

THE EMPTY

Now as to the second type of patience, it is patience with our brother and sister. And this patience comes from the first, for just as Ior withholds his wrath from us, so we ought to withhold it from others.

— From *Meditations on the Graces*, “Patience,” by Wz.
Oded Summerflower

Ash sat on the stone floor of the dungeon, trying to ignore the weight of the chain wrapped around her, trying to ignore the hunger in her belly, trying not to shiver. The shivering posed the most danger. The chain weighed heavily and the hunger burned inexorably, but the shivering would give her away. Only the new girls shivered. Girls like her, who had been there for months, who had drunk the empty a dozen times or more—those girls didn’t feel the cold anymore.

“I hate you,” Teila said to her. “I’ve never hated anything more than I hate you.”

Ash said nothing. She took deep, slow breaths. Focus on the breath; direct the will. They could not touch her there.

“I’ll tear your face into ribbons,” Teila said. “I’ll rip the hair out of your head. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I...”

Ash stopped listening. Teila had only been there two weeks, but she wouldn’t last much longer. The babbling was a sure sign. Ash understood why Teila did it, of course. With all the empty inside of you, it felt good to let it out, to try to pour the hate into someone else. But that was a trick, a trap. The empty was nothing and nowhere, and so it could not be poured

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anywhere else. In trying to get rid of it, you only made it grow. You had to keep it inside of you, hemmed in on every side, crushed down into a small, hard ball of black ice that could not reach your heart. That was the only way.

Teila sat perhaps a dozen feet away, at the opposite end of the wide, iron gate that kept the prisoners in their communal cell. A pair of cloudy glass orbs hung from the stone ceiling on the other side of the gate, glowing a pale blue. Most of the newer girls stayed near the gate for that reason, too afraid to leave the light. A tunnel ran on from there to the guardhouse, perhaps a mile away. They would never go back that way again, not until they'd been fully emptied. Their cell connected to a second tunnel as well, one that ran in the opposite direction, deeper into the earth. Ash didn't know how far that one went, though nothing barred her or anyone else from trying to find out. No gate blocked that way.

No gate but the darkness.

Ash caught herself trembling a little and quickly suppressed it. Teila's ranting had devolved into a feral growl, and she started to pace back and forth, flexing her hands like claws. Ash could feel the tug of the chain a little, every time Teila got too close. The same chain held both of them, binding their chests and necks. It ran through a series of pulleys and iron rings behind and above them, following the long arch of the stone over the gate. As Teila moved away from the wall, the chain shortened and pulled Ash backward. Two locks held the chain in place now, so Teila could only go so far. But soon enough, the locks would be removed.

And then Ash would fight.

And Ash would win.

A soft whisper echoed down the tunnel, accompanied by the sound of boots. Teila stopped growling and drew back into a crouch against the wall, hands up, as if ready to claw at an enemy's face or to protect her own. The newer girls whimpered and started to back away, but they didn't go far. Behind them, the others appeared like ghosts at the edge of the light, pale and shrunken, their hair turned white or falling out altogether. Ash knew she looked like that too. The physical changes couldn't be helped, even when she kept her mind free. At least the empty had not turned her into one of the big ones, bulging with misshapen muscles, tusks curling up over their lips.

A handful of figures rounded the corner of the tunnel and approached the gate. Ash recognized one of them—a lean, hard-nosed turnkey named Lert. He carried the iron bucket and spoon for the empty, his hands gloved in grey wool. Three kunzel walked behind him, robed in black, their knives dripping blood on the floor, making soft little plips

against the stone. Ash braced herself for the wave of cold that always followed the creatures around and felt a grim satisfaction as it rolled over her.

Not a shudder.

They could not touch her.

Lert opened the gate and handed the bucket to the kunzel, allowing them inside before shutting it behind them again. They took no chances with runaways. Not that anyone could escape, of course. But runaways had a tendency to get killed, and they needed the girls alive, or at least alive long enough to be transformed into monsters.

A kunzel hauled Ash to her feet while another approached Teila, checking the chain. They wore masks—white and silver, sculpted to look like the bulging eyes of a spider. Girls like her would not be afraid of those masks, and so Ash was not afraid. These creatures had been like her once. But she would not be like them.

