

Derelict Hearts

by Achanes Outis

– Chapter V –
Grave Robbers



This Saturday morning, the sky is blue. Little clouds. Gentle wind: Spring.

A distant contentment fills me, as Paragoria drives his car through the countryside forests, and their old narrow asphalt roads. I am next to him, sitting on the passenger seat. The Manifestations are off to do their own thing, pursuing their goal without our assistance, this time around.

Pariah wanted to show me a place he and Nekrichta said I “would probably like to see”. They’re always cryptic like this when they’re together and speaking as one, but it’s certainly not as full of euphemisms as when I first met Nekri. If Oudis didn’t trust them either, I would have had a hard time accepting this offer. So unless they want to get rid of me – and I don’t know why they would – this sounded tempting. Something a little strange, unfamiliar, somewhere nowhere. So, of course I would be curious; and now here we are.

A worn-down metal gate; a single rusted large bar blocking the path: a broken lock holding nothing together except some memory of how things might have been, long ago.

Pariah leaves the car to run, as he exits the driver’s seat to push the gate aside. He comes back without uttering a word. Neither do I, as I silently simply observe the surrounding nature and human leftovers scattered about: glass and plastic bottles, an old TV set for some reason, a pan, signs of a somewhat recent campfire... toilet paper bits hanging in low branches of bushes and growing young trees.

A hundred meters later, we can make out some sort of structure between the leaves and branches arching around the path itself. It gets a little too narrow for the car to be able to keep going through it, so we stop before it also gets too difficult to turn the car around. I’m guessing the driver doesn’t want to drive in reverse for too long a distance.

Lixi – “That’s the place?”

Paragoria – “That’s the place.”

I look around as we move forward through the trees. Nothing catches my attention.

Now we see the house, or rather what looks like a house, and probably was a house, without vegetation to block off the view. Surprisingly, nothing big grew that would impede or partly destroy the structure, but I suppose it will happen eventually. Which begs the question...

Lixi – “How long has this place been derelict for?”

Paragoria – “Hm... We last visited with Nekri about two or three years ago. First time we went there was around fifteen years past that. And as I recall... the real estate

agent told us, and note that it hasn't changed much since then, that the place was abandoned for around thirty years."

Lixi – "Real estate?"

Paragoria – "Yeah, we were looking for cheap land to buy with Nekri and Oudis."

Lixi – "Wait... how long was Oudis with you for and why didn't he move out sooner?"

Paragoria – "He's very attached to Nekrichta, and vice-versa, like siblings on friendly terms. He couldn't really bring himself to leave her, and considering the fact that they're probably immortal or something close to it, it didn't bother her or him."

Lixi – "Did it bother you?"

Paragoria – "Not really, we got used to each other pretty quickly. Just some nights with Nekri, we would have preferred for Oudis not to be here, but you know how these things are."

I'm probably supposed to agree or something. I don't really understand that sort of thing, but I can guess having a tall skeleton roam around the house when having an intimate moment is always going to be at least somewhat bothersome, to say the least.

Lixi – "Hmhm." Affirmative mumbling. I'm pretty decent at not saying anything, I think.

Paragoria – "Anyway, we ended up buying our current house with the plot of land it was occupying. Light repairs were needed but nothing too expensive. Compare it to this place, and no one wanted to buy the land because there's just way too many things to do, starting with taking care of this house."

We enter through the inexistent front door. There, everywhere, lies things and furniture. Lots of things, actually. Mold and rot on top of most of them. The would-be windows look like the entrance. If you breath deeply, you can smell the mixture of a light musk smell, decaying flowers and the scent of a dusty, improperly maintained archive room; all cycling through fresh air with the wind going in and out the rectangle-shaped holes in the walls. This place certainly has a flair for screaming adjectives of dejectedness.

Paragoria – "I got to wonder if this place even is for sale anymore."

There indeed was a sign near the gate that read “for sale” with the agency name on it. However, the sign itself is heavily tilted and completely asymmetrical with the horizontal bar-gate, paralleling to the ground right beneath it; with signs of decomposition and discoloration so clear that the green of the grass touching it, has started to merge with its whites.

As for the agency name itself... a quick glance at it reminded me of the afternoons I spent looking around for a place of my own. I know a lot of agency names because of it, however this one, I do not recall.

Lixi – “The agency that sold it... do they still exist?”

Paragoria – “I believe they renamed the company after selling it. It was a local entity, but they also had some shady dealings with some government officials way back when. Probably why the new owner changed the name: the locals must have known more than what was kept in records.”

Lixi – “You think anything will ever be done with this place?”

Paragoria – “Not as long as no one wants to do anything with it. For now it’s just an attraction for trespassers... like you and I, I guess in this case. No idea for how long it will be kept this way. Maybe the agency forgot about it, and it’s at the bottom of listings you can only access if you go to them in real life instead of through websites.”

