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8 100 words

Moon of Memories

by Achanes Outis



Through corridors of trees, driving on decade-old cracked asphalt roads with, surprisingly, no potholes to be found. The shadow of the night obscures the leaves that fell on the road. Rarely taken, moss grew on the sides, and further, the leaves accumulated over the years, leaving a padding of dried brown and black cracked flora. Slowly... very slowly decomposing.

The car's headlights sometimes illuminate a lost fawn, or a fox, or an old wild boar. Here, they act as if no car was coming through, which is surprising to me. Usually they'd gallop or hide or fixate intently at the moving machine. But they're just moving around as normal.

The rhythmic appearance of rotting wooden poles carrying reinforced electric wires guides my wandering sense. We've been on distant countryside roads for a while now. The last car we passed happened well over twenty minutes ago.

Oudis points to the upcoming intersection, forwarding his posture. His jaw opens: words are uttered:

Oudis – "Turn right. Then you keep going until we reach a clearing."

Lixi – "Alright. Surprised there's not many turns to take to get to her place." As I finish the sentence, I let go of the gas pedal, change gears, lightly step on the breaks, and steer to the right; turning slowly, gently.

Oudis – "Not exactly her place. She didn't want to have to remember where to go, even though she has a personal driver."

Lixi – "Not her place... personal driver... home in the middle of nowhere. Sounds familiar."

Oudis – "Of course. Did you expect anything else?"

Lixi – "Not anything less, I guess."

We exhale, as if smiling, at the wordplay.

I remind myself of where we're going, and what for. Tonight is Friday night, soon a Saturday morning. I took vacations that week, wanting to take a break from the bleak of things.

Oudis wanted to see an old friend of his: someone like him. At first I imagined a skeleton in a robe of a different color, or something a bit corny like that. But he told me that no, she's not exactly like him. Though I'm

curious about something... I'll ask now.

Lixi – “Say, you said that she was like you, but not exactly like you. And some time ago you said that you didn't know anyone that was like you, but now it sounds like you've been lying, maybe by omission. Maybe you forgot?”

Oudis – “Well, I don't know other skeletons, but other beings like me... beings that we may be called; even though our existence is only seen and acknowledged by few, proportionally speaking to the whole of living things; there's a few. But it's not that many.”

Lixi – “How many do you think?”

Oudis – “A handful at most. I'm surprised you haven't asked that sort of question before, actually.”

Lixi – “I ride the wave of knowing a strange ethereal humanoid, and so it feels like asking too many questions isn't the way to go about that sort of thing.”

Oudis – “Hm. You've definitely been one of the least curious humans I've met. I haven't said it before, but I'm thankful that you treat me like a friend and not 'just' a strange entity.”

Lixi – “I appreciate you as you are, and you've been a pleasant friend to be around. Sure, I had and have my questions still, but you're first and foremost someone I like... Or something I like? That's still weird.”

Oudis – “Understandable, but that is still nice of you.”

Maybe now is the time to ask further questions, as we approach the clearing. We can see the end of the forest... and it's a field, not a clearing, with how big it seems to be, from out here.

Though, before we arrive, I'd like to get some more context as to what's going on with him.

Lixi – “So, what are you and your friend?”

Oudis – “What are we?” Rhetorical question? But why would it be... or

did he not hear me correctly?

Lixi – “Yeah. What are you? You’re not human, though maybe you were. I don’t know.”

Oudis – “In that sense, I’m a collection of past memories, and of past lives. The accumulation of regrets, joys, atrocities, tragedies and achievements of every living being that used to live.”

Left speechless, my mind can only speak to itself for now. I think, maybe, it starts to make sense: the way he is.

Soon after, we arrive at a humble-looking house. The sky cleared itself of clouds, and the gibbous moon illuminates in discreet blue hues the surroundings, and really, everything there is to see. Which isn’t all that much. Overgrown grass all around, wilted flowers in front of the house, and ready-to-bloom non-descriptive plants in pots on the stairs leading to the front door. A blue wooden door, for a grayed-out house made of wood from trees that don’t exist anymore, and of concrete. Why this mixture? If I were to guess, the house has been here for many decades, so the why of now is not the why of then. At least, the wood is termite-free it seems.

Lixi – “Is it here?”

Oudis – “Yes. Place hasn’t changed since last I went.”

Lixi – “The wooden parts of the house, I recognize it. Its color and texture is so unusual, there’s no way I could not. But that’s probably because we prepared a few rare caskets for some rich families, and that stuff was heavy. Never thought it would look nice like this, though.” I turn the car off.

Oudis – “Well, considering no more material of that type really exists anymore, you wouldn’t think about seeing it again.”

Lixi – “Fair point. Anyway. Anything you want to inform me on, about this friend of yours?”

