

Rosemary in the Moonlight

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"Apparently it's common for lovers to frequent this night market." Jay gestured vaguely to the villager-run stalls around them. "Or at least that's what I've been told." The scent of street foods was near mouth-watering and the warm, festive atmosphere was only amplified by the yellow light of lanterns and the upbeat music playing from the village square in the distance.

"Well, what does that make us?" the girl clinging to her shoulder asked with a teasing lilt. She hovered a foot or so off the ground, and the cool wind brought by the beating of her wings was something Jay found herself surprisingly grateful for.

"Travellers looking for a new experience."

"Boring." The breeze ceased as the girl set her feet back on the ground to walk beside her.

Jay raised an eyebrow. "Rosemary-"

"Sure, they'll have cakes of some sort here, right?" The girl intertwined their fingers and leant forward to grin at her, green eyes shining like dewed leaves in the light. She was inhumanly beautiful, a dangerous trait gifted to her for that very reason. However, the presence of her wings and the antlers protruding from the top of her head were certainly more obvious indicators of the fact.

"Jay."

("The name's Jay, by the way. Jay Thatcher.")



The girl stared at her for a moment before laughing softly, the sound of her voice akin to running one's hands over fine silk. "You can call me Rosemary."

"That's a nice name-"

"It's not mine." There was a moment of silence, and upon registering Jay's confusion, she elaborated. "No one reveals their true name around here. And your full name too... What a brave human you are."

"...Oh." Jay let out an awkward chuckle. "Yeah, you could say I'm more on the courageous side...")

"Oh come on, tell me already. We've been travelling together for *months* now-"
Jay cut off as a pink rose materialised between her lips with a popping sound. She plucked it out and tugged lightly on the vine connecting it to Rosemary's hand. "Hey, if you're trying to shut me up, there are other ways to go about it."

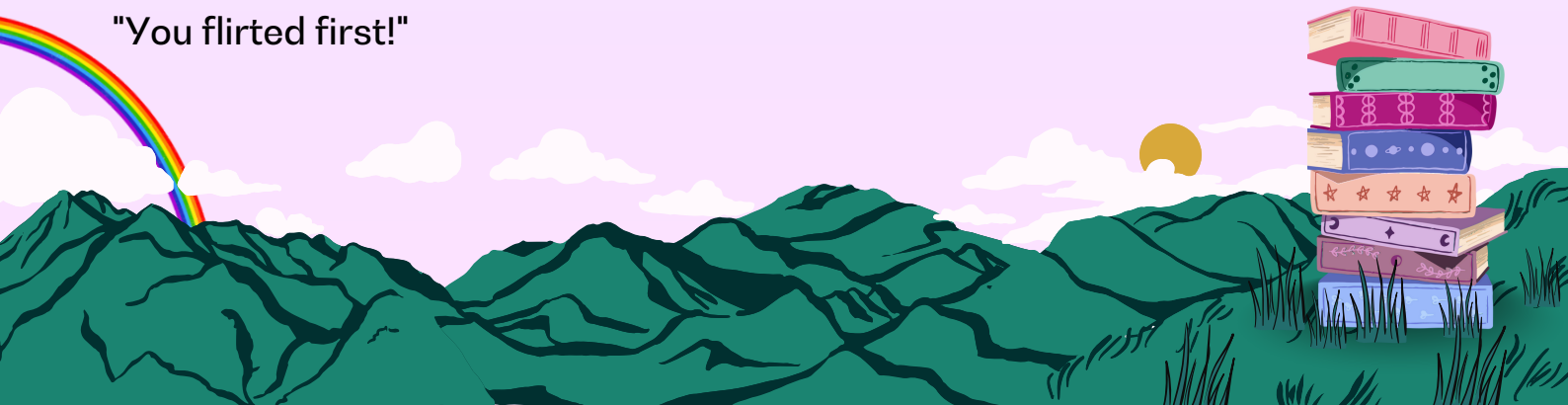
"So you say." With a flick of her hand, rose-adorned vines curled around her antlers. "Hm, your hair is starting to grow out."

Jay's hair was dark and cropped short at the sides with a longer comber on top. It was low maintenance if you put aside how often it needed to be trimmed to keep the length. In comparison, Rosemary's white hair was long and thick. She took joy in styling it - a three-segmented bubble braid that evening - and even tinted the tips green. It was a feature she was very proud of, but brushing was a nightmare. She raised a hand to trace a circle over Jay's head and more vines followed, forming a perfectly fitting flower crown.

