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Choice

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Author Bio

Naufa Amirani is a sophomore student majoring in Biology with a Computer Science minor. She is from the archipelago of Indonesia, and she enjoys learning, writing, and most kinds of spicy food.

Choice

“Choose,” the man says.

One door is large and gilded, light sliding across the raised golden ridges like glistening oil. *Choose me, and I will love you*, it hums. The other is comparatively diminutive and wooden, familiar, unassuming in stance.

He sits between them and watches you. Smoke curls up indulgently from the long pipe he’s cradling, framing eyes that flicker between gold and brown. There is no lifted eyebrow, no secretive curl of his mouth. He watches you plainly and you know there is also no trick behind the doors. It is clear which door you should pick.

“That one,” you say, anyway, pointing at the brown door.

He lowers his eyes. Taps the end of his pipe against a beveled glass ashtray. “Then go,” he answers.

You put your hand on the bronze doorknob, oddly warm, and waste no time turning.

Screaching winds and whiplashes of heat strike you at once. Wherever you are headed, it will not be pleasant. You made the wrong choice, but you step defiantly through it.

‘Not pleasant’ was something of an understatement. The flesh is flayed from your bones and your blood mists and mixes with the wind. You’re pretty sure you die before you are in even vaguely meaningful proximity to the house on the cliff.

“Choose,” the man says.

There is, again, the large golden door. Instead of a brown door, this time a red door juxtaposes, roughly the same size and shape as its predecessor.

You know which is the right road to take, you do. (You always have.) But you raise your hand to point at the red door. “That one,” you declare.

His gaze remains inflectionless. It lingers on you a moment longer, then he tilts his head away. “Then go.”

You feel the biting cold before you even open the door. Darkness swallows mostly everything in sight, leaving a small half-moon of frozen ground beyond the door that is just barely illuminated. You can hear fiercely blowing snow in the distance.

There is no hesitation as you cross the threshold. There can be none.

You’re not sure when you died, this time. All you remember is directionless wandering in the dark, feet shuffling on the ice. You remember slowly losing all feeling in your face, your hands.

“Choose.”

He is using a different kind of tobacco, you think. The aroma is stronger, the puffs more opaque. His expression is nondescript as ever, a blank canvas awaiting your next course of action.

You set your sights on the little blue door. It's getting harder and harder to remember the golden door is even there. Your forefinger finalizes the decision, and you say, like clockwork, "That one."

Like clockwork, he replies, "Then go."

If you forget the door, if you forget where you came from, you can almost pretend you are home. Ocean stretches for miles and miles, for as long as the eye can see, surface glittering like gems in the sunlight. You see it, though—far out near the horizon, a structure that is tall and gently bobbing. Relief tastes intoxicating. You contort your body into a pose you've not used in ages, and dive into the crystalline waves.

The water turns to tar after a couple of breaststrokes. You drown. In hindsight, the outcome should have been obvious, the premise of it all too good to be true. Still, you were thankful you got to feel water around you once more.

Next time, you think. I will reach you, next time.

He takes a moment to sort his pipe out first. His eyes are a murky brown today, half-lidded as he fiddles with the filter. Something clogging it, you assume. You wait.

The all-too-familiar wisps of smoke finally make their appearance, and he looks up at you. "Choose," you say, before he can.

His mouth twists slightly around the stem. You're expecting a response in the form of words, but he takes a drag instead.

"Well." You eye the green door that's inviting you. What reality lies behind this one, you wonder, which egregious way will you find to die this time?

A pointed release of breath draws your attention. "You do not have much longer." The words come slowly and carefully, chosen like knives.

The temptation to ignore him is strong. You brush it aside. In this limbo, there is but you and he. "I must find—" you start, and swallow. "I promised." You want to add—if you can keep pulling me back, on a tiny sliver of hope, then I can keep looking, on a tiny sliver of hope. (It occurs to you that, maybe, you've been looking at this entire thing the wrong way, but you could not change directions even if you tried.)

He is so steady. If the world were to be shaken up like a toy and dashed against some cosmic pavement, this man would remain exactly as is. "Then go," he says.

The door opens to a jungle. Like the ocean, it calls to you. You smell leaves, morning dew. You smell life. Against your wishes, your heart leaps.

Shadows flit about in your peripheral vision, dissipating every time you turn your head. The sound of footfalls that are not yours rings through the air, then nothing. You trace it by memory, pushing past low-hanging boughs. The deeper you go, however, the grayer things become. You don't die so much as fade. A muted dream that mutes you along with it.

Ah, but you are glad it ended when it did. You didn't think you could stand another moment of watching the colors bleed out.

The door that accompanies the gold is different, this time around. Black

and forbidding. Something deep in your bones knows what this means, what it represents. Your fists clench by your sides. He looks at you. The hue of his eyes hangs in perfect balance between brown and gold, rich and beautiful like honey.

“Please.”

“I must,” you answer.

You don’t add—*say that again*. His voice is as rich as his eyes and so, so deep, settling in your ears like something comfortable. Like home. (You can never go home.) The desire to make him repeat himself is overwhelming, crowding the back of your throat. You hold it there.

His fingertips constrict around his pipe, but all he says in return is, “Then go.”

You walk past him. The black door pulsates like a siren’s song, reeling you in almost against your will. The handle is ebony, molded into the shape of a tightly wound coil. You caress it with the palm of your hand, and catch a glimmer at the corner of your eye.

You have never looked back before, but you do now. The man sits facing away from you, but you can see the tear that travels down his cheek.

Choices. They are all we are made of, sometimes. You made a promise, long ago, and you would fulfill it even if it destroys you. But in that tear...you see the road your heart longed to take. The one you know the golden door that stood proud and true in every repetition would have opened to. All you need to do is adjust your trajectory. Walk the necessary distance.

The coil loosens and shifts under your skin. *Come now*, it whispers. You are too old for these daydreams, my dear.

Choices, you think. You open the door.