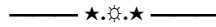


# **Antipolis**

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## I (Vignette One)

*On the shores of the Riviera I shall search for you  
Sweet memories in the velvet night will we make  
The palms will sway in the gentle breeze, the dull roar of the ocean will  
whisper to us From the beaches, and the curtains will brush against the open  
windows  
Linen and silk will cradle us in our aphrodite shell  
The plum-wine sky that stretches eternally will be a dome above our hidden  
pearl  
An enclave in time, where the streets of the starlit seaside cannot touch us  
I will hold you like water in my hands, soft and temporal  
And no human alive will know the quiet verse I murmur on the nape of  
your neck  
In the hidden hour of dark morning*

– Auguste Marsan, “Un Verset Obscur d'un Rêve”

## II (Vignette Two)

She drew from her glistening goblet of wine and drank. Her dark curls framed her pale face, gleaming under brilliant moonlight. The thin melodies of some distant pan flute graced us. We sat on the edge of the night, our shadows lit by the night sky. The edges of our ethereal bodies touched the light, and our darker complexions teemed like the raging sea. She smiled and her fingers brushed the golden circlet adorning her curls.

“Just drink, and let the moment command you,” she instructed in her lithe voice. I obliged and my body melded against hers for the briefest moment as I took the cup from her trembling hands. I drank deeply and felt the waves of poppy and flickering torchlight wash over me.

“I call upon loud-roaring and revealing Dionysus, primeval, double-natured, thrice-born, Bacchic lord, wild, ineffable, secretive, two-horned and two-shaped,” I recited. She collapsed into my chest and extended her arms to the constellations.

“Oh god, isn’t this beautiful?” she sighed.

### III (Vignette Three)

I stopped under the arch, my sandaled foot trailing slightly. The golden light of late noon caught against the edges of the etched and carved stone in sunny shafts. An ancient image of battle and gods was embedded into the rocky wall under the bridge. The wall was mudbrick and alabaster at once, centuries of art and stories. I felt like an ant peering up at its towering stature. The rippling fabric of the stolas drawn into the stone felt larger than the waves of the mighty sea. Closing my eyes I felt as if I could hear the echoes of the past. Winding pathways filled with people in flowing colorful clothing, the chatter of forgotten languages exchanged in houses of knowledge adorned with tapestries, and the ports alive with ships from faraway empires carrying exotic goods that no longer existed, relegated to museums and tombs. There was a history to this land I could not quite see.

I wondered how many children had run around this corner only to stand in awe of the architects chiseling the mythologies of antiquity into a barren wall in the labyrinthine heart of a city. How many young women carrying hydrias on their veiled heads had dreamed of the men and women immortalized in the rock face as they walked down the sundrenched street. How I, thousands of years later, with seaspray in my hair and sweat on my skin, gazed up in wonder at the capabilities of the human race. Our power to transcend time, to communicate art eternally.

## IV: Cleon

He plucked a young olive from a tree bending over a villa's garden wall. We walked further into the park. The edge of the riverbank lapped upon the lawn where lovers read poetry, young people walked with life in their eyes, and hurried students carried their scrolls to class. He gave me the fruit and smiled the way he often did.

"Here," he said, "delight in the gift of nature and our country." I laughed and sat upon the bright grass, motioning for him to do the same.

"This is not our country, Achaeus," I said and leaned back on my forearms. I gazed out at the river cutting through the green city gardens. Dripping willows and vine-ridden ancient walls dotted with civilians enjoying the beauty of the city were spread out around us. "If it was our country, our capital would not be separated by so much land and sea," I continued. "Yes, we forged this city, but it is merely a colony, is it not?"

"You and your politics, Cleon," he chastised me, "it's so tiring." He gestured out at the fantastical scene before us. "Look at all we have! The temples atop the acropolis, the port and its travelers, the mathematicians, and philosophers, and statesmen. We have them all, don't we?" I smiled in spite of myself and rolled over in the grass, my finger tracing his face. His eyes flickered with light he did not often allow before he remembered where we were.

"Not here," he whispered, his face darkening quietly. I drew away slowly, the regret of my hastiness spilling over me.

"I'm sorry," I said and rested on my back, peering upwards to the sky. White birds flew gracefully above, and the rich leaves of summer swayed in the lazy afternoon breeze. I sighed in content. *Weren't we so lucky to have this? To have anything at all?*



## V: Auguste

I swung the french door open to the sunny patio. I had grown up with that view, overlooking the bay and the aquamarine Riviera. I had only ever been there in summertime, but it still felt like home. In my youth I delighted in watching the ships pass by, little dots on the horizon making their slow and silent passage down the coast. In the present, my mother lounged on the chaise beside me, soaking up the brilliant midday sun like a housecat. My sister was close by, waltzing about the kitchen with our cookmaid.

“Auguste!” she called to me, “come here!” I turned away from watching the blue horizon and walked through the sunroom and parlor to the kitchens, where my sister was waiting. The entrance was under a grand arch, tiled with mosaic that was cool to the touch. Cabinets with ornate designs decorated the walls, and glass displays of silverware and tea sets spoke discreetly of our well-off nature. My sister turned towards me, her frilled blouse dotted with flour, and her coiled curls spilling from her bun.

“You look frightful,” I said, stifling a laugh. She glared at me and pointed the brass spoon in her hand at my head.

“Watch your tongue,” she spat, “that’s no way to talk to a lady.” I shrugged, relenting, and turned to her work.

“So, what do you need me for?” I asked her. Her expression fell slightly and her eyes shifted to glance at her feet, which were mostly draped in the trailing hem of her skirt.

“Ah, yes,” she began, “I wanted to speak with you while mother was...incapacitated.” I frowned, my mind traveling to the image of my mother; sleeping the day away in a fit of melancholy. My sister rubbed the back of her neck and spoke again, tearing me back to reality.

“You haven’t been around much and...folks are starting to wonder.” Her teeth tugged at her lower lip. I held back my nerves.

“Wonder what?” I asked as innocently as possible.

“That...ever since you’ve returned from your regular travels you’ve begun to favor an...undesirable lifestyle,” she said tactfully. “There are rumors, Auguste. Of the way you dress, the places and people you see, your private affairs. Mother is getting worried, when she’s awake, at least. And the rest of us, we’re worried too!” I laughed gently and stroked my sister’s arm.

“Oh Philomena, you needn’t think of me. Worry about your own life.”

“My own life? My life is an extension of your reputation!”

“I’ll be gone again soon, I promise. I’m getting everything in order, but you know how it is. I never stay in Antibes for long. Once I know you and mother are sound, you’ll have forgotten I ever stepped foot in this house. You won’t have to worry about me for a good six months. I’ll send you a post and everything.” Philomena looked up at me with her stormy eyes, seemingly dazed.

“What— you just expect to abandon us?” she asked. “After I just said I know what you do? Because if that wasn’t clear I know what you do!” I rolled my eyes and threw up my hands in defense.

“Oh, so you suddenly know everything about me, brilliant!” I mocked. Her brows furrowed and she spoke through clenched teeth.

“This isn’t a laughing matter,” she said. “You got here last week all out of the blue and I’m taking some initiative. This is a conversation you need to hear!” I sighed heavily.

“What is this? An intervention?”

“If you want it to be!”

“This is exactly why I can’t stand it here.”

“I’ve about had it with you—”

“Just let it all out, say what you mean,” I teased coldly. Her angered expression intensified. She clenched a small vase from the counter and smashed it violently on the tiled ground. “You’re a fool, Auguste!” she shrieked, “you dress with the sensibility of a false aristocrat and the wealth of an idiot!” Her gloved hands grasped the silky skirts of her dress in rage.

“You’re just a smug fool, that’s what! Bringing shame on our family! Do you know what my life is like? Every man leaves me when they hear the fortune is in your name, every girl I could befriend fears coming to our villa, and the whole high society whispers your name!” She flung her hands in the air in frustration. “Rumors spread from the gambling dens and brothels to the galas and dinner parties! Rumors that you’re a— some artsy prodigal son leeching off of poets and playwrights from every edge of the country!” She was left gasping after her rant. Her heaves wracked her frail frame with anxiety. I casted my eyes in shame and pulled my long dark hair down from its resting place.

“Is this what you see me as, Mina?” I asked her quietly. “A man with no merit? Who’s life’s purpose is only to serve his family’s image?” Her furrowed brow fell.

“Oh God, how can you say such things?” she whispered offensively. “How can you just break my heart over and over again...?” her words trailed off as tears began to prick her eyes. “Just...get out of here. With whatever this is.” I grabbed her wrist as she started to turn away.

“No. I want to show you what you’re condemning,” I said. “I’m sorry I was so rough with you. Please, let me try again.” Her frightened expression did not dissuade me, and I led her upstairs to the solarium. The room was semi-circular, with large windows in chipped white panes framed by cushioned window seats granting a panoramic view of the coast. Our villa rested on a hill rising from the rest of the city, giving the

appearance that we were towering above the parkways and marketplaces of Antibes. I rested on the center window seat, and my sister sat gingerly next to me. I cranked the window open and forced the thin pane to swing outwards, letting in fresh summer air. I could hear the ocean turning, the palms rustling in the breeze, and the distant horns of ships in the harbor.

“It’s paradise, isn’t it?” I said quietly, still staring out the window. “This is the city where we were both born. You were expected of course, arriving one calm January morning. Mother’s gift for the new year. You grew up with tea gowns, garden parties, walks along the pier with friends who adored you...” I fiddled with the edge of my shirt nervously.

“Yes,” she said. “We were privileged children, what of it?” I shook my head.

“I wasn’t so lucky,” I said. “It was a late August night, mother had hardly thought about me. Named me after the month I arrived. She made sure I was educated, yes. Shipped me away to boarding school in Paris, as you know. But that meant I didn’t grow up with this beautiful city. I was raised amongst the fog and destitute. I raced down gray streets and watched boats come down the Seine from rooftops. The city was an experience in and of itself, yes, but it was not my birthplace. It was not my home.”

“And yet you keep returning there,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “Why?”

“Because,” I said, “Paris offered me freedom. That, Mina, is where I met the free-thinkers. Artists living in homes together in Montparnasse! Outcast Empresses in apartments hosting literary salons! Beautiful people holding balls in everything from a townhouse parlor to the grandest halls your eyes could imagine! God, it was a kind of heaven. But do you want to know what else I learned there?” She leaned in closer to me with anticipation.

“I learned how to hold a love for life Mina,” I said. “I met someone there one fateful night. In a cafe. I had been living my life as a dead man before that night, Mina. My eyes were closed and yet I had still performed the motions of someone who could see. When that person touched me...held me, really...I could finally breathe. For the very first time, in a dim-lit flat in Le Marais, I understood what living was really for. You’ve felt that somewhat, haven’t you? Being touched like you are sacred? As if any sudden movement could break you and the illusion would fall?”

“Yes, Auguste,” she admitted softly, “I have felt it.” I smiled and leaned my head back on the white boards of the wall.

“Then you know why I could never go back.” I closed my eyes as I began to float down the river of time. “You understand where this story goes. When I returned home after University, I only came here to sit by the sea and compose poetry. I dreamed of being inspired by my home. Instead of the Cote d’Azur giving my words life it was my first true lover. I cannot describe him to you, Mina. What I can tell you is why I kept coming back to this temptation. It was not just the comfort and pleasure it afforded me. It was all a part of my search for a purpose. Of course, even the imagery of art hasn’t always been enough to sate *that* journey.” I stiffened my posture, finding self-righteousness in my overly-eloquent words.

“There are many things wrong with me, yes,” I continued, “My audacity to craft language surely, but my ability to love is not among them.” I finally ceased my monologue, and opened my eyes to lock them with hers. Silent tears stained her face and chin now, and her eyes were rubbed red. She had let her bun fall freely to her shoulders, which reminded me of when she was a girl.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she finally responded. Her voice was hushed and breathy, as if she was only just learning to speak. “I’ve no

idea what brother of mine you have become on your long travels, if you are even my brother at all?” She collapsed inwards, resting her forehead on her wrists. “Ugh! I just don’t know, Auguste!” she groaned. “You’ve confused me. I have no idea what to think anymore...” I rested my arm over her shoulders, comforting her.

“You don’t need to think about anything. Just tell me you understand why I have shamed you so.” She peered up at me and slowly brushed her residue tears from her tan skin.

“It’s hard to ask me to understand you,” she said. “And yet...somehow...” she trailed off. I rested my head on her shoulder and smiled.

“Then that will have to be enough.”

## VI: Auguste

Wine dripped down my blouse and into the crease of my chest. My long dark curls spilled onto my shoulders and rested where the scarlet stains were blotching. I threw my hair over my shoulder. I was self-conscious about it. I had allowed it to grow for my own satisfaction, but it betrayed me. Made me vulnerable. I had contemplated cutting it, but the thought of me looking like any other man scared me. I bit my finger as I stared at the celebrations surrounding me. Vibrant colors exploded around the room, which was filled to the brim with society-goers dressed to the nines. Even the balcony windows were thrown open to afford more space for the affairs. I was unusually removed from the festivities, finding myself seated in the corner with a wine glass and no one familiar to talk to.

“You’re dripping.” A voice cut through my thoughts. I glanced up to see the silhouette of a tall man in a well-embroidered waistcoat. The deep magentas and indigos of the room concealed his face, but I could recognize his voice anywhere.

“Cesaire!” I exclaimed, rising from my chair. I quickly embraced him before drawing back to see his sullen expression. I hesitated, my voice tinged with worry.

“What’s wrong...?” I asked him. He shrugged slightly before motioning to the door. He gently led me into the hall, away from the cacophony of the party. We settled just outside the dance hall, but far enough that the music was muffled.

“How are things, Auguste?” he asked me. His voice was dull, it had an uncharacteristic monotonous tone to it. I frowned slightly before answering.

“The usual, really.” I paused. “Why do you ask?” Cesaire leaned against the wall, his edges illuminated by the glow radiating into the dark

hallway. He fumbled with an ornate lighter before flicking the flame on to light his cigarette. He cupped a hand around the fire and clicked the lighter closed with his gloved hand.

“Listen, Auguste,” he began, “it’s been a while, right? Months, actually. I see you at this party, your seeming re-entrance into society. All I’m wondering is...where have you been?” His mouth tugged downwards, clearing betraying his thoughts. I sat in the uncomfortable silence before he picked up again. “Philomena said you weren’t at your father’s wake...” I cleared my throat nervously.

“It’s not– I’ll be at the memorial,” I defended myself. “And there were extenuating circumstances. You’re not privy to my private affairs, and neither is my sister.” He threw up his hands slightly, stepping away from the wall.

“Alright, whatever you say,” he said. “But I’ve got to be honest...people are saying things. You never speak to me, even when I write, and I simply want to see to it you aren’t suffering.” He advanced closer to me. “Is there anything you haven’t been telling anyone? I know you don’t offer many people your emotions, but...” he trailed off and shifted his stance awkwardly.

“It’s difficult to speak of,” I admitted, “and this isn’t really the best place to do it. Why don’t we finish up this party and get out of here? We can walk along the river, the shore, whatever. Take things back to my place.” He smiled and touched my forearm slightly.

“Hm, that sounds nice,” he mused. “Almost like old times. Before the world got so turned around, yeah?” I eyed his hand and nodded along.

“Right,” I said.

We walked back into the party, but I couldn’t shake the memory of his face in that light. I attempted to let the excitement of the evening consume me, submitting to the music, drowning out my inner

monologue with waves of prismatic light and sound. I threw my head back in the midst of the crowd, observing the intricate patterns of the ceiling. Crystalline chandeliers refracted the colorful optics like a kaleidoscope of empirical jewels. I hadn't many experiences with aristocracy in my life, but situated amongst beautiful young creatures of the night clad in gemstone-ridden silk, delicately tailored coats, and glittering headdresses, I could reasonably imagine I was dancing in the palaces of Vienna.

After we had exerted ourselves enough we retired from the party and fled into the moonlit streets of Antibes. I pulled his coat around my near-bare shoulders to shield from the early-autumn cold. Running down the cobblestone towards the harbor I nearly felt normal. He half-turned in his run to observe my face as I laughed into the empty night. His subsequent joy seemed to dissipate when he did. He stopped in his gait, his back at the edge of the dark ocean, perfectly backlit by the cosmos above.

"Wow, Auguste," he said, laughing, "We really haven't seen each other in so long, you look different at night under the moon and street lamps."

"What d'you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know...uh. You look sort of like your sister, I guess," he replied. "If that makes any sense." His voice had an unusual waver to it, and I consciously tucked my hair into my coat as my heart beat louder in my ears.

"Well...we are siblings," I responded dimly. "It's only the hair, really. I'm going to cut it soon." Cesaire looked curiously disappointed at my response and turned to face the water.

"Oh. I suppose I had suspected..." his voice faded away before he could complete his sentence. I approached him slightly, joining his side at the edge of the harbor.

“What. What did you suspect,” I said harshly. My voice had a raspiness to it, perhaps from aggravation. He bowed his head, ashamed.

“It doesn’t seem very Christian to say it.”

“Just say it,” I urged.

“I suppose...well your sister had said...” he whispered.

“Do you really have to draw this out?” I asked, pinching my temples.

“I don’t truly believe it!” He bursted out. “I mean– I’ve seen you enjoy the company of plenty of our female peers! I wouldn’t mean to accuse–” I swung to face him, grabbing him by his collar.

“But you understand what you’re insinuating, don’t you?” I spat. “These are the sorts of words that could ruin me! Not in the way my reputation is tarnished now, no. Really, truly, chase me out of town for good. Philomena wasn’t supposed to say anything, who knows what you’ll do?”

“I didn’t say a word to anyone. I swear,” he responded quietly. I released my hold on his coat, but maintained my hands on his shoulders.

“Then why did you say them to me?”

“I– I can’t answer that,” he said. I sighed deeply and ran my hand through my mangled hair.

“Okay...” I started. We stood in silence and the anger dissipated. “Let’s just...let’s just go to my apartment,” I said. “We can forget you said anything.” He obliged and followed me, somewhat hesitantly, into the winding streets of the city. The wash of night made everything seem more private, more personal, as if the entire world belonged to us. I pulled him forward this time, leading him by the wrist up an old and crumbling staircase lined with thin buildings and shops.

We arrived at the gate of my apartment, and I fumbled with the key from my pocket. I turned it in the rusted lock and pushed it open hurriedly. I smiled gently back at him, feeling somehow rushed and lost

in the moment at the same time. I motioned him inside and we walked up the twisting stairs to my floor– the fourth. Each level afforded a small balcony overlooking the street, and eventually the city and the sea. We quietly entered my room, whose window faced the expansive ocean. The blue gleam of the sky varnished the flat in an underwater tone. The main room had a tiny kitchenette, a lounge, some cabinets and an old chair strewn with clothes. Translucent drapes fluttered around the french-door-style window. I twisted the knob on the oil lamp resting atop my armoire, casting the surrounding area in a golden light.

“Nice place,” Cesaire remarked as he ran his hand along the countertop. I stood behind it and reached into my glass cabinet.

“Do you want anything to drink?” I asked as I stretched for a wine glass.

“Just half a glass would be fine,” he said, “I already drank at the party and all.” I nodded.

“Of course.” I poured him a half-glass of pinot-noir, and myself a full glass of rosé. His tastes in wine were implanted in my muscle memory, and I attempted to suppress memories of his other visits so long ago. I brought the glasses over to the lounge near the window, placing them on the coffee table in front. We each grabbed a glass and clinked them together in cheers. He swirled his drink in his hand and rested on the lounge. I took the chair across.

“So...” he began, his figure stark black against the moonlight and lampglow, “You’ve been absent for some time. I suppose you must know all your old friends have been wondering where you’ve run off to. Zenobie thought you’d moved away, actually. She couldn’t believe it when I insisted you were still in the city. ‘Up and run back to Paris,’ she’d said.” I took a sip from my glass.

“I’ve been occupied. I have a life to live, poems to write, and other pursuits.” He raised his eyebrows and leaned forward.

“Other pursuits? What does that mean?”

“I– just the typical artist-type nonsense,” I said. “I doubt you’d enjoy hearing about them. My exploits would not most likely strike your fancy. Too irresponsible, too messy.” He frowned slightly and leaned back again.

“We’ve known each other since we were boys, Auguste. You can tell me anything, anything at all. I promise I won’t bat an eye. And don’t hold back on my account– I’m no frail soul.” I hummed and downed another bit of my wine.

“Well, alright,” I relented, “but I won’t get into the details. And you must promise not to pry further.” He nodded, crossing his hand over his heart.

“I swear it,” he said. A silence washed over us as I gathered my thoughts.

“I feel that I am in need of a muse,” I said meekly. “My art has been uninspired, and there are so many intriguing people here that could spark life into my work again! I find my eyes caught on sunbathers and theater players– the sorts of distractions most artists would forsake to invest in their creations.”

“So you’re caught on the ladies? What of it?” He asked.

“Because they *are* a distraction, Cesaire. Just small magnets for the imagination, not a fixation. I need to *fixate*.”

“Alright, you need a painter’s muse. Well, a poet’s muse, apparently. Slightly avant-garde but by no means unachievable. Just take one of them home, as it appears you’ve done to me now, seduce them, and propose you write a few verses on their ethereal beauty. There, done!” I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks at his insinuation I had ‘taken him home’.

“You make it sound easier than it is. There is nuance to my situation, Cesaire,” I replied, flustered. His look grew concerned and I could hear the rumors spreading through his mind.

“What makes your particular romantic disposition unique...?” he inquired cautiously. I set down my now-empty wine glass and cleared my throat.

“I said I would spare you the details,” I replied. He nodded with downcast eyes and coughed forcefully. I sat uncomfortably in the quietude.

“Well,” he started, “I won’t meddle in your concerns. You could ask me about my life, perhaps? I may not be as interesting as you—”

“Let’s talk about you,” I interrupted, “that sounds good. How have you been? Uh...how’s Zenobie?” He smiled softly and set down his wine glass on the wooden tabletop.

“Not much has changed, to be frank,” he said, “Zee and I have really mellowed out, I think. We have a townhouse now, with three bedrooms. It’s quite lovely, actually. It overlooks the marina. We’ve been discussing becoming more serious, of course. Her parents are expecting us to tie the knot soon. I’m just...well to be honest I’m not sure I’m ready for the commitment. Or that I’m...” He stopped whatever thought was forming and looked away, his eyes trailing to the window. I reached across the table and placed my hand gently atop his. I felt it shaking slightly, and considered drawing away, but I already felt committed to comforting him.

“Whatever it is that’s bothering you, I assure you that you’ll figure it out. You and Zenobie have always been so—so loving towards each other. If any of us were going to go all the way, it was always going to be you two.” He groaned and stretched his arms up, seemingly not swayed by my compliment.

“Ugh, you really think that?” he asked, “I never thought we’d last this long.” My eyebrows raised in suspicion. It was rather uncharacteristic of him to be so openly negative about his relationship.

“Well of course I thought you’d last this long! My Lord, Cesaire! You were all over each other from the start. Just the most affectionate pair of lovebirds I’d ever laid eyes on. And Zee always did love you—admired you, really. I don’t understand how you could be such a cynic about your own girlfriend.” He sighed dramatically.

“Oh, Auguste...if only you could understand.”

“Understand what?” I asked. He shook his head and turned away from me again. I let go of his hand and gave him his space.

“I haven’t told anyone,” he whispered. I nodded silently and continued to watch him from across the table. “I haven’t even spoken to you in months, and I know we used to be the closest of accomplices, but it’s concerning and awful and—”

“Cesaire. I don’t care.” He bit his lip and stared at me.

“Honestly?”

“Of course.” I sighed softly. “I know I haven’t always been here for you, but I am tonight. We are alone now. It is only this moment existing for us, and it is made for listening.” He ran his hair through his sandy curls and grimaced before finally speaking.

“We never started courting each other out of a mutual romance,” he began. “It was more a fascination with each other that bloomed into something more complicated than I could handle.” He stopped for a moment to gather himself. “Some days I can’t even stand to kiss her...” he threw his head into his hands in shame. “I’m disgusted with myself! She’s the most marvelous person I have ever met and I still balk at the idea of her as my—what? My wife!? God, I can’t even fathom it!” He glanced up at me from his hunched position, and even in the dim room I could see his teary eyes.

“So you thought you preferred her romantically and it turns out you were only close friends. It happens, Cesaire. There is nothing shameful about that. What would dishonor you would be to continue to lead her down a deceptive path. Don’t pursue a romance further if it is a fabrication of falsehoods, simple as that.” I got up from my chair and walked over to the lounge. I took my seat next to him.

“It’ll be alright,” I whispered. He let out a wispy sigh, and I couldn’t help but think about how weary he looked, collapsed in that lounge. He peered up at me with a tinge of hope.

“Do you really believe that...?” he asked timidly. I nodded quietly and slung an arm around his shoulder.

“You’ve always been a great romantic, Cesaire,” I said, “doesn’t matter who it’s with...right?”

“Who would you rather...” he whispered before pausing, “who would you rather I be with?” I coughed uncomfortably and despite wanting to continue extending my presence, the urge to get away from him grew stronger.

“There’s no reason that should be up to me,” I replied, “I’m not your mother. I’m not going to fish up some girl for you to court. It’s really your choice to make.” He bit his lip again and nodded uncomfortably.

“Right...right of course,” he mumbled. He slumped his head down and rested it on his dominant arm. “God, I’m sorry, that was—I don’t know why I said that. Probably getting tipsy or something.” I hummed a noncommittal reply. I was content to bask in the silence that had overtaken us then. “Auguste...?” he asked apprehensively, not turning to meet my gaze.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Why have you really been gone? I know I said I wouldn’t pry but—”

“Come on now, it has nothing to do with you. You’re wonderful, Cesaire. Don’t worry about it.” His brows twisted together and he pursed his lips.

“Ugh, really?” he complained. “We’ve known each other for years! I can’t help but be curious.” He pondered for a moment before continuing. “You know...if you tell me why you haven’t been speaking to us I’ll—I’ll tell you my secret.” My eyebrows raised in curiosity.

“You have a secret...?” I asked. He nodded timidly. I let my arm fall from his shoulder as I weighed my options. He looked shaky beside me, obviously deliberating as well.

“Uh, well, you have to promise you won’t react. And whatever I say can’t be known by anyone else. Alright?” He offered a look of subtle agreement. I fell back into the lounge beside him and let a heavy sigh wrack my frame.

“It all started a while ago,” I said, “I was still in secondary school circa Paris. The boys there, we had mostly free reign of the city, and while I was out on the street quite often I also enjoyed confining myself to the dormitories. My roommates were fivefold—all real self-assured narcissistic academic types. I mostly enjoyed their company, but it was one in particular I found a certain kinship in. His name was Louis. He was born in the capital, so he really knew his way around. He’d take me all kinds of places—usually those less traveled. Sometimes we’d stroll along Canal St. Martin all afternoon, perhaps taking lunch at a cafe along the water. Other times he’d take me all the way out to Belleville to people-watch the artists or browse the street markets. We always went out at night with our friends...that was until one evening our second-to-final year. We went to a bar in Le Marais...” I trailed off from my monologue and realized how scared I looked. I was hunched over with my hands wound together in my lap. I turned away from Cesaire and stared out the window; where

the sky was beginning to show tinges of light. I could feel his prying eyes urging me to continue and I attempted to pick up where I had left off.

“Um...sorry,” I apologized meekly. “Yeah, we um, we went to Le Marais.” I closed my eyes, my breath suddenly becoming heavy in my lungs. I hadn’t anticipated how hard this would be. “We had an alright time at the bar I suppose. That’s not the point. God–um. What I’m trying to say is–” my words spilled out without meaning, gathering into some sort of unintelligible mixture. Cesaire mercifully cut me off.

“I know,” he said, finally making eye contact with me. The movement of his pupils across my face made me feel so scrutinized.

“No, I don’t think you do,” I laughed sadly. As long as I never told him, he would never know. His stare became more intent then, and he cocked his head to the side with a slight frown.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked me. I resisted the urge to scoff in his face.

“Because we’re worlds apart, Cesaire!” I exclaimed, “You and Zee have your life planned out for you, even if you don’t want it, and I– I have nothing!” I shrank back after my outburst, feeling the heat of shame in my face.

“You’re tiring me, Auguste,” he said glumly. “Say what you mean.”

“Uh...” I mumbled, seemingly at a loss for words. I didn’t know what I had been implying. What was I really trying to tell him? What did I actually want him to know? “It’s probably what you suppose it is, then.” I said. “You’ll be disgusted of course, and we’ll have to part ways. Might as well avoid it altogether.”

“So, you’re an invert,” he said calmly, stating it as if it were common knowledge. My eyes widened.

“What did you say...?” I asked. He shrugged slightly and feigned a smile.

“You’ll admit it, right? I mean, I believe that’s what we’ve both been dancing around this entire night, is it not?”

“It really doesn’t perturb you?” I asked softly. My skin felt slick with sweat and my hands were shaking. He shook his head and sat closer to me.

“No, Auguste,” he said, “not as much as it should.” I felt puzzled, my stomach suddenly warm but also still rife with nausea. It was disorienting to say the least.

“You make no sense,” I replied. “What gave it away? And— why don’t you seem the slightest bothered?”

“You’re not a subtle one, Auguste,” he laughed. “The rumor mill did half of the work for me, you know. Philomena and her friend Leonie were implying it over lunch for God’s sake! Honestly, if you’re so worried you should put on a more convincing front. Get a lady or something. Enter society like a true gentleman.”

“But...shouldn’t this disturb you? I mean, we’ve shared accommodations! That must unnerve you somehow.” He gave a disgruntled sigh and rubbed his forehead.

“It’s not the most comfortable thing for me to know about you, Auguste,” he said, “but I won’t tell anyone.” The sky outside was even lighter now, and I assumed the city would begin to wake within the next few hours.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I yawned and rubbed my eye, the sleep deprivation starting to catch up with me. “It’s starting to get light and we haven’t slept at all...” I said and moved to get up. “I should turn in for the night, so should you. Zee’s probably wondering where you’ve been.” His mouth turned down at the corners, not exactly a frown, but negative enough for me to notice. “What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he answered somberly. I stood up and closed the fluttering drapes, the room darkening considerably.

“Is this about your troubles in paradise?” I said quietly. I turned my face back to see him nod lacklusterly.

“We’re through, Auguste,” he said, “I can’t go back to her and pretend we’re madly in love. I’ve been planning to propose to her for months, but there’s always been this...nagging voice in the back of my head discouraging me. I’ve dreamt of a marriage sanctioned by the Church as long as I could remember, it must occur. After tonight...I’m sure.” I stood uncomfortably in the dark, suddenly aware of just how much our lives had changed in this one short evening.

“Why tonight?” I asked. “Surely you’ve voiced your concerns to other— closer confidants? I mean, we haven’t seen each other in months. I’m not exactly the best candidate to break this revelation to.” He pursed his lips hesitantly and drew in closer to himself. He looked like an ashamed child. I felt strangely sad seeing him so unsure of himself. He was normally such a debonair, but the man I saw in front of me was hardly the smooth-talking gentleman I was used to.

“No,” he said shakily, “you’re the first.” My mouth dropped slightly, and my eyebrows raised in slight visible shock.

“Why me?”

“You’re my oldest friend,” he explained. “And you’re the only person who could truly understand.” I laughed awkwardly and scratched my arm.

“Sorry, I think we just established I’m not going to relate to your relationships,” I quipped, but it fell flat. Nonetheless, I continued. “So, no. I don’t believe I understand. I mean, I get falling out of love, or falling into it for the wrong reasons. But...I’ve never considered acquiring a fiancée, Cesaire. It’s not as if that’s a reasonable option for me, either.” He didn’t seem to have any response to me, he simply stared into the dark distance, and I stood in complacency. Then he rose from the lounge to meet me at eye level. I could not anticipate what he would do next. He

lightly brushed my hand with his and then held it firmly in his grip. We remained like that for a while before he suddenly let go.

“I should leave,” he said with downcast eyes. I nodded numbly and walked to the door. I kept my pace brisk and avoided eye contact. I took his coat from the wooden rack and handed it to him. I could hardly make out his face under the dimming lamplight. I felt like holding my breath, so not even the sound of my heart could penetrate the calm.

“Here,” I said and handed his coat to him. He took it gingerly and slipped into the heavily-embroidered fabric.

“Thank you,” he replied, “...for everything.” He placed his hand on the doorknob before pausing, his back foot frozen mid-step. “Please don’t disappear again. Write to me. Visit. Anything. You’re the only person I can talk to.” I nodded and stepped away from the door.

“Okay,” I agreed. His eyes crinkled in a small smile and he left. He had stepped through the threshold. Now I was the one who was alone. “I’ll see you soon,” I said to the empty apartment.

## VII: Cesaire

I walked home down the dark road, the twisted cobblestone threatening to trip me. The roar of the sea was accompanied by my muddied footsteps, softened further by the pounding in my ears. My heartbeat, it sounded like. I stopped at the edge of the marina to stare at the tuna anglers taking their boats out to sea for the early-morning catch. The way they glided through the water seemed so undisturbed— so peaceful. I took a turn down the winding marketplace street still shrouded by nightfall. The antique stands were dark with linens strewn carelessly over priceless valuables, as if the owners assumed they would not be stolen. I turned down a tight alleyway to take the long way home. I cut through a small balcony, jumping over the wrought-iron railing and into a hidden garden path. Bubbling water poured out of the mossy mouth of an aged statue, feeding the greenery that brushed at my shoes. I could see the shining Riviera waves from my position walking between terraced hill house properties. I wondered if Auguste was afforded such a splendid view when he woke up each dawn. I hadn't had the opportunity to see his bedroom when I was at his apartment.

I jumped off the crumbling retainer wall I had been balancing on and onto the terracotta roof of a house below. I hoped they wouldn't mind my feet above their no-doubt-sleeping heads. I slid onto their second floor balcony, and then carefully to the first, and eventually the street below. The sky was nearly bright by now and I could hear the sounds of an awakening city. Not in this district though, it was far too wealthy. As I walked down the middle of the empty road, the subtropic warmth of daylight replacing the briskness of night, I smiled to myself. Somehow, I found contentment in this liminal city.

I turned my key in the ornate lock of my front door. It was beautifully carved and polished, and it was a bizarre reminder of my life

that I was its owner. I slunk into the parlor and slipped off my shoes. I attempted to be as quiet and careful as possible, so as not to disturb Zenobie; who was surely sleeping. I slowly turned around to observe the foyer. A domed skylight made from turquoise stone shed early light on me. The floor below featured patterned marble. To my right was an intricately carved staircase of dark wood leading to the second and third floors. Directly in front of me was a small hallway lined with Zee's antique Greek vase collection. It led to a large open archway that pooled into our living room. The back wall of the living room was an open window and balcony that overlooked the harbor and city below us. To my left sat a second, smaller sitting room. The furniture was plush and new; but entirely untouched. The whole building felt like a dollhouse, somewhere I played pretend but did not belong. I was too small and foreign for its world.

As I started up the stairs, carefully walking on my toes, I heard a creaking strain on the floorboards above. I gritted my teeth and paused mid-step. A shadowy figure appeared at the top of the stairs. She was draped in a silk robe, and her dark hair was piled atop her head in a slanted bun. A scowl was set upon her face and I felt paralyzed in shame and defeat.

"Where have you been?" she asked me coldly. The edge to her voice was apparent, and I knew that I could not lie to her.

"I was at a party...one of those downtown fetes," I admitted. I attempted to keep my voice as steady as possible, so not as to alert my nervousness.

"You said you were only out for a drink," she bit back. Then her eyes sadly softened. "Why would you lie to me, Cesaire?" I began to walk up the rest of the stairs to meet her. I took her wrists in my hands and leaned into her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry, Zee,” I whispered, “I had to. I knew you wouldn’t let me go if you knew why.” She drew back from our embrace with a confused look.

“If I knew what?” she asked. I sighed and bit my lower lip, a consistent habit of mine. She glared at me, prompting a response.

“I had heard through the grapevine that...*Auguste* would be attending the party. I had to see him. I knew you would never agree. You think he’s amoral. You think he’s abandoned us.”

“He’s not ‘amoral’, he’s just foolish! He acts like a child. We can’t just waste our lives away anymore! We have obligations.”

“What kind of obligations?” I snapped, “the kind where we avoid each other and never communicate?” She gasped lightly and drew back, offended.

“I never communicate? You’re the one who’s been deceptive with me!” She turned away in a storm and walked back down the hall to our bedroom. I followed her pleadingly.

“I’m sorry!” I called out. “It was a mistake! It won’t happen again.” She huffed and vanished through the room. I walked in after her, practically nipping at her heels. “Listen,” I began apologetically, “I know you’re upset. What can I do?” She sat on the bed with her head in her hands, but her cloudy demeanor had started to clear. She looked up at me suggestively.

“You can come here and kiss me,” she said. I stopped in my tracks and mustered up a weak smile.

“Of course,” I mumbled. I dipped down and cupped her cheek in my trembling hand before planting a lithe kiss on her lips. She grinned as I kissed her, a small laugh escaping her mouth. I moved my hand to cradle her neck, her thick hair tangling in my fingers. I pulled back slowly and opened my eyes. She was smiling in a way that crinkled the edges of her bright green eyes like paper.

