

WHEN FATE GETS IN THE WAY

By Alex C

“I was hit by a bus. Okay, no, I'm joking. It all happened differently...”

It was a normal Wednesday when 25-year-old Michael was on his way to the restaurant where he worked. The early morning sun was guiding him through the busy streets of the city. Tall buildings, mixing old decrepit facades with newly built glass architecture, stretched in every direction. Store showcases followed the path of pedestrians, trying to lure them in with various commodities. People were everywhere, going somewhere. Everything smelled fresh and flowery. Spring was trying hard. Previously at this time of year, the weather was brutal – snow all around, cold winds, and almost no sun. And now, the complete opposite. Good weather actually improves one's mood. There's a will to be more hopeful about your day when it sparkles in the sunshine, making the city look like gems under natural light. The door of the restaurant was already in sight. It looked crowded. Maybe it was going to be a well-paid shift.

Michael swung the door open. However, as he passed through it, he suddenly ended up in a forest. He couldn't believe his eyes. And rightfully so – who would believe that a regular door he passed through almost every day would one day lead him into the deep forest.

“What the hell is going on?” Mike said quietly.

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, but the forest seemed real. Even upon turning around, there was no door, no way back, only forest. Although it didn't look normal. There was nothing typical about this situation, and yet the forest seemed somehow magical. The trees were nothing like Michael had ever seen before – thick trunks with black bark and dark green buds on the ends of their branches, preparing the early leaves. It reminded him of oaks, yet it was something else. The sun felt the same, and the air seemed fine, even though cleaner, but there was snow under his feet. Michael heard steps getting closer, and all of a sudden five men came up to him.

“Welcome, Hero. We hope your travel wasn't troubled,” said one of them.

The men looked like people, though their clothes seemed more similar to the Middle Ages than modern. All five of them wore leather armor with steel plates and had swords that hung on their left sides. Helmets covered their heads and part of their faces. None other than knights.

“Wait, where even am I?” Michael asked. “Who the hell is Hero?”

“You are in Solarium, a city of solars. The Hero is you,” answered the same man who spoke before. “We are here to accompany you to the palace of Queen Tiame.”

“Wait, wait, wait, I don't get it. Is it some kind of joke? I was supposed to go to work, as usual, be yelled at by some customers, and go home with almost no tips, as usual!”

“With great respect, Hero, I have no idea what you are talking about. Fate has predicted your arrival, and now you are here. All we can tell you is that the miracle of your arrival was predicted a long time ago – place, time, everything.”

Despite the confusion, Mike decided to see how it ends. He agreed to follow the men to the palace and meet Queen Tiame.

The road to the palace was said to be around 15 minutes. At this point the only thing Michael understood was that if this place was actually real and not some kind of fever dream, these people, or, as they called themselves – solars – used the same language and time measures as Michael was used to. During the walk, Mike looked around and tried to understand if this was really happening. One of his theories was that he hit his head when getting inside the restaurant. Maybe right now he was just unconscious and having hallucinations or some weird

dreams. In any case, most probably something happened for him to completely lose his grasp of reality and go into some kind of imaginary world.

The only problem with this theory was that it all felt so real. Michael felt a cold wind running under his T-shirt, making him close his jacket and actually use his red scarf as a piece of clothing and not just an accessory. The sun hitting his face through the naked thick interweaving branches, leaving warm kisses on his skin. The sound of snow under his steps, crunching and crackling under his weight, and the chirping of birds, singing their spring lullabies, made the young man shiver. The forest was very beautiful, and it wasn't quiet. You would think that the wilderness would try to stay calm in the presence of people, but it wasn't. All the sounds and sensations feeling so real that even if it was a dream, it had to be a special kind.

"We are almost there," said one of the knights.

The forest started to clear, and Michael saw the palace that sat on a hill. Down the slope – long stairs leading to the flatlands, where a small city began. All vibrant, but also reminding one of a medieval style. The palace in the distance looked exactly how one would imagine. Just like in fantasy movies. Michael was led down the big road that passed through the farmlands, then into the city. At some point, passers-by started to notice Mike and his unusual clothes. In a place where everyone wears either a long dress with an apron or some simple trousers and a shirt – jeans, a denim jacket, red and white Nike sneakers and a bright red scarf seemed a bit odd.

"We are here," announced one of the knights. "Please, Hero, come in."

Mike barely even noticed how they got to the doors of the palace. Curious surroundings kept his attention occupied. The doors slowly opened, and the beauty of the castle presented itself to Michael. Dark wooden floor with a long red carpet leading from the entrance down the corridor. Dark brown pillars with golden ornaments, and colourful ceilings with drawings of mystical creatures. Walls were decorated with paintings and portraits. For a front door entrance, it was very expensive-looking. Knights led Michael to the throne room, where the queen awaited. The deeper they went into the palace, the simpler it looked. It still was gorgeous, but more because of its architecture than pretty pictures. The throne room, on the other hand, was not only huge, but also as detailed as the front entrance.

After looking around in shock, Mike gazed upon the queen, who stood up from her throne when the guests came in. Her beauty struck him immediately: a young woman with coffee-toned skin, long red hair styled in many thin braids, and her raspberry rose dress that emphasized her silhouette, hugging her figure and falling in gentle waves after her hips. On her head, instead of a crown, was a several-centimetre-wide golden band that curved slightly down to the centre and had small pieces of black shiny rocks embedded in its peak. The woman didn't look like a queen, at least not how Michael would imagine her. She looked plain, yet amazing.

"Welcome, Hero!" announced Queen Tiame. "Please step closer."

Her voice was just slightly deep, with a silky feeling to it. It flew through the room with ease, and its echo reflected from the walls with a bittersweet whisper. Michael stepped closer per the queen's request. Tiame went straight to Mike, took his right hand, and said:

"We are very glad you came, Hero. Let me show you around."

Before she could lead her guest further, Michael, not even really thinking about it, commented:

“You have very beautiful eyes.”

“Oh, thank you, I am flattered,” the queen responded.

Her cheeks so slightly turned pink, emphasizing her ocean-blue eyes. It seemed she also found her companion attractive. Tiame squeezed his hand and led him toward a big table next to her throne. On the table was a giant book, filled with small written text. Queen Tiame explained:

“This is a book of prophecies. We call it Fate. Fate predicts mostly big, but also sometimes small, historical events of Solarium. Every year, after the last prophecy has been fulfilled, Fate updates and gives us new prophecies for the next year.”

“Does it ever make mistakes?” Michael immediately asked.

“Not usually. But some believe that once in a thousand years it might get one thing wrong. Honestly, I do not believe that, because neither in my time nor in any of my ancestors’ did it ever make a mistake.”

“So, you think it can't be wrong? Like, ever?”

“I believe, we have been granted a blessing of knowing parts of our future for a reason. Fate is not simply a prophesy book, it is our guidance to a better life. Even if the story of it making a mistake once in a thousand years is true, it does not cancel out the good Fate brings us and its role in our society. Fate has predicted your arrival and your future here.”

The queen pointed at several last prophecies for the year that stated:

“A Hero will get lost in the Forest of Dreams on March 12th at 8 in the morning. Guide him to his Fate and help him find his way.” “The Evil will be defeated when the snow covers the deserts, and Hero will use the blade to ensure the world's future on the Field of Blood.” “On the last days of February of the next year, Hero and Queen Tiame will exchange vows at a beautiful ceremony of love and hope. Two souls singing as one in the most perfect duet.”

“Ceremony of love and hope? What does it mean?” Michael asked, looking at the queen who stood beside him.

“Well, as far as our decipherers concluded, that means marriage,” Tiame replied calmly.

“What?! Marriage?” Mike gasped. “No, no, no, that's not possible. I mean, you are very beautiful, but I don't even know you.”

“Hero, relax, I know.” Queen Tiame put her hands on the guest's shoulders and calmly continued, “No one is saying it will be now or any time soon. I also have no idea who you are as a person. I know Fate's predictions can be very confusing.

