

The Cursed Village

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There was no sign of life as a blizzard raged over the desolate forest. A flash of steel-blue light seared across the terrain, only to dissipate, leaving behind two adventurers. One was a rogue, dressed in a grey cloak and leather guards. The other was an unconscious wolf in sorcerer robes.

“You did it! We escaped!” the red dragon exclaimed.

Upon seeing his fallen partner, he dropped his two daggers in the snow and crouched down. “Decro?”

He shook the wolf awake, but got no response. The wolf was breathing, though. The teleport spell must’ve drained all his mana.

“Oh good, you’re okay.” Moire heaved a sigh of relief.

But where were they?

He looked around at the snowy landscape around him. The storm clouds in the sky were thick and heavy, blotting out the sun and plunging everything in a gloomy darkness. Frost-covered pine trees surrounded them, making it hard to see beyond the dense forest.

They needed to find shelter.

With great effort, he pulled Decro’s arm over his shoulder and stood up. The wolf stirred with a groan.

“Where are—”

“Not sure, but we need to find shelter. Can you walk?”

The wolf nodded feebly. With unsteady steps, the duo made their way through the thick woods.

The cave was a welcome respite from the unrelenting cold. Once they were deep enough, Decro stumbled onto the stony ground.

“Hey, you alright?” Moire asked.

The wolf nodded.

“You should get some rest. Along the way, I saw a village down the mountain. I’ll go find some help there.”

“No,” the wolf struggled to speak through the cold.

“What?”

“Don’t split up.”

“But you’re in no condition to walk, especially in this weather. I’ll make a quick trip down there, grab a mana potion for you, and come back before you know it.”

Decro shook his head. “We should go together.”

He pressed his hands on the ground to push himself up, but he was too fatigued to get up.

Moire hesitated. “Don’t get up. We’ll rest here until you’ve recovered, then we’ll check out the village together.”

“Okay. Yeah. That sounds good.”

Decro sat down and unslung his leather bag. Moire sheathed his daggers and looked around the cave. The storm wasn’t showing signs of subsiding. He gathered the dry branches littering the cave and put it into a pile. Picking up a rock, he struck his dagger against it to create sparks. After a few attempts, the branches caught fire. As the fire began to burn, Moire sat down beside Decro.

“At least we escaped. The guards were almost upon us.” Moire chuckled. In the warmth of the fire, he could feel his conversational abilities coming back. “Good job with the teleport.”

The wolf nodded. “Thanks.”

“Do you know where we are, though?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Sorry,” he added.

“Hey, don’t apologise for that, alright? The important thing is that we got away safely.”

They sat in silence for some time.

“You’re still shivering,” Moire said.

“The spell took a lot out of me.”

“Do you want to take a nap then? Maybe the storm will let up by the time you wake up.”

There was no response. Moire got up and squatted in front of the wolf.

“Hey. Listen to me. This is not your fault.”

“It is! If I could’ve controlled—”

“If not for your powers, we’d be in the king’s dungeon right now. You know how he hates the Resistance.”

“But I—”

“Between this and rotting in prison for the rest of our lives, I’ll pick this without hesitation. You did good. Don’t cry, okay?” He wiped a tear from the wolf’s eye.

The wolf nodded with a sniff.

“The fatigue is probably getting to you. Get some sleep now. We can find our way back when you’re rested.”

“Yeah.”

Decro laid down and pulled his cloak around him, but it did little to protect him from the cold. He could hear the dragon lay down behind him.

“Huh?”

Moire’s arms caught him by surprise as they wrapped around his waist.

“What are you—”

“Shh. Just rest.”

He could feel the dragon’s body heat pressed against his back. His snout against his neck, resting on his shoulder. A shiver went up his spine, but this time it wasn’t from the cold. The warmth spread throughout his body. As his eyelids felt heavy, sleep came for him.

When Decro woke up, the fire was no more than a pile of charred ashes, and Moire was gone.

Moire held his cloak close to him as he cautiously made his way down the slippery mountainside. The village was at the foot of the mountain, so it wouldn’t be long before he made it there.