Oudis and I get out of the car, and start to walk towards the house’s entrance at a slow pace. A gravel path, mixed in with dirt and grass blades touching the sides.

Oudis – “Hm... she’s special. You’re used to dealing with grief-stricken people, so maybe you’ll be able to handle her well.”

Lixi – “I see. Did she go through a lot?”

Oudis – “She’ll tell you if she wants to. It is not my place to tell in her stead.”

Lixi – “Fair, that too. Sorry for asking.”

Oudis – “Don’t be, your curiosity is not tainted.”

Lixi – “What does that mean?”

Oudis – “Your empathy is pure.”

Lixi – “And... what does that mean?”

Oudis – “Lixi, you know what it means.”

Lixi – “Maybe.” I tried to get some more out of him, but he’s really being cryptic tonight. Very uncommon coming from him.

Oudis – “Anyway, don’t worry too much. She’ll be fine with you, and show her true self quickly. Also, there’s an immense chance that she’s drunk. Again.”

Lixi – “Uh. Foreboding.” Drinking in here... if she’s alone, it’s like a stereotype waiting to confirm itself. Would only then be missing that she’s an artist or something.

Oudis – “She tries to cope with her existence however she can.”

Lixi – “I see. Odd thing to say, but sure.” Really odd. Aren’t we all doing the same thing?

As we climb the short stairs, we start to hear a musical hum coming from inside the house. Can’t quite make out the sound clearly yet. But I can make out the atmosphere changing around us. It gets heavy, heavy with invisible tears.

I stop at the door, looking at Oudis. I gesture a knocking motion.

He understands: Two heavy knocks, the first with two fingers for the dead, the second with two fingers for the living.

The humming notes stop, and as the silence of waiting falls, I realize a piano was being played. If it was her playing, that ticks a square in the stereotype bingo card.

A few seconds pass. Oudis speaks:

Oudis – “Nekrichta. I came with a friend.” Loud yet calm voice. Its outworldly quality echoes clearly through the sleepless night.

Nekrichta – “Oudis? Friend? Come on in!” Loud voice from afar, with a strange quality to it, trying to reach us. Perhaps she was trying to guess who it could have been.

The tall figure opens the door, and gestures for me to go first. I nod and enter the house, wiping my feet on the floormat at the entrance, and taking a step forward afterwards. Looking behind me, I await my friend. He enters and closes the door behind him.

With the reassurance of a friendly presence in an unknown place, I turn my attention to the inside of this house. The smell of the place... old, half abandoned. I'm not sure how to put it into words exactly. Like hope left long ago, but with traces of life ongoing despite it, trying to push through, trying to cling onto something no matter what it might be.

Grey, brown and beige walls. The lighting is dim where there's a lack of windows and natural light, with yellow and orange fluorescent glows. Electric candles with their cables, all intertwined with other somewhat smaller and larger cables, all coated with a light layer of dust. I look up, to see a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, straight sideways, unlit.

In front of me, an empty frame where a door should be. Beyond it, a person a gleam with the shine of the midnight moon, refracting the outside of this house into its insides: a dead night, sat in front of a piano, with what looks to be a glass with a brown-ish liquid inside. Now seeing this scene, as much as I bingo'd my card right then and there, I think I will now proceed to forget I ever did that.

A lady with what looks to be short blond hair, gives us an inquisitive look, with yellow eyes reflecting from afar. She takes a sip from her drink, and starts to play the instrument she is sat in front of.

A simple melody escapes the inanimate, making the place lively with a

simple sonata, rendering itself stricken with notes of sorrow, silently and mellowly increasing in their emotional intensity. A song of what is to come, laced with the grace of ghosts.

Oudis slowly walks towards the lady. As I walk behind him, I intently listen to the musings of a hunched-over entity that looks human, while radiating the same muffled empyrean aura as Oudis. Her hair is somewhat unkempt, with a bun tying most of it together. She cares but not enough to maintain an image of perfection or anything remotely close to it, all the while wearing a long sleeve business shirt, clean in parts, shriveled in others. Looking quickly at her, how she sits, the expression on her face... it fits her apparent sadness. Perhaps that is how she wants to greet us: with a song that spells cold warmth.

We are right next to each other, now. The pianist keeps playing, and we stand here, listening. The skeleton looks to the window next to the musician. I follow his gaze... or rather the sockets where his eyes should be, and try to identify what it is that he would be looking at. It was not difficult to find: the moon. I shouldn't even have had to guess. But the situation I find myself in is unusual, and I don't know what else to do but to try to find familiarity in what is already familiar.

Yet, the situation should be familiar. It should be something I'm accustomed to. But here, there is seemingly no dealings with funeral matters.

Looking back at the player, I notice that her eyes are staring at nothing. This is a look I know well, too, but it feels uncomfortably unfamiliar still. Her eyes – now that I am up close – they are yellow like molten gold. The landscape of her face shows discreet circles of red: cheeks and nose.

