

## Self-Love

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(Inktober Prompt, Day 2: Tranquil)

In great times of stress, Deirdre turned to one of two things: prayer or books. Since her arrival in Greka, however, the latter had become far more reliable than the former. Now, with her prayers and her inquiries to the Church of the Tooth and Claw going unanswered, Deirdre found herself scouring through book after book in the library within the Mage's Circle.

Under flickering candlelight, surrounded by towers of information, her eyes had already passed over more than a thousand pages worth of meditations, magical theory, history, supernatural pondering, and philosophical thought. Her sackcloth robes carried a faint coating of dust, only her sleeves moving enough to have avoided the consequences of time spent in a less-traveled portion of the library. Not too many people went looking for answers to life's questions on yellow pages bound in old, faded leather.

"M-hm. Ma'am?"

Deirdre looked up for the first time in hours, brown eyes encircled by redness. As she shifted, a small cloud of collected material slid off her back to decorate the smooth stone floor beneath. Across from the table stood a large-jowled dog clad in robes of the Mage's Circle.

"You've been here for over twenty-four hours."

Deirdre blinked and looked at the candles nearby, wincing as she realized her eyes had grown accustomed to a steadily darkening room. Many were out, and more than a few spluttered low against the pool of melted wax they had created. "O-oh. I'm very sorry," she mumbled, closing the book she'd been reading; she hadn't been feeling particularly inspired by the topic of non-Standard spirits anyway, but putting it away prior to finishing still felt like straining against a leash. It also occurred to her that her new friends would object to that being a proper simile; she was the only one among them all who could think even subconsciously that resisting a leash was a bad thing.

"I will need to re-shelve at least some of the books and replace the candles for safety reasons."

"I understand, I'm very sorry."

"You are free to check out up to two of the books..."

"Of course, I'm very sorry."

"You are one of the locals we trust most with these..."

"Thank you, that is most kind. Sorry."

Her repeated apologies were issued as she hurriedly grabbed two books from a stack she'd not gotten to quite yet and shook herself off, her tail even helping by whipping against the

back of the heavy cloth with a steady brush and *thwap*. The dog, briefly surprised by the lack of justification needed to coax the bovine to leave, was left in the dust as she sped off towards the counter to sign out her hastily chosen tomes.

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Deirdre huffed into the ceramic cup that her tea had come in, sipping at the mixture while she continued to read one of the books she'd checked out for the next two days. Her hand was always careful to never bring the cup over or near the pages. It didn't just help protect the pages she read, after all. It also prevented her hand from briefly blocking line-of-sight, allowing her to dive into the pages without interruption.

One of the two books, to her discomfort and excitement, was a book of meditations from the Church of the Followed Path. She had been looking to find something like it in the sometimes muddled stacks since her return from the Isle of The Stage. It was supposed to be heresy to a postulant of the Church of the Tooth and Claw like her. But with the only representative of her faith being a heretic...it was the only new perspective she could find on the prayer that she held in her heart.

She remembered standing before the grand prophecy machine, trembling with rage, as she asked her selfish question. Its many arms had moved, and, of the many masks it could choose to wear, it chose one of thoughtfulness and—as Deirdre interpreted it—concern. For her to satisfy the representative of the Church on Greka, she would have to embrace the heresy that representative had so casually spoken. Such thinking was completely out of the question. How could she, Deirdre, servant of all, embrace heresy for purely personal gain?

And so, Deirdre reflected on the words of her teacher. It had been a mere muttering, but her old superior in the Vulrok monastery's library had mentioned other versions of her driving prayer: the prayer of love. Of all the things in this increasingly confusing world, her love for all life was the only thing she was sure of. If she could protect others so they might live longer and better lives, then her life would be well-lived. So any version of the prayer of love, so long as it kept that potency of belief, couldn't be wrong, could it?

There it was. Quickly, she put aside the cooling tea and began to read. The lines were too familiar, ones she could mentally recite within a frozen second of time. However, the most subtle of changes existed.