Lixi – “I see.”

There isn’t much to say. Just guesswork, and even then it’s probably not very interesting.

“It’s definitely a curious place, at least. Do you know the story of it?”

In the clutter of things left in piles and in hurries, you can make out general shapes of things that would have belonged to a teaching facility of some kind.

Paragoria – “If I can recall... it was a teaching facility of some kind.” That’s funny.

“Some association dispensing art classes back whenever this wasn’t what it is now, as well as a lodging. All for who? I don’t know, but you know how it’s been in the countryside over the decades. People leave for towns and cities, as the rest grow an older population and loses all it had over the years, bit by bit...”

Lixi – “You sound a little bitter when you say that.”

Paragoria – “Do I? Sorry. Hm... maybe I am a bit bitter. Grew up in a village, we had festivals and community events. It was a real place to live in. By real I mean... I

don't know what I mean by real. Nothing seems real anymore to me. Haha – probably just silly memories.”

Pariah stares at a wall, standing proudly, head tilted a little upwards, with his eyebrows arched; a nostalgic, wistful look. I look at him, or rather at his singular eye.

Lixi – “I don't know if it's not something I should ask, but your eye... what happened to it?”

Paragoria – “Oh... I guess I never told you. Nekri hasn't either?”

Lixi – “No, she speaks of you but rarely for you, and never when it comes to these things.”

Paragoria – “She's quite a wonderful person. I try to do the same as she does for me, but sometimes I feel a little... maybe too protective towards her. Even though she could beat anyone up with ease. Drunken grace she has when it comes to fighting. You know how I was in the military?”

Lixi – “Heard mentions of it but, the past is the past, and I guess I'm only curious about it now. If you want to talk about it, of course.”

Paragoria – “Certainly. You've been trustworthy and kind to us since we met you. I guess it's no surprise Oudis trusts you, and that's also why I wanted to show you this place. Before I tell you my missing eye's story, what do you think of this ruin?”

Lixi – “It has a charm to it. It's very peaceful; haven't noticed even a birdnest, or even traces of deers and boars coming through here. Maybe there are, but I didn't catch them. I can understand why people stop by to spend some time here near these... what should they be called... crumbling memories? Or are they really memories, given that they encompass learning times and dreams that were had at nights? Dreams themselves are all forgotten and never remembered anyway, and if they, it's all corroded so much more heavily by the passage of time. By now, here this place has nothing left, except the scent of the last person looking at it before leaving it to ruin: apathy.”

Paragoria stands there, looking at me widely open pupils.

Paragoria – “Hm. Honestly, didn't expect you to go that deep with your analysis.”

Lixi – “Is it surprising?”

Paragoria – “Yes. Pleasantly. Now I understand why Nekri and Oudis like you as much as they do.”

It’s true we never ‘properly’ talked with Pariah ever since we met. Always we were accompanied with Oudis or Nekri, and if we were separated, it was only with one of the two, or alone as we lead our lives. Or at least I decided to live alone here and there for some days. This is then the first time where there’s just the two of us, even though it’s been many a week since that... is it corny to say, ‘fateful night’? Nothing much really happened since then, let’s be honest. We’re on a quest to accompany some living or not living things (*which is still confusing to me*) on their quest to find a way to bring an end to life. Sure is not something you want to tell anyone about though, which is easy considering how small my circle of friends is.

Lixi – “That’s nice to hear, I think.” I unconsciously take out of one of my pocket a lighter and a small cigarette holder. What time is it? Does my body want a nicotine hit already? Hm. Guess I should ask if Pariah wants any.

“Want a smoke?”

I don’t even know if he smokes...

Paragoria – “No, thank you. Stopped smoking.”

Lixi – “Oh. Does it bother you if I smoke? I’ll just hold off, if so.”

Paragoria – “No, I don’t mind it. That reminds me that Oudis used to smoke.”

Lixi – “He still does, you know?” I take out a cigarette and put away the holder.

Paragoria – “Really? He told me he quit soon before leaving our shared home.”

Lixi – “He probably quit quitting after meeting me then.”

Paragoria – “Aren’t you an influence on him...”

Lixi – “Am I?” I point at my filterless cancer stick, and light it up.

Paragoria softly laughs. He goes to take a chair that was resting diagonally on a wall, places it in the middle of a clutterless patch on the floor, and sits on it.

Paragoria – “So... the story. I guess... hm... my missing eye first. I’ll be honest, it’s nothing fancy, just a stupid accident. Although I was in special forces for the military of our country, it’s a stupid misfiring incident that made it happen.”

As Pariah talks and as I listen, I go to slowly grab another chair, dusting it off with the back of my hand, and sitting on it, facing him. What a scene. Two people talking face to face, sitting on old wooden chairs, in the middle of a destroyed and rotting industrial-looking forest lodge. What a weird thing for this building to even be here in the first place... It sure fits better when it's like this, at least.

