

N/A: But, I, uh, have this theory that traumatic events are always recalled in the present tense. That's why the narrative changes tense sometimes; it's purposeful. If enough people believe I should change it to fit one tense, I will.

Here's a schematic.

**Step one:** Choose a pairing (extra points if it's a pairing you don't usually write).

**Step two:** Write x number of short parts around a central topic.

**Step three:** The parts must be  $280 < x < 1700$  words each.

The whole story seems rather marginal (why I don't like writing fluff, ha, ho). Sparse on the details, now, too, tried. I like my old style better to be honest. Remember = Fox is sixteen and Krystal is twenty.

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**Darling, I**

see the pattern of memory.

*A short story.*

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**1.**

“You sure you ain't even 'eard of 'im ever before.”

The rat stinks of booze, cigarette smoke, and something else. The atmosphere in the bar also stinks like booze and cigarette smoke, but the rat has some sort of other unique smell; corrupting, invading, unidentifiable but so familiar. She looks sort of soggy, smothered in folds of wet pink cloth that don't suit her natural grey color. To add to the sense of wet, the layers of make-up she had put on her eyes were running, oh-so-slightly, in amorphous forms down her cheeks. Perhaps she is a prostitute.

Kursed hasn't really taken the time to get to know her, or any of her other

roommates. It's only temporary, a week or two and then she'll pay them enough to make the month's rent for their trouble—disappear after her mark has been killed. She doesn't really want to get to know them, but this rat is being irritatingly persistent and Kursed figures that the streets are unwelcoming today anyway since it is raining. Might as well humor her.

"I haven't," the vixen sighs. She keeps her eyes fixed on the bar.

"But 'e's pretty big on Corneria," the rat explains, "and you're from Corneria ain't-cha?"

Kursed groans, faking weariness to coincide with her new alibi. "I'm not from Corneria, I'm from Cerinia. Close-sounding name, yeah, yeah, others get confused a lot, and the planet's gone now anyway," the rat next to her makes a sympathetic cluck and she disregards it, "I've been to Corneria though, once on business," her eyes are still glued to the bar and her drink, not out of disrespect to the rat but just out of necessity. She just doesn't want to look. "It wasn't my thing. I didn't stay very long."

"Really 'cuz I got this picture of 'im 'ere with 'is teammate and she's a girl that looks 'elluva lot like you." The smell from the rat starts to annoy Kursed only because she can't place it. What the hell is that smell? "Not an 'ole lotta blue vixens out there, I tell you," the rat continues. Her voice is blurring slightly so that the words and the spaces between are not very well defined from each other.

"Oh, I don't know," at least Kursed is getting practice with her new accent, "it could be any old vulpine floozy. I'm sure there are other hags out there who get blue full-body dye jobs."

"You ain't an 'ag," the rat sounds piteous. "C'mon, at least look at it. The girl in the background looks a l-aw-t like you. Are you sure you've never met this vulpin' before?"

Kursed turns her head from the bar.

She stares at the rat directly in the eyes for a moment; the whites of the eyeballs are bright red. The rodent looks as though she has been drowning.

She looks down and sees the rodent's photo, offered to her in an arm extended towards her.

She sees the idyll: one blue vixen and one orange fox eating dinner at a fancy restaurant. His eyes are on hers and her eyes are on his; so precious, so exclusive. The photo had never been meant to be taken; she is seeing something she is not meant to see.

Kursed is drowning now, too. She turns her head back to the bar. "No," she says, assuming her old accent (by accident), "I don't know who that is."

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## 2.

The restaurant was not necessarily the most famous on Corneria, but certainly very classy. Fox had excused himself by saying that it was the best he could do on such short notice. Krystal had never even cared about where they ate.

"I'm sorry that this was so abrupt," Fox sighed. "Work has been difficult lately, hasn't it? In the last month it's been the most fast paced in years."

"It's hard to find time together during work, isn't it?" Krystal remarked, blinking once. They stared at each other for some time. Fox began to grow slightly embarrassed and shifted his body, like he was hiding something.

Then he smirked. "We could play a little game," the vulpine suggested, acting slightly coy (though it was technically out of the Cornerian proper masculine gender role).

"All right," Krystal agreed, a slight smile forming in her lips. "Why not?" She like seeing Fox relaxed; in some dark corner of her mind she wondered why her presence didn't make him feel relaxed.

"The rules are simple," Fox gesticulated a circle in the air with his hand to prove that the rules were in fact simple. "All we have to do is: instead of ordering food for ourselves, we just order food for the other person."

“You win the challenge,” talking as though he were giving orders even on a ‘break’, “if you get the order right. It all comes down to a test on connection, or a test on destiny, you see.” He flashed her a pearly grin, one fang showing.

This was cute. Stupid, but also cute.

“I accept your challenge, Fox McCloud,” Krystal joked in a mock-formal tone. They opened their menus at the same time and they were off.

A test on destiny is bound to fail. ‘You will go down, Fox McCloud,’ she competitively narrowed her eyes, and if it would help him any began sending out tiny little pulses of thought proclaiming what she saw that she would like. Not that he would be able to receive them, of course, but she would at least try.

She found what she would order him and she knew she would win. Fox closed his menu and hummed, satisfied.

The waiter came by, clockwork, one brown hare in a tuxedo. His facial expression was one of cordial harassment. “What will the two of you be dining upon tonight? Do you need suggestions?” he asked, producing a white pad of paper and pen.

“Ah, see, we’re playing a game this evening,” Fox smiled up at the waiter and explained the rules. The waiter’s expression did not change. He bent down and Fox whispered his decision to the hare.