Mike shook the queen's hands off himself and said with anger and a drop of fear:

“What is this weird dream? Why does everyone keep calling me Hero? What's going on?”

Tiame patiently waited for Michael to let out the emotions he had accumulated. Frustration, worry, mostly confusion and disbelief. Solars had never had a visitor from another reality before, so they didn't know what to expect, but presumed that patience and serenity were the way to go. Mike was walking around the room, talking irritably to himself. He was trying to wrap his head around what was going on. Tips he had heard on how to make himself wake

up weren't working, and the thought of it being his new reality started to take root. At some point, he stopped, turned to Tiame, and asked:

"This... this place is real, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course. I am as real as you, as any inhabitant of this world," she answered.

"So, I'm actually in a different world that speaks and writes in the same language and uses the same time measurements and their names, except lives in the Middle Ages."

"I do not know what the 'Middle Ages' mean, but I suppose you are correct?"

"Okay," Michael said abruptly.

For now, he could accept the new reality he was placed in. Maybe it was quick, but it's not as if he never dreamed of living in a fantasy world. Michael, of course, never thought it would be possible, but something close to elves and dragons felt cooler than the everyday routine he used to have.

"May we continue?" the queen inquired.

"Yeah, sure," Michael shrugged and went back to the book.

"Good," Tiame proceeded. "Fate speaks about a battle with the great evil, and I suppose you would want to know what it is. There is no way to explain it easily. For several years, our lands have been tormented by a creature called jinnie."

"Wait, is it like a spirit that can grant wishes, but is very cunning and inherently evil?"

"Yes, exactly! Did your home world also have them?" curiously asked the queen.

"No, only legends. However, some people actually believed in them and tried to find them."

"I can only hope your world will never know how horrific jinnies actually are," said Tiame with sadness. "The Field of Blood is a place where several armies failed to defeat the beast. The soil of those grounds is forever stained red from the blood that was spilled there. The jinnie had taken over lands, turning other rulers and citizens into slaves. Now, they have made the Field of Blood their own kingdom, residing there for over four years. Despite them being calm for several years, we know they might launch their attack on us at any moment. The time you are supposed to defeat him is January, since it is then when the desert is getting covered with snow. To be straightforward with you, I lost any hope I had to defeat the monster when..." Tiame paused.

The queen suddenly looked crushed. Her eyes were watery, and it looked like it was hard for her to breathe. In just a second, she collected herself and continued the story:

"When my last army fell. You could not even imagine how glad I am that Fate predicted the jinnie's defeat."

Michael got quiet. The realization hit him.

"Your Majesty, I'm so sorry, but I doubt I can be of any help. I understand that you believe in Fate, but I'm just a guy, not some kind of... well, hero."

"Please, do not say that. You are our only hope, and if you refuse to even try—"

The queen closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She didn't want to continue her sentence. Michael felt bad for the woman and her kingdom. Real or not, their fear and pain seemed deep and fresh like an open wound. Mike couldn't say no to at least attempting to help them somehow.

“Fine, I'll try,” he agreed with a deep sigh.

“Oh, thank you, thank you so much!” Tiame hugged him. “I organised a training plan for you, in case you need it. It is supposed to help you adjust to our world, as well as prepare you to face the jinnie.”

“That would be nice. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

While hugging the queen, Michael noticed her interesting ears:

“If I may ask, what's up with your ears?”

Tiame let go of her champion and while tucking a strand of hair behind her pointy ear, said:

“What do you mean?”

Michael slid his fingers through his light brown hair, which covered his ears, and showed Tiame what he was talking about. The queen was fascinated. She had never seen a person with ears like that. With their pointed shape of ears, solars seemed to resemble traditional elves more and more. The queen decided to look at Mike closer to maybe find more differences between their species.

“You also have very beautiful eyes. They remind me of the tree bark in the Forest of Dreams. So dark and deep,” whispered Tiame.

“Thank you,” answered Michael shyly.

“I believe it is time for you to visit your room and relax a bit,” moving a bit further from the young man, the queen said, “today will be all about you and your adjustment to a new world. We will be having lunch at 13 o'clock. You will have a butler appointed to you, who will help with everything – time management, training, education and other things. I will appoint to you my closest servant – Aluarn. Consider him your guide to Solarium.”

The queen clapped twice, and a young man turned right up as if from nowhere. The butler was thin and only a little taller than Michael. He had a sharp, angular face shape, slightly tanned-looking skin, and vivid green eyes. His black curly hair was styled carefully, and he wore a thin white shirt with long sleeves under a brown leather vest and similar-tone pants. He looked serious but somewhat displeased.

“Hello, Hero,” said the butler indifferently.

“What a nice fella,” Michael muttered to himself.

“I hope you two will find common ground to build a good relationship on,” the queen said before leaving the throne room.

“Let's go, golden boy,” Aluarn said in a tired tone.

At first, Mike followed the butler quietly. He was more interested in the fascinating architecture of the palace, which combined both the simplicity of wood and stone with the elegance of what seemed to be gold and black rock. However, on the second floor, in the quiet corridor, Michael noticed that the butler was grumbling something angrily to himself.

“What are you whispering there?” asked Mike nervously.

“Ah, nothing,” pshawed Aluarn, “just thinking how annoying you are.”

“What's your problem?” asked Michael in confusion.

“Mine? Hah, my problem is an outsider like you having just the most important role in the history of Solarium, which you don't even know anything about. Moreover, you... YOU get to marry Queen Tiame.”

Aluarn was definitely not happy about this situation. Who would have thought that a sweet-looking guy like him could be such a jerk.

“It's not like I chose this fate.”

“Don't you dare speak ill of Fate!” Aluarn turned to Michael with an offended grimace. “You have no idea how important Fate is for our country. You don't know anything – remember that!”

“Chill, I didn't mean it like that. Listen, I'm not happy about all of this either. Especially about spending time with you. So, how about we find Queen Tiame and ask her to replace you?”

“What? No. If my queen demands that I train you, I will make you the best warrior Solarium has ever seen, no matter if I like you or not.”

It felt like Aluarn was jealous. Was it the queen he wanted or the glory? They continued down the corridor until they reached a wooden door with a plate “Hero” on it. Aluarn handed Michael a key and said indifferently:

“This is your room. Here's a key. Have fun.”

The butler turned and wanted to head back, but Mike asked:

“That's it? And now you just go?”

“What did you expect? I'm not going to make you breakfast in bed. All you get from me is your training and occasional calls to lunch or dinner. And don't get into trouble. At the end of the day, I am responsible for you.”

“So, it's like a hotel?”

“A what? You know, I don't care. Just figure it out. Hopefully, you're not too dumb to know how a door works.”

Michael followed Aluarn with his gaze. As soon as the butler turned a corner, Mike opened the door to his room. It was a nice space – nothing too special, but pretty. A big bed with different kinds of pillows and covers, a table with a chair, and a big closet, which apparently was already filled with some clothes. There was also a separate part of the room, divided by a wall and a curtain – a bathroom. Not a setup Michael was used to, but still not horrible.

It was now that Mike remembered he had a work backpack with him. There wasn't anything important – only some backup clothes, a phone charger, some snacks, and some medication for common illnesses. Of all the stuff, the phone charger was for sure the most useless here. By the way, his phone, which all this time was in his pocket with the wired headphones, still worked. It didn't have service, of course, but it was still at 95 percent. Michael dropped his bag near the table and fell on the bed with his phone in his hands. He turned on power-saving mode and opened the gallery. Scrolling through his photos really made him think about his life. It seemed very... sad. No photos of family, only a couple of photos with his only friend, whom he hadn't talked to in months, no pets, no lovers, no one. It seemed like no one would even miss him. Probably the only one who would notice was his boss, yet it would probably be because he had to work today. Tears started to accumulate in the young man's eyes.

He felt like screaming from loneliness. Remembering his life made it feel empty. He hugged one of the pillows, squeezing it tightly to his face, and quietly started crying.