Paragoria – “Simply, I was at the firing range, testing different weapons, and out of complacency, I didn't check the weapon system properly. Took aim, fired... misfired completely, actually. Long story short, the rifle blew up in my face. I don't know if I got blinded instantly, as I couldn't even open my eye properly for a long while. Well, not that it mattered to the administration. 'Chief-Sergeant Erimos had a misfiring incident, blinding him partially. Unable to properly conduct ground operations.' or something along those lines.”

Lixi – “Wait... your family name is Erimos?”

Paragoria – “It is.”

Lixi – “That's a nice name. Anyway, sorry for interrupting.”

Paragoria – “No problem. But yeah, couldn't keep on going in the war, and my contract was close to expiring anyway.”

Lixi – “The war? Which one were you a part of?”

Paragoria – “Just one operation in Afghanistan.”

Lixi – “ 'Just'... you don't have to be humble about it.”

Paragoria – “Probably. Anyway, yeah. All things considered I haven't done much during that time, considering my short stay. I do remember one time when I was asked to lead a squad, protecting a reporter with us as we conducted a hostage escorting operation.”

Lixi – “Escorting and escorting?”

Paragoria – “Yeah, pretty much. With another squad we rounded up a village because of known insurgents hiding amongst the population there. Our squad was tasked with escorting them to closest base we had to sort all of this out, so that we could let the actual civilians go as soon as possible. We had this set up this way because... our more 'traditional' method of dealing with such situations wasn't really possible with the added political weight of having a stupid reporter with us.”

Lixi – “Was it that bothersome?”

Paragoria – “Yes. Absolutely. We could have been much more efficient instead of threading along and waiting for transport for hours on end. We could have avoided what happened during the wait, and even if it was to happen, we could have dealt with it properly on the spot, and not let the situation fester.”

Lixi – “What happened there?”

Paragoria – “Do you really want to know?”

Lixi – “You made me curious, so yes.”

Paragoria – “Alright. The insurgents really were in the many dozens of villagers we had in what amounts to... temporary prisoners, I suppose. But with so many, of course we didn't have ways of restraining them. In the middle of it, and we saw it too late; which is probably what you get when so few people have to look after so many others – rape was occurring.”

Silence for a brief moment. My arms tense up and my spine jolts with a slow moving anger. I take a heavy drag off my cigarette in an attempt to relax my tensing body.

Lixi – “What did you do?”

Paragoria – “On the spot? Separated them. Our translator tried to comfort the victim. We told him to translate that we would deal with the situation when we get them all to base, and that because of the reporter there, we couldn't do it now.

Trust me, we really wanted to execute that fucker right then and there. Whether or not he was a terrorist at that point didn't matter. We saw it, everybody saw it, none could do anything but watch because they feared the perpetrator and us as well. Least we could do is help settle the blood debt, that right there was created.”

Lixi – “A political move to wait, then, I assume.”

Paragoria – “Very much so. Putting on appearances, and now we were stuck between a rock and a hard place. To do what was right and to be stepped on by the pressure of public perception. I'd have shot the reporter too, honestly, that piece of shit was just a snake in wait, with big oogley eyes and questions only to throw dirt at my brothers-in-arms.

Anyway. Once this mission was over, and the reporter was out of sight; and before delivering the hostages back to their villages after sorting out the insurgents, we dealt with the rapist in front of those villagers.”

Lixi – “Execution then?”

Paragoria – “Of course.”

Lixi – “Did you pull the trigger?”

Paragoria – “We asked the victim, then her family; and they refused. It was a corporal who shot the perpetrator... which I apologize to the soldier in the wind now, for I forgot his name; but yes. Was it the right thing to do? I don’t know. Was it right for us to be there in the first place? I don’t know either. It’s easy for anyone to argue that it wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t conduct this mission in the first place. Or to be conducting the operation. Or to have joined the war. Or to have a war at all. But... pawns and politics. Numbers. Something.”

Lixi – “Yeah. I think I can understand that sort of thing. Maybe that’s why we call it a war theater?”

Paragoria – “Could be, actually. It’s certainly entertaining enough to the outside onlooker. Bunch of fuckwits, if you ask me, but that’s probably because all this has real consequences. Though they’re not consequences for the civilians outside of these war-torn places.”

Lixi – “Suppose so. What happened to that corporal anyway?”

Paragoria – “He got blown up by an IED during a mission right before I ended my service. At least, he died instantly.”

Lixi – “I see.”

Paragoria – “Hm.”

We look down at each other’s feet for a little while. Maybe Pariah isn’t at peace with these memories. Yet, the atmosphere is not one of regret, or frustration, or anything really.

The wind gently blows here and there, making any tension quickly dissipate, as the sound of songbirds chirping remind us that we are not living stories, but simply living beings, somewhere nowhere.

