Chapter Three

isolation

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The baron grey sand underneath Oslo's feet felt like air as he stands gazing at the horizon, looking for some direction. Each grain stuck together in a mush, but he didn't so much as sink a centimeter. He feels lightweight, and his body is responsive to his every move. A simple twitch in his finger felt graceful; not a creaky joint nor resistance in any muscle. He shifted his weight forward, leading with his chest. His body was gliding across the grey desert hills. He leaps six feet in the air, only to come down as quick as he went up. He flipped every which way in the air, twisting and turning, pushing the limits of what he could do. The grey molecules sprits up into the air with each landing. The particles start to cling to his clothing, turning his clothing grey. With a sash swinging from the back of his neck like a scarf, his oversized tunic trailed in the air along side it. Soon enough, even his jet-black hair would fall victim to the mundane hue of this world.

"This world. It's so sad."

He breaks no sweat continuing to play around the mounds of sand without a care in the world. Any thought of Ocea or desire to wake her had dissipated. These lands left him to himself, with no concern for any other, but a playground of isolation.

Oslo grabs a hand full of sand and forms it into an orb. He compresses it between his palms as hard as he can until it's solid as a rock. He chucks it up into the air and swings an imaginary baseball bat as the ball drops down in front of him.

SLUG

The ball goes flying into the air, farther than he could see into the horizon. His eyes go searching for it, but it disappears before he can see where it landed.

"Wow." Words escape his mouth with no echo. When he spoke, it was soft and silent, with nothing but an unsettling muffle hardly reaching his own eardrums.

"WOW!" He yells as loud as he can. No difference.

A weight slowly sinks onto his chest. His breathing becomes heavier. He doesn't have a clue what he's doing here. He cries. Thick gobs of salty tears drip from his eyes. He tries to stop them but he can't. His body caves, pushing him over onto his hands and knees as tears gush out to the ground below. The grey dust mixes with each drop, forming it into a gooey substance. Oslo stops and stares in amusement as he catches his breath. He extends his hand toward the mush and cups it into his palm. He slowly brings it closer to his face, deeply inhaling. Lemon. Acid. Cold Metals. Ammonia. The exact scent, he can't grasp or describe, it's new to him. It wobbles in his hand, waiting to be molded, Oslo starts to stretch and bend it. Like snow, the more dust he rubs it in, the bigger it grows.

Without thinking, he molded and shaped it. He created a sturdy cylindrical block that he sat at the top of a mound. He continued to pull and stretch it upward into the sky, forming branches and other rough, chipped textures. The center block formed a trunk that formed branches that formed twigs. The twigs formed leaves which formed buds which formed flowers. But when he stepped back to look at what he had made, it wasn't beautiful. Not at all. It only brought him further despair.

More tears fell from his face, creating streams down the mound in every direction. He cried hard. Until rivers formed all throughout the grey wasteland. And by these rivers, more trees grew. With each tree, more breath was taken out of Oslo, and more sorrow was left behind. The world around him was ever changing, until it was grey no more, filled with many colors. Unbeknownst to Oslo, his first tree sprouted a red flower. And another. And another. Grass sprouted from the dust around him, spreading down by each riverside. His tears were out of control, raising the waters above the streamlines until it reached the base of each tree. The mounds around him begin to disappear into the abyss of his own tears. Before long, the land is completely flooded, all but the mound he sits on. He falls flat on his face in exhaustion, giving in to a deep sleep that's overcome him.

'Asleep...' He thinks to himself.

'How could I be... Inside... Inside? Inside what?' He can't remember.

'What am I inside of...'

He continues to drift. His body once so weightless, feels a force on his back that pushes him into the mound. How can one be asleep in a dream? Regardless, the thought of sleep sounds so delightful his mouth starts to water, and the world around him begins to disappear. Until,

"Ossy! Ossy! You can't give in now!"

Ocea's cry repeats, over and over again, desperate to keep Oslo alert.

Unfazed, her words fall over his deaf ears.

"Stay with me! Ossy, You can't leave me like this!" She begs.

Dazed, "Ocea—" Oslo picks up his head.

