

Two figures walked side by side on an empty sidewalk. Not a single soul could be seen on the winding roads. Oddly enough, the storefront windows of various cafes and restaurants were filled to the brim.

Human families and people dressed in fine suits dined as people with animal ears served them hot plates and tasty beverages. In the reflection of the glass a girl with glasses and black hair tied up into twin tails briefly brushed her bangs aside.

“So, where are you taking us this time?” A masculine voice inquired, the footsteps stopping as her partner – Sinder – also took a moment to fix his suit. “Kind of stuffy wearing something that isn’t battle gear.”

“But it suits you.” The girl – Anna – happily convinced him, causing the permanent frown on his face to mellow slightly.

“Are you sure? Well, if it’s coming from you then I guess it’s true.”

“You give me too much credit, you know.” Anna pouted slightly.

“Aha. For good reason.” He laughed just as they resumed their journey through the city. “Third Sphere, Sector 43. Why here of all places?”

“For starters we’ll draw too much attention in Paradiso. The Twelve Bodies tend to get fussy when you’re close to the Pillar of the World.” Anna reminded him, looking both ways before they crossed the street.

“They’ll get irritated even when I’m near the Ninth Sphere too. At least give me the freedom to leave the City.”

“You know Faux Angels tread on the outer rims. There’s a whole White Forest right out there in the ruins. And there’s all kinds of monsters.” Anna declared with curled fists brought close to her chest. This time she didn’t have her notebooks on hand, and she wore a frilly dress for the special occasion. “Besides... U-Um. We’re forbidden from entering the Expanse. You realize there’s a reason why humanity is couped up like this. Beyond the flower fields is a place the Collective Compendium of All Knowledge can’t begin to write down.”

“I really don’t believe it’s that bad.” Sinder claimed, speaking longingly of that place beyond the City. “Plus I have good memories of the flower fields.”

Anna turned a slight shade of red just as they turned a corner, finally approaching a pretty storefront which was decorated with bundles of flowers.

“We weren’t that far outside of the City. A-And we’re here.”

“A florist?” Sinder wondered.

“No, it’s a restaurant. One of the best in this Sphere.” Anna corrected as she sheepishly looked away. “I thought... since it’s close to that time of the year I wanted to t-treat – I mean, take you away from doing dangerous things all the time. I know I’m not in any position to do this but because you’re always taking care of me –!”

Her nervousness caused her words to gush uncontrollably. Sinder snapped his fingers and at once, her mind returned to her before she felt something rest atop her head.

“Are you calm now?” He asked, fitting his peaked cap on her head.

“Y-Yes. Sorry. I booked a reservation just for two of us. T-To pay you back for all the times you helped me out. Ugh... It’s always me being a mess.” Anna deflated as her self-confidence fizzled away.

“Nonsense. I think that adds to your charm.” Sinder said, causing her to softly smile. “At least you didn’t take us to a place that sells the regurgitated stuff from GEN-06.”

“No way. Even I try to avoid that. Last time I heard someone’s steak screamed at them. Can you believe that?”

Sinder didn’t respond. Anna always thought it was weird how he’d fall into deep thought whenever an anomaly of the Bodies cropped up, especially with GEN-06 – A Pillar of the World ran by one of the Twelve Bodies which supplied the outer rims of the city with a seemingly endless supply of meat.

“Before that it was an eyeball. Let’s hope we don’t find any here.” Sinder playfully jabbed as the two made their way to the seemingly only colorful place in this world.

The two were quickly seated by a fox-eared woman, their orders taken, and in the next minute, their food had already arrived steaming hot and fresh off the stove.

“Pasta, huh. That’s rare.” Sinder noted, wondering how Anna found this place as she cheerfully twirled a large bundle of pasta. “You’d think this is a date with this kind of atmosphere.”

“Ah- Ack – \*Cough\*” Anna choked on her food, immediately worrying Sinder.

“Sorry – Here, let me get some water –!”

“It’s fine. You just... caught me by surprise. That’s all.” Anna truly didn’t mind that Sinder interpreted it as such, her cheeks turning red again like roses as she began to fidget in place. “Um... Sir, is it ok if I call you by your name. J-Just for today?”

“Don’t hold yourself back. In fact, just think that I’m not Sinder for today.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Ahaha. Where’s your imagination?”

“You’re starting to sound like my grandmother.” Anna spoke with a mouthful of pasta.