Satisfied with the chain, the two kunzel withdrew. The third member of their triad stepped forward, in between Ash and Teila. It reached into its robe and pulled out a loaf of bread.

Ash had never seen such a disgusting thing, dripping with fungus and rot. A few maggots dropped to the ground as the kunzel set it down.

Ash had never wanted to eat something so badly in her life.

The girls surrounding them pressed forward, eager. They would not be a part of this, but they couldn't help themselves. They had not had real food since they had come to this cursed place—only the empty. Even the maggots looked good. She knew some people in the Tangles ate them, fried in oil and pepper. She had always been confused by that before now.

"Mine! That's mine!" Teila yelled, jumping up. "I want it, mine!"

"You will have your chance," the kunzel hissed.

Ash rose to her feet and stepped forward to the limit of the chain, a low growl starting in her throat. She stood a full head shorter than Teila, but the changes to her body were much more advanced. She could do things now that she never could before, with the strength of the empty. Anger. Hunger. Hate. She could feel them build inside her, like a river in flood, ready to sweep everything away. She wanted that bread.

The kunzel withdrew, nodding to its companions. Teila dropped to all fours, straining at the chain like a dog, fury and desire burning on her face. The other girls hummed with excitement, pushing forward, crushing together.

Ash set her bare feet, flexing her toes into the stone. She would destroy this girl.

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“Take it,” the kunzel said, pointing to the bread. “Eat it.”

They unleashed the locks.

Ash screamed.

Teila screamed.

They both lunged forward, each getting two steps before the slack in the chain ran out, jerking them to a stop.

Ash leaned low and pushed with everything that she had, chain tight across her chest and neck, breath ragged, the empty pulsing with strength. The crowd shouted and cursed them, flinging threats of violence, promises of pleasure, anything to convince whoever won the bread to let them eat it.

Ash took a step.

Teila howled and redoubled her efforts, throwing herself against the chain in a frenzy, foolishly. Every failed surge left a little slack in the chain, and Ash took each inch, pushing steadily, unrelentingly. The metal links dug into her neck, the constant pressure leaving no space to breathe. But she did not need air. She did not need blood.

She had the empty.

And she let it loose.

It surged out, roaring silently at finally being set free. It swallowed the pain and the cold. It swallowed the fear and anger. It was nothing, and it emptied everything as it filled her, as it drove her, as it pushed her tighter and tighter against the chain that bound her. Teila howled and whimpered, fighting the inevitable, all her anger helpless against the crushing, unrelenting strength of the power inside Ash.

Ash took another step. And another.

Teila fell to the ground, splayed out, fingers trying to dig into the stone. Ash drug her backwards with each step, inch by inch, drawing closer and closer to the bread. She would win. She would eat. She would—at last—be satisfied. The other girls cried with rage and agony, thrilled at the sight of Teila’s humiliation, furious at Ash’s approaching victory.

The empty reached for her name.

Ash slipped.

She fell, vision going black. She cracked her head against the stone, and pain cut through her. At once, Teila surged forward with a shriek, and Ash felt herself dragged backwards, her arms and legs flailing. She tried to stand, but the chain jerked her backwards at once, tumbling her in a tangled heap. She slammed into the back wall, dizzy and helpless.

Ash ignored the pain, trying to find her breath. Sound faded from the world, as if muffled in a woolen blanket. She bent her will inward,

forcing the empty down, crushing it back where it belonged. It resisted, of course, slipping and writhing like an eel. But she was merciless. She was iron.

She won.

She looked up. The world flooded back in—the cold air, the grunts and howls of the other girls, the smell of decay. Teila jumped with ecstasy, holding the bread up like a trophy of war. She taunted Ash and the others in the crowd, wagging the loaf in their faces.

One of the kunzel stepped forward and seized Teila's wrist. It punched her in the face—once, twice.

Teila went limp and fell.

The kunzel pulled the bread out of her hand and slipped it back inside its robe—as expected. Ash had seen this game played out before. So had Teila, for that matter. No one could ever actually eat down here.

