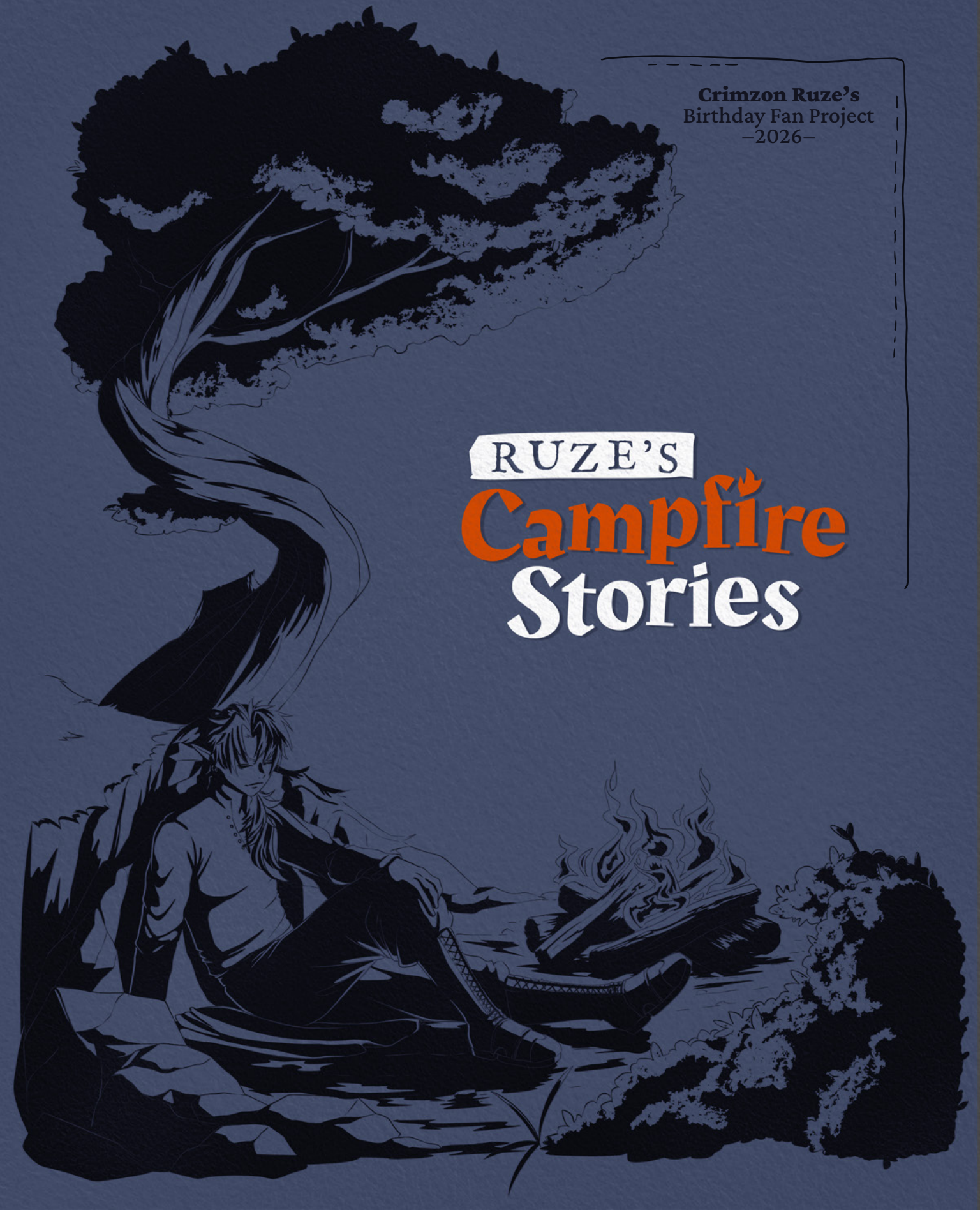
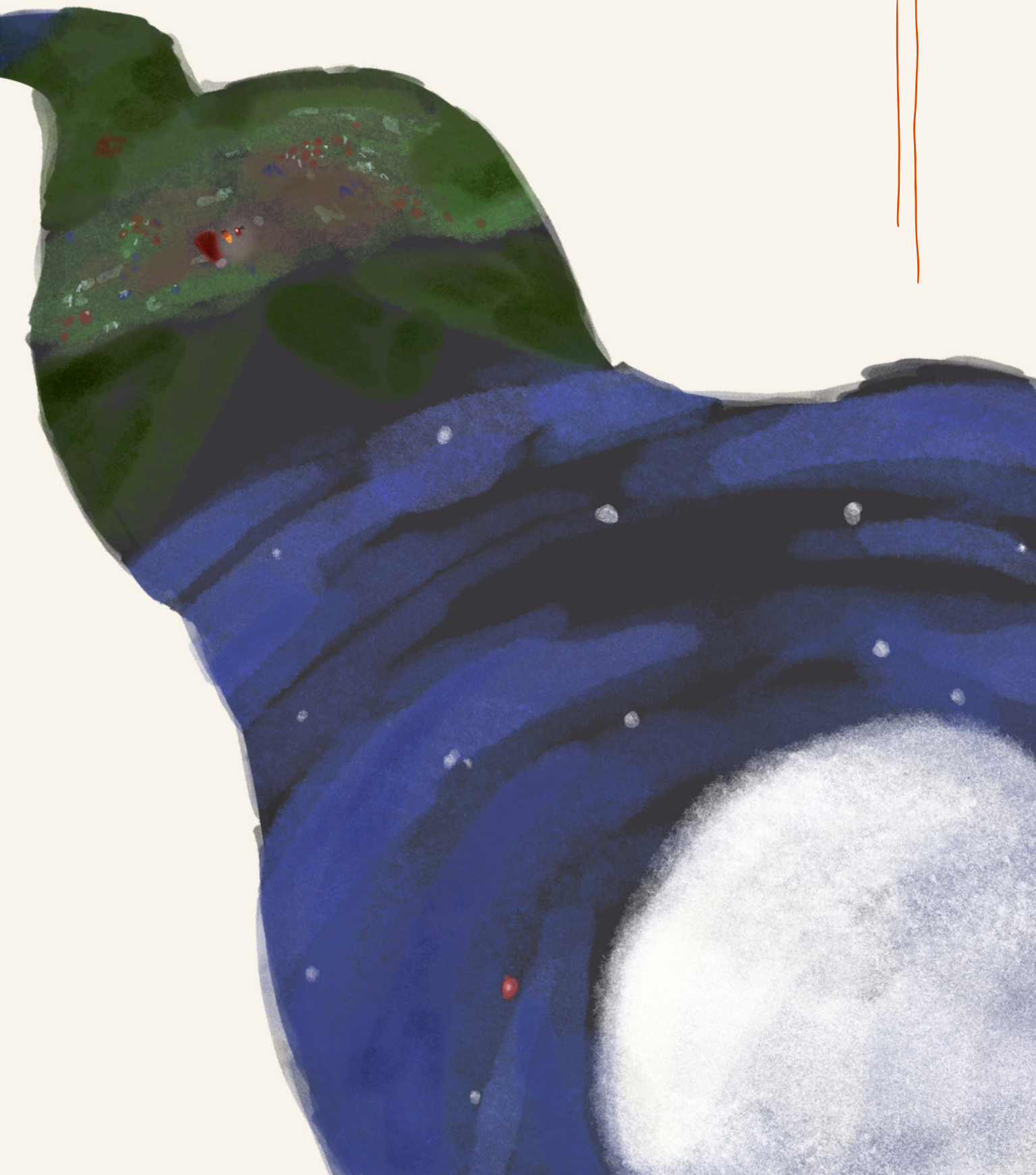
Crimzon Ruze's
Birthday Fan Project
–2026–



RUZE'S Campfire Stories

RUZE'S Campfire Stories





To our light in the dark.
To a warm and endlessly safe place to settle down
with friends and family.
To somewhere laughter and joy are shared together.
To a place to share stories and make memories.

To our campfire, **Crimzon Ruze**.

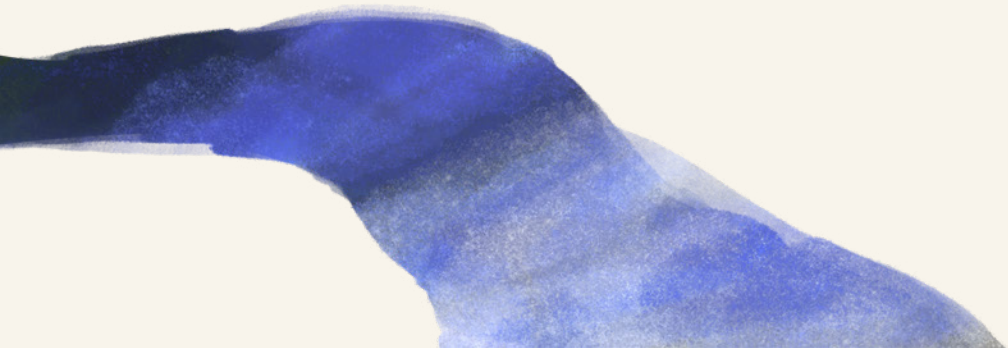


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-08-

Ruze

The Depths

Crimzon Ruze settles himself on the log, then coughs once and considers.

"You know, even with me being Elysium's Greatest Monster Hunter and all that, sometimes I don't blink so well. Sometimes I have nightmares too, you know?"

It started out with me and ARMIS on a ship, sailing to Xenokuni. Jurard was yapping the captain's ear off at the helm, Octavio was in his quarters doing some music thing, and Goldie was in the galley cooking up some grub, while I was alone at the ship's bow, trying not to stare at the vast expanse of water that surrounded us.

I didn't want to admit it, but it unnerved me. Everywhere I looked, just endless water, deep and unfathomable. I tried to stare at the deck boards, but I knew it was there. It wasn't like it went anywhere. But the boys seemed to be enjoying it well enough, so I was left alone with my thoughts. Just how I liked it.

As I looked out at the endless sky and water, I could see a storm coming on the horizon with astonishing speed. The sky grew dark with foreboding clouds, and the winds picked up. Soon it began to pour down rain, and lightning crashed down right near me.

I jumped back, but something grabbed onto my leg and pulled me down onto the deck. At first, I thought I'd gotten caught up in some rope that was whipping around in the wind, but after a few confusing moments, I found I was actually being dragged off the ship ... and into the deep, dark water.

I could barely tell which way was up as air pushed out of my lungs. Only the occasional flashes of lightning and the floating bubbles of air escaping me told me the way to freedom. But I kept being dragged down and down and down, into the depths, further and further from the surface. For a moment, I thought I saw something drop into the water from above, maybe a weighted rope or even the anchor, but it was just too far away. It would never reach me.

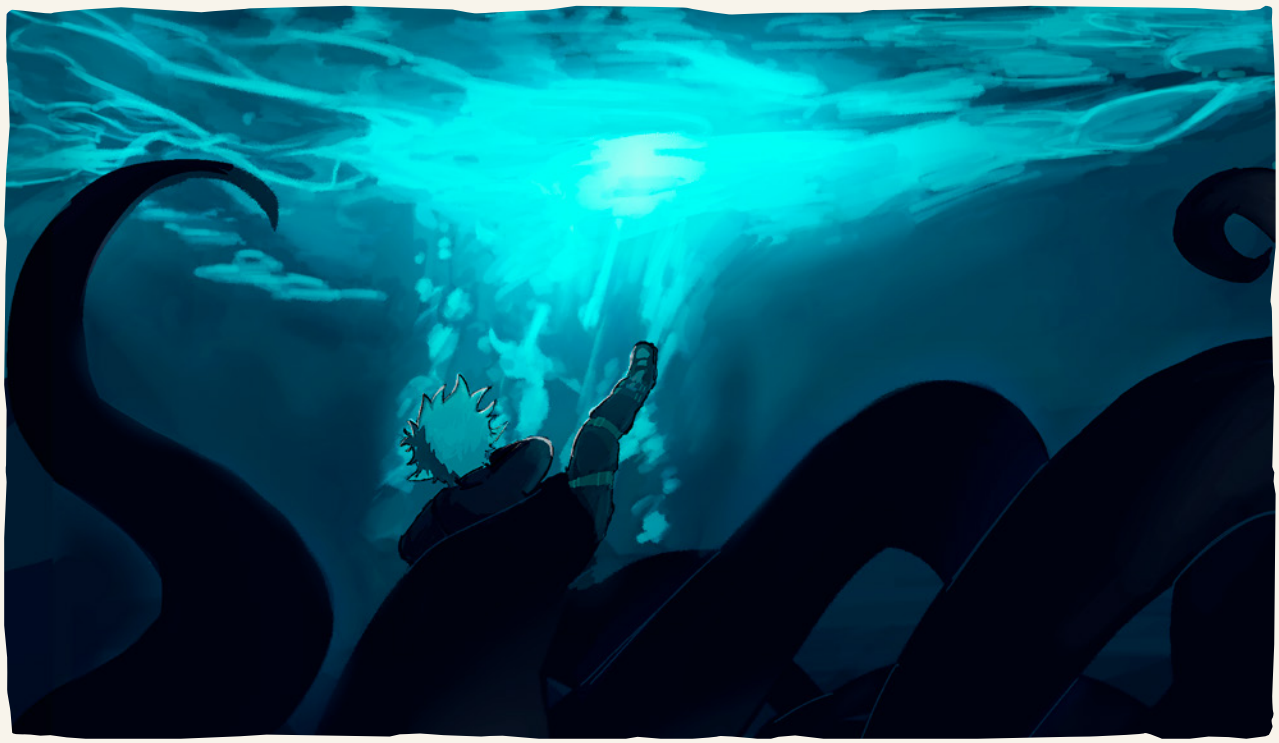
I looked down at my leg, trying to figure out what had dragged me into the ocean, and saw a dark tentacle. When I looked down into the fathomless depths, I could see the dim glow of one massive, alien-looking eye. I could have sworn it blinked at me once, languidly, as though it had all the time in the world.

That was when I began to notice how deep I had sunk into the sea. The water weighed heavily on me, and my vision began to blur as my lungs ached. I shook my leg several times, kicking viciously at it with my opposite foot to try to get the tentacle to release me, but to no avail.

Then another tentacle suddenly grabbed for my other leg, and I almost blacked out as I thrashed to get free. I paused for a moment and assessed the ludicrous situation. The water was dark, and bioluminescent plants glowed faintly around me, tall fronds of some strange leafy growth from the depths. I almost felt at peace with my situation somehow, despite my anger and terror.

A touch from one of those bioluminescent fronds awoke me from my reverie and reignited my instincts.

@semiluminary @sayaurr



Crimzon Ruze does not DO peace! I would not go gentle into that good night! I tried to pull Zephyr from my back to slash at the tentacled monster, but the pressure of the water was so great, so heavy, that everything felt like it was happening in slow motion.

I could feel the last bubbles escaping my lips, floating ever upward toward the distant, unreachable surface. The sea surrounded me on all sides, dark and unknowable. The weight of the water was overwhelming, pressing ever more heavily on my chest. A flash of lightning faintly stirred the waters above ... but it was too late. I would never see the surface again. How could I go down without a fight?

... I awoke suddenly when a frond, no, a tail, touched my face. My cats had all arranged themselves on my chest while I was asleep, pressing down on me like the heavy weight of the sea. A lazy tail had brushed my face, waking me up from that horrible nightmare.

Ruze

Ruze's Great Ruzader Battle

"You want a story, huh?" *Ruze leaned back as he tried to think of something then caught sight of little Ruzaders scurrying just a few feet from the fire.* "Hmm... You got little gremlins too, right? The Axelotls?"

Axel shrugs. "Yeah, I guess. The little things never seem to keep outta trouble. I tell 'em they're just emergency food, but they don't seem to care."

Ruze laughs.

"Yeah, the Ruzaders are just like that for me: *emergency food.*"

Almost on cue, an insulted mrr comes from just beyond where the campfire's light reaches, but Ruze never quite spots which little axetail makes the sound and he chuckles.

Ruze stretches his arms over his head, and says, "So a few months back I challenged the Ruzaders to a little race. Enrichment for their enclosure or whatever. Said whoever makes it to Big Bubby's tavern first would get a little treat." This time the cue led to several interested *mrr*'s as a few Ruzaders scurried up to the fire suddenly.

"*Mrr? Mrrp!*" they squeaked and Ruze shooed them away.

"No! No *treats*! Sheesh. I don't have anything– stop– no, don't–"

Axel laughs and Ruze groans as the next few minutes are spent shooing the Ruzaders away that had scurried up in hopes of a little treat.

"I can't even say a word without you little freaks absolutely swarming me, I swear!"

Ruze ignores the high pitched *complaining* and continues.

"Anyways, I gave them a destination and said I'd be heading to the place. If I got there first, I'd win and they'd get nothing. If they beat me, well, then they get their little t-r-e-a-t.

"I thought at first the worst I'd have to deal with was the swarm of little things moving through the town and causing a ruckus. Unfortunately, I didn't realize this meant an all out war against me to slow my progress." Ruze shakes his head as he remembers, "Little things were biting my ankles, ambushing me off rooftops, hitting me, throwing stuff at me—it was a carnage."

"So they totally owned you then?" Axel asks. "Like...I know how scary my 'lotls can be when they gang up on me."

"No. I won. Of course I did, do I look like I'd let some silly little bug beat me?"

With no warning something *falls from the sky* and lands directly on Ruze's head. An aerial attack from a Ruzader that immediately starts chattering towards Axel.

"Hey! Stop–Stop pulling my hair you *little freak*! I'm not lying to him!" Whatever the angry Ruzader is saying seems to only grow louder until Ruze says, "Fine! You all beat me and got your *little treat*," he mocks, "But I let you–"

"Mrr?"

Ruze groans. "I said the T-word again, didn't I?"

"Yep," Axel says, muffling a laugh as they both look at the chattering Ruzaders approaching the fire in an increasingly loud cacophony.

This was going to be a long night.

@nitroorugrat @qcanis



Ruze

Wanted

"Well c'mon Ruze–you love stories, right? Regale me, Mr. Storyteller~" Flayon teases, legs crossed as he seems to be in a constant state of motion.

Ruze laughs.

"So you come to my fire and now I have to tell you a story?"

Flayon shrugs, unapologetic, and Ruze just shakes his head.

"Have I ever told you how I'm wanted across all of the Badlands?"

"Like, if I turned you in right now I'd get some good coin?" Flay asks, popping forward towards him. "I feel like Tempus working with you guys has been the wrong cash-making scheme if that's the case."

"Nah, the only one you'd likely be able to catch is Jurard, and there's no way he's worth as much as the rest of us."

Ruze leans over to his bag, tugging it open and sighing as he pulls a Ruzader out with a gem already in its little mouth.

"Hey, you little freak. That wasn't for you," he grumbles, returning to the bag to tug out his journal.

Flayon watches patiently, smiling at the Ruzader that tentatively scurries over to him. "Cute little thing," he mutters, causing the Ruzader's eyes to widen, but Flay pets its head and it *mrrrrs* in a contented little purr.

"Don't get too attached, they probably eat metal too and you do not want an infestation in the R-TRUS." Ruze tugs free a few of the wanted posters he'd been looking for. "Here, these are some of the best works. Good luck convincing them you caught me though."

Flayon scruffs the Ruzader and lays it on his lap before leaning forward to grab the fliers from Ruze's hand. It only takes him a moment in the campfire's light to take in the...artistic masterpieces, and he laughs. "*Is that a skirt and a bow?*"

"I don't know where they're finding these artists to do these but I'm always in some crazy outfit. Bunny ears, skirts–they're really fond of maid dresses too. The art is fantastic, but..." Ruze laughs. "Jurard tried to turn me in once to collect the bounty....and they didn't believe it was *me*."

Ruze drops his voice into something similar to Jurard's: "*Ruze! Ruze! Show them your ID!*"

Flayon laughs. "Why would you let yourself get caught??"

Ruze gives him a look that says, *Right?*, and Flayon just laughs harder, "I apologized to the officer at the town and then pulled out *this*." Ruze hands Flayon another wanted poster. Unlike his, this was a rather great rendition of Jurard. "Turned him in on the spot, collected the gold, and Jurard spent that night in a jail cell."

"Evil!!" Flayon chuckles; the Ruzader on his lap startles and scurries off.

Ruze gives a faux bow from his log. "Serves him right. We snuck him out the next day and skipped town, but the secret was... *that wasn't even a real bounty. I made that up.*"

"Did you do the art?"

Ruze shakes his head. "Goldbullet did. Jurard loudly discussed his plan to Octavio within earshot of me, so I had Goldie whip up this artwork real quick so I was ready when he enacted his so-called master plan."

"I applaud your evil genius, Crimzon Ruze." Flay feigns applause, hands still full of fliers, and Ruze gives him another bow for his efforts before taking the wanted posters back and returning them safely into his backpack within the journal.




WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE
WANTED
EVIL GUY!!
WANTED
FREE CAT
WANTED
ALIVE???
1$
WANTED
BOG9!!
or 8? 10?
WANTED
DEAD!!!
FREE♥
BOUNTY
REWARD
WANTED
$$
MONEY!
WANTED
10000000
WANTED
WANTED
WANTED

Octavio

Tangled Webs

Where...?

Information greeted him as he tested his surroundings. Cold, hard ground. Complete and total darkness. Terrible, terrible pain!

What happened? How had he gotten here?

It was a normal bounty mission. Go and clear out a few Corruption Beasts that were nesting in a derelict mining camp. He had gone alone to ensure the Beasts would remain relatively intact for once. He needed the parts. The hunt had gone well enough, but he had forgotten the ever present threat of Man.