“That’s more like it,” she said. “Ah, come here!” She giggled and pulled me onto the bed. The sun was casting its rising rays through the french door windows of our bedroom. The golden dawn light spilled over her features. I always had Zenobie in the mornings. We laid atop the bedcovers, the duvet only disrupted on one side. I turned my face to hers, but drew away before she could meet our lips again.

“We should get breakfast,” I whispered, a pang of sadness to my voice. I knew how dejected I sounded. She frowned, her eyes darting around my face. She calmly swept a falling lock of hair out of my face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly. I only shook my head and planted a kiss on her temple.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just hungry is all. Probably hungover too.” She hummed a sound of disapproval and rolled onto her back.

“Alright. Not right this minute, though. I want you to apologize to me some more.” She shifted her face slightly to wink at me. I stifled a laugh and sat up, leaning back on my arms.

“Well, maybe just a moment more,” I said. She propped her chin up by balancing it on her elbows and waited for me to kiss her again. I brushed my fingers on her bare shoulders. *Touching her this way*, I thought, *it feels wrong knowing what I am soon to tell her*. She leapt passionately into the kiss, as if we hadn’t seen each other for decades. Our lips melded together tightly and she leaned in closer. I squirmed uncomfortably as she placed a frail hand on my chest.

“Please don’t,” I said. She raised her eyebrows in suspicion and lifted her hand away. I gave her a look of apology but she only pushed me back and slid off the edge of the bed, tucking her robe around her.

“You’re tired,” she said dejectedly. “Just go. I’ll make us some breakfast.” She gave me a final glance of disappointment before exiting the room. I was left sitting alone, on the heaps of sheets that covered the bed I seldom slept in. I rubbed my temples together and groaned. It had

been this way for months now. We hadn't discussed it, but our physical relationship had already failed. It was only a matter of time before our romance fell out of favor as well. I hoped she was having an affair. At least then she would be receiving what I couldn't give her, and doing what I could not. I had been too paranoid to seek out new connections. Perhaps it was my blind loyalty, but more likely my absolute insecurity. I recalled what August had told me that night. That Zee and I were 'bound to be together from the start'. Or something along those lines. The previous evening was already blurring in my faded memory. I couldn't comprehend what he meant by that. Zenobie and I had always suffered a difficult romance.

I shook my head and hopped off of the bed. I swung open the mahogany closet and picked a creamy shirt off of the rack. I wrestled out of my old one— no doubt soaked in alcohol and sweat— and tossed it on the messy bed. I half-turned to stare at my body in the full-length mirror resting on the wall across from me. I supposed I was good-looking. I couldn't determine that myself, I needed someone to tell me. Zee had always been willing. I supposed that was why I liked her. I traced my muscles with my index finger, feeling all the individual curves and divots of my chest. I averted my eyes after the seconds of staring grew uncomfortable and slid into my new clothes. I walked out of the room, but I couldn't shake the feeling.

I wandered down the hall, my bare feet cool against the grainy wood floors. The hallway was winding; there were countless rooms we never used. I presumed they would come in handy in the event we hosted guests, but we never did. Despite its size, the townhouse only supported three bedrooms. Zenobie and I only used the master bedroom because she wanted the other two to house our future children. I had been intent on keeping them unfurnished, so they were currently dormant. Despite our bedroom being the one we claimed to both sleep in, Zenobie had

been taking a monthly residence on the chaise downstairs for months while I wallowed in our bed alone. Upon arriving in the dining room I saw that Zenobie had already prepared a basic breakfast. I pulled out my chair at the table and took a seat. She placed a porcelain plate of fruit in front of me.

“It’s light on the stomach,” she explained. “Healthier than what you typically eat, too.” I nodded silently, and she continued. “Make sure to try the pomegranates— they’re Tunisian.” I gave her a numb glance and stabbed into a tangerine with my fork. Her lips pursed into a slight pout and she sat across from me.

“Tell me if you like the carob,” she said. It was an empty sentence, as if she was speaking to a wall.

“It’s good,” I said. She gave me a faint smile and began to eat her own breakfast. The clinking sound of utensils echoed between us for a few solid minutes. I wondered what she was thinking about, but it felt wrong to ask. Too personal. Eventually she looked up at me with the intent to converse.

“So...” she began, “was the party good at least?” I shrugged noncommittally.

“It was alright,” I answered. She continued to stare at me. I sighed and continued, “All of the usual, to be honest. Bright lights, good music, and stupid young people. You’d probably consider them invalids the way they were flailing about.” She hid her laugh behind her hand and wiped some stray pomegranate juice from her mouth.

“I probably would!” She said, “Kids these days have no idea what dancing is. Their movements hardly follow the steps. I don’t believe I’ve seen a proper waltz in years. At least not outside of the courts.” I gulped down the rest of my fruit— save the grapes. I left those to roll awkwardly around my plate.

“So...” she started, “you remember what we have to do today, right?” I glanced up, my eyes widening slightly.

“Uhh...” I stuttered, “remind me.” Her expression again grew dull with frustration, but she answered my question.

“Leonie’s dinner. My parents will be there as well. And don’t forget you have to go to work tomorrow, so no excessive drinking. Oh, and we have some errands to run. I pinned the list to the corkboard in the kitchen.” I scratched my neck nervously.

“I’m sorry, I completely forgot about that,” I admitted. “I’ll run the errands— you just have a good Sunday. Go to church or something.” She smirked and scraped the last of the fruit off of her plate.

“Hm, alright. But I’m not going to church.”

“You can do whatever you’d like.”

“Are you trying to flatter me?”

“Well...perhaps.” She rolled her eyes playfully and snatched a grape from my plate.

“Hey!” I yelped. She grinned and popped it into her mouth.

“Don’t be such a downer,” she said and got up from the table. I watched her walk through the empty doorway to the kitchen with her plate. Her dark hair bounced behind her, and her hips swayed like music. She really was beautiful. Still, I didn’t understand why she was so quick to forgive me. One minute we were staring each other down with contempt, the next we were...this. I sighed wearily, cleared my plate, and sipped my dish into the dry sink.

“I’ll wash them later,” I said. Zenobie nodded, allowing me to walk away. The hours passed in our dollhouse, and we did meaningless things to waste the morning.

Sometime before noon I decided to run our errands. They were menial at best. The sun flew through the sky, and the shadows turned on the dial of time. I passed faces I knew, but none ever stopped to talk in

the streets. It was isolating in a way. At least I knew Zenobie had a day free from me. Eventually the sun was red and low on the horizon, painting the ocean in flames. The empty heavens began to fill with stars rotating above our heads. I was seated outside of a cafe in Old Antibes, hidden somewhere in the winding alleyways. Grapevine crept up the stone exterior and the warm glow of candles illuminated the window my table was placed in front of. I gazed into the restaurant, watching the people going about their lives without me. The rest of the city was alight with gas lamps and candelabras, like a beacon in the dark. I could see most of the town because the street was at the top of a hill. Even the harbor below was visible from my vantage point. I finished my *bourride* and placed the money on the table. Leonie's house was in Cap d'Antibes, which meant I had some walking to do.

As I journeyed through the city the night grew heavier. Its hand came down on the coast like a shadow. Traveling through Juan-Les-Pins my pace became brisk. The sound of music from the night clubs and dance halls brought back memories of the previous night. I imagined Auguste was there again, living in the hedonistic way he often did— for passion and pleasure. Meanwhile, I was alone in the night, on my way to a dull dinner with people I dreaded seeing. Perhaps I could forsake it. I could run off and experience yesterday's ecstatic night again. I could forget my responsibilities. Forget myself. My common sense hijacked that idea. I continued down the shoreside road and left the plan behind.

Leonie's house was more than a mansion. It was custom architecture, and a decadent display of privilege beyond that. Zenobie and I's townhouse was nice, but this was an entirely separate degree of wealth. I approached the wrought iron fence and rang the bell hanging in the crook of the gate. Shortly after, Leonie's valet opened it for me. He was a tall, silent man, and despite his salt-and-pepper hair he looked rather young. I followed him up the stone driveway. Leonie's carriage was

stationed prominently at its head, near the entrance to the house. I eyed it enviously. Well-manicured lawns, shaped greenery, lines of hedges and flowers, and expensive sculptures decorated her property. I adjusted the collar of my coat nervously. I had been to her house dozens of times before, but it never got less stressful. The doors atop her wide marble steps slowly opened to reveal a group of young women. I put on a wide grin and politely kissed each of their cheeks.

“Cesaire!” one of the exclaimed. Her honey-dipped hair bounced in tight ringlets, giving her a near-childlike appearance. She hugged me tightly. “You’re finally here! We weren’t sure you would be coming!” I kept my wavering smile plastered on my face and pulled back from the embrace.

“Sorry— I ran overtime on some errands. It’s lovely to see you, Leonie.” Leonie smiled and tossed her hand nonchalantly.

“It’s not a problem,” she said. “Honestly, if you don’t have enough time to handle proceedings on your own, just write to me! It would be a joy to lend you one of mine.”

“One of yours?” I asked as we walked down the wide halls of her home.

“The help,” she explained. We turned a corner to reveal a spiraling staircase leading to the lower levels of her home— built into the rock of a craggy seaside cliff. We descended down the stairs, my hand sliding on the smooth rail. I craned my neck to observe the painted ceiling above us. Leonie leaned over her shoulder, “Zenobie has already arrived, by the way. She’s in the parlor if you need her.” She stopped walking to turn to me, huddling in close. “You know, she seems happy with you tonight. I was pleasantly surprised, considering what she’s confessed to me lately.” She paused for dramatic effect. “She thinks you’ve gone distant. Now, your relationship seems perfectly content to

the public and myself...but what do I know? Surely no more than anyone else.” I glanced back at the herd of women walking a few paces behind us.

“It’s complicated, Leonie,” I whispered. She tutted and flicked her hair.

“Have it your way,” she replied, “I’m glad you’re here at all. It’s none of my business what your fiancée thinks of you.” I shrank inwards like a wilting flower.

“She’s not my fiancée,” I corrected quietly. Leonie quirked her brow.

“Oh,” she said, “My mistake.” She was at the base of the staircase now, and rearranging her ruffled skirts. I chewed my chapped lips nervously. It was always a careful balance with her.

“You didn’t know, it’s perfectly reasonable to assume—” I said. She shook her head and held up a hand to stop me.

“No, no,” she insisted, “it was an offense. I should have been more keen about your life. I apologize.” I opened my mouth to wave her apology, but she cut in again. “Stop. We’re going to have a splendid evening and I won’t let your worrying spoil that.” I conceded, nodding complacently. The long hallway eventually ended, leading to a large banquet hall. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched from vaulted ceilings to a sheen marble floor. The walls were decked out in gold and oil paintings. A long table was set with a buttery-white tablecloth and decadent silverware. A few dozen guests were present. They satiated themselves on appetizers or wandered around the room making smalltalk. I spotted Zenobie seated alone, and walked over to her.

“Hey,” I said, feeling small. “Sorry I’m late.” She glimpsed at me with a sly side eye before waving for me to take a seat. I sat down and smoothed out the wrinkles in my waistcoat. “So...” I started, “how’s the party? Have your parents arrived?” She shrugged and bit into a piece of bread smeared with brie.

“Mmm, no,” she answered after chewing. I leaned onto my arm and wondered why she appeared so miffed. We had left each other on good terms, for goodness sake.

“Well, I’ll keep an eye out then,” I replied, grabbing a piece of soufflé from the table. “It’s been weeks since we’ve seen them. I expect there will be plenty to catch up on.” Zenobie’s blew a stray piece of hair out of her face.

“You mean weeks since *you* saw them,” she corrected. “I see them all of the time, Cesaire. You simply don’t bother.” I backed off, raising my arms in defense.

“Alright, my apologies,” I said, trying not to mock. She huffed and snatched the soufflé from my plate. I faked a gasp as she bit into it dramatically.

“There,” she said, “that was my consolidation.” I smiled weakly and we began to talk, even if it was stunted. Eventually our conversation fell to the side, once we realized we had nothing to discuss. I reserved the rest of that time for people-watching. My eyes scanned the room, searching for interesting individuals. When I was younger I had paraded around Europe with my friends— especially Auguste. Meeting characters was no doubt my favorite part of our gallivanting. Auguste had enjoyed other parts more. I cringed slightly at the memory of my youth. Then I saw him. I stole a quick glance at Zenobie. She was wrapped up in conversation with some faceless society girls. I set down my glass and mumbled something along the lines of ‘excuse me’. I pushed through the crowd, my eyes fixed on him. A nauseating wave of *deja-vu* swept over me, and I shoved a tight flock of partygoers out of the way. They griped about my presence, but I couldn’t hear what they said. The only sound I could process was the pounding rhythm of my heartbeat. *He shouldn’t be here*, I thought. *This isn’t right*. It was as if two realities were colliding around me. The room looked wrong, like it was spinning— or collapsing.

Finally he was an arm's length away from me. I reached out to him, my fingers trembling.

"Auguste!" I exclaimed. The man standing before me was not Auguste. I brushed my eyes with my sleeve. His face was so distinct, I had seen him! I was positive I had seen him. He had been glowing, like an angel backlit by the gates of Eden. It was beautiful. I had been so sure. I stepped back, my legs struggling to balance themselves.

"Are you alright?" the man who was not Auguste asked me. His voice was muddy; as if he was speaking underwater. The sound of static gushed in my ears. My eyes danced wildly around the room. Black. I saw fire. Something was burning. I could taste charcoal on my tongue. Smoke seared my nose. A triumphal arch somewhere important, engulfed by flames. Black again. When I returned to the room I was hyperventilating. The man was staring at me with worry. He was walking towards me. Sharp panic shot through my body.

"No!" I shouted. The man's expression grew more concerned but I had already turned and ran before he could say anything. I clawed through the crowded room. Despite drawing so much attention to myself, it was like nobody had noticed. They continued sipping their wine and chattering in their obnoxious, overlapping cacophony. I thought I might be dying. A heavy hand dropped onto my shoulder. I froze at the touch and slowly turned around. A breath escaped my tight lungs. It was only Zenobie.

"Where did you run off to?" she asked. I stared at her for a minute, suddenly unable to form words. My pause finally lapsed when I remembered the most basic excuse.

"Oh, just the restroom," I explained. She nodded, saying nothing, and returned to her seat. I followed her, attempting normalcy, but feeling all-too frightened. The pre-dinner festivities were beginning

to die down. The guests were all ushered to their place-settings and the conversation lightened. Zenobie craned her neck, her nerves on display.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. She waved me off.

“Nothing, just looking for my parents,” she responded distantly. Her eyes were fixed on the entrance to the hall, occasionally hovering over the line of patrons seated at the table. There must have been over twenty people there, but none of them were all that recognizable.

“They’re only a bit late,” I said, “I’m sure they’ll arrive soon.” I rubbed her leg under the table, assuring her there was nothing to worry about. She released her tense breath and stopped searching.

“Alright, alright,” she relented and shoved my hand away. I stared at my plate awkwardly. *What does she want from me?* I wondered to myself. She seemed to notice me staring at my half-eaten seafood because she grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Sorry if I’m being a bit aloof,” she whispered, “This party, our impression here, it’s all just very important to me.” She put her smile back on and rubbed my palm kindly. “Everything is okay. Let’s just get through this dinner.” I swallowed and nodded a symbol of agreement. I could enjoy myself this evening. I could pretend there was nothing unusual or wrong between us. I could forget the anomaly I’d experienced. I could forget Auguste. The tinny clinking of a spoon on glass interrupted my musings. I looked up sharply to see Leonie standing at the head of the table, wine and utensil in hand.

“I’d like to make a short address to you all,” she proclaimed. “Tonight I have gathered my closest compatriots—family and friends—to join me in celebrating the delights of living! It is not often that we get the privilege of gathering together. We are often preoccupied by life’s many blisses— working, loving, creating, becoming wealthy and successful people. It is these qualities that bond us, my friends. I am so lucky to have you all. Many of you have supported me in my darkest hours.

Sometimes a shoulder to lean on can help more than money or words.” A polite laugh rippled through the crowd at that. She broke off to give a loving smile to the young man seated next to her. “Now that all of you wonderful people are here, I’d like to make an announcement.” She gestured to the man, and then quietly asked, “Care to join me?” The man stood up and faced the crowd, beaming. Leonie set down the spoon and took his hand in her own, her other firmly on her wine glass. “It is my pleasure to say that Jean-Francis and I...” she paused for dramatic effect, “are engaged! Surprise!” The party erupted into a cascade of screaming, cheering, clapping, and overlapping noise.

“Do you know him?” I asked Zenobie, near-shouting in order to be heard over the chaos. Leonie’s friends were already throwing themselves over her, squealing and kicking their feet like a pack of teenage girls. Zenobie brought her mouth closer to my ear to answer.

“I’ve never seen him in my life,” she said. “I speak with Leonie multiple times a week. I thought we were in her circle...” When I turned to look at her I could see that she was glaring. I decided it would be best to avoid whatever emotions were storming inside of her at that moment. This was the difficulty with high society. There can be no truly loyal friends when the prospect of social climbing is at stake. I wondered how I could ever stand this aspect of my life.

The main entree was already being passed down the table, and I took a dish for my own plate, hoping that eating would give Zenobie some space to process. I needed to think, anyway. Before I knew it the sky had become near-pitch-black, signaling that it was time to leave. The party was over, but I left feeling unresolved. Fine society dinners of this kind had always satisfied me in the past, but I exited this one feeling empty and alone. I had no desire to gossip, no whims to praise the newly engaged couple, and still dreaded the idea of retiring home to my lonely

bed. What a waste of an evening. *Fantastic*, I thought to myself as Zenobie and I trudged along the dark path home. *Just fantastic.*

## VIII: Cleon

I dug my reed pen into the wet tablet and squinted my eyes, making sure every mark would be as perfect as possible. A warm breeze brushed over me, rustling the fig trees hanging above my head. It was a pleasant day. I could hear the distant rolling of the ocean on the rocks somewhere over the hills, and the call of gulls in the sky. The gentle rustling of leaves echoed down the fields of the entire coast.

“Cleon!” A familiar voice called out to me. I turned around on the bench-seat I was perched on. A young woman was walking across the villa yard, her chiton dancing in the wind. She was carrying a basket filled with skeins of wool. She set it on the ground next to the bench and leaned onto the table, staring at the tablet from over my shoulder. I glanced up, twisting my neck to see her face.

“I’m working, Eurynome,” I said. She sighed dramatically and threw her arms over my shoulders, embracing me from behind. She rested her chin next to my ear.

“Ah, but I’m so bored,” she complained playfully. “Everyone else is in the fields today. Except you, you’re being a scholar as usual.” I laughed and shoved her dangling arms off of me.

“Then let me work!” I said. “You’ll all thank me once I’m finished. Plus, I’m not recording history today, I’m taking the tally of our profits.” She picked her basket up again and propped it on her hip.

“So, you’re finally being helpful,” she teased. I rolled my eyes and resumed inscribing the tablet.

“I suppose you could say that,” I said. “There’s a reason I was hired, you know.” She smirked and threw her hand at me.

“Yeah, yeah, we all know you can write, braggart,” she said. Her expression phased to something more serious. “I think we’re going to get

a day off soon. We should take a trip. Go to town or something. Maybe the beach.” I shrugged in response.

“Sounds fun.” I said. After a second of stillness she smacked her lips together, pointing her index finger up as if she had just had a brilliant idea.

“You know,” she began innocently, “there’s someone we should probably invite.” She gave me a sly grin and put a light hand on my shoulder. “Wonder who that is?” I rolled my eyes and hunched over the table. She walked past me and into the villa, striding with purpose. I wanted to return to my work, but something was preventing me. I rested my cheek in my palm and looked out to the rolling hills. They spanned for many hectares past the city limits; which the villa was already outside of, and ended in the dramatic bluffs that plunged into the sea. I could see the shining waters of the Riviera, and the workers in the vineyards. I shook my head and continued etching the tablet before it went dry. Once I had finished I placed it on the stony patio to bake in the beating sun. The patio was infested with flora growing through the cracks. It led to a winding staircase that descended into the gardens, which eventually transformed into the farmlands. The villa was situated to its left, two stories of mudbrick and timber beams. The roof was fire-glazed imbrex and tegula, the color slightly faded from years of exposure. The clay tablet quickly dried under the afternoon sun, and I brought it inside to store. Two inhabitants of the house were seated in the kitchen, sharing figs and salted fish. Typically the men were supposed to eat in the andron, and women the gynaecium, but we were all young and informal, so it didn’t really matter. I took a seat next to them and grabbed a ripe fig from the bowl on the table.

“Good yield today?” I asked. I already knew the answer, but there was little other small talk to make. One of them, Origenes, looked up from his meal to answer.

“Of course,” he said, “these fields are the most plentiful I’ve ever had the pleasure of working.” His friend, Timaeus, nodded in agreement.

“That’s good,” I replied simply. “I took count of our profits today, we’re making good money. The trade is going well, and our supply is bountiful enough to more than break even” Origenes bit into his fig, the juice dripping down his chin.

“Great,” he said. “Better let the boss know.” I gave some sound of confirmation before leaving the kitchen, another fruit in hand. I tossed it into the air, my eye trained on its path. I suddenly had the entire day ahead of me, and nobody to spend it with. Well, there was one person. But it was probably a bad idea. I walked into the courtyard, weighing my options. *It couldn’t be that awful*, I thought to myself. Yes, it could. It certainly could. I thought about what Eurynome had suggested earlier. Perhaps if I invited him on an excursion with other people it wouldn’t be so terrible. I certainly couldn’t stand to be alone with him, though. Although I certainly would like to. Before I could make a decision, he was standing in front of me. I stopped in my tracks, dust billowing around my sandaled feet. The man I had been deciding whether or not to avoid was a few paces away, leaning in the archway.

“Hi,” I said shyly. He smiled and walked over to me, slinging an arm over my shoulder. He was of tall stature, or at least taller than mine.

“Eurynome told me you’d be here,” he said. I glowered at that, silently cursing our meddling mutual friend.

“Oh, great,” I said sarcastically, then feeling nervous added, “Well, you found me.” He nodded solemnly and took a seat under the fluttering trees.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he said. My mouth dropped a bit. “It’s not something I’ve done, I hope,” he said. I shook my head,

suddenly feeling very small standing in front of him. I drew my hands together in front of my chest.

“No, no,” I assured him, “I’m sorry– it’s just, um,” I waved my arms around, hoping he would glean what I meant to say.

“You don’t want to talk about it,” he supplied me. I nodded, sitting beside him. He contemplated that, staring at something in the distance.

“Alright,” he said. “We don’t have to.” I smiled feebly, somewhat relieved.

“Oh,” I said, “thanks.” He shrugged, leaving both of us not sure what to say. I attempted to salvage our quickly awkward conversation. “I, uh...I heard the profit has been good today.”

“It has,” he said. “You should come out to the fields later. See how things are going. Maybe you could even help out for once.” I winced at the jab.

“Er, maybe I will,” I replied ambiguously. He lifted his chin and breathed in his fresh maritime air.

“I’d like that,” he said. He pointed at the green cliffs in the distance. “I heard they want to construct another city over the mountains. Word travels slowly, so perhaps they already have.” I leaned back and observed the verdant landscape.

“I’ve never been past the mountains in that direction,” I remarked. “I wonder what it looks like over there.”

“I don’t know. That’s where the Ligurians invade from, I think. Very primitive. I suppose it could be completely different from anything we know. It’s not like Massalia looks anything like Athens. That’s sort of the allure though, right? A whole untouched coastline. No colonies, no trade, no ports or farmlands. It’s brilliant.” I looked at him expectantly, curious as to where this was leading. He turned his head to smile back at me. “I want to go there,” he said.

“What? Why?” I asked. He shrugged, eyes closed.

“I’m tired of this place,” he replied, “I’ve lived in and around Massalia my entire life. I want to be a part of something new! Something greater.” I pondered this and kicked my feet lazily on the dusty ground.

“I suppose that could be interesting,” I agreed reluctantly.

“I know!” He exclaimed.

“But, you’re not going to leave soon, right?” I clarified. His smile faded and his posture became more withdrawn.

“Well...” he began reticently, “no. I only have a few more months. I wanted to tell you because I want you to come with me. Either that or for you to enjoy the time we have left.” I slumped my head into my hand.

“I— I don’t know if I can just get up and leave,” I said, “I mean, I have a life here, Archaeus! Plus...we both know we haven’t been on the best of terms lately.” He swung his body to face me, staring directly into my eyes.

“I want to fix that,” he told me earnestly. I dropped my head, avoiding eye contact. My honey-brown hair fell in front of my face, hopefully hiding my embarrassed face. He gently pulled the hair behind my ears like parting drapes. “I know you don’t want to discuss it,” he said softly, “but we don’t have much time left. Sometimes we have to take risks.” I shook my head and bolted up.

“We can’t talk about it,” I said, “we just can’t.” He nodded, his brows lowered in contempt.

“Okay,” he said without a trace of emotion. “Fine. Be that way.”

“What can I say to you?” I said, “there’s no fixing this. I’m sorry.” He stood up, shaking his head slightly in discontent.

“I’m heading back to the fields,” he said distantly, “you can join me if you want.” We stood there, under the shimmering sun, dirt and dust swirling around us. Two friends turned into strangers. Shadows on the Riviera. I wanted to reach out to him, to hold his hand or assure him

that I didn't despise him. I knew I couldn't. He would never know. Instead of any meaningful gestures I shuffled my feet awkwardly.

"I'll come with you," I said, "can't guarantee I'll work though. You know I'm not a hands-on kind of person." He scoffed.

"Ha, yeah. We know." I giggled quietly, thinking that maybe we would be okay.

The path down to the farmlands was winding. It was partially packed dirt stamped with footprints, partially rugged stone steps. It cut through golden waving fields of wheat and barley, twisting down the sloping hill into the depths of the valley. A clearing was cut at the base of the fields where tents had been raised to provide shade to resting workers, and as a space to store and process crops. I saw many faces I recognized as residents of the villa, but there were also unfamiliar people— day workers who had arrived from the city. The tents were stocked high with bushels and bundles of grains, and barrels of grapes were stacked just outside of them. Women were cooling themselves with hand fans, their dresses untucked to relieve the beating high-noon sun. Men stood in circles, directing traffic and the organization of crop storage. I walked up to the main tent, where I spotted Eurynome talking with other women. She didn't notice me at first, but she spun around once I tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

"Oh, it's you!" she said. She stepped back and scanned me up and down with one hand planted on her hip. "What are you doing here?" she asked. I pursed my lips.

"I'm here to help," I said. "At least...I think so." She grinned and grasped my wrists, bouncing gently on the balls of her feet.

"Well, if that isn't something to commemorate I don't know what is! What gives?" I hid my face shyly, her hands still holding my arms out.

“Uh...Archaeus asked me to,” I muttered. She stepped closer to me, a knowing smirk planted on her face.

“Ahh, I see,” she said, “seems like my words may have gotten to somebody? Have my boys made up? No more fighting?” I shook my head and dropped my arms back to my side.

“No,” I replied, “we’re still definitely on poor terms.” She frowned, so I attempted to reassure her. “It’s fine. You shouldn’t have gotten involved anyways, it was between us.” She rolled her eyes exaggeratedly.

“Ugh! So dramatic!” she complained, “If you really want to be that way, make yourself useful doing it! We need more pickers in the vineyards, go waste a few hours out there. You’ll forget all about him and your petty troubles. You’ll make us some extra money too, which obviously can’t hurt.” She began to draw away from me. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a social life to attend to.” She gave me a final smile and wave before returning to her cohort of gossips. I begrudgingly left to find a place in the vineyard to spend the rest of the day. The work wasn’t particularly fulfilling in the artistic sense, but it invigorated me in a way. I completed it with some effort; my elbows and knees grew dirty and scraped, my joints tired and worn, and my skin scathed by the sun. My fingertips were stained plum-purple by the sweet nectar of the grapes. It was actually nice to let go for a while, to just immerse myself in the repetition. It was certainly less intricate than my scribe work. Eventually the workers began to drain out of the fields, heading back to the city or to retreat to the villa. I followed them, lost in my thoughts.

That night at the villa was just as eventful as usual. Wine was passed around the table, drinking ranging from light to excessive, depending on the proclivities of the consumers. I partook in the normal evening festivities. I tried to enjoy myself, though it was clear to my close friends that my mind was elsewhere. Eurynome approached me shortly

before bed. The sun had nearly finished setting– the sky was now an ombre of blue velvet to pale periwinkle. I was seated in the crook of a window on the second floor above the courtyard. Most everyone else was downstairs, no doubt enjoying the festivities. Something about being alone at a party was eerily familiar to me despite the fact I didn't often find myself in that position. Eurynome slid into the other side of the window seat.

“Tired?” she asked. I shrugged noncommittally.

“I guess,” I said. “I mean, I went to the vineyards today. I don't usually do field labor. It was a change of pace, I suppose.” She nodded thoughtfully and played with the hem of her chiton.

“I'm sorry if I pushed you today,” she said, “I didn't mean to mess with your life so much. Archaeus– he– well, you know how he is.” I laughed weakly.

“Ha, yeah. Better than most.” She agreed nonverbally and leaned her head against the cool mudbrick wall.

“You don't have to try reconnecting with him. Especially before he leaves.” I gave her a curious look. “He told me,” she explained. “You're not the only one he confides in, you know.”

“We all sort of confide in each other,” I said. She threw her hands out in exasperation.

“Tell me about it!” she exclaimed. I laughed openly that time.

“Haha, I am!” I said. We looked at each other for a spit of silence before both bursting into a fit of hysterics. This was the way it was supposed to be. Just the two of us making each other laugh without any complications. My laughter suddenly faded, trailing off into a lopsided frown. I was left with a sour taste in my mouth, the guilt of knowing how temporary this was. Knowing that I had driven some permanent wedge between us. Only because of how selfish I had been. I got the urge to leave, to retire to my room and avoid my emotions again.

“What’s wrong?” Eurynome asked me. I shook my head and resumed my cheery disposition.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied, “I’m just thinking, that’s all.” That seemed like enough for her, she said nothing.

“You know...” she started carefully, “you could go with him.” My brows shot up and I tucked my arms around my knees.

“Uh– I don’t think that’s the best idea,” I said nervously. She exhaled softly, her curly black hair drowning her features as she curled over to meet me at eye level.

“Why not?” she pressed. I bit my lower lip, puncturing a sore scab formed from all of the times I had chewed the skin before. It was one of those habits I couldn’t shake.

“Because...” I began, my palms feeling clammy, “...because if I start following him now...then I fear I might never stop.” Her expression quickly shifted from calm and collected to genuinely surprised.

“Wait–” she said, “what do you–” her brows twisted into confusion, “–what do you mean by that?” I tucked my face into my knees, attempting to avoid our discussion. She tapped on my head, hungry for more information. Unwilling to let me wallow in my embarrassment.

“*Come on, Cleon!*” she scolded. “Don’t do that! Tell me!” I shook my head, still buried. I threw my arms over my head for good measure.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I mumbled. She scoffed and lifted my face up with a finger below my chin.

“You can *trust* me,” she assured gently, “I’m your friend.” I waved my hands around in agitation, eager to end the conversation.

“I know, I know, it’s just–I can’t. I’m done talking about him.” She leaned forward, our foreheads nearly touching.

“And...why is that?” she asked.

“Because I don’t care about him anymore!” I snapped, “He doesn’t affect me!” Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms.

“Then why does his name still scare you?” she said. Her question bit into my skin. I pushed her away and stepped onto the floor. She cocked her head, still looking at me from her seat on the window. Her olive skin was nearly blue under the moonbeams. I stared at her perfect silhouette. I stood awkwardly, pressed against the wall across from her. I needed that distance between us. I needed to run away. I contemplated it— leaving her in the dark. Before I could, she spoke again.

“I dream about the three of us sometimes,” she said in a low voice, her head resting on her forearms, her knees bound to her chest. It was an uncanny sentence. It cut through the silence. Pierced it. I said nothing. I just stood there wordlessly. “They’re strange dreams,” she continued, “I never know what to make of them. I see a life we never lived. People we never were. Landscapes that are so familiar and tangible, but they’re polluted with twisted structures— dark temples infesting the hills. Except it’s all so...real. It makes us seem inevitable. Some fated cosmic thing. Written in the stars.” She lifted her head and shifted her body to face me straight on. “What do you suppose that means?”

I was still pinned against the wall. Illuminated by starshine and moonlight. I shook my head faintly, just enough for the light around me to shift, to let her know I was still there. Her eyes locked with mine. They were viridescent. Unnatural. Almost as if they didn’t belong to her. To her body. “It means you can’t forget him, Cleon,” she whispered, her steady voice only a shade above silent. “You can’t forget me, or yourself, or any of this,” she said, gesturing to the villa around us. My throat tightened with emotion. There was a pit stirring in my stomach as I envisioned the three of us unmoving against the cosmos. I wanted to cry until the stars blurred.

“How do you even know it’s real?” I asked. “They’re only dreams. They don’t mean anything– not unless you’re an oracle.” I pressed my palms against the wall. “You’re no prophet, Eurynome. None of us are.” She threw her hands up in mock-defeat and hopped onto the floor. There was not much distance between us now.

“I’m only trying to fix us,” she said. “That’s more than you can say for yourself. Now, are you going to tell me *something*? Or will we keep suffering in silence? Pretending as if nothing is amiss. Treating each other like *strangers*.” I balked, my brows furrowing in indignation.

“I don’t treat you like a stranger!” I insisted, “you’re my closest– anything!” She half-lidded her eyes and gave me a taunting smile.

“Prove it then,” she challenged. I stepped forward, bringing my face into the light. My back foot trailed behind, and my hands balled into petty fists.

“Fine!” I spat, “I will.” She crossed her arms impatiently. “The three of us...we all want different things,” I explained. “Sometimes what we want isn’t what we need. I need normalcy. I need to live my life safe from scrutiny and pain. Archaeus needs– he needs risk. He needs to constantly walk the line. And you need control. You need to contort us like some forceful mediator.” Her eyes glistened with the early signs of tears. She rubbed them away with her arm. I closed the gap between us, one hand holding her waist tenderly, the other hovering over her skin, unsure of where to go.

“No– please don’t cry...” I whispered. She caved into me, her arms pinned against my chest. I moved my hands onto her back, embracing her. We stood there for a while, just sort of breathing. I wasn’t sure where to go next. I hoped she would guide me. Perhaps that was the wonderful thing about control, it alleviated the hard choices. She drew back, her face gazing up at mine.

“How can we fix this?” she asked me quietly. Her hands grasped the fabric of my tunic. I cupped her cheeks in my calloused hands, our bodies so close together.

“I’m still trying to figure that out,” I said. She bowed her head, and I kissed her forehead, my lips grazing her hair.

“We both are,” she whispered back. I rested my chin on her head, staring out of the window. I let her words swallow me whole.

“Then...we can conquer this together.” We stood there, letting the calmness settle over us. The night spun around us, a consuming eclipse-shadow. I closed my eyes and allowed memories to control my mind. I remembered bright days, fiery suns blazing over warm waters. I remembered people, too. People I did not know. Places and feelings that lacked all sense. Islands in confusion, muddling this moment. I felt water, cool and sudden, pouring over me. Eurynome moved, pulling me back to reality. I blinked. Twice. Three times.

“It’s so late...” she murmured. “We’ll hardly be able to work in the morning.” I heard her collect her wrinkled skirts and step away. I stood in the dark and stared at the moon. Then I looked at her. Neither of us spoke. I watched her disappear down the hallway, fading into the cover of night. I wiped my cheeks but was surprised to find my fingers were damp. I had been quietly crying and I didn’t even notice. I stuck my head out of the window to observe the stars. They were blurry. Like fires washed to sea.

I woke up the next morning feeling displaced. Our conversation was a fractured memory in my head, like shattered glass. The sun was barely up, and most of the others in my room were still fast asleep. Field work wouldn’t start for another hour at least. I slipped out of my bed, my feet light on the floor. I walked outside, letting the fresh and misty morning air hit me head-on. The grass was slick with dew, but I knew the arid heat would resume shortly. There were a few early-risers preparing

breakfast outside. A handful of others were quietly chatting or washing clothes. I walked over to them.

“G’ morning,” I yawned. They responded likewise. One of them I was decently acquainted with, named Nikoleta. She was married to the only other literate member of the commune.

“I heard the record-keeping is going well,” she remarked, an effort in small-talk. I nodded, my mind eager to start writing.

“It is,” I said. I picked some grass out of the ground and began to weave it around my finger. “I assume Dimos has been receiving assignments as well?” She dipped her head.

“Hmm...not particularly,” she replied. Then she lowered her voice. “He’s enamored with all of this newfangled settlement nonsense. He thinks the Greeks will favor him— give him good payment for his talents. He wants to run off around the Mediterranean.” I perked up, intent on listening to this. The other men and women seated around us turned their attention as well.

“Wait— he wants to settle that new city?” I clarified. Nikoleta bobbed her head in confirmation.

“Exactly,” she said. “He’s obsessed with it! I suppose if you live someplace like Massalia for so long you get restless.”