As Oslo pushes off the ground, the force gets stronger, breaking his left shoulder blade and bruising his hips. A golden flame radiates from inside Oslo's chest, stretching out from his arms and hands and into the grey soil, giving life to his dying creations. The sun rises in the distance, putting an end to the empty horizons, filling the sky with blues and oranges. He digs under the grass, revealing the dust below. He grips a handful of it and throws it to the side, digging one hand at a time until he reaches its core. An old familiar grey goo suddenly bursts out from the hole and starts drifting into the air like a bubble. The weight lifts from Oslo. Relieved, he stands with wobbling knees and reaches out his hand like a curious child. He rips a chunk of goo from the floating cluster, rotating it in his palm and giving it a good look before he ingests it like a marshmallow.

His chest is on fire. His stomach burns. And in a flash, the world around him erupts, leaving it to stardust. He's drifted in a current of warm air that hugs him softly. Golden splashes of light sparkle through a dark blue and tan painted expanse. Oslo laughs with joy, riding the current as far as he can into the dreamscape, in hopes to find Ocea's consciousness.

Suddenly, the warmth abandons Oslo to a shockingly cold atmosphere.

A sinister voice echoes through the dwindling expanse, "Which dream would you like? There's many to choose from!"

Chills trickle down Oslo's spine. He reaches for a weapon, though it has not been with him for quite some time.

"You could've told her to stay, but you let her go. Deeper and deeper."

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"You had her. In the meadow. She was yours! All you had to do was tell her to stay. Where the two of you could live forever."

"No, I can't... I have to wake her. There's a reality out there still!"

"The only one who needs waking up is you, boy. You are powerless to my kingdom. My dreamscape. This world—you really think it belongs to her? Accept your prison of meadows and princesses. It's a far greater paradise than you could ever sculpt in your pathetic reality."

"Who are you?" Oslo yells to the stars.

"I am your helper. Your guide. Your truth finder." The sinister voice laughs.

"Show yourself!"

"You wouldn't survive it." The voice echoes far into the distance as his presence dissipates.

Oslo nods, "The demon."

As sweat drips down his face, the cold air turns warm once again as the current pushes Oslo.

With a heavy heart, Oslo must fight against the demon's temptations. May the current flow on, drifting him to what inhabits Ocea's consciousness. A moment later, a string of grey goo swims beside Oslo, wiggling like a dying worm, waving to him.

Oslo leans toward the goo, "You're in trouble, aren't you?"

The worm struggles closer to Oslo, awaiting his touch.

Oslo stretches out to it, bracing from the moment his hand collides. His finger tips break through this silky substance as the goo multiplies, pouring out around him, and swallowing him whole.

Oslo lays in the center of the goo as it shakes violently. It passes down visions to him. Maroon skies, blood-tainted wood, swords clashing, horses dashing. Anger. He feels anger swell up inside of him, with nothing more than a burning desire to reach her. The girl who was taken from him.

He can see her. She's right there in front of him. As Oslo reaches his hand out, the goo bursts and splatters into pieces.

"Once upon a time there was a princess. Her name was Corea. Corea was always to herself, planning for the days she was with her family and friends. She would bake bread and cakes, grow flowers and trees, and create a place for birds and all sorts of animals to rest alongside them. She lived in a meadow. A valley, surrounded by trees, in a great field of ever-blooming flowers. Corea loved the world she built for her family and friends, but she didn't realize all the while she was building this place, the lives of those she loves are changing. Changing faster than she can keep up with. She worked harder and quicker to cultivate her dreamland, but nothing was ever quite good enough. She spent so much time away that her family and friends started to believe she had abandoned them. "How could they think such a thing?" She thought to herself, unaware to the isolation she was living in. She neglected the very things she was working towards."

Ocea chokes up, struggling to get words out as she fights back tears.

"And then there was a boy. A prince. Named Tella. Tella was of course one of Corea's dearest friends. They grew up together in the old castle town. Corea loves Tella very much, as Tella did Corea. But when Corea vanished into her meadow, Tella didn't know what to do. All the time he had spent for her felt wasted. H—He thought she had abandoned him. So, Tella ran away. And just when Corea had come back to show him the world she's made, he was gone."

"With no sign of ever returning..."

"Keep following my voice, darling Oslo. You will find me here, in my meadow."

Oslo opens his eyes, waking to a grey expanse. While there's no visible floor beneath him, he lays suspended in the air.