“Good choice, sir,” the waiter said as though his job depended on it. “And what will the lady order?” walking over to her. Krystal whispered her decision to the waiter. A similar reaction occurred. The waiter disappeared.

She turned back to her boyfriend. He looked nervous with a sense of purpose.

“I-I’ve been thinking,” he stammered, reaching for his water glass. He took a sip and Krystal was patient.

“What was it that you were thinking, Fox?” she smiled.

“Um,” he looked down at the table. Not at her. “You know how you said it was hard to find time together during work?”

“Yes?” she asked, only confused. Fox blinked, still looking at the table.

“Do, do you,” salivate, swallow, breathe, “would you move in with me, Krystal? I mean—“ as if he had made some sort of mistake.

Krystal’s eyelids shut. One second passed. Her eyelids opened again. “Of course, Fox,” blink, blink, more rapid now. “But don’t we live together now?”

“I mean,” the orange vulpine gave a kind of nervous laugh, “I mean sleep—*stay* in the same room,” an antiquated correction. “Would you like that? I mean, I would like that.”

“Of course,” the vixen said, wide-eyed with stupor. “I would like that, of course. I was, honestly, about to suggest some sort of living arrangement like staying in the same room,” Krystal smirked at her thoughts, straying to some sort of dirty fantasy.

“Yes,” said Fox, quietly.

The waiter came by, again; this time bearing meals for the pair.

“For sir,” the waiter placed a large square plate in front of Fox, containing six yellow-brownd morsels of some substance in a red sauce, among other bowls of food Krystal couldn’t see.

“A set of six grilled small bean curd steaks in tomato paste vinegar, with a side of rice malt-seaweed infused soup, a shredded cabbage salad in house dressing, and a bowl of brown rice with a garnish of ginger root,” the waiter explained.

Fox visibly brightened with a delightfully surprised ‘how-did-you-know’ expression.

She knew because he ordered some variation on that practically every time they went out to dinner. He made it too easy.

“And for the madam,” the waiter bent over and in front of her placed a dish of what looked like some sort of gelatinous brown-pink substance covered in a yellow sauce, with some kind of fruit/vegetable garnish.

“Grilled filet of faux-aquatic invertebrate with hollandaise sauce and a side of finely shredded potato and mango salsa. Enjoy,” the waiter bowed and moved away, the greater machine.

It wasn't exactly what Krystal had wanted. Not that she was necessarily complaining, because it looked good. She actually hadn't tried 'holl-an-daise' sauce before.

Fox watched her expectantly as she took a bite, and how her mouth fell into a thoughtful frown. 'It's awful.'

He frowned also: “You don't like it?” She began scraping the excess sauce off the piece of fake meat.

Fox got a little more somber and the room's colors returned to their natural wavelength. “Well,” she explained carefully, not wanting to disappoint him, “I haven't had it until now, and I found out I don't like it.”

He looked increasingly disappointed, “please,” she pouted, “don't be disappointed. Please.”

“Well, I didn't know,” Fox shrugged, ears drooping so that they made a straight line against the curve of his head. “I'm sorry, Krystal, I can get you something different if you want.”

“Oh no, this is fine,” she dismissed him and began eating her meal. It was slightly better but still not too her liking—too sweet. “This was very close to what I wanted,” she lied, “though without the sauce.”

“It's a sign,” Fox bemoaned.

“No,” Krystal said.

“I'm sorry,” Fox apologized.

“No,” Krystal repeated.

An awkward silence followed. They ate for a while, in silence. Krystal felt slightly lightheaded – the sauce? Fox looked like he was still disappointed in himself. Nothing Krystal said had changed that.

Suddenly: “I just... I guess I wanted that to work,” Krystal looked up from her fake meat and found him staring at his own food, pouting like a child. “Honestly, I kind of proposed the game so that way I could prove a point.” Prove what point?

“You don’t need to prove anything,” the vixen explained, all smiles. “Honestly,” lying again, “this was very close to what I wanted. The food is very good and spending time with you is what’s really important.”

Fox’s hand clenched and unclenched around his fork. “Krystal, I have something important to tell you,” he announced. Then he looked up at her.

The vulpine looked up, at her. He looked up *at her*.

He said: “I’m, I’m in love with you,” and sounded so ashamed of it.

Krystal’s mouth opened, in spite of herself.

“I’m in love with you, too,” she admitted. Why did he sound so ashamed?

So there, they were both in love with each other.

The room flashed, both visibly and audibly. A hyena that had been sitting across from them bolted, his camera bouncing off of his chest; his partner in crime, a female antelope, gave the pair a quick wink and trotted after the photographer, twirling a tape recorder about in her other hand.

“Hey, stop!” Fox shouted, getting up from the table and impotently taking a few steps towards the direction they had run; then completing his orbit and returning to the table. Krystal laughed, quietly.

Fox hid his head under his hands. “Damnit,” he muttered to the table, “that picture will be all over the news tomorrow. Peppy’s gonna kill me. I’m sorry; this night has pretty much been awful so far. I can’t think of anything

else that could go wrong tonight: first, I couldn't get reservations at the right restaurant, and then I ordered you the wrong food—“

“No,” Krystal protested, waving one hand in the space in front of her, “I like it.”

“And then this happened, and, damn-it,” he sighed and was dejected and cute, “I just wanted this night to go perfectly, that's all.”

“It was perfect,” the vixen smiled, “it is perfect.”

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### 3.

The problem was that they had been expecting to be attacked by pirates. The pirates may or may not have been expecting that they would've expected to be attacked by pirates.