“He’ll get himself killed,” an older woman cut in. “God knows what’s out there. Barbarians most likely!” Nikoleta spun her head to glare at the intruding woman.

“He’s not going to *die*,” she snapped. “He’s only curious. Nothing will come of it.” I looked towards the mist-enveloped mountains. My throat felt dry. The grass in my hands was almost entirely torn from my fidgeting.

“What if something does...?” I said, my voice not feeling like my own.

“What?” Nikoleta asked. I didn’t turn to face her. Instead I continued speaking to the middle-distance.

“What if he’s right? What if there *is* a brilliant new frontier? I mean, *we’re* a colony and we do just fine. I can’t imagine anywhere else would be considerably worse. In fact...” I gave pause to what I was saying, feeling as if I was talking from someone else’s mind. “...what if it’s better?” Nikoleta laughed.

“You can go wherever you wish Cleon, but I’m not allowing my husband to wander off into parts unknown. We have a life here.”

“Oh. Right,” I said, my eyes snapping back to hers. “I have a life here too.” The conversation stopped. An awkward feeling permeated the atmosphere.

“So...” a man who was de-seeding a pomegranate said, “should we head in for breakfast?” People mumbled agreements under their breath, fleeing the scene. I pinched my temples, embarrassment spreading across my face.

The next few weeks passed similarly. Waking up early to feel the cool air, spending long days carving tablets, getting through uncomfortable social interactions, and avoiding Eurynome and Archaeus. The seasons ebbed and eased as well. The sun became less an intense beam, more of a pulsing warmth. The brilliant greens of midsummer transitioned to golden-brown and burnt. Fruit grew to its ripest and heaviest, until the air was poisoned with its scent. Some days were easier than others. Stargazing on the terracotta roof, running through the barley fields, hiking into the city to spend my wages, even losing myself in music and wine on careless nights. What I forgot was that the endless work would soon come to a halt. I would no longer have a distraction. The final harvests of summer were being cut and picked, then hauled away on wagons and ships. Workers were leaving the villa in droves, heading back to wherever they had originated. Day workers

arrived less frequently as well. The fields were nearly empty and the world was still.

“We have the next two days off,” a voice said, cutting through my solitude. It startled me. My eyes fluttered open. I had been lying beneath the shady canopy of an olive tree, letting the morning pass me by.

“What?” I asked sleepily. A familiar face was looking down at me, as if I was an ant about to be stepped on. Eurynome’s hair was pinned into a well-tamed bun with a few coils falling down to her cheekbones. She was backlit by the orange sun, sunlight escaping through the fabric of her chiton. Her hands were firmly placed on her hips in a pose of confidence.

“There’s no work today,” she said, “we’re going to the ocean.” I sat up and dusted the grass out of my tangled hair.

“Just us, right?” I asked her. She grabbed my forearm and hoisted me to my feet.

“Uh...not exactly,” she said. I groaned and brushed down the rest of my clothes.

“If it’s who I think it is, I’m not going,” I said with a dull face. She rolled her eyes and threw her arms out in exasperation.

“It’ll be fun!” she exclaimed. “It’s been weeks since the two of you last spoke! I’ve been stepping on eggshells! It’s exhausting.” I crossed my arms and leaned against the rough bark of the tree.

“Tough luck,” I said. She stomped her foot and snatched my wrist.

“No— no way,” she argued. “We’re not doing this. You’re going to have so much fun and there’s nothing you can do about it.” I whined and attempted to claw her hands away.

“There is no way you can call that fun,” I complained, batting her face to combat her strong grip. She shook her head and dragged me a few dozen paces away.

“Listen,” she commanded, placing her palms on my shoulders, “if you want to enjoy yourself, you’ll do as I say. There’s a cart bringing some of the last crates for trade down to the harbor today. We’re going to take it. We’re going to have a brilliant time. You’re not going to make a fuss, and everything will be wonderful.” She gave me a supportive shake. “You’ll thank me later.” I begrudgingly agreed, following her out to the road. There were a few other workers standing near the wagon. Some were loading the cargo onto its bed, others were loitering in the patchy burnt grass. I swiveled my head around, searching for Archaeus, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

“Is he coming?” I asked Eurynome, my eyes still trained on the surrounding fields. She finished hoisting a crate onto the wagon bed before dusting off her hands.

“Well, yeah,” she said and lifted another crate out of the dirt. “He should be here any moment now.” I shifted the weight on the balls of my feet, training my eyes on the ground. She smirked mockingly. “What? Do you miss him or something?” she asked. I swatted at her face.

“No! Ugh, stop saying that!” I yelled. She giggled, nearly dropping the crate.

“Careful!” one of the other workers scolded her. “Young people, I swear...” he cursed under his breath. That only set her into another fit of laughter.

“Ah! I’ve a stitch in my side!” Eurynome cried through laughter. “We— we have to stop laughing so often.” I nodded in resigned agreement. It was nice to see her so joyful. It was nice to see her at all, actually. Before I could speak again she gasped and shot up. I followed her gaze south. I lifted my hand to shade my squinted eyes and stared down the middle of the valley. The flaxen pastures were waving in the gentle breeze, and the mid-morning sunrise was still early and tangerine in the sky. Out of the wavering mirage on the horizon I saw a shadow. A

familiar form. I lowered my hand to shield my face, nervously wishing he would not see me. He strided out of the high grass, the first time our eyes had met in weeks. I dipped my head down and let my hair cover my expression.

“Archaeus!” Eurynome cheered, throwing herself over his tall frame. He smiled and hugged her back.

“Good to see you, too,” he said in response to her enthusiasm. She hung onto his arm, already making fast conversation. I had forgotten that they hadn’t stopped speaking to each other. We mounted the back of the wagon, stuffed between other travelers and goods. The meadows passed by, the landscape slowly becoming craggier. Rocks and boulders began to jut out of the land, threatening to break our wheels. The cliffs plunged into sandy beaches, washed away by the waves. The wagon maneuvered down a steep cross-back road cut into the rock face. I could see the ships docked in the bay, people like insects milling about around them. They were moored but crowded, and soon to leave. Our wagon pulled up to the docks and we helped to unload the cargo. I saw Eurynome thanking the driver, shaking his hand. I turned towards the seastrand— feeling the salty wind in my hair. The vinegary tang in the air was refreshing. I slipped off my sandals and dug my toes into the grainy sand.

“Let’s go in the water!” I heard Eurynome shout over the roaring wind. I nodded, grinning ear to ear. With her signal the three of us broke into a sprint, spraying up sand in our stead. I flung my arms out like wings, pretending I was flying. The cool seafront pushed against my body, causing me to run harder. My chest was filling with iron-tinged breaths but I didn’t feel the need to gasp for air. The ocean’s horizon was wide and expansive, exposing the curvature of the Earth.

The lukewarm coolness of the seawater engulfed my ankles. Sea foam caught on my skin. I spun around in the water, splashing up arcs of

ocean spray. Archaeus and Eurynome ran in close behind me. She was holding up her skirts in bunches, attempting to save them from getting wet. A rogue wave lapped up and soaked them anyways. Archaeus bolted ahead of me, getting waist-deep in the rolling breaks. I observed him from afar; his body silhouetted by the blinding sun.

“Don’t drown!” Eurynome teased him. He ran towards us, sloshing up water as his knees cut through the waves. Eurynome held up her hands in defense, but it was no use. She was shoved into the water with a shriek. Archaeus leaned over her, both of them dripping wet.

“Hey,” he grinned, “don’t drown.” I rolled my eyes with a smile as they began to tussle. It was a good day. We continued to wade and swim throughout the afternoon. The sun warmed the water from overhead. I was walking along the wet sand next to the low tide, observing faraway ships on the skyline. Eurynome was sunning herself somewhere further down the beach. I glanced behind me to make sure I hadn’t wandered too far. Archaeus was still dancing through the waves, and I could see Eurynome relaxing on the sand. When I looked forward again, what I saw stopped me mid-step. Archaeus was standing in the water, only a few paces in front of me. I rubbed my eyes. He was still there.

“Archaeus...?” I called out to him. His mouth moved, but I couldn’t hear what he said. I looked closer. He wasn’t in his tunic, instead he was dressed as a foreigner. Clothing I had never seen before. His hair was groomed strangely as well. I wiped the sweat from my brow, afraid I was suffering from sunstroke. The next step I took broke everything. The entire world shattered in a split second. The sky was suddenly a mirror. The ocean was above my head. The mountains were people. People dancing and dying. Colors looked different, images spun around me. Words in unknown languages. Everything was changing rapidly but I was still stuck in slow-motion, my foot not even touching

the ground. I tensed my eyes, shutting them tightly. I felt sand. I opened my eyes slowly, blinking. I was standing solidly on two feet. Archaeus was gone. I collapsed onto the ground, heaving breaths wracking my body. I clutched my chest and frantically stood. My head was pounding. I looked back to where I had left my friends. They were still there, unscathed. A sick feeling turned in my stomach, as if I knew something I hadn't before. What was happening to me?

## IX: Cesaire

Monday morning was quiet. I woke up alone, in the second bedroom. It was plainly furnished and the bed was too large for one person. I put the sheets back in their proper place, but I didn't have to do much seeing as I'd hardly moved the entire night. I heard Zenobie making herself breakfast downstairs but my appetite was nonexistent, leaving me no desire to join her. Instead I slipped into our bedroom and got dressed. In lieu of my weekend ensemble of intricate waistcoats and ruffled shirts I donned a plain coat, conservative shirt, matching stockings and pants, and my most modest pair of shoes. I walked into the dining room with my satchel slung over my shoulder. Zenobie was sitting by herself at the head of the table, nibbling on stuffed tomatoes. She looked up at me silently as I passed by. I waved my hand shyly, unsure of what to say. She turned back to her plate and I considered leaving without a word. I thought better of it.

"I'm off to work..." I said with an empty voice. She nodded and bit into her food. My hand hovered over the door handle.

"Be safe," she finally said without looking up. I gulped and gave her a short nod before exiting. The morning was warm and bright, but the streets were largely empty. A few commuters and early dog-walkers strolled by, but I mostly had this district of the city to myself. I walked around to the side of our townhouse and unlatched the steel gate barring our small side yard. My bicycle was leaning against the outer wall, just under the parlor window. I wheeled it out front and attached my bag to the carrier behind the seat. As I sped through the little seaside town I had lived in all my life, I couldn't shake the feeling something had changed.

I attempted to let my anxieties go as I climbed the hill on the final leg of my journey. It was a beautiful day, after all. The florists had hung their most fragrant flowers, the waves were especially vivid, and all the

townsfolk had an aura of idyllicism around them. I finally arrived at my destination— *Lycée de Antibes*, the local secondary institution, as well as my place of work. I parked my bicycle next to a few others owned by faculty or wealthy older students. The school was situated in the Maure district of the city, inland and uphill from the marina, and northeast from my house. It had several buildings featuring a wide range of facilities, but I primarily operated in the arts wing. Young men from around Antibes and the surrounding area including Cannes and Biot attended, some making the pilgrimage on foot to receive their continuing education. They would have to travel to Aix-Marseille at least if they wished to pursue further, so for many this was as much as they would receive. I made it my personal ambition to make that education a good one.

The yard was already filling up with chattering schoolboys when I arrived, despite school not starting for another hour. I gave messages of ‘good morning’ and ‘hello’ to my various pupils, stopping to exchange further pleasantries with some of my more involved students. My classroom was not particularly large. Not too long after I had set up for the morning my class began to file in the door. I propped open the windows to allow for some sunshine to escape into the classroom. Once all of my students had seated themselves and stopped talking I rolled down the blackboard behind my desk and began to mark it with chalk.

“Good morning class,” I said. A chorus of similar greetings called back at me. “I hope you all had pleasant weekends. Today we will be continuing our discussions of neoplatonism. Your reading covered attitudes surrounding the philosophy in third century Hellenistic society, which you should reflect upon in your writing today. There will be an opportunity for discussion later, as well.” I set the piece of chalk down and noticed my knuckles were white, having gripped it tightly. I attempted to smooth out my trembling fingers on my coat and turned

back to my class with a sharp inhale. “I would like to address the origins of neoplatonism today,” I said with as much composure as I could manage. “As the name suggests, the more elusive and traditional ‘platonism’ came first. The creator of this antiquated predecessor was, as you know, Plato. However, what about its constituents? How did the followers of platonism historically behave?” I walked over to a map of the ancient Mediterranean.

“The Platonic Academy was centered in Athens, where Plato and subsequently his line of students lectured for several hundred years. Despite his teachings originating in Greece, followers of his belief system can be found all around the ancient world. Even in Massalia, the ancient Ionic Greek colony of our own city, there lived purveyors of platonic-like thought. You may know the explorer Pytheas who resided around here about two thousand years ago. In addition to his works in geography and exploration he was also an astronomer, and familiar with contemporaries of Plato. Many people like this populated antiquity, whether they were common folk or polymaths, hellenism brought philosophy to all of them in one way or another. This is the lesson I want all of you to internalize. The fact that the waves of ideas touch more than those that can see them.” I stopped my pacing. “Any questions before I continue?” A single hand shot up towards the back of the room. I pointed at him, raising my eyebrows. “Yes?”

“There isn’t any reputable evidence that Massalians were knowledgeable about the Academy, or any of the intellectual ongoing in Athens. The trade of ideas isn’t verifiable in this instance. What’s your source?” My excitement for an engaged student quickly fell away. I lowered my arm slowly, my mouth drawing into an open frown.

“I— well, uh,” I stuttered, “I suppose I don’t know. It just seemed...right.” The boy rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. A few confused murmurs rippled through the classroom.

“I’m sorry,” I cleared my throat, “I must have read it somewhere. I’ll search for the citation later...let’s just— let’s just continue with the lesson.” I massaged my temples, a high-pitched ringing piercing me somewhere I couldn’t reach it. The rest of the class passed by in a blur. I let the students take the reigns in their reading and discussion and prayed they wouldn’t find me too distant. The end of class was nearing and my eyes were distracted, affixed on something out of the window.

“Monsieur Vielescot?” the apprehensive voice of a student cut through the static in my ears. I released my tight grip from the edge of my desk, my face quickly assuming a personable expression.

“Oh!” I exclaimed with a nervous laugh. “I didn’t see you there, Janou, my apologies.” He gave me a confused look, almost concerned. I saw an embarrassed group of students standing behind him.

“Sorry, sir,” He said shyly, “I’ve been saying your name for a while. Did I— did I interrupt something?” I sighed heavily and pinched my temples, waving him away.

“No, no, Janou,” I said, “you did nothing wrong. What did you need?” He shook his head and looked down at his shuffling feet.

“Nothing, sir. It’s just that...you haven’t moved in a long time. We were, um, worried.”

“There is nothing to be worried about,” I responded. “I just need some...water. I think.” I glanced at the clock mounted in the corner. “Class is dismissed in a few minutes, is it not?” He nodded timidly, a few of the boys behind him snickered.

“You can talk amongst yourselves until then,” I announced to the rest of the classroom. “Your homework is on the board. Do not forget the reading. Have a—have a good rest of your day.” Once the period had ended and I was finally alone, I slumped to the floor with my head in my hands. I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. I checked the

time; I still had an hour until I had to teach my two afternoon classes. I pulled myself to my feet with a groan and walked into the hallway.

The library was in the same wing as my room, which meant it was nearby. I pushed the library doors open and made a beeline for the information desk. The librarian wasn't there, but that was what I had been betting on. His assistant, a young but uptight woman, was seated at his desk, pouring over book records with a fountain pen in hand. She immediately sensed my presence and stopped her work to address me, her lips drawn in a conservative frown.

"Monsieur Vielescot..." she began, setting her pen down, "how nice of you to visit." I wrung my hands nervously and sat down in the chair in front of her desk.

"Good morning, Marta," I said. She looked me up and down, judgment radiating from her perpetual glare.

"What do you want?" she asked. I tilted closer to the desk.

"I need some research assistance," I said in a hushed tone. She narrowed her eyes and swept aside her paperwork. Her hands clasped together and she took a sharp breath before speaking.

"Well," she said, "alright then. What information are you interested in finding?"

"It's uh..." my voice stalled, "not of much importance, really. I just— I just promised my pupils I would locate a citation for them...on a rather dull topic, actually. It would probably send you right to sleep." She rolled her eyes and rested her chin in her hand.

"You're bluffing," she immediately determined. "Tell me what you're *really* looking for, Vielescot." I held up my hands in defeat.

"Fine," I conceded, "I have a personal problem." A slim smile formed on her lips. Only the trace of one. Marta never appeared joyful, only weirdly amused.

“Very good,” she said and picked up her pen. “Tell me more.” I sunk into the chair, my hand on my brow.

“Last night...I saw something that wasn’t there,” I told her. She twirled the pen between her fingers.

“What was it?” she asked. I thought back through my warped memories, trying to summon up images of my confused state the night before.

“I was at a dinner party,” I explained, “and I saw someone who was not supposed to be there in the crowd. I could plainly see his face—clear as day! But when I got to him...he was a stranger. Then the world went haywire. I saw visions of some— some ancient society or something. It felt vaguely Grecian. It was almost as if I was seeing a different world through someone else’s eyes. Like I was experiencing a memory that wasn’t mine. Everything looked warped and wrong, I must have been hallucinating. It’s difficult to remember.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling the beginning of a headache pressing against my temples. “I don’t— I just don’t know what’s wrong with me, Marta. Everything has been so strange since last night, like the world is out of sorts. As if I understand— *know* something I didn’t before.” She began to write a string of letters and numbers on a slip of paper.

“Are you looking for resources or advice?” she asked, not looking up from her writing. I leaned back in the chair and considered for a moment.

“Both?” I said. She nodded solemnly and adjusted the tight bun in the back of her head.

“Very well then,” she said. “My advice? You’ve lost a few marbles. Probably more than a few. I would see a psychologist— one of those Kierkegaard types. Honestly, I’m hardly surprised. You overwork yourself, you’re already asocial in numerous ways—”

“Asocial?” I cut in. Her lips tightened and she pointed her pen at me.

“...Yes,” she said. “Nearly every tendency you’ve confided in me with is atypical. Reluctancy for social interaction? Belief you are inherently more intelligent than your contemporaries? Your inability to form proper romantic relationships? I *could* go on.” I groaned and ran my hand through my hair.

“Ugh, fine. Just. Continue with your ‘advice’, whatever it is.” She gave me a final look of annoyance before resuming.

“If you don’t wish to subject yourself to the questionably moral field of mental medicine, I would suggest turning somewhere...far more questionable.” I raised my eyebrows and folded my fingers together. “There are certain groups,” she paused, “that believe in the existence of possession of the spirit. The state of being in which you transform into something unlike anything you’ve been before. They’re occultists, really. I know you’re a faithful man, but if your newfound insanity continues to plague you I have a source you can contact.” She gave me a neutral expression, waiting for my response. I stared at her in confusion before stifling a laugh.

“*You?*” I said, “You’re an occultist?” That felt unexpected. She rolled her eyes dramatically and stood from her chair.

“I do not personally believe in such things, no,” she replied, “but I have several acquaintances who are associated with the movement. Your story isn’t exactly one to warrant a ‘normal’ consultation.” I touched my index finger to my mouth and considered what she had said.

“I suppose,” I mused, “but as a Catholic it’s a difficult prospect to consider. Last night was most likely just a one-time incident...perhaps I hallucinated because someone slipped something in my drink. It would explain how disoriented I feel today.” Marta closed her eyes and shrugged.

“Yes, that is quite reasonable,” she responded and gathered her papers from her desk. She waltzed past me and into the aisles. “I’ll let you check out some light reading on the subject if any of it piques your interest.” I didn’t want to follow her but it was impossible to decline that my status as an academic did not heighten my curiosity for the taboo.

“Alright,” I said, “but this doesn’t mean I don’t condemn this witchcraft. Because I definitely do.” She shot me a sly look from over her shoulder and selected a few hardcovers from the shelves.

“I believe you,” she said. She dropped a stack of books into my arms and tapped the cover of the one on top. It was black, thin, and it featured an illustration of Baphomet on the cover. It was titled *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* by Éliphas Lévi. I cringed looking at it, a sick feeling spreading through my body.

“It looks Satanic,” I told her, “why is this in our school’s library?” Marta flicked her wrist and examined her nails, obviously avoiding eye contact with me.

“I host some of my...*personal* volumes here,” she explained nonchalantly. I shoved the books back into her arms.

“I thought you said you *weren’t* an occultist!” I exclaimed. She placed a hand on her hip and turned over one of the books to examine it.

“I’m not,” she replied. “I *am* a connoisseur. My accomplices aren’t simply random, Vielescot. I choose to mingle with certain subcultures. Listen, either you have me— your only confidant, or you deal with this yourself.”

“You’re not my only confidant, Marta,” I said defensively, “ and you’re definitely not my favorite either.” She imitated offense and drew back.

“Ouch! That hurt,” she said mockingly. “I could care less what you think, Cesaire. You’re lucky I’m the only person in this building willing to listen to your plights. Now take the books or get out.” I

snatched the books from her arms and spun on my heel, leaving the library without another word.

“Pssh,” she hissed, “nice seeing you, too.”

The rest of the day flew by without much incident. My headache worsened and it grew continually harder to focus on instructing my students, but I maintained a mostly level head. The books slotted into my bag burned in the back of my mind. With enough mental energy I could distract myself from it. I let the hours slip by me, keeping to simple lessons, lecturing less and providing work time more, and leaning on my coworkers during the afternoon staff meeting. As I closed my classroom door at the end of the day I was interrupted by the intrusion of a familiar shadow seeping over my legs.

“Oh!” I said, looking up from my feet. “Hello, Janou.” My student gave me an awkward smile.

“Good afternoon, Monsieur Vielescot,” he said. “I hope I’m not keeping you from your errands.”

“No, not at all. Do you have a question?” I slung my satchel over my shoulder and gave him my attention.

“Yes, sir. Is that alright?”

“Of course,” I said, “the floor is yours, son.” He nodded and tangled his fingers together—his nervous habit I had noticed time and time again.

“It’s just that, earlier you seemed so strangely affected, sir,” he began quietly, “and I could not help but wonder what had captured your attention. I know it is none of my business to intrude, but it has been eating away at me all day. If it is some new research, some great prospect that will change the field, by God you must tell me! I’m eager, sir, and I promise I’d make a good assistant. I’m set to graduate from my formal education in less than a year, I’m nearly a man. I promise I’m very capable.” I chuckled and shook my head.

“No, no, it is nothing like that,” I said. “Not all philosophers and historians are dwelling on new theories when their minds wander, you know. On occasion we are simply exploring. Just the way any other man would do.” I peered at his downcast face with a frown. “Don’t fret, Janou, I know you’re a very good student. Don’t let that go, there will be many opportunities for you. You should really consider University.” His face immediately beamed.

“Thank you, sir,” he replied giddily. “Let me know if I can be of service. Whenever!” I gave him a polite smile and waved goodbye before pushing past him and down the hallway. His acute attention to my mood bothered me. I usually wasn’t that easy to read, least especially by an inexperienced student who hardly knew me. My mouth twisted bitterly at the thought of baring myself so openly. It was unprofessional of course, but also uncomfortable. I raked my fingers through my sweaty hair and slicked it back. It was growing long, and my curls were starting to overtake my well-kept appearance. The late afternoon sun was unbearably hot, causing sweat to trickle down my forehead. I wiped my brow and mounted my bicycle, my teeth gritting at the hot metal of the handlebars.

As I sped down the winding hill the school rested atop of, I stood up on the pedals and let the wind dance in my face. My eyes closed and basked in the warmth of the beautiful day. A resplendent fountain was forged into the base of the hill, the centerpiece of a rotunda with a view of the bay. Families strolled down the promenade enjoying fresh ice cream and heading down to the surf for swimming and boating. I banked around the fountain and came to a stop on the side of the boardwalk, under the arch of a seafront building. A malformed shape caught the edge of my peripheral vision. It darted past me like a bulging shadow. I spun around, my arm swinging behind me. I scanned the horizon, shielding my squinted eyes with the broad edge of my hand. There was

nothing there. The fountain was bubbling water from its stony orifices, vacationers were lounging on the pale sand, and the world felt perfectly normal.

Before I could so much as breathe I was plunged into darkness. My chest contracted, and I was dragged from my vision, my mouth silently agape as the world around me burned away. The sound of rolling waves slamming the ancient seawall grew unbearably loud. I clenched my eyes and covered my ears. The lilting background noise became a roaring thunder, it overpowered me. I wanted to scream, to claw it out of me, to tear my body away from my burning bones. My vision began to return to me, light slowly flooding back into my eyes. I blinked several times, feeling nauseous. The first thing I saw was the seawall, its alabaster-white bricks perfectly plunging into the churning waters below. The sky revealed itself to me next. To my adjunct horror, it was aflame with the fury of beelzebub himself, draped in hellish glory, crossed with pentecostal flaming light. I took an uneasy step back. Antibes was on fire. People shoved into me, all running towards the sea. Some held buckets, desperate to quell the flames with brackish water. As my eyes adjusted I noticed the true nightmare. A woman next to me jutted into my arm, and I was surprised to feel her bare skin on mine. She was draped in a flowery silk, tattered and muddy, flying behind her in the dark wind. It was unlike any fashion I had ever seen, and entirely immodest. I balked, spinning around to see the rest of the crowd. The entire town of Antibes was suddenly and inexplicably donning Hellenic dress. My mind reeled. It was impossible. I grabbed the wrist of a young man running past me.

“What the Hell is going on?” I yelled over the clamoring masses. He gave me a panicked look and shook me off before darting away. I tried again with a teenage girl next to me. She shook her head in confusion. Despite my better judgment I tried again in Greek.

“Τι συμβαίνει?” I asked her. That seemed to garner some recognition, but a very puzzled look nonetheless. She pulled me down to the ocean with her, running headfirst through the crowds. We were like stampeding animals, flowing together and trampling each other in a frenzied panic. The sky was blood red now. Embers singed my skin, smoke billowed overhead, and I felt my lungs constricting. The girl turned her head back to answer me, but before she could make so much as a sound, the entire world stopped. I awoke collapsed on the cobblestone street of the Antibes I knew. A cohort of crowded heads were blocking out the sun, their worried faces akin to a flock of curious birds. One of them gave me a hand and hoisted me up. I attempted to stand but felt my legs buckle, and was unceremoniously caught by the crook of my back.

“Are you quite alright?” an older woman asked me with concern. I tossed my hand in her direction and attempted to stabilize my spinning head.

“I’m fine,” I said, “I’m really fine.” A sputtering cough shook my chest. I stared down at my quivering palm. A splatter of bright red blood was dashed across my skin. My eyes widened and I hastily scrambled to my feet. I shoved through the onlookers and hopped onto my bike, my hand pressed to my mouth. Perhaps Marta was right, I wasn’t in control of my own body. I was possessed. I pedaled hard, desperate to get home, to feel something familiar. The world outside of my head was a messy blur. Abstract images of oceans and old buildings streamed around me, but I couldn’t make anything out. I was undoubtedly in a panic. Eventually I pulled onto the curb in front of the townhouse. Time was illegible to me, I wasn’t sure how I had gotten there. Nevertheless I welcomed it, throwing my bicycle to the ground and running up the steps. I slammed my shoulder into the door, nearly collapsing on the carpet as I flew through the threshold. I narrowly missed an ornate vase,

but I banged my shin on the edge of the decorative desk it was displayed on.

“Cesaire?” Zenobie’s voice rang from somewhere within the house. “Is that you?” I pulled my sticky hand away from my face, more blood spilling out from between my fingers. I couldn’t speak so I made a sound of confirmation instead, running to the bathroom. I slammed the door behind me and spit into the sink. Blood poured from my chapped lips. I stared into the mirror mounted on the wall. I was deathly pale, a blue tinge tainting my skin. My hair fell in front of my face, nearly hiding my sunken eyes. I shrugged off my overcoat, letting it fall to the tiled ground. I then wiped my mouth, the residual blood staining my forearm.

“Shit,” I whispered sharply. I turned my face away, unable to look at my disheveled state much longer. My white shirt was rolled up at the sleeves, droplets of crimson dashing it like rain. The blood had stopped overflowing my throat, but pools of it still rested behind my teeth. The metallic taste was overwhelming. I spat the rest of it onto the floor, where it filled the crevices between the tiles. My hyperventilating eventually subsided, and I was left pathetically on the ground, surrounded by a scene that certainly foreshadowed my imminent death. I crawled to the door and hung on the handle, slowly cracking it open. My bag was slumped on the ground outside. I dragged it into the bathroom and flimsily unbuttoned the flap, revealing Marta’s cursed books. I tentatively picked up the black one bearing the image of Baphomet. I flipped through the yellowed pages. Words and symbols my dizzy brain could hardly comprehend danced around me. The book was unintelligible, and certainly satanic. I sighed in defeat and tossed it back in the bag. I threw my head back and ran my hands through my hair and back onto my neck, where I rested them. I felt helpless.

A knock from the other side of the door interrupted my lamenting. I let my arms fall to my side, but felt too tired to stand and answer the door.

“I’m in here,” I said as loudly as I could muster. I paused for a moment, observing the state of the bathroom. “Uh, you can come in. Just— just watch your step, okay? And—” Before I could deliver more of my message the door swung open. Zenobie stood in its frame, her hand still on the handle when she screamed shrilly.

“Oh my God!” she shrieked, “What the hell, Cesaire?” What— oh, oh my God...” she looked like she was going to be sick. All I could do was stare at her. She threw her hands to her mouth and backed away. Her hair was pinned up and rolled with ribbons.

“You look really beautiful today...” I managed to say, weakly slumped against the wall. Her hands tentatively fell and she reached out to caress my face.

“What happened to you?” she whispered. I lifted my arm to hold the hand she had placed on my cheek. My head leaned into her elbow.

“You’d never believe me,” I said under my breath. I smiled at her, blood trickling down my chin. She gasped lightly, dropping to her knees. She threw herself over me, cradling me in her arms.

“Please don’t tell me someone hurt you,” she choked. I shook my head slightly, my eyes closed.

“No one laid a finger on me,” I assured her. She pressed her forehead against mine and laced our fingers together.

“Christ, Cesaire, is this why you’ve been so distant? Are you ill?” She searched my face with darting eyes. “Is that why you won’t marry me? Would you die before our wedding day?” I clasped her hand between both of my own and bowed my head.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said, “but something is. Something is strictly wrong with me and it’s eating me up inside. Dying, though? I can’t say.”

“We should call a doctor,” she said, brushing my slick baby hairs away from my brow. “You’re obviously sick. You need help.” I waved her off and cleared my throat.

“No— no doctor,” I asserted. “I’m genuinely...fine.” I pressed on my knees and rose unsteadily to my feet. I slowly let her fingers slip from my grasp, abandoning her on the floor. “It was only a bout of stress. I— feel quite alright. Only need a bit of rest, that’s all. Will you take me to the library?” She stood to face me.

“I don’t believe you’re not ill. I mean— look at you! You coughed up blood all over the place, for heaven’s sake.” She pressed her bangs back and began to sputter. “I— God— I just— I just don’t know what to say—!” I placed a hand on her waist.

“Calm down,” I said gently, “it’s going to be okay. I’ll be in the library. Don’t you wait for me.” I walked past her and out of the bathroom, leaving her open-mouthed with blood staining the hem of her skirt. I trailed my palm along the walls of the house, guiding myself to our small reading room. It featured floor-to-ceiling shelves stocked with all manner of manuscripts. Oil lamps provided ambient lighting, and plump chairs featuring a menagerie of patterns lended a place to rest. I searched the shelves, my finger running over the spines. Eventually I located the book I had been searching for and plucked it away from its dusty bookcase. I took a seat in one of the overstuffed chairs and began to read. Countless chapters I poured over, each leaving me with more questions than the last. After some time, it was clear. Antibes had never suffered a large fire during the Greek period; at least not a documented one. This entirely ruled out time travel. How could I have been

transported to an event that never occurred? I stared up at the ceiling, dwelling on this revelation.

“Marta was goddamn right,” I whispered to myself. Of course she was correct, despite how much I hated the premise. I had to be possessed. Some evil spirit had taken residence in my psyche, gained control of my body. I was being tortured with sick visitations of hellfire and sin. My breath was becoming blood. I was a puppet for the Prince of the East himself. I threw the book against the wall in a fit of anger. I threw the rest of the books resting on the side table for good measure, too. I bit down on my lip until it sprung with scarlet, my skin feeling too tight. I needed to fix this. My burst of rage and excitement died down, quelled by a sudden grounding feeling. I turned to the single window in the room. Delicate light filtered through the drapes. I ran my hand down my face, leaving it damp with sweat and tears. My hair must’ve looked wild. I gathered the tarnished books from the ground and slotted them back on the shelves. I wanted someone to hold me, tell me everything was going to be alright. Hadn’t Zenobie done that for me? It hadn’t comforted me the way I desired. I knew there was only one path forward. I had to take Marta’s recommendation. An occultist exorcism. How far I must’ve fallen to turn to such wicked methods to cure my maladies. How shameful that should make me.

I left the reading room filled with a new determination. Zenobie was waiting for me, her head rested in her hand. I sat beside her in the sitting room, letting us bask in silence together for as long as we wished. The sun was beginning to set by then, and the tangerine sky reminded me of my lingering visions of a burning Antibes. Somehow, the prospect of returning there didn’t scare me. There was a comfort in the idea. A pocket dimension of illusionary people, all mine to confide in. My better senses disagreed, of course. I had confidants here, in the real world. Marta

for my mental ailments, Zenobie for the proceedings of society, and Auguste for all those other matters—trivial and true.

“I love you,” Zenobie finally muttered. I twisted my fingertips in her soft black hair. She was practically glowing under the fiery sky light. I knew what I had to say back, but the words on my lips felt like a lie. I said them anyway.

“I love you more,” I answered, breathing into her neck. I planted a kiss on the top of her head, sweet and full of longing.

“You scared me today,” she said. “I’m so goddamn worried about you. I don’t know—” her voice broke off. She stared out the open window; grand and gleaming, taller than trees. She inhaled sharply. “Some days I don’t know if I’ll walk into your bedroom one morning...and find something I don’t want to see. Are you going to be dead? Gone? Run off with some other woman who can love you more?” I bit my fist.

“I wouldn’t do that to you, Zee,” I reassured her, my voice close to cracking. “I love you too much. And you...you love me more than I deserve.” I let my shoulders fall in defeat. “I’ll marry you. One day when I’m good and ready. When I can give you the life you’re supposed to have. Right now, with all that’s happening to me, I don’t know if I can provide that for you.” She smothered me with another embrace.

“I don’t know what’s happening to you either, but I’ll wait until it’s over,” she said into my neck. “I promise you’re worth waiting for.” A sudden passion surged through me. I drew back from our hug and grinned at her, my arms slung over her shoulders. My legs were slotted into her lap, our skin meeting at all sorts of tangents. Her eyes gleamed with an anticipation I hadn’t seen in a long time. I dove in, locking our lips firm and true. I wasn’t going to mess up this time. I was going to keep her and I was going to fix whatever was wrong with me. Our cheeks melded together as her mouth began to trail down my collarbone, her

slim hands dragging my shirt. My eyes were closed, completely letting in the darkness. Then, sparks flew. I laughed and leaned into another kiss, thinking I was seeing the light that comes with love. The sparks kept flying. They became roaring flames, outlines of buildings engulfed in death. Visions of my hallucinations flashed behind my eyelids. I was still kissing Zenobie. Her face phased into my vision. No, it wasn't Zenobie. It looked like her, but more unkempt, and she was draped in that same Grecian clothing that had appeared in my previous hallucination. She firmly grabbed my jaw, yelling at me, saying something muted and drowned. Something awful, I reckoned. Something hard to hear. I sputtered, spitting real-life-Zenobie out and wiping my mouth in disgust. I opened my eyes to see her worried face hovering over mine as I strangely lay in her arms.

“What— what happened?” she asked, near-panicked. It wasn't her typical offended response to me halting our activities.

“Nothing,” I responded hastily, “Why?” She blinked blankly, as if it should be obvious.

“You were paralyzed,” she said. “You fell slack in my arms. I thought you had fainted.”

“You didn't say anything just then?” I asked. She looked puzzled and shook her head. I wondered if I should tell her what was really plaguing me. No use, I would be rid of it soon enough. I fell back onto the cushions of the couch, rolling my head to face the window. She traced the lines of my hand, staying steadfast by me as I drifted into a shallow sleep. Some time during the middle of the night Zenobie took me upstairs with her, and we slept in the same bed for the first time in months.

## X: Auguste

“Why are you here, Auguste?” The psychiatrist asked me. He leaned back in his drab cushioned chair with a thick cigar between his fingers. He took a drag and puffed out a ring of smoke, smothering the smoldering end in his ashtray.

“I’m seeing things,” I said with a straight face. There was no lying about my intentions here, might as well not conceal my insanity to the man meant to cure it.

“How maudlin,” he remarked with a slight eye roll. “What *things* have you been *seeing*?” I leaned back on the futon and kicked my legs out on the coffee table, crossing my hands in my lap.

“The past, I think,” I said. “People dressed like ancient times. People I know in real life. But they’re different. Not quite the same.” The psychiatrist began to jot something down in his notebook. He peered over the edge of his glasses.