The kunzel hissed something to its companions, and they stepped forward with the bucket of the empty. Teila tried to ward away the spoon, hands fluttering like dying birds. The kunzel forced it down her throat and moved on, pitiless as the stone.

Ash held herself rigid as they approached, knowing the slightest shiver could give her away. She did not know what they would do, if they discovered her mind still walked free of the empty. But she knew they would not let her die. Whatever they did would be far worse.

She caught a glimpse of the empty inside the bucket and turned away at once. It made her stomach churn to look at — like gray water, slicked with oil. It didn't move like water, though. It billowed and rolled, like fog driven by the wind. The kunzel seized her by the hair and thrust a spoonful into her mouth. The empty deadened her tongue, sucking and pulling. She did not swallow, but that didn't matter. There was nothing to swallow, anyway.

Instead, she felt something inside her tear away, drawn out by the empty. She let it go, unable to stop it even had she tried. And by the stars she *had* tried, those first few weeks. The piece of her ripped at last and slipped into the iron spoon, hot and acrid as blood, and the kunzel pulled it out with a hollow pop.

Ash did not shiver.

The kunzel unlocked her from the chain and moved on. Some of the most broken girls stepped forward to meet them, eager for the spoon. Others simply stood where they were, some talking, some silent. A few of the newer ones slipped away, out of the blue glow, trying to lose themselves in the

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darkness. These could not really avoid the spoon, of course. The darkness was no barrier to the kunzel.

Ash sat back on her knees, examining herself surreptitiously. Her nails looked a little sharper now, with a higher curve. Her chest had shrunk again. Her calves had hardened. The empty inside of her pulsed, and a single tear leaked down her cheek, before she could stop it.

She dashed it away quickly, scanning the room to see if anyone had noticed. Foolish weakness. No one cried after their first week. Luckily, the kunzel remained focused on the other girls. Then she heard the sound of boots behind her and looked back.

Lert.

He watched her from the other side of the gate, fingering the keys around his neck. They hung from a thin silver chain. Ash had never seen him this close. He looked bigger than she expected and smelled of smoke. She kept her expression cold and blank.

"Thought you had that won," Lert said. He crouched down, staring at her. "Shame you slipped."

"I want you to die," Ash said. She did not have to pretend to mean it.

He laughed. "That's what they all say. But sometimes I wonder if you are really like all of them, little flower."

Ash smothered a surge of panic. "I want to watch the kunzel stab you in the eye," she said. *How can he know?* She was so careful, so disciplined. "I want to see you shudder and jerk."

He spit on her through the bars, soiling her face. She resisted the urge to wipe it off.

"They let me have one woman a year, did you know that?" he said. "For one week, I get to keep her, all to myself. For a week she gets to eat from my table and sleep under her own lamplight. Then she gets to take an arrow right in her gut, and leave all this behind." He gestured to the kunzel behind her. "For a moment, I thought maybe you might be my woman this year. I like them young and pretty far gone."

He rose and spit on her again. "But I'll leave you here to shrivel away instead. Stay warm, little flower."

Ash hissed curses at him as he drew back up the tunnel to wait for the kunzel to finish their work. *He can't know*, she thought. He was just testing her, sizing her up for his own pleasure. *Stay warm*, he had said. Had he seen her shivering somehow?

She rose and drew back out of the light, out of his sight. She cleaned her face as best she could on the sleeve of her dress. Dirt and sweat had long

since crusted over every fiber. She had worn it ever since she had come to this forsaken place. But she didn't want to be clean—just clean of *him*.

She found a spot in the darkness and sat with her back against the stone, holding her knees to her chest. The kunzel carried on their work, chasing down the stragglers. Ash focused inward, crushing the empty down again, building the walls around it higher and thicker. She had needed to let it loose, for that short time, to fool the others. Now she could put it back where it belonged. She would not be chosen for the chain again for many days.

And by that time, she would be gone.

CLUMSY

Therefore, be patient with others as Ior is with us. For Ior showers us with blessings that we did not earn, while we consider our meager patience toward our brother blessing enough. And indeed it is, provided it is purified with love. Else, it is merely an act of our poor will that soon will crack, as a man standing underneath a boulder may hold it overhead for a moment, until the slightest wind begins to blow.