Paragoria – “What about your eye, though? I know you have a glass eye, but you never really mentioned anything about it.”

Lixi – “I suppose I should tell you about it as well then.”

Paragoria – “If you want to.”

Lixi – “Well, it’s an accident as well. Stupid one.”

Paragoria – “There’s no intelligent accidents.”

Lixi – “True, very true. Just a co-worker in a previous job I had handed me a cutter when I was crouched down trying to open a cardboard box. You can guess what happened.”

Paragoria – “How does this even happen?”

Lixi – “Messy movement, lack of attention, compounding fatigue at the end of a harsh week... just a lot of mistakes piling up and ending up toppling down the security of the mundane.”

Paragoria – “It was at a workplace... did you sue them?”

Lixi – “Did you try to get anything out of your own accident?”

Paragoria – “No. Was my fault for not taking the job seriously during that time. I’m sure the higher ups were happy for me not to say anything, actually.”

Lixi – “Same here. Well, that co-worker doesn’t talk to me anymore, maybe he feels guilty. But I don’t talk to any of my old co-workers anyway, as I just used to jump from workplace to workplace. So, who’s to say?”

Paragoria – “Indeed... hm... how much money is daddy government giving you per month?”

Lixi – “A bunch, not as much as others, considering I work on the side. You?”

Paragoria – “Same.”

Lixi – “That enough for your bills?”

Paragoria – “Oh absolutely. Not for you?”

Lixi – “It is too. It’s just sometimes you hear handicapped people not have enough to keep on going.”

Paragoria – “Well, I don’t know about them. Maybe I’ll be extreme but, when you see people not able to do anything except just stay at home and get paid for existing in a lesser state – and let us be honest this is what a handicap is in my eye – they often get trapped within their own mind or other people’s parasitic desires, and just... hm... let’s just say I don’t trust any of them.”

Lixi – “You know many would chastise you for saying something like this.”

Paragoria – “Would they? You know these people don’t think, and just use rhetoric without even knowing they’re using it. They get spoon-fed inhumanities while pretending to be compassionate, then they wonder why they got fat and aren’t willing to lose the added weight. Or if they start doing, they stop quickly because it’s too hard to put in the effort to do right by the world.”

I laugh a little. Tapping on my cigarette away from my face, the clumped ash falls down on the ground, bouncing a little and then sitting still to be picked up by the next gust of light wind.

Lixi – “You sound like an old grumpy man.”

Paragoria – “Am I not?”

As he finishes his sentence, I cross my arms and legs, analyzing him for a few seconds. Then I answer:

Lixi – “I guess you may be... well, the white hair strands... the eye... the wrinkles... the persistent look of melancholy... not very helpful to convey your youthfulness, I guess.”

He laughs a little. Getting up from the chair he was sitting on, he puts it back exactly to where it was. I follow suit, but I just leave my chair there. I dust myself off, although there’s nothing on my clothing.

Lixi – “So. What was the purpose of bringing me here, really?”

Paragoria – “Do you think there’s any?”

Lixi – “Well... one could say it’s about what we’re doing to help Nekri and Oudis. But...”

Paragoria – “Yeah. It’s not that. I just like the feel of the place. Wanted to see it again, thought about asking you to tag along, since I also wanted to speak with you.”

Lixi – “The vibe of the place...”

Paragoria – “Stop making me feel old please?”

I smirk:

Lixi – “No.”

He shakes his head and laughs discreetly.

I spot near a corner what looks like an old canvas, on top of a wooden furniture. Or rather in the middle of a pile of broken-down wooden furnitures. Approaching it, without touching it, I spot spots of colors. Green, blue... blue, green. A little orange... or light brown? Looks shiny enough, probably was varnished. But it’s weird, I can’t tell anything from what this was supposed to be.

I point at the painting, and turn to Paragoria:

Lixi – “Say, do you think someone could have applied varnish after finding this?”

Paragoria – “I don’t know why they would, but people have done weirder things. It’s kind of nice, actually, if that’s the case. Like preserving a dissipating memory in amber.”

Lixi – “Hm. The dissolution of the flesh through the passage of overgrown time.”

Paragoria – “You spend a lot of time with Nekri do you not?”

Lixi – “Says the man that sleeps in her bed and goes to poetry nights for her sake.”

Paragoria – “Fair enough.” A little smiles draws itself on the corner of his mouth.

Curious me curious me can’t help but ask a question to be...

Lixi – “How is she?”

Paragoria – “Hm?”

Lixi – “Nekri, I mean. As a partner.”

Paragoria – “Why do you ask? Do you want to date Oudis or something?”

Lixi – “He wouldn’t be a great partner, but he’s a great friend. Plus, I’m not into that sort of thing.”

Paragoria – “Really? Not into romance? Would rather be alone?”

Lixi – “Yes. The idea is nice, and I had my time with it, but that’s just it: a nice idea. Though when I see you guys, I wonder about it, if it really is just an idea.”