I notice the smell, too. She's been drinking for at least a little while. And, while the music playing is clumsy like her movement, there is a natural ease in what she's doing. Her physical state, shown to be either that of an intense sadness or deep drinking – perhaps both – she's comfortable navigating her body in it. Her mind, however... with eyes like that, I'm not sure if she's fine, wherever she is, now. And, with what little I know of her now: who is she, and how did she get here? And, to the point of uncomfortability, how did we get here?

I look again at Oudis, still silently looking at the moon. My ear picks up on a new element coming from the piano: A quality I did not notice at first, that I cannot properly put into words. Something special, that speaks, or rather that wants to say something. All I can decipher from it, is agony. One more time then, I look at the person playing, and I realize why I did not pick

up on this discreet sound before: simply, because it wasn't here.

A droplet falls.

Oudis turns and moves, putting himself sideways to his friend.

We watch, breath in, and then we breath out.

A droplet falls.

Hands on the keyboard are lifted; notes slowly drone on. Nekrichta... I believe was her name; has her foot firmly blocking the rightmost pedal from rising. I cannot help but feel her ocean through the whole of what she is now: Her waves are obsidian-colored, crashing onto the souls of those near her, spilling her colors, darkening our skies. The moon shines blindingly here, and we can only sense her pale eclipse.

She reaches for the glass of alcohol... And Oudis puts his skeletal hand on her flesh.

Oudis – “Nekri. Please.” As much as possible, his vocal presence is mellow and kind to the ear.

The droning notes stop abruptly. A second passes by, and the wind enters to hum, like the sound of flames with ragged breathing.

The tormented lady swallows drool, and speaks, still looking at nothing:

Nekrichta – “There from somewhere reverberates the echoes of a song of woes. One more day where the sun escapes, one more day where the moon crawls across infinity, pulled by the weight of what it hates and loves.

One more day where spirits dream and plan, one more day where hope beams out, only to break before the next sunset.

Oudis, how many have you buried since you last came in here?”

Oudis – “Many.”

Nekrichta – “Do you remember them?”

Oudis – “To be them; is it to remember them?”

Nekrichta – “I do not know. I am what none is yet, and I am what already is; never were I to be what was, would I ever dare to want what cannot be either.”

I try to make sense of what she said, until, almost immediately after I

start to turn the gears of my mind, she turns to me:

Nekrichta – “And you, do you remember them?”

How does she know about my occupation? Perhaps Oudis told her. I can only attempt to answer, even if she faces me without looking at me in the eye:

Lixi – “I...”

Pause. There in front of two strange Beings, I could lie and say yes. But I have a feeling that, while Oudis might understand a social lie, Nekrichta might not. Or perhaps she would, but she would prefer the truth of it, and knows what that would be. I cannot fool her, and ultimately, I do not want to do so.

Oudis – “Lixi, you are hesitating. Be yourself more than you usually are. Do not worry.”

The lady finally locks in with my eye, ignoring the one made out of glass. She peers into me. I notice there, with the sheen of moonlight, a trail of drying tears on the side of her face. And so, I realize that I once again was wrong: her eyes are not judging, they are seeking something. Something in me, or perhaps something to believe in, I think. Those eyes, they are the ones that ask for forgiveness, for hope, for closure, for something that makes them able to finally sleep. These are the eyes of a person who wants to remove weights from a burden that cripples them. And I cannot help but show honesty to those that seek it.

I reach inwards, calling my fears and dreams, knitting words into a weave of abstruse phantoms, forgoing perceptible matters, and idealizing reverie into what is real:

Lixi – “An anxious road. Coveting leaves falling, humidity clasp on wheels, feeling it behind the wheel. I think about what it will be like, living, sleeping, a decade away. And I realize then, the song is the same as it was a decade back then.” My gaze turns away, reeling into that of the moon’s through the window. Yet, it feels as if I never averted my eyes.

“The sun still rose, and here still am I alive, while everyone else disappears. Why should we just leave and leave, and the world gets left behind?”

A moment of silence ensues. I look still for a moment at the brightness of a cloudless sky at night, eventually looking back at the two others, still looking at me. I notice that Oudis took a more comfortable stance. I gather from this that I did not disappoint him, whatever it was that he wanted me to do... or to be?

My shifting stare finally lands back to the ambivalence of our drunken peer, who is looking down, as if pondering without the energy to raise her head to confront the horizon. I also feel something on my hand: hers. There is no observation to make, this time, on the difference between flesh and bone. But there is one to make on temperature. She is cold, yet her skin shimmers.