By the time Octavio realized he was no longer alone, it was already too late to react. The last thing he remembered was a noise from behind and then– Nothing.

He sighed. Bandits. They had used him to do the dirty work and gotten rid of him now that he was in the way. The audacity! He was the puppeteer here! Oh, when he got out of this mineshaft... Octavio tensed his limbs. They screamed in protest, but miraculously enough, nothing seemed broken. As long as he was careful, he could walk out.

For the first time since his awakening, he became aware of cold blue light illuminating the stone around him. How convenient that his ensemble glowed in the dark. Although, it seemed his baton had fallen out of his coat at some point, because he could no longer feel its presence directly on him. Granted, he didn't need its power to figure out where it was. He could see it–

"Hey! Put that down!"

For a moment, Octavio thought he was hallucinating, but no, that was indeed a giant spider playing with his baton like it was a child's toy. Or rather, had been; because its attention was now focused on him.

"You awaken."

All right, make that a giant, *talking* spider. He would have to tell Ruze about this when he got out of here! It'd make his month!

"You should have remained in slumber, human. For what comes next will be terribly painful, and I am most sorry."

"An apology doesn't make up for your intent," Octavio chastised. With a pained groan, he sat up. "And my name is *Octavio.* Starts with an O and ends with an O."

"Octavio..." It rolled his name in its mouth. "It is rare that I know the name of my prey. I will remember it well."

"Ah, no. I've got things to do, places to see, and I can't do that if I become food. You don't even want to eat a human. They're not very nutritious; you'd just get hungry again in a few hours!"

"There is no choice in this lean time. Life must feed on life to survive, as is decreed by nature."

"I suppose you're right." Octavio sighed and threw his hands up. "Oh well. I guess I should lay down and let you eat me, but before you do, will you grant me one last request?"

The spider said nothing, and the Maestro took that as his sign to continue.

“I request a game. The both of us must weave a web, and whoever's the best wins. Rather simple I think.”

“Are you bargaining with me?” the spider asked.

“I am.” Octavio grinned. “I think you’ll find me a decent competitor. All I ask is you return my baton to me, because I can’t compete without it.”

Silence once again, before the spider awkwardly tossed it to Octavio. He swiftly picked it up, its power greeting him as if it were an old friend. It whispered to him, confirming what he had suspected the entire time ever since he first laid eyes upon the spider. With a flick of the wrist, silken threads leapt from the wall and coiled around the spider, forcing it to the ground in a prison of its own creation.

“What was it you said again?” Octavio asked. “Life feeds on life?”

“Release me! You have proven yourself, weaver kin. I will not harm you.”

“Hmm,” Octavio tapped the baton against his cheek, and chuckled. “A thought occurred to me. You see, some idiots set up shop rather close to you. I am quite certain that this far from civilization and hapless bounty hunters, they would be helpless against any beasts that wander their way.”

His grin spread across his face like a scythe’s blade, before he flicked his wrist again. The silken thread binding the spider went limp.

“Now, if you don’t mind me, I must be on my way. Farewell, and bon appetit.”



@cardiacfragment @m0rt1mersgr4ve

Octavio

The Most Difficult Puppet

Soft steps make quiet crunches in the dusty sand of the Badlands. Octavio knows better than to make too much noise and startle his potential puppets before he has the chance to wrap his strings around them. The dark of the night cloaks him well, his coat draped over his shoulders enough to cover most of his body— or at least make him an indistinguishable shape to the unfocused eyes of a corruption beast.

He goes alone tonight. It wouldn't do to frighten his allies with the knowledge of what his pursuit actually is.

"There you are," he whispers, the wind muffling his voice. His baton responds, unwinding strings in preparation for ensnarement. But Octavio knows that a beast of this size will need much more than strings.

See, this beast is unlike the others, or at least that's what the townspeople say. The corruption energy that surrounds it only partially conceal its form, and what does end up exposed bears a strong resemblance to a humanoid form— with the exception of massive wings and sharp, ebony horns. Octavio had pressed, but he was unsuccessful in gathering any further information other than the glossed-over but critical detail that this beast bears a remarkable resemblance to Ruze the Red.

Tonight, he dispels the mystery once and for all. Tonight, Ruze answers to him.

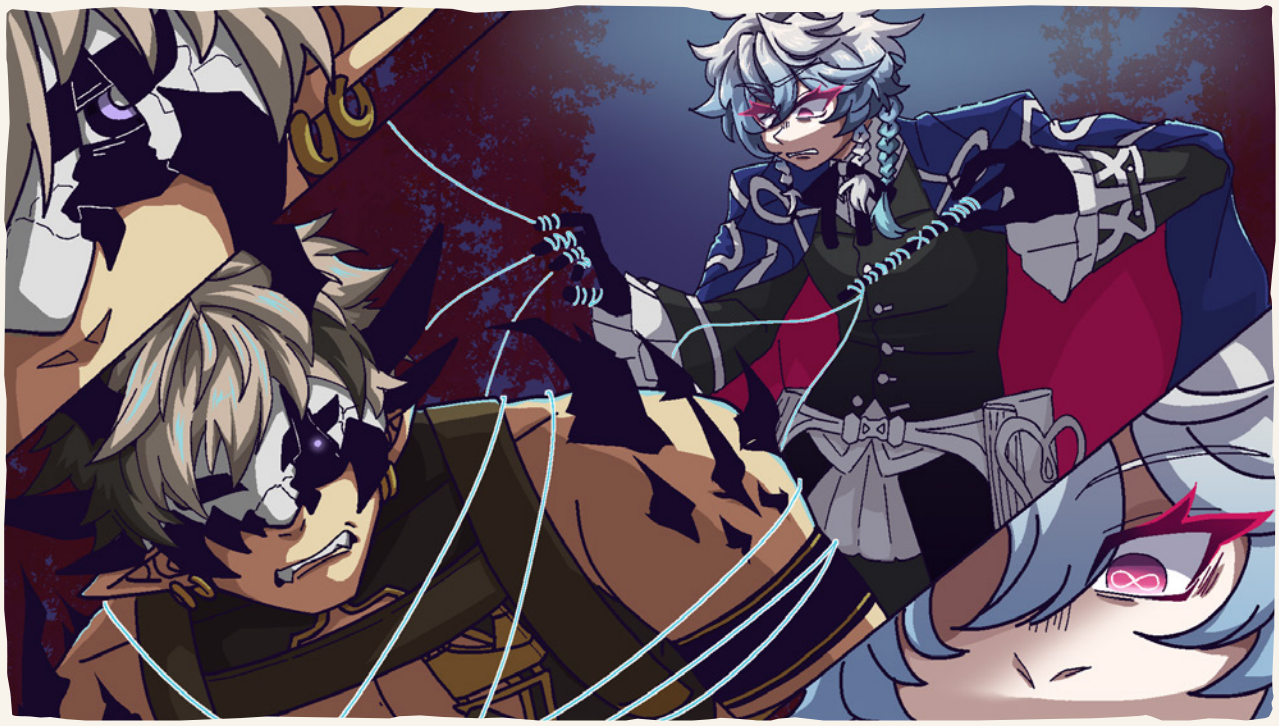
The beast doesn't get the chance to act ahead of time. Octavio's strings fly out and pin his wings down before he can think to make an escape, and his limbs come next. His objective isn't to kill it— and Jurard and Goldbullet would probably be pretty mad if he killed their teammate by accident, anyway— but if he can make it his puppet and force this Ruze-like creature to endure an hours long interrogation, that'll be the next best thing.

Of course, nothing can be easy. Even with the strength of Octavio's strings, the beast doesn't stay down for long. Onyx claws slash through the taut threads on its wings, and it lets out a resounding bellow of rage, its single visible eye locking onto Octavio's position and advancing towards him much faster than Octavio would like. Still, it's not like he was born yesterday. The puppeteer's strings retract, repair, and fly back out in a blink, binding the beast's fingers together. The fortunate thing about having a mostly human form is that it's subject to all the weaknesses of a human body, too.

"Impudent worm!" The voice, gravelly and furious, almost sounds like it's coming from the very shadows themselves. "You would bind me with these paltry threads? Know you the forces that you contend with? For you face Obsidian Ruze, the Infernal Eidolo—"

"That's enough outta you."

Octavio tugs the strings tighter, and surges forward, slingshotting himself at a high enough speed that he can slam the heel of his boot into the creature's back. Obsidian makes a choked noise, and though Octavio certainly doesn't weigh enough to take him down on his own, Obsidian's surprise and his own momentum send the demon reeling forward and then down. The



beast's thrashing and roaring fizzle out into the open air of the midnight desert to no avail— Octavio is not a renowned maestro without reason.

He lets one of the strings slacken. Obsidian, enraged and desperate to free himself, pushes against the binds on his hand. Just as quickly as he'd glimpsed liberation, Octavio reinforces the threads again, pulling his limbs here and there. The game continues like this for some time— Octavio is patient, Obsidian is not, and that works against him in every way it possibly could— and before long, Obsidian exhausts himself within his bounds.

"So are you ready to talk?" Octavio hums, twirling some of his strings back around his baton. "If you tell me the truth about Ruze, and about your connection to him, I might even let you go. What about it, demon?"

Obsidian's voice, once ferocious and loud, has been quieted to a defeated murmur. Octavio has turned his own hubris against him in a way that no mortal ever should have.

"What difference does it make to me, puppeteer?" he sneers. "Meddling ones like you don't get answers. You get taken by Zephyr instead. But if it matters so much to you, I have nothing to lose by revealing the truth of all your compatriot is. It is a tale of infinity, and I doubt you will be able to conceive the full breadth of that which I am about to tell."

Octavio smiles. His strings bring Obsidian's face up, and their eyes meet.

"Oh, I know a thing or two about infinity."

Octavio

Desert Flower

Once, there was a Poppet who lost its way in a vast, vast desert.

The 'how' and 'why' of the Poppet losing its way aren't important. Only that it had and, now that it wandered alone, could only seek out someone to help it find its way again.

The first person it tried to ask was tall and green and covered in hair. A little bird perched on one of their arms, ducking out of sight as soon as the Poppet approached.

The Poppet called out but got no reply. After a few more tries, the Poppet wondered if the little bird would be able to give it an answer—birds could fly high up in the air, after all. They saw far and wide. If anyone knew the way out, surely it would be a bird!

But as the Poppet tried to climb up the tall green one, their spiky white hairs poked the Poppet all over! The poor Poppet was covered in spines by the time it gave up and went to search for someone else.

What did cacti and birds know, anyway?

The second person the Poppet thought to ask was a small, dark brown creature crawling over the sand. This one didn't hide away like the bird or ignore it like the cactus, so the Poppet was very hopeful. It even seemed eager to help it!

"All you have to do," it told the Poppet, "is lift me up in your hands. I know how you can find home, but it's a secret. Let me whisper it into your ear so no one overhears."

So the Poppet nodded and obediently scooped the creature up, holding it beside its head. But instead of telling the Poppet the secret, the creature's tail lashed out and stung the Poppet right on its noggin! The scorpion laughed, scuttling away, as the poor Poppet held its head and cried. How mean!

Eventually, the Poppet continued on.

This time, it found someone standing at the edge of a large lake, just beyond the horizon. The Poppet ignored how sore it was and hurried towards them, hopeful that this person would be the one to help it at last. But the Poppet must've lost its way all over again because it never found the lake, just more sand and another cactus.

Yuck! Not again. The Poppet glared at the cactus and kept going.

At this point, the Poppet began to lose hope. On the horizon, something colorful caught its attention, but the Poppet wasn't in any hurry to investigate after falling for the mirage. Still, it reluctantly walked towards the sea of...of wildflowers? Colorful wildflowers, waving in an unseen breeze, thickly carpeting the desert sand.



Except they weren't flowers at all! Once the Poppet was close enough to realize its mistake, one of the Ruzaders chirped to alert the others and half the prank stopped their playing in the sand to scamper towards it. They huddled around it while it tearfully told them about getting lost and how mean everything had been so far. Some of them helped tug out the cactus spines while others ran off in search of plants that they then chewed up and slathered on the scorpion sting, drawing the pain out of it.

And then they told the Poppet that, since their playing was done, they could lead it home. They even offered to carry it part of the way when the poor, tired Poppet started to flag behind them.

A little bird flying far overhead watched a sea of wildflowers leave the desert, the cutest flower of them all napping on the back of one of the others.

Octavio

The Living Puppet

Octavio sits a little straighter, not unlike a maestro preparing to lead an orchestra into some grand performance before starting his story with his normal melodic lilt.

"This is a story about a puppet I lost years ago–so long ago now that not even I could tell you its name."

"The puppet was no gorgeous thing, made with scrap metal and salvaged wood. Because of this it took quite a long time to make something usable."

Octavio pauses with a small smile as if remembering–Ruze could almost call it warm as he watches.

"I spent hours turning bent and crooked metal straight for its limbs, cutting away rotten pieces of wood...and finally I had created it...*him*. *Humanoid* enough. But not quite perfect. It gave him charm...or at least, that's what I thought."

And for the first time in his story Octavio's face falls, something deep and almost uncomfortably sad.

Ruze shifts. If this was a sore point for Octavio, he didn't have to share, but before Ruze can say as much, a branch breaks in the woods and Octavio jumps. Ruze flinches at the reaction, but they both laugh as it surely was nothing.

"Sorry! It was maybe that very uniqueness that ended up being his downfall. Children who would arrive at my show said he was hideous, *ugly*. That he scared them and made them uncomfortable. It's hard to have a successful show when one of your puppets is making kids cry."

Octavio shifts, crossing his legs and leaning forward to poke at the fire.

"So I stopped using him. Didn't even bring him along with me...and one day he was just gone."

A silence stretches between them and Ruze says, "That's it? That's your story?"

"Ruze, I told you it was about a puppet I lost."

"I thought you'd at least–"

"Do you know how Poppets are made?" *Octavio interrupts, rising to his feet as Ruze shrugs.*

"Energy coming together with will to live and something to do with whatever your whole deal is giving them sentience?"

Octavio neither confirms that or corrects him, but muses, "Puppets are like raising a child. The energy you put in...the emotions..." *He trails off and Ruze isn't sure he's following anymore.* "I wonder if that puppet that ran away was...sad everyone hated him. If it knew."

"...or you just lost it?" *Ruze says, but Tavi looks up at him and his eyes flash pink for just a second before widening, eyeing something behind him.* "What?"

"I always wondered if you'd return..." *Tavi mutters, stepping past the fire and Ruze.*

"Oh come on, that is so cheap and not going to–*AH*!" *Ruze lets out a scream as he whips around and something instead crawls up his leg in front.*

Octavio and the Poppet, Ruze realizes, snicker and fall into full laughter while Ruze glares.

"*I always wondered if you'd return*," Tavi mocks, laughing as Ruze glares, "is what I'd say if any of that was true. You should have seen your face!"

@nitroorugrat @m0rt1mersgr4ve



GoldBullet

Flowers Under Moonlight

Hey there. You know, staring at this campfire reminds me of one time that I went camping alone. Nothing crazy happened, actually. No Corruption Beasts. No rogue thieves. It was a peaceful night. And yet...man. It was a sight to behold.

So, let's actually start from the beginning. I was just driving down the road into the woods, and it was getting dark, so I figured that I might as well find a place to camp for the night. Look, don't get me wrong. The moon and stars were out, so it wasn't as if I was in complete darkness. It's just that I was driving for a while, and I wanted to settle down before I got too tired and lost. So I pulled over into this clearing at the side of the road and began setting up camp. It was a perfect location too: complete circular space, perfect even ground, and the cicadas were chirping up a storm. A perfect place and time to sit, relax, and decompress. I was already planning where everything was going to go: tent there, campfire here, the whole shebang.

But when I turned off the van...man, this was when I got confused. I saw a little bit of a glow further into the woods. There was no one around me at that time, mind you, so it couldn't have been someone else camping for the night. The stars were out, definitely, but they were in the sky. This light was in front of me and further into the woods. I figured that maybe it was a cave or something; perhaps there were some shining rocks in it. And then I figured that maybe camping inside of a cave would be a better place to stay for the night rather than being out in the open. That's when I finally decided to take a look.

It wasn't a hard trek to those lights. It was a straight way, no twists, no turns, not even a hill. At most, I had to climb over a couple of raised roots. But when I got there... Man. It was one of the most gorgeous sights that I have ever seen. It was an entire field of fauna, like daisies, roses, lilies, pansies, all organized in rows and in a circle around this otherwise empty meadow. I was pretty sure that I walked into someone's secret garden. At that point, a cloud came in and blocked the moonlight, and–man. The flowers started glowing brighter. It was like staring at another starry sky. Flowers that were glowing under the moon. It was so wild! It was like staring at one of our concert stages, that's how colorful it was.

I admit it. Once that thought crossed my mind, I had to get in the middle. Stood there for a while and...well, I'm not gonna say that I sang anything, but...I might have had a few lyrics come out of my mouth. What can I say, that flower garden really looked like a stage! The itch got to me. Finished a few words, and then the moon came back out. Most of the flowers' glow were washed out by it, but you could still see the differences if you focused on it a little. But still, that garden looked a lot cooler when you're standing in the middle of it rather than standing at the edge. I recommend it the next time you ever find one.

...well...I guess it wouldn't hurt to mention this. When I was leaving, I went to look at the flowers that were near my feet and noticed this broken leather strap. I think it might have been a snapped bracelet. Come to think of it, when the moon came back, I noticed that there were a lot of weeds hidden among the flowers. I didn't notice them when everything was glowing, but it was a lot easier to notice them when I was standing in it. I don't think that garden had been tended to in a while. Ah, well. Shouldn't speculate about the person when I never saw them, you know? The garden they made is all I need to know about them.



@YeahSureWynuat @yu_ru0319

GoldBullet

Zombie Story

Goldbullet:

There wasn't much to do out where I was growing up, and eventually you get tired of going to the same three spots over and over again. So of course, I went exploring. Started normal enough: I would head down side streets I hadn't seen before, check out a new patch of forest and run my ass back home before it got too dark. It was fun! Definitely gave me something to do. Then I started travelling further just so I could find something new and stave off boredom for another few days.

Ruze: Damn, you've been halfway to an adrenaline junkie from day one, huh?

Goldbullet: Thrill-seeking's in my blood, what can I say? For better or for worse it got me out time after time.

But one night, I wandered into this gigantic estate with a massive gothic mansion right in the middle. The place looked completely abandoned, with plants growing up the walls into the brickwork and through broken windows.

Ruze: And at no point did you worry that there was gonna be someone else in there. Classic.

Goldbullet: Not really. As far as I could hear, it was dead silent. Plus, the whole CQC expert part of my title isn't just there for show ya'know.

Ruze: Yeah, fair point. You are still a nightmare to spar with.

Goldbullet: Exactly. So, as I walk further in, I'm seeing two things. One, the place is goddamn beautiful, even as run down as it was, the decor looked like it would cost half my organs to even think of buying. Two, whoever was going through this house before me must've been absolutely hauling ass. Half the doors are still locked, and the few that are open are completely trashed. Finally, I reach the back of this hallway, and the very last door has been completely blown off its hinges. Naturally, I decided to check it out. I could at least tell it was probably meant to be a library, mostly due to the mass of books thrown all over the place. But at the back of the room there was an open hatch, with a staircase leading down into God knows where.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I started strolling down into the abyss. It was pitch black down there, and the flashlight I had brought with me wasn't doing jack. As far as I could tell, I had just walked into the mother of all wine cellars right below the floorboards. As I go further, I start seeing this red sludge pooling on the floor. Now the whole place had general notes of dust and mould, but this was different. It was bad.

I had thought maybe the casks had split open and started rotting, when I turn the corner and see that same sludge plastering the walls, with these vein-like branches pulsing through it. Evidently it noticed me too, as a second later those goopy looking tendrils rushed at me and rooted me to the spot. Parts of the sludge had started turning into these bubbling malformed hands, grabbing wildly at anything in reach and dragging me backwards. I managed to flip around, only to see five massive shambling flesh creatures peel themselves from the wall and lunge at me. I managed to rip myself free from and start



booking it upstairs, hearing these disgusting gurgling screeches behind me as these things chase me down. I half slipped on the goop while climbing and ended up crashing headfirst into the floor while the hatch slammed closed behind me. And as I'm dazed and bleeding on the ground, I realise my blood is starting to bubble, and I see that sludge writhing up through the gaps in the floorboards, limbs splitting apart and revealing needle sharp tendrils shooting through the wood like a spike trap. I managed to scramble to my feet screaming and barrelled right out the front door, I didn't look behind me until I made it back to the tavern.

Ruze: ...What the hell?

Goldbullet: I still don't know what caused it or what that stuff was, but I swear when I close my eyes, I can still hear those screams on the wind.

[Ruze closes his eyes briefly, and apart from the crackling of the fire and a light breeze, there isn't much to hear. When he opens them, Goldie is gone.]

Ruze: Wh-?

[Goldie pops up behind Ruze and yells, grabbing him by the shoulders.]

Ruze: AAAH! YOU- MY GOD DUDE. How?!

Goldbullet: Hahaha! Five-star stealth baby! Man, that was good.

Ruze: I'm gonna kill you.

Goldbullet: Worth it.

GoldBullet

Fire Lizard Money Gang

Ruze watched as Goldie eyed his fire, then gave him a warning: "Whatever you're planning better not be like last time."

"*Last time?*" Goldbullet asked innocently, glancing up at Ruze with a grin that said he knew exactly which time.