Paragoria – “It’s a lot of things to deal with. You know already, Nekri is a handful. But her heart is pure and so full of hope that it drives me to make her the happiest she could ever be. Problem is... how can you make her happy? The Manifestation of Hope, or that’s her surname anyway – You can only make her happy if the future is bright, I would assume.”

Lixi – “Isn’t this at odds with what helping them to do?”

Paragoria – “I’m not so sure. I haven’t seen her as content as she is now in a long long time. Last time she was smiling that often was when she wasn’t too disenchanting with the age we currently live in. Certainly she always has her melancholic tendencies, but there’s nothing that her hopeful nature can’t push through.”

Lixi – “You think it means anything?”

We stand in the middle of this crumbled dwelling, few meters away from each other, surrounded by blue walls, with a blue sky peeking through the holes in the so-called ‘roof’, and green leaves flowing with the wind looking at us through the empty widow frames.

Paragoria – “I know Oudis and her enough now to know that they’ll succeed in what they want to do. But I know Nekri more, and I can tell you that... the future, as short as it may end up being, is the brightest there is. I’m inclined to help her, even if it means what it means. I want to believe in her, and I want to believe it’s worth it. All of this.”

Lixi – “I see.”

Another catchphrase for me... Saying 'I see' as I acknowledge an answer that was given, without anything to say after it, as a point to end a conversation that was started. But that's what it is, so is there anything else to be said? It's sweet, soft and lonely in some strange way.

And maybe that's just it. We're here, meters apart, living lonely lives with beings living their own lonely lives. Brought all together just so we can make everything not lonely by simply not be able to be lonely anymore. It's a strange thing, a silly conclusion, but in some way, how could there be pain if there cannot be any pain in the first place? Maybe that's what they're going for. A stupid, simple conclusion like that.

To seek out simplicity after unneeded complexity. The tendency to reverse the tendency to over-complicate things. The deconstruction of fractals by removing all the dimensions they exist in. Purity in nullity. Peace. Nothing.

The idea is simple, but it makes me deeply uncomfortable in some way, as much as it makes me desire it immensely. A very strange feeling. Perhaps I need time to organize my thoughts.

Lixi – “Maybe I'll take some time away from all of what we've been doing; all of you, too. Maybe a week or two. Probably two.”

Paragoria – “What's up with the sudden withdrawal?”

Lixi – “I just... it's just I'm not sure I've yet to make my mind about any of this really.”

Pariah ponders for a moment.

Paragoria – “I understand. I would have done the same, were I not caring for Nekri.”

Lixi – “Even for a few days, you can't leave?”

Paragoria – “We tried a few times, but when I came back, each time was a complete disaster. In some ways she's very reliant on company. Although... now that Oudis is back...”

Lixi – “Well, something to talk about with them. I'll do the same. You're still unsure about this whole thing, are you not?”

Paragoria – “Of course. I don't think it right, and I don't feel it right either. But still... I'm also duty-bound to do what I said I would do.”

Lixi – “For these sorts of things... I know I’m no one, but can I urge you to consider the possibility of breaking your oath just this once? You know the gravity of the situation we’re in. We could abscond here and now and leave without a trace, or we could be civil about it and talk about our reluctance to keep going at the moment. Or just keep on going, the goal itself is driving us and giving us some form of purpose, and maybe that’s the biggest thing for us. Like a trap.”

Paragoria – “I know we don’t have to see this to its conclusion, that we can stop and leave. I know Nekri is also hesitant, but she’s beholding to Oudis. And there’s something else... even Oudis, I think he’s hesitant about doing this.”

Lixi – “The one who wants to do this, doesn’t really want to?”

Paragoria – “Yes. As much as he suffers, he also doesn’t want to offload his only solution to the world. A big part of him wants it to stop, and another part, albeit lesser, wants life to end more... shall we say, naturally.”

Lixi – “Hm... do you think Nekrichta is there to stop him from fulfilling his goal?”

Paragoria – “Could be. Also to provide emotional support. Were she completely human, I’d say she’s one of the greatest people I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. Although she has quite the negative sides to her, but still – Even if she’s needy, clumsy and a drunkard, she’s really lovely.”

Were it any other person, I’d be thinking he’s just infatuated with her. But his overly honest and steadfast demeanor makes me believe he just sublimed her more bothersome traits to be something that he gets to love; although, only because it is her. An interesting way to turn around negatives into positives. But it’s clearly been working for both of them.

Lixi – “So you’re also the emotional support for Nekri, then?”

Paragoria – “Like a partner is supposed to be there for their partner, and vice-versa. Kind of a silly question.”

Lixi – “Yeah, it is. Just thought it was funny, like a chain of emotional support.” I smile as I say this.

Paragoria – “Hmhm.” Neutral expression.

Well, at least I tried to make it funny... oh well, noting down that this isn't not his type of humor.