"There you go, very pretty."

"Thank you, now if you could stop flirting so we can-"

"You flirted first!"



“Well, fair, but we’re here to look around, not at each other.”

“Maybe I’d prefer to look at you?” Rosemary sent a wink to a horned stall runner who appeared to be staring, then blew a stray rose their way. “That person seems to agree.”

Jay raised an eyebrow, then smirked and tugged her by the hand into the square, where couples of all kinds - horned, feathered, winged, human - spun and stepped in time to the music. A group of musicians bearing a flute, a drum, a harp and a couple of other instruments she didn’t recognise played their folk music at the edge of it all. The sound carried with it a certain spark. It was wind whistling through leaves, the stars dancing through the cosmos. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“What?” Rosemary blinked in surprise. “Well, alright, but be quick.”

With a nod, she was off. Rosemary turned her attention back to the joyful dancers ahead of her and the sky above. She hummed along, swaying back and forth absentmindedly. When Jay returned, a string of sparkling blue beads in one hand and two small wrapped cakes in the other, she was gazing up at the moon with a gentle expression.

(In the centre of a pond hidden in a dense grove stood a strange girl. The moon shone directly above, its beams illuminating her in a way that made it appear as if she were glowing. It bounced off her hair, cascading in waves down her back between two translucent green wings like liquid starlight.

“...You're not human.”

The girl seemed to pause as Jay spoke. Then she turned her head to look at her with doe-like eyes, one half-obscured by the sweep of her hair. “...That may be true.” The sound of her voice was akin to running one's hands over fine silk.



Her brow was furrowed and pink lips pulled into a frown. "But there are many inhuman villages around here, I hear. You look kind. You have warm eyes. Will you help me?"

"Uh...I have brown eyes. I don't know about warm." Jay raised a foot to step into the water, then stopped. "Help with what?"

The girl was dangerously alluring. Every bit of her screamed 'come here, I won't bite,' but Jay knew better than to trust that sort of impulse. The girl raised an arm, sending ripples through the reflection of the moon. The arm was wrapped in vines that lead down into the water as if rooting her there and when she tugged, they appeared to tighten. "I..." She lowered her eyes. "...I am stuck."

"I can see that." Jay snickered. "How long have you been there?"

The girl shrugged and muttered "a while."

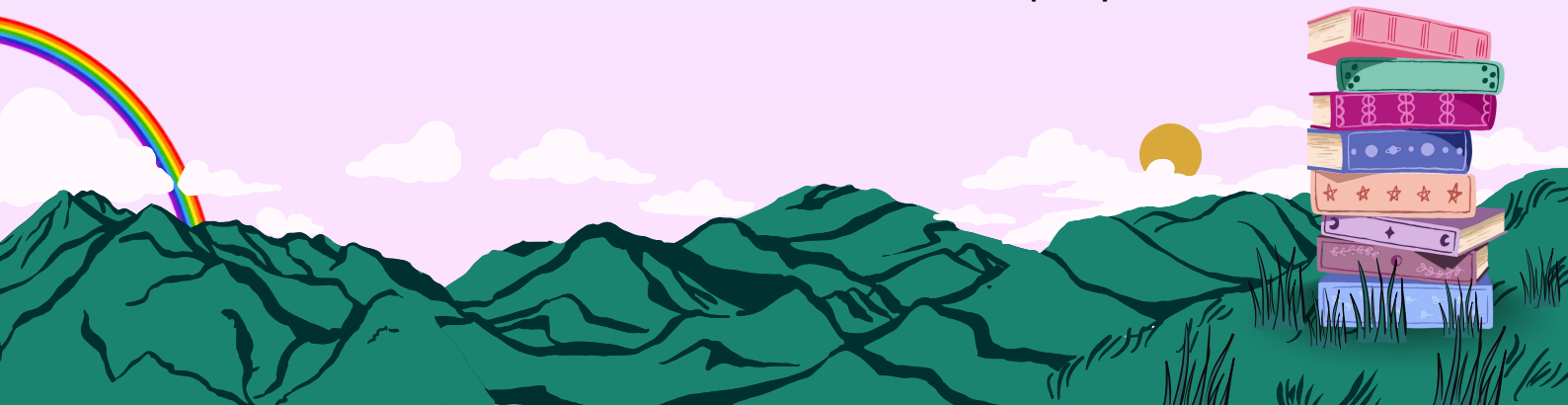
"Aren't you cold?"