"Yeah, last time when you lit your cape on fire, Jurard's tent, and then almost got my coat."

"No no no, I don't know what you're talking about Ruze. That was clearly an attack. I don't know how you could be misremembering such a gruesome ambush against me and your precious teammates, but *I* had nothing to do with what happened."

Ruze distinctly remembers watching Gibby lighting the campfire, twirling his cape into the lit fire, cursing loudly, and rapidly spreading said fire in a moment of pure chaos across the camp, but decides he'll let Goldbullet weave his little tale.

"Oh *really*? An *attack*? I must have forgotten; was it the evil fire gnomes finally catching up to us with their evil fire magics?"

Goldie grins. "Yes! See Ruze, I knew you'd remember, the fire gnomes remembered when we lost little Timmy on that grand adventure and–well, they had chosen when we settled all snug in our little camp to finally set their grand counterattack in motion."

Ruze nodded. "*Riiiight*. I must have been distracted."

"Yeah, if I remember correctly you were reading one of your silly books. Jurard was talkin' too loud to see them coming or somethin', and Octavio was, uh, y'know, *puppet*. Only I had been on the lookout for the attackers out there by the fire."

"Right, I do remember Octavio puppetting all around the camp that night, that *is* right. I just can't believe I forgot your grand battle against the fire gnomes. Did you fight them hand to hand?"

Goldbullet throws a few punches in front of him. "*Bam! Pow!* You know me, CQC expert of Armis. I took 'em down, one by one, *uh*..."

"*Like the kings of the underground?"* Ruze offers dryly, thinking back to the bounty they did that involved *the song* Goldie's quoting.

"Exactly! It was a bit difficult 'cause, you know, they're just little guys. They did manage to get my cape, Jurard's tent, and if I hadn't intervened at the last moment Ruze...they likely would have hit you dead on while you were reading." Goldbullet mimed a few more moves that took down these imaginary gnomes, and Ruze nodded very seriously.

"Yeah, silent gnome fire wizard-assassins are pretty tough opponents, but good thing *big strong Goldbullet* was there to save us. Honestly, if it had been someone else...*well*...we may have just been totally wiped out."

"Yeah, fire lizard assassins gangs are absolutely deadly," Goldie agreed, and Ruze sighed at how easily it had been to get this story completely off the rails and without any continuity. "So I really don't appreciate you spreading those crazy lies about me accidentally lighting my cape on fire. Because I definitely did not do that. I have never lit anything on my body on fire accidentally at all. No gloves. No capes. Nothing."

Ruze doubted *that*, much like the rest of this ridiculous story, was true in the slightest.



Jurard

Jurard On Errand

"Jurard, why are you late?" Ruze asked the man sitting across from him.

The two men were gathered around a campfire, each holding a bowl of soup. They were on a mission for the past few days, and tomorrow they will return to the tavern. If the way back was safer then Ruze would have considered traveling overnight instead of camping. However, his teammate arrived hours into the night instead of at sunset like he expected.

"The client took too long to pay up and the shopkeeper was too slow with our orders," Jurard answered. Ruze raised an eyebrow. The leader of ARMIS came back disheveled compared to when he left to meet up with their client.

"Then why are you haggard tonight, brother?" Ruze remarked, skeptical of his companion's claim.

The prince let out a long sigh. "The client tried to cheat us out of paying the bounty. But don't worry! I took care of it. They thought I couldn't tell fake cash from genuine because I'm not from here, but joke's on them! The shopkeeper knows real money."

It was Ruze's turn to sigh. "What?!" he blurted as he rubbed his temple.

Jurard interrupted before his partner could comment. "It's not as bad as you think, buddy! It was caught early. Anyway, I ran to where the meeting was and asked the locals where they last saw our client. They didn't go far but I had to chase them. And you know what? They tripped!" The redhead laughed hard at the memory. "They're a fool to think they can outrun Jurard T. Rexford."

"Yet they outsmarted you," Ruze quipped.

Jurard pouted. "Not now, Ruze. Let me finish," he grumbled. "Where was I? Oh, I have to report the guy to the Department of Monster Hunting. We should stop by their office on the way home."

Ruze nodded in acknowledgement. If their client's village was under attack then someone else can place a bounty even if it's pooled by the community. Their client said the reward was to be paid from their own pocket, but they can only afford to hire two people.

"So...were they broke?" the hunter asked.

His partner shook his head. "No. They have the money; they're just stingy as hell. I ransacked their place for our reward."

"But why do they have counterfeit money?" Ruze thought aloud before he could retract it. "Nevermind."

Jurard continued on with his tale. "After I got the payment 'for the second time'," he gestured with air quotes, "I rushed to the store where I was buying our supplies. The shopkeeper was patient but bro, they're as slow as a snail. It'd be fine if they were the restocker and another person was the cashier - the store didn't look understaffed; I saw a helper!"



"Did you thank them for noticing the fake money?" Ruze reminded half-jokingly.

"Of course," the prince replied. "I thought today's shopping would be quick yet we finished by nightfall."

"When I was loading the supplies onto the horse, I saw an extra loaf among them. I don't remember buying that much bread. Then I saw movement from the corner of my eye. It surprised me. I shouldn't shoot while I'm there or I might hit someone so I left the horse and ran. If this was the client, their henchman, or a robber then I can't let them get me. I thought I was going to lose the chaser but they kept up with me. I don't know how long we'd been running before I heard them call:

"SIR! YOU FORGOT TO PAY, SIR! COME BACK, SIR!" Jurard put on an impression of some poor, exasperated soul. Ruze almost groaned. The redhead saw it and exclaimed, "Hey! I'm sharing my embarrassment, okay?" His companion shrugged.

"It was the store helper yelling at me," Jurard explained to the hunter. "I thought I paid for everything. Turns out I forgot an item I requested from their stockroom. I guess their speed doesn't extend to searching their inventory. As for the bread, it's free! They were giving away their unsold bread an hour before closing, one for each customer."

Ruze stood up, walked towards Jurard and patted his shoulder. "Thanks for regaling my curiosity, brother. We have a long day ahead so rest up," he muttered. "Too bad the inn was full or we'd be staying there."

Jurard flashed an apologetic smile. "Ruze, it's fine. Today was quite an experience. Thanks for setting up camp."

Jurard

Fame and Glory

Oh? You wanna hear a story from *the great* Jurard T. Rexford? *The great* leader of the bounty hunter unit, ARMIS?

Well, I usually charge for this sort of thing, but I guess I can indulge you.

Ahem! Once upon a time, there was a great king who was respected by everyone! Unlike other kingdoms, he had won the throne not by birthright, but by his own merit and power. Although, his good looks and natural charm certainly helped as well! He demonstrated his might and overwhelming intelligence until there was *no one left* who could question his right to the throne. With him as the great leader, the kingdom flourished! The crops thrived and yielded great bounties, the treasury overflowed with vast amounts of gold, and the ladies were throwing themselves at the feet of the king! With him on the throne, the land knew nothing but peace and prosperity, and they lived happily ever after! The end.

Beautifully done, if I do say so myself!

...huh? What was that? "Be real"? What the heck is that supposed to mean? I thought the whole point of this was to tell creative, fun stories! How much more fun can it get than imagining someone who successfully obtained fame and glory?

...what? You were hoping I would be more "authentic"?

I'm so confused. I thought we were telling stories around the campfire, not being vulnerable about our feelings or whatever. Wait... Were you expecting me to reveal a tragic backstory or something? Because if that's the case, sorry to disappoint, but I'm from a royal family! Even got a crown to prove it!

I had everything... Endless riches, servants at my beck and call to cater to my every whim, and even a great power that flows through my veins!

Yeah... I had everything I could ever want...

So long as I kept my mouth shut and followed the path that my family set out for me, I could continue living in the lap of luxury.

Like a puppet... or a prized stallion.

Tch... What bullshit.



@Rota13M @qcanis



That ain't the life I want to live. That's barely a life at all! Letting someone control my every move... my every word... Sounds like nothing but misery...

No, I'd rather break off and go out on my own! Make my own way in the world!

Huh? "Aren't I afraid about the struggle?"

Hahaha! Well, no pain, no gain, as they say! I'd rather struggle through poverty and work my ass off just to get my next meal than *ever* go back to living under my family's thumb again!

Sure, it's been tough, and I've gotten more scrapes and bruises than I'm comfortable with, but there's been upsides too. I mean, heck... I probably never would've met ARMIS if I stayed with my family.

ARMIS taught me a lot about how to survive in this bounty hunter business. More than that though...-they're just great comrades...

Okay, this stays between us, but...I feel like if we work together, we could really accomplish anything. Heck! I think we could even make it through the gates of hell together unscathed so long as we're together.

So bring it on, world! Bring on all the suffering and pain you can throw at us! We'll just throw it back in your face! After all, only idiots would think that blessings would just fall at their feet even though they didn't put in any effort. You have to work hard to defy your so-called "destiny" that others are so keen to thrust upon you. You have to fight tooth and nail to make a name for yourself if you want to be remembered for your own merits.

So that's what I'm gonna do. I'm going to grab destiny by the balls and never let go!

...Okay, that sounded better in my head, but you get what I mean! No one tells me how to live my life except me! And the same goes for my team! Even if the odds seem stacked against us, we'll keep fighting to the bitter end—until there's no one left who doesn't know the name ARMIS!

And even if our name becomes nothing but a long-lost memory, at least we'll have left a permanent mark on this world.

ARMIS was here...ARMIS stood for something great...and ARMIS made a difference in people's lives.

There. Real enough for you?

Jurard

Jurard's "Contribution"

I'm only going to tell this once, so you better prick up those pointy ears and listen up! It's a heroic tale of helping those who can't help themselves, one of many in the glorious career of *the great* Jurard T. Rexford.

A tale of desperation-turned-celebration, a saga of tears and cheers, an epic of struggles, scuffles and hard-won battles, a story of– OKAY I'm getting to it!

It all began one sunny day. I was out in the market getting groceries for dinner with the Sorawrity, because Gibby was sick in bed and you and Octavio were out on a mission. So responsibility fell to me, ARMIS's dependable *leader,* to step up and make sure no one went hungry.

Hey, don't roll your eyes, the stew I made was delicious! All those stamina potions fried your taste buds and you're just upset your palette isn't refined enough to appreciate decadent blackened meat and generously salted soup *à la* Rexford. Anyway, would you stop nitpicking? Just eat your marshmallows and save the commentary for later.

So as I was saying, before I was *rudely interrupted*, we were in the market. It was loud, with vendors yelling and shoppers haggling. The smell of freshly-baked treats and battered, deep fried meats filled the air. Not sure why anyone would scarf down oily, piping hot skewers on one of the hottest days of the year, but to each their own.

We happened to have leftover funds from the last job, so I splurged on some cuts of marbled meat. Sorawrity were helping me carry everything. They were struggling to keep up with their stubby little feet while lifting the meat over their heads, but it was the least they could do. I was doing all the hard work haggling and shopping.

While we were listening to some shopkeeper yap about their instant cold-curing medication, there was a crash from behind, followed by sounds of screaming and frantic footsteps.

"Stop! Thief!" yelled a shopkeeper as he chased after a cloaked figure through the hustle and bustle of the market. I spun around as the thief shoved me into a nearby stall and sent me crashing into the crates of sketchy meds, causing the Sorawrity to drop our packaged meat.

"Is there anyone big, strong, and handsome that can help? You'll be rewarded handsomely."

Removing Glory and Fame from their holsters, I leapt from the rubble and immediately gave chase. The poor shopkeeper had been the only one running after the thief, and from his huffing and puffing and desperate cries, he was at his wits' end. I couldn't stand by and turn a blind eye to a gentleman in jeopardy.

Unleashing Dino Mode, I closed the distance. Firing a few warning shots, I saw the criminal yelp and begin throwing random goods in a futile attempt to slow me down. Some bullets had torn through the fabric of their cloak, narrowly grazing their skin and drawing blood.

Was it overkill? Maybe. But at that moment, all that was on my mind was the shopkeeper's distressed face and the reward waiting for me with my name on it.

As the thief's running slowed into a tired, anguished limp, I tackled and pinned them to the ground, holding their arms firmly behind their back. They wriggled, kicked, and squirmed, not realising that it was all over from the very millisecond they crossed paths with Jurard T. Rexford.

All in a good day's work. The En–huh? Tell you what *actually* happened? What do you mean? I literally *just* told you.

What got stolen? Didn't get a good look, and does that even matter?

Why didn't ARMIS get another bill for unnecessary collateral damage? Uh–turns out the thief was a wanted criminal with a bounty. They considered it a necessary sacrifice for helping to rid the streets of them. Mmhmm.

How much was the bounty? What was the handsome reward? What, you going to write a report about it? Details, schmetails. You think I remember the exact digits?

Oh don't give me that look. I was– I did– FINE. Sorawrity decided to be a bunch of little a-holes and scamper away with my coin pouch while I wasn't looking. I chased and followed them underneath one of the stalls in Dino Mode because I was mad, and some petty thief who was being chased tripped on my tail, fell and got caught.

THERE. HAPPY? I still saved the day so– STOP LAUGHING, RUZE YOU SON OF A–



@energonstars @_artbylove_

Shinri

A Haunting Visitor

"Mr. Josuiji," the lady visitor looked at me, her eyes deepening with concern, "I believe I am being haunted by a poltergeist."

She went on to explain that ever since about a week she'd moved to her new home on the outskirts of Paradise, strange things had been happening. Plates and silverware falling off tables, weird noises in the night, furniture thumping and shaking as though something had fallen on it.

She hadn't minded it much until, well ... The lady sighed and looked embarrassed, then lifted her skirt to show a long, straight, fairly deep cut across her leg. While it didn't look life-threatening, I couldn't help but agree that it wasn't good and offered to look into the haunting. She handed me a key and gave me directions to her home. She offered me a week in her home to solve the problem and mentioned that she had paid Axel half the fee upfront.

So I gathered my gear and went off in the direction of her home. It was right up my alley, after all: spooks, poltergeists, a real haunted house!

I suppose I was more optimistic than I should have been, looking back. Nothing happened for the first three days. Or at least nothing obvious. I occasionally felt a touch of cold here or there, saw a curtain or dishcloth shift a bit, that sort of thing. At most, I sensed something watching me from the corner of my eye, but when I turned my head, nothing was there.

Still, I had four more days to work with, so I bided my time, and on the next day, things started happening. A table shook as though something heavy had landed on it. Several books fell off a shelf with nothing in sight. A cold frisson went down my leg, and when I went to inspect it, I saw that my sock had been ripped without me even noticing. Even so, I had to be patient. I addressed the ghost, but heard no answer other than a distant howl or yowl as something pushed open the door and left.

The fifth day was more promising. I noticed the ghost entering by cracking open the door, almost as if it were something invisible rather than a spirit. After that, I stood very still and reached out my palm in a welcoming manner, but the ghost felt like it paused, a dense spot of cold in front of my outstretched hand. Something cold and soft touched it for a moment, and then I heard a clattering as though something had rushed out, a breeze behind it blowing the door shut.

I looked at my hand and then began to think. I walked around the house, looking for a few possible specific items that might connect what had just happened with the ghostly presence. And when I found them, I knew that I was on the right track!

On the sixth night, I waited again with a few tricks up my sleeve, sitting on a chair in good view of the door. When the door cracked open, I pulled a bit of fish out of my pocket and placed my hand close to the floor. Sure enough, the cold spot approached and paused

again. Was it perhaps ... sniffing? Emboldened, I dropped the fish, reached into my pocket, and tried a bit of a trick. I took a bell strung on a ribbon and quickly tried to slide it around the cold spot!

Then came a yowling as the ribbon fell through the spot ... yet the spirit still jingled, a distant twinkling of sound. Had I just belled a ghost cat? After a bit of crashing around, the ghost cat clearly became used to the bell and came back to inspect the bit of fish again. I gave it some cold pets and decided I could return to the Guild Hall with interesting tidings.

When I explained the situation to the lady, she suddenly burst into tears. She had moved to her new home because her husband and their cat Rufus had died in a fire not long before. Rufus must have missed her and decided to find his way to her new home! She paid Axel the rest of the fee and left, satisfied that her beloved cat, at least, had returned to her.



@semiluminary @Maccchia

Shinri's Home Furniture Excursion

"Shinri. Please tell me this isn't all your furniture..." Hakka pleaded, surprising me with a visit in the early hours of the morning.

I glanced around. A futon, a work desk for my files on corruption beasts, a corner of the room for my weapons, clothes and a basic stove with a few utensils for cooking. That was the state of my room back then.

"....Well..." I dragged, wincing at my lack of defense.

"Shinriiii!!!!" Hakka's expression was a mix of disbelief and horror. After a moment of collecting himself, he inhaled sharply. "I was happy you were finally settling down, but I am not about to let my friend live like this! Get ready, we're buying stuff for your place."

My eyes widened. "Now? How am I supposed to afford anything? I just moved in."

"Don't worry, we can put it on the guild's tab. Now c'mon!" Hakka exclaimed, pulling me out the door.

"First things first, the basics!" Hakka declared, as we walked into the local Elysian furniture depot. For the next several hours, we immersed ourselves in selecting proper furnishings: a closet, bookshelf, coffee maker, dining table with seating, clothing rack, dishware, storage containers, and decorations.

Once that was covered, we went to the Xenokunian furniture section of the store. "For something to remind us of our old home, y'know?" Hakka remarked while I glanced around. We bought a kotatsu, a bow rack with an arrow case, koi streamers, and spare futons. While browsing, a certain kokeshi doll caught my eye.

"Oooh, it's haunted? I wonder if I'll get to talk to a ghost if I buy this." I remarked, reading the description on the nameplate next to it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to exorcise that Shinri?"

"Don't worry," I said with confidence, "as long as the ghost isn't harmful, I could use the extra company!" I grinned, while Hakka shook his head at me.

"Well, I don't sense any evil intent, so I guess it'll be fine..."

Finally, we went to a local gardening center. "You need to be reminded to touch grass, so maybe having some plants around would help," was Hakka's response to me wondering why we were there. He wasn't wrong, but I was slightly offended. Scanning around, my eyes were drawn to some potted azaleas' vibrant colors.

"....I wonder if I could eat one of these..."

Hakka gave me a flat look. "Okay. Clearly it's time to go eat." With that final purchase, we were on our way.

After spending the whole day furniture shopping and having dinner, I was spent, literally and physically. On the commute home, I turned toward my friend.

"Hakka?" He looked at me, questioning. "I know we just bought all of the furniture for delivery, but how exactly do you expect me to assemble and put everything away myself?"

Hakka grinned. "I have a plan."

Wondering what he meant, we parted ways after a hug and a promise to see each other tomorrow. I went home and passed out almost immediately, exhausted.

The next day, I blearily got up to the sound of my doorbell going off. Yawning, I opened my door, assuming Hakka had arrived with the moving crew. “Good mor–”

“Ayo man, what’s up? Your moving crew’s here!”

“Morning, Shinri!”

“Hey Pal, Hakka said you needed some moving help? Let me tell ya, it's a real doozy if you don’t have enough helping hands.”

“Hi~I brought Chibi-Trus with me; he can help with the move!”

The whole Tempus Guild had shown up, Hakka taking up the rear with the furniture delivery crew, grinning at my shocked face. “Told you I had a plan.” I huffed out a laugh, smiling. “Should’ve seen that coming. Welcome boys! Thank you for coming, it’s gonna be a long day.” I gestured into my place, letting everyone in.

And so we began, unloading everything I bought yesterday, assembling and moving things where I felt they belonged.

I was a wandering ronin for most of my life, only keeping what I needed for travel, never expecting to settle down. But working with the Guild together in furnishing my place, seeing Altare and Axel hauling around the heavy items together, Bettel contemplating the best way to arrange decorations without breaking anything, and Hakka and Flayon excitedly chatting away about how they’d update my wardrobe once I had my dresser to store clothes, I finally felt like I had found a home.



@WhisperRaines @zeebadeebap

Shinri

The Merchant

Ruze and Shinri converse around a warm campfire.

"Have I told you the time I rescued the kois?"

Ruze furrows his eyebrows with a confused look as he responds,

"No? When did that happen?"

Shinri nods as he begins to share the memory.

"Yeah, I was away for a few days, and when I came back I made it just in time to notice the Koipanions disappearing. One by one, into these golden particles of light. The light travelled into the forest so I followed after it and it got darker the more I followed."

Sensing a sudden ominous change in the air, Ruze surveys his surroundings. Noticing an eerie silence, the trees even feel taller to him–as if they touch the sky and no light can pierce through.

"Is it night already? Coulda sworn it was sunset."

Shinri glances above their heads to see darkness.

"Whoa~ The same thing happened when I was in the forest! That's when I heard a collection of bells heading in my direction–moving closer and closer until I saw glowing blue flames from a hitch wagon and someone sitting on top of it. Aaah...it was so cool."

As the story continues, the flame in between them begins to flicker with hints of blue. Both Ruze and Shinri exchange curious glances. Ruze speaks up,

"Who or what was it? You didn't sign a contract or anythin', did you?"

Giving a rumbling laugh in response to the possibility, Shinri continues,

"No no, they ignored me when I suggested it. They were wearing a dark veil over their head and a long, dark blue robe. Their cargo was like...jars filled with weird liquids, creatures, jewels, weapons, and other cool things! I found a sleeping Puniko in a big jar of water with miniature Koipanions in similar jars. They looked so cute! They were wiggling their fins and bodies as they made *pop-pop* noises to me."

Ruze crosses his leg over the other on his seat as he listens with a curious gaze.