In a couple of hours, the butler came to take him to lunch. They didn't talk. Lunch itself was nice. Queen Tiame organised a whole feast and gathered almost every person from the city just to get acquainted with Michael. Kids especially liked the new hero. They wanted to know everything about Mike's world and his clothes. What got Michael confused was that everyone called him Hero instead of his real name. He didn't even get to say anything, since most of the guests already knew him as such, and he really didn't have it in him to correct everyone. Lunch turned into dinner, and after what seemed like a blink of an eye, it was time to go to bed. In the dark of the night, it didn't matter how fun the feast was and how many people Mike met. He was lying in his new bed, crying about the life he never had to have in his world.

Michael woke up when the sun was already up. His face felt swollen from all the crying, it even hurt a little bit. Mike turned away from the wall and, through sleepiness, looked at Aluarn, who was sitting on the chair facing the bed.

“What the... What are you doing in my room?!” Michael yelled, quickly woken up by an intruder.

“I have a key,” said the butler, feeling as annoyed as yesterday.

“It doesn't mean you can watch me sleep like a creep. What's wrong with you, dude?”

“It's time to get up. Breakfast will be served in ten minutes.”

Michael expected the butler to leave after this, but he continued to sit in his place.

“Are you planning to leave?”

“Um, no. Why?”

“So, are you going to just sit and watch me getting dressed? Don't you find it weird?”

“I mean, I can close my eyes, if you don't want me to look at your swollen mug.”

This butler from hell was definitely looking for a fight. Michael rubbed his face, sighed, and got up from the bed. He started picking up his clothes from the floor, where he had left them last night, when he heard a sexualising whistle. The one men usually make inappropriately towards attractive women.

“That's it. Get out!” said Michael threateningly.

“Alright, alright, no need to overreact,” Aluarn laughed, walking out of the room.

That was a horrible way to start a day. Mike washed his face, but it didn't give him the refreshing feeling he hoped for. He looked in the closet, deciding if he wanted to try something from local fashion. He tried on some stuff, but it was either too big or too tight. Nothing really fit, so Mike decided to wear the same clothes he came in here in. It felt unusual to wear the same underwear and socks, but there was no other choice. Good thing he had taken a shower yesterday at home, because who knows how long it will be before he figures out a routine here. His room had a bath, but it wasn't like at usual modern homes, since there was no traditional plumbing. Same with the toilet. It felt kind of like a camping trip, except there wasn't a due day when he would go home. In any case, the same blue jeans, a white T-shirt, a denim jacket with a woollen inside, and a red scarf – an outfit for the day.

The butler was waiting outside the room. When Michael came out, he commented:

“Finally, let's go. You're late already.”

“It's not my fault I had nothing to wear.”

“For all I care, you could have gone naked. Move.”

Aluarn led Michael downstairs to a small room with a table – a private dining room. The queen was already there, eating breakfast. The butler sat Mike opposite the woman and stood in one of the room's corners. Catering personnel immediately suggested all kinds of cuisine to the champion. After Michael chose what he wanted, he turned to the queen, who patiently waited for his attention.

“Good morning, Hero,” Tiame said.

“Good morning, Your Highness.”

"What are those titles you call me? Yesterday you said something like "majesty", today "highness"."

"In my world, that's how people usually address royalty. Both titles are a sign of respect and admiration, or something like that. Don't your servants call you like that?"

"Usually, locals address me by my status and name, "Queen Tiame", or simply by name. My parents liked it when citizens addressed them as "Ma'am and Sir", but I prefer to keep it simple," she explained.

"I admire your humbleness, Tiame," Michael smiled.

The queen returned the expression, and both got back to eating. The food was good, even great. It tasted both familiar and curiously different. When breakfast was over, the queen inquired:

"Were the clothes we provided not to your liking?"

"Oh, no, they were actually much nicer than I expected. However, the size..."

"My apologies, we did not know what size you would be," the queen said and turned to the butler, "Aluarn, darling, could you bring Hero to Beatrice in an hour or so?"

"Of course," the butler slowly nodded.

"Beatrice is our best seamstress. She will make any clothes you require just how you like them," Tiame explained.

"Thank you. Also, can we discuss the butler?" asked Mike.

Aluarn quietly coughed. He sounded worried, and Michael counted it as a win.

"Aluarn? Is everything alright between you two?" the queen asked, turning her gaze from one man to another.

"Could you teach him some manners? He broke into my room this morning," Michael said, smiling with satisfaction.

"What? Seriously?" Tiame was shocked. "Aluarn, is it true?"

"I deeply apologise it seemed this way, Hero," the butler bowed, "it will not happen again."

"I really hope you will get acquainted and find each other's company more welcoming," the queen said. "In addition, to encourage that, I ask you both to communicate your worries to each other better and solve your disputes without bringing me into it. You both are grown men. You should know how to deal with it yourselves."

Both men sighed in disappointment. Michael looked at Aluarn and caught an angry stare. The butler seemed ready to kill. At the same time, Tiame stood up, said her goodbyes, and made her way to other matters. Aluarn waited for Mike to get up from the table to leave. However, Michael started to clean up, helping other servants. The butler was surprised, yet joined in the cleaning process.

"Why are you helping?" he questioned Michael.

"I used to work as a waiter in a restaurant. After dealing with too many assholes myself, there's no way I won't help clean up after a meal."

"But you are literally a future king, you don't need to do that."

Aluarn seemed confused by Mike's actions. It looked like he didn't expect a new hero to be so polite.

"I know. But I will die before I forget how hard I had to work before I came here. Also, it won't kill you to be a decent person from time to time," Mike smirked.

"Don't promise anything you can't do."

After the table was cleaned, the butler led the hero to the library. It was huge. There were several levels of bookshelves. While the palace mostly incorporated wood and gold, the library was made of wood and black rock. High at the very ceiling were many chandeliers, lighting up the place. Smaller light sources stood next to every desk and table for private usage. The whole library looked as elegant as everything else before did, yet it had the grandiose vibe to it, that some other parts of the palace lacked. Michael looked around in awe, taking in the feeling of greatness this space radiated.

"You seem impressed," Aluarn noted calmly, "that's good, because you're going to spend a lot of time here."

"Reading, I hope?"

"Yes, you should learn some history before we get to the actual training."

"Oh, yes!" Michael exclaimed excitedly, ready to go, when the butler stopped him.

"You'll start where I say."

Aluarn led Mike through the shelves, deeper and deeper into the library. The beauty of the place had Michael distracted, and, without knowing, the hero got right into the trap the butler had set up. In a quiet, lonely, and dark corner of the shelves, Aluarn grabbed Michael and pushed him against the wall. Just slightly taller butler pressed Mike into the shelves with his elbow, looming over him, and whispered aggressively:

"If it was up to me, you'd already be far away from here. Alone. With no one to help you. So be grateful for what you get. If you can't handle me, then how do you plan to stand against the jinnie, huh?"

Aluarn's sinister dark green eyes focused on Michael, who was at a loss for words. He didn't expect such a trick from the one who was supposed to guide him. He tried to utter something, but Aluarn interrupted:

"Don't you ever dare to say a word about this to the queen. Understood?"

"Afraid of consequences?" with every strength he had, said Michael.

Aluarn let him go with a growl. From a push he made against the shelf, a book fell on Mike's head. It was a heavy book with an ironic title: "The Rules of Etiquette."

This time Michael didn't put down his guard. This situation had shown he couldn't trust Aluarn, no matter what Tiame said. The butler hated him, though intended to actually prepare him for the battle at the end of the year.

"Here," said Aluarn, pointing at a chair next to the table full of books, "all of this is for you. When you're finished, we will get to actual training. Now, read."

Michael quietly sat down and picked one of the books. He always loved reading, especially fiction. He had read what seemed like hundreds of books about fantasy worlds and magic. His favourite was the "Percy Jackson" series, no matter how cliché it was.

The first book he picked up was "History of Solarium". And it was big. The rest of the day was spent in the library reading. The butler came and went, only occasionally checking on Mike. It was more peaceful when he was gone.

