twice. It wanted to make sure I would be destroyed for good.”

“But you –”

“I outwitted it.”

Raven gave her a thumbs-up.

“I have this wristband on me now. I took it from the worm. It might be the band of the administrator. Of – the whole Tropeverse.”

“Like a – ruler?”

“Sort of. And –”

Mary was not sure of where she was going. It was just a wild hunch.

“I believe, that because I’m wearing it, something different is going to happen to me. It’s likely that everything and everyone else – is going to be assigned their roles again. Like in the previous cycle.”

On the whole, it was a huge unknown. Mary could not know if she would be reincarnated as a three-segment worm too, instead of her normal form. That, honestly, she would hate from the bottom of her heart.

Raven nodded inside the helmet.

“You will become the ruler? I wish good luck to you. May you do well in that position.”

Mary felt the conversation was yet incomplete. And Raven was wishing her well. Was that a bad sign?

“I’m not at all sure how it goes, but still, I have to ask. Would you like to join me?”

Raven’s expression darkened, even when seen just through the helmet slit.

“I am not worth that role. I was supposed to stand by your side, but – I gave in and attacked.”

Mary felt herself deflate. It had been just a stretch, but Raven was not willing to join her in any case. She felt like breaking down. She could not help it – right there and then she broke to tears. She had come this far, and had met the warlord again, but now he wanted nothing more to do with her.

They tumbled down further.

“Mary? Why do you cry?” Raven asked as the motion accelerated yet more.

At first Mary could get the words out barely, then her voice rose almost into a shout.

“How can you not understand? It hurts that you’re willing to give up so easily. That you can’t give yourself – or us – a second chance.”

Raven looked at her. The agony in his eyes was plain to see, and Mary could not see how this was possibly going to be resolved. Except by the new cycle beginning, and Mary hopefully forgetting him for good. And him forgetting her in turn.

“I would want to. But how –”

“Just grab my hand before we hit the bottom!”

They collided again in midair, just as the fall was about to end, fumbling to make their hands meet. But they could not get a solid grasp. As Mary had the wristband, she thought she would enter the next level. But everything else was unsure.

A clap of thunder sounded, and there was an all-encompassing, insanely bright light. She was not sure where she was, or when it was, or what it was.

There was no frame of reference. Was what she thought as up, up for real, or was it down? Or left? Or right?

Kayla tried to remember where she had been last. Before this disorientation hit. They had possibly been driving the Cadillac yet again, but now –

She found before herself a space fighter cockpit, that was strangely familiar to her. All the levers and switches.

And understanding came to her at last. It was a weird kind of understanding, to be ripped away from her last known frame of reference, yet to know precisely her new situation.

She was a space hero, who had traversed the galaxies for years. Trying to free them from the oppression of the tentacle-lord, and its vast armies.

But yet she knew deep in her heart that she did not give a shit of the whole galactic war that was going on, on multiple fronts. Instead she had another goal in her mind.

She knew that the tentacle-lord had managed to recruit the ace – Roy – on its side. That was bad. Kayla wanted herself and him to be on the same side instead.

To reach that goal, there were yet many options she could pursue. She could unite the space pirates on her side. This would require disappearing deep into the galactic underworld, hacking into systems that were far above her clearance level, but they were also something Kayla knew like her own back pockets. She almost felt excited. Just the thrill of the docking sequence, when entering a pirate spaceport, was already something not of this world.

Kayla plotted the course for the next pirate station. Her true quest would begin from here.

Outside of the large windows, Tropeverse was rebuilding itself. Mary could see it momentarily as a soup of triangles, like a wavefront that was spreading into the horizon, but then it was gone.

The new cycle had begun. Mary gazed at the large flat-screen monitors directly in front of her. They presented her with a view of the whole world. With a flick of her fingers, she could zoom in on whatever location needed her attention.

Mary was still not sure what she felt now. She was thinking of the title she would give herself. Certainly, she could have settled on something like “goddess,” or “queen.”

That was perhaps a little too pompous.

She could just refer to herself as the Administrative Sentinel. It was just a bit cold, perhaps, but manageable.

All around her, the office floor and ceiling glowed pure white. Mary knew she could reach into the interface to rebuild her surroundings as she saw fit, but so far she had let them stay in the default appearance.

It had not happened exactly like she had imagined.

She had been wearing the steel wristband, and that meant she alone had been granted access to the administrative level.

It meant Raven was out there somewhere. Not with her, like she would have hoped for.

Thinking of this, Mary closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She knew she would expend the most compassion she would manage, to be the best Administrative Sentinel the Tropeverse had yet seen. But she would be alone in her perfection.

Maybe that served her right. She would not take a role in the stories that would unfold in the world below her, but instead she would stay watching, ready to intervene whenever any trope needed her assistance.

That, perhaps, was the right way to put her perfection into use.

She also knew she could exit the administrative level at will. The rules were not exact, but the principle of the least interference would hold. Like a lifetime ago, when she had substituted for the starship crew, and met the warring alien races.

In theory, she could meet everyone she knew from the last cycle again. That at least brought her comfort.