@MellowDuckie @Daysof_Euphoria



"That's cute, but how'd you manage to save 'em? It didn't try to attack you?"

Shinri shakes his head no.

"I asked about the fire, why the earth moved for them to travel, and how they shrank the kois to that size. Trying to make polite conversation! But they stopped and floated from their seat to the air in front of me. They waved their long sleeves in a *shoo* gesture and scolded me in this haunting and echoing voice–'to get away from their merchandise.' They noticed I was trying to reach the kois when they weren't looking."

Ruze leans back a little with his arms crossed, a tinge of surprise in his voice as he asks,

"Huh, it just scolded you?"

Shinri gives a small shrug as he looks at Ruze with a smile.

"They did try to spook me but I found their threats fascinating. After they ran out of ideas it felt like they were frustrated and gave me a one time trade offer: to leave them alone and they'd give back the Koipanions they took. But, I added a request..a token to remember the encounter, and they agreed, promising to deliver it soon."

Ruze gives a hearty laugh as Shinri comes to the conclusion of the story.

"They really said 'never mind, you can have them back.' That's so funny!"

The sound of a bell is suddenly heard echoing from the surrounding trees, causing Ruze to stop laughing. He looks to the right and comes face-to-face with a veiled individual, a blue glow surrounding their visage, floating near him. They disappear before his eyes before they reappear around Shinri's frame; they drop a leathered pouch on the ground near him. As the figure leaves, streams of moonlight peek through the trees.

Ruze lets out the breath he didn't realize he was holding. He turns to look at Shinri who is already looking inside the medium sized pouch to grab its contents. Shinri tosses Ruze a darkened orb; its center slowly shifts to an image of both men smiling around the campfire while in his palm. Shinri reads the small note attached to the bag aloud:

"A token to remember."

Shinri

Saving Private Koipanion

"Shh," Shinri whispers, settling the Koipanion more securely beneath his arm. The Koipanion makes one last quiet, miserable *blub* and then goes quiet.

From where Shinri is crouched, he can see two massive hindpaws stop in front of him, pause, and then amble away. As curious as he is to get a better look at the creature the hindpaws belong to, he waits until it's out of sight to slip out from beneath the table and towards the treeline.

A few days ago, one of the koi had gone missing. Tracking it down had been an adventure in itself when all Shinri had to go on was several other koi's vague descriptions of a massive bird...thing plucking it out of the pond and flying away. Hunting down the koi had led to him finding it physically unharmed but plated on a buffet table at a gathering of monstrous creatures in the middle of the woods.

...Shinri really wanted to stick around long enough to learn more about the gathering—it seemed like a pretty festive party—but getting the koi back to the pond was his current priority.

Aside from the koi, the only other living creatures on the buffet table had been locked in easy to open cages and had scurried off into the forest as soon as Shinri freed them. The noise had drawn some attention, but it seemed like whoever had wandered over to check assumed the other partygoers had already eaten them.

The koi lets out another sad *blub*, and Shinri ducks behind a tree to give the poor fish a hug, not willing to risk verbally comforting it and being overheard. The hug works, thankfully. The koi trembles but goes quiet again.

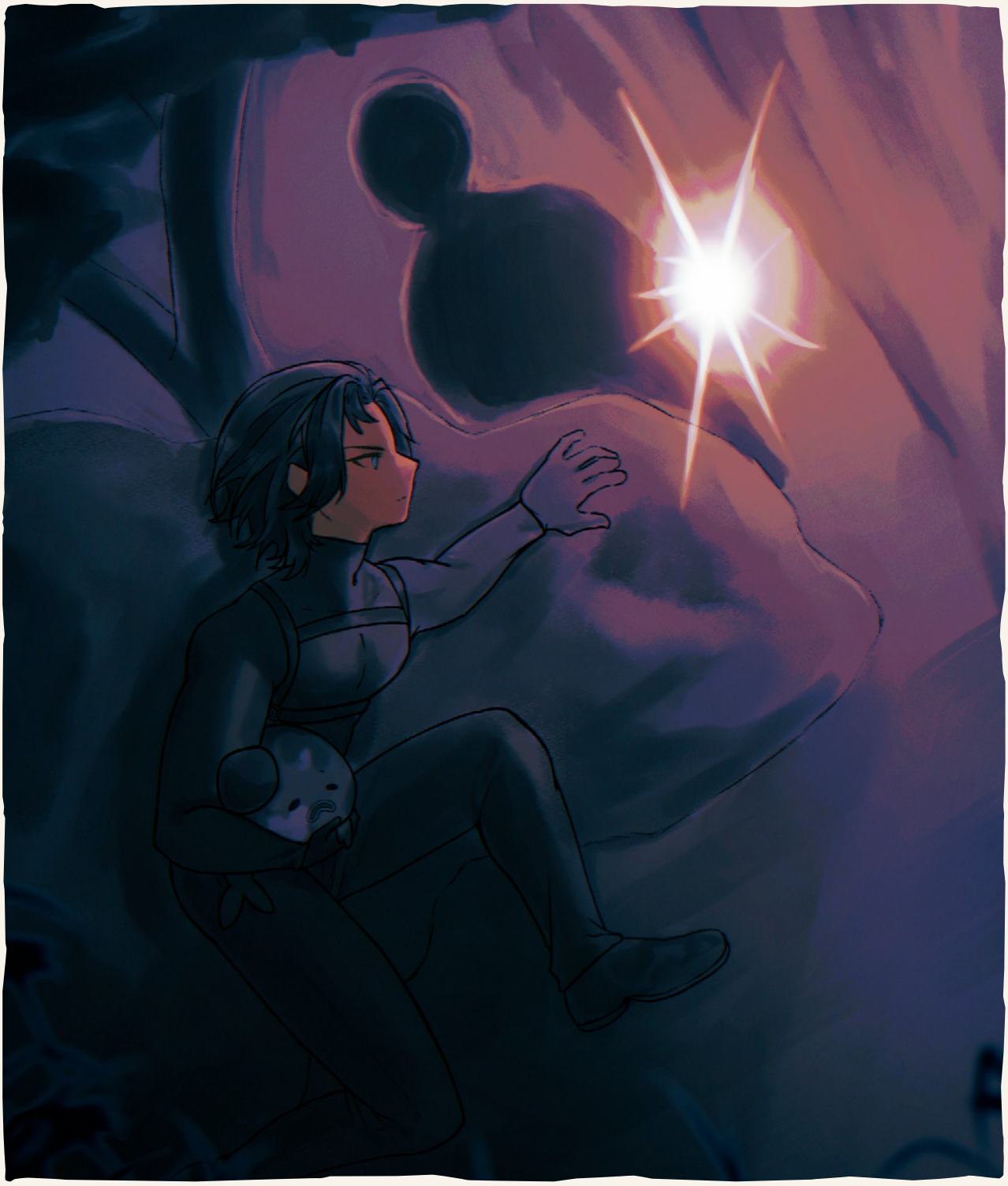
Tucking it back under his arm, Shinri peeks out at the clearing the gathering is in and then the forest itself. Not all of the monsters are in the clearing, some having broken off into little groups he can either see or hear as they wander through the woods together. There's laughter and conversation happening in several languages, most of which Shinri doesn't recognize, and a very sweet-looking ghost peering back at him from a nondescript box beside the buffet table. They raise a finger to their lips, miming a '*shh*' of their own, before smiling shyly.

Getting the koi back to the pond is top priority, but he might be able to do that fast enough to come back, maybe.

The koi gives a soft, encouraging *poppoppop*.

Right, right. Shinri creeps through the forest, pausing every so often to listen to rustling leaves and increasingly distant voices or to circle around a group of monsters. Once he's gotten far enough that he hasn't seen or heard anyone for twenty minutes, he feels confident enough to trade stealth for speed in getting the koi back to the pond.

The other koi swim excited circles around it, happy to be reunited, though they're a little confused by how quickly Shinri's gone again.



Hakka

After Sundown Comes Alive

Ghost stories are child's play for someone like me, you know—and without my own stories to tell, I wouldn't call myself an exorcist, right? So try not to get shaky on your boots, now. (*Just kidding*.)

This one was a mission from years ago, I recall. An ordinary building, in one piece but still visibly abandoned. Either a place forgotten by people or time itself, or the perfect hot spot for ghosts—a stigmatized property. So there was I, a little bird out of his nest, and in the middle of nowhere.

A young man, just a little older than me, apologized profusely for scaring me after tapping on my shoulder before I noticed him; he was dapper, polite, and very much *alive*. Probably taking me for a lost traveler, I explained my background to him and that I was the one appointed for the investigation. He then stared at me with surprise, certainly because of my youthful looks.

While he shared details of the possible haunting, I understood right away that it was his childhood home and that all activities happened at nighttime. An interesting extra layer to everything, and a great way to build character!

A week passed by like a rollercoaster: any semblance of peace was gone by the second day, and tension increased the longer I stayed there. I was for sure dealing with a haunted property until the question became about *who* haunted it. The noises were the loudest at night, but I think nothing would've prepared me for what was yet to come.

By day two, I tried talking to whoever was behind the door. A voice then answered me: a feminine one, gentle in tone, yet imposing in her words, and asking me the same question every night: to let her inside the house.

Without any backup plans and unsure of the risks, I kept turning her down. As expected, she grew more impatient and reactive the more I refused to let her in, but there were moments when we could hold a short conversation. (Sometimes I feel like I would've heard her side of the story if our time hadn't been so short.)

I tried to gather more information from her during our conversations, and it worked until she insisted on coming in again. Then her questions shifted to desperate pleas to open the door for her, escalating in intensity.

But my time was running out, and I needed a conclusion soon; when day five came around, I decided to confront the situation head-on. I stood in front of the door—now with my hand on the knob, waiting until the faulty clock hit midnight as the noises grew louder than before.

I open the door to find nothing, and the noises immediately stop; that's when it hit me that the property itself was a barrier, and the ghost sent me flying back inside like a storm, allowing me to see her for the first time: a beautiful woman with dark grey hair, a clear contrast to her white clothing and the furious expression on her face. (But more than furious, she seemed... upset?)

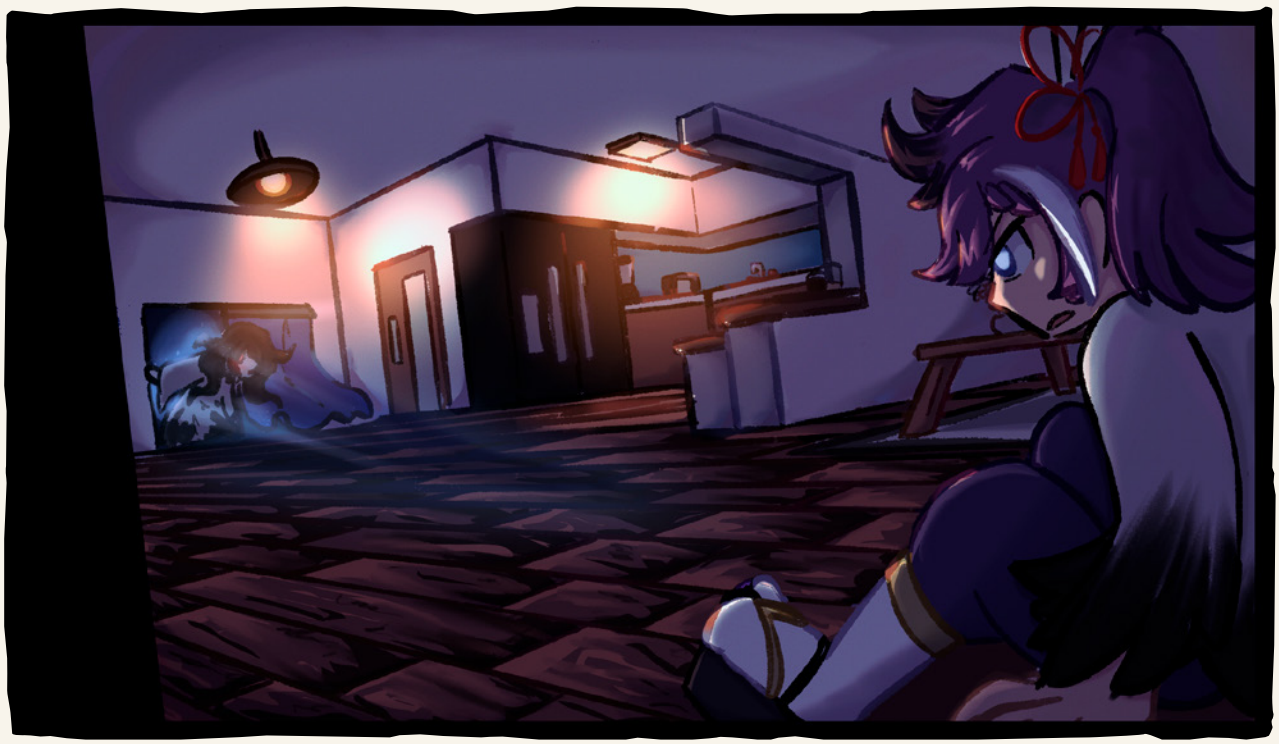
Also, the supernatural always has a trick up its sleeve, you see. Overpowered and pushed to the floor with abnormal strength, I barely managed to escape, but it was enough to grab my talismans, run out the door, and lead the ghost outside with me.

To my surprise, while I fought to free myself from her grasp again, the man from days ago ran up to us. But then came the unexpected part: he hugged the ghost from behind, and she released me. So he could *see and* touch her, but *how*?

Still, it was the perfect chance to pull out a talisman and begin the ritual. We watched the sun rise in the distance when it was finally over, leaving me more confused than ever—but hey, mission complete!

The other mystery now was that guy and his story, but he brushed it off with a "family secret" answer and a radiant smile. (Was it obvious that I stopped trying to understand anything at that point?)

That's how I discovered that ghosts can manifest from many sources, but especially from emotions: this one became bound to a person's guilt, so I was there to help the two of them move on. For my exorcist journey, that mission was only the beginning—but as Banzoin Hakka, there would still be so much to learn about the intriguing world from the other side.



@wererinne @QuarkAnds

Hakka

The Fifth or The Best?

Alright, listen up, you rascal. I'm gonna be real serious here because I usually am. Save the snickering for later. Anyway, let's go back to the beginning. So, for starters, you know I'm somewhat of a genius, right? That brings us to this particular morning; I was out browsing supplies with TEMPUS in the local market near where we were staying at the time. For some reason, Hakkito has been distracted all morning and I couldn't quite figure out what they were so busy with, until...I noticed the hanamusubi knot on their head was missing a feather and was starting to get loose.

You know what, I'm so glad I noticed it in time since we were already walking by a flower shop that was coincidentally selling a variety of hanamusubi ropes too. I told Shinri where I'd be for a while so I could help out Hakkito–that's why I got separated from the group from there on out. Hakkito seemed distressed about the thing, so I gently asked what happened and wondered how the knot had gotten that way. **"Are you okay? Don't worry so much, alright? We'll get it fixed right away, I promise."** The little bird could only nod sadly as I paid off the new rope we chose. I understand that the knot was one of their favorite things, which is why they must have been caught off-guard by it becoming undone.

Just as I was about to return to the rest of the boys the next street over, a group of bandits rushed into the middle of the bustling market and shouted, **"Hand over any valuables! Most especially magical trinkets and pieces of gold, or we won't hesitate to get them by force!"**



@gibbyluvrific @babybatmochi



Obviously, as any person with good will and the qualities of a great exorcist who can throw hands would, I asked a vendor if they could kindly hold Hakkito for me a bit and faced the bandits myself, spears at hand. **“Not on my watch, you don’t.”**

The bandits stayed firm as I spoke with five of them holding different weapons of their own. It would've been nice to have the other boys with me right then, I’m not gonna lie. I brushed the thought off as I immediately got into action, hitting their pressure points with the bottom of my spear so as to not cause any injuries and instead knock them unconscious until the right authorities could lock them up, you know? But then, I saw one of them get swept away quickly. **“What the hell was that?!”** I was genuinely worried that those bad guys had back-up, but thank god I looked behind me. It was just you, you idiot!

“Guess we meet again here, Hakka,” he said. First, I still can’t believe you were trying to out-chuuni me even in the middle of a fight. Second, why were you there again? ...

Right, right. Something about getting gifts for ARMIS in secret, apparently... Anyway, you sling Zephyr with no warning, by the way. Good thing I stepped back early since I figured you had a coordinated thing going on. One bandit got tied after the other, and thanks to our efforts, no one innocent was injured or robbed of their goods.

“We make a pretty good team, don’t you think?” I proudly smiled over the work we’d done. Then, I looked over and I saw you already leaving, like, I don’t even get a thank you for the help?! So, that brings us to now, having some drinks from a tavern since I think I deserve it as the official fifth member of ARMIS. Even Hakkito agrees with me!

Ruze: “... Or so you proclaimed. Only you, might I add.”

Ruze, I swear, if you disrespect me like this one more time—

Ruze: “Hey, fine, I'll take it back. I’m just cranky my post-battle nap got interrupted. Just drink up, will ya?”

Okay, whatever you say Ruze, but I’ll tell the TEMPUS boys I was a major help in this whole thing, got it? The coolest and cutest exorcist of all Xenokuni has saved the day once again!

Hakka

Magic Egg

Once upon a time, there was a sorcerer and an egg.

The sorcerer didn't have the egg, but the sorcerer did have a description of where to find it. The egg was inside the belly of a hare sealed inside a chest buried beneath an ancient tree on an island that only showed itself to the world once a year.

Why did the sorcerer need the egg? For sorcerer things, for one, but more than that, the sorcerer didn't need the egg itself—rather, they needed what was hidden inside it. No one knew exactly what it was, only that inside the egg was something with tremendous magical power. So the sorcerer set out to find the egg.

An island that only shows itself once a year is noteworthy enough that generations-old stories about its general location existed, easy enough to find for someone looking for them. Finding the location didn't help one know what day the island showed itself. The stories contradicted one another, some placing its appearance in winter and some in spring, some saying it appeared on rainy days where the sun peeked through the clouds and other that it appeared on the shortest day of the year.

The sorcerer was dedicated and stubborn. Instead of trying to narrow down the exact day, they bought a small fishing boat and spent every day exploring the area it should appear. Months into this, their dedication finally paid off.

Overcoming the first hurdle didn't mean the task at hand became any easier. If anything, it became more difficult because the sorcerer was keenly aware that staying on the island too long could trap them there until it next reappeared to the world.

The sorcerer set out to find the tree, which was neither the tallest nor centermost tree on the island. No; it was small and sickly, branches curled in on itself and barren of leaves. Using the shovel they'd brought along, the sorcerer dug and dug and dug as the sun slid further down the sky until at last they found the chest. The moment the chest was open, out sprung a rabbit fleeing as fast from its once-prison as it could, but the sorcerer had thought ahead—a net stretched across the top of the hole. Hopelessly tangled, it was easy enough to catch the enchanted rabbit and slice the egg free from within it.

Stashing the egg securely away, the sorcerer hurried to their boat and fled the island.

Back at home, the sorcerer cared for the egg, waiting for it to hatch and for the unfathomable magic power within it to become theirs. When the first cracks started appearing on its surface, the sorcerer was ecstatic beyond words.

And what was the magic hidden within the egg?

A Hakkito!

The Hakkito then proceeded to beat the sorcerer up, steal all their money, and go buy itself some strawberries.



Flayon

Tale of The Troublesome Two

It started as just another day for Flayon and his Machiroons at the Tempus Guild: he was given a mission and was later on his way in a helicopter. As much as it pained them, the Machiroons had to keep themselves occupied while he was gone. But these two little Roons couldn't keep themselves quiet for a minute without their oshi. And so, they snuck out of the guild, hopped their way through the city, then traveled to a dry town in the Badlands through a portal. It didn't take them long before they spotted a prank of Ruzaders headed over to The Criminal's Cut. They looked at each other with large, swirling eyes gleaming with sinister excitement and bounced after them.

Once inside, they snuck under the tables and watched Ruzaders crawl up the support beams. Sorawrities bounced up high to meet them at the top, draping the ceilings with red and purple banners and plastic axes. While the acrobats glided through the air, one of the Roons stole a box of thumb tacks. In the kitchen, Big Bubby led as head chef of the Bubbies, cooking a wide variety of foods. Whenever a Bubby turned their back, one of the Roons snatched a bottle of ghost pepper sauce, then a few buckets from a closet, and finally some big bottles of milk from the fridge. They soon found themselves swaying to the orchestra of Poppets from the beams until they stopped, departing from their instruments for a break. This gave the opportunity for one Roon to chew up a large stick of bubblegum while the other shoved confetti into a tuba; its partner sealed it with the gum before a few more tubas were given the same treatment.

In the afternoon, the Roons hid in an air vent on the dining room floor so as to witness everyone gathered around the tables that were set up like a banquet. A big multi-tiered cake could be seen in the middle, and close to it was Big Bubby, guarding a huge simmering pot of stew..the same pot the Roons particularly gleamed at. Soon enough, a parade of Bettelions, Hakkitos, the rest of the Machiroons, and other Starmin entered the tavern–along with Flayon, who had just returned from his mission. Soon after, the rest of the Tempus boys joined the party, and everyone began to quiet down as the lights dimmed. Under the cover of darkness, the mischievous Roons sprinkled some tacks on several seats. Once the ARMIS boys walked through the door, the lights flared back on and an eruption of cheers cascaded over the walls, cueing the two Roons to beeline back to their hiding spot.