Earlier in the cave, the freezing temperatures roused him from his slumber. Decro was hugging him with his snout buried in the dragon’s chest, but their shared body heat was no match for the cold.

Moire slowly extracted himself from the embrace. The wolf stirred, but didn’t wake up. Dusting the gravel off his clothes, he strapped his leather pouch around his waist and made his way out the cave.

The blizzard made the downhill journey painfully arduous. A careless step could send him rolling down the icy slope and into a bottomless ravine. But he persevered each step of the way, trudging through the snow. Eventually, he reached the foot of the mountain.

As Moire stepped into the village, the flurry of snow seemed to subside. The blizzard was still blotting out the sky, but at least it wasn’t spraying in his face. It was almost as if there were enchantments protecting the village from the storm. The howling winds were gone, replaced by a cool, gentle breeze.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

“Hello?” Moire asked cautiously as he tightened his grip on his daggers.

There was no response.

“Hello?” he asked, louder this time. “Anyone there?”

The cobblestone street was empty. Not a single cart or horse was in sight. Cottages lined either side of the street, making the village seem quaint at first sight. Yet on closer look, there was something odd about them.

There was no sign of life. There was no light behind the windows, no shoes on the doorsteps, no clothes on the clotheslines. If people ever lived in these houses, they were long gone by now. What happened here?

This place reeked of magic enchantments. The cottages were well-preserved despite the raging blizzard. Their stone walls and straw roofs were in good condition. Even the snow on the street was in manageable patches on the cobblestone instead of covering everything beneath a thick blanket of white. The whole scene was a picturesque view, much like the hand-painted illustrations in an explorer’s manuscript.

The street led into the village square: a large open area paved with more cobblestone. Booths made of wooden planks surrounded the square, all of which were empty. In the middle of the square was a tall plinth made of black granite. Moire expected a statue of the village founder to be there, but the plinth was empty. There was no plaque there either.

The dragon furrowed his brow. Everything about this place felt wrong. His instincts were telling him to get out of here. Even if he continued the search, he doubted that he’d find a mana potion for Decro. He decided to cut his losses and head back. Maybe he’d even get back to the cave before Decro woke up. He was about to head back when he realised the air was eerily still and it was deathly quiet.

Minimising his movement, the rogue turned towards the path he came from. There was a strange figure coming towards him.

Moire froze.

Despite being hunched over, the figure was still over twice of Moire’s height. But what unnerved the dragon was its form: every inch of its body was covered in red and green strips, with loose ribbons hanging here and there. The only feature on its draconic-shaped head were twisted horns; everything else was wrapped in the coloured strips.

What was that?

It sniffed the air, looking for something, then it turned sharply towards Moire. That was enough to spur the rogue into action. Moire ran. Behind him, he could hear the beast give chase with heavy footsteps thumping against the cobblestone. He slipped on the icy road. His body landed heavily and his shoulder hurt from bearing the brunt of the fall.

“Oww!”

But the beast was swiftly gaining on him. Moire scrambled to his feet and ran. He turned left at the first junction, then right at the next, but the beast was impossible to shake off. With every turn he made, the monster followed. His stamina was running out, but the beast showed no sign of tiring. He had to lose the trail quickly.

At the next junction, he turned the corner and dived into the first window he saw. The wooden sticks were no match for his weight, snapping into a shower of splinters as he rolled on the wooden floor of the cottage. Jars of old food fell from the nearby shelf, smashing on the floor and spilling their foul liquid everywhere. The putrid scents assaulted his nose: hints of rotting meat coupled with the overwhelming scent of vinegar.

Cutting himself on the broken glass, Moire hastily scrambled towards the wall beneath the window. He pressed himself against the wooden wall and held his breath. There was the sound of heavy footsteps on the icy pavement, then the sound of scratching as the beast slid to a stop. Then it began sniffing the air.

Stomp.

Stomp. Stomp.

The beast trudged over to the house where the dragon was hiding. Moire held his breath, quelling his urge to retch.

