

CHAPTER 6: Homeward Bound

Atlas and Janet arrive at the cockpit to talk to Robin.



“Uncle? Janet and I wanted to ask if we could head back to Setune Town.”



“I heard.” Robin is already working on setting the autopilot to Setune Town. “Are you sure you can handle going back? Janet hasn’t learned how to use her badge, has she?”



“W-well... I haven’t, no...”



“But Ash and Saria both can use sun magic, and I don’t need the badge to use it, either! Rem’s also a sun mage... surely all four of us would be enough, right?”



“Yeah! And with Lariat and I able to use moon magic, it should be alright!”



Robin looks at them both, silent for some few seconds.

“...There’s one more thing I should tell you, then.”



“You remember how I told you that Aerumna is attracted to negative emotion, correct?”



“I think so... it’s because Aerumna is what happens when negative emotions fuse with magic.”



“That’s correct.” They nod in approval. “Now, with that in mind, how do you think you would get rid of Aerumna?”



“Yooooou’d fuse your magic with *positive* emotions?”



“Precisely.” Another nod.



“The most important thing to remember is that you can’t *fake it*. You can’t fool Aerumna, even if you put on a smile and tell yourself that you’re okay. You have to address whatever you’re feeling—pain, fear, guilt, *rage*—understand it, why it exists, and treat yourself kindly. And when you say you’re alright, you have to **mean it**. Do you understand?”



Atlas nods, though they seem uncertain.



Janet does the same, also seeming unsure.



Robin inhales and exhales through their nose, slowly and deeply. It feels very practiced.



“Atlas. What’s upsetting you?”



“Um. I guess I just... have a hard time telling whether or not I’m okay sometimes. I’ll feel fine, but there’s still that fear that whatever happiness I’m feeling is... temporary, y’know?”



“It’s alright to not know. I understand that.” Robin nods. “Nothing ever lasts. I’ve learned that much. What that instead means is that *sadness* doesn’t last, either. Life is a pendulum that moves between one or the other—which means that you can use those moments of sadness to look forward to happiness.”



“I...think that makes sense.” Look forward to happiness...



"Janet, what's troubling you?"



"I...don't know."



"You don't know?" Gentle.



"I don't know. I just kind of ignore my bad feelings."



"Janet..."



"Atlas. It's alright." Robin turns to Janet.



"I understand that feeling. It's easier to just tell people that you're alright, to not show any weakness. But those emotions are going to continue stewing inside of you, making you feel worse and worse, until you can't take it anymore. It's better to address them and give them space in your mind than to just shove them aside."



"Aw, you make it sound easy. If I could just sit myself down and talk it over like I'm a kindergartner, I would have done that already!"



"If you could, what would you tell yourself?"



"I dunno... I guess..."



“...Your friends will still like you, even if you’re not as smart or talented as them...”



“Of course I’d still like you, Janet! You’re definitely smarter than me, anyway.”



“I’m always so impressed by the gadgets you make! I could never do something like that... it’s what makes you cool and special to me.”



“You got good at magic way faster than me, though! I’m just sitting here, copying down magic circles and sigils and crap, while *you* get to do the cool stuff right away! It makes me feel like I’m wasting my time!”



“B-but we’re working together...! I never felt like it was a competition... and besides, you have all those sigils memorized just after writing them *once*, while I have to keep writing them down over and over in my sketchbook!”



“That doesn’t mean I’m *better* than you! You’ve still been able to do way more actual spells than me!”



“Yours are harder to do in the airship because they could damage the interior...!!”



“That’s **enough**, both of you!”



Robin barely raised their voice, yet it’s still enough for both of them fall silent.



They take another deep breath. Inhale, exhale.



"Janet. It's clear that you take a lot of pride in your skills and what you're able to do well."



"...It's all that I **have**."



"I don't think that's true. You have your friends who care about you, who *want* to stay by you, when you're strong *and* when you're weak."



"And if you keep treating life like it's a competition, you're going to reject help when you need it the most, because you'll see it as *pity* from fellow competitors, rather than your friends *caring* about you. Do you understand?"



"I shouldn't **need** help!" She wipes at her eyes, frustrated and red-faced. "I'm tired of needing help! I'm tired of everyone being better at everything than me! I want to be good at something for once! I want to stop giving people reasons to look down on me!"



“Are your friends really looking down on you, or are you putting your own insecurities in their mouths? Because the entire time you’ve been on this ship, I’ve heard nothing but support from *all of you* towards each other.”



She stops. Looks between Robin and Atlas, clearly trying to come up with a rebuttal.



Atlas is quiet, but they reach their hand out towards her.



...She accepts, holding their hand in kind.



Robin watches them for a moment.