Her hand grasps mine, and attempts to interlock with my fingers. I let her, sensing her drunken clumsy attempt at doing so. There is pity in my mind, to see her like this. And that pity convinces me to let her be tactile. I do not mind, but... there is something still different. Her, grasping my hand like this, seem to be a gesture of thankfulness and of acceptance of my presence. What changes from the 'usual' grieving individual, is that her sense of grief feels completely different.

As she slowly gets up from her piano stool, using me as a support to not trip over, I realize the difference: She is indeed like Oudis, although most definitely not as tall. An epiphany occurs in my mind. As I try to articulate a question to confirm my newfound answers, my mind occurs the other realization of sensation. A hug.

A hug? I guess I should have seen it coming. I'm not fond of physical contact, but now is not the time to have personal preference. I'll ask the question later then. I look at Oudis, hoping that he'll tell me if it's a good idea to try to comfort the person hugging me further. Knowing what I have in mind, he nods.

I hug her back, and speak, trying to hold onto my abstractions. The need to impress must go away, it needs to be natural again:

Lixi — "Seldom ever, would we reach to answers that give us pause, to let us hope in the peace of our dreams. Misunderstood sentences ricocheting off petals flowing through the slowest of winds, mountains growling against clouds engulfing their peaks once more. And we hear it all, senseless to their carelessness, careless in our fragile mortality, immortal in shifting and decaying memories."

The light bouncing off the skin of the back of her neck gently pierces my lone retina. She buries her head, her grasp tightens, and something else happens:

Her ocean that desaturated the coloring notes of her music now flows into my inner self; differently this time. Perhaps it has to do with the moonlight, but I start to feel heavy of heart. My eye, too, becomes heavy, and I close both eyelids, as if wanting to swim against the current of her soul.

A swirling tempest floods my mind, and dyes it with her lament. Our souls bathe in the same floating space, under clouds seemingly unending. Her ocean is wide, and infinite. The tide has a spherical form. She is the eclipse, both sun and moon; the culmination of dreams and hopes of every living thing. And I sense, as I brave her storm, that her horizon is empty, and that her winds are weightless in their fury. I look back, and there is no shore as the tides erase their lining: She is weightless, above and below herself.

Nekrichta – “Please, stay the line.” Her voice parallels the gravity that keeps pulling me in.

‘What is going on?’, My mind asks, trying to go back to the reality in front of me. But I drown its wonders; its action now must be inaction, if I want to understand the person in my arms.

My curiosity lets me dive below her obsidian lake of tears. Her suffering is clear, the agony I picked up in the humming of playing slow notes was not for show of ears.

A mirage draws itself, clear as spring, in her distant fears: My peers that have yet-to-be, living and dying... all at once, swirling: the happiness and sadness of their success and failures.

She is hope, but has almost given up on it all. She cannot process pain well; she drinks from it, drowning instead. She is not human, and in the same vein, is more than human. It is a lonesome place, but a vessel to keep a vacant company lives above this depth.

Perhaps it is enough now. Her stream of consciousness pushes me upwards. I let myself swim back to the surface, crawling to the ship ashore, drifting away from her entropic sea.

We open our eyelids synchronously, and loose our grasp. I cannot smell her alcohol odor anymore, so I assume that it’s probably imprinted all over my clothes. I let her end this immobile dance whenever she wants, which she does, now that we came back to the inland of material reality. She is smiling now, somewhat. A little relief is drawn on her red face, although her eyebrows

betray the attempted portrayal of solace. Her jaw moves, and words like notes waltz around my ears, now only, for me.

Nekrichta – “The home is a garden that I can’t keep alive. I receive guests and friends... dearest of friends – they flood my heart, but it always become vapor that escapes into my lungs. I wish to speak in love, and lovingly do I speak: but my words are the sound of dreams, and dreamers die when they awake.”

She and I let go of each other, and suddenly, I find myself breathing in deeply. Nekrichta takes a step back, turns her head around, looking for her drink. Oudis is holding it, and he gestures a simple “no” with his free hand. She pouts, and goes to sit back down with very little grace – not that she cares.

I stand unmoving, wrapping my head around what happened. Soon after, my working mind comes back, and the gears turn once more like a clock, forgetting incessantly the ticking second, before the one that now isn’t.

Thinking back on my epiphany before letting go in the pursuit of ghosts, I ask both entities:

Lixi – “You two; are you the whole of the moon?”

Oudis – “She might very well be. Some time ago, whenever a time ago might have been, someone who used to help us gave us the title of ‘Manifestations’. I do not know what to make of it, but perhaps it is a correct label.”

Nekrichta – “Severed seas in future spectrums of light, befitting a fair sum of feathers flying over oceans sleeping through nights.” Although I thought myself now to be more attuned to her way of saying things, it seems that this journey to her world did not help in understanding that much more.

‘Manifestations’. If Oudis is the Veil and an aggregate of memories, she is that which pierces it. I can understand why they are friends, and also why they seem to rarely be with one another.