Sniff. Sniff.

The beast poked its nose through the broken window. Its stray ribbons dangled from its snout, floating in the air around Moire. The dragon curled himself in the corner, trying not to touch the strips of red and green.

The beast sniffed, catching a wiff of the horrible scents in the room. It let out a violent snort and stormed off. Moire remained quiet as the beast explored the street. After a few excruciating minutes that felt like hours, the beast left.

Moire waited for a while longer to make sure the beast was gone. He peered over the window. The street was empty. Getting up, he took stock of the situation. His hands were bleeding, but his armour had protected him from the worst of it. He gingerly removed the shards of glass on his hands, cleaned it off with water from his canteen, then wrapped it up with bandages from his satchel.

“Ugh.”

This trip was more trouble than it was worth. Hiking down the treacherous mountain through the brutal blizzard, only to have to escape from a bizarre ribbon monster. For all that effort, he had nothing to show for it. No mana potion, no map, no way home. Now he had to retrace his steps through the village and back to the mountain, keeping watch for the beast in case it appeared again. Then he had to brave the snowstorm on the uphill hike. He hoped Decro was

still asleep so he wouldn't have to come up with an explanation, but given his poor luck, he wasn't optimistic.

He stumbled onto the cold street and looked around. The streets were clear, so he turned back the way he came. He had not walked far when he heard soft music. It had an ethereal quality to it, as each note felt like a multitude of pitches in harmony, yet merging together to form the purest tones Moire had ever heard. The calming tune echoed through his mind, clearing his head of his worries, his stress, his thoughts.

What was producing this heavenly music?

He turned around. There was no sign of the source, but the music was guiding him there like a magnetic pull towards the pole. His eyes glazed over, ignoring his surroundings as he made his way down the street. He didn't even bother to keep an eye out for danger. All he needed to do was to find the source of the music.

It led him to a two-storey building covered with red and green bolts of cloth. The fabric draped over its steep slanted roof of brown slate tiles, obscuring most of the smooth stone and dark wood that formed the building's walls. Gold and silver tinsel were wound around the buildings, interspersed with colourful metallic balls. The additions to the buildings felt out of place, almost as if someone had decorated it for some unknown festive holiday.

But the dragon didn't question it. Why should he, when all he wanted to see was the source of the music within this building? He walked towards the building, climbing the stone steps leading to its entrance. The double doors swung open by themselves, revealing an imposing dark hall.

Moire walked in. The doors closed behind him. He snapped out of his trance as the music stopped.

"Where... where am I?"

He found himself in the middle of the town hall. It was filled with wooden benches, all of them facing the end of the hall where a small stage was set up. Everything was covered in red and green ribbons, almost as if they were creeping plants reclaiming an overgrown building. They formed a twisted carpet on the floor, winding around the benches like vicious vines. Light from the windows was blotted out by the strips of fabric, leaving the room in ominous shades of green and red.

"How did I get here?" He looked around in confusion. "What is this place?"

On the stage, the bolts of cloth had taken over entirely. They criss-crossed over each other, forming a dense web of fabric. Wind blew in through the broken windows, causing the ribbons to writhe around as if they were alive.

"Wha—"

Something grabbed his leg. He looked down to see a ribbon coiled around his leg.

They were alive!

Moire tugged against the cloth, but it held tightly with a grip of steel. His fighting instincts kicked in. He grabbed his daggers and slashed the cloth away in a flash. The severed fabric fell limply to the floor, but the dragon didn't stop to look. He turned and ran for the doors as ribbons wrapped around the wooden doors.

The dragon lunged for the door and pushed. It opened slightly, but the ribbons slammed it close again with a booming bang. More strips of fabric wound around the handles tightly. Moire slashed at them desperately, but for every layer he cut away, two more wrapped around the latches. They were trapping him in the building.

"Shit, shit, shit."