The real show began once everyone started taking their seats. Several Sorawrities screeched in pain, rocketing towards the ceiling and ricocheting all over the place–until they knocked buckets of milk off the beams and drenched the crowd below. The little dino balls had also tipped the cake off its plate and into the pot, splattering the stew all over Ruze and Flayon. The stew's pungent ghost pepper smell and taste got Ruze wheezing, but Flayon liked it just fine. Within the same moment, some of the Poppets found their tubas clogged; they tried to blow the blockages free, but instead grew bubbles out of the bells that burst into confetti once too large. The result turned into a collage of spilled milk, some confetti on the side, and splattered cake and sauce in the epicenter of the chaos.

@Oceansta7ker @QuarkAnds



A Ruzader tapped on Ruze and Flayon's ankles to draw their attention to an air vent on the floor where they found two Machiroons laughing their tails off beside an open box of thumb tacks. In the blink of an eye, Flayon yoinked the two out of the vent, forcing them to face the angry eyes of everyone at the party. The Ruzader also fetched an empty sauce bottle from the vent. "I THOUGHT there was a bottle missing!" Big Bubby exclaimed.

"So... you're really that much of a mess without me, aren't you?" Flayon looked them over with condescending eyes. "Well, that was unimpressive, but it looks like some punishment is in order." His mouth morphed into an evil grin at the now-quivering Roons. "And I've got just the thing for you two."

And so the Roons had to spend the rest of the night and the following day cleaning and repairing The Criminal's Cut. They swore to never pull another stunt like that ever again.

Isn't that right...Machiroons?

Bettel

Gavis Bettel Gets Mogged By a Cookie

There's a good reason that Bettel was chosen to go on the Xenokuni expedition all those years ago.

Many underestimate him. He underestimates himself. You don't tend to expect much from the jester that trips over air every other day and who might genuinely only be alive because the Hollow Tree thought it'd be funny. But those that know him well, know that the bumbling exterior belies cunning wit—and the ability to enthrall the masses without even trying. And what a power that is, especially considering his formidable opponents.

It's just a shame that this power of his only comes to light in the dumbest situations possible.

"Hottest... jester? What the... Did Flayon put you up to this?"

Bettel holds a flyer in his hand, peering past it and down at the little imp looking back at him with excitement in its eyes. It shakes its head, and tries its best to convey (via interpretive dance) why Bettel was signed up for this...impromptu town square competition without his knowledge or consent.

"Okay, I got that much." Bettel nods, squatting to meet the creature somewhat at eye level. "So what exactly do I have to do? Do a little dance? Sing a little song?"

No! the imp gestures emphatically, with all the cheer that it can muster in its little body. *You're going to fight to the death!*

"... What?"

Your first round starts in twenty minutes! Good luck out there!

"WHAT?"

From the looks of things, no one else expected Bettel to show up either. And he can see why. Only a few of the competitors are even human, and almost all of them have enough combat ability to turn Bettel into a black-and-purple smear on the town square cobble—not that that's a particularly high bar to pass. What might pass for a "jester" in this part of the world clearly doesn't apply to him.

"If I get mogged by a cookie, I'm going to cry," Bettel mutters under his breath, checking the tension of his ribbon whip. "And, shoot, the others aren't looking much easier. Is that a freaking frog puppet? At least that one girl with the red and blue kinda seems like it'll be an even match instead of just...carnage and destruction..."

Just outside, he can hear the announcer's voice introducing his opponent, met with both raucous cheers and jeering boos. Through the slit in the curtains, the bright sunlight reveals his diminutive rival, enveloped in shadow.

Damn. Bettel really is about to lose to a freaking cookie. Twobert is never going to let him hear the end of it when they reunite in the afterlife.

The announcer calls Bettel to the arena, and he tucks his whip away, breathing deep. J*ust treat it like a show, Betsy. If you're going to die, at least make it funny.*

"BET-TEL! BET-TEL! BET-TEL!" cries the crowd in unison, every syllable matched to the clack of his shoes on the pavement as he steps out to greet his end.





Bettel

Bettel Unexpected Show

Bettel crosses his legs and taps a hand against his knee as he thinks, "What about the story of my most recent show? It sure was... *something!* It even had a fun cameo by you if I recall, and I'm sure you were just itching to know how that all turned out!"

"Hellooooo and good morning everyone! I'm the Jester of Guild Tempus, Bettel! Thank you all for coming to my sho–*it is morning right?*" Bettel smiled wide, bent deep in a bow as he heard a few giggles from the folks sitting up front. Laughs already from just some light incompetence at his opening was a good sign that today's crowd would be a fun one.

Bettel spent the next twenty minutes or so of his show doing some basic gags: a card trick, a few totally staged trips onto his face, and some comedic jokes. "Next I'll bring out my assistant, the one and only Phantom!"

Bettel reached into his hat tugging Phantom free from where he clung, smiling as he looked at that little glaring eyeball. The crowd cooed at how "cute" he was and Bettel explained that Phantom was his dog and had been trained to do a few tricks.

He settled Phantom onto the ground and turned to grab a hoop he'd prepared, "Come on Phantom! Show them your hops!" Bettel leaned over with the hoop and much to his surprise, Phantom *did not jump through the hoop.* "Ha...ha! Come on buddy, just like we practiced!" The crowd would laugh whether Phantom jumped or not, which he was most certainly *not doing*.

"Stage fright! Happens to the best of us!" Bettel said, wiping sweat from his brow. Phantom turned away from both him and the crowd, causing an eruption of cooed "aww"s. This was a great bit for now, but Bettel had planned for Phantom tricks to take up the next twenty minutes of his performance—and they couldn't sit and watch Phantom ignore him for that long!

Thankfully, Bettel didn't have to wait long because a sudden *roar* shook the entire amphitheater.

That wasn't in his set list.

Bettel watched in horror as a dragon flew into the open air above the audience. Just when he was going to scream at the audience to run, they all...cheered?

"Wow! This show is great! A tamed dragon!"

THAT DRAGON WASN'T TAMED.

"I-"

"Octavio, could you maybe puppet that thing away from the–*I don't know*–crowd of innocent people?!"

Bettel was helpless as he noticed Ruze land a ways away yelling up at the beast. If he squinted, he could now make out the tiny form of Octavio on its back, strings apparently steering this literal dragon up and away from the crowd. *What was Armis doing here?*

Bettel snatched up Phantom as the dragon's large maw turned towards him with a growl, squeezing his eyes shut and shielding Phantom with his body as he was certain he was about to become a jester crisp before this crowd.

They had not signed waivers for this, or included *"life-altering moment"* in the ticket price!

"Whoa! Not so fast!" Tavi laughed. "Oh! Hey Bettel, is that you? Nice show!" Bettel heard rather than saw the massive beast pull away, feeling as a large flap of its wings brought it back into the air.

He didn't open his eyes until he heard the crowd cheering and chanting "Phantom", peeking to see that in the chaos Phantom had apparently wiggled out of his arms and stood between him and where the dragon had been previously.

"Aw, Phantom buddy, were you going to protect me from the big scary dragon?" Bettel said, taking a deep breath to calm himself as the crowd cheered. Phantom turned back and glared, but placed a single paw on where Bettel had discarded the hoop. "Are you ready to...do hops now...?"

He could tell if he didn't get on with it quickly Phantom might change his mind.

"After that, the show went off without a hitch! The crowd loved Phantom's tricks and didn't suspect that we'd almost all died a horrible death at all!" *Bettel wrung his hands.*

"Ah, we had it mostly under control. Glad it didn't ruin your show though." *Ruze mused, laughing as he remembered the mission that had caused them to cross paths.* "We'll be sending the bill for our guest appearance to the guild."

"Oh I'm sure Axel will totally remember to ignore that!" *Bettel laughed, hoping Ruze wasn't being serious.*



@nitroorugrat @kimmykoosh_art

Bettel

Bettel's Leader Tales

The old shopkeeper effusively thanks Vanguard for their help resolving her crisis, hobbling behind her front counter to grab a basket of fresh fruits and homemade bread. She hands it over to Shinri and pats his shoulder.

"What good young men you four are. And how lucky they are to have a strapping young man like you at the helm."

It takes a second to realize she thinks *Shinri* is the leader of Vanguard. Once the realization sets in, Hakka and Flayon snicker with each other and Bettel is silently praying no one will correct her. Might as well let her—

"Actually," Shinri says. *Shit.* "He's our leader."

The old shopkeeper turns to look at Bettel. The smile on her face drops and she shuffles over, squinting her eyes like she's missing something. "Oh...well, dearie me. Good for you, young man. Keep yourself out of trouble, you hear?"

There's a beat of silence afterwards that's so profoundly awkward that Bettel wants to claw his skin off. Instead, he says something politely meaningless and gets out of there as fast as he can.

It isn't the first and certainly isn't the last time someone doesn't realize Bettel is technically (and when did that even happen? Bettel has no clue) leader of Guild Tempus' Vanguard Unit. It rarely bothers him, especially when it's as innocuous as this. If anything, it helps keep most of the annoying public-facing work he has to do as leader less annoying and less public.

Vanguard is working a relatively easy assignment. One that's been straightforward so far, too, with no serious injuries and a negligible amount of property damage. How they manage to anger the elder of the village the assignment is taking place in, Bettel isn't sure, but once they're on his bad side, they're on the bad side of just about everyone else in town. Bettel can't quite tell if they blame Hakka or Shinri for whatever's going on (both, maybe?) but either way, they're refusing to listen to a word either of them have to say. Flayon isn't helping diffuse the situation, either.

So Bettel steps in.

He's still not sure why exactly they're so mad but Bettel's learned that sometimes the best way to handle situations like these is with a distraction. Something unexpected enough to get everyone's minds off being mad long enough to settle their tempers. Clearing his throat, he projects his voice as he says, "Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention!"

It doesn't silence the angry voices but it does make them drop to a discontented murmur around him. Before he loses the opportunity, he says, "As the

@softcartilage Sigma_Gold



leader of Vanguard, I'd like to offer you our most heartfelt apologies—" For... whatever. "Please accept a show of goodwill on our part in reaching a resolution we're all happy with."

Which is everyone's cue for one of the most surefire ways to get out of this sort of trouble—an impromptu magic show.

Something about the joy of parlor tricks and feats of strength and dexterity really make people forget they were considering driving you out of town with pitchforks and torches a couple hours ago. And if all Bettel has to do is a couple card tricks and some juggling to not get driven out of said town with the aforementioned pitchforks and torches? Worth it.

...Of course, Guild Tempus is still going to be stuck footing the bill for the historical monument they'd *apparently* accidentally destroyed, which. Oops. In hindsight, maybe that stone pillar had looked a little important after all. But...well, at least Bettel knew what they were mad about finally?

Axel

Guild Tempus Banned Activities: Hot Pot

Axel shifts on the log, settling in before stretching with a large yawn.

"A story? I can tell you about when I planned a community hot pot night with the boys."

When Ruze doesn't interrupt, Axel takes a deep breath and begins.

"So...the first moral of the story is never ever have a community Hot Pot night with the guild."

Ruze snorts.

"Normally you don't start with the moral first."

Axel shrugs.

"Hey man, it's my story–I'll tell it how I want."

Ruze puts his hands up and Axel continues.

"So anyways, Altare had tricked me into running this event. Apparently as human resources and unofficial treasurer I'm required to fundraise or raise morale...*moraleraise*? Whatever. So I posted this big notice on the guild's main quest board about the hot pot *mission*."

"Told 'em to bring one item each. Simple. Had like a money pool to participate...like a potluck or somethin'."

Axel waves his hand in the air before rubbing it down his face.

"Issue was...I didn't set any limitations on what they could bring. Didn't think I needed to clarify that it needed to be somethin' edible. Like a vegetable or an *edible* meat."

Ruze thinks about what he knows of the Tempus boys and smiles.

"What, those little freaks didn't bring anything normal?"

Axel looks exasperated.

"Would you trust Armis to bring food for a potluck?"

"Goldie sure. Octavio or Jurard? *Hell no.*"

"See, you've already learned from my story before I'm even finished. The first sign of disaster was when Shinri showed up on time and had brought bones but wouldn't tell me what they were *from*. Bone broth sure. Maybe a cow bone? Sure. But he was being *weird about it*. So I refused to let him add it."

Axel seems to suffer a full body shiver before continuing, "Hakka brought some mushrooms and veggies he'd scavenged next and I thought maybe I'd been worried for nothin', right?"

"Let me guess, Bettel?"

Axel groans.

"No! But *man*, Bettel brought something he'd cooked apparently as a side? Completely burnt to a crisp, unrecognizable!"

Ruze chuckles at what was clearly an unfolding disaster.

"But no, next was Flayon. He brought meat."

"What was wrong with it?"

Axel shrugs.

"Nothing. Just don't trust Flayon, he's kinda weird, y'know? But it looked fine. Altare made me put it in the pot, and so far none of us had any weird side effects."

Seeming to remember the leader as he mentioned him, Axel laughs.

"Altare also brought some mostly normal stuff–actually, I think he suspected this was going to go sideways and bought a lot of extra stuff. Good leader and all that."

"Anyways, we're never doing 'bring your own food' stuff at the guild again. That whole thing was a disaster, even if it all turned out pretty tasty."

Ruze crosses his arms and leans back a bit from the fire.

"Axel, you never said what you brought."

"Oh! So get this, I have a recipe for axelotl stew and I also caught a few hakkitos 'cos I'm sure they taste like chicken and I thought if I just snuck 'em in before anyone noticed it would be all fine but Altare caught me and you know how he is. *Mr. Hero* said," *and Axel's voice shifted higher and a little breathier as he imitated the leader, "Axellll! Let them go right now!* So I was just in charge of spices and the soup base since we weren't allowed to have any fun."

The curious *mrrs* of a few Ruzaders peeking around the logs at the two men made Ruze pause in thought as he considered what Ruzader soup might taste like. Maybe like shrimp? Or crawfish? Seeming to sense his ill thoughts, the Ruzaders scurried back into the bushes and the two men fell into a comfortable silence once more.



@nitroorugrat @yu_ru0319

Axel

Sure Bet

"What, you think I can't win against Bettel?"

These incredulous words were all Axel needed to reach a very important conclusion.

"Yeah," he says, throwing an arm over Flayon's shoulders and leaning forward. "You think Flayon can't win a little arm wrestling contest? Wanna bet?"

Everyone does, in fact, want to bet. The festive atmosphere definitely helps ease everyone's willingness to toss some money behind the whole affair and, while they're bickering about who would win and how easily, furniture is shifted around in preparation.

Axel tracks everyone's bets in a notepad, the money sorted on the side of the same table Flayon and Bettel are preparing to arm wrestle on. Bettel looks like he's regretting his decision already and Flayon is bouncing on his feet in excitement. Most of the bets are, obviously, on Flayon's side, though there's a couple going Bettel's way too. Axel's not sure if anyone else is paying attention to who is betting for who, which works just fine for him.

"Best two out of three?" Flayon asks.

"Yeah," Bettel agrees, sounding even less enthused by the prospect than he looks. "Good with me."

The first round lasts approximately three seconds before Flayon's got Bettel's arm pinned to the table. Whoops and cheers fill the room, along with a few laughing pleas for Flayon to take it easy on Bettel or give him a headstart.

"Yeah, sure. I'll give you ten seconds before I move my arm if you want."

The second round starts, Flayon's arm barely wavering at first but starting to push down towards the end. It's a closer match than expected, Flayon and Bettel at a standstill until Bettel manages to pin Flayon's arm.

More cheers, this time accompanied by a genuine, "Good job, Bettel!" from Flayon.

They agree to no headstart for the final round, the outcome purely decided by whoever can win a normal match. Bettel's unexpected win in the second round heightens the interest around it but the winner's still clear. Clear to Axel, anyway, considering he'd pulled Flayon and Bettel aside while everyone was preparing and gotten them to agree to rig the contest and split the winnings three ways.

Bettel pins Flayon's arm after putting on a decent show to make things look aboveboard. Decent enough to keep anyone from proving outright it's cheating, at least, though the fact Axel's coincidentally put his money on Bettel is proof enough according to everyone else. Which is unfair, in Axel's opinion, even if it's true.

Unfair and also not bothering him in the least as he collects his winnings.



Altare

The Tempus HQ Ghost

Taking a deep breath, Altare starts his story. "The Tempus HQ was silent that night. Almost everyone left for the fourth mission we received that week. *Almost* everyone, because Shinri got sick from the previous one. (*That's what he gets for wearing that stupid crop top open jacket in the rain.*) And I, as the leader, was voted to stay behind to take care of him...and fill out the paperwork for the first three missions."

Altare grumbles the last part, knowing very well that the rest of his guild just found excuses to avoid having to fill reports.

"It was, again, a stormy night. We had lost electricity a few times already. I was going to check on Shinri one last time before bed, but as I walked to his room, I heard strange scraping noises coming from the main hall.. I speedwalked to Shinri's room and decided to act as if I didn't hear anything–"

Ruze cuts him off. "Totally not because you were scared or anything," he teases, reading the Tempus leader easily.

"Shut up," *Altare threw back with a pout before resuming.* "Anyway, when I opened Shinri's door and walked in, there was a very loud noise of something falling to the ground, coming once again from the hall..."

Flashback

"Altare? What was that?" Shinri asked, barely turning his head toward the door to avoid making the damp cloth fall from his forehead.
Altare, hesitant, answered, "I don't know. There are weird sounds coming from the hall..."

"Ouhh, you think it's a ghost?"

"Ghost don't exist, Shinri."

"Mmm, you're scared." Shinri smirked at him. "You say that but you won't check~"

"I'm not scared!"



@Daysof_Euphoria @mmmonstruo



"Poor little Altare, leader of guild Tempus, afraid of ghosts that don't exist~"

Altare grumbled before giving in. "FINE. I'll go check"

End of Flashback

"I slammed his door as I went. I could hear him giggle through it...I took barely three steps before lightning struck and the guild fell into darkness again.

"The whole hall was pitch black. I only had my light stone with me. As I walked closer to where I thought the noise was coming from, there were more creaks and scraping noises. It was definitely coming from the kitchen... So I made my way there, advancing through the hall carefully and silently. The storm was raging outside, flashes of lightning illuminated the hall periodically, followed by thunder..."

Altare was doing his best to recount his evening in a spooky way, but it didn't seem to scare Ruze all that much.

"And when I finally arrived in the kitchen, there was a huge metal crashing sound! I jumped, startled, and my foot slipped on something and I fell on my butt. When I looked down to see what I stepped on, I could only see red liquid on the floor and my shoe. There were more noises, like something scurrying around, bumping into something else, and a stool fell right before me! So I threw my light stone in front of me and got ready for battle...only to see a Hakkito and an Axelotl on the floor beside the stool, holding their foreheads. The floor was covered in strawberries, metal bowls scattered everywhere, pantry open, items fallen as if they had been scaled to get to the snack shelf..."

Ruze let out a barking laugh at the description.

"I fixed them all a snack before cleaning their mess. When I went to tell Shinri, he was fast asleep," *Altare finished, looking like his will to live left his body.* "I guess they had run out of the snacks Axel and Hakka prepared."

Altare

The Delightful, Delicious, and Definitely Strange Foods of the Badlands

Altare's gentle laughter could be heard as he slung his backpack on, and another bag at his hip while slotting his Gunsaber in its holster. He combined it with cooking utensils. He could hear Axel's boisterous voice in the background. "Where the fuck are ya going?" Altare would laugh one more time. "I'm going to gather food for our new members Axel, they should be here in a week but perhaps even sooner. You never know in the badlands so I am getting a headstart."

Axel took the list as he listened to Altare and read it. "Bumblebud Salad, Slow Cooked Chimera Ribs, Roasted Blackstripe Sleeper Crab, Glassberry Sugarbread, Turtligatorcakes, Mercury Beetle Steak, Shadowmist Tarts, Spidersilk Cotton Candy and holy cow, Dragonfire Ember Eggs. You really planned all this out, are you sure you don't need help?" He asked.

Altare would turn and head out the door waving at Axel before his feet crossed the sand and he grabbed one of the Hoverboards that sat by the entrance. It looked very similar to Flayon's shields. "Thanks for designing these for us Flayon, you are the best!" He said and fired up the hoverboard and took off for the grasslands.

Altare got back on his hoverboard and after a days journey through the peaceful night he landed in front of the Great Sakura Tree, its beautiful pink petals raining down in soft winds, a sweet scent filled the air as he walked under its shaded branches just as the sun hit the right spot in the sky and it revealed the position of the sweet glassberries noting how peaceful it was while gathering them, during this a picture fell out of his jacket, one of Armis, and another of HQ. Holding them side by side he frowned a soft sad frown. The smiling faces of Armis staring back at him combined with the faded picture of HQ. "Axel may have gotten onto me but this is why I am doing this. To make sure Armis feels welcome." He said and put the pictures away before heading off on his way to get the rest of the ingredients.

Altare would then grab his hoverboard and make way for his last, final and admittedly the most dangerous of locations, the Midnight Spires, home to the Shadowmist and the Dragonfire Ember eggs, a delicious delicacy but a hard one to get and if Altare was going to get them. He had to be smart, and fast. His eyes narrowed and he kicked on the hoverboard and moved silently across the land. The Shadowmist was easy to get and it wasn't long before he had plenty of it bottled up and ready to go. "Fantastic, this is going to make some elegant tarts once it's refined and cooked down!" Altare said pleased to himself before securing the swirling mist in his backpack.