One embodies the past, carrying both the bliss and pain of existence, while the other embodies the future, carrying the hopes, dreams and tragedies of what will be, all the while unable to turn away from entropy. Both of them

exist in a constant state of psychological torment, although Oudis seem to handle it much better than his counterpart. I guess that, carrying the memories of everything would make one wise enough to take a step back and push through their pain. Or maybe it's not wisdom that does it for him, maybe it's just a cold heart. And in return, maybe Nekrichta has a heart so full of brightness, that it turned on its head, and is now an eclipse, full of a forlorn love and despair of what is to come, with only the experience of her existence to keep her anchored to whatever world we found ourselves in.

Which makes me wonder then...

Lixi – “Apologies but I have a question for Nekrichta. Do you see the future?”

Nekrichta – “Bright goodbyes and waving hands, ash clouds filling lungs and stomachs. A shadow of sorrow evaporates from burnt leaves of time, and the universe saw all colors in shades of grey.”

I'll take that as a yes. If that's the case... I don't know what to think. Perhaps I should not think about this at all. I don't think you're supposed to think so much about that sort of thing, but them – they can't help but think this way.

Lixi – “Oudis... I know you're suffering too, but what made her – Nekri, if I can call her by that name – talk in such ways?”

Nekrichta wants to answer, but as she starts to form a word, she is suddenly stopped by the skeleton's voice.

Oudis – “She's drunk to the brim tonight. In her inebriated state she speaks factually, but in her tongue, in her ways. I think you understand her well, considering you like to use abstracts too, so don't rely on me to translate anything, especially after she warmed up to you.”

Lixi – “And... When she's sober?”

Oudis – “Last time she was sober was when alcohol didn't exist.”

Lixi – “You two are that old?”

Nekrichta – “How old is old? Old... old... am I old?”

Oudis – “Too old to remember how old. Point is, I wanted you to come here because I thought you could help us two, like someone did before.”

Lixi – “What happened to that someone?”

Oudis – “Died of a heart attack at seventy something. It was... I don’t know. Long ago. They were a chemist, that I remember well. A daydreamer and half a airhead, and they were really a joy to be around. Different than you – in character I mean –, you’re very often quite serious.”

Lixi – “Hard to not be.”

Oudis – “Not complaining, do not worry. Would not have stuck around if you were annoying.”

Lixi – “Thank you... I think.”

Nekrichta – “Oudis! What’s her name.” Exclamation, impatience in the revolt of a question.

Right, we never even made proper introductions. Or did we? I can’t remember now.

Oudis – “Lixi.”

Nekrichta – “Oh. Pretty name. Beautiful name. Very. Lixi!” Exclamation, same impatience. “Will you... *hic* apologies.” She taps on her thorax, and suddenly changes her posture and tone. “The air in the mourning flies by our face, desolation drying our tears. Anguish and love that doesn’t die, swirling, unable to hold. The ‘natural world’ or whatever else it’s called... Have you been in a forest lately?”

Her tangents and sudden changes are hard to keep track of, but I think I can get the gist of it. Her mind is intact, it is just that she’s... drunk to the brim, as Oudis put it.

Lixi – “Only drive through them mostly. Haven’t spent time in one for many weeks now.”

Nekrichta – “Next, when next you will. Go there. Stand near trees; sit, feel. Sorrow permeates the trees.”

I'd want to say it's because it's winter time, but given it's her that says it... I'll go there in spring, to know for sure.

Oudis – “Lixi, we appreciate you being here. If you don't want to help, that is fine, and know that I'm still glad you met Nekri, and that you let her hold you. I think you helped her alleviate a lot of her anguish, even if it's only for a day or two. Knowing her, she'll remember you fondly, when her clarity is here. And by clarity being here, I mean when she'll just be tipsy and not near blackout drunk. But she likes to be in that state too much – not that I blame her – so I don't know when she'll be more herself... or maybe at this point, her being drunk is herself.”

Lixi – “I don't know if I want to help, as I don't even know what kind of help you want. But I'm glad to already have helped a bit. Also, why do you not drink like her, considering you still ingest things? Somehow...”

Oudis – “Not my thing. I like to stay clear, to see things for what they are without filters. And as to why I can ingest, that is a great question. But I can't answer that, because I don't know, like Nekri doesn't know why her skin refracts light like this.”

Nekrichta – “Moonwarmth doesn't make me warm anymore. My shirt was ironed by dear Paragoria... He is warm, him.” She glances at Oudis, but he does not pay it mind.

Lixi – “Paragoria?”

Oudis – “Like I'm by your side a lot of times, Paragoria is by Nekri's side most of the time. I used to live with these two before meeting you, mainly to keep an eye on Nekri while making sure Paria could handle her antics.” He tilts his head towards the shining lady. “Actually, where is he tonight?”