Mary submerged herself into the interface. She could modify the world as she saw fit. For extreme situations, she also had “play” and “pause” buttons, to restart and suspend the whole of the Tropeverse.

These were naturally not to be used frivolously.

In the pause mode, she could edit the properties of the tropes as she saw fit. That was a lot of power for any single person to wield. She also had the power to search for any object, any trope in the world.

Right now, she searched for herself, just to get familiar with the interface.

The position of everything would be determined by the “transform” component. Position, rotation and scale.

By typing “Mary Sue” into the search field, she could only see one result. There she was, high in the glowing white administrative tower, separated from the rest of the Tropeverse.

Mary noted the position. It was close to the whole world’s origin, but just a bit above. X 0, Y 218, Z 0.

She was not sure how far she would be allowed to go in bending the rules. After all, it seemed like she had no strict superior, or a chain of command. Maybe she did in fact have the sole responsibility for all of the Tropeverse, with no-one higher up to answer to.

Then she collected the courage to perform another search. The one her heart longed for. Could it be right, to sacrifice potentially the whole world’s balance just so that she could feel content?

But -

He was someone the previous administrator had wanted destroyed in any case. Would he make that much of a difference?

Mary did not need to make the decision right there and then. Maybe she would not find him at all. Or decide he was doing all right, and leave him to be.

Mary typed into the search field.

RAVEN

There were too many search results. Mary felt discouraged already. But she entered additional search terms.

RAVEN WARLORD VOLCANO

This thankfully narrowed the search results to just one.

Mary double-clicked on the scene hierarchy view, and the position shifted. She saw a man in dragon armor, commanding a troop of at least thirty soldiers. They were about to conduct a raid on a village down below, as the villagers had “forgotten” their protection payments to the Akuma clan.

In other words, Raven was doing just fine. Living out the role he was meant to live.

Mary sighed. Maybe it was not meant to be. He likely did not remember her at all. At least she could keep watch on him, and protect him if need be.

But maybe, just maybe –

Sometimes rules could be broken.

Mary knew this would possibly come to bite her in the ass a hundred times over. Maybe she would be expelled from the administrator position, and some treacherous worm, like Three-Act-Structure the Second, would take over.

But what the hell. She hit the “pause” button. Then she selected Raven, and his “transform” component.

Mary was not completely sure of what she should type, but if Y was up, she thought to just type X 0, Y 220, Z 0. If this would not work out, she could always transport him back to his army.

Then she hit “play.”

The Tropeverse simulation continued, and something landed on her with force. Mary fell down from the administrator’s chair and hit the floor.

To be ripped from his surroundings was not a pleasant sensation. Lord Raven Darkness was ready to scream out his anger. Particularly as this meant the troops he should have been commanding, would be left on their own.

But now he had a wholly odd landscape in front of him. The ceiling and the floor were just pure white, and above him was a table with translucent windows he could not honestly understand, showing a view into whole another direction, but apparently still real.

Maybe there was a reason for this.

As he oriented himself better, he found to have fallen on someone, who was lying on the floor now. He reached into the depths of his mind and thought he knew her. He had fought with her through unimaginable dangers, when the whole world had been at stake.

He remembered her name too. Mary Sue. There had been a conflict between them, fatal even, but it was resolved now. She was dressed in a bright white gown, her long hair cascading to the floor. The last Raven remembered, she had been wearing battle armor instead, wielding a bow with lethal accuracy.

Mary moved a little, and Raven felt a kind of familiar relief. Perhaps she was not even hurt. It was rather irrational at this exact moment, but Raven thought he could stay very long just staring at her face, with that very serene expression on it.

Mary almost did not want to open her eyes. Changing the “transform” had worked – but what now?

She was not afraid of injury. It had hurt to fall on the floor, with an armored warlord on top, but the pain was already fading. Mary guessed being the Administrative Sentinel granted some protection. Instead, she could easily imagine how disoriented and angry Raven would be, transported into a completely foreign environment.

But then she felt a hand brush her cheek.

“Mary –” Raven’s quiet voice called out.

Sometimes it was possible to know from just something very simple that things were going to work out, after all.

Mary thought this was a moment like that.

She opened her eyes slightly. There, shimmering a bit due to her eyelids was Raven, without the dragon helmet now, but the black mane falling on his shoulders instead.

Mary could not help her mouth curving into a smile.

“Are you hurt?” Raven asked.

“You know my name. And you don’t appear angry at me. That means – I’m just fine.”

She almost thought she could get silly now. Or actually there was one more serious thing she wanted to know.

“But just how do you remember, Raven? And that’s still your name, right?” she asked.

Raven’s face turned thoughtful. He made a fist with his left hand, the index finger extended, then wrapped his right hand fingers around the left index finger, the tips of the right thumb and index finger making contact with it.

“This is RETSU. Mastery of time and space. Through my youth, I practiced these gestures and mantras ceaselessly, sure I would unlock something if I kept going at it. As there always was something just at the edge of my memory. Until finally I began to remember something most people do not. My previous life. It is from there I remember you. I even remember the white void between lives. You told me there that you would be a ruler. But then we were pulled apart—”

Raven’s voice turned pained toward the end. Mary had to close her eyes as she remembered the same. How she had thought that would remain the final state of things.