But this was why Star Fox had been hired. It was a routine weapon sale, between the governments of Corneria and Fortuna. The large cargo ship carried several fighter space ships, as well as thousands of state of the art hand-to-hand combat weapons. Weapon sales were usually accompanied with pirate attacks. There had to be some way of feeding the growing fire.

Krystal sat on the back of the cargo ship, which was hovering above the jungles of Fortuna at a safe level. Her Arwing (the CloudRunner, after her friends on Sauria) was relatively dormant now, but waiting.

The strategy was this: Fox and Slippy would guard the front, in case of pirate attacks from the front, and Krystal would guard the back in a stealth position, to catch the pirates attacking from the back off guard.

It started when Krystal could see bright orange lights shining from under the canopy. She felt sick with anticipation. *And then everything was illuminated from below.* “Pirates,” she confirmed into the communications channel shared between the three.

The lights were recognizably the engines of pirate ships firing up.

“We have bogies up front too,” Slippy said. Then, to what Krystal could see, four different ships rose up from under the jungle to meet them in the sky, like a sprung trap.

“Four in the front,” Fox said, beginning to exchange fire from what Krystal could hear in the background. “Can you take care of the ones in the rear, Krys?”

“No problem,” she said. Her pirates were still unassuming. The vixen shot at one with the CloudRunner’s lasers and it turned into a bright orange ball of light before dissolving into black smoke, touching down onto the jungle in sick tendrils.

Knowing that the pirates would piece two and two together eventually, she started her fission engines and immediately leapt into the air; the not-quite-ready state of her engines caused a little difficulty, but she kept her head level and swooped upwards to engage the pirates again. Ungraceful, maybe, but it was practical.

Another one soon joined his comrade in dissolution. Krystal was doing well today. The remaining two were slightly more aware of her now and both began following her every move, staying determined on her tail.

The radio channel flickered in and out a couple of times; ostensibly Slippy was frozen in fear of his own incompetence, the pirates would take advantage of it, Fox would save him. Krystal didn’t register whatever they were saying, and so severed her link in a fit of nervousness. It was distracting her.

She turned the ship around, only to find one of the pirates off to her peripheral left and following her moves. Frustrating. Her laser fire only seemed to hit air; not that her aim was particularly true because of the relative speeds of both her and the enemy’s aircrafts.

Finally one of her shots connected with one pirate fatally in the wing of its aircraft; as it was falling to the jungle, she shot the other wing and relatively disabled any chance of it returning to the air soon. The pirate might survive.

She pulled a U-turn and was quick in locating her final target. Oftentimes pirates would usually retreat by now; even more common, when the first one

fell (regardless of their status) they would scatter. A situation like the present was rather rare. But the target did not move, instead choosing to sit there and hover. Then it suddenly began rapidly accelerating, directly towards her. The pirate would no longer try to aim for the cargo ship, nor follow her in an attempt to shoot her down.

Krystal fired and the ship exploded. A slow-moving high-atmospheric wind blew its remains towards her, and the CloudRunner was enveloped in black, visibility reduced to near zero.

The vixen took this pause in battle as an opportunity to scratch the top of her nose. The radio beeped impertinently, signaling she was getting an incoming call. She picked it up.

Immediately: “why the hell did you sever the communications link?” Fox’s voice rang angry at her, talking down to her like she was a novice, “never do that on a mission. It’s important to keep it on at all times just in—“

Lasers were being fired from behind her. The vixen dipped down out of the cloud of smoke and into the open air. Two more pirates had appeared from the ground on her side of the cargo ship.

“Crap, guys,” Slippy’s voice was both tense and informative, “we got another ambush.”

‘No shit,’ Krystal frowned and gripped her flight controls harder.

“I have two in the back,” she said over the communication channel. “I might need some extra help, whichever of you guys finishes first up there.”

“I’m in trouble,” the amphibian’s voice rang again, making the vixen sigh involuntarily. He always seemed to get first precedence when it came to being overwhelmed.

These pirates were slightly more coordinated as a team. Krystal would chase after one and the other would chase after her; trying to throw the one on her tail, the pirate she had been chasing would stop and fire at her, causing her to go into a dive in order to escape fire.

‘They’re still no match for me,’ she affirmed in her mind, trying to boost some sort of skill that relied proportionally on self-confidence.

“Are you alright Krystal? Is something wrong?” Fox asked, now concerned instead of angry. She ignored him; he wasn’t helping her by interrogating her about tangent situations.

She sighed, into the communications channel. “I can’t concentrate,” the vixen proclaimed, “you guys will have to come back here and help me, or at least stop distract—“

“Help me Fox!” Slippy interrupted.

Krystal shut it off again. She had been dodging lasers but firing none of her own. The job would not get done if that persisted.

Finally, (she had been doing so well today,) several shots hit her back. The CloudRunner shook with the impact; she swore and aimed the steering controls for the higher atmosphere. The pirates followed, not so closely, all the while randomly firing straight upward.

Krystal reached her zenith. She would now stop fighting the forces and cut the atmosphere on gravity’s grain. The ground moved closer towards her, trees coming back into definition, a cargo ship floating above them and slightly depressing the trees with its force; and then bright flashes of orange—a battle.

She pulled up on the controls and was back where she started. The pirates hadn’t even caught up with her yet. One steady press of the laser button and one of them dispersed back into particles.

The last pirate ship suddenly sped off for the distance, perhaps sensing imminent defeat and doing the considerate thing; but in its imaginary wake it had left a tiny, blinking light, like a star suspended in the troposphere.