*"If there is suffering, let me bear it instead. Give unto me what you cannot bear."*

There was no mentioning of her as least of all. And the words were far gentler with their imperatives. Her prayer, after all, specified her place was to bear any and all suffering.

Her eyes caught on a phrase she'd never heard spoken or preached before. *"Let me never forget that I am also life to love. Let my self-love be strong, strong enough that I might then give love to those who lack it for themselves."*

“Self-love?”

There was only so much the book’s meditations could provide, and, to Deirdre’s displeasure, they seemed to take for granted the idea of this ‘self-love’. Crunching her nose, she sighed, pushing the book back to focus once more on her tea. Sipping the now-cool drink, she thought of what the next step would be. Usually, she would consult with her superior, but, with her superior confirmed a heretic by what was effectively a legendary divination golem, that seemed ill-advised. There were only a few people she could ask now, and none of them knew things from the perspective of religion or faith.

Still, experience was experience. And what were friends for if not to bug with personal questions?

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“Nikki, what do you know of self-love?”

The skunk briefly choked on the water they were sipping, forcing it down to look at the cow seated across from their bed. “I-I’m sorry, what?”

“Self-love. How do you do it?”

The skunk’s expression grew increasingly flustered, fingers fiddling with the dancer’s pink ribbon that stretched from the rings on their biceps to the ones on their wrists. “I- I feel like showing you that would be really awkward for both of us...but, I mean....if you wanted me to...I mean, umm...I’ve been told I’m very good with my tongue?”

Deirdre blinked, hands folded on her lap as she considered things. “You...relax with tongue baths?” she pondered aloud. “I had thought that such was mostly something felines do.”

Nikki’s expression was frozen for a few seconds. Eventually, though, they pieced the puzzle together. The blush on the sword-dancer’s face only deepened as a result, and it was in times like these they were thankful their face was mostly hidden by black fur. “Oh! Oh. Sorry, I...misunderstood. You meant something else,” they stammered, squirming atop their inn room’s bed. “Well, I suppose I dance. Just...let my body move and feel free. It’s what I know best, and it feels good to feel my own rhythm.”

“Your own rhythm?”

“Yeah. To move where I want to move with no restraints. It’s just...how I know myself.”

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“Gertrude, what do you know of self-love?”

The black cat didn't look overly excited to have been stopped by Deirdre on her way out of the inn. But it was genuinely impressive that the overly timid church cow had approached her at all, most of all while Gertrude had all her axes on hand. "What?"

"You know...how do you love yourself? Relax or feel good or something?"

Gertrude knew what her answer was. But, as her tail swished behind her, she couldn't help but grin at the mental image of the conservatively-dressed religious nut before her trying to emulate her routines and habits. "Hah! I don't think you'd be able to do it. You'd probably pass out after three beers!"

"I'm sorry?"

"I drink, Dei," the cat sneered. "I drink, I fight, and I boast. I'm a fucking legend, and nothing makes me happier than to prove it to stuck-up, stuffy types. I train, and then I go out and kill something that other people get scared thinking about. Then I come back to drink and boast about it."

Deirdre sucked in her cheeks, tensing up at the usual no-nonsense approach Gertrude had to things. She envied the self-confidence, the type of empowered attitude her upbringing made her associate with predator species who deserved to be on top. "And...that's how you show yourself love, too?"

"Well, yeah. I know I'm awesome. So it's only right I make sure other people know too. Need to know anything else?"

Deirdre shook her head no, swallowing nervously at the thought of trying to keep up with the feline's strong personality. Gertrude shrugged at the cow's somewhat predictable response. "Alright, later." With that short farewell, the black cat strode out of the inn towards her usual training area, smiling as her paws tapped along the handle of one of her axes.

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"Alessi, what do you know of self-love?"