Altare would then turn to face the towering spires and turn to run off in their direction moving into the direction of the dragon's nest, laying low as the mighty dragons lazed around, some of them flew overhead which made him duck, staying low while sneaking closer to the nests. As each dragon moved around he



turned on his light armor to protect against the heat, creeping ever closer until he grabbed three eggs. Slowly he put them in his backpack, each one wrapped in a gentle cloth and he moved to sneak off and he almost made it until he felt a wave of heat going towards him. “Oh crap!” He said, thankful for the ice magic that swirled around his light armor, grabbing the hoverboard he kicked it on and started to smile as he outran the flames of the dragons of The Midnight Spires. He made it out singed, tired but alive and oh so very satisfied.

Altare made it back to Guild Tempus and headed straight to the kitchen and started putting the food away leaving only what would be prepared for Armis out on the table. Axel came to help seeing how tired Altare was, later that evening he stood in front of the long King Arthuresqe type table with a full spread of food and the shimmering Hourglass Wine as the centerpiece.

The door opened and he looked up to see the four figures shaded in the doorway Altare would smile, hold his arms out and proudly shout. “Good evening Armis, and welcome to Guild Tempus!”

Altare

Growing Pains

Cohesion is one of the most important markers of a team's success. There's a reason they say an army about to head into battle fears last minute additions more than anything else. It doesn't take much to ruin the harmony between like-minded individuals. Even a little bit of tension and...

Well.

But all sorts of things can disrupt that harmony! Like this:

Imagine you're, oh, I don't know, putting together a guild of heroes. You all have the same goal in mind, right? Maybe for different reasons, sure, but you all want to protect the innocent and defend against the monsters that threaten them. And maybe the four of you—there are four of you in this hypothetical—all get along fairly well, but maybe you have others with you that don't. Like a bunch of slimes and bats and axelotls and...spiders? I mean, they kinda look like a very plump mixture of a spider and a starfish, I guess, but—

Maybe the hypothetical isn't serving me here.

Anyway!

Early on with Guild Tempus, there was a lot of fighting between the Cultare and the Axelotls and the Vesties and the Magmites. It was just little stuff that built up, ya know? Maybe one of them stole something from



@softcartilage @adiostama



the others or one of us was having an argument and they started fighting with each other about it. That kind of thing.

But when you can't even hunt down corruption beasts without having an Axelotl and a Magmite getting into a slapfight and alerting everything in the area, it's kind of a problem.

There are a lot of solutions you could try for that sort of thing, but the one that worked for us was putting all of them in a great, big, get-along sweater. Or less a sweater, I guess, and more...two bedsheets sewn together in more of a great big get-along bag—but regardless!

So after we put them in the get-along sweater-slash-bag, we hung it up from a tree and they had to bond and work together to get out of it—which was a lot of grumpy little creature sounds and definitely some biting going on in there at first, but after they tired themselves out and couldn't figure it out on their own, they realized they had to work together. And after they started working together, they got out of there in no time!

...Actually, they tried to work together for about 30 minutes and couldn't figure it out so we had to help them out a little. But we haven't had any problems with them fighting like that ever since, and that's the important part!

A Stranger

MischarARMISzation

I have been hearing a lot of...*interesting* speculations, you see, about the characters of ARMIS. I have to tell you: some of them are borderline ridiculous, and once we delve in the story, you will know why.

Let us start with their..."leader," Jurard T. Rexford.

Yes, the hesitancy is intentional. Normally, a leader of a pack is the most trusted individual to guide a group. As they are the one keeping everything together, the adjectives people would use to describe them are responsible, strong, convincing, and many others.

In the case of Jurard, however, many argue against the title for him as he's...one of, if not the most, daredevil member of the unit. His reputation has been built upon endlessly burrowing himself in debt. I believe there is no resident loanshark of the Badlands that he hasn't become indebted to.

If you ask me, however, there is a valid reason behind those debts.

He has been the one to build the dinosaur-themed bar, as well as other recreational venues within the Badlands. When asked, his motivation is always to give back to ARMIS and his devoted Sorawrity.

Next is his childhood friend, Octavio, who is equally—if not more—eccentric.

Every time he pays a visit to the tavern, he picks a very specific seat and orders the same exact drink. I've also heard a lot about him lashing out at *everyone* for bizarre reasons. For example, Octavio issued a declaration of war to his comrade, Goldbullet, for refusing his cooking. To be fair, that food was also questionable. I mean, if I am served a combination of kale, spinach, cow's tongue and Corruption Beast bones, I would *not* jump towards giving one the benefit of doubt.

Speaking of Goldbullet, I am surprised to hear the rumours that he refuses food! Isn't he one of The Badlands' big eaters? I have seen him eat a huge tower of tropical fruits, three giant bowls of meatballs... I have seen him eating practically *every single feast* that I know to exist in the Badlands.

Some people speculate he is getting sick of them. Others argue he may want to try new things. If you ask me? ...I have no idea. Just like how people portray Crimzon Ruze.

Ah, yes, Ruze.

I could *not* believe—and I also have absolutely no clue—on how people think he is the brightest of the group.

By brightest person, I mean the person who will greet everyone, say hi, smile widely at them, and give motivational quotes of the day! He would wake up before the sun rises, cook for the entire village, and dance happily like a happy-go-lucky guy. I do not recall him being such an extroverted being; all I know is that he's always in a grumpy mood and hates everybody–affectionately. Perhaps he won a jackpot? Or he has finally found a partner? Something else? In any case, I am happy to see him happy! This is probably the best mischaracterization I've heard.



A Stranger

Tea K.O.

So, indulge me if you've heard this before. I have this story from a friend of a friend. This happened in a peaceful town not far from here.

In this town, there is a diner serving a special type of calming tea brew that induces relaxation–good for those who do a lot of physical work, such as monster hunting and the like. Now, this brew is harmless to most people, but if you're–let's say an 'extraordinary' type of being–then this brew can induce some very interesting reactions.

'Like what' you ask? I've heard stories of sleepiness, maybe even a split of personalities.

Ruze, you're looking a little pale–are you feeling okay? Should I continue my story?

Alright.

Again, this brew's side effects are mild enough that the local authority saw no problem in allowing it to be served.

You noticed the past tense? Yes, they recently had to renege on that because a customer with cookies and cream hair caused such a stir after ordering it. He fell fast asleep after downing the whole pot at once. This happens often enough, but then this person started awake, seemingly with a whole different persona! I know it sounds unbelievable, but my source seemed convinced.

This 'persona', let's call him 'Verdant', proceeded to order every item on the menu after waking up. You wouldn't believe the trouble the diner went through in order to find enough cups to hold everything. It'd be alright if that was the end of it, but I think one of the brews on the menu induced another persona split. Either that or people were experiencing some mass hallucinations, because everyone who was there at the time swore on the Hollow Tree that there were six of these cookies and cream-haired men in the diner at once.

You seem to be sweating, Ruze–are you certain you're doing fine?

Well, if you're sure.

Where was I? Right, Verdant was drinking every tea on the menu and behind him there was a pink colored one making himself cozy with another regular, apparently trying to read their fortunes or fish for information about the local government. My source seemed unsure since their memory of that one was very fuzzy for some reason.

They remembered two others quite well though! There was a yellow guy, 'Citrine', disturbing the local Wizard of the Roasts meet-up, and unfortunately, he made them cry with his too logical roasts of their magic systems.

Why are you looking satisfied, Ruze?

It had better be 'nothing'; the wizards' feelings were severely hurt, you know.

And a blue one, let's assign him 'Azure'– What is it, what's that face for?

You smelled something trashy? Maybe it's the local dumpster site...at any rate, this one was seen going

after seemingly single people in the diner. 'Seemingly' because there were very vocal and almost violent complaints about the unwelcomed propositioning from their partners. Good thing the staff there were able to step in before punches were thrown.

What about the other blue guy? How did you know about– Well, whatever. Turquoise was just off in the corner sneaking snacks to the customers' pets in their carriers and on their leashes. The staff didn't say anything bad about him at all, really; they were the ones who snuck him those treats.

Forget about that one. There was another significant complaint for a larger-than-life man in a winged costume that crashed the weekly Dungeons & Demons session. He was heard calling himself 'Obsidian'. He didn't do much damage–if we don't count strolling over to the DM's chair and placing himself in charge while the DM went to the washroom. At first the players humored him, but then he started god-modding the monsters and somehow the dice kept favoring him. Those poor players.

Am I missing one color? I told you about all six of them though?

An orange one? Oh, you must mean the one the authorities took to the detention cell. Yeah, he was found passed out at the table with the remnants of Verdant's cups. Since each of the other 'colors' escaped the diner somehow before they were able to answer for their messes, and he was the only one left who seemed to have something to do with them, he got roped into answering questions for the guards and paying the bills. He seemed fine with it, even if he seemed a little confused.

You're facepalming, but did you like my tale?



@susu4246 @_mmilksop

A Stranger

Old Wives Tales

You know about Ol' Sly, don't you?

'course you do. Everyone in the Badlands does.

No, the real question is *what* you know about Ol' Sly, 'cause there's more stories about it than time to hear them. Stories about Ol' Sly slipping inside homes in the form of a jackal and switching infants just because it can, stories about Ol' Sly wooing princes and princesses and making a fool of their courts in the process, stories about it scrambling up the moon to escape a pack of dogs, its claws scratching free all the stars in the sky.

This one's about how Ol' Sly made the Badlands into the Badlands.

'cause the Badlands weren't always bad. It used to be lush as anything, all sylvan rivers and ancient forests filled to the brim with songbirds and fisher cats and what have you. And Ol' Sly was there with the rest of them—the woodland critters and the spirits and the things we don't speak on, not even now that the forests they used to hide in are all dead and buried in sand.

Ol' Sly was there and, 'cause it's its way, Ol' Sly stirred up some trouble.

Now, the shadows have always been a friend of Ol' Sly and, more importantly, they've always been sweet on the sun. And maybe the sun felt the same way, except the shadows were too shy to outright say anything. So one day when Ol' Sly was lounging in the shade, fresh off some bit of mischief, and got an idea while the shadows were sighing over the sun.

Ol' Sly wasn't as close to the sun as it was to the shadows but Ol' Sly is a friend to everyone, just as much as it was a nuisance. So it says to the shadows: "Not long ago, Sister Sun promised me a favor for settling a fight between her and Brother Moon. Why don't I use it to set the two of you up on a date?"

And the shadows refused, all in a fluster, but the shadows are of so many minds that it didn't take Ol' Sly long to talk them into it.

So the next day, Ol' Sly went to the sun and asked her about repaying that favor by attending a dinner it was holding. And Sister Sun knew Ol' Sly was always up to something but she also knew, however wily it was, its heart was in the right place. So she agreed.

It was Ol' Sly and Sister Sun and the shadows and a few other folks at the dinner, and Ol' Sly made sure the sun and shadows were seated right next to each other. There was wine like you wouldn't believe, too, and after a while Ol' Sly sorta forgot it was matchmaking.

@softcartilage @sadihx



So Ol' Sly challenged Sister Sun and the shadows to a drinking contest. The shadows won, of course, 'cause the shadows have a million mouths and a million bellies but Ol' Sly can hold its own. Sister Sun, though?

Sister Sun got so drunk that she passed out, right there in the sky, and couldn't no one move her. All the while she was sleeping, the day never passed into night and her bright, drunken brilliance withered all those sylvan rivers and ancient forests until it was just dry earth and hot sand. If it weren't for the shadows giving all the poor creatures on earth a bit of shade to cool themselves in, nothing would've survived.

By the time Sister Sun slept it off, the Badlands was the Badlands. And embarrassed as she was, she was thankful, too, of what the shadows did to protect the little creatures of the world. And so she ended up just as sweet on the shadows as the shadows were on her, though what happened after is a different story to tell.

A Stranger

The Legend of the Ghost Stampede

There was once a group of Ruzaders who went on an adventure into the sands of the Badlands. They wanted to go on a retreat away from the place they now lived with Ruze and adventure back to their homeland.

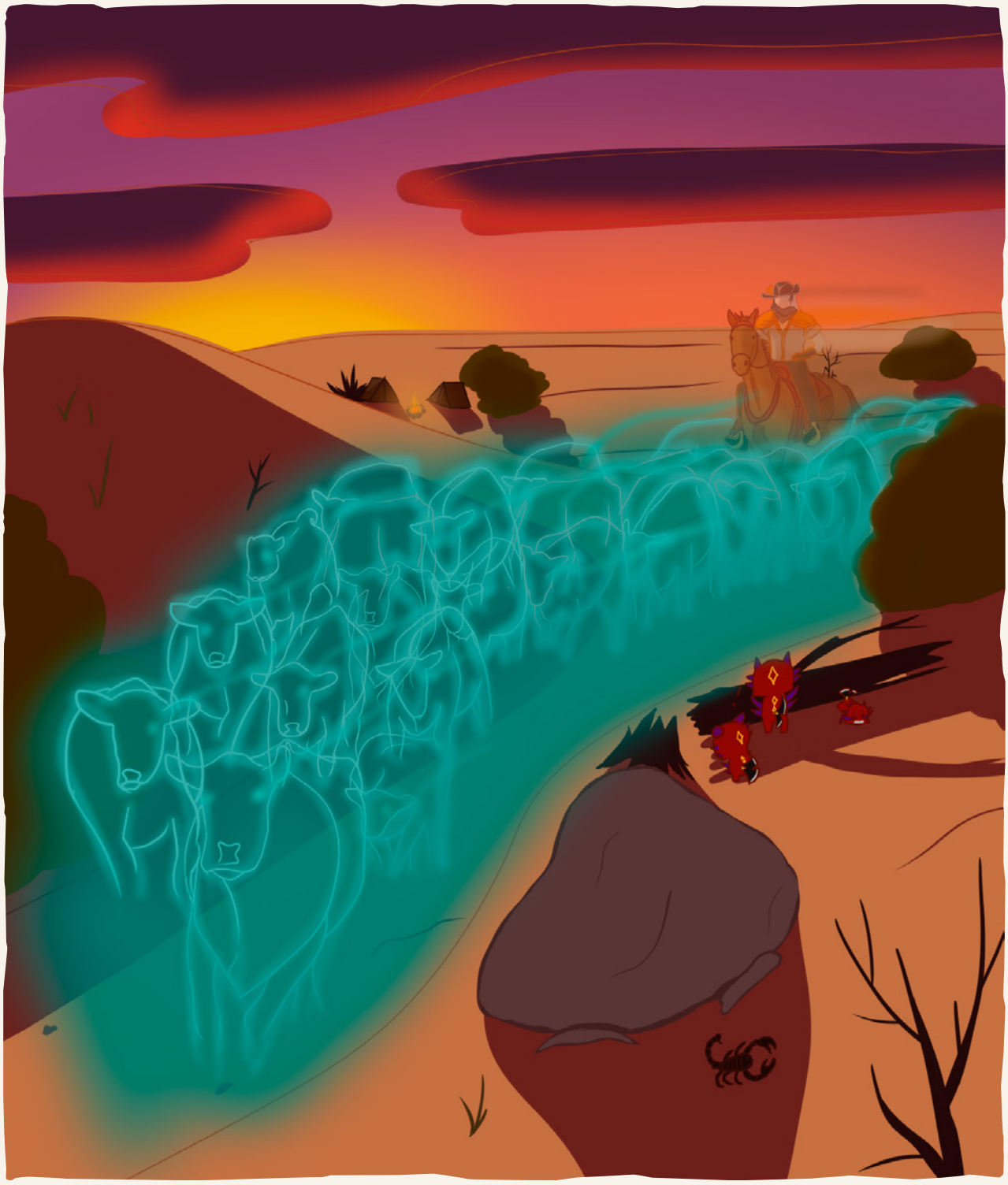
Having decided to travel, they gathered together everything they would need for the adventure before them. They brought along lots of camping supplies to set up a spot to sleep and eat. They had a tent to sleep in and a fire to keep warm around like the one we are facing now. They brought the finest of gems: emeralds, rubies, and–of course–cinnabar.

The morning after arriving at their destination, the Ruzaders decided to go on a hike through the desert. Their journey was long and meandering, aiming to see the sights they could only see while away from home. They became so caught up in their sightseeing that they lost track of time; night fell before they realized they should head back to their camp. Traveling in the dark, the Ruzaders accidentally stumbled upon a terrifying creature.

It didn't take long for them to realize it was a Corruption Beast. It was an enormous, black mass that somewhat resembled a wild bull. It had long, sharp horns, a broad body, and glowing red eyes. (The Ruzaders made it a point to describe the eyes as *scary*.) Remembering they were facing a monster without their safety net of a bounty hunter to protect them, they opted to run for their lives. As they cowered out of sight, not wanting to be caught by the Beast, they heard strange noises in the distance. The Beast stopped to listen before leaving the area.

Seeing the Beast had left, they carefully ventured out to find their way back to camp. However, instead of their tent and firepit, they saw the source of all the noise: a stampede of glowing, see-through cattle, led by a cowboy in orange, racing through the desert. Getting closer to the herd to see the mesmerizing sight, they realized it was a ghost of a memory–and the cattle were being led by someone they knew! Before the Ruzaders was Vermillion, one of the voices they knew from their very own Ruze. Someone or something out there had sent a memory of their Ruze to protect them despite being alone and far from home. They stayed out of his way until the cattle had passed before finally making their way back to their camp. All throughout the night, they could hear the sounds of distant hoofbeats, but remained safe inside their tent and out of sight.

It's said that you can still hear the stampede on some nights in the darkness, and if you're lucky, even encounter the image of a familiar cowboy. Listen close if you catch a glimpse of the stampede, and you may hear the gravelly voice of a cowboy rustling the cows on the breeze.



Visual Novel




Sprites

Ruze

@indy_himura









Octavio

@tofubunnycat







GoldBullet

@Maccchia



Jurard

@dalurenne












Shinri
@kyvwings

Hakka

@HavingMercy.bsky.social









Flayon

@babybatmochi



Bettel

@kopi_art1







Axel

@AstralisArts




Altare
@freshoutdawater

A Stranger

@sylveonne




Dialogues

Ruze

@nitroorugrat

Opening with campfire
The duet of bug song and a crackling campfire are the only companions to Crimzon Ruze's early evening at this campsite somewhere in the Badlands.

Enter Ruze
"At least this campsite was exactly where the bounty said it would be, now if only the rest of this goes just as simply." Ruze grumbled, settling himself onto the log before the fire.

The mysterious bounty had instructed him here and told him to expect visitors, however, the sound of someone approaching still startled him. His hands twitched to grab where he'd laid out Zephyr but he decides he'll give them the chance to show themselves, "Who's there?"

"This better not be a trap..."

A figure steps into the light and Ruze sees...

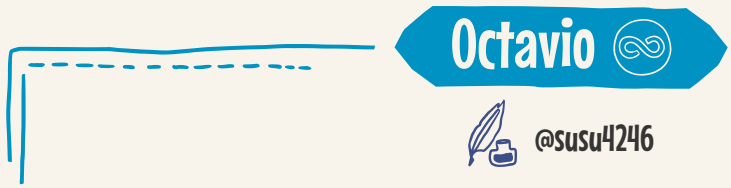
End
As quiet settles around Ruze again he leans back to observe the stars. He takes a deep breath and rises so he can finally turn in for the night when–

Mrrrr!

"Wha– hey! I know that's you Ruzaders!" Ruze sighs, looking towards the source of the sound to catch the glimpses of axetails scurrying away. He thinks that's the direction his companion just left towards and knowing if the Ruzader's cause some issue he'll never hear the end of it...he reluctantly follows.

Fade to black
.....
(All) "HAPPY BIRTHDAY CRIMZON RUZE!!"

It seems his mysterious bounty had been the members of Tempus, Armis, and all the Ruzaders working hard to prepare a surprise party for him!



The campfire burns bright against a backdrop of endless stars and velvet night. Ruze hopes Octavio will come back from his foraging soon to keep it that way. Where in Elysium did his fellow bounty hunter run off to, he wonders idly as he pokes the dying embers. He's not worried for him. Not yet.

A crash in the underbrush in the distance makes Ruze roll his eyes. One thing you can say about Octavio: he's got the natural grace to pull off anything on stage, be it singing, dancing, or puppeteering; and a sheltered ungainliness in the wilds to make you wonder how he'd survived in the Badlands for so long.

Octavio: RUuuuuuZEEee, is that you?

Ruze: Keep going straight, you'll run into me soon. Or run over me, with the way you're hurrying. Try not to trip on those strings of yours.

Octavio: There you are. I got wood, water, and nothing else. Dry rations for dinner again tonight.

Ruze nods and puts away the kindling. The water goes in the pot, the pot on the fire to boil. You can't be too careful out in the wilderness.

Ruze: Thanks for trying, I'll brew us something. Now sit down and stop looming.

Octavio: Loom? Me? I'd never do something so sinister.

Octavio sits down carefully, spreading his overcoat near the fire to dry. The river was cold but he did get the water without too much mishap. Ruze doesn't need to know he almost lost the bucket.

A poppet peeks out of Octavio's coat pocket, quietly chittering at his Maestro. Octavio glances at the little familiar and asks:

Octavio: What is it, Poppet?

A few moments pass and he chuckles, presumably in reaction to something from their connected strings.

Ruze: What is it? I'm feeling a little bit left out.

Octavio: Aw, don't sulk Ruze. Poppet was telling me their song request. Well, more like a bedtime story.

The maestro's hand pats the pocket gently as his signature baton appears suddenly in his other hand.

Octavio: I'm always happy to have an audience.

Ruze: Do I get a say in any of this? Oh never mind, show me what you've got.

Octavio: What would you like to hear?

Story end
Ruze: That was surprisingly good, but don't tell me that's all you have. Got any more?