When the lights at the library were turned on, but outside was already dark, Michael fell asleep. He didn't eat any lunch, so by this time he was exhausted. Aluarn came to take him to the forgotten visit to Beatrice and saw him peacefully sleeping. The butler bent down to look at the hero. A strand of hair covered Mike's face. Aluarn gently tucked it behind the guy's ear and for a moment quietly observed him, taking in all the details. Soft angles of Michael's face, the barely noticeable bristle on his chin, his deep brown eyes that looked smooth and silky like dark chocolate.

"Ah!" Aluarn gasped, slightly jumping away from Mike.

"Is it your fetish or something to watch people sleep?" asked Michael, getting up from the chair and rubbing the left side of his face.

"Time for a tailor visit," the butler said calmly, ignoring his companion's question.

"Fine, but you really creep me out with your interest in my sleep. Please stop it."

Aluarn disregarded it again and silently led Michael to Beatrice's office, located on the ground floor in a deep corner of the palace. When they came, they saw a girl working on some fabric. She looked Japanese and very young.

"Beatrice!" with fake excitement proclaimed Aluarn, "how's our best seamstress doing?"

"Look who decided to show up. I've been waiting for you the whole day," said the girl with annoyance.

She had an interesting accent, and her voice was very high in comparison to the queen's. She sounded and looked youthful, though bold and confident.

"We got caught up in the library," said Aluarn, rubbing his neck with embarrassment.

"Oh, I know you, Aluarn," Beatrice grabbed Michael by the hand and led him behind a corner, "your excuses might work on Tiame, but I know you just forgot."

"What are you doing?!" Mike screamed when Beatrice started to undress him.

"Shush! Do you want me to measure you through all of this?"

"How old even are you?!" Michael jumped out of the curtain, with barely anything on him.

Aluarn found it funny and couldn't hold his laughter. However, as soon as Beatrice's head showed from a curtain, the butler shut his mouth with both hands. The girl scared both of them with just her presence.

"18," she answered, "but my age doesn't mean I'm not the best you've ever met."

"You're a scary lady, you know that?" commented Mike.

"Oh, believe me, she knows," the butler said before quickly disappearing behind the door.

Beatrice used every second to measure Michael from head to toes. The only place she didn't measure was his underwear, and that was only because he wasn't comfortable with that. Maybe Beatrice was the best at her craft, but she also was the feistiest eighteen-year-old Mike had ever met. In about half an hour, the seamstress allowed her client to dress up and sent him away, literally pushing him out the door. Aluarn was waiting right there. He smirked and nodded for Michael to go.

“Where's Beatrice from?” asked Mike.

“From almost the other part of the world. She was part of the nomads, but their group met the jinnie on their way. Her whole family and clan were taken as slaves, and yet she managed to escape. She once told me that her mother was a tailor, so Beatrice helped her from a very young age. When she came to Solarium, Tiame took her in and helped to advance her passion.”

“That's... so sad,” wistfully commented Michael.

“She hides behind that mask of fearlessness, but I'm pretty sure that deep inside she's just scared. I don't think the luxury and toughness of this palace can return to her the feeling of safety, no matter how hard Tiame tries,” ruefully said Aluarn.

They continued their way silently. The dining room wasn't far, and this time they came before the queen. The butler assumed the same position as during breakfast, and Mike did the same. The catering staff started to do their job and presented Michael with all kinds of dish choices. While Mike was trying to decide, Tiame walked in the door and sat across from him at her usual place. She greeted Mike and the butler, after which she said:

“Aluarn, darling, join us at the table. I presume it was a tough day for both of you. Do not be shy. You know how I enjoy it when you dine with me.”

“Of course,” Aluarn smiled.

The butler sat on the right side of the queen. Michael looked at Aluarn with slight shock. Dining with the queen seemed like a big privilege, or maybe Tiame is a queen of people and invites everyone to sit with her. On the other hand, she did mention that Aluarn is her favourite.

“So, Hero, how was your first day of training?” Tiame asked.

“Exciting. I spent the whole day in the library, reading about Solarium's history. Did you know that the name of Solarium comes from the first queen, Solary, who helped to build this city? I mean, of course you know, you're the queen yourself,” Michael's excitement turned into embarrassment.

Tiame commented through a giggle:

“Yes, I know. You are adorable, Hero.”

The queen's laughter filled the room like sunlight through the window on a summer day. Michael couldn't look away from the beautiful woman. Even at a painful time for her country, next to a complete stranger, she was filled with happiness and hope. Unfortunately, Aluarn's quiet laugh snatched Mike out of his daze. This butler ruined every enjoyable moment Michael had.

“I am glad you are enjoying your training,” Tiame smiled, “I also hope that you two will get along sooner or later.”

And the dinner went on. Time flew by, and the night was looming over the kingdom. The small room Michael was provided felt like a tiny prison cell, where they put him for the night, only to grab him in the morning for new types of torture. The agonising part of it all was the annoying butler the hero had to deal with. Otherwise, spending time in the library was more of a pleasure than a throe.

The nightfall soon dissolved in the wonders of dreams. Michael dreamed of a normal life he had just a couple of days ago. The mundane work and internet scrolling, the people and co-

workers, his apartment in town. The dream felt like a fantasy, similarly to how a slumber about this universe would usually. Then the morning came. A gentle awakening, greeted by the first rays of sunlight seeping through the thin curtains on the window. It crawled under them onto the hero's pillow, making its slow way to his face to remind him not to oversleep. The room itself was quiet. No intruders were present in there, but a pile of new clothes was sitting on the chair that was carefully positioned next to the closet.

While getting up from the bed, Michael thought of how sneaky that damned butler had to be. He opened the curtain, letting in the light of a new day. Just now, coming closer, he noticed a calendar next to the closet. It said March 14th. After washing up, Mike went to pick up the new clothes he was provided with. He put them on, discovering that they were not only perfectly fitted for him, but also closely tailored to resemble something like what he came here in.

"Thanks, Beatrice, I guess," the hero chuckled, trying to look himself over, "gotta put up a mirror though.

That was the moment Michael noticed something tucked in under the new garments. A letter from the butler that told the champion to get to the breakfast table as soon as he was done preening himself. The sarcastic tone transcended the limitations of the written word, causing Mike to cringe. However, the next step was appointed, so there he went.

The palace's hallways were busy, but also peaceful. Not one person running or anxiously rushing somewhere. The servants Michael saw greeted him like royalty, bowing so slightly to not disrupt his flow but also to show their respect. The hero greeted them back, participating in an awkward dance of bowing to each other but not really saying much. It seemed everyone had their job to do, and they were on a mission. Yet Mike strolled down the corridors, taking in the magnificent altitude and elegance of the place. The clear blue sky shared its sunlight through the big windows, laying out a pattern on the carpets and warming up the chambers. Down the stairs and lower to the dining area Michael went, guided only by memory. However, he managed to find his way easier when a pleasant smell of freshly cooked food enthralled his senses.

Upon entering the correct room, the hero saw no one. Only when making a step in did he hear a familiar voice:

"You're here, golden boy, sit down."

"Good morning to you too, whatever your name was," Michael replied and sat down in front of an empty plate.

"I suppose you found my letter," clenching his teeth into a forced smile said Aluarn.

"What letter?"

An outright lie by the outsider annoyed the butler even more. Leaning in the corner, he breathed heavily with his arms crossed. His eyes squinted and fixated on the newcomer.

"What's got you so on edge? Are you hangry?" Mike asked, poking the bear.

"Oh, Queen Tiame and he already ate," an older woman walked in with another platter of fresh goods.

She put the food before Michael, waiting to see if he'd like it or not.

“Thank you so much,” Mike smiled at the lady. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I know your name.”

“Oh, don’t worry yourself with it, Hero. I’m only here to bring you food,” the woman humbly replied, bowing slightly in the process.