The following silence would have been a little awkward, if it wasn't for the fact that now, Paragoria is pacing around the cyan ruins. I dare not utter a word, as I see his face slightly contorts to that of a worried man. If he trusts me enough, he will speak before long. Until then, I suppose I should think about some way to accommodate his seemingly building anguish. Well, I should do so, but like an idiot, I stand still and watch him walk back and forth, wondering what he may or may not say.

Eventually, he stops, looks up through the half-collapsed roof, and a moment later speaks again:

Paragoria – “Time flies by.”

Lixi – “There something specific on your mind for you to say that right after your drawn circles?”

Pariah lowers his gaze, and looks at me.

Paragoria – “Hm.” Affirmative humming. “Apologies for not saying anything, and also thank you for not saying anything either... and yes. Specific enough.”

Lixi – “Guess bringing back memories can hit a little hard in some spots.”

Paragoria – “It certainly can.”

Lixi – “You wanna sit again?”

Paragoria – “I think I'd like that.”

We get back to where we were, take back our chairs, and sit down again.

A dozen or so seconds pass, as the man in front of me tries to find a point to start talking on. Hesitations, face changes, he's not quite sure. But finally, he starts:

Paragoria – “Time flies by... Time slips by, rather. Been many years since we came here first, and as for many memories, it still feels like it wasn't that long ago. I can even recall the real estate agent's face, for some reason... also recalling he wasn't much into fitness. Wonder if he had health issues since then. Anyway, I'm getting side-tracked. Or maybe not, actually. I'm just confused about the passage of time.”\$

Lixi – “Well... I can't tell you much. You've been alive longer than I, probably something like twice as long. So I don't have the experience to commiserate or encourage you, I don't think; not on this, at least. But maybe no one really can, except

perhaps those that lost it all already?”

Paragoria – “If they lost it all, wouldn’t they be dead?”

Lixi – “Hm yeah, but like... tragedy struck and they lost everything except their will to live and start anew.”

Paragoria – “Strong folks. Then I’m not sure if they worry about time at all.”

Lixi – “Maybe that’s the thing.”

Paragoria – “Hm... maybe. But not worrying about that sort of thing, how is it even possible?”

Lixi – “Not sure.”

Paragoria – “Maybe they... maybe they plug their ears and put a blindfold on, singing loudly when they realize one day that three years went by in the blink of an eye, and they can’t even remember what happened last week.”

Lixi – “Sounds like a plan, honestly. If it avoids them the pain of anguish, it’s probably a fair plan. What else is there to do anyway?”

Paragoria – “Indeed. What else is there to do... but to have to deal with the knowledge of time passing by without you being able to do anything about it except wail and yelp in the middle of a room cycling between filling and emptying room.”

Lixi – “Subtly emptying more and more until there’s just you, and if you are lucky, someone else, during the last days in that room before it crumbles.”

Paragoria – “Someone else... something else... nothing else.”

Lixi – “Pariah.”

Paragoria – “Yes?”*

Lixi – “You’ll always have Nekri.”

Paragoria – “Maybe. But she’ll be alone, eventually.”

Lixi – “That... maybe true. Oudis?”

Paragoria – “There’s no telling who will disappear first. Him or her. Probably her, I’d imagine”

Lixi – “So she would not necessarily be alone.”

Paragoria – “Well... let me put it this way. Friends are friends, they are wonderful and we love them deeply with all our heart. They are one of the strongest bonds one can possess, I believe.”

Lixi – “Okay... wouldn’t that tick the box?”

Paragoria – “Not exactly if they’re not at your side near constantly.”

I rub my forehead for a bit, perplexed by his lack of faith in our common friend.

Lixi – “I understand you’re worrying for what picture will Nekri be painting after your departure, and while I don’t think it’s going to be blues, reds, sunshine, happiness either; please trust Oudis like he trusts you. They’ve spent millenniums together, why would he suddenly leave if you leave? Be hopeful.”

Paragoria slumps his head, and silence permeates the surrounding crumbled structure for a moment.

Paragoria – “You kind of sound like Nekri here. She would say the same thing, though...”

Lixi – “More poetically?” I smile at him.

Paragoria – “Most likely.” He looks at me, and smiles back.

Lixi – “Look, I don’t have much experience with people either, I don’t really like going into relationships at all. The idea is nice but the other human always I tend to dislike. Not because they are, but because they’re here with me. Need solitude, you know? Well, by solitude, I mean distant communication – few messages every other day. So I don’t really know how you’re supposed to deal with what you’re going through exactly, but I figure that both Oudis and Nekri can very much be content without anyone. There’s no way they haven’t made peace with loneliness in some way.”

Paragoria – “You’re probably right. I shouldn’t be gloomy about that sort of thing. She’ll be alright no matter what.”

I look through one of the curtain-less windows for an instant.