Without a second thought, he stands up. He steps forward. The grey wasteland is a distant memory now, like it was all a bad dream. Strangely enough, all he can remember is how free he felt, how beautiful it was, forgetting the agony he experienced. The next thing he knew he was placing his foot onto a cold, damp tile. He could hear a trickling fountain, only to realize he was standing in it. Before him stood a giant gateway. It roared open, echoing through the enormous hall in front of him, revealing the bloody maroon skies behind them, pulsing to the sound of drums.

"My lord! You are healed!" Makita beckons to him. "My lord, your foot is no longer cursed!"

Oslo lifts his foot into his hand, balancing to view his once white scaled foot. "*Hai...*" Murmurs Oslo.

He looks back to Makita as he places his foot on the ground. "What's happened? Have they found her?"

"No progress has been made my lord, there's been a standstill at Lord Koji's gates."

"It's time." Oslo looks to his right palm, massaging it with his left, "Makita, bring me the *Gauntletta*."

Makita is taken aback. A smile starts to crack, but he quickly straightens his face as he eagerly runs to the dark passage to the right of Oslo's healing well. He passes many doorways, approaching one at the very end. As he opens the door, a room with various weapons mounted to the walls is revealed. Each weapon is contained within a steel frame, tucked behind thick glass. He passes by dual swords colored a deep blue at the hilt with silver or gold gems in the center of the diamond-shaped handle guard. He passes walls of Orbs varying in intricate yet organic design, with spirits swirling around on the inside. He grasps the handle of a frame that holds a mechanical gauntlet. It has three parts to it, yet Makita only grabs one. A glove section that would slip over Oslo's knuckles.

Makita rolls up the right sleeve of Oslo's Kimono, "The Gauntletta, my lord." He slips the hefty gauntlet onto Oslo's right hand.

"Domo." Oslo grabs Makita's right shoulder, "My friend, let this fight be our last."

Oslo marches down the grand stairway before him, through the pillared hall, and out the front gate, revealing his war-torn kingdom. He steps onto a large wooden beam atop the never ending castle stairs, overlooking the remains of a kingdom. Fire burning over wooden stakes, mud and blood covered grasses, ponds of water nearly dried up or destroyed. Yet Oslo looks east, left of where he stands, seeing his armies continue to march toward the Eastern gates.

"We've prepared your horse, my lord." Makita gestures to the bottom of the stairway.

Oslo trots down the stairs, his feet hitting each step one after another in a controlled rhythm. Still barefoot, he leaps off the third from the bottom step onto the barebacked horse. The horse stirs as he grips the mane, settling him down with a few brushes from his left hand.

Oslo looks at Makita and draws his right two fingers from his left temple to his right. Makita bows in response as Oslo hikes the horse away. As soon as his right heel met the Horses' flesh, Oslo fell into a muddy puddle, ruining his white tuxedo.

"Damnit! You—Horse!" Oslo stands in up, brushing off his wet pants and shoulders. He spins around as he cannot remember which direction he had been going. There's nothing but concrete Jungle and large crowds roaring through the night-lively streets of some odd city. He can't make out where exactly he is when a familiar voice calls out,

"Cal!" A name is called by a woman in the distance.

Oslo turns around, facing a tower in which poshly dressed crowds are spilling into.

"Hey, Cal!"

Oslo looks up to see a brunette in a brown fur coat and bright red lipstick waving to him, "You might need to get yourself a new suit!" Her arm is wrapped around a man with a clean version of Oslo's suit. The couple continues walking up the stairs of the white-lit building as he stands at the base as his shoes and socks continue to soak in the puddle.

'Cal?... She was talking to me?'

Oslo shrugs it off, seeing that the man does indeed have the same suit as him, he follows the couple up the steps. He taps the gentleman on the back, "I'm gonna need that suit."

He turns back to face Oslo, "What're you talking about?"

The girl peers over her date's shoulder, "Cal, get lost. You shouldn't have come here anyways."

"I don't have time to explain, I need the suit." Oslo was growing impatient.

"Cal, you really came here alone, didn't you? And it shows." The girl releases herself from the man and moves into Oslo's face, "You shouldn't have come in the first place. You know she doesn't want to see you."

"Who?"

"Cal, really? *Sara* doesn't wanna see ya. Buh bye." She looks down on Oslo like she's never seen anyone more pathetic.