“Shit,” she grit her teeth and smiled all sarcastic-congenial, ‘a bomb,’ pressed the acceleration pedal all the way down.

Then it went off, from behind her. The explosion caught the back of her ship, but she had already been hurtling for the makeshift-landing pad of the

bigger cargo freight. The CloudRunner bounced; her head snapped backwards and forwards with the sudden tension caused by several forces working against each other.

Inertia finally won and Krystal was still alive. She inhaled and exhaled for a few moments.

The CloudRunner's computer explained to her that the ship had sustained some medium damage on the back, including a tiny puncture in the fuel tank that was leaking at a very slow rate. Krystal shut the engines off and rested her head in her hands, attempting to calm down.

'If Slippy didn't try to take on most of the work and end up doing about half, this team would be more efficient,' she lifted her head and watched the top of the cargo ship. 'I wish Falco hadn't left—'

The Arwing Mk II planted itself in her view. The screen-shield unlocked, lifted, and Fox McCloud stepped out, looking passively unhappy with something. He walked towards her.

'The ship damage is going to come out of my stipend anyway,' she thought, 'but for insubordination, he's probably going to kill me.'

The first thing Fox did was slamming his fist into the CloudRunner's screen-shield. The vixen jumped, in reflex. His action hadn't done any damage to the ship, but that wasn't the point; from Fox's view, his fist would've appeared to directly connect with Krystal's face.

Fox stood there, completely immobile, with his fist still on her ship. Some kind of emotion was emanating from him. Krystal was intrigued by it only because it wasn't anger.

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#### **4.**

First the subterranean tunnels yield only rebel forces, then lava; it wasn't on purpose; duty of the royal family, to ensure their lineage survived; it has always been theorized that under Cerinia there are a network of naturally

formed tunnels, existing directly between the crust and the mantle of the planet.

There are loud booms coming from the square; a sense of pervading loneliness; it wasn't on purpose, it wasn't on purpose; strong feelings of anger rising from the ground; she awakes and is afraid, first a servant comes and then her mother; 'Mama?'; first, there were loud booms coming from the square, now screams.

Someone, a soldier, comes and alerts her father after they all assemble; the most commonly accepted hypothesis behind the origin of these natural tunnels is that they were formed by extensive volcanic activity in prehistoric Cerinia; she isn't able to remember the servant's face, she sometimes barely remembers what her mother looked like unless she really tries; "they're coming from the ground," the soldier keeps repeating, "they're coming from the ground; it wasn't on purpose.

Some more serious scientists have disregarded this theory, stating that such natural tunnels would either cause the crust to cave in or the magma from the mantle to erupt at the slightest disturbance, and if the tunnels were extant, the balance would have to be so delicately maintained that any kind of exploration or even shift of the ground would result in the very end of the planet; strong feelings of anger coming from under the ground; the dark faces storm the castle, eventually, coming in through the windows, savaging several advisors; the duty of the royal family, to ensure their lineage survived.

It wasn't on purpose; "Mama?" she asks, when she is put in the spacecraft, alone; it is the duty of the royal family to ensure that their lineage survives; "They're coming from the ground," the dark faces storm the castle, eventually, in the light Krystal would have been able to see the flags, the tetrad, the rebel symbol; and then everything is illuminated from below with sickening orange light as the ground erupted, before the G-forces knocked her out; it wasn't on purpose; all she feels is a sense of pervading loneliness as she is put in the spacecraft, alone.

Her muscles had awoken before her. They were already tense and poised for battle. Her back was arched, her hackles raised, her hands raised to strike out at some imaginary foe with a shadowed face.

Krystal sighed (half in relief and half in worry) and got out of her bed, recognized her surroundings as the Great Fox once again, and calmly ordered her nervous system to shut down and stop pumping adrenaline into her bloodstream; there was no imminent danger, or at least none for the time being.

Her room was spare in furnishings; she had only been here several “days”, whatever terrestrial time accounted for in space. Which wasn’t much.

The door moved open automatically, and she was startled into losing whatever parts of the nightmare she had been holding on to. Grumbling to herself, the vixen walked out into the hall of the Great Fox’s living quarters and found the kitchen with very little effort.

“You’re awake too?” said a peculiarly high voice. Fox McCloud sat at a table with a halo of interrupted sleep and a half-eaten bowl of cereal. Well, good, at least she didn’t want to be alone right now.

“Yes, I was having,” she stopped and tried to think of words to say, “I was having unpleasant dreams. Do you have a word for those?”

“Nightmares,” Fox explained, not looking at her. He stared, mad-eyed with lack of sleep, his cereal and shoveled a spoonful into his mouth. The vulpine chewed and swallowed quickly. “I had one, too. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Mine? Not particularly,” she said, seating herself at the same table. “Would it help you if we talk about yours?”

Fox shrugged, still not looking directly at her. “Both of my parents died when I was very young. Occasionally I dream about it still, sometimes.”

“I am sorry,” Krystal’s eyebrows bent mansard in sympathy. “My parents died as well. I have nightmares about them too, occasionally.”

Fox finally took a shy glance at her, and Krystal was proud, if only for that moment. Somehow he managed to summon up the courage to look her directly in the eye and talk to her at the same time. She hadn’t been sure if he was able to do that with anyone, at first.

“How did yours die?” he near-whispered.

“It was an accident. I mean, their deaths were on purpose, but. I am sorry,” she blinked and tried to start from the beginning. “My planet, Cerinia, was on the brink of civil war when I left. The first strike came late at night, rebels attacked the castle, and my parents were the monarchs of the planet. Unfortunately, some physical side effect of the rebellion’s method of reaching the capital by an impromptu underground tunnel, well, caused a worldwide volcanic eruption for some reason, and the entire planet was destroyed.”