Farewell
Ruze applauds quietly as to not wake the sleeping poppet breathing softly in Octavio's pocket.

Octavio: Thank you, thank you. Now how about that brew as payment?

Ruze: Shoot, I forgot to leave some for you. Uh, mind getting some more water?

Octavio: ...fine. I'll be back soon. Why am I the one to always go?

Octavio grumbles but rises without further protest. The night is gentle with nature's music. Maybe he'll come across new inspiration for his next song on this walk through the dark.





The sound of crackling fire and smell of burning wood permeate the air. Ruze looks up at the blanket of glittering stars that cast a watchful eye over him. He lets out a deep sigh. He's alone, save for the cheerful chirping crickets and the fireflies that buzzed around. Oh, and Zephyr resting right next to him.

The comforting atmosphere of the evening is interrupted by the low approaching rumble of an engine. Ruze looks towards the direction of the sound, as an all-too-familiar camper van swims into view and stops just by the start of the forest trail. Rifle in tow and silver eagle pin glistening under the pale moonlight, the head sniper of ARMIS walks up and takes a seat right opposite Ruze, shooting his teammate a warm smile.

Goldbullet: Hey Ruze, mind if I join you?

Ruze: Knock yourself out. How d'you find me anyway?

Goldbullet: Heard you might be here from a certain puppetmaster. Why's it look like you're just sitting around here moping?

Ruze: Tch, next time I see Octavio I'm sewin' his big mouth shut. I'm not moping, I'm pondering. Contemplating. Ruminating. There's a distinct lexical difference.

Goldbullet: Sure, sure, if you say so. You hungry? Whipped up a stew from the leftover veggies we had. Jurard tried to help, but I think he ended up inventing a new way of creating charcoal and a way of speeding up a vegetable's aging.

Ruze: As expected from our glorious leader. Thanks but I'm go-

As if by the command of some divine being of comedic timing, Ruze's stomach lets out a loud, rumbling growl. The monster hunter shrinks slightly into his crimson coat, brows furrowing and lips pulling down into a frown. The sniper laughs, procuring a steel tin from one of his belt pouches.

Ruze: Yeah yeah laugh it up. Hand it over.

Goldbullet: While you're stuffing yourself silly, fancy a story?

Ruze: Gonna regale me about how much we royally screwed up that mission?

Goldbullet: Nope, I think what your grumpy mopey self needs right now is a good ol' campfire story. What's a campfire without some good company and tall tales?

Ruze: Good company is debatable, but sure, be my guest. I'm all ears.

Goldbullet: Now which one should I tell you? Decisions, decisions...

Story end
Ruze: Well that was interesting. Campfire's still goin' strong so...got any more where that came from?

Farewell
Ruze: Thanks for the distraction and the grub, Goldie. I'm gonna stay here a little while longer.

Goldbullet: Well don't take too long, okay? I'll see you soon. Oh! Before I forget, make sure to clear your schedule for later this week.

Ruze: What, Jurard find another dogwater peanut-paying job from some penny-pinching schmuck?

Goldbullet: Nope! You're coming with me to the market, buddy. Need a pair of strong arms to carry all the groceries. Consider it payment for the stories.

Ruze: Manual labour as your personal gofer in exchange for entertainment.

Goldbullet: Fair trade, isn't it? You can even help me prep the ingredients for dinner too.

Ruze: Sounds fair and absolutely not exploitative.

Goldbullet: You're the only one besides me who won't burn down the tavern trying to boil water.

The sniper and monster hunter share a laugh, as the campfire's flame crackled on, steady and warm.





Another branch is fed to the campfire. It flares to life in a chaotic tangling of flames, crackling loudly until the fire settles back into itself. The occasional pop or crack sounds, flames leaping, but for the most part it is steady and cheerful as it offers its warmth.

One sharp crack coincides with the snap of a twig beneath someone's foot as they approach the campfire. Even before they enter the halo of light offered by the fire, Ruze recognizes the footsteps. Maybe the fire does, too, because there's another brief flare into chaos, flames jumping higher than before, that starts to calm again once Jurard waves at Ruze.

Or maybe that's just Ruze's imagination. Applying a little extra whimsy to the already fairytale-esque night.

Ruze: Heya, Jurard. Wasn't expecting to see you out here.

Jurard makes an offended noise, but doesn't refuse when Ruze gestures at the log opposite him around the fire.

He takes a seat and the two fall into some good-natured bickering.

Jurard: What's that supposed to mean? Didn't you already have a bunch of people come and–

Ruze: It wasn't a bunch–

Jurard: –because Gibby said you were telling stories around the campfire and that–

Ruze: –and Gibby can keep his damned mouth shut about it because it wasn't a bunch–

Jurard: –and if it's fine for Altare to do it than it should be fine for me too–

Ruze: –if you wanna tell a story then just tell a damn story!

A pause. Then:

Jurard: Uh... then... what story do you want to hear?

Story end
Ruze: Huh.... interesting. Got anymore?

Farewell
Ruze: ...So that was the story you wanted to tell? Really?

Jurard: Hey! It was a good story!

Ruze laughs.

Ruze: Yeah, yeah, it was a pretty good story I guess. Shame about the storyteller, I guess, but–

Jurard: The storyteller was the best part! Don't be like that, Ruze. After I came all the way out here to spend time together and sit by a campfire and everything?

Ruze: Yeah, yeah. I'm just kidding, Jurard. Thanks for the story. Feel free to hang out for a little while, enjoy the fire.



Shinri

@Daysof_Euphoria

On a warm-ish evening, where sleep evades even a seasoned hunter, the resident ronin of guild Tempus stumbles upon a campsite. Or well, at least, a campfire. Tending to the flames, a figure is sitting next to it and as Shinri keeps on advancing, he realises that this is someone he's quite familiar with.

Nearing the campsite further, he's not surprised to see the man's body language tense, sensing his approach.

Shinri: "Hey Ruze, it's been a while." Shinri calls as he slows down, announcing himself.

Ruze: "Shinri? What are you doing here?" The crimson hunter asks as he turns to look at the ronin over his shoulder.

Shinri: "Hmm.. Patrolling?" Shinri answers, a half truth. Ruze seems to catch his white lie, but doesn't comment on it.

Ruze: "You need a break? There's another seat" Ruze invites him, pointing at a second stump.

Shinri considers the offer for half a moment before silently joining and taking place.

Shinri: "So, what brings you out here?" Shinri asks.

Ruze: "Bounty hunting"

Shinri: "Alone?"

Ruze: "Hey, sometimes a guy needs a break"

A low chuckle escapes Shinri before he can catch himself. He can understand the bounty hunter on that point.

Shinri: “So, sleeping under the stars?”

Ruze: “Probably not much sleeping.. but yeah.”

Shinri: “Oh?”

Ruze: “I need to stay awake, bounty obliges”

Shinri: “Hmm..” Shinri hums pensively. “Well, if you would like some company.. How about we share a few stories? The campfire and the stars provide a great mood.”

Ruze: “... Sure, why not. What kind of story do we want to hear?”

Story end
As the night goes on and stories are shared, the ronin’s eyes grow heavier.

Shinri: “Well, those were interesting tales, but I think I’ll have to call it a night.” Shinri says as he gets up and stretches.

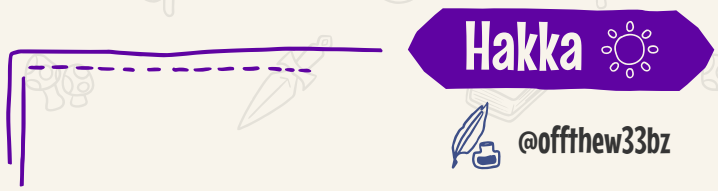
Ruze lets out an amused huff..

Ruze: “Yeah yeah, go to bed old man.”

Shinri shakes his head, smiling. As he walks away, he throws a final

Shinri: “Good night, Ruze.” as parting words.

Ruze: “Yeah.. G’night Shinri.”



His eyes glaze over the fire burning brightly over him, taking note of the different hues and colors cycling; Red, Orange, White, Blue, Purple. The last color peaked his Interest as Hakka looms over him, smiling and giggling at his response

Hakka: Hey dude, what's up?

Ruze: !! What the fuck Hakka, don't just quietly walk up on people like that

Hakka: Well, pay attention then dummy you're out here by yourself.

Ruze: Oh whatever, anyways, How are you? How've you been?

Hakka: I'm good! Just got back from a crazy adventure, as usual. Where's everyone else?

Ruze: Idk dude everyone's just chillin out, I just decided to do my own thing for now

Hakka: Huh. Well, if you want/need some company, I have plenty of time now.

Ruze: Actually I don't-

Hakka: Great! You're so nice to me for letting me stay, Ruze

Hakka takes a seat next to him as the Monster hunter shoots an annoyed glance, sighing dramatically

Ruze: ... Yep.

Ruze: Anyways, are you gonna tell me about it or?

Hakka: Yeah I gotchu dude, how about I tell you some recent stories first?

Ruze: Uhh, thanks for the story Hakka but, Is that all?

Hakka: Nope! I got plenty more under my wing

Story end
Hakka: Ahh, man I gotta start heading out

Ruze: Already? You just got here

Hakka: Time waits for no one, and my hakkitos need me and have needed me for quite some time. Sooooo, see ya!

Ruze: Alright man, catch ya later.





A cool night breeze ruffles Ruze's hair, carrying with it the calls of insects and nocturnal birds. The campfire burns steadily, warm reds and oranges dancing together at the center of the fire pit, and as hypnotizing as they are to watch, Ruze turns his gaze upwards to the stars instead.

He watches them for a while, tracing along the lines of constellations in his mind, and is watching at precisely the right time to see a flash of light overhead. If it wasn't so familiar, Ruze might've mistaken it for a shooting star.

But it is familiar, so Ruze isn't surprised when, ten or so minutes later, Flayon bounces out of the darkness.

Flayon: Hi, Ruze! What're you doing all the way out here?

Flayon doesn't wait to be invited to take a seat, plopping down on the log opposite Ruze. Wrapping his arms around himself, he shivers and closes his eyes as he leans towards the warmth of the fire.

Ruze: Could ask you the same.

Ruze snorts, then actually answers:

Ruze: Just enjoying a peaceful night. Thought it'd be nice and if someone wandered up we could do the whole campfire stories thing.

Flayon: Oh?

Flayon's eyes open, looking excited by the prospect.

Flayon: And you weren't going to tell me? That's so mean of you, Ruze. If I hadn't spotted you from the R-TRUS, I wouldn't have even known to drop by.

Ruze: Yeah, yeah. Look, it wasn't like a planned event or anything. Just seemed like a nice night for a fire. You got a story you wanna tell or...?

Flayon: Depends. What kinda story do you want to hear?

Story end
Flayon: Do you wanna hear another one?

Farewell
Flayon: Soooo... what'd you think?

Ruze: Pretty good story, thank you. I appreciate it, gamer. You wanna stick around for a while, enjoy the fire?

Flayon hesitates before pouting.

Flayon: Teeeechnically I'm supposed to be working right now so I should probably get back to that. So I guess I should get going.

Flayon rises back to his feet, stretching out like a cat that's just got done sunbathing. Which isn't that far off, really.

Flayon: But thanks for the offer! It was nice to hang out, Ruze!

Ruze: Yeah, yeah. Same to you. I'll catch you later.



Bettel

@mogfrogs

Bettel approached the campfire, seeking the warmth but also the company it promised.

He smiled shyly at Ruze as he sat down.

Bettel: “Mind if I hang out for a bit?”

Ruze: “Sure, make yourself comfortable. Is this the time you finally let me explain to you why Houselocked is the best isekai ever?”

Bettel: “Haha.. uhm..not sure about that right now. I just felt a bit chilly and the fire looked cozy. But let's pick up on Wardagger 50k soon?”

Ruze: “Heh, yeah we should play the new videogame some time.”

Bettel:“For now, how about I offer some entertainment?”

Ruze: “I swear to God, Bettel, don't start juggling in front of the fire. I'm not gonna pull ya out.”

Bettel: “Oh, no no! I was more thinking of some stories. I've had quite some fun... experiences!”

Ruze: “Pff, I was just joking. But yeah, man. I'm all ears.”

Bettel: “Alright, which of my misadventures would you wanna hear about?”

Story end
As the story came to an end, Bettel gestured a little bow.

Ruze: “That was crazy. But also extremely entertaining. Thanks, Betsy.”

Bettel: “Thanks for listening, Ruze. I'm getting sleepy now, so I'll take my leave. Tell me all about this ‘Houselocked’ comic you geek out so much over next time we're gaming, yeah?”

Ruze: “Better be ready for a 5 hour lecture!”

Bettel laughed as he got up, nodding ever so slightly. What had he just agreed to?

He gave Ruze a little wave before he turned on his heels and walked off into the night, now warm and happy.





A tall man approaches the campfire, striking an imposing figure in the dim light, face obscured by shadow. He wears a jacket with its collar raised to brace against the chilly evening air, and a braid hanging on the left of his face sways as he walks with a confident swagger. If Ruze didn't immediately recognize the figure's silhouette, he might have reached for Zephyr, but he knows this man well - it's Axel Syrios, resident gladiator of Guild Tempus. And head of Human Resources, Ruze chuckles to himself. Before he can consider the man's qualifications for the position, Axel reaches the campfire and greets him heartily.

Axel: Crimzon Ruze. Fancy seein' you out here, hey?

Ruze: Hey Axel, long time no see. Marshmallow?

Ruze holds out a bag and gestures at some long sticks nearby.

Axel: Don't mind if I do! Thanks, man.

Ruze: No problem. It's been a long day, take a load off. I've been out here a while, so the fire's good and hot.

Axel: A while, huh...what brings you out here tonight, anyway? You look like ya got somethin' on your mind, you know?

Ruze: I guess? I'unno. Just thinkin' about all missions I've been on, all the bounties I've collected. These past couple years have been crazy, and I guess I just wanted to take a little time to think back on things. Maybe roast a marshmallow or two while I'm at it.

Axel: Yeah I hear you. It's dangerous work out there. Good thing you're Elysium's greatest monster hunter, right?

Ruze: I mean yeah, 'course I am! But you're right, it is dangerous, and it ain't easy. I've seen a lot out there in the Badlands. Maybe more than one person should ever have to see.

Axel: You mean the corruption beasts? Real nasty fellows. Yo, it's a good thing you've got ARMIS though, hey? Nice to have them backing you up in case things go south.

Ruze: Yeah, and the corruption is getting worse by the day. Sometimes it feels like we're barely holding it back. But...you're right about ARMIS. Don't you dare

tell them I said this, but I guess they're pretty alright. It's a good thing they've got me to lead them, though, or they'd be totally lost.

Axel: Wait, I thought Jurard was the leader of the ARMIS unit?

Ruze: Maybe on paper.

The two men laugh, then Ruze lets out a sigh.

Ruze: I've come a long way. We all have, me and the boys. It's been a tough road, but...it ain't all bad. Definitely got some stories I could tell, but honestly, you've probably heard half of 'em. Hell, you were there for some of 'em!

Axel: That's true, that's true! But you know, I've got a story or two of my own, hey? Things you weren't there for. I could tell ya some, if you want.

Ruze: Ah yes, more of your tall tales. If it's about some girl you met at the tavern, I don't think I wanna know.

Axel: HEY! I'm not talking about a girl, alright? And they're not tall tales either, this shit actually happened!

Ruze: Alright, alright, got it. Totally real stories. What'cha got for me?

Axel: Hmm, which one should I tell you...

Story end
Axel: So, whaddaya think? I'm pretty cool, right?

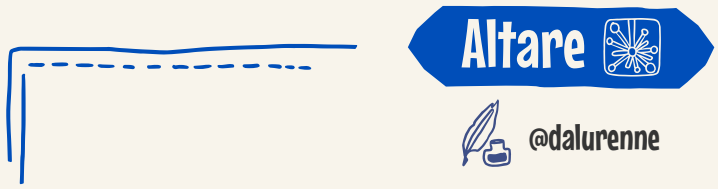
Ruze: I mean, you've definitely got some anime protagonist vibes, I'll give you that.

Axel: You know what? I'll take it. Thanks for the marshmallows, by the way. They are making me a little hungry, though. Thinkin' about going out for hotpot, if you wanna come.

Ruze: Hey, anytime, thanks for hangin' out. I'll take a rain check on the hotpot, though. Think I'll stay out here a while longer.

Axel: No problem man, no problem. I'll see you around, hey?

Ruze: Catch you later!



The crackle of the fire is warm, comforting, and a distraction from the dangers beyond the circle of light.

A chill wind stirs the flames and a burning log shifts, settling with a pop that makes Ruze's hand twitch for Zephyr.

The shadows deepen and shift for a moment, and a red flicker makes him stiffen in alarm. But he relaxes slightly when he sees the familiar figure of Guild TEMPUS's leader.

As he draws closer though, the sense of familiarity is replaced with an unsettling chill.

Instead of blue armor he sees a crimson glow, and once-friendly green eyes are dark with malice as they settle on Ruze and his little campfire.

Altare blinks and waves at him with a grin, and the menacing image falls away like a sudden awakening from a dream.

Had it simply been a reflection of the flickering flames?

Ruze shakes off the odd feeling and gives a reluctant wave back.

Ruze: "'Sup? Out on another 3am walk?"

Altare: "How about you? Enjoying some R&R?"

Ruze: "Well I *was.*"

Altare simply laughs, unfazed by the implication.

Altare: "Mind if I join you for a bit?"

Ruze bites back a sigh. His "remote" campsite was more crowded than he hoped. Just one person other than himself was already one too many, in his opinion.

But since Altare was here, he might as well make the most of it.

Ruze: "Sure thing."

Altare takes a seat without any hesitation.

Altare: "Thanks! It was getting kind of chilly, so the fire's nice."

Ruze: "So what are you doing all the way out here? Seems a little out of the way for the mighty leader of guild Tempus."

It hadn't slipped Ruze's attention that Altare hadn't exactly answered him before.

Altare looked around at the dark woods.

Altare: "Is it? We have a lot of quests that take us to all sorts of places, so this is pretty normal for us, I think."

He gives Ruze a casual grin.

Altare: "If you want some alone time away from the boys, I think you're going to have to head out a little bit further."

Ruze simply grunts in agreement.

Altare: "Still, thanks for sharing the fire. Seeing a familiar face was a welcome surprise!"

Ruze: "Don't think it comes free."

Altare:: "Should I share a small story as payment, then? It would be a nice way to pass the time, and I have a couple up my sleeve that I think you'd find interesting."

Ruze settles back into his seat.

Ruze: "I guess that would be an acceptable payment."

Altare: "OK! Which story do you wanna hear about?"

Story end
Ruze: "That was certainly a story."

Altare: "Right? Want another? Got plenty more where that came from!"

Farewell
Ruze: "I'd say that was pretty good payment for sharing the fire."

Altare: "Nice!"

Altare: "In which case, it's getting late so I should head out."

Altare rises to his feet, brushes off his clothes, and heads back into the trees.

Ruze: "Good luck with your hunt."

Altare simply laughs in response.

Altare: "From the stories I've heard, you need the luck more than I do! You should keep it for yourself! Besides, I already got something pretty useful tonight."

What was *that* supposed to mean?

Before Ruze can ask, Altare is already walking away, figure disappearing into the trees.

As Ruze watches the man's receding back, he could have sworn that he saw a glint of red again.

It was only then that Ruze suddenly realized: despite his keen hearing, he had heard no footsteps at all from Altare.



A Stranger



@susu4246

The forest is deep, dark, and strangely muted. The sleeping sounds of unseen bugs and beasts seem faraway as though underwater. A traveler walks carefully through the underbrush, their silhouette and set of shoulders giving off an air of distress.

A Stranger: Oh. This isn't good. I've seen this landmark before. Looks like I've been walking in circles all this time.

I should have listened when they told me this place was a labyrinth. Now what should I do...

They turn and pause mid-stride, a different source of light from the setting sun filtering through the dense foliage catching their eyes.

A Stranger: Huh, what's that glow? Someone's campsite maybe? I think I'd rather risk getting robbed instead of freezing to death standing up. Hopefully the camp's owner is friendly.

The traveler approaches slowly, palms out, hands empty to show their harmless intentions. Behind the friendly dancing fire sits an intimidating figure in a big red coat, a larger than life axe resting easily on his shoulder. The gems of the weapon seem to wink at them, throwing off unnatural sparks divorced from the blaze, looking almost ready to jump out of the man's arm at any moment. He shifts into a wary stance as the traveler ventures closer.

Ruze: Who goes there? Identify yourself before I axe you again.

A Stranger: Just a traveler looking for shelter and a place to rest their weary legs. Incredible wordplay by the way, I give you minus two points.

Ruze: Monsters around here are never that generous with their score so you must be a human. Well met, traveler.

A Stranger: Hello stranger, I'm glad to meet a friendly face after traipsing around lost all day.

Ruze: Come and sit before you keel over then. My charity is as wide as the ocean but not deep enough to attend a sickbed.

The traveler carefully takes a seat, making no sudden moves. They have a feeling of being watched twice over, even though there's only one figure nonchalantly sitting there.

A Stranger: Thanks for the offer. May I ask your name? I would offer mine...but I have taken a vow you see.

Ruze: I don't 'see' but that's alright. You seem harmless enough with that vacant look under the not-suspicious-at-all anonymous hood. Call me 'Ruze'.

A Stranger: 'Ruze'...a good name to give a passing stranger.

Ruze: Isn't it? Have you taken a vow of mystery along with anonymity, or can I ask what you're doing here in these parts?