"Nature cannot hurt me."

"Right..." Jay dug through her belongings for a knife. "What are you, some sort of fae? A nymph?"

The girl tilted her head and smiled sweetly. "Would you like it if I were?" Upon not immediately receiving a response, she continued. "You look strong, surely you could cut me free?")

Her concern that night had not been unfounded, for as soon as she was freed, Rosemary had attacked, eyes filled with the feral, desperate need to survive. She'd been distracted by a stale cake falling from Jay's bag, and from there had decided on her own that she'd accompany her instead.



Jay supposed the idea of experiencing such simple delights must have somehow seemed more enticing than avoiding the risks of travelling with a human.

“It’d be good for you too!”

“Really? And why would that be?”

“Being a lone traveller is dangerous you know, especially if you’re a girl.”

“Are you saying I can’t take care of myself?”

“I’m saying you won’t need to.” She raised a hand. A vine burst up from the ground, topped with a rose. It was followed by another that wrapped the first and smothered it, crushing it until it was nothing but pulp. “Nothing will even get close. In return, take me places that have cakes!”

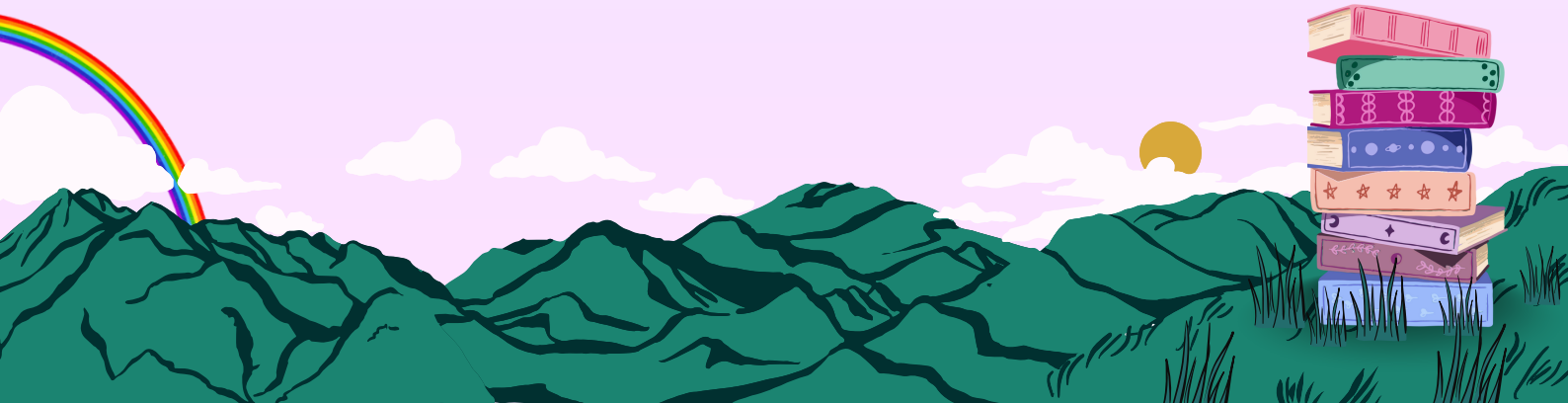
“Care to dance, M'lady?”

Rosemary jumped a little and turned to face Jay, who stood with a hand outstretched and holding the beads. “Oh, you startled me.” Her eyes flicked down to the beads. “What’s that?”

“You like them?”

“Well, I like anything pretty. Are those cakes?”

“Well at least he looks a little prettier now, right?” Rosemary winced as Jay carefully applied an ointment to the dark bruise blooming across her cheekbone. An unconscious man with a mouth choked full of roses laid at her feet, his arms and legs bound with vines. “Are the cakes we bought okay?”



"A bit squashed, but otherwise alright, I think." Jay briefly glanced back to the entrance of the alley they were hidden in. "Thanks for dealing with that, by the way."

"It's fine, but next time we're attacked, wouldn't it be more convenient just to kill them? I mean, this one seemed as if he wanted to kill you."

"No, we don't do that. They could have families." Jay rummaged through her bag for their medical supplies. The seriousness in her tone made Rosemary bite back any retorts.

"You are...oddly sensitive when it comes to this topic."

"Isn't it only natural?" Jay's expression softened into something more melancholic, if only for a moment. "No one should have to deal with the grief of losing a loved one. Grief sucks."