Nekrichta – “Paria... dining with friend. He said that... He said. I don't remember. Sometime soon he'll be here? Morning... Sometime... Do you know how long is sometimes? Sometimes I think that time is strange: always ticking, road moving, unmoving, flailing arms to the wind, screams in the

leaves.”

I have a feeling that this missing man needed to go take a break from living with this Manifestation. I guess that he must be strong willed, or something else, to be willing to live with her. Actually, I wonder...

Lixi – “How long have you and... Paragoria, known each other?” After saying this to the woman in front of me, I remember that her conception of time, and that of Oudis’, isn’t a very reliable one. So I try to think of an alternative... “Was Paragoria young when you met him?”

Nekrichta – “Young like young crows are! Because he was a crow, a beautiful crow that knew the world would be blue, cold like blue, freezing pale blue; and he wanted to be warm too.”

Interesting enough. I wonder what he’s like. We could stay here, I suppose, to wait for him. I turn to Oudis, to ask:

Lixi – “Oudis, should we stay here to wait? Or let her sink in sorrow by herself?”

Oudis – “You pull on strings I don’t really have, Lixi.”

Lixi – “But you do have them.”

Oudis – “Always will for my friends. Of course we will stay, as long as it’s also fine for you.”

Lixi – “Okay. I’d like to know though, what is that help you need?”

Oudis – “Perhaps it would be best to wait. But know that, if Nekrichta is right, and I do not see her to be wrong, you helping or not will be inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. It has more to do with making sure we...” Nekri suddenly stands and takes the stage.

Nekrichta – “End it. Free us. Share your tears, plant a tree for the gallow of life to grow on... grow in... inside out the belly of the beast, water it and watch it decay, with no trace.”

An audible sigh comes from Oudis. He really wanted to tell about it

himself.

Oudis – “What’s said has been said. We want to disappear; to stop existing. We can’t die as long as people believe in what we are manifested as. Hence, we will not die as long as the living exists. As long as memories are made, I will keep on existing with them. As for Nekri, I believe she would still be alive even if all humans were to disappear. There is something about the will of life that goes beyond many things, and that’s the kind of hope that fuels her existence.”

I move around the standing entities, and go to sit down on the stool where someone was a minute ago or so. I can feel the coldness of it, as if no one ever sat on it. I’m trying to register the ideas presented to me. It is hard to come to terms with, especially so soon after experiencing it all.

Lixi – “I’ll... think about it.” Confused voice with a hint of sudden fatigue.

Oudis – “Do not feel pressured. It is a kindness you would do to us, but not to others. I will be honest with why I chose to be around you: ‘Why you’, instead of ‘why me’, this time.

Because you carry scars that will always be here, that you cannot heal from. Because you believe in things that shaped your life so that it could be one of pure clarity.

Because you gracefully deal with suffering, although you have not dealt with many forms of it. But you know they exist, nevertheless you despise them.

Because you used to love the world, but you grew cold and resentful towards it.

Because you can be trusted, and because, despite it all, you still have hope, and you still want to live through the pain of life, hopeful that there is worth to it at the end of the road.

But we... do not want to bear this immortality, anymore.”

He is on point for many things. I don’t know if he prepared his speech in advance, or if that’s one he used before on someone else. Maybe he picks his friends based on utility and if he’ll get along with them; one or the other? Or something else. I don’t know. I should feel betrayed but I know he’s not here to hurt, and I know he’s here to help me as well. Still...

Lixi – “That idea of yours... To put an end of life so that you can end

your own suffering. How selfish can you be?”

Nekrichta – “Not sudden. Slow, peaceful, like a serenade played melancholically near a cliff, for the cinders of the dead we used to love... we used to. Used to forget.” Her eyes suddenly sparkle, only for her to blink twice and have them back to their usual state.

Oudis – “Yes. For generations down the line most will still live and cradle life. If you are willing to help – and if we succeed, human life will not end abruptly. Life will slowly be unable to take hold, ultimately ending with only a few humans remaining. At least, that is our prediction. We trust them to be the last ones standing. I think it would be deserved, as pretty or horrid as it may seem.”

Nekrichta – “Echoes of muffled sounds, lungs drowning in rivers of mud, hungry butterflies dyed in grey, starless skies, dust of stars.”

Lixi – “And so... a slow death. So slow that nobody would notice, and eventually nobody would know how or why it all came to be.”

Oudis – “They’ll adapt to it.”

Lixi – “Can’t you two just keep going until a more... natural way of ending things presents itself?”

Both grunt, expressing dissatisfaction. A negative answer; they really must have been there for so long, that time became an eternity... unbearably counting hours, mixing dates with a day, a millennium away.

A time so long that what they go through, is not something that I can entertain the idea of. Like how big numbers are hard to comprehend, even when you see them. I cannot imagine what they go through, but I know that it is real. And maybe, the intensity of such a thing can be ‘worth’ more than many little things? Maybe, they are justified in their wish?