“Do they look the same as the people in your life?” he asked. I nodded. “Hmph,” he grunted, “so the only difference is their style of dress?”

“No sir, they also wear their hair differently. That’s not it, though. I have the sinking feeling they are distinct people, different people, who assume the shape of my friends.” The psychiatrist scribbled furiously.

“Interesting,” he murmured while writing. “Tell me more about how this makes you feel.” I scratched my arm uncomfortably.

“It– it makes me feel sad, I think,” I said. “I get the feeling that I’ve lost something. Some life I lived or people I loved, now unrecognizable to me. It’s...a forlorn feeling. A yearning.” He nodded slowly and pointed his pen at me.

“Has there been a death in the family lately?” he asked. I shook my head, ignoring the image of the telegram I had received upon my father’s passing. “Anything along those lines?” He tried again. “Any severed relationships?”

“Uh, yes,” I answered truthfully. He quickly wrote that down.

“Would you elaborate on that?” He asked. I flicked my hand out with a sigh.

“My familial relationships are sub-par,” I explained. “My mother suffers from several afflictions, leaving her incapacitated. My sister struggles to connect with me, and the rest of my family wants little to do with me. I’ve burned lots of bridges with friendship, as well. There’s a good friend that I— well, we are on difficult terms. I saw him recently but...I don’t know if things will ever be the same between us.” I bit my nail. “Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, quite,” the psychiatrist said. “Is this good friend one of the people that features in your visions?” My eyebrows raised.

“Um, yes, actually,” I said, surprised. “He and his sweetheart. They’re the ones I keep seeing.” He hummed and wrote that down.

“Anyone else?” he asked. I shrugged and shook my head.

“No, just them so far. Sometimes there’s other people, but they’re not anyone I know. They fit in with the world that I envision, but they’re not relevant. As far as I can tell, at least.”

“It seems you’re internalizing this abandonment of your previously close friendships, which is manifesting in a state of dementia.”

“What do I do?” I asked. He set his notebook down and pressed the bridge of his glasses up his nose.

“If this continues to present an issue, a lunatic asylum would be recommended. If that is unfeasible, bloodletting or purgatives could be recommended.” I let my legs drop from the table and inched back in my seat.

“I’m not a lunatic!” I protested. He tapped his notes with a raised brow.

“Why are you here, then?” he asked. I itched the nape of my neck nervously. The room we sat in was well-decorated but darkly lit, making me feel claustrophobic.

“I was concerned for myself,” I explained. “But that proves how sound I am! I’m self-aware of my own condition. I don’t need what you’re offering me. This was a mistake, I’m sorry.”

“You do understand that your permanent medical record will now bear my diagnosis?” he said. I hung my head and nodded.

“I– yes,” I said. He took a long draw from his cigar, the smoke stinging my nostrils. I wracked my brain for a solution. “Listen, if you could just let me go without another word I’ll pay you. Just don’t remind me this ever occurred.” He narrowed his eyes and scratched the end of his beard.

“That would be frankly unprofessional of me, would it not?” he asked. I gave him an awkward shrug.

“I mean, yeah,” I said, “but you’d also get to enjoy my wealth. Not a terrible trade-off I would say.”

I left the psychiatrist’s office feeling dissatisfied. Out of all of the trials and tribulations I had faced in my life so far, this was certainly the most confusing. I had no reference for it. Insanity wasn’t exactly something everyone grappled with. I supposed there was my mother. That was different, though. She wasn’t mentally broken, just a pathetic woman with little love for her children. I kicked a rock on the street and slumped onto the corner of a sidewalk. The sun was already setting in deep bands of orange. I blew a piece of hair out of my face, unsure of how to proceed. I remained in that state for the rest of the evening. I slept alone in my bed for the first time in a long time. No parties to attend, no artists to woo, no people to impress. Only me and my thoughts. I stared

up at the ceiling for a while, counting the scratches on the tiles like constellations. I wondered if I was actually traveling back in time. That somehow seemed like a more sane proposal. At least then, I wouldn't be at fault for my madness. If that was the case, I thought, Cesaire and Zenobie would have to be traveling back with me at the same time. I turned over onto my pillow and laughed quietly. No, that was ridiculous. Moonlight from my bedside window poured over my face and I stared out at the real stars. If I thought hard enough, I could imagine Cesaire staring back at me. I buried my face in my comforter.

“Oh my God,” I muttered to myself. I closed my eyes and let myself drift off into the undertow of murky dreams. I have no idea what I dreamt that night, but whatever it was, it changed me. As soon as I woke up, a pit formed in my lower stomach. I sat up in bed, my hands clutching my bare chest. I was filled with the overwhelming sense that I had lost something important. My lips parted, ready to speak and supply an answer, but nothing came out. I stuttered, inhaled, and closed my mouth in confusion. I ruffled my hair and slid out of bed with a stretching yawn. I went to draw open my fluttering curtains, but as soon as my fingers touched the fabric they began to tingle with the heat of a thousand suns. I gasped and let go, gaping down at my hands. I turned them over, examining my skin. I looked normal enough, although a slight tremor was shaking through my whole body.

I wetted my lips and took a few steps back. I was so thirsty. My eyes continued to be trained on my hands. Nothing happened for what felt like a very long time. Then, they flickered. I wasn't sure how to describe it, even to myself. It was as if for a fleeting moment my hands became someone else's. My thin and spindly fingers phased into something stockier and stronger. In the blink of an eye, it was gone. My mouth hung open, unsure of what to make of what I had just seen. I stepped forward and carefully placed my hands back on the curtains. My

breath hitched. They did not burn. I exhaled and let my body relax, gripping the fabric gratefully and drawing the drapes.

“Maybe walking out on the psychiatrist was a mistake...” I muttered. Images of sanitariums and asylums flashed across my vision. I cringed and gritted my teeth. I couldn’t subject myself to that. There had to be another way. I wrapped a robe around my frame and walked into the main room of my flat. I grabbed a pomegranate from the bowl on the counter. I bit into it and leaned back, weighing my options. I knew more than a few alternative-types who held taboo beliefs. Perhaps they would be able to take an avant-garde approach to my problem. A light knock on my door disturbed my early-morning musings. I glanced out my window; the periwinkle sky was still dim and light. It seemed an odd hour for visitors. I cautiously approached the door and clicked open the handle.

“Philomena?” I gasped. My sister looked as if she had seen better days. Her eyes were sunken, her skin sallow, and her hair was lazily drawn into a sweeping bun. “What are you doing here?” I asked her, blocking the door frame. She pressed into my forearm, dodging me entirely.

“Let me in,” she said darkly. I lightly shoved her away.

“What?” I balked, taken back. “What’s wrong with you?” Tears welled in the edges of her eyes. She pushed me aside and entered my apartment. I stood in the doorway, confused. “Talk to me, Mina,” I said. She pinched her nose bridge and slumped into the corner chair.

“I need your help,” she said monotonously. I walked to her side and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“What can I do?” I asked her. She laced her fingers between mine and heaved a sigh. I saw years of stress and anxiety weighing on her, aging her beyond her years. Her features, once soft, were now harsh and angular under the low light of morning. I had never seen her so defeated.

“It’s me,” she said. I blinked. Philomena never called on me for personal issues. “Everything’s gotten worse, Auguste,” she continued. “Mother’s spiraling. She hardly leaves her bedrest anymore. I’m alone in that house. I shouldn’t have told you to leave. I shouldn’t have abandoned you like that.” She began to weep quietly. “I can’t– um, I can’t control when I cry,” she choked, “I’m sorry, I–” she sucked her breath in and hastily wiped her wet cheeks dry. “There’s something I want to do. I want you to do it with me.” I hovered my other hand over her shoulder, unsure if I should hug her or leave her be. It was all so sudden. I hardly ever saw my sister and here she was sobbing in my living room before sunrise.

“What is it?” I asked. She laughed solemnly.

“God, you’ll never believe it when I tell you,” she said. I walked around the chair and sat in the one next to her, my hand now rested on her arm.

“I won’t judge you, Mina,” I said seriously, “I’m here for you. Whatever you want, whatever you need.” She pinched her lips and nodded slowly.

“I want to attend a seance,” she said. My eyebrows raised as if they had minds of their own. I attempted to contain my shock.

“Oh,” I replied as calmly as possible, “any particular reason *why*? I mean, I’m along for anything but–”

“I believe Mother is infected with some sort of demon,” she said. “A dark energy. It’s polluting me, burning the bridge that connects me to Heaven. I want to reestablish my commune with the divine.” She blushed furiously and tucked her head into her chest. “I know it sounds ridiculous,” she mumbled, “but it’s what I want. I want you to be there as well, so we can heal our souls together. You don’t have to believe in it, just be there with me. Please.” I leaned into her embrace.

“Of course, Mina,” I said, “I’m just happy you came to me when you were hurting. I haven’t always been present in your life, but I don’t want to maintain walls between us now. We’re adults, we can live our life however we please.”

“Within reason,” she added curtly. I curved the corner of my mouth and pulled back from our hug.

“You know I never listen to reason,” I quipped back. We both giggled a bit at that. It was a tender moment. Nearly normal, but with stains of melancholy at the edges. That heavy feeling I had awoken with settled back into me. I let my laughter drain away and curled back into my own chair. “When is the seance?” I asked dimly.

“Thursday,” she answered. She paused for a moment, as if generating an idea. “You know,” she continued, “this doesn’t only have to concern Mother. Any other supernatural, metaphysical, spiritual, or mental ailments you wish to reconcile with...any grief you haven’t made peace with. This may be the time and place to mend that. I won’t speak for your life but I’ll reckon it hasn’t all been smooth sailing, right? I mean, you’re an unconventional young man.” I smiled grimly.

“You would assume correctly,” I said, “but it’s not my adventures across the Riviera that scarred me with pain and regret. Mother is a part of that, yes. There’s you as well— abandoning you, miscommunicating with you, losing you. Despite that, most private sorrows aren’t caused by others. It’s an internal hurting, I think.”

“Where do they come from?” she whispered, “For you, I mean.” She faltered, her eyes darting over my face. “Unless that’s too much of a prying question—”

“No,” I said, holding up a hand to stop her. “It’s alright.” I closed my eyes, letting the warm glow of memory consume me. “While I’ve been absent, I’ve been seeking inspiration. Often in other people. But I fear I may have strayed too far into the hedges. Now I see them

everywhere. In dreams, in nature, in the sky. I even see them within the past. Visitations, nay, visions of the past. Not any past I or they have ever experienced. Someplace far more distant. That is the cross I must bear. That is where my sorrow is sourced.” Philomena stared at me, evidently left uncertain. I shrugged. I had spoken my truth.

“That’s gorgeous, Auguste,” she said quietly. “But I do not know what you mean. You see their faces in the past?” I smiled bitterly and nodded.

“Yes, in hallucinations of a sort,” I said. “It’s too difficult to explain right now. I’m hoping that your seance will heal this aspect of myself. Alleviate whatever root pain is causing it.” She stood up from her chair and threw open the half-drawn drapes, flooding the sitting room with blanched light.

“Alright, that’s it,” she said staunchly, “we’ve had our routine depressing conversation. What is it that you really want to do with me? I’ll discuss whatever you desire, follow you wherever you’re inclined to.” I stretched and stood up to meet her. We were nearly the same height, our eyes sitting level with each other at our water lines. We didn’t end up doing much that day. Mostly we talked. About our regrets, our grievances, our habits, the ways our lives were developing. We were entirely unproductive and yet it felt like the most whirlwind day of my life. The act of doing nothing gave way to explaining everything. Philomena left before dinner, a reminder we each had our own places to return to. It was a bittersweet goodbye, as it always was. I cherished every second of it.

Thursday arrived before I could even anticipate it. My destination was situated in an antiquated sector of the city. People here were more conservative with their spending, leading to more reserved fashion choices and a lesser economic presence on the streets. Markets were mainly locally sourced, streets were shoddily cobbled, and the pier

was devoid of tourism. Despite this, the architecture of the area was beautiful. Balconies on every floor, brightly colored paint jobs, arches and ironwork galleries. Hanging plants acted as decorations, lending the area a particularly tropical feeling. I lifted the paper with the address up again, checking that I had arrived at the correct place. It was a tall townhouse adorned with ornate galleries and four floors of balconies.

A small crowd of seance-goers were crowded in front of the door, anxiously flashing their invitations before being herded inside. I approached the door inconspicuously and showed my invitation to a young woman dressed in a flowing white robe. The edges of her eyes were smudged with ink, and her fingertips were stained berry-red. Her hair was wild and loose, gathered in a golden headpiece. She reminded me vaguely of illustrations I had seen of Ancient Egyptian queens. Or perhaps Babylonian goddesses. Whatever she was portraying, it certainly seemed other-worldly. I followed the stream of occultists up the banister staircase. The house was cluttered and maximalist, despite being a relatively large building. Artifacts of all manner of times and ages adorned the walls. I noticed a gleaming sailor's sextet, a collection of jars filled with undeterminable objects, a fireplace mantle cluttered with idols of foreign gods and candles, and a bundle of herbs hanging from the ceiling. I ducked my head under the doorway into the upstairs, dodging a horseshoe nailed to the top of the frame.

The seance room was simultaneously spacious and claustrophobic. A large manner of esoteric paraphernalia smothered the space, and a clothed table rested in the middle. A single small window was propped open but half-covered by fabric, limiting the light filtering into the dark room. Candles burning on the table provided the majority of illumination. I took a seat, noticing that the majority of others at the table were covered in heavy velvet cloaks or pagan masks. They ranged from respectably Venetian to vulgarly animalistic. I supposed that

Ancient Celts must have worn similar ones, perhaps even the tribes that had resided in our region. It didn't leave me any less disturbed, though. The woman from the door was now standing in the corner of the room. She carefully slipped the seance-leader a pen and leaflets of paper. Our seance-leader flipped her cloak down and took her seat. She held up her hand to signal us to be quiet.

"Greetings," she began, "you may unmask." I pulled down the cloth I had drawn over my nose. The rest of the table revealed themselves as well. I noticed Philomena first. She was sitting next to me, her hand laced between mine. She smiled at me and I squeezed her hand back. Then, I turned my head to look at the people sitting across from me. My mouth dropped open with a silent gasp, and my hand fell from Philomena's. Cesaire was at the seance. He was here. Our eyes met, and I swear I saw his glint with a crease around the edges. Was he smiling at me? Was he pleased to see me? Did he *miss me*? These were all questions I had little time to answer. The seance-leader was lowering her hands. It was then I realized that time had slowed around me. All of these revelations happened within a single fleeting second. As time snapped back, I rubbed my eyes in disorientation.

"Everyone join your hands," the seance-leader instructed us in her firm but lulling voice. I wrapped my right hand around Philomena, and my left around a stranger. The leader closed her eyes and asked us all to do the same. I could still see the blurry glow of the candles through my shut eyelids, dancing like the fury of the sun in a dark room. Strange noises began to emit from the seance-leader's mouth. I carefully opened my eyes to see her unnaturally convulsing. I quickly shut them again in fear.

"Yes, yes, yes," she muttered, "I'm getting something. It's channeling...oh! God! I see hellfire licking my skin! Brandishing me! Devils dancing and rejoicing in the death of Heaven! Who is bringing

this evil upon the room? Spare me! Spare me, God!” I winced at her screams. I wondered if it was my spirit corrupting the medium. She threw her head back and opened her gaping mouth. “Oh! Oh!” she yelled, “He hath arrived! He is upon us!” I grasped Philomena’s hand nervously. *Who? Who was here?* “The angels!” she cried. “There is a celestial presence! I feel it! Oh, sweet mercy!” A sudden pulsating energy jolted my body to life. My eyes shot open, unable to control themselves. I nearly fell backward when I saw the state of the room. Wind whipped around us, a pulsating sphere of light hovered over the table, nearly blinding me, and blood ran from the medium’s eyes. I tried to unlatch my hands and escape, but Philomena and the stranger’s grips were too strong. It felt as if we were melded together.

The rest of the table remained in an apparent trance. Their eyes were closed and their bodies frozen. Everyone, save for Cesaire. He was staring at me with a terrified expression, his arms pinned to the table by the iron grips of unaware seance-goers. The light in the air began to mutate. Colors spun from its dancing surface, turning into flickering images. I was blown back in my seat, my head hitting the chair. I saw millions of pictures flash by me in seconds. The seeming entire story of human history thus far. Barges sailing down ancient rivers, palm fronds dancing in empty halls, and thunder hanging low above endless plains. My mouth was dry, my skin slick, and my mind entirely blank. Through the twisting dust tearing through the room my squinted eyes saw figures. Running silhouettes, traversing a dangerous landscape.

The room spun with impossibly blinding light. My knuckles grew white as I tightened my grip on Philomena’s hand. I prayed for her to wake up, for all of this to end. The room began to peel away, objects fading into nothingness as the whirling tear in the fabric of everything spread its hand into our world. The people in the dust grew larger, their eyes covered by raised forearms. Their clothing was otherworldly;

tattered layers of various muddy browns, grays, and blacks torn by the gritty desolation of a wasteland. One of them began to reach out his free hand. Philomena's own hand fell limp to her side at the same time. The dust-people began to glitch and stagger. In a split second decision I grabbed the hand of the mysterious hallucination-man. In the moment before our fingers met, I saw Cesaire leaning over the table to do the same. Our eyes locked and for the first time in my life I simultaneously felt pure fear and calm coursing through me. It was exhilarating. The black swamped me like late summer rain. Flooding my mind.

I woke up to the sound of barrenness. My cheek was pressed to the dry ground of a flat, empty basin. Wind whistled and howled around me, spraying whirls of dust through my hair. My hand shivered and my shoulders tensed as I attempted to stand. I could hear nothing besides the hollow gale. I pulled myself to my knees and squinted at the pale sun. It was so faint I could hardly separate it from the sky. I turned my head, searching for an answer. There was nobody there. It seemed I was completely alone. The panic began to set in. *Where was I? What was happening? Was I dreaming this?* I lifted myself shakily to my feet and spun around, the blinding nothingness blurring my vision.

"Hello?" I called out into the sandstorm. There was no reply. I bit my fingertips nervously. I stood there for a moment, my mind racing in an attempt to contextualize my situation. Before I could come to any semblance of a conclusion, a cold hand wrenched me into the void. "Oh my God!" I screamed, my voice ripping from my throat. The owner of the mysterious hand cast a shadow over my face. I slowly turned around and was met with the same shadowy figure who had reached out to me during the seance. They had a mask and goggles pulled over their face, but I assumed they were a man. They carried a bow-staff wrapped with a frayed cloth. Their clothes were threadbare and weathered, evidently wrung through by many years in this desert. They wore heavy boots and

several layers of fluttering fabrics tied around their hips; which were secured by two leather belts. I opened my mouth to speak again, but instead inhaled a smothering breath of dust. I began to hack and cough, my eyes growing red and watery.

The figure reached into a gray satchel thrown over their shoulder and pulled out a cloth mask and a pair of clunky goggles. They covered my mouth with their gloved hand and slipped the mask over my nose. I reached for my neck, searching for the mask I had worn to the seance. My skin was bare, the mask seemingly flown off into the wind. Their hand was cool and smooth through the soft glove. My stomach fluttered at the touch. My eyes danced around their covered face, trying to read them somehow. They brushed the sides of my face and slid the goggles onto my eyes. The world became washed in a cyanotype blue. The cloth filtered my breath, freeing my lungs. I wanted to thank them, but just as soon as they had come, they faded into the swirling dust. This time I chased after them, following their obscure silhouette into the abyss. I pushed against the slant of the brutal wind, leaning into its touch. The outline of the mysterious figure guided me, but only slightly. It was truly an inhospitable landscape.

“Where are you going?” I shouted into the expanse. I expected my voice to echo, but instead found it muffled to near-silence by the roaring wind. A sudden gust rocked me forward, and I collapsed onto the hard ground. I looked upward, and saw a wavering shadow growing where the dust was beginning to part. Ancient and decrepit Greek pillars stood on a crumbling foundation in the center of these wastes. The more my vision cleared, the more confused I became. Behind the pillars were the ruins of an Archamaenidan temple, complete with statues. The final confusing element was the inclusion of a great dome reminiscent of Umayyad Caliphate Syria; with strange Phoenician influences. I brushed the sand off of my goggles, unsure of what I was seeing. I pulled myself

off of the ground and walked through the odd menagerie of Ancient architecture. Without the raging storm, the wasteland seemed calm. I could now see I was standing on vast salt flats. The ground of the eclectic ruins was a mosaic of stone, glass, and clay creating the image of an Assyrian Lamassu. The winged protective deity faced towards the sinking dome. I walked along its spine and entered the building, light on my feet where the stone overhead seemed uneasy.

The entrance to the domed hall was impossibly large. I felt like an ant entering the maw of a great beast. My shadow was long and spindly, lit brightly from the outside wastes, but fading deep into the hollow belly of the building. Falling bits of rock crumbled from the vaulted ceilings as I walked, but the floors were perfectly flat and clean. The walls bore tiled murals of bygone gods and conquests. I wished I had a light to lend them, but it seemed like they had wallowed away in the darkness for a long time, so they must have been accustomed to it by then. I heard a skirting sound only a few paces in front of me. It was accompanied by the clear rushing of running water. As my eyesight adjusted I realized what stood before me. An endlessly tall back-wall stretching into the dome, covered in miles of mosaic and clay-paint artwork depicting a forgotten mythology. A dying torch was planted on the slightly raised stone-slab ground in front of it. Standing at a fountain seeping from the wall was the hooded figure. I approached them tentatively, careful not to startle them so they wouldn't disappear again. I needed answers.

“What is this place?” I asked them. They turned around and motioned me to sit across from them. I took my place on the cold ground, shivering and warming my hands with the torch flame.

“Remnants of a failed reality,” they answered. This was my first time hearing their voice. It was beautiful in an uncomfortable way. I nearly recognized it somehow, but it was too difficult to tell with the

muffling of their mask. It was certainly a male voice, but lacked a typical deeper edge.

“Failed reality?” I clarified. “Am I not on Earth?” He adjusted the fabric wrapped around his palms and shrugged.

“You are not ‘on’ *anywhere*,” he told me. “This is a pocket dimension. It is a purgatory. Nobody is born here. Nobody claims this as their home. It is where rejects, wanderers, and the forgotten go to smolder before their fires can be seen.” I didn’t understand most of what he had explained, but some words were familiar.

“I’m in purgatory?” I asked, “I’m dead?” He shook his head.

“No, no,” he said, “you’re very much still alive. You’re just not on the same plane of existence anymore.” I couldn’t grasp the concept. I decided to let it go before I could spiral.

“Why am I here, then?” I asked tentatively, “and who are you to guide me?” He laughed softly, a sound which caused an aching of nostalgia in my heart. It was so painfully familiar, but how?

“All will be revealed in time,” he said, “which we haven’t much of. I wanted to lead you here so I could assure you would enter the gate. I can’t transport you to where we must go from the base reality, that would be irresponsible. Would probably collapse some continuities and cause a bridge-fall...so I had to access you from a dead dimension. I hope you don’t mind the hassle.” I blinked a few times, completely befuddled.

“If I’m being honest, I don’t understand anything that’s happening right now. I’m struggling to process this. So, I don’t mind the hassle. Due to the fact I don’t *know* the hassle.” He nodded profoundly and wrapped his hand around mine.

“I’ll explain everything soon,” he assured me. “But now, I need you to come with me. Can you do that for me?”

“I don’t even know you,” I retaliated. I wanted to tell him how terrified I was. He pulled the staked torch from the rough ground and beckoned me to stand.

“The conditions are aligning,” he said as he looked at a confusing contraption in his hand. It was constructed from glimmering metals of silver and gold, and moved like an instrument. “We need to enter the gate now. The probability fields may not be favorable for much longer.” I grabbed his hands, pleadingly.

“I don’t know what’s happening!” I protested. “What is *going on*? Please, tell me! Or I won’t go with you.” He swatted me away and shook his head.

“There isn’t any time,” he replied. “We have to leave or we could be stranded for who knows how long. Could be years. Could be forever. You can never tell with these places.” I ran my hands through my hair and groaned. As far as I could tell, this was the afterlife, and I was being tested. This individual seemed more neutral than devilish. Perhaps I should take my chances and follow him. I didn’t want to be stuck here forever. I hit my fist into my other hand in a motion of determination.

“Fine,” I agreed, “I’ll go with you. But you have to promise me you’re not leading me to my eternal damnation.” He cocked his head, as if what I had said was confusing. Finally, I thought, he’s trying out my shoes for size. He didn’t respond to my sudden agreement. Instead, he strapped his bag over his chest, raised his torch, and began walking down the mural wall. The fire caught on the edges of the tiles, revealing foreign scenes of conquest and the cosmos. My breath suddenly felt frigid beneath my mask. The whole atmosphere dropped in temperature, as if we had entered a cellar. That’s when I saw it. The gate. It was embedded into the rockface, decorated with ancient esoteric symbols and sigils, and its surface rippled with an aurora of unknowable colors. I could scarcely believe my eyes. It was unlike anything I had ever seen, and I had to admit

I was having difficulty comprehending its existence. He took my hand and began to lead me towards it. My breath hitched in my lungs, tightening my diaphragm.

“We’re going in there...?” I asked lightly. He curtly nodded and continued to guide me forwards. I felt nausea forming in my gut. Then, his skin hit the rippling entrance to the gate. I watched him be absorbed, disappearing into the void. I tensed myself for impact, every muscle in my body straining before entry. I felt the cool wave of the gate passing over me. I was submerged into total darkness at first, but when I carefully peeled my eyes open I saw the prism of dazzling hues falling like stars around me. It was absolutely beautiful. Just as soon as I could take it all in, it faded away. The mysterious man and I were left standing in a pale taiga, with craggy mountains taller than giants of lore cradling the palm of the valley we rested in. It was impossibly cold there. My breath formed jets of steam like geysers, or smoke from a dragon’s mouth. Towering trees hung above our heads, unlike any I had seen before. They appeared dark and waxed, with leaves like sewing needles. I recognized them to be evergreens, but they were much larger than those I was familiar with. Moss and lichen coated the ground, and I could see an icy lake across the dotted forest-wetlands.

“Where are we?” I asked breathlessly. The stranger began to walk in the direction of the lake.

“We’re in a place called the Kenai Peninsula,” he explained, “it’s very far away from anywhere you have ever been.”

“Kenai...” I repeated, “is that Finnish? These forests do seem boreal enough to be Lapland, yes? The climate is certainly cold enough, as well.” He laughed quietly and hopped over a downed nurse log.

“You’ve got the latitude about right,” he said, “but no, we are nowhere near Finland. The truth is, we aren’t in Europe. We’re in the New World.”

“You mean North America?” I clarified. He shrugged and waved his hand nonchalantly.

“Ah, yes,” he agreed, “North America. This is a portion of the continent situated across the sea from the Eastern side of the Russian Empire. It’s commonly referred to as Alaska, and it will eventually be claimed by the United States. When you’re from, it’s still owned by the Russians. The issue with that is, we’re not when you’re from at the moment. Alaska has already been made a state at this time.”

“Wait, you mean to tell me we’re in the *future*?” I exclaimed. He rolled his eyes through his foggy goggles.

“The concept of ‘the future’ is extremely subjective,” he said. “We’re in the future relative to your original time, but to me this is simply another time and location to seek refuge.” My mind was spinning. Here I was, in this boundless, untouched land, on the other side of the world from my home, who knows how many years in the future, and with no clear answers on how to return. If that was even a possibility. I wanted to throw up.

“If you feel sick, do it behind a tree,” he said as if he was reading my mind. I glared at him and pulled down the cloth hugging my face. “You shouldn’t remove that,” he advised. “It will assist in your acclimation to the climate. Going from subtropical to subarctic is jarring for the human body. You don’t want to freeze on our hike.” I raised my eyebrows.

“Our hike?” I said, “How long will that be, exactly?”

“You’ll be fine,” he said, “it’s only a few hours.” I gritted my teeth and threw my face into my hands.

“Great...” I groaned sarcastically. We continued to walk in near-silence for a long while. The landscape seemed eternal and was slow-moving. It didn’t shift or change much, and those mountains appeared immovable. They stood their eternal ground without the

slightest illusion of growth. Finally, he let us take a seat underneath a shedding tree to eat some of the food he had packed in his satchel. I had learned that the trees were called 'Sitka Spruce.' I recalled that France had mountain spruces in the northern regions, but I had never seen them. The closest thing we had on the Riviera were cypresses. He reached into a leather pouch and handed me a few pieces of stiff, smoky meat.

"It's salmon," he explained, "try it." I flipped it over in my hand and gnawed its edge. It tasted peculiar, unlike any fish I had eaten, but surprisingly appetizing.

"I've had salmon, you know," I said. "I live by the ocean." I waited for him to take off his face coverings and eat with me, but he didn't. He simply sat and watched. I raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to eat as well?" I asked. He glanced down at his crossed legs and picked a piece of fish from the bag. I could tell he looked hesitant.

"You can't watch me," he said. I frowned and finished eating my salmon. What was I supposed to do? Close my eyes?

"Why?" I asked. "You don't want me to see your face?" I wondered what was beneath his disguise. If he was my guide through the afterlife like I assumed, it could be anything. Perhaps a never-ending void, or horrors beyond human perception.

"You can't see me," he answered solemnly, "it would complicate things. It's best if we keep this as simple as possible." I twisted some twigs between my fingers and nodded slowly.

"Alright," I said, "I'll close my eyes while you eat. Better yet, I'll go behind the tree. Promise." He huffed and took his meal in his hand. I got up and walked to my hiding spot. I closed my eyes while he ate, careful not to let my curiosity win. *This is a test*, I thought. *The universe is testing me*. Eventually I got bored enough to open my eyes and take in the landscape. It was foreign, dramatic and impossibly large. Everything seemed bigger there. I saw thicker forests across the stretching meadows

and wetlands, and noticed that the mountains encircled us entirely. I missed the briny smell of the ocean, the sound of the waves accompanying me.

“You can come back now,” I heard him say. I stepped out from behind the tree, tore off my goggles and mask, and tossed them into his bag.

“Before we continue,” I said, “you’re going to tell me where you’re taking me. I don’t know who you are– you’re not even real for all I know. The least you can do is afford me a little closure.” He stood to meet me at eye level and looked down my nose. I shifted the weight between my feet nervously.

“We’re headed to a town,” he finally said, “It’s called Moose Pass.” He began to walk again, and I followed him. I waved my hands around to prompt him further. “There are people there we need to meet,” he continued, “everything will be explained once we arrive. We only need to hike for another hour, it won’t be long. Try not to trample the wildlands or make too much of a scene. As the name suggests, there are moose out here.”

“God, this really *is* like Finland...” I muttered as we continued to trudge through the cold and watery landscape. I craned my neck up at the sky, surprised to see the sun was still hanging high. Flocks of geese flew above me, sounding calls that echoed across the empty terrain. We still had a ways to go, and I knew this was only the beginning of whatever situation I had been transported into. I should have been terrified, but the majesty of the land left me with a strange sense of tranquility instead. I could only pray no further misfortune would befall me.



## XI: Cesaire

“Welcome to Moose Pass, Cesaire,” the mysterious woman said. “It’s not much, but it’s a worthy base of operations. I’m sure you’ll grow to appreciate it in time.” I saw a boxy house constructed from planks and supported by stilts wedged into the woods in front us. “A log cabin,” she supplied.

“I *know* what a log cabin is,” I said. “We have them in the French Alps.” She shrugged and flipped her dark, curly ponytail over her shoulder.

“How am I supposed to know how much you know?” she replied. “Now, that *log cabin* is where we will be staying. There will be some others there as well. I expect you not to annoy them as much as you did me, but don’t feel uncomfortable asking them questions.”

“Which I have a lot of,” I added.

“Of course you do, all of which will—”

“—Be revealed in time, I know,” I interrupted. I followed her towards the cabin. The porch was raised by a few shabby steps, and decorated with three peeling wooden adirondack chairs. Mosquito nets were draped from the bows, and the door was chipped and weathered. The cabin faced a fast-running and icy river. The water churned over the rocks furiously, so foreign to the placid calm of the Riviera. The woman opened the door for me, revealing a humble living room. The furniture and decor were odd to me. The walls were covered by a yellow-green wallpaper and framed paintings. At least, I assumed they were paintings. They were drawn in impossibly vibrant and detailed colors, and they looked entirely realistic and life-like— photographs as I would come to know them. A small clock hung in the corner, and there was a lounge that looked frumpier and *greener* than any I had seen before. Overall, the space lacked decorum.

“Welcome to the 20th century,” the woman said with her hands planted on her hips. I spun back to face her, shock coursing through me.

“So, it’s true?” I asked her in astonishment. “Is this really the future?” She nodded and gestured to the room around us.

“The interior design leaves some to be desired, yes?” She laughed, “Welcome to 1987. It’s an interesting year.” My lips parted as if to speak, but I simply had nothing to say. I was too occupied with the room orbiting around me. “It’s not particularly notable,” she continued, “especially not in rural southcentral Alaska, but it’s a nice enough time. Solid technology, simple living, good music. You’ll come to appreciate it.” I began to pace, my arms boxed around my head with anxiety.

“1987— that’s—that’s more than 140 years in the future, I—everyone I know is dead! The world is a completely different place!” She placed a light hand on my shoulder and offered me a sad look.

“I’m sorry, Cesaire,” she said softly, “but this is where you have to be now. It’s necessary, you weren’t safe before.”

“Safe?” I exclaimed, “I was plenty safe! I was *home*! I actually knew where my life was going and who I was! Now I have nothing!” She pressed me down onto the saggy lounge-like furniture.

“Take a seat,” she instructed. “The others are waiting in the kitchen. We’re going to explain everything soon. *Only if* you can calm down. Can you do that for me?” I let a ragged sigh pass through me.

“Okay...” I whispered. “I can try.” She sat next to me and rubbed my back.

“Trying is all we ask,” she said. “Now, come on. Let’s get those questions answered, shall we?”

“Alright,” I said shakily. I exhaled and followed her through the rustic dining room into the kitchen. It was decorated with linoleum floors, mounted cabinets, a door to the back-porch, a gas stove, and a round table in the middle with a light hanging overhead. A few people

were sitting at the table. Only one of them was covering their face in the way the mysterious woman was. The rest seemed like normal people, although their style of dress was no doubt alien to me. They donned items I couldn't recognize at the time; such as jeans, flannels, and work boots. They also appeared to be playing cards. That I was familiar with at least. One of them sat with his back to me. Although the back of his hair was mangled and messy, it seemed strongly familiar to me. *It almost looked like—no, that was impossible—*

“Cesaire?” His voice was a refuge to me. I nearly burst into tears on the spot. Auguste was seated at the table, holding a winning hand. His poker-face-grin immediately faded into a mixture of agony and joy. He looked so different, although I had seen him across from me at the seance only a few days before. His hair was cut back and curly, he was dressed in a white shirt, brown flannel, rough jeans, and rugged boots. He sat on his barstool with an air of confidence and comfort. He was perfect. I approached him carefully at first, before fully embracing him.

“I thought I would never see you again,” I cried between choked tears. Similar ones poured down his cheeks as he hugged me tighter.

“They told me you were coming, but I couldn't believe it,” he mumbled. I laced our fingers together over his back and buried my face into his chest.

“God, what are you doing here?” I sobbed. I pulled back slightly to observe him closer. “And what are you *wearing?*” Auguste brushed away the tears rolling from his eyes and laughed through his tears.

“It's such a long story,” he said, “I have so much to tell you.” The woman I had been traveling with for the past three days tapped my shoulder to gather my attention.

“First you're going to need to get some new clothes on your back and some food in that mouth,” she said. “There's a change of clothes in one of the bedrooms, Auguste will take you.” I hesitantly pulled away

from Auguste and let him lead me down a hall to the sleeping area of the cabin. He took me up a steep flight of stairs and past a cramped loft into the final two upstairs rooms— a bedroom with twin beds and a bathroom. We walked into the bedroom, which was small, with a slanted wood ceiling. A dresser was slotted into the corner, and the beds were made with wool comforters and plaid blankets. On one of the beds lay a folded pile of clothes.

“This is our bedroom,” he explained. I stopped in my tracks, the wood plank floor creaking underneath my feet.

“*Our* bedroom?” I clarified. “They’re making us sleep together?” He waved his hands wildly, as if I had said something terribly offensive.

“Not together!” he assured me. “Just in the same space! It’s easier to keep us together if they can.”

“I don’t even know who *they* are,” I said and glared at him. He slicked his thick hair back and sighed, the faint light filtering in from the small, grainy window hitting his face.

“Just get dressed,” he said wearily. “I can’t explain everything to you right now. It’s not my place.” I snatched the clothes off of the bed and unfolded them. They were similar to what I had seen everyone else wearing; a long-sleeve gray woolen shirt, a sage green flannel, brown cargo pants, and thick black socks. I stared at Auguste and motioned my head towards the door. He got the memo and stepped out of the room for me to change. The new clothing left me feeling exposed and informal, but they were more comfortable and durable than anything I had worn before. *Perhaps the people of the future are afforded some benefits of relative modernity after all*, I thought.