"Sara? She's here?" He pushes past the girl to go inside.

"Cal! Cal!"

He forcefully steps toward the doorway to find an Usher staring him up and down. "I'm sorry sir, while the venue is black tie, it needless to say should be a clean one."

"What do you mean? It's not that bad!" Oslo stares down at his suit to find it completely covered in guck, trash, vomit, you name it. "Where did this all..." He turns around to the couple again, "What did you do to me?"

"Cal, you did this to yourself. She doesn't want you. Why would she?" They push past him again and go inside with ease.

He shivers as he walks down and sits near the bottom of the steps. The sound of honking horns, commercial ads, bystanders, and vendors yelling about this or that fill the air. The smell of wet cement and rotten bananas lingers around him.

"How could I let this happen? My one chance to find her, embrace her again. *Sara*. She's in there. Just a wall of concrete stands between me and her."

He hears drums start behind him, coming from the party inside. Though unexpectedly they sound tribal, like the beat of bongos or a djembe, not the style of music you would expect at this function.

He looks up down at his mud-soaked shoes with a corner of the leather still peeping out, reflecting the street lights around him. He reaches down, pushing some mud over the rest of the leather. His feet, now completely covered in mud, feel cleaner than they ever have. A hairy old man kneels in front of Oslo, reaching to scrub his feet with his hands and a bowl of water. Still hearing the drums behind him, Oslo looks up to meet eyes with the old man.

"Where am I?"

The peculiar man covered in furs, horns, and paint stares into Oslo's soul without a word for a response. The old Shaman continues washing Oslo's feet. He looks around only to find that he's inside a teepee, wearing nothing but a loin cloth around his waist. He feels tacky skin on his face that's been covered with paint. His hair is long, greasy, and a mess to say the least. The drums continue to get louder and louder.

"Come— dis wey" The Shaman stands to guide Oslo out of the teepee.

Oslo's still muddied feet carry him through a colony of tents made of furs and leather until they reach one that's far more magnificent than the others. They step inside to a room smoke filled room, with a throne made of sticks and mud at the center of it. On it, sits a man so wrinkled you couldn't see his facial features whatsoever. His lips looked the same as his eyes, his nose as plump as his breasts. Skin clings to his bones, and piercings cover any loose skin one could find. The man on the throne raises his finger, shaking desperately, pointing at Oslo.

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"Y...o...u..."
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"Yes—your... majesty."

The other old men in the room shake their heads in disapproval.

"You are sentenced, to live life alone. In the great desolate hole. *Mayanmark*, *tusogee*, *ren-mahk-ina*." His words come out slow and creaky.

Oslo leans forward, trying to understand what he was saying, "What have I done wrong?" The Shaman that washed his feet ties leather around Oslo's wrists.

"Y...o...u... Have hidden our daughter. *Taken* her from us. If she is not hidden, then she must be dead."

"I don't know your daughter, I don't know any of you!"

"Do not take me for a fool." The elder forms a circle with his hands, "Tuso, Gaga, mahk-rena-duso!"

A force presses against Oslo's chest, pushing him out of the tent and into the sky. He floats above the colony with wind rushing around him. The elder and his clan walk out from the cover of their tent to observe Oslo.

"What are you doing to me!?" Oslo chokes through the air.

"Reveal her. Or be damned!" The elder holds the circle towards Oslo.

Oslo breath is short, his chest tight, "I don't... Know..."

The elder overlaps his fingers, closing the circle. Oslo gently falls from the sky until his knees fold into the dirt below.

"Take him." The old wrinkled one gestures away.

Oslo stands in a deep hole, spanning about ten feet at its widest, sitting close to thirty feet into the ground. He walks his bruised legs to the wall of the hole, putting his

hand against it. The ground feels like sand as he stretches his toes through it. He digs his feet into it until a wave splashes against his toes. As he stands still in the deep den, he sees glimpses of a beach flashing before his eyes. He hears the birds and echoes of water splashing against the coast. He looks up, staring at the muddy wall. But for a moment he sees the coastline, feeling the salty breeze and the water splash against his ankles. Only to blink and be faced with the wall again. Like a flashing light, the beach is revealed to him ever so often. With each passing sight, he sees someone off in the distance. Coming closer and closer with each moment.