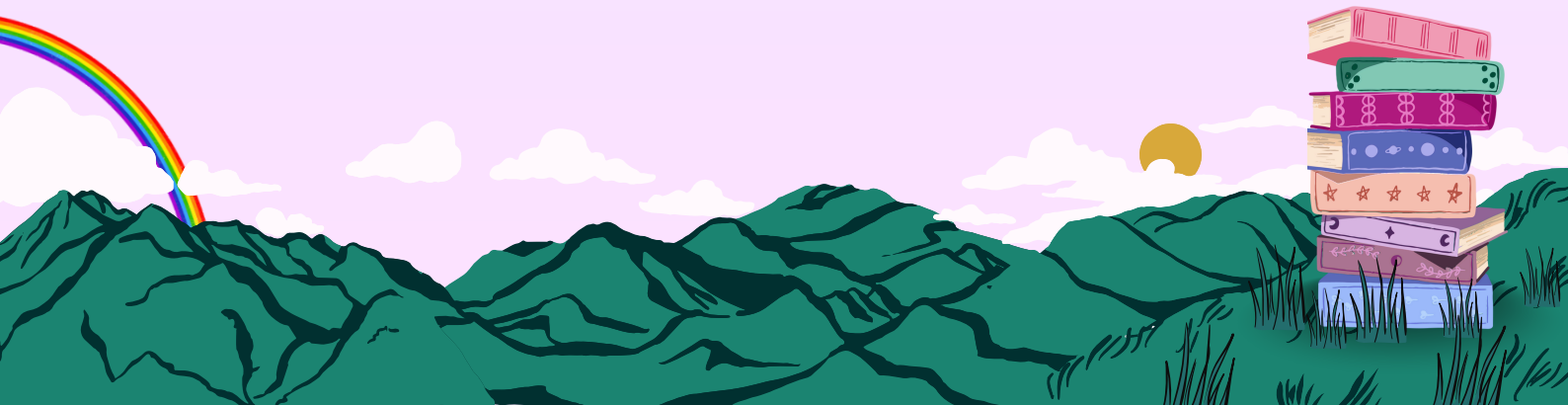
"But grief is just love, is it not? People only grieve when they have loved dearly, right?" There was a beat of silence. "I hope to grieve one day."

"Well, yes," Jay half shrugged. "But if you grieve something it usually means you've lost it. Do you want to lose something?"

"I suppose not." Rosemary's brow furrowed a bit. "But I want to have loved something.")

"Pretty like me?" Jay teased, then tucked the cakes away in her bag. "And these are for later."

Rosemary shrugged playfully. "Hm... I don't know, I don't think pretty people withhold cakes."



“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Rosemary laughed at the exclamation and Jay rolled her eyes. She draped the beads over her partner’s hair, securing them in the vines she used as hairbands. “There. You can love these. Grieve them when they break.”

“Thank you.” Rosemary leant forward to press a kiss to her cheek, quick and featherlight. She smiled at the pink tint it brought to Jay’s complexion.

“Well then, that dance? We can eat afterwards.”

Her expression changed to something more smug. “Of course, how could I possibly refuse the very beautiful cake holder before me?”

Hand in hand, they joined the other dancers. They pressed close together, stepping in rhythmic circles. A hand on a shoulder, a hand on a waist, Rosemary’s green skirt twirled with her body and her corset accentuated the sway of her hips. Jay spun her under her arm, then pulled her back in and she grinned, bright and warming like the morning sun turning frost to dew.

Deciding she wanted to try, Rosemary switched the positions of their hands and spun Jay out. Jay stumbled through it, feet catching on each other. Rosemary caught her in a dip.

“Hey, I’m the one in the suit, you know!”

“Yes, quite bland if you ask me. Your pants and waistcoat are different shades of brown too. Horrendous.”

“Deal with it.”

Rosemary pulled her back upright. “You’re lucky it looks good on you.”



They parted, turned, bowed, then quickly came together again as others switched their partners. Jay returned to the lead. “Is that so, Rose?” She lifted Rosemary into the air by her waist in time with the others around them.

The girl laughed like windchimes and spoke a single word, a correction. “Valeria!”

Jay’s eyes widened, then a honeyed smile spread across her lips. “Valeria!” She lowered her and they pressed flush together once more. A hand on a shoulder, a hand on a waist, heart to heart. “It took you long enough.”

(Under the moonlight they danced, reminiscing on names and night markets.

“Valeria, I’d grieve you.”

Valeria’s fingertips brushed over Jay’s jaw. “And I’d love you.”)