“Oh,” Fox looked intensely worried for a moment, but then relaxed into a sort of guilt, like his problems were superfluous compared to Krystal’s. “God, I’m so sorry, I had no idea that your planet got—“

She interrupted him. “How did your parents die, Fox?” She didn’t want to make him feel guilty.

Fox sighed, and stared at his cereal again. Krystal frowned. “My father was one of the best mercenaries out there in his time, working in Star Fox which I inherited upon his death. He was a very skilled pilot, probably better than I am now. There was an assassination attempt, when I was young, and somehow they had hooked up a bomb to his car. He wasn’t in the car when it detonated, though, it was my mother.”

“I am sorry,” the vixen nodded sympathetically.

“And then,” Fox continued, scooping up milk with his spoon and dumping it back in the bowl, like a little kid. “And then, right before the Lylat Wars had started,” Krystal had no idea what the Lylat Wars were, “my father went out on a reconnaissance mission for the Cornerian government to talk to Andross,” she didn’t know if it was the same Andross or a different Andross as the one that had just tried to use her powers, “he went with two crew members: Peppy, who still works for me, you know him, and Pigma Dengar, who turned out to be a double agent. Pigma shot him down and he was presumed dead. They never recovered his body.”

“I am sorry, Fox,” Krystal said. “It is hard when you lose your parents.”

“It’s even harder when you lose a planet,” Fox said, looking up at her again, “geez, Krystal. I’m sorry, too.”

The vixen smiled. “Thank you, but do not worry: I am fine now.”

“Me too. I’m also fine,” the orange vulpine reflexively smiled in reply, and Krystal knew they were both lying.

“I’m sort of glad you’re awake,” Fox said, then suddenly looked overly shocked at his own words. “I mean, not about the nightmares, or your parents dying, that’s not good, but,” his ears flattened on his head and he was being overly cute by way of foot-in-mouth, “I sort of... felt lonely. That’s all.”

‘He needs to learn how to talk to girls,’ Krystal smirked, mostly to herself. ‘He is only sixteen, four years younger than me, but still. If he is a supposed hero, he’ll have to learn how to talk to girls.’

“I was feeling lonely also,” the vixen said to Fox. He must have noticed her smirk because he looked like he wanted to kick himself. “I appreciate your company.”

“Thank you?” Fox asked, confusion setting in his facial muscles.

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## 5.

“D-do you believe in destiny?”

Perhaps Fox had meant to sound romantic. He sounded very nervous instead. For some reason, he was nervous. Krystal couldn't imagine why, considering what they had just done.

She lied on top of him in bed, both of them completely naked. An outside streetlight cast illuminated stripes through the blinds drawn over the window, the beams painting parts of Fox’s face and eyes in lighter tones.

‘Destiny is a load of bullshit,’ she thought.

“In Cerinian culture,” she explained, “we have this saying about destined lovers, from a folktale. The folktale goes like this: there was a young bovine boy in ancient Cerinia who lived near the woods, and he had to fetch water from a well up his parents’ property. On one particularly warm night when there was no water, he went to the well and saw a tall crow standing there. The avian explained that all creatures are tied to their destined lover by two pieces of red string, one on each pinky.

“The crow and the young bovine followed the bull’s own red strings across to the neighboring village, and there they found a young bovine girl who was the lucky recipient of the other sides of the string. Needless to say, the boy was young and still in the phase where he hated girls, so he threw a rock at the young girl, that hit her in one eyebrow, and the boy fled back to his farm.

“Many years later, his parents arranged a marriage for him. When he met his wife, she was very beautiful and he was pleased, though she always wore some sort of ornament on her forehead, a bandana or a hat or something. One day he requested that she take it off, and shyly she did, exposing a tiny scar under her eyebrow. The scar made her self-conscious, she received it from a young bovine she had met in her youth.”

She finished and relaxed. Perhaps Fox was feeling unfulfilled. “That’s all? That’s the whole story?” he asked with a semi-incredulous tone.

“Well,” Krystal screwed up her face. “The point is that destined lovers are tied together by red strings, one from each pinky finger.”

“Oh,” Fox said in a tiny voice. It barely carried into her ear across the tiny space between them. “Do you,” he swallowed and his entire body trembled as though he was about to erupt somehow, “have you found the ends of your strings?”

‘Destiny is a load of bullshit,’ she thought. ‘The story is bullshit. Events will happen and others will believe that there are reasons for those events, but it’s all by accident, not on purpose.’

She lifted his right hand to her mouth and kissed the spot under his pinky finger, only to placate him.

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## 6.

The three of them stood in front of Fox and Krystal's room.

The Great Fox was producing an unhealthily loud drone. Krystal rubbed her forehead. She couldn't remember hearing it before, but it dawned on her that she might just not have heard it until now.

"Just try to be happy for him," she added.

"I am happy for him," Fox muttered to his shoes. He was not looking at Krystal or Falco as he talked; his normal measure of protection when he was on the defending side of any kind of personal attack.

"He's really landed the big one. Be proud," Falco explained, trying to console Fox with an arm placed on his shoulder. The gesture was more cornering than comforting.

And the hallway lights went bright green with an expressively complex fear, as perceived by Krystal. She felt a lot of different types of fear: equated a child's fear of abandonment, and an insecure vulpine's fear of physical contact, and a general fear of others; and underneath it an orange tint of loss. Sadness.