“Well, I also used to just bring food out for people to enjoy, doesn’t mean my name wasn’t important. I want to know the name of a person who’s getting me all this delicious stuff.”

“Oh, thank you, Hero. My name’s Martha. Please enjoy your meal.”

“Thank you, Martha,” Michael smiled, after which he finally got to the food.

The meal was as wonderful as previous times. The choice of different dishes made Mike’s head spin. However, overeating wouldn’t be wise. He had to restrain himself from fitting all of it both on his plate and into his stomach. Such a nice meal was a beautiful start to the day.

“Thank you so much again,” the hero told the server, wiping his mouth, “it was very good. Please convey my compliments to the chef.”

“Of course, Hero, I will. We’ll see you for lunch,” Martha replied and collected the dirty dishes.

“Can I help you somehow?” Michael asked the server.

“Oh, no, thank you. I’m pretty sure Aluarn has waited long enough.”

“He can wait some more,” Mike chuckled, picking up the half-finished trays.

The butler snorted and rolled his eyes. Picking up some of the trays as well, he proceeded to carry them to the kitchen.

“Don’t think ill of our Aluarn, Hero,” Martha whispered to Michael while the butler was out of the room, “he’s not usually like this. He might be sarcastic and rough around the edges, but he’s not this mean.”

“Ever since I got here, he was nothing but rude to me,” Mike said, confused.

“I think he’s just upset that you were chosen by Fate to fight the jinnie. Also, he and Tiame are very close, so he might be very protective of her. Especially since you’re not from around here,” the woman spoke her mind.

“Oh, Martha, today you are my ray of sunshine,” Michael sighed, shaking his head in both disbelief and the ridiculousness of the situation, “let’s finish this up. Otherwise, the grumpy gremlin will bite us with his witful sarcasm.”

The lady giggled, containing laughter. The cleanup went fast, and soon Aluarn and Michael were on their way to the next stop – library.

The displeased butler led the way. In the corridors they met several other workers periodically. Upon greeting them, Michael started to notice something. The typically angry look of Aluarn seemed to disappear while talking to somebody else. He smiled and joked with familiar faces, giving out high-fives or sometimes even handshakes. Many workers seemed to be happy to see them. The serious grimace only came back when the butler was catching the hero’s look. So they soon reached the library, and a similar observation was even more obvious. While Michael was reading the same history book he hadn’t finished previously, he could hear a distant whisper of a live conversation.

Sneakily, Mike turned around to see what’s going on. Next to one of the bookshelves stood a young woman, seemingly a librarian, maybe around the age of a college student. Her light coral hair floatily came down to her waist, while curtain bangs covered the upper part of her face. She wore a long blue sundress with yellow and pink patterns, and blue ballet flats. Holding

a couple of books to her chest, the young woman talked enthusiastically with the butler. His tone was almost unrecognisable. Aluarn spoke lighter, rejoicingly. Michael couldn't hear what exactly his acquaintance was saying, but he could definitely make out what kind of reaction it provoked in the woman. They smiled, giggled, and altogether enjoyed an active discourse. This could only mean one thing for Mike – Aluarn's roughness was reserved only for him.

Concentrating on the history of Solarium became a little difficult after learning an unfortunate fact. Instead, the hero wondered if Martha was right in her assumptions about the butler. And if so, how can Michael prove that he doesn't pose any danger to the normality of Aluarn's everyday life.

A couple of hours later, and another time for a meal came around. The butler came over to the hero, letting him know that they were expected for lunch. While making their way back down the same corridors, Michael decided to risk it and confront the butler once more about his distaste for the newcomer.

"Aluarn," Mike began.

"What?" an unwilling response followed.

"I saw you being nice to everyone else today."

"And?"

"Why is it just me you treat like a piece of shit?"

"Because you are the only one deserving of such status."

"But why? I didn't ask for any of this."

"Simple answer to a simple question. If you don't get it, it's your problem."

"You are such an ass, you know that?"

"Yep."

At least he was honest about it. However, another conclusion Michael could draw from this short exchange – there was no easy way to clear the air between them. Imagining every day to be like this seemed annoying, but survivable. Also, no one said that making other friends was off the table.

March 15th, Saturday. The day was surprisingly gloomy. Heavy clouds covered the sky, leaving no trace of sunlight. The wind rustled the trees, shaking their first buds to life. The air seemed dense, like before rain.

For Michael, the day began with an awkward conversation about the bathroom. The matter of taking a bath grew more and more important, but asking the butler about it felt embarrassing. Yet the hero had to do that because the oily look of his hair started to concern him. Surprisingly though, Aluarn wasn't abashed by such an inquiry and seemed content to provide an explanation. Apparently, in every bathroom there was a clay pitcher filled with hot water. As the butler explained, this pitcher was "special", the amount of water in it always stayed the same, so even when you filled a bath with it, the pitcher would stay full.

"Magic?"

"Yes, magic," Aluarn confirmed.

"A magical water pitcher, I'll be damned. Does it mean there are other types of magic use?" Michael questioned curiously.

"Yes," the lack of enthusiasm from the butlers' perspective was expected.

This got Michael excited. If magic is real here, maybe at some point, he'll be able to learn it. Just the possibility of such an outcome filled the hero with energy.

Michael also learned how the sewerage and heating worked in the kingdom. As the hero had read before in the books, Solarium was built on hot springs, that provided fertile soil for farming and warmer temperatures during winter. What was new to him was that the same hot springs were used to create heating in the palace and many private homes in addition to usual fire places. A system of pipes led hot water through the radiators located in every room of the palace, providing warmth during the cold months. The same hot springs were the source of endless hot water in the pitcher, which served as a physical connection to water instead of a usual faucet. Sewerage worked a little closer to Mike's world. However, the waste collected wasn't discarded into nature to decompose, but instead was reused in farming as fertilisers. The palace's system was isolated from the rest of the city, using waste created by its inhabitants for their own greenhouse. Something that Michael noticed in all of these explanations was how much solars were trying to create a green and unintrusive system of self-sufficiency to avoid disturbing or damaging the environment around them. The thoughtfulness of this nation was admirable.

Aluarn also brought Michael some soaps and towels, then left him alone, only reminding him to be down in the library when he's done. Day after day, Mike was learning something new. Which meant no time for a long relaxation session, he had to be back to the books as soon as he could. The magic water didn't seem that magical, but it felt nice to finally have a moment to himself and wash up. The soaps the butler provided were naturally made, and they had different smells as well. One smelled like flowers, one like mint and lemon, and another one reminded Mike of the shampoo bottles in the supermarkets, that were sold with a title like "Smell like a true man." Mint with citrus was more Michael's style, partially because his usual shampoo in his home world had a similar combination. A bath was nice, even though the lack of a shower was peculiar. He dried off with one of the towels Aluarn brought, got into some clothes, and rushed to the library. Maybe those history books had something about magic in them.

In the library, the sullen weather wasn't felt as strongly. Bright, high-hanging chandeliers illuminated the chamber with a golden candlelight. Upon entering the grand doors, Michael saw Tiame conversing with Aluarn near the hero's usual reading space. The queen turned to the hero when the butler pointed him out. What confused Michael was Tiame's reaction. She put both of her hands in front of her mouth, covering a slight giggle and a smile that were overcoming her. Her face showed surprise, and her eyes widened in shock.

"What?" Michael asked, coming closer to the two.

"Don't you have a mirror in your room?" the butler asked, smiling cunningly.

"No, I wanted to ask to get it, but... what's going on?" the more he spoke, the more bewildered he felt.

"Hero, you are sparkling," Tiame said, still attempting to contain laughter.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Look at your skin," the queen led him to one of the shelves that were behind the glass.

In the reflection, Mike saw himself sparkling with silver glitter. It was all over his hair, face and body, mostly peeking through his clothes on his bare skin. At this point, the hero could think of only one reference... "It's the skin of a killer, Bella." And it would be a great comparison because, in the candlelight of the library, Michael glimmered like a disco ball.

"You little piece of shit," Mike swore under his breath, referring to an obvious culprit of this crime.

