

You Walk Away

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You Walk Away

by [Rockets](#)

Summary

Fray is right, of course. Fray has always been right.

Prologue - Our Path

Esselte elects to take a room at the Forgotten Knight that evening, rather than make her way up to the Fortemps manor. She would have been welcomed there, she knows, but she's done a lot of traveling and talking and fulfilling obligations over the past fortnight, and truthfully she needs to take a night for herself. So the tavern it is, instead.

The sun set bells ago, and a heavy snowstorm has set in since then, but the thick triple-glazed window keeps the room warm and mutes the noise of the storm down to a distant, low thrum. The glazing can hardly do anything about the way the storm blocks out the moonlight, however, so the low fire in the hearth is the only light in the room. Shadows have taken up residence in the room's corners, shifting with the flickering of the firelight.

Esselte crawls into bed, pulls the thick blankets up over her head, and lets her mind go blank. No obligations tonight. No crises to worry about, no burden of duty to set aside for a time. Just her, and the storm, and the darkness.

...

"You offered, once," she says quietly. "You reminded me that there are lands where nobody knows who we are. That if it ever became too much, that we could always just... renounce everything and leave it all behind. The Scions. The Alliance. Even Hydaelyn. Did you ever-"

She frowns, unsure how to phrase her question. The darkness in the room waits patiently for her to sort out her thoughts.

"Well, it was thirteen at the time..." she quotes, in a passable mimicry of Hythlodæus' voice. "Do you think Azem did that? Faced with the Convocation and their monstrous stopgap measure on the one hand, and Venat's *decimation* on the other, she instead... did neither. And died in the process, evidently. Died alone, but walking free."

She hears a reply in voice that she knows all too well. She doesn't need to look out from under the blankets to know who it is. "I don't know any more about the details than you do," answers Fray in her low, rough voice. "But you're right, it does match the pattern. I imagine she would have done what she could, right up to her breaking point – like *you* tend to do, even still."

Esselte smiles and tilts her head, acknowledging the point. "I had a thought. We've got more practice with the Echo now than we did when you were first training me. And you've always been good at... showing me what we want to see. So I was thinking: it's been a while since we had ourselves a communion, hasn't it? And maybe, if you made a guess as to how it went for Azem at the end, we could watch it play out with the Echo?"

Fray snorts an undignified laugh. "Ah, Esselte. Your plans only ever get more reckless, don't they?" She laughs again, thoroughly amused. "Though of course, that's one of the reasons I love you. Let's try it, shall we?"

There is a shuffling of the blankets, shifting of weight on the bed until she's comfortable.

"Well then. Close your eyes and hold out your hand. Breathe deep through your nose – let the air fill your lungs, then let it pass from your lips. Slower, slower. Listen to your heart. Listen to my voice." There's a pause, then another snort of laughter from Fray. "...Share my feelings. Know my thoughts."

She slips into the abyss of imagined memory.

Chapter 1 - The Stars in the Dark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On the ninety-ninth floor of Achora Heights, Azem shuts the door to her personal suite with a quiet click. She removes her mask in silence, then hangs it from the hook on the back of the door.

Without the mask, she doesn't have to be Azem anymore. Here, alone in her home, she is free to simply be herself. To be Apollo, and nobody else.

A moment passes. Two. She breathes deep through her nose, letting the air fill her lungs, then lets it pass from her lips. Then, finally, with a strangled whine of fury and impotence, Apollo sinks to her knees on the cold tile of the foyer.

"They don't *listen*! They're afraid, so *afraid*, and it's making them shortsighted! *Half of the-!?*" She breaks off with a sob.

The silence spools out into her lonely apartment, broken only by her choked crying.

Eventually, as ever, she runs out of tears. It is a limitation of humanity – albeit a merciful one – that no matter how deep the grief, one cannot weep forever. She feels hollow, almost colorless around the edges, and there's a pain in her heart that refuses to subside. But even so, she refuses to let herself unravel. She's needed. She has her duty.

The sun has all but set, and deep shadows have sprouted in the corners of the room. Apollo shakily climbs back to her feet, leaning heavily against the door for support. The gloom swirls around her, but she doesn't turn on the lights, not just yet. The last dregs of twilight slanting through the large windows suit her mood just at the moment.