— From *Meditations on the Graces*, “Patience,” by Wz.
Oded Summerflower

Ash woke in the darkness, a scream rising up in her gut. She cut it off with a sharp click of her teeth. Iron did not scream.

She sat up. Though no sun or moon shone down here, most of the girls still slept around the same time. A few always remained awake, however, wandering back and forth between the lamps or holding each other for warmth. Ash looked around carefully and listened for the sound of anyone near her in the darkness.

Nothing.

She rose and dizziness seized her at once, forcing her to put a hand to the stone wall. With the empty imprisoned, she had to rely more on her own strength, and she had precious little of that left.

When the world stopped spinning, Ash turned away from the gate, toward the total blackness of the tunnel that lay on the far side of the cell.

No one ever went in that tunnel, though it stood open. No one knew where it led, and no one had courage to brave the darkness. No one but Ash.

She took a deep breath and started forward, feeling the wall with her hand. The light from the gate lamps faded as she walked, darkness thickening around her. She began to count her steps, her bare feet silent on the stone, toes numb with cold. She had no other way of telling how far she had traveled. The darkness did not change with distance. It pressed always as close as her breast and as far away as the sky.

She hated having her eyes open in that darkness, so she closed them. She felt the tunnel curve to the right, then straighten out, the ground sloping slightly down. She could hear the sounds of the others long after the light vanished behind her, echoing along the corridors. Then they, too, were swallowed at last by the stone.

She felt fear, then, and hated herself for it. She had made this journey many times and knew what lay at the end of it. She had no reason to be afraid. But will as she might, she could not rid herself of her fear as she could rid herself of the empty. She trembled as she walked, feeling as if something might seize her at any moment, knowing nothing would.

She counted her thousandth step, and the texture of the wall changed, growing damp and slick, dotted with patches of soft algae. Ash breathed with relief. She forced herself to go another three hundred steps before she stopped—three hundred quiet, unhurried steps. Then she turned to the wall and started to drag her fingers against the algae, gathering it into a small pile in her hand. She trembled, too eager and scared, dropped the little ball of algae to the ground.

She took a deep breath and picked it back up.

Control.

She made a small cut on her arm—easy to do now that her fingernails had grown so sharp. She felt the blood well out, and she dipped the pile of algae in the little, warm stream.

After a few moments, the algae began to glow.

It shone with a pitiful, weak light, pale green and faint. But the sight of it calmed her fears almost at once. In this darkness, it filled her better than food or drink. It made her feel as if her own soul glowed in response, and for a few moments the incessant gnawing of the empty almost vanished.

She started walking again, holding the glowing algae in her hand. The tunnel here rose about twice her height, and spanned half again as wide. It did not seem to be a natural tunnel. The edges met at sharp angles,

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flat and even. She wondered what poor men had been forced to dig it, and why. She wondered how many of them had died there.

She began to hum, a soft tremble down low in her throat. The song came from her old life; she knew she had likely forgotten most of it. She thought her mother had sang it, or an aunt, perhaps. Someone who had been kind to her.

After another six hundred steps she heard a soft skittering sound ahead of her, and she stopped. She set half her algae on the ground in front of her, and took a step back. The sound rapidly grew louder, echoing lightly off the stone.

Then, out of the darkness, scampering along the ground, came her friend.

“Hello Clumsy,” she whispered. “I brought you a snack.”

He raised his bulbous head to regard her, antennae twitching. The green glow of the algae shone in his multi-faceted eyes, and his little mandibles clicked a greeting. Then he came fully into the light, dozens of legs twitching and rolling along his long body. When they had first met, she took him for some sort of underground red backed lurker, and had expected him to sting and eat her. She had hoped for it really. People said lurker venom was an unbearably painful way to die, but at least then it would have been over. She could have died in control.

But she had found something far better than death.

Clumsy bent his head to the algae that she had set on the ground and quickly gobbled it up. She knelt and petted him, still humming her song. Hard armor segments covered his back, though he never seemed as cold as she expected.