"What happened, Hero? Did you fall in a barrel of sparkles?" Aluarn teased sarcastically. Instead of throwing the butler under the bus, Michael decided to own it.

"My queen," he stretched his hand to Tiame, bowing slightly, "would you like a little sparkle on your beautiful hands as well?"

Tiame laughed, accepting the invitation. Mike took her hand, spun the queen around and pulled her closer to himself. The woman seemed flustered by such an elegant move, and slightly pressed her lips together to shyly suppress a wide smile. The hero kissed one of her hands, then bent a little over the queen and shook his head violently, splashing some of the glitter around. Tiame couldn't keep herself contained anymore and burst out laughing. Her enjoyment took over the airy room with a warm echo, diverting everyone's attention to the situation. A couple of seconds later, Michael stopped, glancing at the joyful expression of the queen and the grouchy face of the butler that conveyed both suspicion and dissatisfaction. Mike smirked at the thought of a failed plan.

"I can't believe you just did that," the butler commented.

"Aluarn, look," the queen stepped back from the hero, twirling around in her now partially sparkling dress and still laughing, "he actually put some sparkles onto my dress."

"I'm glad you like it," the butler chuckled.

Looking at Tiame's reaction, even his grimace turned to a smile. He observed the queen for a moment before catching her hand mid-turn and pulling her into a short dance. Aluarn took the queen by both hands, leading her into a spin with him in the tempo of a ballroom style. They needed no music, and it seemed natural for them to break out in a dance like this. They spun and swung in a small circle, but their energy captivated the whole room. All this time, the queen didn't stop smiling and giggling. Soon Aluarn released her from the short dance with a final twirl, and Tiame came back to face the hero with a big smile on her face.

“I knew Aluarn did something when he called me to join you in the library today for a brief time,” she said, “but I did not expect you two to make up such an entertaining surprise.”

“Well, I suppose we both love to see you smile,” Michael gracefully concluded the experience with a compliment.

“I am used to Aluarn being this extravagant with his time and ideas. I can say now, you yourself are full of surprises, Hero,” Tiame said, right before leaving for her other duties.

What first seemed to be a cruel prank from the butler turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Michael managed to forget completely about his discomfort after seeing how much joy it brought to that attractive and usually reserved woman. Accidentally, Aluarn might have opened the door for Mike to new possibilities.

“You lucky gnome,” Aluarn smirked, crossing his arms, “and I thought to make you a laughing stock.”

“Gotta work harder to do that then,” Michael teased the butler back.

“I will make you spend the whole day like this,” the butler threatened.

“I know. That’s kinda what I was hoping for,” the hero smirked, passing the butler by to go to his reading place.

It left Aluarn a little bit flabbergasted, leaving him no cards to play with. So, the day continued as normal. However, it would be unfair to call it usual, because wherever they went, every servant, worker, or passer-by noticed Michael and inquired about the bizarre look.

March 16th, Sunday. Another grey-looking day hovered over the kingdom, but it was far from being gloomy. Solarium was known for its rainy springs, so each year the country hosted celebrations. Several weekends a season were devoted to coming together and having fun. This weekend was like that. A combination of celebrating the arrival of the hero and the wonderful spring weather was taking place at the main square in the city. A temporary market of goods was organised, as well as a stage for speeches and entertainment. Aluarn wanted Michael to attend this event, not only from a rest perspective, but also to see the culture and people of Solarium in real life. Putting a face to those he was meant to save would help Mike develop a sense of importance of his task. After a hefty breakfast and a trip to Beatrice for a special attire, the butler and the hero made their way to the city.

Exiting the main doors of the palace, Aluarn led Michael down the giant cobblestone stairs right into the city. This road was known as the main passage that connected the centre of Solarium with the royal castle by one long street named “The Sun Street”. Along this stone path were elegant metal lampposts decorated with baskets with plants. They were turned off during the day and only shined with flames of candles during the nights. This street was known to have one of the most expansive estates and included a lot of important infrastructure. The closest houses to the palace were shops and businesses that often got work requests from the queen and the castle workers. The servants and employees of the royalty who didn’t reside inside the palace were provided with living spaces either within community housing or private family homes, all placed on the same Sun Street. The main idea of such a design was to provide the staff with all necessary resources within close range so that their job didn’t complicate their life with long travel. Some counted such accommodations a privilege, while others agreed that it was a necessity. In any case, it created a certain difference between the Sun Street and other more commonly occupied regions of the city. The main problem of such a structure was limited choice options. While the rest of Solarium’s inhabitants could freely choose a region and

housing to their liking available on the market, the workers of the palace lacked such opportunity. The available houses were limited, and any who wanted to get a family home instead of solo rooms had to wait for someone to move out or go around to find someone to trade their living situations with. Yet the majority of the staff didn't complain about the provided housing because most of the time the queen managed to find ways to keep everyone satisfied. The shops and infrastructure of the street were also well thought through. The Sun Street became a little bit like a closed environment, whereas the rest operated on an open market. Still, the main alley always stayed the most active place for events. The centre of Solarium was a fountain decorated with gold and black rock, like the majority of the palace, that depicted mythical creatures and statues of the backbone occupations of the country: farmers, animal herders, tailors, teachers, healers and builders. The fountain was a tribute to the people who made this country and the history of it. Surrounding it were mostly universities and its housing, as well as some entertainment facilities - main theatre, opera house and library.

Today, surrounding the fountain were temporary market tents and a stage in front of the theatre building. All adorned with colourful ribbons and flowers made from strips of cloth and leather. The celebration was meant to promote use of leftover material and welcoming of the new season of fresh ones. The shops provided all kinds of scraps they accumulated during the winter: clothes and textile goods made from different pieces of clothes, marinated and preserved meals and broth starters from leftovers, decorations and household items made from mixes of wood and metal scraps, paintings from leftover paint, or sculptures from mixed clay. The imagination of the artisans left Michael in awe.

Drifting through the crowd of solars, Aluarn showed Mike around, telling him more about one or another thing they saw. Some sellers told the men about their merchandise, inviting them to try it or even buy it. It was a challenge to convince Michael to let go of some things, persuading him with the only argument – a lack of money in his pockets. Yet conversations with solars seemed to make the hero excited to learn more. Against Aluarn's suggestions, Mike even got into a locally known game with the kids, who then beat him several times in a row, leaving him with his ego bruised but also joyful. Soon, performances began at the celebratory stage. The artists varied from dancers and singers, to poets and magicians. For hours, they amused the visitors of the market, until Michael finally noticed that there were more people around than before.

“Why are so many people here?” the hero asked Aluarn, who sat next to him on a bench in the crowd, watching the performances.

“It's almost time for Tiame's speech,” the butler explained.

“Oh, that's cool,” Mike smiled with excitement.

“And after that, she'll invite you on stage,” the companion continued unexpectedly.

“Wait, what?” excitement changed to worry.

At the same time, the queen made her way on stage. Michael anxiously looked up at her. Tiame was wearing a beautiful gown made in the same special way out of scraps and pieces of fabrics, with a similar silhouette to her usual pink one but decorated with textile flowers and ribbons braided in her hair. Her usual crown was also updated with ribbons that glided with a light breeze. Confidently, with a reserved smile, she spoke to the audience:

“Hello, my dears. Today is a joyous day. We celebrate the end of the season of preservation and resilience, a white winter that gifted us beautiful snowfall. And we welcome the

beginning of the season of the new and refreshed, an abundant spring that will bring us warmth and new opportunities. With this season, we open our arms, minds and hearts to find, learn and create more wonders and pulchritude. Despite the hardships we faced in the passing winter and a dismal threat at our doorstep, we prevail and keep going forward step by step. It is important to remember Fate and the hope it brought us at the start of this year. And this time, we can celebrate not only our perseverance, but also a new fighting chance in the face of our champion. Hero!”