I slowly opened the door to find Auguste leaning against the wall waiting for me. His fingers were slotted into his pockets and his shirt was unbuttoned at the top. I couldn’t believe how much better this era suited him. I, on the other hand, walked out of the bedroom timidly, feeling

deeply uncomfortable in this new environment. I was certain I looked ridiculous, or at least indecent.

“You look good,” he said nonchalantly. “The green compliments your eyes. They’re nearly the same color.” Auguste was always an amateur poet, but it still caught me off-guard to hear such a delicate compliment from him. Our last formal meeting had occurred only a little over a week ago, but it soon dawned on me it felt as if a lifetime had passed between that time and now.

“You look...good as well,” I said back. He gave me a confused half-smile and stood up from his leaning position against the wall.

“Alright then,” he replied awkwardly. He gave me one final look as he stood paused mid-step, where his eyes lingered in mine. “Let’s go downstairs,” he said slowly, his gaze still not leaving my face. I carefully entered the kitchen, walking behind Auguste. The woman who brought me to the cabin was still masked. I wondered if she would ever remove it. The man who I assumed brought Auguste was wearing his mask and hooded cloak as well. The rest of them were still playing cards around the table. They watched me expectantly.

“Sit down, Cesaire,” the woman instructed me. I pulled an empty stool out and sat next to Auguste. “You’ve gone through a lot of shock and turmoil these past few days,” she began. “You were stripped away from your home, your time, the only life you have ever known—with no explanation or warning. You had to walk here for several days, and now you’re faced with the reality of your situation. It is no doubt a harrowing and jarring experience. I empathize with you. The reason for that?” She paused, hands folded. “I’ve been in your exact position. It was a long time ago, but I was you. Stolen from my life, made to travel to a distant land. I don’t want to keep you in the dark much longer, so I will try my best to explain.” She gestured to Auguste apologetically, “He does not yet know any of this either. We have only familiarized him with

ourselves.” I shot him a desperate look, expecting him to reveal he understood what was happening. He offered me a blank stare, obviously surprised, as he had thought he was more keyed in than he was.

“The thing is...” she said, “you are an anomaly. Just as nearly every person in this room is. Your very existence in the space-time continuum disrupts the fabric of reality. That is, if you do nothing about it. Leaving you to your own devices in linear time is the most dangerous act you or us can make.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, unclear as to what she meant.

“I’m sorry, what do you mean I’m an anomaly?” I asked anxiously. “Is Auguste one as well?” She inhaled deeply and pressed her hands together.

“That is a complicated question,” she replied, “to answer it as comprehensively as possible, Auguste is also an anomaly. The meaning of that being...” she traced her eyes along the tiled ceiling, searching for the proper term. “...being that you are entangled with forces beyond your reckoning. Time is not affixed to you, you cannot be tethered to the typical human experience. The unfortunate side effect of this being that it causes instability in both you and the universe.” I groaned and buried my head into my forearms, which were resting against the table.

“Why did you bring us here if all time is unsafe?” Auguste asked. She snapped her fingers and pointed at him excitedly.

“I’m so glad you asked!” she said. “The reason for your anomaly is complicated. Fixing it is even trickier. It requires you and others with the same affliction to be present in the same space and time. That way, your collective strain on reality can be centralized, and create a neutralizing effect. The only catch is...the longer we ignore the threat, the more it spreads. More anomalies are appearing than we can rescue. We’re going to need to stop the corrosion before it’s too late.” I sat still for a

long time. I slowly swiveled to make eye contact with Auguste. He raised his hand shakily, obviously similarly disturbed.

“So...” he said, “all anomalies...we’re connected?”

“In one way or another, yes,” she confirmed. “But not to each other. To non-anomalous...forces.” He scratched his arm and nodded ever-so-slightly.

“Alright,” he said. “Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Go ahead.”

“How am I connected to you?” he asked, “and why can’t I see your face—or his? What are you still hiding from us?” She tugged on her dark curls and I could feel her discomfort.

“I can tell you my name,” she mumbled. “And his as well.” She gestured to the masked man who had taken Auguste from the seance. “I can’t show you myself though, I’m sorry. At least not yet. Not until everything is stable here. It’s simply, um...protocol.” I didn’t necessarily buy her excuse, but I wasn’t at the liability to argue. I simply placed out my hand for her to shake.

“My name is Cesaire Vielescot,” I said. She took my fingers between hers and shook my hand firmly. There was an electric energy to her hands, it was nostalgic somehow.

“Pleased to meet you,” she replied. “My name is Eurynome.” I drew back with a confused smile.

“Is that...Greek?” I asked her hesitantly. She fiddled with her curls and nodded shyly.

“Oh, uh, yes,” she replied. “I’m not from there, though.” I hummed a response and jutted my thumb towards the masked man.

“What about him?” I asked. “What’s he called?” The man leaned over the table. “You can call me Cleon,” he said. I paused at his voice. It was eerily familiar to me, more so than Eurynome.

“Pleased to meet you...” I said carefully. I cocked my head and took a good, long, look at him. *What was it about him that irked me so much?*

“Dinner is going to be in less than an hour,” Eurynome said. “I suggest you become acquainted with everyone and explore the rest of the house. We can discuss more of the situation later.” I watched her stride past me and step into a walk-in pantry closet. The other four people at the table turned to me, expecting the introductions to commence.

“You already know everything you need to know about me,” I said dully. One of the men with a considerable amount of poker chips in his possession spoke first.

“The name’s Melem-Iram,” he said and gave me a curt wave. His arms were thick and strong, likely from ages of labor and fieldwork. He sported an impressive beard, and thick black hair. His skin was richly tanned, again a sign of agricultural work. I had never seen anyone with his complexion before.

“That’s a rather odd name,” I commented pointedly. “Where are *you* from? Surely not Greece.” He flicked through the cards in his hands and huffed a short, barking laugh.

“Hah! I should hope not,” he said. “I’m from Kish.” He smiled at my blank stare. “A Sumerian city,” he explained. “Part of Mesopotamia.” I raised my eyebrows and played off my shock with a polite grin.

“Wow!” I remarked, “That’s really...antiquated?” He chuckled and plucked a card from the table.

“To some, *you* are antiquated,” he replied, “but never mind that.” He gestured to a young man and woman seated to his right. “This is Azeem and Phebah.” They nodded and waved. Azeem was a lanky man with dark hair and beady hazel eyes hidden behind silver frames. Phebah had rosy cheeks and a halo of tightly-curved dusty-brown hair. Despite

their completely opposing features— a steep nose versus a round cherubim one— they were roughly the same skin tone. Melem-Iram pointed across the table to the final member of the entourage, an older woman with a faded tattoo on her chin and raven-black hair streaked with silver.

“And that...” he said, “is K’aayhltla.” The woman nodded curtly and turned back to the cards in her hand.

“I’m putting twenty more in the pot,” she said. I sucked in a breath and resigned to the situation.

“Deal me in,” I said. Melem-Irma passed me a hand and I settled into my seat. I soon discovered that K’aayhltla was extremely adept at the craft of cards, and that I had no idea what rules we were playing by.

“You know,” I said with some frustration after another fold, “it’s us French that invented ‘poker’ in the first place. *Poque* we would call it.”

“This isn’t just poker, kid,” K’aayhltla said stonily, “this is Texas Holdem’. It’s an art form. It’s Vegas, baby.”

“What is...Vegas?” I asked. She rolled her eyes and licked her thumb before flipping through her hand.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she grinned slyly. “Haha...what’s Vegas? That’s a good one.”

“Give him a break, K’aay,” Phebah frowned. “He’s only just arrived. He hardly knows a lick about our quest, far less about his future!” She turned to me and placed a gentle hand on my arm. “Don’t mind her, she’s been floating around spacetime for longer than she can remember. She lacks what most folks would call...perspective. You’ll get used to it.”

“How long is ‘longer than she can remember’?” I asked quietly. “How long have *you* been away from your home? What about Auguste? What about me—?”

“You and Auguste have been gone the same amount of time,” she assured me. “Just because you’re moving through time, doesn’t mean the amount of time moving through *you* changes. You’re still only three days older than when you left home. It’s just that you can go anywhere now. Well, within reason. There are places you can’t be, places where anomalies converge. Places like your home.”

“Antibes is a convergence of anomalies?” I asked. She nodded and rested her chin in her hand.

“Don’t fret,” she said softly, “we are going to fix everything. That our quest you see— to set the universe right. You’ll see Antibes again.”

“Pray he doesn’t,” a dark voice interrupted. It was the masked man, Cleon. He had hardly spoken in the time I had been there.

“Why not?” I asked accusingly. He leaned back and crossed his arms. I didn’t appreciate his attitude.

“It won’t be a pretty sight when we reconverge,” he said ominously, “it’s going to be one great merger of information spanning bridges, making fires, creating histories that were never meant to be. The violence spawned from that is enough to break us.”

“Shut up Cleon,” Phebah spat, “you don’t need to scare him. You don’t know that your theories are correct, anyways. Quantum Physics wasn’t exactly a subject during your time.”

“We invented math,” he retorted. Melem-Iram huffed.

“I don’t think you can claim that,” he said. “Where do you think you got your arithmetic from? Oh yeah, the Babylonians.”

“God, could you stop fighting for one minute,” Auguste cut in. He looked at me hesitantly, as if he was about to say something, but it melted in his mouth. His hands were raised in the air, and he slowly lowered them.

“I’m sorry about them,” he said. “They banter all day long.” The group all muttered various apologies under their breath before resuming

the game. At some later point, as supper was nearing, I leaned over to talk with Auguste.

“You seem to have picked up a lot in the little time you’ve been here,” I whispered. “What’s your secret?” He shifted his eyes downcast and shrugged carelessly.

“Hm, I suppose I just fit in well here,” he said. “They’re all dysfunctional pariahs in their own regards, similar to myself.”

“You’re no pariah!” I hissed, “Why would you say that?” He gave me a firm look and raised an eyebrow.

“You haven’t exactly been involved in my life recently,” he replied. “I’ve been ostracized to hell and back. The *bohemians* hardly tolerate me.”

“What? Is this because of...” I trailed off, feeling awkward. He scratched the inside of his wrist and looked away.

“Are we really going to discuss this here?” he asked vacantly. Sunlight through dead trees and evergreens filtered into the kitchen. It caught on the edges of his jaw, backlighting his profile. I spun a hanging lock of my hair with an absent finger and averted my gaze.

“No,” I said. “Pretend I never said anything.” Phebah pursed her lips and leaned across the table.

“What are you two whispering about?” she cut in. I shyly buried my face in my palm and Auguste stared more intently out the window.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. She smirked and folded her hands together innocently.

“Alright,” she replied coyly. “Carry on with nothing.” I resisted the urge to shoot her a pointed glare.

Dinner arrived without much fanfare. The cuisine was mostly familiar to me, with some odd additions. We gathered around the larger dining room table, a soft amber light hanging overhead. I was not acquainted with the concept of electricity, and it frankly frightened me,

but Phebah assured me that it was incredibly similar to oil lamps. Eurynome passed out a plate of smoked salmon, a bowl of assorted berries, a large salad, and a pitcher of lemonade. She also placed a carton of ‘nagoonberry sorbet’ at the edge of the table.

“That’s dessert,” she said strictly to the eager patrons of her cooking. “Eat your entrees first.” I waited patiently for her to remove her mask to eat but it never happened. Cleon kept his on for the whole meal as well. My curiosity was killing me. Despite promises to elaborate on my situation, the others seemed more interested in discussing their personal ongoings. I sat silently as I listened to winding conversations about bear-proofing food stores, berry-picking in the meadows, dip net fishing on the river, and heading into town to purchase supplies at the mercantile. Their discussions seemed so provincial I couldn’t believe these were supposed to be time travelers. The evening ended in Azeem strumming away at a classical guitar with Phebah and Melem-Iram adding shoddily-sung lyrics. I sat uncomfortably on the floor as Auguste stretched out on the couch I leaned on, and Eurynome washed dishes in the kitchen before eventually leaving to pick berries in the woods on the property. Cleon was nowhere to be found.

“Where did you pick up that tune?” Auguste asked through a yawn. Phebah, who was perched on the fireplace ledge, cradled her chin thoughtfully.

“Can’t rightly remember,” she said. “Perhaps I invented it.” Melem-Iram laughed heartily.

“You?” he chuckled, “Invent a melody? I doubt it.” She crossed her arms in protest, kicking his shin lightly.

“You’ve no idea how good I am!” she taunted. “It’s not as if you met me during my time. I could have been the most brilliant musician in the Caribbean and you’d have never known!”

“You’re from the Caribbean Sea?” I asked, curious. She nodded gleefully and twisted a coil of hair around her finger.

“Nassau!” She said proudly. “Born and raised.” I thought about the name, but could only generate some base knowledge on the House of Orange-Nassau.

“A Dutch island?” I asked. She shook her head and giggled.

“No, no,” she said, “Nassau is the name of the city. It’s the center of the most brilliant island in the world...” she stretched her arms out and beamed, “New Providence!”

“Which is what?” I asked.

“It’s an island owned by the British. Or at least it was when I lived there. Now it’s a part of an independent country— the Bahamas. Well, I suppose it’s a part of a commonwealth, but damn is that a lot of history for you. Definitely too much for you to process.” I nodded dimly, not quite understanding. I supposed it made sense enough.

“She’s not being entirely transparent,” Melem-Iram cut in. “Nassau in her time wasn’t only the capital of New Providence...it was the *pirate haven* of the Caribbean.”

“You were a pirate!?” I exclaimed. She groaned and threw her head into her hands, her hair spilling over her knees.

“*Why* Melem?” she whined. “Now I have to do the whole spiel!” Auguste and I exchanged a curious glance.

“I’m open to listen,” I offered. She slowly peeked out from her hunched-over position with an open-mouth smile.

“You really would?” she asked giddily.

“Why not?” I shrugged. She sat back up and settled into her seat, ready to regale me.

“It’s really quite the saga...” she began, suspense coating her voice. The room leaned in intently, even those who had no doubt heard it a thousand times before.

“A saga we won’t be sharing,” a cold voice interrupted. We all spun our heads to see K’aayhltla leaning in the doorway with crossed arms. “Cesaire, Auguste— you’re coming with me. Eurynome and I would like to discuss some ground rules...in *private*.” I looked over to Auguste for guidance, but he seemed just as lost as I was. I nodded sheepishly and followed her out of the room, Auguste trailing behind us. She led us down the spindly wood-paneled hallway and into the backyard beside a cedar-scented shower shack. I leaned back on the wall of the house, splinters digging into my shoulders. I crossed my arms apprehensively and awaited further instruction. Auguste appeared to do the same, although I couldn’t get a read on his expression. I had been failing to do that a lot lately, I realized. Eurynome finally appeared, phasing out of the bushes and brush at the edge of the overgrown yard with a basket under her arm. The corners of her peachy lips were stained with dark juice, and her kinky dark hair was tugged into a magenta scarf.

“Alright boys,” she started, “it’s time for your official debrief.” I exchanged a quick glance at Auguste, not certain what to expect. Eurynome clicked her fingers together in front of my nose. “Hey, look at me,” she directed. I faced her slowly, uncomfortably close to her green eyes shining through her venetian mask. “There is one very important detail I need you each to understand perfectly,” she said. “You are one token in an exponentially larger game. You must play by our rules or get burnt. If you fail to comply with anything we tell you, we cannot guarantee your safety. Do you get that?” I nodded hesitantly, elbowing Auguste to get him to do the same. “The first rule you must abide— you will not question the identities, lives, or histories of any of the residents. Even if they offer their backstories to you, you mustn’t accept. Leave the room if you have to. The second rule— if you ever attempt to leave or succeed in leaving, we again cannot guarantee your safety. You must accept that Moose Pass is the most secure place for you in all of

spacetime. Third, we will ask you questions you will have the urge not to answer, or to lie about. You must always provide us with complete and honest responses— no matter what. Finally, if anything goes particularly wrong, you must be educated on the *failsafe*.” I perked up from where my vision had trailed to the dusty ground.

“What’s the failsafe?” I asked. Her eyes crinkled, which I assume meant she was smirking beneath the mask.

“Follow me and you will find out,” she said and began to walk around the house. K’ayhltla trailed behind her. I kicked up forest duff under my boots and observed the swinging evergreens above us as we walked. We stopped after a short time, coming to a cellar door embedded in a swath of meadow a few hundred feet from the cabin. I expected us to simply stare at it, but to my surprise Eurynome crouched down and heaved the wooden doors open in a cloud of dust. She descended into the cellar, disappearing beneath the earth. I followed her cautiously, my hand steady on the cool wall. It was dark and murky inside, much like the other cellars I had been inside during my life. I didn’t detect the scent of fermentation that hovers over wine, or even the sweet tang of hanging vegetables and meat. My eyes widened as they adjusted to the murky dark. Instead of the usual contents of a cellar, this barrow was filled with strange metallic sticks stacked on top of each other. Eurynome picked one off of a shelf, spinning it between her fingers. It glowed at the end, emitting an eerie blue light. The rest of it appeared as a solid block of iron.

“We call these our essences,” she explained. “This is mine. It contains a complete catalog of all of my thoughts, emotions, memory, DNA sequencing, and the condition of my existence in time. Plus...wherever I have been in the spacetime continuum and whatever effects I’ve left behind. Not that I expect you to understand any of that. What’s important is that you know all the information one could

possibly maintain on an individual is stored here– including both of yours.” It seemed impossible. *How could my very essence be diluted into an alien metal stick stored in some faraway place across space and time? I had never been to the future before! I’d never interacted with time travelers!* I was bewildered.

“Why do you have my– well, my *everything* here?” K’aayhltla and Eurynome exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

“It must be gleaned from a pure DNA sample,” K’aayhltla said calmly. Due to the fact she appeared to be praying I wouldn’t question this answer further, I decided to inquire.

“What is this DNA you keep mentioning?” I asked her. Eurynome wrung her hands uncomfortably before rolling her shoulders back and regaining her composure. She beckoned us back out of the cellar, and I trudged behind her silently. We stood in a malformed circle on the grass above the cellar door. Eurynome craned her head back to observe the rising moon.

“DNA,” she started cautiously, “it’s an acronym. It stands for deoxyribonucleic acid. Known to humanity through modern technology you have not yet encountered. The scientific specificities are irrelevant to you, and certainly not within your current breadth of comprehension. What is important to understand is what it represents symbolically.” I heard her tongue click against her lips behind her mask. Whatever she had to tell me was obviously not easy to convey. “It’s a substance within every living creature’s body...that contains a sort of *record* of all of the information that composes their being. Their genetics– eye color, certain diseases, height, instructions for making you function. They’re unique profiles, they can technically be replicated, but it’s nowhere near common practice. Your DNA is a biological code sleeping within your body that is entirely a summary of you.”

I shifted on my feet nervously. The sky was quickly darkening above us, and the stars were becoming all the more visible to me. I attempted to focus on the constellations, one of the only constants left in my life. They were cosmic anchors for me. I maintained my eye on the Pleiades while I raised my next question.

“And...how does one obtain DNA?” I asked hoarsely. My voice was scantily a whisper as waves of realization poured over me. Now all I needed was for Eurynome to confirm it. She exchanged a pained look with K’aayhltla before audibly exhaling.

“It must—it must be sourced directly from the body it belongs to,” she answered. She looked incredibly stiff, her fists clenched white at her sides. K’aayhltla turned her head shyly away, her silver streak of hair catching the moonlight. Auguste breathed heavily, the rises and falls of his chest rapidly increasing as our mutual confusion and panic settled in.

“How did you—?” I began before pacing in anger. I threw back my head and groaned, my clenched palms pressed into my temples. Auguste seemed similarly affected, but he only stood staring, as if transfixed by some distant light. Eurynome approached me as if I were a distressed child. Her arms were bent yet still outstretched— a careful gesture of peace.

“It’s incredibly contrived,” she told me hurriedly. “You cannot know the truth just yet. You are not ready. You must acclimate— prove that you are stable enough to handle that which you cannot possibly comprehend. It’s only protocol.” I shook my head sharply, backing away with heels dug into damp grass.

“No, no I don’t want to know,” I said. “If you aren’t willing to give me the whole truth now I will never trust you to supply it ever.” She swallowed painfully and nodded in truce.

“Okay,” she agreed. “That’s fair. But I can’t let you run off, Cesaire. You have no idea how incredibly dangerous this universe is for

you. One wrong step and you're falling. We are the only ones who can hold your hand while you walk the tightrope, you hear me? So no matter what happens, no matter how much we disgust or upset you, you have to stay. You *need* to stay." I massaged my scalp tensely and closed my eyes so tight that they summoned kaleidoscopes.

"I don't– I don't want to listen to you," I said.

"I know, but you have to."

"I just met you!"

"We are the only people who can keep you alive. If you don't prefer living...well, we simply cannot allow that." I looked up to meet her eyes, my hands slowly falling to rest beside my thighs.

"I never said I wanted to die," I said. She smiled bitterly and gestured to the night sky like a dome above our heads.

"You see the sky, Cesaire? It is a representation of a simple *fraction* of the world you have available to you now. However, just like space, in your sea of options there are only a handful of droplets yet stable enough to support you. You must know that most planets cannot sustain life, yes? Spacetime is the same for anomalies. If you stray from the very specific criteria necessary for your survival...well." She stared at me as her green eyes grew deeply serious. "...It's suicide." A silent moment passed before I nodded slowly and set my mouth into a firm line.

"Alright," I relented, "I'll stay. I'll stay *but* I want complete assurance that the truth will be revealed to me once I am adequately prepared. That I won't forever be your plaything to keep in the dark." I inhaled sharply. "And I want to go home. Whatever plot I am involving myself in, if it doesn't result in my reunion with the life that truly matters to me, I'll sabotage it. I don't belong here. I want to belong again, understand?" Eurynome seemed to purse her lips and nodded in solemn agreement.

“I understand more deeply than you could ever imagine,” she said. “We have a deal. I promise.” I grasped her hand and shook it firmly. Her skin was smooth but unnaturally cold. Another reason for me to be unsettled by her. I turned to face Auguste, who had been completely silent during Eurynome and I’s entire exchange.

“What say you, Auguste?” I asked, my inflection falling back on our typical bardic banter. He wrapped his arms around his bare arms all the way up to his shoulders and held himself tightly.

“I think...” he began quietly, “I think I want to get to work. Do with me what you will, I’ll do it. I swear it.” He looked so brilliant then. The yellowed moon haloed behind his rich curls. His palms were outstretched. He was a word that I could not force past my bared teeth. Eurynome seemed impressed, almost emotional. She took a few steps forward before awkwardly embracing him. There was a single second of calm before he stumbled back from the hug, his arms raised in defense.

“Sorry,” she said quickly and ironed out the hem of her skirt with a few neat brushes. “I admire your resilience, Auguste. I do hope that Cesaire will adopt a similarly dedicated attitude.” I rolled my eyes, which did not go unnoticed, but was instead pointedly ignored. “Let’s head back to the cabin, shall we?” She proposed wearily. The other three of us nodded with a mirrored exhaustion and began to tread through the meadow back whence we came. I could not take my mind off of Auguste’s surprising oath as we walked. Obviously I had always known him to be a dramatic individual, but that particular speech was so blatantly theatrical it seemed satirical. Either I was missing an important piece of information or Auguste was falling prey to his desire to be admired quicker than I anticipated. No matter. He never admitted that sort of thing to himself, anyhow.

The remainder of the evening was unusually still and uneventful. I was introduced to the concept of the modern indoor shower, I received

some bedclothes, and I promptly went to bed. It was the act of entering the bed that was easiest, but actually sleeping was a much more arduous task. I spent several hours staring at the cedar-paneled ceiling contemplating my situation. The bed was much more comfortable than any I had slept in before, but it was also smaller. Not to mention, it smelled strongly of wool and detergent. I had to admit that the prospect of sleeping in the same room as Auguste disturbed me. I was used to maintaining a space for myself; even Zenobie seldom entered my bedroom. It was useless to make a fuss out of the matter, but I worried that the discomfort was keeping me awake. I rolled my head over my pillow to glare at Auguste's sleeping form. *No, not discomfort*, I thought. *Violation*. It was a violation of my privacy and dignity. I quickly turned over to face the wall and huffed out a noise of disgust. I closed my eyes and attempted to ground myself.

I imagined the sweeping botanical gardens at my Aunt's estate between Toulon and Saint Cyr-sur-Mer. The way the perfectly trimmed hedgerows lined up with paved pathways and alabaster fountains. The brilliant sea summoning warm breezes through palm fronds. I thought of strolling down the streets of Cannes with Zenobie on my arm, stopping to pursue the shops or admire the architecture. Most of all, I remembered the near-normalcy I held so dearly to myself. Whereas Auguste proudly leaned into peculiarity and our artist friends followed closely suit, I admired society the way it was. Religion was a refuge to me, and I considered myself a man of the Lord. Marriage was an institution I respected, even when it lacked enjoyment. My job instilled me with a sense of responsibility and pride; the ability to engage the next generation in academia and proper education. Still, there were always cracks in the facade. Always footholes I couldn't quite properly hang on to. My only respite had been the pillars of consistency my life had afforded me. Now, every boundary and standard had been flooded away. *How was I to*

*maintain my morality now?* Not when I was attempting to sleep in a crowded bed, in a foreign land, in a room with a heathen. I fell asleep feeling sick to my stomach.

## XII: Auguste

I woke to the sound of woodland birds heralding the first rays of morning light, just as I had the three nights before. I raised myself from the heavy sheets and rubbed my eyes groggily. Cesaire wasn't in his bed, and it was already neatly made. The sunrise outside was pink and faint, so I assumed he must have risen while it was still dark. I was beginning to fall into a routine at that point. Change into dark jeans and a cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Brush my teeth and comb my newly-cropped curls in the mirror. Wash my face in the sink and marvel over the miracle of mixer taps.

I sauntered down the stairs, my hand lightly trailing over the smooth wood of the railing. The majority of the house was already awake and bustling about, arranging breakfast and preparing for morning chores. I spotted Cesaire cautiously observing a cereal box at the kitchen counter. He was leaned over the speckled countertop, his eyebrows tangled in confusion. Phebah was laughing at his expense, taking the cardboard box from his hand, pouring it for him, *helping* him. I leaned back against the wall and slotted my thumbs into my pockets.

“Good morning,” I said plainly. Cesaire briefly looked up, disturbing the careful placement of honeyed hair upon his forehead.

“You're a bit late,” he replied and shifted his gaze back downwards. I shrugged and grabbed an orange out of the fruit basket.

“You could've raised me if you really wanted to.” He scoffed beneath his breath and opened the fridge to reach for a carton of milk.

“That's not my job, now is it?” He rebuffed. I slid onto the stool across from him and dug my short nails into the orange peel.

“No, I suppose not,” I said. He shoved a scoop of cereal into his mouth and his eyes immediately widened.

“Woah,” he breathed, “woah, woah, woah. What do they put in this stuff? This is...” he trailed off to continue devouring the bowl. I laughed lightly and Phebah did the same.

“It’s miraculous, right? People put an exuberant amount of sugar in food these days. The concept is downright repulsive, but the result is heavenly.” He nodded excitedly and twirled his scratched spoon around in his fingers.

“I’ll give the future this victory for sure,” he said. There was a moment when both of us were smiling. Perhaps we were happy to be reunited. Maybe we had simply reached a momentary state of mutual contentment. Whatever it was, it quickly passed. Cesaire downed the remainder of milk in the bottom of his bowl and rested it on the counter with a clink. He looked disoriented, and I worried I had done something wrong.

“What is it?” I inquired carefully. He bit his lip on the dark scab that marred his complexion. It was typical of him to fall back on such a habit when confronted with a personal question.

“Nothing,” he said stereotypically. He twisted around with one arm slung over the back of his chair to peer up at Phebah. “What are we doing today?” he asked her, obviously eager to abandon our short conversation. She pouted her dark lips into a rosebud smile and planted a hand on her hip, the other arm swinging loosely at her side.

“Today...” she began mysteriously, “we’re getting you *acquainted*. You’ve got a lot to learn if you want to survive here. Auguste doesn’t know the half of it! So, you’ll both be learning together. We’ll catch you up in no time, don’t fret.” Cesaire nodded sagely, as if he was still adjusting to the concept of change. It wasn’t unlike him. I adapted easily. Falling into whatever role was demanded of me per the social situation. Often, that role was opposed to the cultural standard. He tended to take a more ‘cog in the machine’ approach. So yes, it was of no

surprise to me that he would be perturbed by being flung out of normalcy. Any normal person would. His lips parted in an exaggerated fashion before he spoke. I expected the typical drivel. Yet, he managed to catch me off guard again. Always a tricky one.

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding. “Yeah, alright. Let’s take the plunge. I’ll learn if you are willing to teach.”

“Absolutely!” Phebah squealed. “All of us are.” She tossed her head over her shoulder to shout across the house, her unbound hair hovering like a raincloud. “Melem! C’mere, I believe we could use your expertise today!” She spun back to us with a glamorously toothy grin. “I have just had the most brilliant idea.”

“Sounds intriguing!” Cesaire said a bit too fervently. He immediately drew back. “I mean...just by...the tone of your voice.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “You sound rather excited...is what I meant to convey...there.” Phebah swung her arms around his chair and rested her chin on the crook of his shoulder, her lips floating near his left ear. I swallowed, my mouth feeling dry.

“I am *very* excited,” she assured him. “So excited in fact, that I think we should commence the festivities...*immediately!*” She jumped back up and twirled around with her arms outstretched and mouth open in a joyful laugh. I never understood how she generated so much energy in the morning.

“I haven’t even had my breakfast yet,” I groaned. She pinched her brow and sighed in annoyance.

“*Fine,*” she said, “finish that orange and have some cereal. Then we’re hitting the road, baby!” I clicked my tongue and got up to grab a bowl from the cabinets. Melem-Iram wandered into the room as I poured some slightly stale cereal into my bowl. He occupied a substantial amount of the door frame and looked slightly bored. His beard was noticeably unbrushed, as well.

“What’s the plan?” he asked. Phebah slunk over to him and threw herself dramatically against the wall, her wrist fashioned flamboyantly upon her forehead.

“It’s a glorious scheme, honestly,” she began. “We’re to ferry the fledglings into town for the week’s supply run. They’ll be fabulously educated about the wonders of the 20th century. We’ll surprise them in a million ways. It will be an absolute blast.” Melem-Iram smirked and crossed his arms.

“And you need me for this, why?” he asked. Phebah tucked a coil of hair behind her ear and peered up at him pleadingly.

“I can’t drive...?” she said as convincingly sweet as possible. He scoffed and flicked her shoulder.

“Neither of them have ever seen an automobile before, Phebah. You think their very first week is the proper time to introduce that to them?” She shrugged and flicked her hand out to observe her nails. My eyes widened as I noticed they were an unnatural yellow shade.

“Are your nails alright?” I asked nervously. She could be infected with a terrible pox or jaundice of some sort for all I knew. She laughed brightly.

“Oh! This is just nail polish. Girls these days paint their nails for aesthetic purposes I suppose.”

“See?” Melem-Iram interjected, “They’re still adjusting to their situation. It’s irresponsible to spring such a foreign concept on them.” I licked my spoon and frowned. I was irked that I was being treated like such a child.

“Whatever flagrant fancy you are discussing,” I said as eloquently as possible, “I am thoroughly equipped to handle.” He huffed out a breath of annoyance as Phebah swung back and forth on her heels as a measure of begging.

“Ugh,” he groaned, “fine.” She threw her hands up in glee and cheered. He stuck a pointed finger in her face to cut her off. “On one condition. They have to observe the vehicle first. If they can’t handle it, it returns to the garage and we don’t speak of the experience until later. Understood?” She heaved a labored sigh and sank onto a barstool seat.

“Yes, okay,” she said. She snapped around to squint at me as I slowly chewed my breakfast. “And you, hurry up. Cesaire downed his cereal at a much more impressive caliber. Don’t leave me disappointed.” I swallowed the rest of the bowl in a few gulps and wiped my mouth.

“There,” I said, “let’s go see this eighth wonder you speak of.” We followed Phebah and Melem-Iram outside, my newly-assigned work boots kicking through pine needles and summer dirt. We took a short path through the thicket and shrubbery to a dilapidated structure on the edge of the property. My breath made puffs of steam in the cool morning air, but the sun was already beaming bright lines of tangerine through the forest. Melem-Iram heaved the front door of the building open, rolling it up into the ceiling. When he stepped aside, he revealed a bloated contraption of metal and leather. It had wheels, which made it vaguely resemble a cart or carriage, but I couldn’t identify it outside of that. I knew it had to be a mode of transportation, and it looked to seat around five. It lacked a hookup for horses, however, and it featured many confusing details I couldn’t assign meaning to.

“This is one of the future’s greatest inventions,” Phebah explained. “We call it a car, but Melem prefers the term automobile. Finds it more respectable. Technically, this one is a ‘truck.’ Simply a type of car. Don’t question how it works...just know that it transports us at astounding speeds between locations.” I cocked my head and pursued the vehicle from several angles. “Does it disturb you?” Phebah asked me cautiously. I smacked my lips together and placed my hands on my hips, bending at the waist to observe the detailing.

“No,” I answered. “I don’t think so?” She jabbed Melem-Iram in his hefty side and smiled, satisfied.

“I knew you could handle it,” she proclaimed proudly. Melem-Iram raised an eyebrow and jerked open the driver’s-side door of the car.

“Now to see if they can stomach this–” he said before the headlights of the car flashed on, causing me to jump back in a panic. The truck emitted a guttural roar as its engine hummed to life, and I couldn’t hide the fact that I was terrified.

“What...what is that hideous sound?” I asked gingerly. Phebah patted my shoulder in assurance and slid into the passenger’s seat.

“This–!” she shouted from behind the glass of the dash window, “Is the noise of raw power!” She beckoned us in the back seat, and I carefully fumbled with the door handle before crawling in to sit down. I ducked under the curved metal of the door frame, and despite the truck being claustrophobic, I felt extremely exposed perched on its worn leather seats. Cesaire seemed uncomfortable as well, but was being more vocal about it.

“Are you positive this is safe...?” he inquired. Phebah leaned over her seat, her chin rested on a slung forearm.

“Perfectly!” she assured us. “Consider this a modern carriage. Very similar technology...just more adapted. It’s quite intuitive once you get used to it.” She turned back to Melem-Iram and punched her fist into the air. “Hit it!” she yelled.

I yelped and fell backwards as the car lurched forward. Melem-Iram hissed something under his breath and adjusted the stiff knob embedded between the two front seats. Phebah sighed wearily, but it wasn’t long before we were jolting out of the garage. The car rocked like a boat on the choppy sea as we raced down the gravel path away from the house. I gripped onto the side of my seat for dear life, my teeth

chattering and knuckles blanched stark white. Cesaire pressed his flat palms to his dusty window, watching the trees fly by at an increasingly dizzy speed. I remained rooted in my seat, attempting to look unfazed. A stolen glance out of the corner of my eye revealed the most fascinating sight. The landscape had warped into a blurry oil painting of mixing colors and shapes. The vague concept of reality melded together to create an abstract expressionist paradise. My mouth parted in awe and I joined Cesaire in staring out of my window. He was supposed to be the more reserved of us, but I knew we were equally inspired by the art of living. This was certainly one of those instances.

“It’s so enchanting...” I remarked breathily. Cesaire nodded eagerly and leaned back in his seat in content.

“I must admit I have been suspicious of this uncanny land,” he said, “but its wonders continue to pleasantly surprise me.” I nodded slowly and examined his stoic face. The imperceptible trace of a smile lingered on his lips, causing me to break out in a soft grin.

“I understand what you speak of, Cesaire,” I replied. “There is an allure to the unknowable being revealed and made known, is there not?” Before Cesaire could reply I heard choked laughter from the front seat.

“You lot are so dramatic,” Phebah giggled. “Melem and I are receiving a whole theatrical demonstration up here!”

“I am a poet,” I countered stormily, “my words are my instrument, my music. Do you wish to deny me that connection with my—” I ended my sentence abruptly to look at Cesaire. His mouth was stretched into an uncomfortable line. I scratched the side of my head and attempted a new direction. “My friend and I communicate in a certain way,” I amended. “You must understand that refinement is not sourced from pretentiousness but from a love of language. It gives a mechanism to its speaker. It is a means for tools of expression and definition.”

Phebah continued to chortle her little peals of laughter and tapped her fingers on the dashboard.

“Alright,” she said giddily, “if you say so.” I crossed my arms and let my cheeks burn with embarrassment. What once seemed an impressive lyrical skill now only left me feeling childish. *The follies of modernity*, I supposed. The car turned off the gravel stretch onto the main paved highway. I peered out of the window and marveled at just how smooth the road beneath was. The effect it had on our quality of travel was palpable. She seemed to recognize my silence.

“This stretch,” she said, “it’s called the Seward Highway. Takes travelers up to Anchorage– the big city around the fjords. We don’t typically rely on cobblestone these days. The material that paves roads now is called asphalt. It makes for a comfortable trip, much more than that gravel back there.” I nodded a symbol of understanding and continued to look out the window. Our ride took us down the peninsula, past forests, dotted lakes, brushy taiga, and towering peaks. The town we pulled into was built around a harbor crowded with commercial fishing vessels. Melem-Iram made a few slow turns on the cramped grid-like streets of the small community. Eventually he parked us in front of a marketplace, the low buzz of the engine tapering off. I got out of the car and attempted to shut the door, but it only bounced off its hinge.