But now it would not be like that at all, and suddenly Mary just could not stop the tears of joy. She wanted to say something, even something very simple, but it was impossible right now.

Therefore she just reached out to Raven and pulled him close to kiss him. She could sense his surprise, even a bit of wariness, as she explored his lips, just very gently, as her way of expressing that now there would be no more longing, no more waiting across lives to meet again.

Finally Mary withdrew a little, and saw Raven’s brown eyes from very close, hoping she had managed to convey the message.

There was an intensity to them, like he wanted to speak with them to her in turn.

And then, almost if the movement was again faster than Mary could comprehend, Raven’s lips were upon hers. She felt his other hand reach out to support the back of her head, until he held her very firmly, very close, and kissed her with strength that seemed to match the burning of his eyes. Mary felt almost breathless, a little bit flattened against his armor, desperate to kiss him back.

And this too, was more than what she could have

hoped for. Now there was no doubt of Raven's feelings at all.

As it was finally over, and they were just smiling at each other, Mary wondered whether that qualified. Whether it had been proven that the big damn kiss worked again. She remembered Kayla – she had talked of how the camera should orbit them. That was harder to imagine, at least as long as they were on the floor.

But now Mary thought she would manage to get words out again. Still she had to snort to clear her voice, and breathed deep to gather strength.

"I thought I'd rule this fortress alone. Just like you. But rather than a ruler, I really think of myself as maintenance. Or technical support. To see that the world works right."

"You are speaking of what a god – or a goddess does."

Mary shook Raven's shoulder pad. "Very funny. I have to verify that things work. That was one."

It was possibly the time to get silly at last. She rolled just a little distance away as Raven looked on puzzled, still half-sitting and half-lying on the floor. Then Mary reached under him and lifted him in her arms. With the dragon armor on, he was heavy for sure, but it was possible being the administrator also granted powers that she did not have in her previous existence.

"And this is another. Yes, seems to work."

Raven was shaking his head with amusement. "You are a funny goddess, Mary. I think the world is in good hands."

Still holding him, Mary sat in front of the terminals.

The soldiers had dispersed, and the view was just showing an empty courtyard. To be honest, she did not want to know how the raid would be progressing. Some of what happened in Tropeverse was just unquestionably brutal. And in theory now she needed to be prepared for all of it.

“Will you ever exit this place?” Raven asked. “And if you do, can I go with you?”

“I believe I’m allowed to do that. And of course you can accompany me. I believe I need an advisor, if you’d like to think of yourself as one. But – I’d also understand if you wished to go back to your life.”

Mary thought it was only fair for him to know he had that option. Even if he was never going to use it. Just thinking of it made her a bit wistful.

Raven turned to look her in the eyes.

“Lord Raven Darkness, advisor to the Goddess. That is what I wish to be.”

The full name was always a bit funny. Mary almost grinned with delight. “Just remember, if you have anything on your mind, don’t hesitate. And no formalities, please.”

“One thing,” Raven said. “Can we switch places?”

Mary guessed that would have come up at some point.

“Of course. But wait. You don’t have to move.”

Mary turned so that she could reach the screen with one finger of her left hand. She found and selected herself from the scene hierarchy, then the transform’s Y-coordinate.

She typed 219 into the box.

As she pressed enter, she thought of whether she was making a fatal mistake. If their bodies would intersect in a horrible manner, or even explode into infinity.

Her heart jumped from relief as it worked in a more civilized manner instead. Raven landed into the chair, and she in turn fell in his lap. Possibly it was best to not make this a habit though. Next time it might go wrong.

“That is good,” Raven said, kissing her on the forehead.

And Mary rested her head against the shoulder pad and sighed. No armor would have been better, but this was good enough for now.

They had no hurry.

Far below them, countless tropes interacted in complex ways, and maybe even completely new tropes were being born. Mary thought of a song, of lyrics, that would fit this moment. So that she would get to use her apparently perfect voice again. It could not be about torn apart hearts and lost victories any more. But she honestly could not think of one. The last time had been some kind of fluke.

Like she had been channeling some outside force.

Mary Sue knew Tropeverse still held many mysteries to unfold.

Epilogue

Mary Sue woke up from the dream, back in her home cottage. She had heard epic, majestic music that signaled she had reached her ultimate goal. Too bad she knew it had only been a dream.

But –

Something was not the same as last time. There was a table, with wide flat-screen monitors on it, that had not been there before. And someone Mary well knew sitting behind them, looking perplexed.

“Mary! You woke up just in time. I try to rebuild the volcano fortress from these pieces – but they are all stuck at the zero zero zero point!”

Mary looked down at her wrist, at the steel band that read:

TROPEVERSE ADMINISTRATIVE SENTINEL

Not a dream, she thought. She bolted up from her bed. “Hold on. Don’t touch anything. I’ll fix it.”

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