The grey fox's head rested in their gloved hands, tail waving behind them in obvious approval; it wasn't often the silly cow actually approached people or asked if they could sit down for a quick chat. If Alessi didn't know Deirdre well, they'd have had a different, more forward answer to give. Instead, they smiled and thought.

"*Well*, darling," they began, sounding just as delighted as they had when they first sat down at the inn table, "if we're talking about things to do for myself rather than involving someone else... A lot of it is in my daily routine! A nice, warm bath, or at least as warm as the innkeeper can muster—oh I know it's not his fault, but a cold soak is just so... cold—and, of course, plenty of self-care. Brushing my hair, my tail, applying perfume *just* so... That takes up a good deal of the morning, you know, but it's important to look my best! Especially if I'm going to be poking

around and trying to hear something interesting. People do so enjoy a pretty young thing watching them work or play, calling encouragement... but, of course, there's only so much gossip and dock worker-watching one can do..."

"And then...I dance!" Alessi lifted their head and arms, sighing with delight as they struck a pose there at the table, imagining lingering eyes upon them. The truth wasn't far off, given how the other people in the inn's common area looked at the flamboyant display with confusion. "In the street, at the docks, wherever my wandering might take me...the dance doesn't leave my body. Sometimes I even manage to find someone willing to accompany me with a tune. That's always such a treat!"

"Dancing..." Deirdre mumbled to herself. "Why does it have to be dancing?"

"But," Alessi continued as they sat back down, gleeful at being given the opportunity to go on, "if we might include activities done with *company*... oh-ho-*hooo*, the things we might get up to..." There, the fox paused, their expression turning contemplative even if their tail showed no signs of reducing its pleased fanning in the air. They gave a small tisk, clearly disappointed at having thought of a topic they were not yet ready to broach with the darling bovine. "Really though," they finally said, "I get the most relaxation dancing for someone and giving them my routine, as it were."

Deirdre nodded. She hardly could express how much she felt the same concerning how pleasing it was to be useful and enjoyed by others. But...it was self-love the prayer prescribed. She needed to try that. "Thank you, Alessi," she said, her voice still stumbling over the effort to not use the honorifics she grew accustomed to using when addressing others...especially predators like foxes. "You've given me a few ideas to think about."

"... you know you have lovely hair yourself, dear," Alessi said, leaning their head forward once more to rest in their hands. "I'd be happy to brush it sometime for you. Maybe style it up, if you'd like? What fun is it if I only use what I know on myself, after all?"

Deirdre smiled. The grey fox's enthusiasm was contagious at times. "I...if it relaxes you, then I certainly would be happy to give it a try?" she said, her voice already tuned for an apology. "But right now I must decline."

"As you wish, darling," they said with a sly smile, a finger playfully twirling around a bang of their brown hair. "My offer will remain on the table. Unless you want the offer to happen elsewhere~"

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Deirdre inquired of other friends and fellow adventurers. Marus, the red fox archer, considered his favorite stew and a good book to be self-care; the studious girl certainly

empathized with the book idea to some degree. Nekot, the raccoon scout, spoke of feeling the breeze rushing through a tree's canopy and of expressing himself through regularly dying his hair in different colors. She didn't need to ask Vovare what self-love meant to him; some predators were more explicit in their hungers than others. She didn't know many other adventurers well enough to ask, and, although she knew she was still on the island, she still did not have the strength to approach the so-called "divine bovine" for fear of what she might have said or done to make Regina leave questing behind.

As far as Deirdre could understand it, self-love meant knowing what brought you peace, freedom, or happiness—no matter how small—and justifying it as a good use of time for your own sake. Perhaps it was something different or deeper, but...she had to start somewhere.

So there she stood in the mid-afternoon, her body laden only with the thick, welded-closed collar and without the weight of heavy sackcloth robes or twice-forged armor, within the privacy of her own inn room. She breathed in, closed her strained eyes, and listened. In her ears, Deirdre could hear her pulse, agitated from countless hours awake without sleep. Her stomachs uncomfortably shifted and growled, angry that the cow hadn't gotten more food to compensate for the energy-burning insomnia. Her breath was heavy, inhaled and exhaled slow and offbeat from her thumping heart. Her tail waved behind her, waiting for something.