“You’ve got to really slam it,” Phebah called from over her shoulder. I followed her advice, and was humbled to find it took me more than two tries. The more I engaged with this world, the more I found myself overwhelmed by it. The market sign was infused with a colorful version of electricity (neon, as I would come to know it), the aisles were lined with food wrapped in an uncomfortable material (plastic), and the back of the store featured glass cabinets piled with drinks and substances one might typically find stored in a cellar (freezers). Cesaire and I lagged awkwardly behind our more adept hosts

as they purchased a bag of groceries. I was intrigued by the ding of the register and the automatic dispense of the receipt, but I maintained my silence. Phebah was already pushing past us, a stuffed paper bag slotted between her arms.

“Let’s go,” she said without looking back. Attempting to display to Cesaire that I might be familiar with this procedure, I straightened my back and strode out of the store. The top of the door collided with a bell as I pushed it open. The car ride back was less quiet, and we fell into the rhythm we assumed around a good game of poker. Phebah was quippy and cheerful, Melem-Iram reluctantly entertained her, and even Cesaire found ways to contribute in his own formal manner. Still, I knew that he and I were very different from these people. We were boundless wanderers, pilgrims in audience with a holy artifact for an unfamiliar god. It was lonely, in its own familiar way.

As the days passed, our hours began to form into swells on the open sea. Some of our time was spent joining the rest of the household in chores, meals, and laughter. Those were the crests upon the waves. Other times I found myself suspended in despair, or lost in some untraceable thought. Those were the times that the water stilled. I enjoyed accumulating new knowledge, but I found more fascination in observing Cesaire’s attempts to adapt.

One evening, the orange glow of the kitchen light spilling over the room, I lounged on a stiff wooden chair, watching him. He was furiously scrubbing plates with a dish towel. Eurynome had told him to use the dishwasher, but he was baffled by its apparent unintuitiveness. I draped one arm over my knee, one leg hoisted on the seat, while my other hung loosely to the ground. I was making my best effort to seem unafflicted and mysterious. He seemed too preoccupied to care. I wanted to speak to him then, say something aloof and artistic, but I choked on my words before my mind could even form them. Instances of this

incapacitation taking refuge in my lungs only increased. I found myself stalling as he strained to drag an old farming plow across the dirt of the plot behind the house. I was paralyzed by his confident demeanor when he dominated poker night, throwing a glowing royal flush on the table with a winning smile. My nights were spent with my arms pinned to my sides in stunned silence, unwilling to acknowledge his presence in our room.

I couldn't even muster the guts to speak now, as he was walking through the door, an unpleasant interruption to a lively conversation Phebah, Azeem, and I had been heavily engaged in. *Spectacular*, I thought to myself, *I'll be drowning in my own pathetic social failing any moment now*. By that point, I was considering him a hindrance to me. I wanted so badly to impress our more experienced housemates with my eager assimilation, but his very presence dragged me back to the place I was before time reared its ugly head.

"Good afternoon," Azeem said nonchalantly. We were seated on the front porch, accompanied by the simmering hum of insects and the contemplative plucking of Azeem's guitar. Cesaire, his social reservations beginning to melt around him, eagerly sat beside us.

"Likewise," he said cheerily. Then, to none of my surprise, he turned to speak with me. "I have the most brilliant news," he said, "it's rather urgent, so I'd like to deliver it to you. If it's no inconvenience." Despite knowing it would be best to avoid, and certainly against my own good, I nodded.

"Alright," he began with outstretched palms, "Eurynome has authorized that we might explore the property...on our own! Well, you and I together, I mean. As a unit." I attempted to look profoundly contemplative.

"Very well?" I replied, finding my voice. "That sounds the likes of a perfectly lovely outing for another eve." Phebah curled an eyebrow at

me and not-very-subtly jabbed me between the ribs with her sharp elbow. I hissed and rubbed my side. She smirked at me and crossed her legs, smoothing out her skirt with a perky pout. “I mean...” I said with some effort, “I suppose we could embark now. Seeing as I am not *too* preoccupied.” His face lit up and he took me by the wrist, lifting me from my seat. I forgot how touchy he could get when he was excited. Azeem offered us a stoic expression, quickly resuming his absent-minded guitar-plucking. Phebah was less subdued, and shot me a toothy grin. I rolled my eyes and spun on my heel, allowing Cesaire to drag me away.

We wandered around the house, and entered the woods on the backside of the property. Its leaves were speckled by crisp sunlight, an early golden hour like liquid honey on foliage. I laced my fingers behind my back, my neck craning to watch a flock of geese fly over the canopy above. It was a tranquil place, but it was untamed. The gardens and cliffs of my home had been teeming with life, well-manicured, and intensely managed. It was a museum of nature rather than a true environment. The forests here exhibited the opposite ideology. They ran wild and free, only game trails and nurse logs disrupting their tangled undergrowth. I suppose I thought the future would be a regulated paradise, a monolith of sorts. It was strangely gratifying to know that the world was still the disorderly purgatory I had left behind. We walked the winding path in relative silence for a few minutes before we arrived at a small grove on the edge of the property. It was bathed in a thick amber light, and its leaves rustled in a sweet late-summer breeze. I shuffled my feet and swept some dirt aside, sitting down beneath a copse of reddish pines. Cesaire took his seat across from me, his back leaning into the soft bark of a decaying felled tree.

“What is it you are so desperate to say to me?” I asked after a moment of prolonged silence. He bowed his head and twisted his fingers

together anxiously. His breath hitched as he steadied himself for what he was about to say.

“I want to discuss our being here,” he said.

“Is something wrong?”

“Wha– of course!”

“What do you mean? I thought you were excited about something.”

“No...I was only happy to talk to you– ugh. It’s plain as day, Auguste. We are not living normal lives. No matter how many days we spend here attempting to assimilate into some perverted version of normality, we will never belong.” I nodded tersely and looked away.

“We didn’t belong back there either,” I countered.

“*You* did not belong,” he said, “*I* was perfectly fine. I had a relationship, a career, a religion, good social standing. What did you have?” I leaned forward, my nails digging into the forest floor.

“I thought you were eager to share a pleasant time with me! To at least entertain civil conversation.”

“I was!” he launched back. “I mean– I, I am.” He heaved a grounding sigh. “But we have hardly discussed our predicament since we arrived. You refuse to communicate with me, you regulate yourself to brooding in the corner. It’s– well, I cannot call it pathetic. I can, however, note that it is atypical. You claim to love this prison cell so much? Then why does it lack the ability to summon joy within you? I see not the inspiration that you basked in by the glistening Riviera, only an unassured and disaffected man. Certainly not the man I care for.” I balked, drawing back slowly. He regained his composure and cleared his throat. My lips touched for a few awkward seconds as I processed.

“I act differently here because...I do not need to employ the same defenses I did at home,” I said gently. “In our usual lives, the only way to be recognized for your artistry, to deflect the mainstream, is to be

outwardly unusual and fringe. It is to engage with a certain scene, to dress a certain way, to speak in a certain manner. There is a stereotype to uphold. Here, there is no such system to be opposed to. Only a handful of people, a house, and the stillness of the Earth.” I sat in these words unmoving for a moment, before another phrase manifested in my mind. “And you, I suppose,” I added. “You change me here.” His eyebrows raised in mild shock, but he did not respond to me immediately. There was another deliberate pause that hung like a heavy sheet between us.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Auguste,” he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I’m your only remnant of our old life. I’m your only artifact of home. Why would my being here *change* you?”

“Because,” I replied ever so softly, “You kept my life tolerable. Beyond all the artistic nonsense. It was you, but I just couldn’t see it until now. When it had all been pulled away from me. And no amount of space or time could make that fade.” He watched me carefully. I leaned forward, my hands planted firmly on the earth. Only a foot of space divided us.

“You left me, Auguste,” he said. “You sacrificed our— you abandoned me to traipse about the continent! The last time we had a proper talk it was by moonlight in your apartment, and both of us were decidedly intoxicated. We confessed our afflictions to each other and panicked at the thought of returning to our prior level of commitment. Not even your sister knew where you had fled off to! How do you think that made me feel?” I simply shook my head. “I had nothing,” he said desperately. There were real tears wetting his eyes now. It shocked me. “You know Zenobie and I were falling apart from the start. You know I was drowning in that town. No matter how hard I tried—” I threw my arms around him, cradling him.

“I am so sorry,” I whispered in his ear, “I am so sorry. For all the pain, the confusion, the negligence. For the fact that despite all of our

investment in each other, I seldom allow us to really, truly *speak*.” A truly needed cry escaped his mouth as he buried his head into the flank of my shoulder.

“You’ve never apologized to me before,” he said with some trace of shock. He lifted his chin up to stare into my eyes. “Why?” I brushed a stray strand of hair from his forehead and let my spare hand rest on his knee.

“I want to make an effort,” I admitted. “It seems appropriate for me to make amends with my friend.” He drew back, returning to his seat across from me, although much closer this time.

“Do you think we have an agreeable friendship?” He asked timidly. “I mean, after all we’ve been through and done to each other.” I took no time to ponder this.

“Yes,” I answered firmly. “You are my greatest companion, and that you shall remain. I intend that to be true.”

“Auguste,” he said, “What is this really?” My arms dropped from his waist and settled in my lap, as I suddenly felt exposed.

“What do you mean?” I asked. He rolled his hand around his wrist, as if the answer were obvious.

“You’ve lost your edge,” he replied. He looked directly down my nose. “But I kind of love it.” I recoiled, uncomfortable with the phrase.

“You...love...?” I stuttered. “You *love* the way I am when not overly consumed by a hunger for fame and alternative fortune. You *love* when I am finally at ease. No longer absorbed and histrionic.” I rolled my eyes. “Of course you would ‘love’ that! You wish everyone were to be as boiled down as you.” He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

“I thought we were at a cease-fire with all of this bickering,” he groaned. I waved my hands around wildly, curbing the urge to mock him.

“This is why I was so terrified to speak with you!” I exclaimed. “Ongoing dialogue! It is not in my wheelhouse. Whatsoever.”

“Next thing I know, you’ll be revealing some other terrible revelation about our lives. You’re so awfully...negative when you mean to be.” I drew away from him, the possibility of telling the truth budding on my tongue.

“I was keen to leave you again,” I said. He stared at me, searching for elaboration.

“What?” he asked. I ran my hands through my hair, stress building beneath my skin, goosebumps raising on my arms.

“I returned home to see my mother after my father’s passing,” I continued. “I did not plan to stay for much longer. I tended to her for a few months, told everyone I had returned to be inspired by my birthplace, attended parties to maintain appearances, and was soon to leave. That time...I did not intend to come back.” He blinked a few times as if this was unpredictable news to him.

“Why did you take me home with you?” he asked me out of nowhere.

“How does that question concern the current subject?” I asked. He dug into his lip, pearly crimson peeking out of his scars.

“You claim you wanted to disappear into the night,” he said, “to leave us all behind and never return. And yet...you invited me into your apartment. You allowed me, who you claimed to disavow, to invade your private affairs. Why is that?” What could I say to that? How could I confess a truth so candid that even I avoided it?

“I was going to ask you to run away with me,” I confessed shakily. “Forever. To never return.” I drew in a ragged breath before falling quiet again, desperately wracking my brain for the right words to say. “I’ve said it before,” I finally said, “you are the only one who truly understands. You have been with me for as long as—”

“—As long as anyone can remember,” he finished my sentence for me. I stared at him, my gaze transfixed on his still breath, the rising and falling of his chest. We were sitting there, in the dirt and grain of the planet, suddenly alone. The only sound was that of dead leaves blistering under the late august sun, playing a motif to our stunned silence. The spell broke. He broke eye contact and nodded, making a small noise under his breath. “Okay,” he mumbled, “okay, okay.” I cocked my head at him, lips barely parted in a question.

“What— what’s wrong?” I asked lightly. He shook his head, hands raised in defense.

“This is just...it’s just ridiculous,” he said. “What are we even saying? In any other world, we’d be running away from each other. It’s only by our insane circumstances— that you still refuse to properly discuss— that we are here together now.” I grasped his hands in mine, holding him tightly.

“If you want to discuss our life as it is, you must view it through the lens of this reality.” I said. “Perhaps I was foolhardy and desperate. But that was then. This is now.” He threw his head back in sarcastic laughter.

“Even if you had *begged* me to follow you, I couldn’t have possibly gone,” he said sharply. His eyes met mine, and somehow he wrapped our fingers tighter. “I have *responsibilities*, Auguste,” he said. “No matter how trying my relationship with Zenobie was, no matter how painful my allegiance to the Church, no matter how lost or lonely I felt, it was my cross to bear. And I bore it proudly.”

“Zenobie!” I exclaimed. “She could come with us!” His eyes closed in slow pain, as if I was a child who had said something foolish.

“She could...” he sighed, “...but you wouldn’t *want her to*.” I pulled myself closer to him, our foreheads nearly touching.

“I would make that sacrifice,” I said hastily, “I would make it for you.” My pupils darted over his face, desperate to break through.

“What I really wonder,” he whispered, “is what will you do in this world? You say all that truly matters is the present? What do you wish for us, then? What do you want?” I searched his expression for any hint of what he was asking me to say. Finding nothing, I took a plunge into the deep.

“I want to stay here,” I admitted, “and I want you to be with me. Everything will be strange and everyone will be a stranger, except each other. That is what I wish for.” He lifted his head from mine and observed me silently.

“You don’t want to return home?” he asked. I shook my head. He dropped my hands, all of the sudden seeming small against the backdrop of resplendent golden sun.

“I thought you loved the world for the way it was,” he said with an edge to his voice. “The crest of the wave upon the shore, the way the morning filtered through stained glass, the artistry of human extravagance meeting nature’s confusing simplicity. What is there for you here?”

“You are here,” I stated plainly. “That is worth more to me than an empty landscape.” He groaned in frustration and threw his head into his hands.

“I cannot possibly be worth that much to you!” he cried.

“Think about it, Cesaire,” I replied brokenly. “What is the singular constant in my life? The one person who I have always run back to? The person who I have thrown everything I have, even when I am losing.”

“Don’t say it’s me,” he choked. “Anyone but me. Say it’s your sister, your Parisian lover, your poetry, anything. Just don’t say it’s me.”

“But why?” I shouted. He shrunk away from me, and I sank into the ground. “But why...?” I repeated hoarsely.

“Because it’s wrong,” he replied adamantly. “It’s dangerous and tempting and *immoral!*” I blinked blankly.

“Immoral?” I repeated hollowly. He grimaced, his glaring mistake plastered disgustingly over our conversation. He stood and brushed off his knees in one fell swoop.

“Forget I said anything,” he said grimly. “Just forget it. This whole— all of it.” I reached for him, clamoring to my feet.

“Wait! Cesaire, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean—” It was too late. He was already walking away, striding swiftly down the path from where we had come. I picked up my pace, old leaves and snapped twigs cracking beneath my feet. He was moving away from me faster than I could catch up. I reached for him, practically begging for him to come back to me. Blindly believing there was anything to save. He disappeared from my sight, his silhouette consumed by the thicket of the woods. I slowed my pace and walked the rest of the path home in defeat. The mysterious wonder of nature felt less awe-inspiring and more isolating then.

I squinted as I arrived at the headlands of the trail and phased out of the bushes. The sun, now low and thick in the sky, hit my face like a cruel hand against my cheek. I trudged through the tangled weeds in the overgrown backyard of the cabin. I walked around the side of the house, my hand tracing over the shingles and seeking splinters. When I came around to the front porch, I saw that Phebah and Azeem were still seated there, the latter bent over his whisky-tinted guitar. Phebah perked up as I strode up the sagging porch-steps.

“How was it?” she asked me obliviously. Her sunshine-y demeanor was growing less endearing by the minute. I did not afford her a moment of my time, instead opting to speed past her and slam my shoulder into the screen door. She spun around, her cloud of hair lagging

behind her. “Wait—what’s wrong?” I could hear her saying. I slammed the door. It didn’t matter to me if Cesaire had gotten there first, I ran up the stairs to collapse on my bed. A million emotions like tiny fires inside my brain were lighting up like beacons around me. I poured my face into my flimsy pillow and let out a shrill scream. Frustration seeped from every cell in my body. *How could I mess up so terribly?* the blaring voice in my head shouted accusingly. When I finally lifted the pillow from my matted hair, I realized I was alone in the room. My expectations were flushed out of me. I was embarrassed to realize I had secretly hoped he would be there. Watching me from a shaded corner. Ready to extend a hand and put our words behind us.

I folded over on the edge of the bed, my ringlet curls hanging down to the tip of my nose. Letting them stick to my skin with a mixture of salty tears and sweat. The sun was dipping into a sugary sunset, and my body was cast in long shadows contrasted with rich light. It made me seem so much larger than I really was. A scared and confused young man, tired of putting up a front. Tired of giving. I fell backwards and let the thin sheets hold me like a conch shell. My eyes closed and I shuddered. I would ask for dinner in my room that night. Then I would lie sleeplessly. Not daring to shift my neck to meet his stare. Not making a single sound. A single movement. Not allowing him the respite of my attention. Not after I had offered him everything and still been left wanting.



### XIII: Eurynome

I rubbed my eyes, revealing excess mascara on my thumbs. I groaned and wiped it off on a tissue from my bedside dresser. I raised myself from my heavy sheets with some effort, still blinking through the harsh light streaming into my window. Coiled blackberry hair swung in my tired face and my bones ached from another restless night. I leaned back on my forearms, elbows digging into the mattress. Cleon's slumbering form rose and fell with quiet breaths in the bed next to me. I slipped off my bed, feet padding across the carpeted floor.

"Wake up," I whispered gently and shook his shoulders. He groaned, rolling over with a groggy grimace.

"We're still here?" he asked quietly. I nodded and faced myself away as he stretched himself out of bed. "You're still the same you?" he confirmed. I let my hair hang in my face and looked at him from the corner of my eye.

"Yes. Another day in the same reality." I stared at the calendar mounted on the wall. The newest unmarked day confirmed my analysis. "August sixteenth, nineteen-eighty-seven. Day eight-hundred and thirty-four." I rubbed my knuckles and traced my skin up to the nape of my neck, where I felt around the base. "My form is still intact, no signs of degeneration." I stood up and flexed my wrists. "You?" He finished pinching the sides of his neck.

"All clear." I sighed and looped my hair through my fingers, swooping it into a ponytail. I meandered over to the small bathroom attached to our bedroom and turned, with some effort, the squeaky faucet. Cool water poured over my hands like a blessing and I splashed it onto my face, a shock of freezing well water hitting my scarred skin. I hunched over the sink and gripped the sides. I stared at myself in the mirror, afraid of what I saw. A tired young woman with an arched

Roman nose and once-tan skin paled by illness and time. Eyes green as an alpine lake. A reflection more clear and careful than any I had been intended to see in my lifetime. I let the rest of my morning routine waltz around me wordlessly. Brushing my teeth, moussing my hair, slipping into my black clothes, polishing my mask. Cleon was resting on the edge of his bed, disguise in hand.

“Don’t you ever tire of wearing these?” he asked me. I shrugged and took the silky ribbon delicately in my fingers, tying the mask beneath my hair. He frowned and turned his mask in his hand. “Don’t you think we should be truthful eventually?” I rested a hand on his shoulder and slid next to him.

“We can’t, Cleon,” I answered calmly. “You have no idea if they could even process it. They could rebel and flee. Then we’d have to start all over.”

“The rest of them understand—”

“—They’re not the ones to which this is applicable.” He massaged his temple and collapsed over his crossed legs.

“You’re right,” he said, giving in. “I don’t know why I proposed something so...foolish.” He tied the mask on his soft-featured face and regained his composure, the polished posture the anonymity afforded him entering his spine.

“It wasn’t *foolish*,” I assured him, “you’re growing restless. It’s only natural. We all are. The days are closing in on us and we still lack the final piece of the puzzle.” I felt so helplessly tired then. The weight of years and worlds heavy on my shoulders. I wanted to fall back into the swath of Cleon’s unmade bed and drift away. The burden of responsibility held me back.

“Speaking of missing pieces...” he muttered.

“Don’t dwell on it,” I said. “He has been delegated a very important task. You can’t expect him to be here whenever he feels like it.

It's simply not reasonable." He spun his head towards me, his inner glare radiating from his tense posture.

"He is no more important than the rest of us," he snapped. "It *hurts* that we have to be unnecessarily separated, Eurynome. Not to mention the fact that I— God, no. I can't even—" I drew him into a tight side-hug.

"—I know," I murmured, "I know." He looked distraught in that faint morning light. It was like living inside an oil painting. Eerie. He rolled his shoulders back and cricked his neck before standing and making a beeline to the door. I followed suit, the feeling of loss still gumming up my stomach.

The morning was as internally tense and externally quiet as usual. The living room was filled with the teasing whispers of Phebah and Azeem laboring over their latest composition. Melem-Iram was chopping wood outside. K'aayhltla was scrubbing dishes from breakfast. Auguste and Cesaire were at the table, saying nothing to each other, but their body language practically screaming. Cleon was dusting a bureau nearby, making a point of avoiding eye contact. His palpable discomfort towards Auguste and blatant avoidance of Cesaire was testing my nerves, but I couldn't say anything without risking offense. Rationally, his decision was valid. I lounged in the corner, my hands cupped around a steaming mug of tea. Auguste was leaning across the table, whispering something to Cesaire. He looked pained, angry even. Cesaire bit back, his voice cutting at the edge of my hearing range. He shook his head violently and got up, storming out of the room. Auguste watched him leave with desperation, only slumping down in defeat once Cesaire was safely out of sight. I sighed and sipped my tea. Whatever they were going through wasn't my problem. It never was. I watched Auguste make up his mind and follow Cesaire, his posture stiff yet determined. I observed him casually, my lips drawn into a line. There were a few quiet moments

before my curiosity got the best of me. I nodded nonchalantly at Cleon as I slunk out of the room. I searched a few rooms before hearing the low lull of voices coming from outside. The pair had navigated to the backyard. I stepped into the guest bedroom, carpeted and dark. I stuck to the wall and stood next to the open window. I could hear them speaking through the fluttering drapes, and I held my breath to conceal my position.

“–didn’t mean to scare you,” I heard Auguste faintly say. There was a heavy silence before Cesaire responded.

“It was all my fault. We aren’t...that’s not who we are to each other.” I pinched my nose bridge and tried to contain my pained laughter. I had heard *this* conversation before.

“I mean...” I heard Auguste nervously stutter. My eyes widened. It was too soon. They weren’t supposed to be talking about this yet. The repercussions could be dire, time could run out on itself. I itched my knuckles as I waited anxiously for the second half of the sentence to drop. “...forget it.” I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Of course. You can never say what you mean. Whatever. We’ve established I have my commitments, you have your dreams, and the only reason we have each other is cruel fate. It was a mistake trying to have a conversation with you.”

“Cesaire, please, would you just work with me?” I shook my head and rubbed my forehead. They were painfully inept with each other.

“That’s more difficult than it sounds. I’m scared, Auguste. I’m scared...”

“What are you scared of?” There was another uncomfortable pause.

“...You.” I heard the rustling of dried grass under someone’s feet. *Was he walking away?* I craned my neck to catch a glimpse. Auguste was staring at him, looking mildly uncomfortable.

“Why— that doesn’t even make any sense! I’m the closest thing you have to a refuge here. You can’t just wish me away.”

“You keep saying these words I don’t understand!”

“Because I don’t know how to make you hear me.” Cesaire looked visibly agitated. He took a step forward, invading the other’s space.

“Then say it louder,” he replied slowly. I stood straighter, my cheek brushing the drapes, anticipation sending shivers down my spine. *Are they really going through with this?* I wondered. *Please, please don’t.*

“I—I can’t. I’m sorry.” I winced, his words deeply uncomfortable but ultimately necessary.

“I thought as much.” This time, I heard footfalls on the weedy ground trailing away from the house, and I knew that Cesaire had left without another word. I ducked below the windowsill and crouched out of the empty room, my hands still shaking. Walking down the hallway, I saw the silhouette of Auguste walking in the side door, light bisecting him. He gave me a lopsided smile that failed to reach his eyes. I floundered, my foot catching on the ground.

“How are you?” I asked. He shot me a puzzled look and shrugged, leaning his shoulder into the wall.

“About as fine as I can be,” he answered. I raised my brow. “I mean, what do you really expect me to say? I’m feeling brilliant? I’m content with being trapped in an unknown land, surrounded by people who tell me nothing, circling myself in purgatory?” He crossed his arms and watched me for a second. “What are we even here for, Eurynome?”

“We’re serving a greater good,” I said firmly. “We’re keeping you alive.” He rolled his eyes and sauntered towards me.

“Of course,” he mocked. “Another vague and useless answer.” I planted my hands on my hips and sighed deeply.

“This is for your own good, Auguste. Just please, if you are truly struggling with anything. I may not be able to supply the answers you seek, but I can offer a shoulder to cry on.”

“Why would I be struggling with anything?” he asked sarcastically. I shook my head and let my hands fall to my side.

“I don’t know, Auguste. That is all up to you to decide.” He scratched the inside of his wrist and slumped against the wall, his hair falling flat on the peeling wallpaper.

“There is one thing...” he admitted quietly. I stepped closer to him and shuffled my feet together.

“Yes?” I prompted. He avoided my gaze and searched the carpeted floor for answers. I heard a sharp inhale before he spoke.

“It’s about Cesaire.” I smiled keenly and felt relieved. *Thank you for telling me*, I wanted to say. *Thank you for having this conversation with me*. I stayed silent instead, opting to listen respectfully. He sunk to the floor, his hands clasped over his knees, which were tucked into his chest. I followed suit, finding my palms on the ground. “I want to agree with him so much,” he began, “but I cannot make him see eye-to-eye with me, no matter how hard I try. We’re always changing our minds and meeting each other with centimeters to spare. It’s like grazing the edge of a knife...but never drawing blood.” He looked visibly distraught, and I rubbed his shoulder in a comforting motion.

“It sounds like you want different things,” I said. “Maybe the best way to move forward is to accept your differing desires.” He looked at me confusedly, his dark hair obscuring the left side of his face.

“Why do you have to say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“*Desires*. I don’t— I don’t ‘desire’ anything about...him.” Old memories flickered in the back ranks of my mind, desperate fleeing

feelings from a time so long ago. Innocence and longing mixed together in a mire of ill nostalgia.

“But—but what if you did?” I whispered, my voice hardly a flicker. His mouth hung open in deep-seated offense, and he backed away from me. His pupils were searching me for any context, an apology even.

“You don’t even know me,” he said. “How could you say such a thing? How could you accuse me of something so...so...disgusting?” I cringed and grated my teeth together. *Shit*, I thought. The murky light of mid-morning circled the back of his head like a halo. Motes of dust flitted through the air, blurring the moment into a poorly exposed photograph. I saw my friend, I saw a stranger, I saw a scared and confused young man. I saw someone who needed rescuing. I extended my hand to his and circled his smooth skin with my thumb.

“You were both brought here for a reason,” I supplied. “One I cannot name for fear of repercussions, but that is not relevant. What matters is the fact that you have had the great fortune of being fated to someone. Rationality aside, the universe wants you to be people together. No matter space or time.” His eyes darted down to our intertwined hands, but he did not let go.

“Is that the case for all anomalies? Are you fated to someone?” I let out a self-deprecating laugh at the glaring irony of the situation.

“Not in the traditional sense, no. Cleon and I are connected, yes. However, there is another. I suppose you could say I’m implicated with both of them. In a strictly platonic fashion. Also a scientific one if you think about it.” I left the majority of the answer up to interpretation, not wanting to risk the indulgence of context.

“Another?” he asked. “Who?” I scoffed and twirled a curl of my hair. Now *that* was a question I would love to avoid.

“Um,” I stuttered, “he’s not of much importance. He isn’t here, of course. Has other important responsibilities and whatnot. I have not

seen him in, uh, in a while.” He raised a curious eyebrow at me but did not prompt me to elaborate. I threw my head back and let it unceremoniously bump into the wall. “His name is Archaeus,” I relented. “He was a very dear friend. Not my story to tell, though. He was much more important to Cleon. Even if I loved both of them very much.”

“Was?” Auguste inquired. I blushed furiously and rubbed my cheeks to subdue their rosy heat.

“They’ve— they’ve had their rough patches,” I told him cryptically. He laughed awkwardly and scratched the back of his neck.

“Sounds like Cleon and I,” he mumbled. “Regardless, we always return to each other eventually, don’t we?” My eyes widened.

“I suppose they are similar to you two,” I said in a hurried, hushed voice. I was staring at my feet, practically boring a hole with my vision. “Not that it particularly *matters*.” He clicked his tongue.

“No, I suppose not.” He paused, his head tilted in quiet contemplation. He turned to me hesitatingly. “Eurynome?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.” There was another gap in his speech, and I could hear the gentle puffs of his lungs pressing hard against his chest.

“Why do you care so much? Have you— have you ever really loved someone?” He stammered on the last sentence, clearly nervous. I offered him a warm smile.

“I care because you are my fr— my charge. And yes, I’ve been in love. This might not be what you need to hear right now but, it didn’t exactly work out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It wasn’t exactly written in the stars. Quite the contrary, actually.” He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Cleon and I...I know you hardly know us, but. Well, do you think we’re, uh, *going to work out?*” I placed a heavy arm on his shoulder and looked upon him. The morning mist had nearly all burned off, and he was bathed in a glistening light. I nodded.

“Yes.” That one word of affirmation was all he needed. The tension flooded out of his muscles, and he drew away. I turned up my chin and watched him stand, offer a final glance of peace, and he walked down the hallway. I was left stranded, sitting up against that wall, fingers drowned in old carpet, feeling strangeness burning in my stomach. I prayed I hadn’t just caused a paradox. I was startled by the muffled sounds of the rest of the house clamoring to life in their mid-morning routines. I brushed off my bruised knees and left the hallway. I took a sharp turn to the staircase and crept upstairs, ducking my head to avoid the low-hanging bars on the ceiling. I came to the end of the hallway, striding briskly past Auguste and Cesaire’s room. I pressed my palms on one of the cedar panels on the wall, feeling around the grooves and divots. *Click*. The panel swung inwards, revealing a crowded crawl space. I quickly ducked inside and shut the door behind me, swiftly as to not creak the hinges.

The interior of the secret room was lit by string lights taped to the walls. There was a bean bag squished into the corner, band posters posted up with thumbtacks, and a miniature set of shelves absolutely stuffed with cassette tapes. A tape player rested on top of its grainy surface. I crawled onto the bean bag and leaned forward over my knees to pluck a tape from the shelf. I turned it over in my hand to reveal a clean-drawn sharpie label: *16 Aug. 1987*. Today’s date. Right on schedule. I slotted it into the tape player and leaned back, my hair pasted to the wall, my sharp knees tucked close to my chest, and my hands clasped in my lap. There was a scratchy pause before the tape began to play, and then a loud ringing of a brass bell. I winced at the biting noise.

“Starting message,” the tape spat out. “Intended date of reception: August sixteenth, nineteen-eighty-seven. Intended receiver: Eurynome of Massalia. Correspondence origin: Archaeus of Antipolis. Switching...” there was another ding of the bell before the clerical voice was replaced with a much warmer and more familiar one. Despite my intended animosity, I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt.

“Hey, lovely,” Archaeus’s sweet voice said. “I hope everything is going well with you and Cleon. Paradox avoidance aside, the Assembly has noted the obtainment of the anomalies. I must admit I’m glad I wasn’t present for that. It must be...strange. I hope mine isn’t too much trouble for you. I understand the imprint I left on that timeline was, um, less than ideal.” I let out a short bark of laughter.

“You’ve got that right...” I mumbled.

“—Anyways, I have official business to discuss, so pardon my abrasiveness, but it is important you receive this information. The Assembly has done a conclusive diagnostic on the stability of the timeline and have been able to create a definitive means to end for us. You have approximately four more months at the Alaskan outpost to source the final anomaly. I understand that may be...difficult for you...but it’s a necessary burden. In other news, the decay-point repair at focal bridge-falls has been underway. Antipolis could be habitable at this rate! Also...please give Cleon my best wishes. I know we can’t directly speak and he can’t send me a message, but I’m assuming he isn’t wildly happy right now. And no, there doesn’t yet appear to be another time split from a potential melding with your missing anomaly. I assume that implies your future selves are still deliberating. Tricky stuff, that. Good luck and as always, I love you. Αντίο, Eurynome. *μην πεθάνεις.*”

The tape clicked off and I was left with the same sickeningly sweet melancholy feeling I was always haunted by when I heard his voice. I slumped over and rubbed my temples, the urgency of our situation

growing ever more dire. *Four months...* echoed nervously in my mind. That was hardly enough time to acclimate Auguste and Cesaire without causing another bridge-fall. I needed to have a conversation with Cleon. I waited nervously for him to return from his errands, the sun dripping pink light and swooping lower into the sky as the day waned on.

Many hours later, I finally heard the creaking whine of the front door, and a soft click in the lock. I perked up from my spot sprawled across the dingy couch and bolted to the door. It swung open to reveal Cleon toting bags heavy with freshly picked berries. His hair was matted and his eyes drooped, but there was no time for rest. Before he could so much as utter a word I flung my arms around his bony shoulders and pulled my lips to his ear.

“Meet me by the shower block,” I whispered into his wispy amber hair. He drew back and shoved his bags into my stomach. I took them and buckled with the weight, scrambling to gather them in my arms.

“Good to see you, too,” he said plainly. His lip bent into a smile as he strode past, and if he weren’t wearing that awful mask I swear he would have winked. I waited a few moments before tossing the berries onto the speckled countertop and slunk inconspicuously out the back door. Cleon was leaned casually against the splintery shower wall, the broken ceramic floor pooling with brackish water from the night before. I drew the shower curtain closed and spun around to face him. The late afternoon light was spilling into the ceiling-less cubicle, forging sharp shadows on his now mask-less face.

“I assume you received a correspondence?” He asked. I nodded, my fingers dancing together nervously.

“We’ve received a timeframe,” I said. “It’s not good news.” He sighed and slowly nodded, acceptance already flowing through the font of his unmoving rationality.

“Alright,” he said, “that’s to be expected. What’s the timeframe?”  
I itched the back of my neck.

“Um. Four months.” His eyes widened, flickering with a newfound fear.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Oh my God.”

“I know.” We stared at each other, processing. The air was still, only the chirping of evening crickets in the high grass permeating the silence.

“What are we going to do?” he asked quietly. I turned my head to the side, teeth clenched together and long hair feeling heavy on my neck.

“I really...I really think we need to tell Auguste and Cesaire.”

“What!? No! That could cause a bridge-fall!” I pinched my temples, my hand flicking towards him in exasperation.

“We already *have* a bridge-fall. Plenty of them! What’s one more potential flame in the fire? We could end all of this— all of this *suffering*. But they have to know, Cleon!” He crossed his arms.

“What are we even supposed to say? Your entire life is a ruse? You’re a figment of a grand cosmic mistake? They’ll never be able to handle it. Not ‘Auguste’ in all his poetic justice glory. Certainly not ‘Cesaire’ with his unshakeable rigidity. They’re dysfunctional people, Eurynome...” His expression softened, his eyes shining almost pleadingly. “...They’re *our* dysfunctional people. What will they think of us...when they know...we’re all to blame?”

“...To blame for what?” The shower curtain was fluttering in the sweet summer breeze. Open to the outside world. Open to reveal Auguste. Standing on the edge of the crumbling mosaic floor. His mouth opened in shock. His words echoing across the entire valley. I faltered, stuttered syllables melting in my mouth.

“What. The. *Fuck*,” he said shakily, his skin growing pale. I glanced back at Cleon, again to Auguste, and to Cleon once more.

“Who are y-you?” Auguste whispered, his fingers coming together in a shaky sign of the cross. I threw my arms out to separate the two men.

“I–I can explain!” I yelped, “please, please, calm down. It’s–it’s uh, it’s going to be okay.” In a desperate attempt to mitigate the growing panic and confusion, I grabbed Auguste’s shoulders and pressed his forehead to mine. “Please, listen to me, Auguste,” I whispered intently. I need you to be rational right now.”

“There’s n-nothing rational ab-bout this!” he cried. He shook himself free of my grip and turned on Cleon, jutting his finger into his face. “Y-you. You have Cesaire’s face,” he said bitterly, the confusion and pain twisting his expression. Tears were silently flowing over his aquiline nose and all of his limbs were unceremoniously trembling. “Why do you have his face?” Cleon tilted his chin back and sighed heavily. I could see the weight of his years. The striking differences in his features from those that Auguste was used to. He was familiar with a strong-jawed, bright-eyed young man with a mess of honey-brown curls. This foreign-familiar person before him was anything but. Lines where smooth skin had been, dead space behind pupils, shocks of wild gray in his faded curls. Despite this, it was undoubtedly him. The curve of his nose, the curl of his ears, the bow of his lips. I wondered if Cleon felt irrevocably old now.

“I have his face,” he finally said, “because I am him.” My mouth fell open, and I swung around to scoff at him, my hair whipping into my face.