“...Janet. I’m not scolding you, nor am I trying to “fix” you. What I *am* trying to do is give you tools to handle the sorts of feelings you’re having. I can tell that you’ve already built some very strong friendships on this ship, and I want you to remember that. This isn’t a competition.”



“Since when did you become a therapist?” She gives a very weak and sad comeback, not making eye contact.



“Since I had to learn to control the Aerumna in my body.” They’re seemingly taking it as a serious inquiry.



“Are you gonna be okay, Janet?” They squeeze her hand.



She takes a deep breath. In, out...



“...I’ll try to be.”



“Above all else, be kind to yourself. Please.”



“Are you guys done babbling yeeeeet? We’re almost at Setune Town!”



“W-we are??” That felt really quick!



“Janet, look outside...!”



“Whuh—?”

As the ship passes through some invisible barrier, Setune seems to appear in real time, buildings and structures populating what appeared to be a wide field in mere seconds. Luckily, the town is largely free of Aerumna—



—save for the neighboring house.

Where someone sits on its roof, as Aerumna unsuccessfully attempts to climb up to meet them.



“Wait—is that Pro down there? We need to save ir!”



“Eeeeh? Who’s that?” Citopixe peers down at the town below.



“That’s one of our friends from school! What’s ie doing on ir roof?!”



“Um—should we send the ladder down? Or—“



“Atlas, grab the others that’re gonna come down with us! I’ll get the ladder down so we can bring Pro up here!”



“Ah—got it!”

With that, Atlas runs off to the lounge.



Meanwhile, Janet runs off to get the ladder prepared.



“Prometheus! Grab onto this!”

With that, she shoves the ladder down, the ship moving close enough for it to land beside the house.



“Janet?? I—okay!” He grabs onto the ladder without thinking, only sparing a single glance downwards before he continues to climb.



“Janet, we’re here!” Atlas runs back over with Ash, Saria, and Lariat in tow.



“So *that’s* what it looks like outside of the desert...”



“Yes, yes, it’s all very green—we have a *mission* to be focusing on!”



Janet helps Pro up onto the ship, pulling ir up once ie’s close enough.



Ie looks understandably frazzled.



“The Aerumna’s all gathered into one place. We could easily dispose of it with a well-aimed fire spell.”



“Please don’t set my house on fire .” Ie weakly raises a finger in protest.



“Boiling water, then? Heat, water, plus some spacial magic to destabilize it...”



“Atlas, do me a favor.” Ash pulls out what looks like an orange marker and starts drawing a magic circle on the palm of phir hand. “When I start this spell, I want you to imagine the water that comes from my hand destabilizing every drop of Aerumna down there. What we’re doing is boiling it off and separating it out into pure sun magic, which will just dissipate into the air.”



“Um—should I also be thinking positive thoughts...??” They get prepared regardless, but...



“You shouldn’t have to.” Scribble scribble... “That’s one way of dealing with Aerumna, but you can also just pull the sun magic away from it, and that works too, just in a different way. There’s actually a risk of accidentally using sacrificial magic when you infuse it with positi—”



“Less *talking*, more **writing**!”



“Teaching moment! Important for beginners!”



“Atlas, are you ready?” Ash puts the marker back in phir pocket and shakes phir hand out, before holding it at the ready.



“I think so...!”



They close their eyes, focusing on what they imagine Ash’s spell will look like, as well as the Aerumna disappearing as the sun magic dissipates...



And while Atlas does that, Ash thrusts phir hand outwards, sending a torrent of water from the magic circle in a pressurized spray, the pressure and speed supernaturally maintained as the water hits the Aerumna.

As it does, the Aerumna visibly boils and bubbles, steaming off and eventually evaporating completely as the relentless force of the jet continues its assault.



Once the Aerumna is gone, Ash closes their hand into a fist, ceasing the flow of the water. Phi takes a few steps back, clearly having expended quite a bit of energy.



“Holy cow.” Now she understands why she can’t use a lot of sun magic in the ship.



“Hm.” Saria peers down at Setune, tilting her head. “Impressive. Well done, Temple.”



Shaky thumbs up.



“Are you alright, Pro?” Atlas kneels by their side worriedly, now that the Aerumna is gone.



Another shaky thumbs up from Pro.

“I’m putting that at the very bottom of the list of things I thought would happen in my life. Thanks for the save, though.”



“I’m just glad we got to you in time! I don’t know if I’d forgive myself if anything happened to you because of us...”



“I’m not about to blame you for all of that, so don’t worry. I *would* like to know what the heck it was, though.”



“We should bring you to a place to rest before the explanations begin.” Lariat speaks up, having been silently watching until now. “The floor isn’t a good place to receive complex new ideas.”



“Makes sense to me. I’d like a chair. Sofa’d be nice.”



“Let’s head to the lounge, then!”

END CHAPTER X