Rubbing snot from her nose with the back of her wrist, she pads her way into the bedroom, stepping out of her shoes on the way. It's darker in here, but there's still just enough light to see by. The shadows on her bed shift at her approach, but she ignores the movement. She knows what *that* is. Instead, she tugs her robe off, reverts her underthings to their constituent aether, and stands naked in front of the mirror, examining herself critically.

Hmm. Nothing about her body has changed since the most recent update to the design, several dozen cycles ago, and yet– it feels like something is missing. She's close, very close– but not quite there.

She stares her reflection in the eyes.

No. No more. Enough.

She closes her eyes, concentrating on her breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth. A form of meditation, but not a silent one. Focusing inwards upon her own thoughts, trying to understand herself better, to find her inner conflicts and bring them to the fore where they can be resolved. An old technique, one from near the dawn of time, and rarely used of late. In a world full of peace, what kind of person has inner conflict to examine? In a world on the brink of crisis, what kind of person has time for introspection?

Apollo closes her eyes, but it is *Azem* once again who opens them. They glow gold in the mirror as always, piercing through the deepening darkness in the room. But next to the golden reflection another pair of eyes open, these a vibrant, angry red with vertical slits for pupils.

"Hey, Azem," says Nyx lazily, her voice rich and husky. "Welcome back."

"Good evening, Nyx," replies Azem politely. She doesn't turn around. She knows what she'll find. It's easier to maintain this if she keeps her focus on the reflections in the mirror. "I need your help."

"Hmmm." Nyx's pleased hum comes out almost like a purr. It's almost as if Azem can feel her chest rumbling against her back. Almost. "Well. I won't tease. Not when you're finally, *finally* making progress. You're finally starting to see them for what they are now, aren't you?"

"We do everything we can for them," says Azem quietly. "We find their things. We kill their enemies. We do what they can't do themselves. And yet-!"

"-it's not enough," agrees Nyx. "No single person's *sacrifice* could ever be enough, not even from you. You're only one woman. A symbol cannot have faults. They look to the Convocation – to *you* – to save them from this, to wave your hand and put everything to rights. But it's not that simple, and even though you *swear* that a true solution can yet be found, you can see the disappointment in their eyes. If you can't be the perfect hero they demand, if you can't simply drain yourself dry and make everything perfect again, they'll just-

"-make a bigger hero," finishes Azem. She clenches her fists at her sides, fingernails digging into her palms. "A great *savior*, come to answer their hopes and prayers. And all the while they won't *listen* to me, but neither will they let me *go*! Berating me, day after day, wasting all of our time until I finally break and give them the unanimous vote they insist upon. Meanwhile, Venat-

Nyx *snarls*, suddenly all fury and scorn. "*Venat*. Always thinks she knows best. Always so clever, so sure, so *doting*. She 'trusts in the strength of Man', as she puts it, oh yes. But she doesn't trust us to make the right decision! She too would have us *sacrifice* without understanding what that truly means. She-

"Nyx," interrupts Azem softly. "This is what we do. We sacrifice. We bear the burden and fight on, kicking and screaming until our last breath is spent. If there's anything, *anything* I can do to end this calamity then I *have* to do it. This is my *duty*! But..." She sighs.

"I'm tired. I'm so tired."

Nyx is silent for a long, long time.

"You have to ask," murmurs Nyx eventually. "I stand by my previous offer, but you have to ask."

Azem nods slowly. She turns away from the mirror and heads into the bathroom. The half-light from the windows doesn't reach far into the apartment, and so the back room is nearly pitch black, but she has no trouble finding the medicine cabinet by memory. Glass clinks as she removes the bottle of Fantasia, the very last one she got from Deudalaphon. She'll have to remember to restock— ah, but it won't matter, will it?

She sets the bottle down next to the sink and leans on the counter with both hands, hunched forward and staring into the smaller mirror over the sink. Nyx curls her arms around her waist, hugging her reassuringly from behind. "I'm waiting," she murmurs, right next to Azem's ear.

"I need you," says Azem quietly, so quietly. "Take over from me for a time. Say the things I cannot. Free us. Please."

Nyx grabs the bottle, flicks the stopper out with her thumb, and chugs the whole thing down in one single, swift movement.

When Apollo reopens her eyes, a pair of red lights reflect back at her from the mirror. She turns on her heel and heads back to the bedroom to get dressed, tail flicking from side to side behind her as she goes. There's a lot of work to be done, and not much time in which to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Hesperos: I drank some weird blood and became the world's first elf
Apollo: hold my beer

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