“*Cleon!*” I hissed. He raised his hands in defense.

“We were going to tell him anyway,” he said. Auguste began pacing, cold sweat condensing on his face.

“What. What do you *mean*?” he sobbed. “How can one person be two people? I mean— you look so much older! So much more *worn* and *jaded*! That’s not the Cesaire I know.”

“It’s complicated, Auguste,” I pleaded. “All in due—”

“No! Do *not* say ‘all in due time.’ I deserve to know! This is *my* life.” I clenched my jaw and looked urgently at Cleon.

“What do I say?” I whispered to him harshly. He set his features firmly and crossed his arms. I heard his sharp inhale.

“The Cesaire that you know is an entangled copy of an imprint I left through unregulated time travel,” he told Auguste. “I assumed a new identity, forged a new life, even gave myself a new name. It caused an anomaly. A person who wasn’t supposed to be there— with new information— causing ripple effects in the pool of time. My information was *entangled* with the new information generated from me assuming a new life in a new time. When I left...that information remained. It created a parallel timeline where said identity was its own person. It also created...cracks. Bridge-falls as we call them. Place-times in the cosmos where everything goes awry. Your own hometown of Antibes was once mine— Antipolis. Never mind the *when*. That location is cursed in any timeline or era. It’s our job to fix it.” Auguste stared blankly, even rubbed his eyes.

“I don’t understand.” Cleon smirked and uncrossed his arms.

“Of course you don’t understand. It’s a complex issue. You’re not ready for it. Not yet.” Auguste nodded, slowly at first, then more assuredly.

“How do you feel?” I asked him hesitantly. He stalled, his lips rubbing together in thought.

“I feel...angered. Melancholy. A little nostalgic. Mostly terribly upset. Cesaire was never a *real person*? Was my life ever...anything? Was it more than some terrible figment of your imagination?”

“It’s more nuanced than that,” I assured him. “Yes, you are real. But your existence is dangerous.”

“Wait,” he said slowly, “am I...do I *have*. You know. *A copy?*” I groaned, my teeth grinding together.

“Um. Unfortunately, yes.” Cleon jabbed my ribs with his pointed elbow and I slapped his hand away with a glare. “He deserves to know!” I protested. Auguste appeared dizzy. I prayed he wouldn’t faint.

“Where,” he began, “*where* is the other me?” Cleon grimaced and tilted his face away shyly.

“He’s not here...” he whispered in response. Auguste stepped forward.

“Well, then where is he?” he asked.

“He’s in the future. Or the past. He phases between the two depending on his task at hand.”

“But you *have* met him, right?” Cleon swiped his tongue over his front teeth.

“Yes...of—of course,” he said thinly. “He and I. We were, um, we were very good friends. Complicated, but good.”

“Like Cesaire and I?”

“Yes, very much the same.” *He has no idea just how similar they truly are*, I thought to myself.

“Wait,” Auguste suddenly sprouted, “is this how you obtained my ‘dee-en-ay’?” I picked at my nail beds and nodded.

“You’re very observant. Yes,” I admitted. “We collect samples from all Origins. It’s a failsafe. An assurance. If anything were to happen to you or your Origin we would need to generate a replacement in order to maintain the conservation of information in the order of space-time.”

“Replace?” He shrieked. “How do you intend to do that?” I placed my hand on his shoulder and began to guide him away from the shower block.

“Why don’t we give the tirade of questions a rest? We can speak more on this inside. With Cesaire later as well.” I could see him attempting to process all of the information we had just provided him. His forehead was slick with pellets of sweat, his hands shaking, and his eyes wild.

“He’ll be greatly disturbed,” he insisted. “Another version of him traipsing about? He will never stand for it. He’d sooner abandon this whole wretched outpost.” I said nothing, simply walked the two of us into the house and collapsed at the bruised kitchen table. The light of late afternoon had tapered into a rich clementine wash of sunset over our bodies. I tipped my nose up, staring at him down its slanted slope. He rested his sharp elbows on the un-varnished wood tabletop and returned the wordless gesture.

“So,” I prompted, “is reality sinking in yet?” He let out a hefty sigh and released the tension that had been possessing him so violently.

“It’s less sinking in and more hurtling me through uncomfortable turbulence,” he answered wearily. “My entire life is a lie that you hid from me. You brought me away from the only world I’d ever known and still thought it appropriate to keep me in the dark.” He let his chin spill into the chalice of his hands. “We’ve spoken so much, exchanged so many words, and yet I still feel as though I’m being strangled by a language I cannot comprehend. Hell, I don’t even *know* the first thing about you! And I doubt you truly understand me.” He leaned forward. “Because I am *not* whoever you think I am. That is some imposter I do not claim for myself— that person will never represent my life. No matter how hard you try, you will never impose that upon me.” He tucked a stray fly of wine-dark hair behind his ear and leaned back in his chair with a bitterly sly smile. “So. Who are you, Eurynome?”

Despite my best efforts I found my arms raising behind my head, picking at the ribbon concealing me, untwining my final defense. My

cheeks burned. My stomach was a turbulent sea. My hands gently cradled the mask in my lap. I lifted my eyes deliberately, my mouth open in a shaky exhale.

“Hello, Auguste,” I said. He leaned back, his eyes blurry from shock.

“*Zenobie*?” I blushed fiercely and nervously laughed.

“Um. Yes,” I confirmed between uncomfortable laughter.

“Although, I’d prefer you to refer to me as Eurynome, if at all possible. That *is* my name. ‘Zenobie’ was more an...ill-informed moniker.” He pushed his curls back from his forehead and laughed astoundedly.

“Wow. Um. Okay. This is...this is a lot.”

“Surely no more than discovering Cleon?” I asked. I didn’t recall Archaeus and I having a particularly strong bond the first time around. It had taken time to form it into the way it was now. Then again, it had been ages.

“This makes far less sense,” he said, still reeling. “You in my world; you’re uptight, you’re prissy, you’re oblivious. You’re *obsessed* with being socially presentable. None of that seems applicable to whoever I see sitting before me. Not to mention how you look. Well, you look incredibly changed, pardon my abrasiveness.” I raised my palm to pardon him.

“No need,” I said. “I know I’ve aged less delicately than one might have hoped. I’m not sure why the imprint I left behind behaves so starkly from me, however. That is concerning.”

“Concerning? Is there anything for me to worry about?”

“No, no! Deviations occur fairly regularly. I’m simply concerned that mine had to be so negative.” He scratched his inner wrist thoughtfully.

“If you have Cesaire and I here, why do you not have Zenobie?” I smirked and propped my cheek onto my arm.

“Hah, now that is the shining question. In order to retrieve an anomaly who has never time traveled before, they must be attempting to commune with the extra-human world, or otherwise aware of the ephemeral. You and Cesaire were attending a seance, which opened a pathway for us. Unfortunately, Zenobie is far more sensible.” He hummed and cocked his head.

“Well, if you can travel through time however you please, why can you not find her at any point in her life when she may have attempted a communique? She was a whimsical child if I recall correctly.” My expression grew bitter.

“Hm. The issue is twofold,” I answered. “If we retrieve her at any point before the age I was when my imprint created her, we invoke a paradox. That would send both of us into deterioration, which would destabilize the timeline, most likely triggering a bridge-fall. The second problem arises from the fact that our lives are not solidified by fate. Any version of her in any space or time could make a choice that generates the right conditions, but it could last a blink of an eye before it shifts again. We got incredibly lucky with you and Cesaire. You both elected to attend that seance across an inordinate amount of timelines— millions, even.”

“You must get lucky fairly often,” he quipped. “Phebah, Azeem, Melem-Iram...” I itched the nape of my neck.

“Oh. I see,” I said. “No. We honestly got the opposite of lucky with them. They’re all refugees. Anomalies that were retrieved in paradox-inducing ways. Either their Origins were eliminated from the timeline, they were retrieved at an illegitimate age, or they’ve been removed from their location in the timeline for too long and they’ve started to degenerate.”

“Wh—what? Degenerate? Is that going to happen to me?” My eyes crinkled nervously, and I yearned to avoid his begging gaze.

“It won’t if everything goes according to plan,” I assured him. “Which it will. There is nothing for you to worry about.” I sat primly and crossed my hands in my lap, feeling satisfied with my explanation, when I felt the buzzing sense of someone standing behind me. I slowly turned around to reveal Phebah leaning in the arched entryway to the living room.

“So,” she said, “you told him?” I narrowed my eyes and straightened my posture.

“He deserved to know,” I countered. She shrugged and dramatically slunk into the chair between Auguste and I.

“Whatever. Don’t rightly care. I suppose he’ll be curious to know my life story now, yeah?” He perked up and nodded.

“Oh, yes!” he agreed, “That was one of the arduous laws— I couldn’t investigate your past.” Phebah opened her mouth to speak but I quickly cut her off.

“No, no, it is a rule for a reason. Knowing any specificities could trigger a paradox. Phebah isn’t supposed to exist anymore. She’s a fugitive, her Origin has been removed from the known timeline.” She rolled her eyes and groaned exhaustedly.

“You don’t *know* that!” she protested. “My Origin could still be out there! It was never confirmed.”

“Phebah...your DNA profile cannot be matched anywhere. Her existence is near-impossible. There is no known way of hiding your signature from detection.” She pouted and swung her leg over her thigh.

“Whatever.” She swiveled to Auguste. “How do you feel? Now that you know.” He itched at his knuckles hesitantly.

“I’m not quite sure,” he replied. “I’d appreciate it if Cesaire was keyed into this whole ordeal.” I pressed on my knees to heave myself out of my brittle chair.

“That can be arranged,” I said. “We’ll tell him when he comes home.” Auguste nodded solemnly and dropped his chin. He appeared petrified, and I watched him silently for quite some time. Phebah loudly smacked her lips together and slapped the table with awkward enthusiasm.

“Well then!” she exclaimed, “I’d say it’s nearing supper time, is it not? Do you mind if I cook?” Auguste glanced up from behind his shaggy bangs but said nothing; I felt my voice grating in my throat, but I must have agreed because Phebah was already hauling pots onto the stovetop and talking up a storm. I avoided Auguste’s awkward eye contact and began to pick at my nails. The evening faded away from me, I hardly felt awake. Everything was changing so fast and we had so little time. I let the din of the kitchen envelop me as I was swallowed by my thoughts. *Four months to set everything right.* I had been to the aftermath of plenty of bridge-falls, they were our staging grounds for time jumps of course, but I had never felt the effects. I wouldn’t be breathing if I had. I imagined how it must feel. Fire licking your skin, carving you up from the inside, a cruel butcher. Your atoms disintegrating. Particles choked on splintering probabilities. Being dragged into the burning hell-edge of the world. Watching your reality go up in flames. I couldn’t do that to her. My counterpart and my beautiful mistake.

The pictures in my mind shifted to visualize her. I remembered being cushioned by the velvet pillows of a cradled window seat, my frilly dress splayed out, my hair wound tightly on the back of my head. I remembered playing at high society, still a careless dreamer imbued with a power I did not understand. I reckoned that was who Zenobie had come to be. A high-strung young woman with her eye trained on a window. Her cheek would be pressed against the cold glass, her breath making whorls of fog on its surface. She’d be observing the landscape—cypress trees crowned in morning sea-mist, the tiled roofs of homes in

neat rows, the roaring waves dancing on the coastline. The world to her would be painted in watercolors. Diluted and lovely. She would hum the melodies played in concert halls, not to be considered sophisticated, but because she had a mind trained on artistry. I let the imagery grow more vivid, as if I were being sucked down a winding tunnel. I felt the dizzy vertigo of being split open, spread out across spacetime in broken pieces. It had been so long since I had chased the call of her familiarity. The vision grew darker, static buzzing in my ears. I sputtered and gasped, my head breaking the murky water. It was all quiet. It was all quiet and I knew how to reach her.

“Everything alright there?” I heard Phebah’s voice echo through the fog of my mind. I picked myself up and plastered a strong enough smile to dismiss her worry.

“Oh yes,” I said. “It’s all going to be perfectly fine.”

#### XIV: Cesaire

The energy at the dinner table was uncomfortably stilted. I had just returned from a several-hours excursion into the country, and was feeling particularly winded. It was apparent to me that I was not the only one who had expended myself that day. Although it was a mystery what could be more exhausting inside of a crowded cabin than on an expansive farm out on the peninsula. I picked at my ground beef, rolling my fork around my plate. All the while I observed the weary faces of the Moose Pass denizens. Eurynome's jaw was clenched, a tendon jumping beneath her skin. Auguste sat to her left, appearing similarly frazzled and avoiding looking in my direction for no more than a spare second. Instead of seeming fraught, Cleon sat stoically, his plate entirely untouched. Even the ever-optimistic Phebah seemed unusually strained as she scraped some sweet yams onto my plate.

"So-o-o," she said in an exaggerated voice, "how was work today? You and the boys get along alright?" I heard someone's chair scrape on the scuffed hardwood. I cleared my throat and rested my utensil on the brim of my plate.

"Fine," I said, splaying my palm on my chest. "It was fine. Good weather, the skies were fair to us today. I've spent so many tiresome years in academia I forgot how much I adore the natural world. Although I must say, farm work isn't really for me. I'd much prefer to, uh, to write some poetry, even." I glanced up from my salad to catch Auguste's eye. He sharply turned his head. *So much for an apology.*

"And you, Melem?" Phebah went on to say. I took the opportunity to burrow myself into my dinner again. There was talking at the table, but the only person I could focus on was Auguste, sitting across from me, not meeting my eye for even a second. I tightened my grip on my fork and frowned.

“I’m sorry,” I said, cutting through the conversation. “Am I *bothering* you?” He balked and threw down his spoon with a clatter.

“Oh my God!” he exclaimed, “you are so confusing! Wasn’t it only this morning you told me you wanted *nothing to do with me*?”

“What? No! I just—I just meant we were crossing boundaries that I find dangerous to tread. I still—I still *like* you.” My skin crawled with the sensation that the entire table was watching us. “Can we not discuss this?” He scoffed, twisting his fork between his fingers.

“Of *course* you ‘don’t want to talk about it’,” he mocked. “You did the same thing this morning, last night, and every time I ever try to really communicate with you!” I shrank back and played with my fingers uncomfortably.

“You need to stop taking everything I say as a personal insult.”

“If only you’d stop making me run in circles!”

“Only if *you* stop demanding my entire emotional devotion!”

“Then stop asking for it!” His eyes flashed with the same mistake I had committed the night before. I felt the coin flip, felt the weight of commitment on my shoulders.

“Auguste,” I said slowly, “is there anything you want to tell me?” I could see him thinking, weighing the options in his mind. We were still sitting at that well-set dining room table, surrounded by people rooted to their seats, staring at us silently. I smoothed out a stray bit of tablecloth and waited for his response.

“Take off your mask, Eurynome,” he whispered. My head darted up and I looked at her expectantly. She was unmoving, almost as if she was waiting for Auguste’s final command. “Please,” he ordered, “you said we would tell him. We need to tell him. *I* need—” She reached into her hair and let the mask glide down from her face. The corners of my vision were submerged into a sickening darkness.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh my God.” She broke into a tiny smile that failed to reach her vibrant green eyes. How did I not recognize them from behind that intricate mask? How did her voice not awaken me to her concealed nature? The reason winded me. “You look.” I wetted my lips. “You look so different.” She tried so desperately to lock her eyes into mine, but I could see the strain beneath the surface. It didn’t take long for the bittersweet feeling to simmer into fear and confusion. “Am I dreaming or dead?” I asked, feeling rather ill.

“Neither,” Eurynome (Zenobie?) confirmed. I did not know what to do.

“Can *anyone* tell me what is happening right now?” I demanded. Auguste and Eurynome shared a sneaking expression.

“You’re going to lose your mind,” Auguste warned. I waved my hands around the sides of my face agitatedly.

“I don’t care,” I snapped. “Just...just explain!” The entire table peered over their plates to stare at Cleon, who was still as statuesque as he had been when the conversation started. He sighed deeply and slowly stood from his chair. He waved his arm to the hallway and motioned for me to follow him.

“Excuse us, will you?” he said dimly to the room. I saw some small nods, averted gazes, shuffling feet. This had to be the worst dinner party I had ever attended. Even more, I felt personally responsible for its failure. I brushed down the chaps of my pants and strode into the hall, trailing Cleon’s heels. He swung open the door to the guest bedroom and pushed his back into its knotted wood to close it. I crossed my arms uncomfortably, feeling hairs rising and skin puckering.

“You’re in shock,” he told me. “I do not believe you are fit to learn the whole truth as of yet, but our time is running out, and Eurynome demands it of me. All I ask is that you do not scream *too* loud.” I raised my brows and smirked.

“Whatever you have to say for yourself could not surprise me more than I am now,” I said, still in shock. He worked his jaw and I could see his hands shaking. He began to untie his mask. I watched the elaborate fabric bend off the crook of his brow, the slope of his nose, the dip of his chin. I watched and my life was shattered. I watched and I was made an alien in my own body.

“What the actual fu—” my hands quickly jumped up to caress my face. I ran them over my features, trying anything to ground myself. I couldn’t tell at first, but there were hyperventilations spreading through my body like tiny fires.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I shuttered, “I—I...cannot cope with...*this*.” I rubbed my eyes and pressed my lips together. “Excuse me, uh, I just. *What the fuck* is happening right now.” We stood there, basked in that dusty amber light, two insects suspended in an unknown abyss. The same body reflecting itself as well as water mirrors the sky. I lifted a trembling finger. He followed the gesture, and our fingertips connected. I gasped, feeling a painful burning between us, despite his hands being thickly gloved. It felt the way I imagined holy fire might.

“Am I...in heaven?” His eyes— which were uncomfortably my own— crinkled enough to suggest not. I pulled my hand away from his and stared at my body. “Who *are* you?” I finally asked. This seemed to be the right question, because he was willing to speak.

“We are the same,” he said. I shook my head violently, my mind rippling with confused thoughts flying through me at a mile-a-minute.

“No, no, no, no. That is *not* a proper explanation. Why do you have my *face*?” The room was swallowed by a vignette of shadow, and I felt myself submerged into the belly of the beast. Cleon was clearly speaking, but his words scarcely reached my ears. I heard a sharp ringing, a static-y buzzing. When I came to my own, I found myself collapsed on the dusty floor, Cleon a few careful feet away from me.

“—I was offered a terrible ambrosia,” I heard him say. I raised my head from my bent knees and began to listen. “The ability to traverse space and time, to forge my own solace. It was unknown to me at the time, but this was less of a blessing and more of a curse. I spent a few blissful years in assumption of a new identity. A high society man, a scholar, my literacy was appreciated and celebrated. I felt as if I had finally been granted the life I deserved. Then, everything came crashing down. I woke to the sound of flames, to my dear Antibes being engulfed in death. What was once a place where bridges between space and time met in glory became a wasteland— a bridge-fall. The sweet nectar of power I had drunk was a lie— it was illegitimate. I was brought forth a celestial council— the Assembly— for my crimes. They told me I had wrongly influenced the timeline, that I had implicated my information into its veins. They told me...that I had supplanted myself into a place I did belong enough to create a parallel timeline. An anomalous timeline. The person I had fashioned myself to be was illegally realized. That person being....you.” I blinked a few times and let my head hit the uneven wall.

“So. We are the same person, but I am also a product of you?” He nodded timidly. I groaned and felt tears clawing at the back of my throat. “I know being an anomaly is a bad thing, but just how dangerous am I?” He tugged at his bottom lip.

“Your existence does not bode well,” he admitted. “It puts the entire timeline at risk. And...and it’s fading fast.”

“How much time?” I whispered. He clenched his eyes and sighed.

“Four months.” I shook my head and scoffed.

“Time travel caused this issue, why can it not fix it? Go back to before you had traveled, set this right.”

“That is not possible,” he muttered grimly.

“Why not?” I asked, my voice laced with worry.

“Time is not *linear*, nor is it a single entity. Base-Time operates within a single timeline— most entities are subject to it, instead of moving through it. However, there is also a Complex-Time. This rules over all timelines. Imagine a dog running on the roof of a locomotive, or uh, any moving vehicle you’re familiar with. If humans are fleas, they are moved through time by living stationary on the dog’s hair. However, the dog is still being moved on a larger scale by the train. Therefore, we cannot ‘undo’ time travel. Time travel affects Base-Time but it operates in Complex-Time. If I wanted, I could visit myself at any age in the past, but it would only splinter the timeline, it wouldn’t *fix* anything. What’s been done in time travel has been done as definitively as any normal action.”

“I cannot pretend to comprehend that. But you said we have four months...so what is the solution?” He gritted his teeth and hissed.

“Ummm. Well. That is quite the conversation, isn’t it?” I waited for any elaboration, but he said nothing.

“Does it have anything to do with the vials of my biology you have stored away in that cellar? I mean, you must have obtained it from the fact you are me.” He stared straight ahead, his neck bobbing with a dry swallow.

“In a sort of way,” he answered cryptically. I grimaced and hoisted myself to my feet. He peered up at me, but did not do the same.

“Alright,” I said, “I want to speak with everyone else. I want to speak with—”

“—Auguste,” he finished for me. I curled an eyebrow.

“You couldn’t know I would want to talk to him,” I retorted, “I could very well want to reunite with my dear love.” He held back a bark of laughter with his hand.

“Haha...ha. Eurynome is your ‘dear love’ is she now?” I frowned and bent over to point my nose at his face.

“You find that amusing? Is there some scandalous detail you want to reveal to me? Some other tale of your mistaken exploits?” He waved his hand dismissively.

“No, no, not at all,” he said lightly. “Carry on. I’ll just— I’m going to stay here for a while longer.” I placed my hand on the brassy doorknob and narrowed my eyes at him. He did not move, only watched me expectantly.

“Fine,” I said stiffly, “fine.” I jabbed my finger towards him. “But this is still extremely strange and awful and I very much do not care for it.” I wanted to walk out of that door, but I couldn’t quite electrify my tendons enough to twist the knob.

“Are you leaving?” he asked plainly, “Is there anything you require?” I hesitated, my tongue rising and falling in my mouth. My knees felt weak and soft.

“Are you, um. Are you happy?” I asked quietly. He gazed at me emptily.

“I don’t know, are you?” I gripped the door handle tighter.

“You believe we feel the same emotions because we share the same flesh?” He shook his head.

“No, I believe it is wrong to use me as a reflection for yourself, because no matter what it may seem like to you, we are still our own people. Please remember that, Cesaire.” I smiled weakly and turned the door open.

“Very well,” I replied curtly. Then, feeling sentimental, “Cleon,” I added. I saw the sliver of a smile bloom on his lips through the crack in the door as it closed behind me. Auguste was waiting in the hall. His flannel was rolled up at the sleeves, his bare forearms crossed.

“So now you know,” he said.

“You already knew! How could you?” He tilted his chin nonchalantly, although I could see more of him teeming beneath the surface of his ambivalence.

“I only found out a few hours ago,” he countered, “I was spying on Cleon and Eurynome; they weren’t masked. I wanted to tell you as soon as possible, that’s why I demanded it at dinner.”

“So you know everything?” I asked, “How much time we have left? What we are?” He hummed a noise of confirmation. I sighed heavily and brushed my wavy hair back with the heels of my hands. “God, okay. Did they tell you what the resolution to our damage is?” He shook his head.

“Are you truly prepared to potentially sacrifice everything for a life we do not even know?” He asked quietly. I frowned, confused.

“What do you mean?”

“They haven’t told me,” he explained, “but I suspect that the end result of ‘healing the universe’ won’t place us where we were before.”

“I am so blind,” I cried, “you’re right.” I felt the tears I had been fighting for the well up again. “Oh God, will I never see the sun rise upon my sea again? Where is there for us beyond our home? Ceasing to exist...?” I saw his expression soften and he drew me into an embrace.

“No,” he muttered, “no, there is a place for us. We will find it, I promise.” He pulled back and took his hand firmly in mine. “Let’s go save this goddam universe, okay?” I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and gave him a bittersweet smile.

“May you write one last sonnet for the Riviera,” I said.

“And may you attend one last banquet on the cape.” Our arms swung in time and we left that hallway behind, embedded with a dizzying new purpose. The entire house was seated quietly around their half-eaten supper, awaiting our return.

“Listen up, you lot of time delinquents,” Auguste said with a grin. “We’re ready, and we’re going to fix the world whether you like it or not. Let’s get to work.” I saw Phebah smile proudly, K’aayhltla nod in agreement, and even Eurynome looked satisfied.

“We thought you’d be driven mad,” Phebah quipped. “We were preparing for the worst. What made you want to take such an initiative?” I looked at Auguste with a keen glint in my eyes.

“Nothing may be perfect,” I replied, “but everything is worth saving. I miss my home, but I also finally know the truth, and I want to breathe purpose into my new meaning.”

“Likewise,” Auguste agreed in an uncharacteristically pointed fashion. Eurynome adjusted her posture, tucking a strand of graying hair into her chignon.

“Well then. It seems as if our mission has been reinvigorated. Welcome to the cause, boys. Officially.” Phebah toyed with her salad and laughed.

“They’ve *always* been part of the cause. They *are* the cause.”

“Precisely why you need us,” Auguste added.

“You’re not still mad at each other, are you?” Phebah asked innocently. I turned to Auguste expectantly.

“I don’t know, are we?”

“Only if you promise to listen to me.”

“Only if *you* promise to be patient with me.” We both stared at each other for what seemed like ages, but was likely mere seconds.

“Deal,” we both said at the same time. There was still such a long road ahead of us, but with no more shrouds of deceit hanging over us, we could now see the end of it. That was the sure question, of course. *How exactly did one achieve ‘the end’ of a disaster beyond mortal knowing?* I shyly approached Eurynome.

“Hey...” I mumbled. She gave me a lopsided smile.

“Hey.” The whole ordeal was entirely strange and surreal, and definitely a heap of disorienting, but for some reason I was comforted by her presence.

“So,” I started hesitantly, “How do we get started?” She appeared to brighten and she leaned across the table with renewed determination.

“Well...” And then we were off.

From this moment on, the trajectory of my destiny would truly be permanently altered. This was, undoubtedly, a point of no return. The routine of my life began to shift. The system of the tapes were revealed to me, and although Eurynome was the only one allowed to listen to them, it was still a comfort to me that there were others looking out for us from beyond the fray. We spent many hours sifting through piles of data on Zenobie’s constantly changing destiny, attempting to determine the best path to reach her.

When Auguste and I weren’t being educated on the intricacies of time travel, we maintained the outpost. While Auguste was most intrigued by the natural world, I found Melem-Iram’s tentative driving lessons to be engaging. The skies finally seemed a little brighter, and I grew to feel less like a confined animal and more like a real human person. Alaska began to make its mark on me, too. Small pink lines crossed on my fingers where I had spent afternoons picking berries in the fields down south the peninsula. I developed a burnt tan from hours traversing the backwoods of the property. A white scar puckered on the edge of my palm from where I’d cut myself tying a hook on a fishing line. The in-between times allotted to us were precious moments, but also necessities to survive in modernity. The first time I sat behind the wheel of Melem-Iram’s precious truck, I felt wholly unprepared. I was the sudden commander of an unruly beast; not yet suited to face the empty road. Reflecting back on the experience, the histrionics are apparent to me. Still it remains true; adjusting was no easy feat at the time.

As autumn began to dawn on us and the leaves shriveled up, readying themselves for departure, new experiences bloomed before me. On a mid-September evening, Phebah and K'aayhltla drove me out to a desolate airstrip. This is where I was awed by my first encounter with flight. A pinnacle of human achievement. I stood baffled as the bush plane's engine gust whipped my freshly-cut hair. K'aayhltla had told me it was delivering important cargo to an isolated community in the high country, but the significance of its duty was lost on me. My sole focus was the breadth of its wingspan, the shine of the sun on its waxen surface, the perfect arc of its takeoff.

I had always been an antiquarian, fascinated by the tales of exploits past. I had never thought to engage in the more brutal realm of science. Had never dreamed that the future would be full of wondrous inventions as intriguing as the ruins of times before. That too, became the subject of much of my free time. I felt comfortable questioning Eurynome and Cleon on their past. On the off-chance I was ever to return home, interviews from primary sources would prove invaluable to my career, even if they only provided clues to problems the larger historical community had not solved yet. Many evenings were spent lounged in the corduroy armchair, the wood stove crackling and warming the dark living room, furiously scribbling notes in my journal. I had always found something calming about the process of writing. Now, I learned bitterly that it was not a process I enjoyed on my own volition. Cleon, in his accounts of life in ancient Massalia, informed me that he had been a scribe—employed with taking stock of an estate's yields. Eurynome had been a weaver and fieldworker, reluctantly employed due to a lack of Greek settlement in the colonies.

“Many of the settlers were not nationals,” she told me. “They were Gauls, Celts, slaves, or tenants taken from far-off places. Massalia—and by extension, its neighboring colony of Antipolis, were the

hinterlands to Athens. We participated in many of the same rituals, yes. Bacchus was known to us, at least. But we were a complicated people, not quite wholly Ionian in nature.”

I documented their lives with fervor, so enticed by their vivid recollections of a bygone age. I wondered if they found it uncomfortable that I had dedicated my academic livelihood to understanding and instructing pupils in their culture— in their entire existence.

“It’s only natural,” Cleon had said. “You were entangled from the start. Somewhere buried deep inside of your information, was traces of mine. Veins of influence that mutated and grew. It is sensical that it would have manifested as a fascination for antiquity. You were not only searching for the keys to the past, but the keys to *your* past. Or, at least, the original version of you.”

I nodded silently, recording this in the margins of my detailed notes. It stirred a sour emotion in my core, but I could not control that. Eurynome tended to counteract my strife. She had formed some strange bond with Zenobie that was guiding our work. Every evening she retreated into her hidden hovel in the attic to perform her cryptic rituals. We were not to question or disturb her. Although she was seeming more confident than usual, I devoted less time to worrying about myself and more to worrying about her, because she was beginning to seem unusually drained. Her hair was silvering at an unnatural rate, and dark wells bloomed beneath her eyes. A supernatural process was possessing her, if I were to believe anything. I told myself I was allotting her special attention because she was ailing, but that was a shallow lie. I knew, not far beneath the skimming surface, that I was longing to heal my relationship with Zenobie through her. If Eurynome noticed, she did not comment on it. She simply let me extend a hand to hers, brush a piece of hair from her cheek, whisper soft words of kindness in the shyest passing.

Not only did I have a renewed investment in my relationship with Zenobie, but in how I approached time with Auguste. Our repeated bouts of bickering had not been faring well for us, and I was determined to level a new approach. Aid came to us in the form of our new-found friends. It was the late hour of September by then. Geese were keening in v-shaped bows, the few deciduous trees we had were half-barren, and the arm of evening was lengthening; sticking its fingers into the warmth of the day and stealing away our sweet summer. Phebah, Auguste, and I were sprawled on the thick carpet of the living room, while Azeem was perched above us like an observant bird, plucking away at his six-string. One side of my face was sweltering with the heat of the wood stove, while the other was chilled by a poorly-insulated draft. Phebah was closest to the fire, and was practically melting.

“Ugh,” she moaned, “I am so *bored!*” I rolled my eyes cheekily and laughed.

“We could always head out to the shed and watch the instruments for signs of Zenobie,” I suggested, practical as usual. She groaned louder and flipped onto her stomach.

“No-o-o. You always want to search for Zenobie. You are *so* of one mind. You’ve gotta, um,” she waved her hand around as she searched for a phrase, “you’ve gotta slow down and live a little! Learn to appreciate the aesthetics of life.”

“And how do you propose I do that,” I deadpanned. She began to giggle, and my face paled at her wide fiendish grin. That always signaled trouble with her.

“Oh, I know...” I raised a dubious brow. “Music!” she decreed. I propped myself up onto my elbows and pointed my thumb at Azeem plucking away on the couch.

“What, like Azeem?” I asked. She scoffed and got up, waltzing out of the room without a word. I waited patiently. Auguste shrugged to

signal to me he was just as lost as I was. After a minute or so, she pranced back through the doorframe with some object in tow. A tape-player, if I wasn't mistaken. (Although, I only knew it by name, not function).

"Did you steal that from Eurynome!?" I yelled. The secret room in the attic where Eurynome conducted her attempted contacts with Zenobie was the only place I had seen the device before.

"No," Phebah replied, "it's for playing music— I nabbed it out of storage. We used to listen to it all the time...but that was before the world started ending." I grazed my hand on its smooth metal surface, drawing a thin film of dust.

"This is a contemporary instrument?" I asked, awe-struck. She smirked at me and reached around to the crowded bookshelf behind her, retrieving a tape from between two large volumes on mycological foraging.

"It's akin to a contemporary *phonograph*," she explained and slotted the tape into the mouth of the machine. I gave her a blank stare and her eyes widened.

"Oh. You haven't heard of that either." I cracked a smile and shook my head. "When was that invented again...?" she muttered to herself. "1850s? No, no. Thomas Edison...oh. 1877."

"Beyond my time," I said.

"Well," she started, tapping the tape-player. "This is my favorite modern wonder. It's like sorcery, I swear."

"Even more than aeroplanes?" I gasped.

"So much more," she confirmed. "Imagine...an entire symphony in your bedroom. The voice of a beautiful opera soprano whenever you desire. Any song, anywhere, any *when*. That's what this does. It records audio, much like a scribe records spoken word as written, but it maintains the sound as...sound!" Auguste perked up at this, rising to sit next to me and gaze upon this object.

“Well, activate it, then!” he said giddily. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and smiled. He was so fascinated by art, it was admirable. *To be that invested in artistry*, I meant. As if he knew I was thinking of him, he draped his arm around my shoulder and leaned his head upon it. Phebah obliged his request and pressed the chunky button signaling ‘play.’

“You’re going to *love* this,” she said. There was a loud click, the static-y regurgitations of the machine’s guts, and then the pure tones of a guitar accompanied by soft-tapped drums. The introduction faded into a woman’s low voice, smooth as a ribbon. I sat transfixed, not sure what to make of this technology, of this *music!* I had never heard anything like it. My mouth must have been hanging open, because I could feel my throat drying. I listened to the lyrics, and felt my face begin to burn.

*So, I remember when we were driving, driving in your car  
Speed so fast, I felt like I was drunk  
City lights lay out before us  
And your arm felt nice wrapped around my shoulder*

I gasped lightly, and stared at Auguste’s hand resting by my neck. He seemed to get the memo, because he slowly lifted his head from my shoulder and drew his arm back to wrap around his knees. I gritted my teeth and tried to pay attention to the rest of the song.

*And I, had a feeling that I belonged  
I, had a feeling I could be someone, be someone, be someone*

*What is this?* I thought to myself. It felt like a ballad of sorts, but the verse was so candid and *confrontational!* What fazed me more, was

that I somehow understood. It felt like an invasion of my mind, of the emotions that I locked away in a place so deep inside of myself. I *had* sped so fast I felt like I was drunk. That time, all those weeks ago, when this place was still new to me. Phebah and Melem-Iram had taken us to the market— my first time in the truck. Auguste and I were sitting in the back seat. He had been so transfixed on the landscape flying by, he'd never noticed how I'd spent the entire ride staring at him. As the next verse picked up, I slowly turned my head and tried to meet his eyes. He was staring straight ahead, a sort of pink-ish glow to his cheeks. I wondered if the stove was overheating.

*You got a fast car*

*Is it fast enough so we can fly away?*

*Still gotta make a decision*

*Leave tonight, or live and die this way*

The song was over before I could catch his gaze. I felt my lungs loosen, and I exhaled. My fingers had been digging into the carpet, and I wasn't entirely certain I had blinked the entire time. I pressed a fist to my chest and cleared my throat.

"Um, wow. Thank you, Phebah. That was...lovely."

"Isn't it just?" she beamed. I smiled weakly and nodded. Auguste was completely silent, and just being near him made me feel seasick. The burning feeling in my face spread to my stomach, and I had the overwhelming urge to leave. I tried smoothing my shirt out to distract myself, but I only ended up seeming neurotic. The warmth bloomed within me and I knew I had to get out of there. I bolted up, striding to the door.

"Well, that was amazing, but I think I need to leave now," I said hurriedly, "Bye, see you late-e-r!" Phebah started to wave me farewell, but

I was already gone. I tore down the hallway and quickly darted up the stairs. I slammed my bedroom door open and pressed it behind me with my shoulders, my breath picking up to the edge of hyperventilation. I could feel my chest rising and falling, pressing against my button-down. I smoothed my hair, wrapping it close to my face. I slowly sank to the floor, my sharp breaths heavy in my ears. The warm hearth swelling in my core would not dissipate.

“Oh my God,” I whispered. “Oh...my...” I swallowed hard, choking on my words. My hands were still on the sides of my face, and I moved them around to authenticate my lucidity. I let them sink to my lap, where they rested on my lower abdomen. That warm sensation was beginning to make me feel sick. *What just happened*, I asked myself. *Literally what happened back there*. My eyes widened in disbelief. *Genuinely, what is wrong with me?* I attempted to calm my breathing, wiping my clammy palms on my thighs. *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...* I quickly laced my hands together and clenched my eyes, chin tilted to the ceiling.