She screwed up her snout and attempted to block the excess emotions out. It was either her severe connection to Fox (like a vine wrapped around another vine now) or this odd vibration rattling her skull that caused her equilibrium to tilt and warp in strange directions.

Krystal grabbed her head with one hand, as if to relieve built-up pressure. Fox shrugged off Falco's arm, frowning with his characteristic stony-face.

"What the hell is wrong with you," Falco interrogated. He seemed irate about Fox's defensive movements. "Yeah, so Peppy's going to leave Star Fox, but he was practically retired anyway. He's old, Fox. He needs a government position, and Chancellor of Corneria is not exactly unfitting. So why the hell aren't you happy for him."

“I just—“ Fox started. Falco raised one hand, to silence the vulpine. Then he began walking down the hallway, away from the two foxes.

“Not coming back until you cool off, man,” the avian said. “If you want to take my advice, Krystal,” not looking at her but instead talking to the hallway with increasing volume so that she would hear, “I’d leave him alone. He needs to sort himself out. Nothing you can do.”

Falco eventually disappeared. The blue vixen turned from the trail the avian left and looked to where her boyfriend stood.

‘He feels abandoned,’ Krystal played therapist, ‘not only by Peppy’s promotion and imminent departure from team Star Fox, but also by Falco not being forgiving of his depression.’

Fox looked tired, his eyes hollowed-looking and appearing to sink back into his skull. Krystal frowned in stringed-instrument sympathy. Poor boy.

‘He’s reliving his father’s death,’ she stared at him with no verbal communication to justify it, and he wasn’t making any motion to hide himself—for once. ‘I always know when he relives it because shadows begin to move across his eyes, like the negative of a film playing inside of his head.’

The vixen moved towards him. ‘All he needs is to know he is loved,’ she smiled (trying to play up what she was doing) and snaked an arm around him. It was intimate, not like what Falco had done; not like what Falco had done to him.

The end of her arm began toying with the waistband of his pants. “I know you’ve been tense, lately,” she whispered into his ear. His mood began changing; a reaction. “I love you Fox. And I’d like to cheer you up.”

Perhaps, in hindsight, that was not one of her better ideas. Fox pushed her off too. “No,” he near-shouted.

They stared at each other for a little while in the hallway. Fox turned around and opened the door to their room, went inside it.

“I’m sorry,” Krystal muttered. “I didn’t mean to—“ he cut her off.

“I just,” Fox swallowed, staring at her wild-eyed but not with lust. “Not right now, okay? I need to be alone for a while.”

And with that he shut the door. Audibly locked it with a sickening crunch that sounded akin to a bone breaking. Somewhere in the bowels of the ship, the vibration had stopped. She became painfully aware of the silence of everywhere else on the Great Fox.

Krystal had been locked out of her own room.

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## 7.

They had come to the park in order to watch Solar set, but unfortunately they had chosen to sit on a hill that faced the opposite direction. No matter; instead Krystal produced a jar of bubble soap Fox had given her. His arms were folded behind his head. She blew bubbles that floated over to the far side of the park before disappearing.

“What is that word,” Krystal flatly asked. “When a bubble, for instance, destroys itself? Do you say that in Lylatian: ‘the bubble was destroyed’?”

“Uh, I think I get what you’re asking,” Fox said after a brief hesitation. “We say that bubbles ‘pop’. ‘To pop’, ‘popped’, ‘will pop’, ‘popping’, like that.”

“‘Pop’,” Krystal repeated. She enjoyed saying ‘pop’; it was a short and sharp word, and sounded light-hearted in contrast to what action it described. “Do bubbles only pop, or do other things pop as well?”

“Hm,” Fox smiled, slightly, his eyebrows still stuck in that permanent furrow. “Balloons, they also ‘pop’.”

“Oh, so, spherical things pop,” the vixen surmised. “Planets, do they also pop?”

Fox began to laugh. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a planet popping,” then resumed laughter.

Krystal, who didn't know that pop was not a word synonymous with destruction yet, did not find it funny. She put her wand back in the jar of soap, set it down on the grass, and waited patiently for Fox to calm himself; when he made no such motion, she interrupted with "What do planets—do—then, when they are destroyed?"

The orange vulpine calmed down with a few short breaths. "We just say that: 'the planet was destroyed'. I think a good way to explain the usage of pop is like 'boom', in the way that it describes a noise the subject makes, not necessarily the state. Pop is a noise that things make when they burst."

Krystal hissed quietly in frustration. "In Cerinian we keep our noises and words separate," she joked, playing cultural condescension.

"Speak some for me," Fox commanded, grinning as he propped himself up on his arms. Krystal had only spoken Dinosaur Language around him, so she guessed he had never heard any.

"How about," she paused for a moment to stare at the bubbles in the distance 'popping'. Having brought it up caused her to have some sort of sick and reflective interest on the subject. "Kshe zerina odäaran uii; the planet was destroyed."

"Wow," sort of a stunned and useless comment. Perhaps Fox had imagined Cerinian would sound different.

She sighed and began to explain: "The grammar is completely different. 'Zerina' means planet, coming from the same roots as the name 'Cerinia', and 'odalan' means to destroy. 'Odäaran' is an irregular conjugation which, I guess in grammatical tense you might refer to it as 'past continuous'?" Fox nodded at her, maybe listening. "Kshe and uii are both particles that define what type of sentence it is. 'Kshe' is a past-tense conjugation of 'kse' which makes the sentence a declaration, and 'uii' is the past-tense conjugation of 'ui', which defines the sentence as being perceived externally."