Oudis – “For living things that die, sometime someday I will collect their selves in some way. Memories accumulate, and I grow to exist with them. I cannot forgo all of the beauty and atrocity of what life can be. Make no mistake, I still believe that life is beautiful... to a point. But it all muddies, and with time; a quick enough time, already my soul – were I be a culmination of them all, or simply be a singular one – it all becomes an

inescapable shade of darker colors. And even if sometimes hope still exists, and even if sometimes the days are still pretty... it always hurts somewhere, and I cannot appreciate them anymore. And I don't want to keep going through it."

Nekrichta looks down to the ground. She does not need to say anything, she already made me understand without speaking.

I do not know what to think, what to say, or what to do. I will sit still for now, pondering about it, wrapping my head around it. Maybe... What is this man's name, that is supposed to arrive soon? Maybe he will help me to come to a conclusion, to an answer for the pained.

Silence falls. Soon after, Oudis suggests that we move to the table in the living room. He tries to keep drinks away from Nekrichta, and is most often successful, but she still sometimes catch a drink. Her alcohol tolerance is... incredible, to say the least.

Oudis does not speak to me, as he knows it may not be the greatest of ideas at the moment. Nekri sometimes utter abstract tellings, but I am too focused on my unfocused mind to pay heed to her words.

An hour passes by. Oudis watches the clear moon through the window. The Manifestation of this astral body comes to bring us food. Water, dried meats and other salted snacks. Meat like this, clearly homemade... a sign that we really are in the countryside. I suppose that the man we are waiting on is a hunter, or that his friends are? Something. No matter. I give my thanks to the gloomy gleaming lady, and she smiles weakly.

Hours pass. Discussions between the two Manifestations were had, as I wasn't listening still, forgetting to count minutes.

Time passes. The front door opens. I look. A man, seemingly in his forties, likely as tall as Nekri, closes the door behind him, and wipes his feet on the mat. He looks at us three, freezing his movement. He was not expecting Oudis and I. Nekrichta exclaims:

Nekrichta — "Paria! Did the tree sing beautiful whistles tonight?" She stands up, and approaches the man at a leisurely pace.

He moves again, and smiles. A smile of gratefulness, directed at us, while looking at the moving moon.

Paragoria — "Yes. Beautiful sways of words. Pretty poems were told, like

when we often count them to us two, floating to share the unconscious of our slumber.” The now-beaming human lookalike grabs the right hand of the man, and looks at it, caressing it with two fingers, drawing gentle invisible lines. He let her, and while his companion is busy admiring his skin, looks at us; at me, and speaks again:

“Thank you for being here. I assume you’re the one that made her hopeful for a little while again. It is always nice when it happens, I believe.” His head rotates towards the skeleton, sitting next to me. “And Oudis, as usual... thank you for being a friend to us. And... honestly, we missed you. Is this a friend? How long will you stay?” He asks the last two questions for Oudis... and also for me? I don’t know, it is confusing. I let the Manifestation of Memories answer.

Oudis – “A great friend, much like you. I told her about our... what you do not want to be a part of. She’s called Lixi; works in a funeral home, and she’ll be the one to decide when we leave.”

Lixi – “Way to put me on the spot... Anyway, pleasure to meet you, albeit somewhat from afar. Apologies for not getting up yet.” I get up and go shake the man’s left hand, as Nekri is still looking and holding his right one. His grasp is firm, fair yet somewhat warm and kind. His posture is a strange mixture between tired and proud. His neck is wide. His face is gaunt, scarred by a difficult life. One-eyed – his other is opaquely white – but he does not hide it like me.

This man has a heavy heart; there’s something buried that he selectively shares. In this moment, it’s easy to tell with whom.

“We’ll leave whenever you want us to leave. I have no obligations on my end for a while, and am on vacations.” We let go of our handshake. I look towards the shining being, who pays no mind to our discussion. She is still drawing lines, although now she elegantly moves them with her thumb. I am unsure what to make of it, what kind of relationship this spells. But it is heartwarming to observe.

Paragoria – “I see.” His voice brings my vision and attention back to him. He quickly gestures at me to wait, and turns to the closest being to him, and speaks as if Oudis and I were not here.

“This time I remembered to remember. Called old Avelöf last morning, and went to see him this evening. Wasn’t sure if he would come through with what he owed us, but he did, tenfold. We’re set on food for the coming months. Him and his wife also let me use their bakehouse, so I made you

plenty of sweets with that little smokey taste you like, all coated with drops of your homemade vanilla rum, even if I... whatever, I know that you enjoy this as well.”

An old man and his wife that may be able to see Nekrichta... I wonder if that means people can see her as if she were “normal”, unlike Oudis.