Half dazed and feeling near dead, "Ocea..." Oslo murmurs leaning his forehead against the wall until his neck caves and he falls to the muddy floor. His eyelids hang half open, his throat cracked dry, and his skin leathery.

The ground felt more like wood. He groans, picking up his head and rubbing it, only to see in front of him a wood table with a cloth hanging over it. He looks up, a tear ready to shed. There sits Ocea directly across the table from him. He looks around the room, but not keeping his eyes off of her too long, he's in the meadow house again.

"Ossy." Ocea smiles.

"Ocea—" The site of her was refreshing, like drinking a cold glass of water.

"Have you decided?"

"Decided what?"

Ocea smirks, and closes her eyes, with her lips quivering. "Decided what we should do— about us..."

Oslo's face turns bright red, "What do you mean?"

"I know childhood can seem... silly. I know we're less familiar with each other now."

"uh huh." Oslo nods.

Ocea leans forward, "Do you remember the letter I wrote you? Left out by the Oak tree the night you stormed off? You know... after I saved you?"

Oslo laughs into a sigh, "Yes, I remember that day."

"But the letter, do you remember the letter?"

"I do. Of course I remember—" Oslo scratches his head, "As for the contents of it. I can't remember. Not for the life of me."

Ocea leans back, "That's okay." She smiles graciously, "It has to do with...Well, listen Oslo, you are dear to me. And sometimes I wish that when something is said it's meant for life. I wish nothing could ever change such a thing said. Nothing like time, distance, adolescence, or hormones. It's silly." Ocea quivers, "The innocence of childhood has seemed to be ripped from us as we only get older. It's not fair"

Oslo's heart pounds, feeling the full effect of what Ocea is saying but longing to know— "What is this all about? Is it the letter?" Oslo reaches his hand across the table, laying it in front of Ocea as she still looks out the window, "What did it say?"

Tears fall down her face, "If only you could remember..." She turns to look into his eyes, "You'll have to look deeper. Look deeper Ossy. You'll find it, I know you will."

The room grew dark and cold, the sun no longer beaming from the windows. A sudden fear was instilled into Oslo's mind, pushing him to stand back in the corner of the room. As his hands reach the counter of the kitchen, he can no longer move, watching as a shadow began to lurk through the doorway.

"O-Oc-e...a" Oslo quivers, a chill shivers down his spine.

A dark figure steps into the room, one silent foot at a time. His long slender figure holds Oslo in a chokehold, completely paralyzed to any movement. He looked much like the demon he faced in the forest, but more scathing. His figure was far darker, larger, and with no real definition. His movement was surreal. Casting no shadow, he looked as though he was pasted into a photograph. His face couldn't be made out, except for a sinister smile that could only be noticed because of the rough skin around his lips, the only real skin that was distinguishable, the rest of him was too dark to see. He wags his finger, stepping towards Ocea with open arms. Ocea sits there, staring directly into Oslo's eyes with tears coming out of her face.

"Do you know me, *boy*?" The demon remarks.

Oslo tries to shake his head but can't, "N n-no..."

The monster mouths with no sound, *de a t h*.

"Yo...u can't— take he..r" Oslo shivers with a chill in his feet.

The demon stretches both of his elongated arms and places each hand on her shoulders, staring deeply into Oslo's eyes while he does so. Oslo can only make out his

eyes, the smallest white specs, slightly lower on a face than he'd expect. He not only notices them, he can't stop looking at them. He's hypnotized.

"You're not allowed to move here. No, not in my presence. I am *Kanashibari*. But you and I have met once before."

Oslo wants to scream but can only let out a whisper, "You're the demon from the wood." He gasps for air, "Are you real?.. Or a.. Figment of.. Her imagination?"

The demon grins, exposing his red teeth. Hairs spirt from his head, inching longer as his smile grows bigger, squeezing Ocea tighter until her elbows pierce her sides. Though, she doesn't bat an eye. Dark scales slide out of the pores around his fingers and hands.

"Oh, I am real, child. Not a figment. Not an imagination."

With long thin strands of hair falling to his feet, covering the table Ocea sits at. He tears Ocea from her seat, and in one swift movement, strides out the doorway.

"OSSY!!!" Ocea's cry echoes sharply, cutting Oslo's eardrums.

Unable to move or speak, Oslo screams in his chest. Blood rushes to his head, and just as he feels he's going to pop, the chokehold is released.