When he had finished eating, she stuck out her arm. He clambered on and perched himself atop her shoulders, legs gripping gently as she started back down the tunnel.

“Sorry it took so long this time,” Ash said. “They had me on the chain for a few days.”

Clumsy vibrated against her, rubbing his head against her cheek.

“Good to see you, too,” she said. “It won’t be long now. A bit more gathering and one more sleep. They’ll bring the new girls soon, and take the broken ones away. Then they won’t be back for three or four sleeps at least. You still want to come with me, don’t you?”

Clumsy rested his head in her hair and then settled down again on her shoulder.

“Good,” she said. “We’ll do it together. And if I die, you can eat me and get fat.”

Clumsy made no response to this, as if taking it for granted. She gathered a bit more algae as they walked, making long grooves on the walls. She wondered how long the algae had been growing here, undisturbed, and how long it would take to grow back. She fed some bits to Clumsy, dipping it in her blood, and used the rest to light their way. The glow always faded out of the algae eventually, like a fire running out of fuel, and once it did, the same algae would not glow again.

The tunnel cut to the left, and they turned into a small room. Two tunnels led off in different directions from the back and right-hand walls, deeper into the earth. At least, Ash assumed they went in different directions. She hadn't tested her theory yet. A small outcrop of stone jutted out from the left-hand wall, almost like a long bench. She held up her light and saw that her stockpile of algae still sat on the bench, as big as ever, like a giant, fat toad. She breathed a sigh of relief. For some reason, she always half expected to come back one day and find that Clumsy had eaten everything. Next to her algae lay a small, white skirt—dirty and ragged, of course, but still mostly sound. Another girl had left it ten or twelve sleeps ago, her soul swallowed by the empty. Ash didn't know her name. She didn't know any of their names. She knew she needed a way to carry all that algae though, and she didn't have a sack. A tied up skirt would have to do.

She held up her light toward the back corner of the room. The ceiling dipped lower here than in the corridor, standing no more than an arm's length overhead. A dark patch of algae grew in the corner—all that remained in this room that she hadn't already cleared. She had decided to harvest the whole room before she escaped, though she didn't know why. This place just seemed like a gift to her, and it felt right to honor every part of it.

"Just a little bit left, Clumsy," she said. "Then we shall be ready."

She started to turn.

A fist smashed into her jaw.

She felt very little pain. Less than she should have. A second blow followed the first, striking her just below the eye, and she dropped to the stone. Her legs wouldn't work. She tried to focus, tried to see her attacker, but black swirls danced in front of her vision, spinning around with streaks of purple and blue. She could see boots and dark leather pants, a tall body, a fine silver chain.

Lert.

"I knew there was something wrong with you," he said. "You might fool the kunzel, but—"

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His words cut off with a curse and a cry of pain. The black swirls cleared for a moment, and Ash saw Lert backing away, hopping on one foot, shouting like red death. Clumsy reared up in front of her, hissing like an alley cat, his legs spinning, his sharp mandibles snapping. *Good boy...*

She struggled to rise, but fell again almost at once, strength gone. She could feel the empty trying to get out again. She could kill Lert, if she gave it the freedom it wanted. It had more power than him, less mercy. She could claw him to shreds.

"Black witch!" Lert said, backing up against the far wall. "What kind of daemon have you found for yourself?"

"Clumsy is a friend," she said. She braced herself against the wall and pushed herself up, still wobbly. She felt blood swelling under her eye.

"I'm going to rip it in half," Lert said. He bent down and pulled something small from the shadows.

A crossbow.

The empty roared within her, battering against the walls of its prison. It could take her cold and hunger. It could take her weariness—such weariness—take it from her forever. The crossbow could not hurt it. The cold could not hurt it. Nothing could hurt it, because it was nothing. It wanted to rush forward at Lert, rip the crossbow from his hands and shove it down his throat, it wanted to pour itself through her like acid and burn away his soul, it wanted to slice open his gut and swallow every drop of his wretched blood, it wanted, it wanted...

It could not touch her.

She built the walls inside her higher and thicker. She laughed at it, the empty, laughed at its futile power. It could change her body, but it could not touch her will.