The audience started cheering. Aluarn pushed Michael to his feet while Tiame inaugurated his presence on the stage. Carefully and nervously, Mike went through the clapping crowd that gave him way, creating a corridor straight to the scene. Step after step led the hero to the centre, right in front of the biggest audience he had ever seen. Presentations and speeches were never Michael’s strong suit, yet now he was put on the spot without any warning and had to come up with something inspiring to say.

Mike’s hands were suddenly sweaty and shaking. His heart was racing, leaving him breathless. The crowd before him started to blur in his eyes. Hot flashes rushing through his body, making his every limb freeze in place. Panic set in. It felt like forever, filled with nothing but quiet from the hero. Luckily, the queen caught Michael’s hesitation early and came to his aid.

“Please, show more love to our humble champion!” she called upon the audience. While solars cheered once more, the queen said quietly to Michael:

“You don’t need to say much. Just try to breathe slowly and tell them that the jinnie will be defeated. Give them a little bit of hope, and I will do the rest.”

The crowd calmed down, longing for the champion’s voice. Michael could hear nothing but his own heartbeat ringing in his ears. However, he squeezed several sentences out of himself, not truly comprehending what exactly he was saying with such confidence.

“I am the Hero,” Mike proclaimed loudly. “I have yet to know more about Solarium and its people, but I promise to do anything I can to defeat the jinnie. There will be no more terror in these lands!”

The solars roared with blissful hopefulness, clapping and shouting in support of the orator. The queen stepped in, guiding Michael first to bow and then to leave the stage, continuing her speech:

“Rejoice, solars, as we step into the new era of hope and power. Celebrate today in the name of our champion and in the name of new upcoming peace!”

While Tiame finished her performance, Michael stumbled off the scene, his legs numb and shaking. He almost fell from the last step of the short stairs, but Aluarn managed to save the hero’s face by catching and supporting him off it. The butler led him back to their seats, putting the shocked saviour on the bench. Mike’s head was spinning. It all was a big blur for him, and only ten or so minutes later he came back to his senses. By that time, the performances of the artists had resumed, and part of the crowd started to disperse. Now a new concern set in. Michael couldn’t remember a word he had said, which made him unsure of this occurrence’s success. Still sitting next to the butler, he leaned sideways and quietly asked:

“Aluarn, hey.”

The butler nodded upwards, as if asking what’s up.

“How was my speech? Was it okay?”

The hero's voice was shaking slightly. His nervousness could be observed with the naked eye.

“Yeah, it was alright,” the butler shrugged.

“Are you serious or just messing with me?” knowing his companion, it was almost impossible to trust his word.

“Don't worry, I'd be much happier if it was bad.”

“Fair point,” Mike agreed, “but what exactly did I say?”

The butler chuckled, holding in laughter:

“I didn't expect it to work this well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I knew you had to prepare a speech, but I didn't expect you to freak out like this. You really don't remember a word you said?”

“You piece of—” Michael mumbled, then, raising his voice a little, “no, I don't. Are you completely nuts? Didn't Tiame say that your job depends on me?”

“I'll be fine, believe me. And I didn't know you are so-o bad with public speaking. Yet you did it pretty decently. Still funny though,” the butler giggled to himself.

“So, what the fuck did I say there?”

“I'm the hero, yada-yada,” Aluarn said, making air quote marks, “I don't know you, but I will do anything to defeat the jinnie. There will be no more terror. Something like that.”

“That's cringey, but doesn't sound that bad,” Michael breathed out.

“Told you. The important part everyone loved it, so you're good. But what a lovely sight to see you struggle so much with a simple task.”

“I'd love to see you talk to the whole kingdom like that.”

“Pff, you would, if I didn't have to be your babysitter,” Aluarn pshawed.

Michael stayed silent. He had nothing to trip the butler on. Truth is, Aluarn wouldn't be the queen's closest servant if he wasn't good at his job, so attempting to outshine him was futile. However, the hero could now relax. Since his speech was sufficient, his companion's plan didn't work completely, even if it caused Michael great distress and Aluarn great amusement. It was over, and all that was left was to enjoy the rest of the day.

The evening came over, and finally Aluarn let Michael acquire some trinkets from the market. The queen herself had bought some art to support the local artisans. They crossed paths at one of the stands, where both of them really liked a painting that reminded Mike of abstract style.

“Oh, hi, Tiame,” Aluarn put his hand on the queen's shoulder.

The woman turned around and immediately broke into a smile:

“Hello, my friends. What are you still doing here so late?”

“Hero wanted to buy some stuff,” the butler pointed slightly back at Mike, already holding a whole basket of interesting fallalery.

“Hello, Tiame,” the hero joined the conversation, “what are you here for?”

“This painting has caught my eye tonight. I am considering purchasing it.”

“Really? Me too,” Michael said enthusiastically.

The young lady at the counter was pale as a sheet. She tried to hold her hands together so they wouldn't shake, but it was still noticeable. The presence of both the queen and the hero at her stall was exhilarating, making her jittery.

The painting in question was of a butterfly. It was physiologically correct and very detailed, but its most curious characteristic was the colours that the artist used. It seemed to be a controlled and well-thought-through mess of leftover paints, all combined with a unifying black chroma. It was vibrant and textured. Despite its unrealistic colour scheme, it created an illusion, as if the butterfly was merely sitting on the canvas and was ready to take flight at any moment.

"It's a very creative piece," Michael commented to the seller.

"Indeed, it is," Tiame agreed. "Do you want to get it, Hero?"

"Yeah, but I think, you should. I wouldn't have any place to put it anyway," he smiled sweetly.

"I have an idea," Aluarn pitched in. "How about you both buy it?"

"Could you elaborate?" the queen urged.

"Since you both like it so much, how about you pay double price? It would not only benefit the artist and thank them, or in this case, I assume, her, but also show how much you both want to support solars."

The butler looked at the young woman, who stood there like a deer in the headlights, and winked at her with a smile. Then he addressed the buyers once more:

"It's not like we would be spending too much anyway. And since Hero didn't go over the limit on his spending, we can consider a double price a donation to the author of the piece."

Tiame thought for a moment, taking another look at the painting. The large size of the canvas and the number of details implied long hours or more like months of work. Such dedication to the craft deserved recognition.

"I presume it is a valid suggestion. But only if Hero agrees," the queen summarised.

"Sure," Michael agreed without thinking.

In his mind, this painting had to cost more and paying double the tag seemed obvious. He looked at the woman, questioning:

"What inspired you to paint this?"

The young lady's lips shook, whispering the answer with a faltering voice:

"I'm studying to be a biologist. I love butterflies."

Her answer made everyone smile softly. The dithers of the student were lovely in their innocence. The queen asked for her wallet from one of her surrounding servants, taking out the amount written on the price tag. Aluarn followed her lead, taking the same coin from the provided pouch with money for Michael's spending at the market. The woman held out her shaking hands, accepting both offerings.

"Th-thank you," the student whispered, pressing the money to her chest.

"Thank you, my dear," Tiame said.

Then she asked one of the servants to take the art and deliver it to the palace. This whole action generated interest in the crowd of late market visitors. Solars surrounded the queen's entourage, trying to catch a glance at the special piece. When Tiame, Michael, Aluarn and other staff went away from the counter, the stall of the young student got swarmed with curious

bystanders. While they were walking away, Mike noticed that the butler kept looking back with a pleased, gentle gaze that was combined with a soft smile. It seemed to make him happy that his suggestion worked and granted a talented woman the recognition she deserved. The queen kept discussing how bright that student was and how proud her parents must be. Her fascination with the work of the artist didn't seem to go down until they reached the palace's doors.

"Our dinner should be ready," the queen said.

"May I leave Hero with you for dinner? I need to attend to some other business," Aluarn asked.

"Of course," Tiame smiled.

"Excuse me," the butler went in with everyone, then excused himself and was gone.

The hero was left with the queen. Some servants tried to take his basket of trinkets to his room, but Michael insisted on taking them with him to the dinner table to show Tiame. So, they went to the usual dining room, still expressing their satisfaction with the celebration. Upon reaching their destination, the table was already prepared. As they sat down, Michael said:

"I'm starving."