The sun shines through the windows as the birds chirp again. Oslo runs outside, only to find himself in a long and dark hallway.

He hears a voice in the distance, "Oslo! Oslo!"

He turns nervously, checking his surroundings. A gothic hallway is filled with paintings and candles mounted to the tattered wallpaper. He shivers, feeling a presence around him like something's watching him. There are doors lined up at each end of the hall, with a dark red carpet leading to them.

He hears again, "Oslo!"

He attempts to duck down under a small table with a sour smelling cloth draped over it but half his body sticks out of it.

'Damn.' He runs for it, knocking the table down as he stands back up. He goes to a door in the opposite end of the hall, away from the yelling. He rattles the doorknob, but it's locked.

"Oslo!"

He balls up in a corner and covers his face with his hands. He hears creaking and footsteps rapidly moving towards the opposite end of the hall. Oslo can feel the door's gaze as the footsteps come to a stop. A shadow covers the hallway, all candles blow out, and Oslo is alone.

'Follow my voice, Ossy. Follow my voice.'

The sound of Ocea rings through his head as he turns and barges through the door behind him. The knob melted in his hand like butter, and the door crumbled into a thousand pieces. Before him is a large open space leading to nothing. Tattered walls, paintings, and darkness. However, he couldn't see the far end of the room, but before he approached it he stared intently. He sees nothing at first, but a moment later he sees a strange figure dancing in the dark. The silhouette was slender and fox-like. Though it wasn't a fox, it was a man. A man with a tail, wearing a suit, with ears stretching above his head. It danced mechanically like it was made of paper and would bend sharply at the joints. It opened its mouth like it was letting out a laugh but no sound would come out.

Oslo slowly steps towards the right-most wall, brushing his back and hands against it as he slid forward to the other end of the room. The figure moved closer to the center of the room. Keeping the creature in his eyesight, he slid further. One step at a time, until the tip of his toe, caught the carpet and he tripped over. He immediately looked up at the figure and saw it dancing no more. It was still, put on pause mid-dance, with it's mouth wide open. Oslo dare not move any further, he dare not blink for that matter. His eyes begin to water until a thick grey goop falls from his tear ducts. He can't help it. He. must. *Blink*.

The creature scurries on all fours directly at Oslo. A mechanical stuffed fox head with human eyes and human limbs climbs the floor with a smile. A bright blood-dipped tail hangs over its head as it goes to wrap it around Oslo's neck. As its tacky fur brushes his neck, Oslo's eyes turn in and see nothing.

Until moments later he sees white. He hears a *BANG BANG* *beep beep* *BANG BANG* *beep beep* over and over. His head spun in a daze.

'Don't forget me...'

Oslo's pounding heart slows as he rises into the Ether in a cold sweat. Never had he been so comforted by the empty space around him before.

"Ossy." A voice comes from behind him.

Oslo turns to Ocea floating within an arms reach.

The Ether turns dark. Pitch black.

"Give her to me. You demon, let me wake her!" Oslo scowls, as *Kanashibari* still has its grip on her.

The long-haired beast dangles in the air with Ocea in his arms, grinning cheek to cheek. "You create these nightmares for yourself, *child*. You play pretend with a world that does not do the same."

Ocea and Kanashibari vanish into the darkness. Oslo screams, yet no sound can be heard.

The words repeat through Oslo's head over and over.

'You create these nightmares. You create these nightmares. You create these nightmares.'

The darkness covers Oslo. It numbs every sensation, isolating his melting heart.

All he can hear are murmurs in the distance,

"Corea, dancing in her lilies, roses, and tulips. Corea, singing lullabies, ballads, and poetry. Corea, moving with the way of the meadow."

'Her father and mother pleaded, "Don't forget the girl in the meadow. Don't forget Corea."

The prince nodded his head, assuring Corea's parents he won't leave her like dust to the wind. The prince refused. He looked them in the eyes, regardless of his bitterness towards her. Regardless of the thought that she didn't want to be with him. She doesn't deserve to be alone. She should never ever be alone.'

'But little did the Prince know, Corea was begging the skies for him.'

"Don't drift away. Fight every last inch of this. Just like Oslo and the Deep Red Sea. Please. Follow my voice, Ossy, don't drift away. Don't forget the girl in the meadow."