Lixi – “You don’t want her to find another person after you, do you?”

Paragoria – “No, not really. That’s not the crux of the issue I believe, but maybe that’s also part of it.”

Lixi – “How many partners did she have before? You ever asked?”

Paragoria – “Yeah. Perhaps surprisingly, at least it was to me, and even out of my insecurities I asked our friendly skeleton, but she had about one partner every three or four centuries.”

Lixi – “Oh, she must take a long time to come to terms with loss.”

Paragoria – “It seems that way. One of her friends died early on during our relationship, and it took her a while to make her peace with it. It wasn’t until this friend’s sister, who knew her somewhat well as well, came to her and talked about that friend’s dreams, achievements, and how she regarded life and even how she saw Nekri as a friend.”

Lixi – “Seems to be the spell to break her free from sorrow.”

Paragoria – “And it makes sense for her.”

Lixi – “The Manifestation embodying hope... in despair, quickly delivered by hope.”

Paragoria – “Yes.”

Lixi – “Hmhm. Does make sense.”

Another moment of silence. A topic to be discussed. A decision to leave. What will we say?

Lixi – “What will we say...”

Paragoria – “Sorry?”

Lixi – “Hm? Oh, was I thinking out loud?”

Paragoria – “You were.”

Lixi – “Oh. Yeah... was wondering what should we say next, actually.”

Paragoria – “Well... was wondering the same.”

I stretch and yawn with a hand in front of my mouth, and my conversational friend does the same after me. Maybe, if a deer was looking through one of the window's frame, it would yawn too.

Lixi – “What else is there to say?”

Paragoria – “I don't know.”

He gets up and goes to the entrance of the inhabitable place, and stands outside, back turned, likely waiting for me.

I follow suit and exit as well. Standing next to him, I ask:

Lixi – “What was there to see here, anyway?”

Paragoria – “What we saw, and that's about it. Don't you think it's a nice place?”

Lixi – “Even the memories there started to melt away, I'm not sure I would call it nice. But cool? Yeah, it's a pretty cool place.”

Paragoria – “Then that's nice.”

I recall the time I spent a night with Nekri in the empty parking lot...

Lixi – “Say, do you take from Nekri? In how you speak, I mean?”

Paragoria – “Probably a bit, and I'd assume vice-versa. Why?”

Lixi – “You just said the exact same thing she said to me a while back.”

Paragoria – “Oh! That's more of an inside joke between us, but we use it sometimes because it sounds alright to use outside of that context.”

Lixi – “Guess it works. Anyway, ready to leave?”

Paragoria – “Yeah. Let's go.”

We walk back the distance, walking through the trees, and get to the car. Nothing new of note in the short time we spent. All this driving for a dozen or so

minutes elsewhere though, I guess fuel is of no concern to Pariah.

Paragoria – “Just gotta go take a piss.”

Lixi – “Sure, go ahead.”

Got no desire to empty the bladder myself, and worst case scenario we’ll just stop by the road.

I realize today is not much of a day where we think about big things. We just swam in memories that were already half rotten and half gone, and... I already forgot I was in that crumbling boarding house.

As I scan the surrounding forest, I notice a colored bump that seems to be buzzing. Blue and orange. I get a little closer to it, and realize quickly enough that those are all butterflies. And if they’re all clustered together like this, it can only mean there is a corpse there. Perhaps Pariah would be curious to see this? I sure am, now, as morbid as it may be.

I turn back and see him come my way. He probably noticed that I noticed something.

Lixi – “Hey Pariah, there’s something there. Butterflies everywhere.”

Paragoria – “Hm... Wanna bet?”

Lixi – “On?”

Paragoria – “What’s under them.”

Lixi – “No.”

Paragoria – “Hm, alright. No fun.”

Lixi – “Yeah I just want to get to it. Is it not interesting enough as it is? No need to spice it up.”

Paragoria – “A little spice for a little life.”

Lixi – “Ironic considering what the butterflies are drinking from.”

We walk towards the impromptu nest of colored insect wings. Few meters later, they notice and scare themselves away. The living blanket is gone, and what was hidden beneath it is shown again naked to the world, and to us for the first time.

Paragoria – “I lost my own bet.”

Lixi – “What did you think it was?”

Paragoria – “A deer.”

A boar was left there, entrails open, bleeding from every orifice, drying and dried blood splattered around, tears under its eyes.

Paragoria – “Of all the beasts that could have been here and be like this, a boar?”

Lixi – “Its death couldn’t have been nice.”

Paragoria – “I assume it’s fresh. Already torn open, and the butterflies were already here.”

Death is always sad to see to me. It’s always harsh and difficult when you see a human, especially a child in a coffin; but nevertheless, an animal corpse, or even an insect corpse... It doesn’t fly well under my radar. I notice them. Of course I don’t get as sad for insects as I would for a human, but still. They were alive too. A nest of dead wasps is still saddening to see, in my eyes.