"Oh, my, why would you not say that before?" the queen seemed worried.

"Oh, no, it's just an expression. I'm not really dying from hunger. I meant that I'm glad we get to finally eat. I kinda skipped lunch today."

"Did Aluarn not get you anything from the food stalls at the festival?"

"I mean, we did get some stuff, but we were mostly walking around, looking at things," Michael chuckled, already grabbing food from the common plates.

"I see," the queen spoke softly, also getting dinner on her plate. "I wanted to ask you about your speech—"

"Oh, shit, was it bad?" Mike freaked out.

"No, no, Hero, it was good. What I meant to ask was about your reaction on the stage. I noticed you were very nervous," Tiame inquired.

"More like scared and shaking to the bone," the hero chuckled awkwardly.

"Did Aluarn inform you of the upcoming speech?" she grew suspicious.

"Maybe, I don't really remember," Michael avoided the obvious answer, stuffing his mouth with food.

Tiame smiled, diverting her attention to the presented dinner. She didn't need the hero to rat out the devious butler because she knew what he was doing at this very moment. What Aluarn didn't think of before was the fact that, even though he was Tiame's good friend and the closest butler, she still had other servants who often told her about his endeavours. In her opinion, Aluarn's actions were within the expected norm. She knew him well and acknowledged his dislike of the hero from the first day but refrained from involving herself directly in this issue. Two grown men were fully capable of dealing with their feelings on their own. Tiame had enough trust in both Aluarn and Michael to believe they wouldn't mess up any important obligations.

After finishing their main dishes, Michael decided to show the queen some of the stuff he had bought. In front of her, to her confusion, he helped clean the table to make more space for a demonstration. Then proceeded to tell her about everything he had got and why.

There were many small things. Most of them were decorative statues, miniature pots for plants and book marks. However, he had also got buttons that he thought of asking Beatrice to

incorporate into his new outfit, for which he had also acquired curious threads. He demonstrated a new prized possession – a children's toy, which was a common plaything for solars but seemed to bring great inquisitiveness in Michael. He talked about each little object with such fascination, it infected Tiame. Ordinary stuff amazed the newcomer so much that it made her think about them in more detail. It brought memories and stories to the front of her mind, opening a whole other conversation about the history of those trinkets and Tiame's personal experiences with them.

They sat at the dinner table longer than both had expected. Talking about their memories and life stories around little things like bookmarks and children's toys, with cups of cold, unfinished tea still next to them. The clock hands had moved on past twelve, and only then did Tiame acknowledge the time. She encouraged the end of the delightful conversation, sending yawning Michael to sleep. He kissed her hand goodbye and made his way to his room. The hero was overflowing with pleasant emotions. He was replaying some of the moments of their conversation in his head, continuously smiling at the memories.

However, his great mood partially flew out the window, when he opened the door to his room. What he saw was another prank from the butler. Everything in the hero's room was wrapped in paper. Table, chair, bed, even bedsheets and pillows, every pencil on his table, book, and item – all that was in any way present in the area. It meant Michael now had to spend more time awake, unwrapping everything he needed to go to bed. And so, he started with the bathroom. It took him more than half an hour to just brush his teeth and wash his face. Then he opened the wardrobe, where he discovered that Aluarn didn't simply cover the furniture in paper but also every hanger and piece of clothes separately. The dedication to the bit was admirable, but it was also tiring to deal with the consequences. It was after one a.m., and Michael still had his bed to rip out of its creative prison. At this point he was so exhausted, he was ready to sleep on the paper, yet decided against it. Another half an hour passed. The bed was still partially wrapped, but the main part of it was freed. The hero fell on it already half asleep, ready to drift into sweet slumber. Suddenly, he discovered yet another clever but cruel joke left by Aluarn – his pillow was not just wrapped in paper, the butler had replaced it with a pillowcase stuffed with crumpled paper. At this point Mike couldn't care less and threw the fake pillow on the floor, almost immediately falling asleep on the flat mattress.

The night passed peacefully. Michael didn't even notice he was sleeping without a pillow. He dreamt of the festival, of Tiame, and of weird, unfitting things from his world. A usual mess of a dream, but it was interrupted abruptly. At exactly six a.m., the hero was ripped out of his dreams by a loud and annoying sound that shattered the quiet in seconds. A piercing ringing sound of an alarm clock was filling the room.

Jumping up from the bed, Michael realised the darn clock was hidden. The majority of the room was still wrapped in paper, so finding the intruder would prove difficult. Mike started with the places he had already unwrapped – bathroom and wardrobe. Digging through every tiny crack and possible nook, the hero concluded it wasn't there. The more obvious but tedious place was the table. Ripping through the paper, Michael made his way to every item he could see. None of them was the clock. By this point, he had started to get a headache from the constant ringing. Mike dropped on the floor next to the table, covering his ears. He couldn't think of any other place to look, except... Could it be inside the mattress? In desperation, the hero rummaged through the bed, throwing everything on the floor. He turned the mattress

upside down, looking for any zips or something else to get inside, but couldn't find anything. In pure rage, he threw it as hard as he could across the room. Then, through the ribbing of the bed, he saw it. The damned alarm clock was under his bed all along. Michael face-palmed and went for the clock. He took it and turned it off, finally getting the desired quiet. Sitting on the floor, leaning on the disassembled bed, the hero breathed heavily. His eyes were ready to shut back to sleep, and he had no energy to put any of the mess back in its place. He rolled over on the floor, grabbing the cover, and dropped asleep right there.

Next time Michael woke up, the sun was already long up. The hero slowly squinted his eyes open. His head felt heavy and mind foggy. In the corner of the room, on the still paper-wrapped chair, sat a familiar figure. The butler had put his legs on the edge of the table and sat there reading a book. Mike moved slightly, looking around at the mess he had created. Aluarn glanced over at the hero. A smirk grazed his lips:

"Look who's awake."

"Fuck off," Michael murmured, still not completely alert.

"Come on, sleeping beauty, I brought you breakfast in bed," the butler kept swaying on the chair.

"Since when so nice?" the hero asked illegibly.

"Not nice, simply letting you catch up on the missed breakfast," the instigator explained.

"You know, placing that alarm clock under your bed seemed too predictable in the moment, but I see it worked like a charm."

"Meh-meh-meh, fuck you," Mike mocked the butler, simultaneously wishing he'd go away.

"It's Monday, if you forgot. We have to get back to work. No time for moping around, so chop-chop," the butler clapped twice, smirking.

Aluarn knew it would annoy the hell out of Michael, so he acted in extremes. He got up from his seat, came over to the hero, and pulled the cover off him. Mike rolled over on his back, looking up at the smug face of the butler.

"Get up, sleepyhead, time for your education."

Michael sighed wearily and crawled from under the intruder. Aluarn observed with satisfaction how the mighty hero struggled to get himself to the bathroom. He closed the curtain behind himself and inquired:

"Are you going to stay there?"

"Not in the mood to hear your morning routine, so I'll wait for you in the library. I hope you remember the way."

With this comment the butler exited the room. Michael peeked out from the curtain, scanning the area. Aluarn did indeed go away, leaving a tray of food on the table. Still rubbing his eyes, Mike started his slow morning.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Michael's brainpower was limited from the lack of proper sleep, and another evening spent cleaning up his room after the butler's cruel joke left him even more exhausted. Yet the next night went much better. As did the next three days. Aluarn did pull a couple of other inconvenient pranks, like putting a live frog in Mike's room or switching the normal ink the hero used for notes for disappearing one. However, nothing could compare to the frustration left by the paper-wrap bit. That celebration day also left Michael distrustful of Aluarn. It made him wonder how much important information the

cunning butler was withholding. Bringing this concern to Tiame felt useless, since Aluarn seemed to dismiss any remarks on his behaviour. However, even the lack of trust between the hero and the butler didn't stop them from getting through several books of historical and educational material.