A Stranger: I'm afraid my business is my own.

There's a sudden pause in the conversation, but oddly not an uncomfortable one. The silence stretches with preoccupied minds, both weighing the other's demeanor. Still, there comes a point where someone needs to break the monotony and it might as well be the guest.

A Stranger: Instead of my personal story, would you like to hear a tale to pass the long night? I have traveled to many places and experienced a great many wondrous things. You seem a worldly man but I dare say some twists and turns may surprise even you.

Ruze raises an eyebrow but makes no comment on the boasts. Instead, he nods in challenge.

Ruze: Sure, let's hear what you got.

A Stranger: What would you like to hear?

Story end

Ruze: That was interesting but the night's still young, do you have any more acts in your repertoire?

Farewell

Ruze: Thanks for the tale. Night's getting on and the fire needs tending but something tells me you're not going to be here to see the embers dwindle.

The traveler shifts in their seat and glances surreptitiously at the axe by Ruze's side. The gem in the center seems to waver in their sight and suddenly they have the urge to be anywhere but here at the warm fireside, talking to this bounty they have stumbled upon with sheer blind luck.

A Stranger: You're right, the moon has risen enough and I can see which way I should go from here. I can't delay my task any longer. Thank you for sharing your fire with me.

Ruze: Try not to trip and we hope we don't see you again.

The traveler exits hastily. Ruze's words were nonchalantly delivered but a shiver of fear went through them like an evil wind all the same. The moniker "Crimzon Ruze" was well earned.




Background



static version



tree stumps



static version with sprites


@suzurannyaa



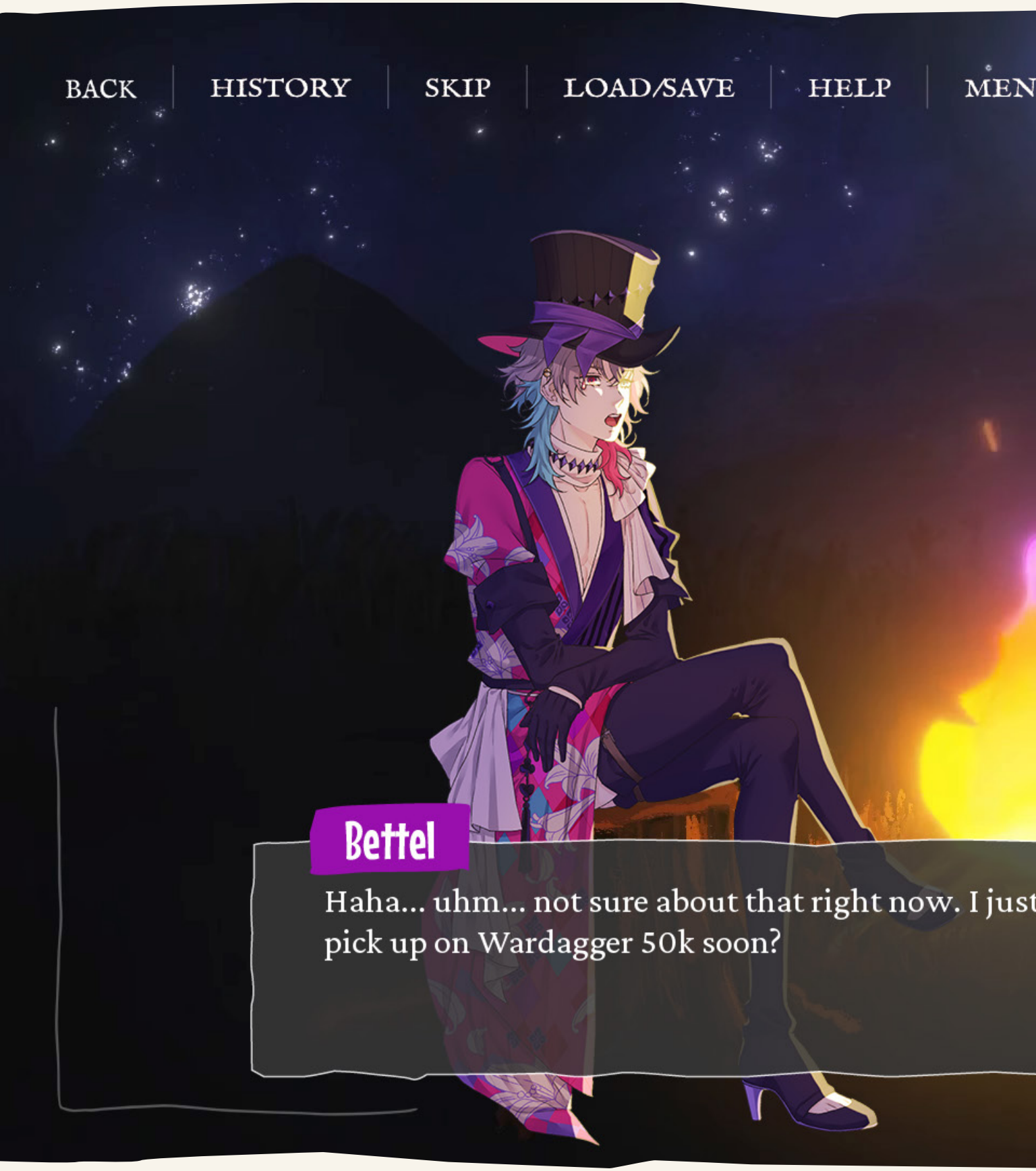

GUI



main menu



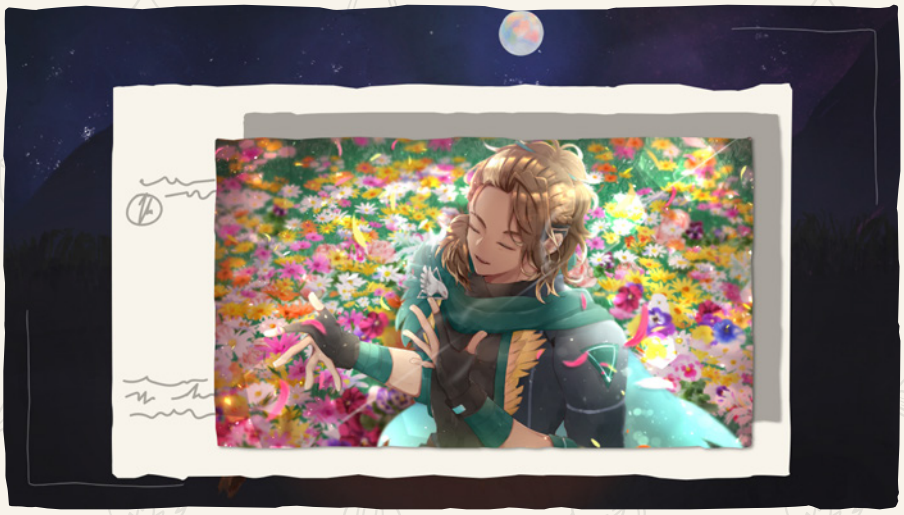
sub menus



Bettel

Haha... uhm... not sure about that right now. I just
pick up on Wardagger 50k soon?

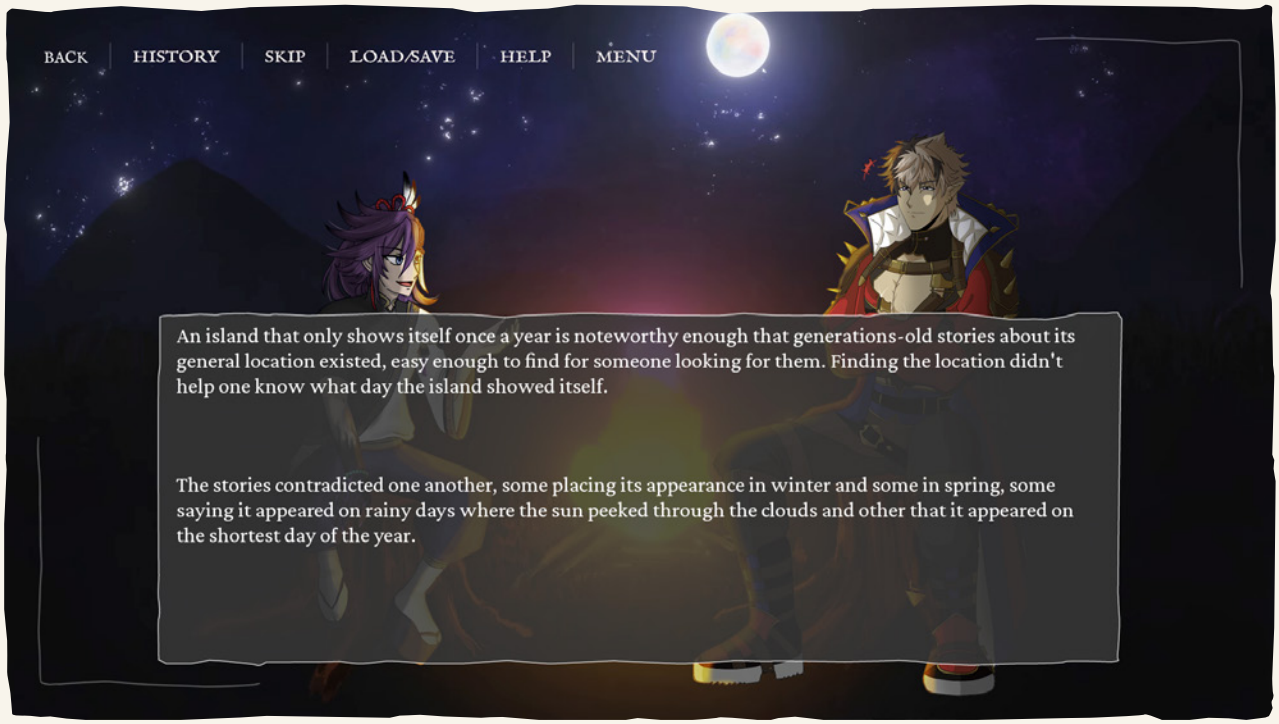

U
gameplay
t felt a bit chilly and the fire looked cozy. But let's







stories
art pieces
display



stories display



Extras




Project
Design

RUZE'S Campfire Stories

main logo

RUZE'S Campfire Stories

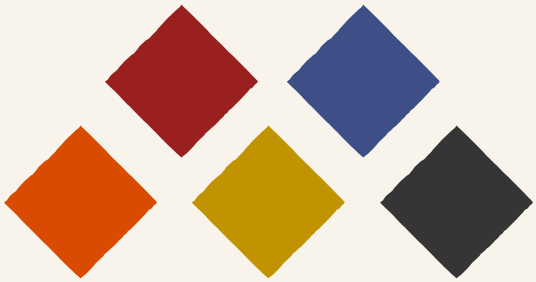
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isotype

RUZE'S Campfire Stories

for dark backgrounds



color palette



section dividers



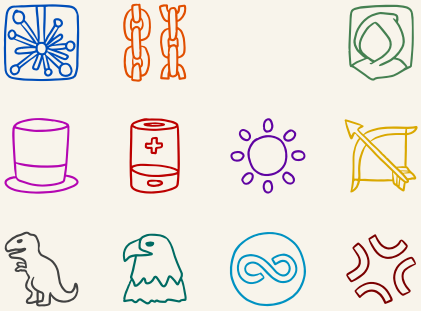
character name tags



texture pattern



project icon set



characters icon set



credits icon set

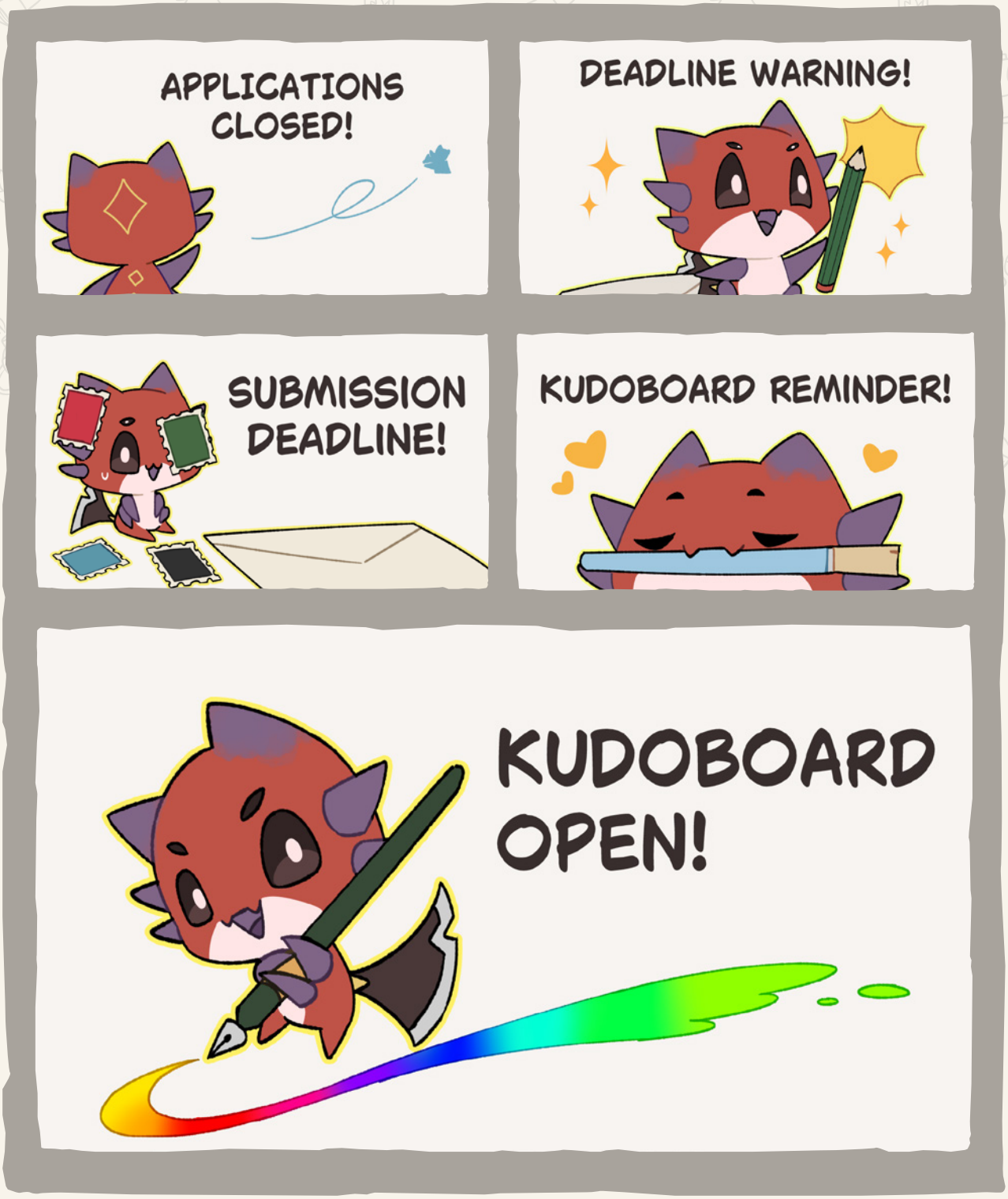


stories icon set


Social
Media Art


APPLICATIONS OPEN!
WANTED
?!
APPLICATIONS CLOSED!
DEADLINE WARNING!
SUBMISSION DEADLINE!


APPLICATIONS OPEN!
APPLICATIONS CLOSED!
DEADLINE WARNING!
SUBMISSION DEADLINE!
APPLICATIONS OPEN!


APPLICATIONS CLOSED!
DEADLINE WARNING!
SUBMISSION DEADLINE!
KUDOBOARD REMINDER!
KUDOBOARD OPEN!


KUDOBOARD REMINDER!
1 WEEK UNTIL KUDOBOARD CLOSES!
1 MONTH UNTIL KUDOBOARD CLOSES!
KUDOBOARD REMINDER!
1 DAY UNTIL KUDOBOARD CLOSES!


APPLICATIONS OPEN!
DEADLINE WARNING!
APPLICATIONS CLOSED!
SUBMISSION DEADLINE!
KUDOBOARD CLOSED!


Additional
Art

book cover
illustration

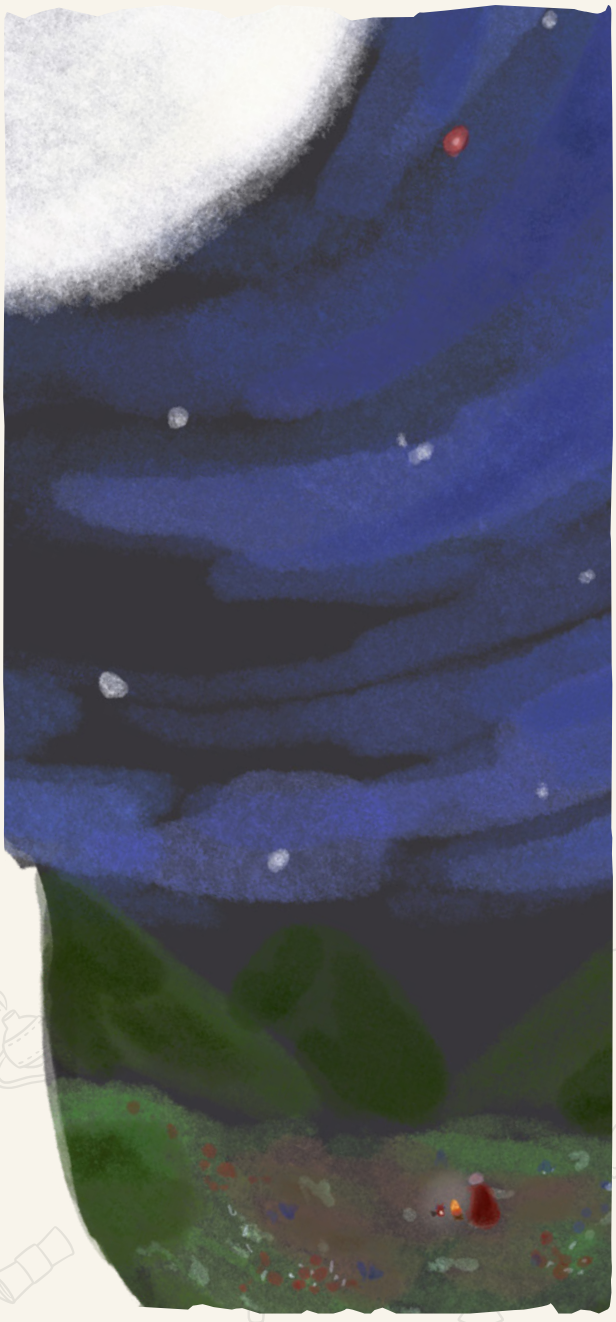


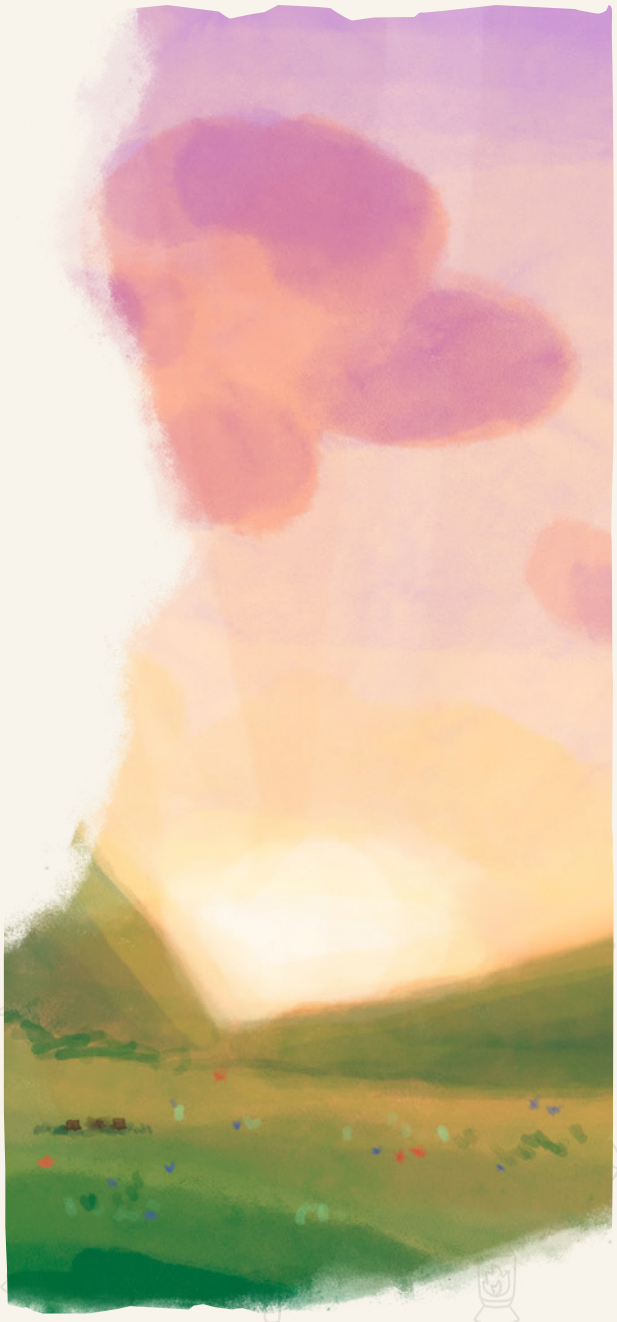






details





section dividers


@qcanis
@Sigma_Gold
final scene art





Credits

Team Credits

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RUZE'S
Campfire Stories