He turned around to look for another way out, but it was too late. More fabric wrapped around his ankles and pulled them together. The dragon fell to the floor. Before he could react, they started dragging him away from the door and towards the end of the hall. In his panic, he let go of his daggers and they clattered to the side. He reached for them, but the ribbons pulled him away.

"No! Someone, help! Decro! Decro!"

He was pulled to the stage, towards the tangled web of fabric where writhing ribbons reached out for him. Moire renewed his efforts in struggling, but they were all in vain. A strip of cloth wrapped itself around his wrist and another one coiled around his arm. They tugged him into an upright position, pulling him into the tangle of ribbons.

"Let me go!" Moire strained and pulled. "Help! Someone, please!"

But there was nobody in the deserted village to hear his pleas. He was lifted off the ground into the middle of the web where more ribbons shot towards him. Strips of cloth pulled his arms together behind his back, binding them in an unyielding roll of fabric. His legs were squeezed together as the ribbons constricted his body.

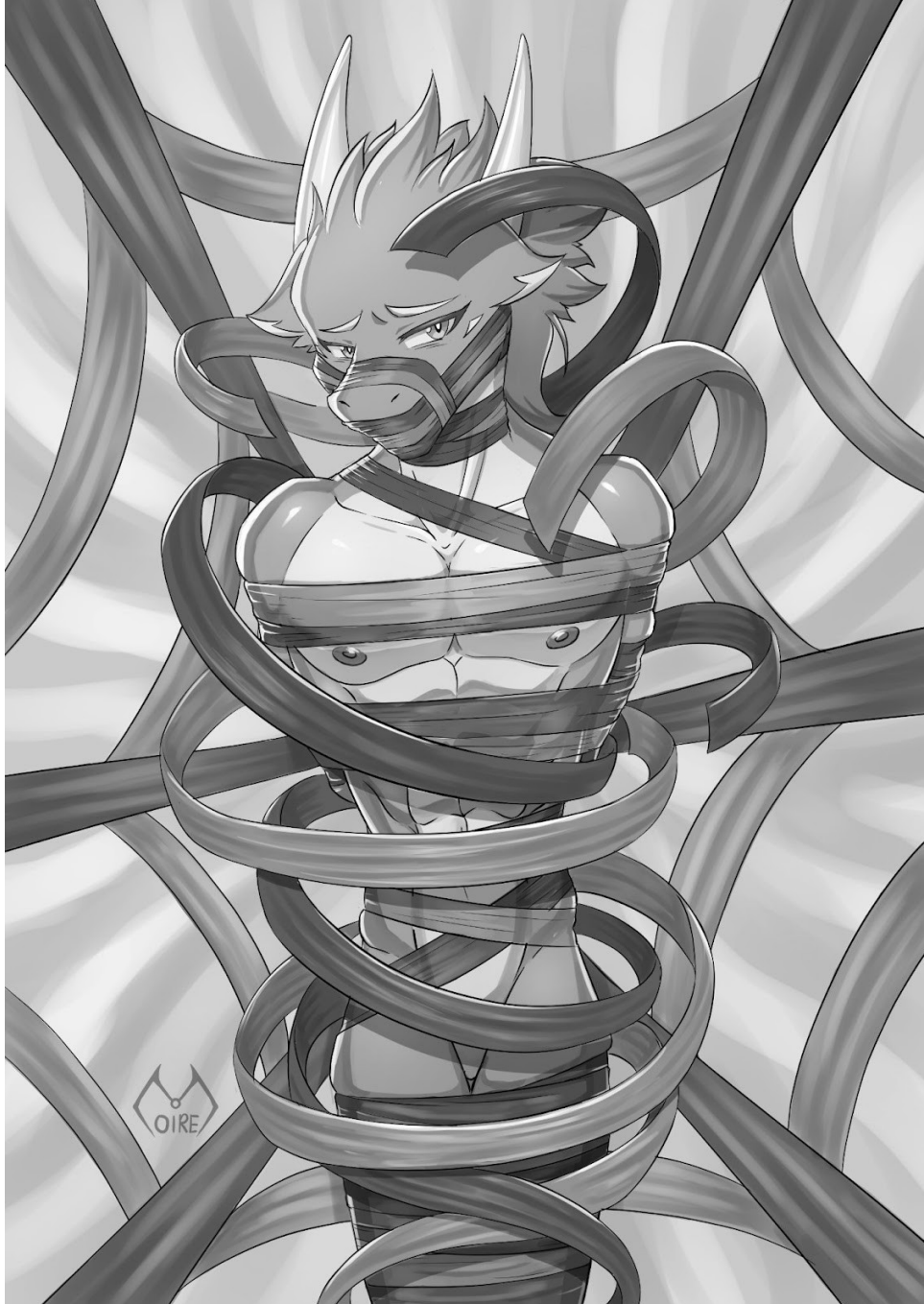


“Get off me! Hel—mfft!”

A strip of cloth coiled around his maw and pulled tight, cutting Moire off. He squirmed desperately, trying to escape. With each passing moment, more and more ribbons wound around him. His twisting body began to resemble a red and green worm more than a dragon rogue.

Moire continued to fight, but he knew he wasn't going to win. Every movement he made felt like he was tugging against sticky rubber, and his stamina was quickly running out.

What would happen to him? Would he be left in this ribbon snare until he died of thirst? Or was this a trap to capture an unsuspecting prey until someone (or something) came back to find the squirming victim?



More bolts of cloth wound around him, mummifying him with their taut wrappings. It constricted his chest, his abdomen, his legs. His arms ached from their uncomfortable positions behind his back. The ribbons moved up to his head, where they wrapped around his face. His panicked eyes darted about the room before his vision was completely obscured.

The dragon was wrapped; not a single inch of him could be seen beneath the heavy wrapping of ribbons. The suspended bundle continued squirming for a while, gradually losing strength until it hung limply in the air.



“Moire? Are you there?”

