“Eli, is... is there anything I can do to help?” The turtle-crab had raised an eyebrow quizzically at her. “To help with what?” Mano hadn’t known how to broach the topic. “Have you ever thought about seeing someone? About everything that happened, I mean?” She’d felt stereotypically male in her clumsiness around women sometimes. “My parents sent me to a therapist when I was a kid.” That had been all she’d needed to say about it. “I understand. If, if you need to talk to me, you can talk to me, you know?”

Elizabeth had sighed. “What’s there to talk about?” Mano had grasped for words. “It’s seemed like things have been getting to you a lot,” she’d finally said. “Well... There are a lot of things,” the turtle-crab had euphemized. “You do a lot of good, you know.” The poet had scoffed. “Sure I do.” The journalist had hated the way she’d dismissed things like that. “I know you mean it. I just think you’re wrong.”

*I can’t stand this and I know I can’t do anything about it, what am I going to do?*

“Of course I know I’m not doing so well. Of course I know you can tell,” Elizabeth had shaken her head. “I can make my own decisions.” Mano hadn’t liked the way she’d put that. “What kind of decisions do you mean?” The turtle-crab hadn’t welcomed the question. “I mean in general.” The cephalopod started feeling like she’d been making things worse. “You don’t see yourself clearly when you’re thinking like that.” The poet had snapped back at her. “I can see myself perfectly well! And I know the way I feel about things,” she’d punctuated ferociously.

“There’s only so much suffering a person can endure.” Mano had been starting to feel the ground slipping out from under her. “Eli, we’ve been through so much together,” her voice had given out, “there’s nothing I wouldn’t see you through.” The turtle-crab had looked at her painfully. “But I’ve already put you through so much.” The cephalopod had shaken her head. “None of it would mean anything without you,” she’d insisted. “Maybe none of it means anything anyway,” the poet had answered darkly, “but you’re doing the right thing saying so.”

Privately she’d already begun to think about which method she’d been going to use.

*‘I need a miracle.’*

The method dance proved difficult. Hemingway had ruined guns for her, no blade would’ve pierced her shell, no poison would’ve killed her, Judas had ruined hanging, Gandhi had ruined starvation, Buddhists had ruined self-immolation, Islamists had ruined explosives, and she couldn’t drown herself since she could breathe underwater. The shell that protected her felt like the Great Wall had been built around her, daring her to break through it. But a way to die that she could’ve lived with would’ve had to indict religion, not play into it.

So she’d read Mano’s scriptures after all.

Eventually she’d learned that some yogis were able to attain a level of mental discipline which permitted them to slow down or speed up their own heartbeats at will. Elizabeth may have hated herself, and she may have been many things, but she hadn’t been weak-willed. It’d been important to her for people to know that. So she studied, and practiced, and with great discipline and effort, mastered the skills of her girlfriend’s ancestors. It’d almost made her confident enough in her own abilities to want to live after all.

Almost.

*‘I will face my fear.’*

Mano had found a note one morning tasting oceans in her eyes.

*‘Don’t ever blame yourself, Mano. You did everything you could, and I really do mean that.*

*I don’t think I’ve ever told you this, but atheism’s never been associated with hopelessness for me. You see, it’s not that I wish there were an afterlife but can’t convince myself that it’s possible for there to be one. It’s not even that I’m that afraid of hell anymore. It’s just that my version of an ideal afterlife is one in which I finally get to stop having to exist.*

*I remember reading an interesting theory about the afterlife one day. It was that after we die, we all go to whatever our own personal idea of what the afterlife should be happens to be. It’s a lot more non-confrontational that I usually care for, but right now, for some reason, it doesn’t really seem all that bad to me. If that was true, it’d mean you could still go through however many incarnations you’re still supposed to have left after your current one and I, on the other hand, could achieve dissolution right now.*

*I’m going to go find out the truth of the matter for myself now. If you’re right, I’ll have to agree with you and if I’m right, I’ll no longer be around to argue, so either way, the debate ends here. I’ve thought about it and I’m going to go with heart failure, like Neruda. If I do have to get reincarnated, I hope to come back as something easygoing, gentle and male this time.*

*You’re strong, Mano. I know you can get over me. I’ve never seen anything you couldn’t get over. We’re only steps in evolution, you and I, nowhere near its pinnacle. I may not have told you this enough, but you never had to be just the way I was, you know. Evolution will still keep going even after I’ll be gone, and I’m reconciled with that. Scatter my ashes at the Galapagos.*

*I may have never believed in your gods, but I’ve always believed in you.*

*Ever your mock turtle,*

*Elizabeth.’*

Mano had found her lying on her back in a perfect corpse asana, perfect down to every last detail. Her own body had convulsed, trembled, wailed and wriggled in agony on the ground when she’d found her, inconsolable. At the funeral, she’d used her color-shifting ability to make her entire body black, as well as her clothes.

“Elizabeth was the kind of person who this world needs more of, not less of. She cared about others more than about herself, she gave so much and got so little in return. She’s been through worse and she’s accomplished more than anyone I’ve ever known. She was a force of nature, and nature will miss her. I wish I could have made her as happy as she made me. I’m sorry, everyone... I tried.” Her eulogy had sounded absolutely pathetic to her. She was no poet.

*‘There are just so many of you and there’s only one of me.’*

At the end of her rope, desperately trying to get away from what had happened to her as fast as she could, she’d ended up having to sell the rights to Elizabeth’s work to some of her fans for rent and food. Everything had seemed meaningless without her anyway, and Mano felt like she didn’t deserve to have any of her girlfriend’s accomplishments associated with her name, like if she’d deserved it, she’d have been good enough to have saved her in the first place. Elizabeth had used to say that, when the work was out there, it no longer belonged to her.

She’d wished that it hadn’t taken a poet’s suicide to lend their work notoriety. It stank.

There’d been no closure for her. How could you get revenge when the killer and victim were the same person? She gave half of the money away, and kept the other to build a sub for her to live in, to give herself something to do to take her mind off things, but especially to get a place where she’d always feel at home, and where she could hide from the world. She hadn’t been able to face the world when she’d felt that she may as well have killed Elizabeth. She’d bought herself a year’s worth of supplies, and decided she’d become a hermit for a while.

*‘You’ve got your space and I’ve got my space, see? Everyone’s happy.’*

It hadn’t taken long before she’d started hearing voices talk to her. But there had been on one around to tell her she’d been losing her mind, so it hadn’t worried her. She’d known her supplies wouldn’t last forever, and when she’d resurface, she’d been determined to have come up with something down there that would’ve been better than what she’d had going in. She’d wanted to find a way to get the world closer to how Elizabeth had wanted it to be. Maybe in some way that could make up for what she hadn’t been able to do then, she’d hoped.

*‘Slow and steady now...’*

Tinkering with her plants and machines, having turned into a full-fledged mad scientist by then, she’d finally come up with her own take on an empathy drug. It’d been going to be something better than the drugs that shrinks or crime could provide, something that would go in for the mirror neurons to reward empathy on a neurochemical level. It’d been meant to make people addicted to caring about others, to finally atone for her sins and make the world a better place.