“Well, she was the one who told you about this time of year. It’s not widely celebrated. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was just us two who knew about it in this entire Sphere.”

“Because it’s knowledge from another world.” Anna claimed, holding her fork out like a stick. “Grandma had a friend from a far-away world that would tell her all about it. They called this time of the year Christmas. T-The... time of giving.”

Anna reached into a pocket from under the table, grabbing something tiny as she struggled to meet with Sinder’s eyes.

“S-So... I thought I should continue the tradition my grandma learned. If you don’t mind...!”

She thrust her hands out towards Sinder, holding a small, festively wrapped box. It was clear that Anna made the box as well since this world was unfamiliar with the holiday. Sinder was briefly taken aback by the gesture, and with a rare, fond smile; he took the box with heartfelt thanks.

“You really are the most thoughtful of them all.” He grinned, holding the box close to his face as he inspected every drawn detail on the ribbons. “Can I open it?”

“Please!” Anna nearly jumped from her seat. “I-I mean... yes, please.”

He unraveled the gift and was surprised to find a red quill pen inside. It was simple and far from the extravagant gifts and bribes he had received throughout his life as a member of a Body.

Yet it was the only gift that deeply touched his heart. He never said it out loud to Anna. In fact, Anna never really knew how much it meant to him at the time.

“S-Sorry. Someone’s calling my pager!” Anna, unable to take the awkwardness any longer, stood up and was about to leave until Sinder suddenly reached out to hold her wrist.

“Wait!” He placed the box down and sifted through his own pocket, retrieving a box of his own. “Funnily enough, I also had a friend that celebrated that holiday. Anna. I want you to take this. It’s... nothing really special either, but it was the only one I could find. Straight from the ruins of the Expanse.”

*At the time I didn’t know what shocked me more...*

Anna began to internally monologue.

*The fact that Sinder touched me, or that he gave me a gift. The man never really smiled all that much but when I was with him, it seemed like I was always able to see a different side to him.*

She couldn’t be more elated to open it. And inside...

"It's so pretty."

... was a false, diamond brooch.

Gemstones were rare so the only things widely available were imitations. But even so, Anna who came from nothing accepted it. To her it was more valuable than any real gemstone in the world.

*Sinder had different sides to him. At times it felt like he knew things that no one else did. Looking back now I don't remember how many resets we spent together, because I only remember one.*

*I wished I had the courage to tell you how much I loved you, Sinder.*

*How about you?*

...

"Ah – Anna! You're scribbling into the book again!" Ignis' voice cried from right beside her.

"Huh –!?" She snapped out of her trance, finding herself back in the Eternal Library where she was surrounded by several familiar faces.

"My, another page wasted. Shall we start again?" Magus said. "We wouldn't want our precious memories held by arbitrary means!"

"Bzzzt~!" Snap agreed as the Little Frost above its back held a small bundle of Captured Memories.

What Anna was making was a scrapbook to hold their memories, written by the gift Sinder left for her – the Final Feather of the Scorched Dove. As it turned out, the feather never came from Sinder himself.

It was, in essence, the gift she gave to Sinder long, long ago.

"Indeed." The Arbiter also spoke. "Our memories are scattered across a sea of literature and the in-between nonsense. It will be wise to have a comprehensive book we can reminisce with."

The Star Child also agreed with a series of rapid nods.

"I'll prepare a new book." Nav hummed, tapping the shoulders of the triplets to aid her.

"Then I'll get some more snacks!" Jury exclaimed with a face full of cookie crumbs.

"That'll be a big help, thank you!" Anna smiled, letting loose of a long, drained sigh as she finally came back.

*It took three hundred years, but I'm doing better now thanks to everyone. I hope you're also doing well wherever you are now, Sinder.*

Suddenly, one last voice called out to her.

"Anna? What's wrong? You've been out of it lately." Frost spoke to her as she looked up expecting to see Frost but instead it was the Hired Arm that crouched closest to her.

Frost was far away in the background, watching over the group right beside the Arbiter.

The Hired Arm smiled at her as if knowing what was on her mind. Anna clutched onto Sinder's mantle and held the quill tightly in her other hand. At the same time, the Hired Arm reached down to stroke her head with affection.

"It's nothing... I was just reminiscing about our old world."

She relaxed into the palm of the Hired Arm and took a deep breath.

*I can finally call this world my home.*

*Sinder.*

*Thank you for being with me.*