Decro hastily grabbed his satchel, slung it over his body, and held it close. He went to the entrance of the cave and looked into the blizzard. Beyond the looming silhouettes of the trees was nothing but white.

“Moire? Please, answer me!”

He stormed back into the cave, hands cupped over his ears.

“Argh!”

He wanted to tear his fur out. He wanted to scream. Hot tears flowed down his face.

“Come on, come on.” He closed his eyes and winced. “What do I do now?”

The wind howled in reply.

Moire must’ve left for the village. That was where he wanted to go earlier, if not for the fatigue. His fatigue. Decro bit his lip.

This was his fault.

But what could he do now? Should he go to the village to look for Moire? What if they missed each other and Moire comes back to see him gone? What if the dragon didn’t even go to the village, but elsewhere?

Should he just wait for Moire to come back, then? That sounded like the best idea, but what if the dragon was in danger? He couldn’t just wait here while Moire was facing some unknown perils.

He hit his fists against his temples. “C’mon, think. Think!”

Oh! The tracking crystals.

Decro rummaged through his satchel and found the last blue crystal. He hesitated. He always made it a point to have spare magic crystals in case of an emergency. A well-timed crystal had gotten him out of serious trouble on a number of occasions now.

He looked at the blizzard for a sign of the dragon. Nothing. He let out a sigh.

“Fine...” he muttered.

Decro stepped into the storm, feeling the snowflakes pelt his fur. He knelt on the snowy ground with his cloak billowing in the torrential wind. Cupping the gem in his hands and closing his eyes, he focused his energy.

“Draconis Quaerere,” he whispered.

The crystal glowed a bright blue, then disappeared in a brilliant flash. Even with his eyes closed, Decro was blinded by the light. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking away the dancing spots in his vision. The blue outlines of footprints glowed in the snow, starting from the cave entrance and leading into the forest.

The wolf sighed, letting out a puff of condensation from his mouth. He got up, dusted the snow off his cloak, and held it close against his body for warmth. The cold was going to make this an arduous journey, but he needed to press on.

He had a dragon to track.

Something woke Moire up. For a second, he forgot where he was. His arms were numb, his body was sore, and his head was throbbing. As he tried to shift, he remembered what had happened.