No movement came. No inspiration for movement came. If both Nikki and Alessi could dance, surely it wasn't just an individual fluke...right? Maybe the girl needed something to work off of. So she stepped forward with one hoof, feeling it clack against the wooden panels below and hearing the boards squeak with the shift in weight. Nothing. She raised her opposite arm, letting her shoulder feel the weight of the limb above it. Nothing. Were the movements too small? She tried to swing her leg to step across. It caught on her shin, and her entire balance shifted.

"Eeep!" **THUD-CLUNK** *ccccccccrrrk!*

Deirdre found herself slammed onto the floor, the entire room's floor creaking from the massive hit and proving the inn, while free for adventurers, wasn't too shoddily constructed. Her breath briefly paused as the tight collar fused around her neck. Deirdre tried to be mad and humiliated. Her face was positioned in her best frustrated expression. However, she couldn't help herself. Instead, she began to giggle. And then she began to laugh.

So there she laid, naked on the floor, laughing at her own clumsiness in a sleepless haze. Her forehead throbbed and ached, and her body felt itself begin to bruise, but Deirdre couldn't help herself. Who ever heard of a Tooth and Claw postulant trying to dance? It certainly wasn't one of the lessons at the monastery for common female prey!

"So much for rhythm," she wheezed to herself, wiping away a tear as the fit of mirth began to subside. Grabbing the nearby bed, she hoisted herself back up to a standing position,

rubbing the plump curves that had somewhat cushioned her fall. Sighing, she began to redress herself, donning the heavy sackcloth robes once more. The weight felt briefly strange, but she felt sheltered by that weight. Deirdre certainly wasn't willing to try any outfit using the strange and beautiful tunic she had been gifted by the local weaver for completing a mission. Not yet, at least. And not without somebody to help her understand what looked good.

Leaving the inn, Deirdre stumbled out of the more bustling parts of town to a nearby hill, the same hill she'd stood upon to see the city more clearly when she arrived. Settling herself down next to a tree there, she leaned back against the rough bark and looked out over the scene.

The water shimmered with the afternoon sun, a breeze cooling dock workers as they unloaded another supply shipment from the continent. A few were distracted from the heat by someone with a positively flirtatious tail wagging back and forth. The waves were gentle, gentle enough for another small figure to bend down to the water's edge and wash his hair, a strange color discoloring the nearby water before dissipating into the broader ocean. Some workers, standing in the warm sun, seemed to cheer enthusiastically as someone decorated with ribbons walked towards the entrance of a nearby bar. A training yard held a few soldiers at work, but they kept a respectful distance to the individual throwing metal objects at thick wooden targets. The city, while bustling and built-up for constant activity, still had plenty of green along its streets and in its gardens, contrasting with the surrounding blue, the red brick buildings, the grey cobblestone paths, and the white columns of richer institutions. More than a few relaxed these weary pre-dinner hours away, laying their weapons down to rest, a bow to one side and a book in their hands. The terrain constantly changed, stray clouds casting comforting shadows across the Grekan life.

Deirdre's love was for all who had love. And, while she deeply cared and wanted to help anyone down there or anywhere else, her eyes still picked up her friends and comrades first and foremost. No matter how distant, she saw their passions and gave them her attentions. Some of them likely didn't even have the slightest affection for her, but it didn't matter. They were there, and she knew them.

Her eyelids gently lowered, taking in the strange and beautiful island she called home. "Someday," she mumbled with a smile, "someday I'll be strong enough to protect you all." And if that meant falling flat on her butt in the world's worst attempt to dance, then she'd keep getting those bruises. Maybe, just taking a nap while thinking of friends was good enough for self-love. At least, good enough for now.