I crouch near the dead boar, and just look at it. Paragoria joins me, and becomes another crouching spectator of reality.

Paragoria – “Nekri once told me something, it stuck with me.”

Lixi – “What did she say?”

Paragoria – “In the morning it feels like coming into a clearing, and the disorientation lingers only for a breath.”

Lixi – “Hm... did you replace morning with mourning?”

Paragoria – “Yeah. She didn’t mean it like that but I took it like that.”

Lixi – “It does smell pretty terrible.” I playfully smirk.

Pariah laughs a little. It distances us, even were we close to see this. Makes the weight of the atmosphere lighter.

Paragoria – “Look at the insects. A feast for the ages; always, for them.”

Lixi – “You know when I see them just eat and plant their eggs or whatever, I wonder if they have taste buds.”

Paragoria – “Fuck I hope not.”

Lixi – “Same. Glad we like what we like to eat... a rotting boar corpse doesn't look very appetizing.”

Paragoria – “Maybe we were born part of the wrong species. Bet they're having a swell time not knowing what is happening, except that they get to have it all for themselves.”

Lixi – “Maybe. I've seen similar things. Human bodies being eaten by uninvited crawlers. Corpse left there forgotten for an hour too long.”

Paragoria – “Yeah. I get that.”

Lixi – “I'm not too surprised. How did you deal with it?”

Paragoria – “I didn't.”

Things were as they were; are as they are. Yet again, what else is there to say? A life is a life until it isn't, then nothing can be done.

We keep on looking, onlookers observing, slight changes in our crouching position to not be too uncomfortable over time.

There is nothing to add to it. It's a spontaneous meditation on life. When we see this, the dead don't speak, so why should we?

And as such, perhaps the birds see this as well. The chirping surrounding us directly has ceased, and a stillness instilled itself. For however long will this last? Until the spell breaks, an agreement in its silence has been made: A few minutes here, looking at this, wondering how it came to be, what it is, and when will it be no more.

The eventual disappearance of a being that used to live. A mother, as Pariah noticed and pointing out the open belly and unborn squeakers. Flies and maggots were obscuring my view, and I was a little too focused on looking at the agonized face. A mother has died, and her children may never know the pain of life. Perhaps it was the best that could have happened to them, in this case.

When you see this sort of thing, are you supposed to stay for longer? Be sadder? I do not know. Maybe it's too much at this point, and we default to apathy. I know I just did. A defensive mechanism like that, I understand its purpose, but it now makes me unable to fully understand what is in front of me. I wish I could feel this, even if it broke me then and there. I would at least understand. Maybe it's stupid to feel this way

from a boar, but when I see this, I can't help but recall the numerous corpses that I saw in my line of work. For some reason, this boar has more weight to its death than many. Maybe it has to do with its natural find as well? Maybe it's something else. Whatever the case may be, I am affected, that I know for sure.

Some time passes by in silence. A silent goodbye to an animal we never knew, we never cared about, and that we would be told to hate. Valid, I suppose, but I am not a hunter, or a farmer, nor do I own a forest, so I do not know if I am well placed to hate them.

Nevertheless, we now get up from our lowered position, and without a word, we go back to the car. As I'm pondering things and nothings all at once, time seems to compress itself, and when I come to, we already are on the road. Not a word was said, it is as if we were coming back from a burial.

Paragoria – “Do you think we should continue down the path of helping our friends?”

I take a few seconds before answering with a non-answer:

Lixi – “Should we...”

Paragoria – “I understand their aim is not to kill, simply rather to render everything inert.”

Lixi – “No more offsprings from anything and anyone... sure sounds more peaceful than what that boar and its unborn children might went through.”

Paragoria – “So?”

Lixi – “Hm? Sorry I guess I haven't answered yet. Well... I don't know. Maybe.”

Paragoria – “Still uncertain as well?”

Lixi – “Yeah.”

Paragoria – “And to think it's been months now since we've been on the fence.”

Lixi – “Will it ever change?”

Paragoria – “Maybe at the very last minute.”

Lixi – “Wouldn't that be funny...”

Paragoria – “Probably. But honestly, we’ll most likely hesitate no matter what. Like we don’t want to do anything otherwise we’d be responsible in some way for whatever happens. Even though we already entangled ourselves willingly into all of this.”

Lixi – “We’re kinda stupid, aren’t we?”

Paragoria – “We sure are.”

We laugh, as the sound of the road reels under the car wheels. The painting of the forest landscape changing at such speeds that it’s hypnotizing. I don’t think there’s much else to say or to add in this moment. Maybe weather talk, maybe something useless again. Something to occupy the mind and forget, yet again. Perhaps that’s what we’ll want soon enough with Pariah, and thus, that’s what we’ll do. Until then... I guess we’ll stay here, floating and sitting on an iron machine, in a silence blurred by a roaring engine.