Shit.

He could hear heavy footsteps approach, stopping mere inches in front of him. Deep breaths accompanied the unknown presence.

“It seems we have a new visitor,” the gruff voice chuckled. “Let’s add you to my ranks.”

Moire remained silent. The ribbons around his eyes shifted aside, and he found himself eye to eye with a fiendish creature. He had the features of a bull, from the horns to the tail. However, there was something demonic about him. His facial features were sharp. His eyes were an infernal red. His horns were just as twisted and sharp as his claws, with their curved edges and harsh points. An unholy aura emanated from his body.

“Mfnft!” the dragon protested. His body shook as he feebly struggled.

“There, there,” the bull grinned. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Moire met the bull’s gaze.

“Relax.”

Relax.

“Slow your breaths.”

Slow...

The dragon’s eyes widened and he let out a soft whimper.

The bull was trying to hypnotise him!

He closed his eyes and tried to turn away.

“Look,” the bull commanded.

Moire felt an urge to obey and gaze into the bull’s entrancing eyes. He had to fight this! He squeezed his eyes tighter, willing his body not to listen.

“Look at me.”

Control. Slipping.

His eyes opened just a slit, but that was enough. The bull's will bore into Moire's psyche, and the dragon's facial muscles relaxed. His expression softened as he fell deeply into the bull's gaze.

"Breathe in."

Moire felt like he was sinking.

"Breathe out."

Deeper.

"Breathe in."

Deeper.

"With your next breaths, you exhale your thoughts. Breathe out."

The dragon's mind felt foggy as his thoughts slipped away.

"In."

The dragon inhaled.

"Out."

His eyes glazed over.

"Good boy."

A happiness spread from within the dragon.

Wait. No, he had to fight this!

Moire closed his eyes and pulled away. His muscles tensed up as he struggled against the binding fabric.

"Stop fighting this."

The dragon stopped.

"When you give in, you feel relaxed."

Relaxed.

"You feel good."

He felt good.

But—

"You feel happy."

Happy.

“Don’t resist.”

Don’t resist.

“Just obey.”

Obey.

“Obey.”

Obey.

“I will count down to one.”

“As I count down, you will fall deeper and deeper into my trance.”

“With every step down, there’s no coming back. Everything is permanent.”

“When I say sleep, your mind will be completely blank, and you will fall into a mindless trance.”

“Ten.”

“Nine.”

“Eight.”

“Seven.”

“Six.”

“Five.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

Sleep.

“Moire?”

Decro shouted as he looked around the junction. The connecting streets were all empty, save for the blue draconic footprints leading down one of them. The wolf furrowed his brow and grumbled beneath his breath.

He was stressed.

His sorcery instincts were sharp. He could sense evil and pervasive enchantments in the air, swirling around him like a stifling fog. His magic resistance was stronger now that he had recharged some of his mana, but it was still hard to breathe. The sooner he found Moire and got out of here, the better.

The tracking footprints lead him to an open space in the village surrounded by empty wooden booths. A black granite plinth stood in the middle, missing a statue.

“Moire?” he muttered. He knew it was too soft for anyone to hear, but he didn’t want to alert any potential threats to his presence. He sighed. It felt pointless. The earlier he got out of here, the better.

“You’d make a good statue,” a gruff voice said behind him.

Decro swung around. A fireball flared up in his palm. A demonic bull was standing behind him with a smirk on his face.

“Who are you?”

The bull made no effort to reply.

“Tell me now!” Decro demanded. The flame in his hand grew bigger. “I’m not afraid—”

Something shoved the wolf from the back, knocking him to the cobblestone pavement. He turned around and scrambled back. A large red and green beast had pounced on him, snarling at him with its enormous jaws. Its hide was made of ribbons hanging all over the beast’s hunched over form.

Decro hastily shoved the fireball at the beast, knocking it back. It let out a piercing shriek, buying the wolf just enough time to scramble to his feet. It would have to do, because the beast started chasing him.