The one this man is talking to is contently nodding back at these words. Nekri’s jaw begins to move with the shadow of shifting palms, mincing her thoughts before vocalizing them with phantasmal adjectives.

As she thinks, I focus on this show of hands: they are now exploring themselves in a simultaneous duality. My gaze can hardly move away from this. A perfected repetition; a spectacle of a harmonious show of a wish to attain a tender eternity.

Nekrichta — “A cyan silk sewn in threads of gratitudes grounding you to moving sands. Your will is a hope, with self-sacrifices in sweat. Your time paid forward, returning lent blades dripped in your own dried blood... I still don’t understand why your feathers are warm, when they are white on the inside, wings tearing their scar tissue each time we yawn together in our nest... always warm... But still, ever as always, I am here, wishing for you to never be away, ever long.”

If I’ve ever seen love before, this must be the pinnacle of deepest affection. And... passion like this can only take roots if their garden has an alcove for the beast of uninvited change. Tragically ever-in-love, knowingly drifting towards a bottomless waterfall. A love that eventually will explode, after one’s mortal quietus, creating a river of a deep lethargic red: the twirling shade of their dreams, the widow’s sorrow permeating aisles in grocery shops, making the uncaring care in a thorny distress.

The caring cyclops focuses back to me:

Paragoria — “You can stay however long you want. We have a bedroom for guests ready to go, although no clothing changes. I’m hoping that, at least, you wouldn’t mind staying to rest before going back to your home? We’d have a large breakfast to share with you two, if you want. As well, it is reassuring to hear that you’ve already been told of their plan. What do you think of it?” The hand-holder now holds her own, hiding her face by looking at the ground, and goes back towards the table where Oudis sits, passing through an open door connected to the living room.

Lixi – “Of course. Thank you for the hospitality. As for the plan... I’m still conflicted. I don’t know if I can understand what they’re going through. But... maybe there’s something else. Something else, in the whole of life itself, that screams from inside our strange friends.”

Paragoria exhales, looks away... Looks at Nekri, who is now currently cleaning the table we sat at. A slight smile appears on the man’s face. He looks at me, with a neutral yet determined expression.

Paragoria – “You can tell, why I do not want that.”

Lixi – “It is clear. You love her. I’d even go as far as to say, from what I’ve seen, that you both deeply love each other. But...” I ponder loudly. “Isn’t it strange to love a Manifestation. I mean, loving, like this? And to have one love you back deeply?”

Paragoria – “It is. I am weak of spirit in that sense. I think that I may be wrong, yet I know that we would likely still live together until I die first. But I do not want her death. Yet I do not want her to suffer either. Selfishly perhaps, I would want for her to fight against her pain and sorrow, and to break through it all, becoming the beacon of hope that she used to embody.” He pauses. “That she used to... that is what Oudis told me; her story. She confirmed it, when she wasn’t... too drunk.”

Lixi – “I see. Perhaps it would be best, however... the encroaching end isn’t wrong either. The rule of entropy, it doesn’t seem to be incorrect.”

Paragoria – “I don’t think it to be incorrect either. But instead of a deafening hopeless silence, do you not believe it would be better to have everything fade away with a smile?”

With a way of speaking like this, I can tell why they’re living together, and I can already tell that I’ll get along fine enough with them as well.

Lixi – “I understand why you may believe the former as the finality of this plan, but the latter seems to be what the plan entails.”

Paragoria – “I know. It’s just... I don’t want it to end.”

He slowly turns to look at Nekri, and a pained expression appears on his face. I look to her, too. She is laughing at a blunder she most likely made. Liquid is spilled on the table, empty glass in her hand. Oudis is supporting his forehead with a skeletal hand, elbow sitting on the table near the spill. He doesn't seem to be upset or surprised. I'm guessing that, if he had skin on top of his skull, he would be smiling nostalgically. This would fit him. This... I suppose, fits her, too. I turn back to look at Paragoria, who now has a slight smile on the side of his mouth. I guess that's the kind of expression I would put on Oudis right now. What I imagined. A pretty nostalgic memory being relived, as if it never ended.

This man does not want life to end. Somewhere, nobody really does, I would assume. And I would think... hope, rather, that even for the two that want this to happen, they do not exactly want this. Although, they've seen more and been through more than any of us alive now, before or after.

Maybe they're the ones who are right. Maybe their sense of life has been warped due to how every experience compounds in their minds. Maybe they're wrong. Or maybe, we two humans, just want them to be wrong, even if we may agree on certain things. Even if I may agree on many things.

All that we see is conflicting. All we can do now is keep living through time, forced to move forward by the nature of our existence, by the nature of life, by the nature of us being human. I resent this, yet I am grateful to be that way. Oudis didn't miss the mark, back when he analyzed me. He never missed the mark. But please... for once... miss it. Please.