"Perceived externally?" Fox asked with one eyebrow raised. Krystal laughed.

"Well, I'm sure it sounds weird to you, but our cultures are completely different, meaning that our linguistic preferences will also be very different.

‘Ui’ means the sentence is perceived externally, and not declaring an internal emotion. ‘Ua’ is, well, for example: ‘I’m hungry’ in Cerinian is ‘Kse onkaa euznga-guye da ua’. If I said ‘Ksa onkaa euznga-guye da ua’, it would mean ‘Are you (or are they) hungry?’”

“Too complicated,” the vulpine next to her screwed up his face and began chuckling.

“Well, maybe I’ll teach you some Cerinian and we can practice,” Krystal said.

“I’d like that,” somehow his hand overcame the distance between them and found hers.

Even through the minimal contact, Krystal could feel Fox’s vivid red nervousness. All Cerinians being inherent telepaths, the verbal distinction between external stimuli and internal emotions was very important, since occasionally the boundaries in reality would be hard to define. It would seem odd to other cultures that didn’t have to live with a heightened sense of empathy.

Not wanting to make him feel like his advance was being purposefully rebuffed, she squeezed his hand slightly and then withdrew to pick up the jar of bubble soap. In her peripheral vision she could see Fox frown slightly. She dipped the wand back in the jar and waited.

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## 8.

Was this the same evening? No, maybe not. Were they on Corneria? No, they were on Sauria; wait, actually, no, they couldn’t have been on Sauria because they never visited there while they were together. So it must’ve been on Corneria.

And Solar was rising, not setting—relative solar declination increasing. They had come to watch it together. The sky slowly turned from blue to grey to pink.

They were on top of the roof. They were on Corneria; on top of the roof of Fox's—their Cornerian apartment.

Krystal was tired. She blinked, feeling the brunt of the never-ending day resting in her skull and in her abnormally heavy eyelids. They had been up all night, with a purposeless gathering of friends.

Her hand was in his hand in her hand.

Somewhere below them others were smoking cigarettes. The collective smoke was reaching all the way up to the top of the building. Perhaps it was Falco; Katt; Slippy; Amanda; Fay; Miyu; whoever, on their way out of their building with the rising sun like so many night terrors. What, did they all smoke?

She wasn't able to sense Fox's emotions.

And he was saying something like: "I know we're meant to be, Krystal, I know because I feel so comfortable around you, like you were some part of me that I was missing. But I know that I've found it in you. I feel so...myself around you."

He looked at her and she looked at him. The changing light was reflected in his corneas. "I haven't felt this way since my father died. Hell, I don't think I've been happy since my father died. I haven't been happy for a long time, Krystal."

He gave her hand a slight squeeze. She smiled, feeling nothing but emptiness. Was he lying?

"I've never felt this way about anyone," the vulpine kept talking, "I know it's destiny, I know it. I'm in love with you, Krystal. You complete me. I'm so deeply in love with you, Krystal, we have such a connection. It must be fate. I've found the ends of my strings, Krystal, and you are the other end of my tether. You pull me to you, I feel it."

The skyline slowly began glowing red. Solar would appear in the sky within the minute.

'What? What the hell is he saying.'

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## 9.

What proved to be his first mistake (of the many he would make this evening) was that he had chosen to do it in the dockyard. It was always a relatively deserted place. And it was dark now, too, so if there were any witnesses it would be difficult for them to tell what had happened.

What proved to be his second mistake was how he said what he had brought her here for. He was turned away from her, so that she could see the white back of his flight-suit shaded in the dimming light. She could also see his hand on the chain link fence tighten. “Krystal, you’re leaving the team.”

It wasn’t necessarily the content that was the only thing that messed her up; his way of phrasing it seemed off to her as well.

One: he could’ve said, “Krystal, I want you to leave the team.” Optative: reasons would be explained, a discussion, honest communication.

Two: he could’ve said, “Krystal, I need you to leave the team.” Imperative: a command, and while that would not have been a prime way to phrase it either, it certainly was better than what he said.

It only made her frustrated because it sounded like something she was doing. Not something he wanted her to do, or something he needed her to do. He was implying that it was her fault.

“Why,” phrased not so much a question. The gravity of his words hadn’t really hit her yet, a heavy bolt of lightning grounded and waiting for the inevitable Amen to follow.

“I just,” Fox’s voice sounded very detached. “It’s—it’s dangerous. Up there, Slippy was—almost killed had it not been for you and I covering him. I don’t want you to get hurt, or get killed. Okay? You’re leaving the team.”

“That was entirely Slippy, not me,” Krystal felt her voice rising and tried to keep it calm. “He’s the one who is in danger, not me. Those pirates took advantage of his ineptitude—“

“I know, I know,” Fox interrupted dismissively, not really listening to her. “But I don’t want to take anymore risks.”

Krystal blinked, confused. “Falco left, Peppy got appointed and left, and now you don’t want me on the team anymore. So it’ll just be you and Slippy, now? He may be a technical genius, but even you know he’s a completely incompetent—“

“Slip is a good kid,” Fox protested, turning around from the fence. She didn’t even need to see his facial expression to know what it was, knit eyebrows and a pout. “Listen, I’ve been thinking. I don’t want you up there anymore, on missions. You should stay down here on Corneria and—“

“And what, wait for you all the time?” she interrupted, balling her hands into her fists in order to let her tension out somewhere. “That’s what you want me to do? I want to fight alongside you, do something I love with the man I love. Don’t you care about what I want? Don’t you care about me at all?”