He ran across the village square, tossing spell after spell at the monster. The beast swiped each spell away effortlessly before lunging for the wolf. Decro dived to the side, narrowly dodging its sharp claws. He shot another spell, causing the beast to roar in pain before rushing towards him again.

The beast wasn’t stopping. His spells were not doing enough damage to his opponent, and his mana was running out. He needed to run. However, before he could escape, something grabbed his ankle.

Decro looked down. A red ribbon was wrapped around his ankle, tugging him back. The beast had extended multiple ribbons from its back towards the wolf, trying to ensnare him in their powerful grips. Another one wound around his wrist, and a third one gripped his waist. The wolf tried to cast the freedom enchantment but the spell fizzled out with the last of his mana reserves.

“Crap.”

The beast pulled Decro close to it.

“Help! Anyone, please!”

His eyes caught sight of the blue tracking footprints across the cobblestone. These were fresh. Decro hastily traced them. They led to the beast that was attacking him.

“Moire?” His voice cracked. “Is... is that you?”

The beast didn't respond, dragging its victim close. Decro was face to face with the beast's cloth jaws. The ribbons were wound and twisted to form its ferocious visage. Its fabric teeth were twisted into pointed tips. The wolf didn't doubt for a second that they would tear through him despite their seemingly soft material.

But inside the monster was his friend, Moire.

“Moire, if you're in there, please. Don't do this.”

His words weren't going through. If Moire was in there, it wasn't the Moire he knew.

“Please.”

He closed his eyes, hoping his death came swiftly.

“On the plinth,” the bull instructed.

The beast dragged Decro over to the centre of the village square and lifted the wolf up onto the plinth. More ribbons emerged from its back to hold the wolf in place. They ripped his cloak and satchel away, leaving him in nothing but his skin-tight bodysuit. The fabric around his torso constricted him, making it hard to breathe.

“Moire, please.”

Manipulating its ribbons, the beast moved Decro's limbs to pose him. The wolf was forced into a position where he was taking a step forward, with his arm outstretched. Decro looked around in confusion. The wind was swirling around him, coating him with tiny crystals of ice.



His restraints didn't let him move much, but he managed to shake off the layer of ice. But the wind around him grew colder, blasting at him like a blizzard. For every flake of snow he shook off, ten more stuck to his fur. Decro shivered. He was terrified. He was cold. The layer of ice forming around him was turning him into a living popsicle.

"No, no. I don't want to die."

Tears escaped his eyes, quickly turning into ice too.

"Moire?"

His facial features were frozen in place, leaving him staring at the beast that had once been his friend. He could no longer move or speak. The ribbons released him as the beast moved away, but the damage was done: he had been reduced to an ice statue.

Decro couldn't see where Moire went, but he could hear the guffaw of the bull as they left. He was stuck staring at the empty town square.

It was cold. So cold.

There was no escape for him, was there?

Perhaps another adventurer would find their way here. Maybe they would see the wolf trapped in ice and free him. Then he could go and save Moire! Or if Moire could fight the trance he was in and come save him. They could escape the village and find their way home. But until then, he was stuck here.



Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of his outstretched hand. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but the tips of his fingers were glossy.

Wait.

It wasn't the lighting. The tips of his fingers were slowly turning into clear ice.

No!

But there was nothing he could do to stop this. Decro spent the next hour watching in despair as his body was gradually transmuted into ice. His open palm turned into a glassy lens. The transparency spread down his arm and towards his body.

The wolf couldn't see it, but the rest of his body was undergoing a similar change. His legs and tails were completely turned into ice. There was no distinction between his body and the ice that imprisoned him. The white fur on chest dissolved into pure clarity, along with the rest of his torso.



Decro felt the cold permeate his body. It was over for him. The most he could hope for was for Moire to eventually be freed, so he wished as hard as he could. As the icy transformation spread up his neck, the last of his mortal form dissolved into glistening crystal. The ice wolf statue was finished. The granite plinth would be its eternal perch, guarded by the beasts that prowled the accursed village.

~ End ~