She was iron.

"You're pathetic," she said.

Lert scowled. "Shut up," he said. "Do you know what they do with runaways? You're going to beg me to kill you, before they are done with you."

"I'm not talking to you," she said.

She saw confusion on his face for a moment—just for a moment.

Because the next moment, a shadow leapt out of the darkness of the tunnel behind him and slammed him to the ground.

Lert shouted. She heard the twang of the crossbow and felt the wind of the bolt as it tore by her face and skipped off the stone behind her.

Lert grappled with the shadow, swinging his crossbow like a club, kicking and squirming to try to get out from under the shadow's grip. The

shadow moved like lightning, three quick blows slamming down. Ash heard something snap, and Lert gave a strangled cry, body twitching.

Then he fell still.

The shadow stood up—resolved itself into the shape of a man.

She struggled to see him properly in the light, with the algae dying and lying scattered across the floor. He looked tall and muscular, dressed in a filthy, tattered linen shirt and dark trousers. A long growth of beard covered his face. And his eyes...

His eyes were dead white.

"Are you alright, sister?" he asked.

"No," she said.

The man hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "No, I suppose neither of us are."

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked.

"If you try to kill me first," he said.

She nodded. *Fair*. "Why did you kill Lert?"

"Is that his name?"

She nodded.

"My ears are good enough to know that your head is moving, sister, but not good enough to know which direction," he said. "Is that a yes or a no?"

"You can't see," she said.

"No," he said, though she hadn't really asked. "The zincir took my sight, and would have taken much more, if Ior had let them."

"You escaped from the zincir?" she asked. "How?"

"I have not escaped," he said. "Though I am free of the zincir for now. They underestimated the strength of the graces. As they always do."

He bent down over Lert's body and pulled free the silver necklace that held the keys. "I am going to keep this," he said, slipping it over his own neck. "Though if you wish, I can use it to help you go free of this place."

"I—" Ash stopped, not sure what to say. She didn't know this man or his intentions, though certainly he was no friend of the kunzel. "Who are you?" she asked. "Why are you helping me?"

"I am a thorn in the side of Tjabo and the whispering things," he said. "You can call me Thorn, if you wish. That is close enough to my real name."

"Thorn," she repeated. "Very well. I'm Ash. This is my friend Clumsy."

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Clumsy crawled up her legs and back, wrapping himself around her shoulders again. He did not seem bothered by the stranger, and that made her feel much better.

"The milidread?" the man asked. "I have not known them to make friends."

"I don't know what a 'milidread' is," she said, bending down to light more of the algae. "But whatever Clumsy is, he is my friend. How would you know anyway, if you cannot see him?"

"I have heard the clattering legs of his kind before," he said. "When I still had my sight, I saw them kill many good men, and I killed many of them in return."

"I don't think he's a lurker, if that's what you mean. He'd have eaten me by now, if he was."

"I suppose members of a family can be very different from one another. Be warned, though. The same rules apply to Clumsy as to you. I will defend myself. If he is dear to you, make sure he behaves."

"He is my friend, not a pet," Ash said. "I do not command him. But I will ask."

"Very well," he said. He picked up Lert's crossbow and pulled the belt of bolts free, buckling it around his own waist. "Follow me."

He turned and started walking into the right-hand tunnel.

"Wait!" she said. "Do you know where you are going?"

"Up to a point," he said, pausing. "Do you know any better?" He seemed to be genuinely asking.

"No," she said. "I just... I do not know you."

"Afraid you might be in danger?" he asked.

She opened her mouth to reply, and then she saw the smile on his face. *A joke*. An actual joke. She hadn't heard a joke in—well, she couldn't actually remember ever hearing a joke, now, though she knew she must have at some point. How else would she know what one was?

"You don't know me," he said. "But there are some choices that do not wait for us to make them. They come without warning and leave without mercy. Make your choice, and leave the rest to Ior."

He turned again, not waiting for her to answer, and walked into the darkness of the tunnel.

Ash hesitated for a moment. Just for a moment.

Then she hurriedly gathered the algae into her cobbled together skirt, swung it over her shoulder, and followed.