“Of course I care about you, Krystal, I’m in love with you,” he said for the umpteenth time with the feeling that it was something he was ashamed of. “I’ve told you that a million times and I’ll tell you a million times again, I love you. I’m in love with you, Krystal. And I need my others that I love to be safe. I want you to just be safe.”

“So then why can’t I just be careful?” the vixen protested. “I’ve always been careful. We’re good at what we do, why—“ her voice got quieter on its own, “why can’t we just have what we have?”

“Krystal, I’m scared,” he looked scared, but after that his words and the emotions Krystal could sense coming from him went out of synchronization. “It’s not going to be you, I know. You’re a good pilot and I can trust that. But what if you get ambushed, or even overwhelmed? I can’t trust Slippy to rescue you, or even myself. It won’t be your fault, I know that, but... somehow it’ll happen. It’s only a matter of time, that’s all. Please, just do this for me.”

She didn’t understand. “I don’t... understand,” what a good word to describe how she felt. Her fists unclenched. “That’s not really what you’re afraid of.”

Fox jumped at her words slightly. “Or rather,” she continued, “you are afraid of that, but that’s not the only thing you’re afraid of.”

In Krystal’s defense, she had never really wanted to pry into it, so this was his third mistake of the evening. “What else is it?” Fox sounded slightly tenser than before. “Tell me, you tell me. What else is it that I’m afraid of?”

“Do you really want to know?” she barked. “Do you really not already know what it is.”

Fox went silent. His facial expression drooped for a moment, before snapping back elastic to its original position. Krystal was disappointed.

“I—“ she said. “I guess I have to leave.” Not really believing what she was saying, but there it was. Fox looked surprised and Krystal wondered why he was.

“Why,” cruel; it was almost like he was mimicking her. Shouldn’t she be the one shocked? Wasn’t she the real victim of his self-imposed defenses? His arms folded in on each other, in a self-embrace. He was closed.

“Why?” hers was more of a rhetorical question. “Why am I leaving?”

“Why are you leaving, Krystal,” Fox sighed. In an instant he fell back into that pattern – again the sad, abandoned, and denied child. Shadows moved in his eyes again; or something. Was it light? “Don’t you, no, you don’t get it, do you. Why don’t you understand? I love you. I love you,” he repeated. “I love you. Why can’t you see this?”

“Because you can say it all you want but you don’t mean it,” Krystal explained. “You can say it all you want and you can feel however the hell you want to feel, but you keep pushing me out, Fox. You push everyone out because you are afraid of them.”

“I’m afraid,” he asked. “If anyone is afraid of love, it’s you, Krystal.” She failed to see how his logic worked out. “You’re the one that’s been lying. You may be a fucking mystic or whatever, but I can tell what you lie about. And this just proves it,” the volume of his voice was nearing hysteria and it was making her sort of frightened.

The vixen frowned at him.

“You don’t believe in this,” the vulpine explained. “This is all some kind of joke to you, isn’t it?”

“Don’t pin your shit on me,” she barked; reaching some kind of threshold. What it was she wasn’t sure. She felt something in her ebb out.

“You don’t see it,” he continued. “You never have. You’ve never felt it. You don’t think this is meant to be. You’re not in love with me.”

Without anything she could think of to say in reply, her mind reverted to more primitive tactics of persuasion. She slapped him.

The vixen gasped, after the blow connected, and mostly for her own sake. She hadn’t meant to do it. It wasn’t on purpose; her mistake.

His last mistake of the evening: Fox wouldn’t take it like he was supposed to. Like a man? He hit her similarly in reply; watching her face register the pain, watching her with the same stony and reproachful expression he wore most of the time.

Kursed loses track of what happened exactly when she looks back on it. She must’ve thrown a punch or two at him, but then one way or another they fall on the ground and continue hitting each other, like a proper fight. Fox somehow ends up straddling her chest, at this time the vixen distantly wonders if he is going to choke her to death.

A spot of wet hits her forehead, and she looks up. Water is leaking from Fox’s eyes.

He punches her directly in the snout and the pain makes her faze out for a moment; she resurfaces to Fox hitting her face unceasingly but with very little force. His consideration. She pushes up and dislodges him from where he had been sitting on her. He crumples, even though she thinks she didn’t hurt him very much during the course of pushing him off of her. The vixen falls to him and begins punching his ribs economically with one fist, which irritates Fox (at least) because he tries to kick her from his horizontal position with no real success. He realizes that is ineffective and pulls her down; they wrestle for a while with no exchanging blows, but twisting the

other's limbs in alien and painful ways. At some point during the fight he becomes excessively weakened, and Krystal drags him over to the fence post. She slams his head against it once, thud, twice, thud, Fox groaned, three times, thud. He goes limp.

Lovingly, she places his body upright against the fence, then moves backwards to look at him. He is a little roughed up, sitting there unconscious with a weak-looking expression she can't help but pity. Both of his eyes would swell dark soon, certainly, and more bruises would appear on his face and chest. Nothing he wasn't used to, physically anyway. Maybe he wakes up, later. She doesn't check to see how badly she hurt him.

No more colors from him. Not now.

Krystal sniffs, wipes her nose when she realizes it is leaking fluid. She thinks that maybe Fox's tears had somehow pooled on her nose, at first. Her fingers come back in front of her eyes, stained bright red. She wipes her nose again with the back of her hand, and smears the remaining blood on her pants.

Then she turns and walks away. The air is getting colder and it is making her eyes tear.

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Ratio of paragraphs to words in 'Darling, I' – 269:8851

Ratio of paragraphs to words in 'Grendel' Prologue – 8:1193