“Please forgive me,” I prayed quietly. I mumbled a few more words under my breath before letting my arms collapse to the floor. I groaned and leaned my head against the door. I pressed my lips together and let my breathing return to normal. *Let’s think about this rationally. What did this mean? That I felt something for Auguste?* There were so many reasons why that was impossible. First of all, I was in love with Zenobie. Second of all, I wasn’t like that. Lastly, he would never reciprocate me. He needed me to be there for him. I was what gave him refuge— I was his stability. To do this to him, that would be a breach of trust. Of what our bond represented. *You’re blowing this out of proportion. You don’t even feel that way for him. You’re tricking yourself.* I shuddered, rubbing my arms as the warmth suddenly faded. *It’s only in your head.* I let my head drop into my knees. *You’re just lonely.* I heard the

soft pads of footfalls from outside the room. *It doesn't have to mean anything.* Three light knocks sounded at the door.

“Hey...are you in here?” I heard Auguste’s voice say. *Of course he had to come.*

“Go away,” I said. My cheeks were wet and I sputtered as tears slid down my chin. I hadn’t even realized I was crying. The door swung open as much as it could with my back pressed against it.

“Please, Cesaire. You left so suddenly...we’re supposed to tell each other when something is wrong, aren’t we?” I let out another quiet sob as I recalled our new resolve to communicate.

“Ye-yes,” I managed to reply.

“Well then,” he said gently, “will you let me in?” I crawled away from the door and curled up by the foot of my bed. Auguste opened the door deliberately, tentatively. He gave me the brightest smile. I was suddenly aware of how different he looked from a mere few months ago. His once-long hair was cropped, his curls wound tighter. His shoulders had broadened from labor, and he had a farmer’s tan. I bit my lip harder than usual. *Why are you like this? Stop that!* I could taste the coppery tinge of blood. *Don't be disgusting.*

“Hey,” he said lightly. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and wrangled myself onto my bed, so as to not appear so pathetic.

“Hey...” I mirrored. He sunk onto the edge of the twin bed with me. I closed my eyes and let silent tears stream down my cheeks. *What have I done to deserve this?* I fluttered my lashes open and stared at our fingers inches apart. *You know what you've done.* I curled my hand into a ball. *You went too far.* For some reason, he did the same. *You overstepped.* My eyes flicked up to meet him. *You ruined something good.* He was watching me intently. *You could have had something beautiful.* He opened his mouth to speak. *You could have had it all.*

“What went wrong? Modern music is a bit too much for your taste?” He asked me carefully. I said nothing, so he probed further. “Sudden feelings of homesickness? We can keep searching for Zenobie if you’d like.”

“No, no, it’s not that,” I asserted. He frowned, clearly puzzled.

“What is it, then?” He asked. I paused, my eyes still locked in his. *Don’t say anything. You aren’t thinking properly. Whatever it is you want to say to him, it’s wrong.* I played with my fingers and shook my head.

“Nothing,” I whispered, “nothing at all. I just got...overwhelmed.” There was a moment when I thought that would be enough for him, but his brow furrowed and his voice’s edge got sharper.

“That’s not the truth, and you know it,” he frowned. “You know you can tell me anything, Cesaire.”

“No! No, not everything,” I cried. “Please, please, leave me alone.” He shrunk away from me, his spine straightening. Taken aback.

“I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh come on, spare me. You always have something to say,” I snapped. “You’re the most talkative person I know. You never shut up.” He seemed hurt but tried one more time.

“Come now, Cesaire, I’m here for you.” *That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.*

“I know.” I let the conversation drop off the edge.

“Okay...”

“Okay. Please leave.”

“You know I’d rather no—”

“Just do what I say, Auguste.” There was a moment of panic in his eyes. I maintained my joyless expression to convey I was serious.

“Fine.” He wearily relented and left the room, but not without a final forlorn glimpse. I winced guiltily, collapsing back onto the covers

once he was safely out of sight. When I closed my eyes, all I could see was his face reflecting mine. *Shit.*

I hopped off my bed and pinched my fingers beneath the small window, hoisting it open. I pulled myself onto the window seat and crawled through the propped window, sliding onto the roof. It was covered in a dusting of pine needles and cones, and I was pretty sure there was some animal excrement up there as well. Despite this, it was still the best way to leave the house undetected. I used the traction from my work boots to slow my descent, kicking my feet out to brace myself as I reached the edge of the roof. I dropped down into the brush below, narrowly avoiding the view of the kitchen window, and dashed across the backyard. I darted around the decrepit old shed and swung open its rusted door. I wasn't surprised to see Eurynome inside, laboring over the instruments. They were strange contraptions; spitting beacons of light, making peculiar pinging noises, appearing like amalgamations of polished metal and tarnished wires. Her back was facing me and she was hunched over one of the center devices, tinkering away at the knobs and buttons.

"Welcome, Cesaire," she said, still consumed in her work. She was as keen as a predator— able to identify any of us by our footsteps. I did not reply, only settled onto the stool next to the table where she was working. "You must be wondering if I've had any luck," she hummed.

"Well, yes," I said. She smiled coolly and flicked a switch on the machine.

"Hardly, I'm afraid," she admitted. I placed my hand on her arm in a motion of concern. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair frazzled, and her skin had lost its Mediterranean luster. I could have sworn she looked unnaturally older— especially with the front pieces of her hair quickly graying.

“Perhaps you should rest,” I said softly. She shook me off and muttered something I couldn’t hear. Her lips were pale, their once-rosy sheen drained almost vampirically. “I’m concerned for you, Eurynome.”

“What has gotten into you today?” she bit. “You and Auguste get into a spat?” My brows raised and I stammered, my voice being drowned by shock.

“I-I mean. Well...” I inhaled. “How did you know?” She smirked and flexed her wrist, examining her nails coyly.

“Whenever you two get hung up about each other, you come running to me,” she pointed out. “Now, I can’t speculate fully on your reasoning...but I suspect it has something to do with the fact I possess your old coping mechanism’s face.”

“Zenobie wasn’t just a *coping mechanism*,” I protested. “I was— I *am* in love with her. You should know! You and Cleon are involved the way we are, aren’t you? I mean, it only makes sense that relationships would reflect across timelines.” She carefully set down the tool she had been tinkering with and fully directed her attention to me, leaning back against the desk. Her expression was an unprecedented mixture of confusion and amusement. I suddenly felt examined by her, as if I were some experiment being exposed beneath a microscope.

“You mean to say,” she began, bereft of any irony, “you believe Cleon and I are a *couple*. An item, if you will.” My face contorted into a cautious smile.

“Ye-e-e-s?” I replied, stretching my answer out with uncertainty. Her stable expression fractured and she began to laugh.

“Oh, oh my,” she giggled from behind a polite hand, “no wonder you’ve been so blind! You’re seeing everything all wrong!”

“Blind?” I yelped. “Blind to what?” She ran her crazed hair back with a stray hand, looking truly astonished.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, “you really don’t know.” I flung my arms about wildly, gesturing to myself.

“No! No I don’t know!” I exclaimed. “Care to clue me in?” She sank her back into the work table, her forearms propping her up from behind. She surveyed the interior of the shed idly, and I could tell she was struggling on how to approach whatever subject she was about to breach. She exhaled audibly, a hissing noise from between her teeth.

“Whew, alright,” she breathed out. “Recall when I told you of the first life I lived? Back in Massalia?”

“Yes?”

“Great. And you remember Cleon and I’s companion who now works in multidimensional messaging for the Assembly, yes?”

“Auguste’s Origin? Archaeus?” She snapped her fingers and bobbed her head.

“Right. Well. In our timeline, Cleon and I weren’t involved with each other. Not ever, really. When we went to contemporary Antibes, the first time we traveled, we assumed the identity of a married couple– but none of it was legitimate of course. We were protecting the true relationship at hand.”

“You and Archaeus...?” I tried gingerly. She flinched, visibly disgusted.

“Erm, ew. No. Try again.” The answer she was guiding me towards was directly under my nose, of course, but I was more than reluctant to find it. In fact, I was doing everything in my power to avoid confronting the obvious truth. “Do I need to spell it out for you?” she asked wearily. I bit down on my lower lip.

“Cleon and...” I strained to maintain my composure.

“...Archaeus?” She threw her hands up in victory.

“Yes!” she burst out, “who else would it be?” She planted her hands on her hips. “Don’t you see now? I mean, I know it’s

unprofessional to interfere with your life, but I'm losing my goddamn *mind* as our time runs down, and you're my friend now, anyways. It's my job to meddle at this point."

"I don't understand what you're implying." She offered me a hollow glare.

"Seriously? Don't be an idiot, Cesaire. It's why you're always running into my arms— you're made self-conscious by the tension between you and Auguste and you consider me a temple of safety and normalcy. I'm your familiar refuge in the face of the unknown; that unknown being the ultimate truth." I could feel that swelling heat building inside me again. I swiped at my cheeks with my knuckles as if to dab away my blush.

"I—I have no idea what you're talking about," I sputtered. "You've mis-contextualized this whole thing. Just because our Origins did something does not mean we are beholden to repeat their same mistakes." She raised a brow at my choice of words, but did not comment on it.

"You said it yourself, Cesaire. Relationships reflect across timelines." *Good lord*, I thought to myself, *I am having the weirdest day ever*.

"Listen," I said, regaining my confidence. "If you want me to stop asking you personal questions, you can just say that. No need to devise an elaborate web of lies and apply some lunatic pseudo-science to my perfectly normal thought process." She rolled her eyes in mock defeat and began tightening a screw on her devices.

"Don't say I didn't warn you when you finally realize," she quipped. I crossed my arms and leaned over the table, observing the streaming lights pulsating within the core of the machines.

"Auguste and I are doing just fine," I affirmed. "Zenobie on the other hand..." She squinted her eyes, fine-tuning a three-tiered knob.

“We’re doing everything in our power to search for her,” she assured me. “My experiments are going wonderfully, the bond is stronger than ever.”

“But is it helping you?” She blew a piece of hair out of her face and fiddled with some sliders.

“Definitely,” she replied without pause. “Don’t even worry about it, Cesaire.” I huffed and rested my head on my arms.

“You know I can’t take your word for that,” I said. She shrugged and pinched a blinking switch.

“And you know I can’t take your word for why you’ve been acting so strange towards me, and by extension Auguste.”

“We’ve been doing just fine,” I grumbled defensively. “Better than ever, actually.”

“Sure. Whatever you say.” A blaring beeping interrupted our conversation, coupled with a flashing red beacon. “Oh!” Eurynome shouted. She spun around hastily, her unkempt hair waving in her face. She motioned towards the door with frantic limbs. “Cesaire, go get Cleon.” It did not take long for me to comply. I hurtled out of the shed, my feet gliding over the dead grass of the yard and carrying me into the familiar haven of the cabin.

“Cleon!” I shouted into the house, my hands cupped around my mouth. “Cle-e-e-on!” The man stumbled out of the kitchen, cradling a warm mug of apple cider (I could smell the spice from across the room). Phebah was lounging at the table, sipping her own beverage.

“Oh! There you are,” she said. I dismissed her, latching on to Cleon’s arm.

“No time,” I told her. “Cleon, you have to come with me. Quickly.” He loosened my grip and set his mug onto the table.

“Alright, alright, what is it?” He asked with slight annoyance.

“The shed,” is all I managed to reply. He dashed towards the back door and I gave chase close behind.

“I’ll keep your drink warm!” Phebah shouted after us. We burst into the shed, revealing Eurynome keeled over beneath the table. She tilted her head to us, revealing wetted eyes and chattering teeth. The white in her hair had crept deeper, rooting itself to her scalp.

“What happened!?” I screeched, dropping down to comfort her. I caressed her in my arms, petting her hair down and smoothing it away from her shaken eyes. Her lips were moving but no sound was escaping them. Cleon’s head swiveled around in panic, searching for the origin of her strife.

“Just point,” he said, “just point to whatever’s causing this. What went wrong, Eurynome? Talk to us!” She whimpered and buried her ghost-white face into her knees. Her whispers became louder and more legible.

“I saw her...I was so close...I was—” she broke off into another whine and shook her head, her hair dusting her legs. “She’s vanished now. She’s forgetting me.” Cleon sank down to her level, crouched next to me. He placed a soft kiss on her forehead and helped her up, her feet dragging on the cool concrete floor.

“Shh,” he hushed, “it’s going to be alright. Do you know what went wrong?” She stumbled, wavering as she attempted to stand. Eventually, she steadied herself on the ledge of her work table. The blinking lights cast streaming lines of color across her face; the effect was psychedelic.

“I’ve made so much progress intertwining us,” she explained, “but by bringing us closer, I fear I may have sped up my degeneration. The toll is taking. Time is ticking. We *must* find her, Cleon.” I chewed my nails, my teeth denting the cellulite.

“You’re degenerating?” Cleon asked breathlessly. She cringed, a pang of guilt spreading through her.

“I can’t say for sure.” Her chest loosened and the blood began to flow back under her skin. “I’m fine,” she insisted. “I didn’t mean it, I am perfectly fine.” She strained her muscles and hobbled out of the shed, both of us following her closely.

“We have to contact the Assembly,” Cleon asserted as she attempted to breeze past him (but only succeeded in appearing like a wounded animal with a fatal limp.) “They can relieve your duty from the field,” he continued, “they’ll put you in a regeneration chamber. You can live!” She grunted, her face painfully contorted as she forced her legs to carry her into the house.

“I said...I’m *fine*,” she bit between labored pants. She wrenched the back door open and collapsed on the first empty chair at the kitchen table. Phebah was still there, sipping her drink and looking rather puzzled. Eurynome let her head lull back and exhaled in exasperation and defeat.

“You can’t just ignore this!” Cleon cried, “You’re important to me!” She glared at him and traced a strand of bleached hair.

“Saving the universe is important. I’m disposable. Having me is a luxury compared to maintaining the fabric and stability of existence.” Cleon reached down and took the lock of hair from her bony hands, practically shoving it into her face.

“Look at this Eurynome, you’re *dying*. Isn’t it painful? Your cells are falling apart, your atoms are decaying, your body’s failing all around you like a crumbling ruin. You should feel awful. Worse than awful, even.” She grinded her molars together and rubbed her arms.

“I’m tough as nails. It can’t bother me when I know my comfort is a sacrifice for the existence of all life.” Phebah had caught on by now

and was staring at us, stricken. She set her mug on the stained wood table with a clink.

“You don’t want to end up like me,” she said solemnly. “I have, what? Maybe six cosmic years left? Eight if I’m truly lucky? The way you must be destroying yourself, I’d be shocked if you had two.” Eurynome bowed her head and groaned.

“Chastise me all you want, but I know I’m close. I could feel her, I practically *was her*. I saw into her very soul, her being, her life. She was on the very verge of making the determining choice— the decision that would save us all.” Even in such dire times, my yearning curiosity for closure got the best of me.

“What did you see?” I asked timidly. Her crow’s feet crinkled and she let out a slight laugh. Her vision trailed off somewhere far away, journeying through a sea of nostalgia and murky memories, venturing into a mind not quite hers.

“Lonely hours. Long stretches of nothingness. A sort of tranquil contentment by the comfort of an unconquerable ocean. Beach palms swaying in a hot wind. The yellowed pages and musty scent of an old book. And oh...oh, of course. The suffocating smoke. The darkened water. The pestilence of a ships’ steerage. The—” she stopped abruptly, the imagery becoming too painful a vestige for her to channel. I enveloped my hand in hers, offering her the comfort of an old friend, as if I had the right to do so.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t intend to push you,” I assured her. “I just have to wonder what Zenobie could be doing on a ship? This must be after I’ve disappeared. She probably feels stranded and hopeless. I abandoned her.” Eurynome shook her head.

“You did no such thing,” she said. “I can feel the pulse of her emotions. She is satisfied. She is happy.” I ran my fingers through my hair in confusion.

“But. She loves me! She needs me. I need *her*.” Eurynome sunk deeper into her hard oaken seat and gave me the smallest shrug.

“The bond does not lie. I know how to interpret our entanglement. Her life has increased in joy with your departure.”

“This cannot be...” I whispered and sank into a shock. While I was suspended in disbelief, Cleon and Phebah came to the aid of Eurynome, guiding her to her bedroom to rest. The day became foggy then, hazed over like condensation on a mirror after a long bath. *If only someone would've given me a rag to dry it all away.* The rest of the house spoke long into the night, hushed and cluttered together in a gaggle by the light of the living room lamp. They spoke in lilted tones about terms and logistics that failed to register with me. Even Auguste participated, so engrossed in the discussion it didn't even seem to register with him I maintained a strict vow of silence. I heard fragments of the conversation thrown about; islands of debate floating in a black velvet abyss.

“We should bring her forth to the Assembly,” Cleon urged.

“I confer,” Phebah had said. “She's playing with dangerous fire.”

“Isn't the mission more important?” K'aayhltla asked.

“The lives of all are worth more than one,” said Azeem. I was phasing in and out of lucidity it seemed. I was most focused on staring at the same piece of carpet for the entire duration of the night, letting the maw of my thoughts swallow me whole. *If Zenobie is better off without me, what purpose did I ever really serve? My commitment to her was a display of values and faith. There was no romantic joy in the way one might expect, but my devotion made it worthwhile. She needed me. My mind went reeling, spiraling like a devilish staircase. But she never did, did she? All that you gave was for nothing.* I worried Eurynome was making the same mistake as myself. Giving her body to a meaningless pyre. I wanted to pray for her, to offer her some salvation, anything. But it was as if I had forgotten the key to God. Any displays of theism dried up

within me before they could spring forth. I was snapped out of my musings and the static crawled out of my vision, revealing the usual homely living room, populated by my housemates.

“We’re voting, Cesaire,” Auguste told me, a hint of worry lacing his voice. I rubbed my eyes and tried to generate some saliva.

“Oh,” I choked through my dry throat, “okay.” The room was silent as it awaited my decision. “Um, I’m sorry. Can you repeat the question?” Cleon raised his brows, and restated the movement for me with a syrupy voice.

“Do you. Vote. To bring Eurynome to the Assembly for healing.” I gulped.

“Uhm. Yes?” There were some under-breath chitters, some scurried whispers, even an undercurrent of panic.

“Very well,” Cleon said with as much authority as possible, “we’ll set a course for the Assembly in seven days. Cosmic Year Scale.”



## XV: Auguste

I blew a puff of air on a rebellious curl hanging down on my nose bridge. I was seated on the creaky porch steps, my legs bent into my chest, and my arms crossed on my pointed knees. The sun was unnaturally hot that day, beating down on us in simmering waves. Melem-Iram and Cesaire were talking a few feet away from me. I caught the glint of tossed keys reflecting a glimmer of light. They landed in Cesaire's hands, although he had to fumble to catch them.

"Not a single scratch, okay?" Melem-Iram said sternly. Cesaire nodded.

"Are we good to go?" I asked. I heard the click of the front door swinging open, the tell-tale screech of its poorly-oiled hinges giving Cleon's entrance away. He squeezed past me and patted Cesaire on the shoulder.

"You remember the task at hand?" he asked. Cesaire's jaw jumped with nerves but he gave a thumb's up in silent affirmation.

"Are we *going*?" I asked again, impatient. The other three men side-eyed me but did not reply. I sighed dramatically and rested my chin on my knuckles.

"You have three days to get there and return," Cleon continued. "Try not to get side-tracked, even though you may want to. You're the only residents who haven't been calibrated for travel to the Assembly."

"I still don't understand why you cannot simply accompany us?" Cesaire asked, his voice wavering.

"We have important matters to address here. Jumping to the Assembly without using any dead bridges, pocket dimensions, or the like is a hefty feat. It has the potential for major repercussions, I'm sure you are aware." Cesaire worked his lip with his upper teeth and relented glumly.

“Yes, yes, you’ve explained,” he said. “The Assembly is the center of the wheel, traveling there without the assistance of spokes could destabilize the axel.”

“Huh,” Cleon chuckled, “you really grasped onto that car metaphor.”

“I like cars. And I’m an appreciator of metaphors. They’re a lovely linguistic tool, quite the wonderful assistance for a good thesis—”

“Okay, Professor,” I mocked playfully, getting up. “I’m going to cut you off right there.” I offered Cleon my most mellow posture and unaffected smile. “Can we leave now? Eurynome isn’t getting any better.”

“Very well,” he gave in. “Take to the road, godspeed, may the winds be in your favor, and all that.” I bowed to him in respect and yanked Cesaire’s wrist, dragging him to the battered old truck parked in the dusty driveway. I jerked the passenger door open, waiting expectantly for Cesaire to take his position behind the wheel. The leather of the seats were tanned and shredded, but comfortable in the way a familiar friend might be. I rested my hand on the molded divider between our seats and reclined back, a contented smile growing on my face. I watched Cesaire through the dirt-dusted window. He was still shuffling around and mumbling his worries to Cleon and Melem-Iram. I saw Cleon pat him on the arm, a tentative display of camaraderie. My smile soured as I thought about how uncanny befriending a derivative of yourself must be. I would be lying if I didn’t say I wasn’t looking forward to it. I rested my hair on the headrest and stretched my legs until they could no longer extend. Cesaire clicked his door open and slid inside stiffly. His focus was trained on the horizon and his posture was straight as a pin.

“Excited?” I asked him casually. He gave me a noncommittal grunt in response. His hands were wrapped around the steering wheel, and he struggled to slot the key into the ignition. The engine roared to

life and overwhelmed our silence. It felt inappropriate to speak. He pulled the stick out of park and fell into a deep concentration, obviously preoccupied with the rules and regulations of driving that Melem-Iram had drilled into him all of those afternoons out at the garage. I watched the cabin fade into the distance as we sped down the gravel road leading to the wider country. The bright blue sky swallowed us whole. I was calmed by the rolling lull of the peninsula and settled into my seat. I was still acutely aware of Cesaire's silence.

"I'm glad we're getting to go on this trip together," I said without looking at him, almost as if I were speaking to nothing. I heard him exhale and turned my head expectantly. His shoulders were tense and he maintained his eye on the winding road.

"Me too," he finally said. My face melted into a gentle smile.

"Do you have the faintest clue on how to navigate us?" I asked. He scoffed and jutted his shoulder at the map rolled tightly on the dashboard. "Oh, right," I said dumbly. "Despite all of the wonders of the modern era, they still use maps..."

"Well. They use maps in this decade," He mumbled. "Melem tells me that in only a handful of decades they use little robots inside of miniature televisions."

"Huh. Wait, what are robots again?"

"The automatron men that carry out menial tasks we humans are too troubled to bother with."

"Ah, yes. The metallic creatures." I was taken aback to hear a bit of laughter slip out of his mouth. I glanced over and he was smiling softly, his arms less taut.

"*Creatures*," he repeated, shaking his head. I scoffed, laughing as well.

"That's what they are!" I protested. "They may not be living beings, but they sure as well have strange little souls of *some* sort!"

“Robot souls!” He howled. I pushed my bangs back and huffed, but I could not contain my grin.

“I reckon– I reckon whoever might be in charge stuffs the souls of animals that don’t have a use for them anymore– into their tiny tin chambers,” I said, my imagination running wild. “They put blood in their wiring and whatnot. That must be what makes them go.”

“Does that imply oil is *blood*?”

“Why would you draw that conclusion?” I laughed. “Just because oil comes from within the olives does not mean it is their blood. Don’t be impetuous.” He shook his head and momentarily lifted a hand from the wheel to gesture at the truck.

“No, no,” he said, “There’s several sorts of oils these days. Not only the cooking type, but a mechanical one as well. It comes from within the Earth. Her very core or something along those lines. It animates automobiles.” I scratched my forehead, not following anything he had just said.

“I thought trucks drove on their own volition...” I said blankly. “Auto– self. Mobile– moveable. Self-moveable. It didn’t occur to me that there had to be a second element involved in the process.” He rolled his eyes, still smiling.

“Well, of course. Perpetual motion is an illegitimate theory. All energy must be generated from somewhere. The Law of Conservation of Energy– it’s classical physics.” He cocked his head playfully. “Didn’t you receive a boarding school education?” I stuck my chin up in mock offense.

“Don’t go assuming that just because I attended means that I *learned*.” He chuckled and turned us onto the main road. The truck tires bouncing on the gravel steadied out as we hit the buttery pavement.

“Fair enough,” he replied. “Although I am curious as to what it was like. Your life back home. The parts I never experienced, I mean.” My hands crawled onto my arms and I dug my fingers into my flannel.

“Cold,” I answered, “distant, too. Paris was this sprawling metropolis. I didn’t know how to handle it. How to fathom it, even. Despite all of the years I spent there, I never truly felt like I knew anyone. I never felt like anyone knew me. I was glad to leave.” He tapped the steering wheel awkwardly.

“There had to be good parts, though,” he said, “otherwise you wouldn’t have kept running away to explore the continent with your cohort of artist friends.” I shrugged noncommittally.

“Eh. I knew I wanted to escape Antibes— mainly so I could avoid the responsibility of my mother and the scrutiny of my sister. I knew I wanted to be a poet. It made sense to leave.”

“Where was the most satisfying place you ended up?” He asked. “The one that could have kept you there forever if you had a little less agency about you?” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“The one time you came,” I admitted. “The second summer you were in University. We invited our friends, of course. Zenobie, Leonie, whoever. But it was that night on the edge of Lake Geneva I really felt as if I could never return. I was...entranced. The sky was a dark mirror, the stars were brighter than jewels. The water lapped at our bare legs and we waded in its depths without a care. I thought I was floating through a dream.” I heard the warm hum of the engine pulsing beneath us, the smooth glide of the road, the roar of the wind passing us by. We sat in those noises for a second, letting them mix around us. Cesaire sighed.

“That was a wonderful time,” he agreed. “But I couldn’t chase you around Europe forever, I’m afraid.” I nodded, the weight of his words drifting away from me.

“I know,” I said. “It matters not to me. We are discovering a new world now, are we not?” His brows raised in surprise.

“Huh. I suppose we are,” he realized. “And what a lovely land it is.” We trained our eyes on the distant horizon. Mountains in the shapes of slumbering giants held down the hem of the billowing landscape. Frigid and shallow lakes broke up the brushy taiga marshes. Swaying sitka spruce and mountain hemlock made temperate towers. I had grown accustomed to the peninsula, but the further we drove into its depths, the more astounded I grew.

“It doesn’t fail to take your breath away, huh?” I remarked.

“You could say that again.”

“It doesn’t fail—”

“—Shut up.” I giggled and I swore he would have punched my shoulder had he not been driving. “So, what’s the first stop on the map?” I picked up the tightly-wound paper and unbound it, my eyes scanning over the intricate veins of roadways and water passages.

“Looks like we take the Seward Highway through Anchorage, and continue on the Glenn Highway up until Fairbanks, where we’ll be stopping for the night.”

“Anchorage is a proper modern city, Eurynome told me,” Cesaire noted. “I’m not sure how prepared I am to witness such a thing.”

“Ah come on, you’ve seen some of man’s greatest architecture in your time. Basilicas, Cathedrals, crumbling castle walls formed by our Frankish forefathers. Hell, we’ve both witnessed Paris! The beating heart of Europe! This northern wasteland doesn’t stand a chance against The Saint-Chappelle, Notre-Dame, Arc de Triomphe, Palace de Versailles...”

“Alright, alright,” he laughed, “I get it. You love old buildings.” I crossed my arms and slouched into my seat.

“The triumphal arch isn’t even that old! It was only inaugurated what? Twelve years ago?” He clicked his tongue through barred teeth.

“Closer to 150 years ago now,” he corrected me. My indignant expression fell.

“Oh. Right.” I adjusted myself, leaning my head against the glossy window.

“What do you reckon France is like now?” I asked. He hummed uncomfortably, as if imagining our homeland as anything other than a figment of the past was painful for him. I imagined it was. It was for me, at least.

“They’ve probably gone back and forth on the monarchy subject,” he said. “Phebah told me her home is still under British rule, something about the Commonwealth. I suppose if kings are still around across the channel, we must have them as well. We’ve got a miserable king right now, I bet. Always playing it sweet with the bourgeoisie.”

“Cesaire,” I said, “*we* are the bourgeoisie.”

“Ah, right,” he chuckled, “I’d nearly forgotten.” I narrowed my eyes in scrutiny.

“Do you know something you’re not telling me?” He gritted his teeth anxiously and avoided my direction. I stared at him.

“Okay, fine,” he yielded, “we don’t actually have a king anymore. I read a history book.” I gasped, my hands flying to guard my mouth.

“You *what!*?” I yelped. He looked at me apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Auguste! I’m a scholar. I *teach* the *history* of philosophy. I’ve been interviewing the house members on their lives for goodness sake!” He sighed, defeated. “I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to know. To see which of my premonitions had come to pass.” I smiled gently and patted his arm.

“It’s alright, Cesaire,” I reassured him. “But you have to tell me. What’s our future set to be?”

“Whoop,” he exhaled. “Strap in, because it is quite the ride.” I beamed and held onto my seatbelt for dramatic effect. “Alright, so we set

our scene two years after our disappearance from the timeline, 1848...” The ride stretched out into uncounted time as he began to regale me with a lengthy chronicle of our country’s labored history (future?). There were sagas of revolution, devastating war, and governments changed hands many times over. There were great thinkers, brilliant innovations and inventions, unbelievable works of art, and people flooding the streets in protest a million times over.

I couldn’t believe how far our nation would go in such a relatively short amount of time. How far the world would go. Atom bombs, automobiles, power plants, new wave films, scandalous fashions, anarchists, communists, cabarets, impressionists, fallen colonial empires, devastating losses, shining artistic achievements. I began to well up with a heavy sorrow. The feeling that I had lost something. I had missed so much, but I had no right to despair. I would have been long dead for most of it, anyways, I told myself. Despite this, I was filled with a longing to experience all of those storied decades. I wished that I wasn’t stranded across the planet, in a desolate country. I prayed that one day I would see the shores of my home again, and all that was to come.

Our first day on the road stretched on without much incident. We passed through Anchorage after a little less than two hours, and we were awed by our first modern city. I pressed my palms to the window and peered out at the streets rolling slowly by us as we crawled through the sprawling metropolis. It lacked a certain polish that European cities teemed with, but it was not falling behind in urbanity. Traffic lights hung like bells on bent poles, buildings were cubic and crowded, and the streets were wide, dark rivers that reflected the neon lights of shop signs in their rippling puddles.

“Whatever I was picturing...it wasn’t exactly this,” I admitted. Cesaire nodded tersely and sucked air between his teeth.

“Yeah,” he concurred. “I thought modern architecture would possess more—”

“—Technique? Artistry?” He snapped his fingers.

“Right. Those things.” He turned us onto a larger street and we drove past a cinema decorated with a dazzling display of electric lights. I craned my neck to catch the billing upon the marquee.

“Fatal Attraction, The Princess Bride, and Dirty Dancing,” I read aloud. “These are the names of theatrical productions? They must not perform classics any longer, because I don’t recognize any of them.” Cesaire shook his head and slowed into a red light.

“No, those aren’t the names of plays,” he corrected, “they show *films* at theaters now, remember? You’ve seen at least one or two by now, haven’t you?” I scoffed, remembering that frivolous ‘entertainment’ I’d been forced into observing.

“Ugh, I can hardly picture such disgraces desecrating the artistic stage. How does that compare to Euripides? Aristophanes? *Shakespeare?*”

“So you do know your Classical playwrights!” Cesaire laughed lightly. “I must admit I’m impressed. I thought you might have been more enamored with the contemporary or the transcendentalist.” I crossed my arms in defense.

“I can appreciate multitudes. Just because you’re the antiquarian philosophical magnate doesn’t mean I lack the qualities necessary to appreciate the Greeks. Plus, we are technically citizens of the age anyways, right?” The light finally turned green and we began to speed off the main road and onto the next leg of the highway.

“Yes,” he said absently, “I suppose we are somewhat. But I will always consider myself French. Because we are our own people, are we not?” I made some noise of agreement, and then we were off. We must have had some conversations on the next stretch of the drive, but my

memory grows hazy looking back on it. Mainly, I recall the sense of peace I felt gliding along that empty country. Looking over at Cesaire ever so often to see his tangled hair rollicking in the speedy wind.

We began to follow a snaking river some miles north of Anchorage. It was pale and dotted with scrubby islands. We passed through a few towns much like Moose Pass. They sported a smattering of cabins, hovel-ish houses, and trading posts. Some had weedy yards with the bodies of rusted cars laying in them like dead animals. We even spotted a few people— berry-pickers congregating on an overgrown shoulder of the road, some ill-equipped hitchhikers, and a few old women smoking on a dilapidated porch with a sagging overhang. Besides that and the occasional car, we were largely alone.

That was when I saw it. I could hardly believe my eyes. Out of that primordial valley, lush and green, rose the closest creature to God. A colossal peak chiseled in blinding alabasters and verdant viridescence. An unparalleled beast of beauty and prowess. I gasped, my hand covering my mouth. I felt the car jerk and swerve, Cesaire almost driving off of the road at the sight of it.

“What is that,” I said, my voice nary a whisper.

“I have no idea...” he responded in a similar hushed tone. We continued to drive, but the mountain was so massive that it hardly moved as we hurtled by. To say we were baffled would be an understatement.

“Whatever she is,” I said, “she has no rival, no equal. Pyrenees, Alps, Apennines, Urals, no matter. I have never seen such a magnificent formation of the Earth. In fact, I never knew such a thing could exist.”

“Grab me a tape from the glovebox,” Cesaire instructed me suddenly.

“Huh? Why?”

“Just trust me,” he said quickly, “I’ve come to understand the power of a soundtrack in recent weeks.” His free hand fluttered around as he waited for me to hand him a cassette tape. I selected one at random from the stack and he slotted it into the tape player with blind ease. I surmised that he and Melem-Iram frequently provided themselves with a ‘soundtrack’ on their drives. There was a short whirring before the gentle scales of a keyboard filled the car, followed soon after by a rich woman’s voice pouring out like honey. Cesaire was right, it accompanied the sweeping landscape and magnificent mountain quite well. I sighed contentedly and turned my gaze to his tender smile, my cheek pressed against the soft leather of my headrest. He was focused on the horizon, but I could tell he was swayed by the music. It swelled, picking up into a powerful chorus.

*Time cast a spell on you, but you won't forget me  
I know I could have loved you  
But you would not let me*

I frowned, and I could see his eyes welling with the same panic he had displayed a month or so before when we got our first taste of music. I prayed he couldn’t recognize the burning below my skin, or that I noticed his.

*I'll follow you down 'til the sound of my voice will haunt you  
Give me just a chance  
You'll never get away from the sound of the woman that loves you*

Something flickered beneath my surface. I made a split-second decision to just...lean into it. I began to bob my head to the pulsing beat, my grin growing larger by the second.

“Come on!” I encouraged him, “It’s a great song, right?” His stiff jaw line quivered, and I saw the corners of his lips bend into a tiny sort of smile. “That’s the spirit,” I said. He laughed quietly, and I knew it was genuine.

*Was I such a fool?*

He mouthed the words of the song.

*I'll follow you down til' the sound of my voice will haunt you*

His voice began to flood in, soft but sure.

*Give me just a chance*

It strengthened into a current, I could hear him almost speaking to me.

*You'll never get away from the sound of the woman that loves you*

There he was, his hands placed firmly on the wheel, his brow turned up with determination, his rich eyes staring the road down, his mouth open in a confidently resplendent smile, belting out every word. I had caught on to the lyrics by then. I joined in for the last few lines, our voices weaving together under the shadow of the towering peaks.

*Time cast a spell on you, but you won't forget me*

*I know I could've loved you, but you would not let me*

*I'll follow you down 'til the sound of my voice...*

“I think I understand the appeal now,” I said. The mixtape continued to play, but the lyrics didn’t matter much to me now. I felt lulled by the pull of the road. A thin ribbon coiling through a lonely realm. The trees ruffled and ridged like the tides mixing with the streaming freshwater of an estuary. Cesaire and I were in tune for the first time in a long time.

“Imagine the ease of which we could have traveled if we had automobiles back in our era,” he said out of the blue.

“We had locomotives,” I pointed out. “Although, I suppose that was a bit different. Far less freedom. Far less choice. These highways can deliver you practically anywhere whenever you desire.”

“Where do you desire to go?” He asked, “I mean—um. If you could try car travel in Europe.” It didn’t take me long to consider that question.

“Villa Diodati,” I answered.

“What?”

“It’s a mansion in Switzerland near Lake Geneva,” I explained. “Byron, Polidori, and the Shelleys rented it in the Year Without a Summer. Some of their greatest works of poetry and fiction were produced there. Frankenstein, The Vampyre, the third canto of Childe Harold.” Cesaire briefly caught my eyes in the rear-view mirror.

“Is that why you demanded we go to Lake Geneva that one summer?” He asked, his voice light and fluttery. I blushed and buried my cheek into my shoulder.

“I thought I might be similarly inspired,” I mumbled. “Especially if my dear friends were present. I was wrong, though. Nothing came of it.” His smile faded, and I wanted to kick myself at the misstep. “Well—not *nothing!*” I frantically amended, “I greatly enjoyed you— your being there.” He smirked and leaned back, his arms firm and steady on the wheel.

“I see,” he said, “Your mistake lies in your execution. Clearly it is not the manor or location itself that is charged with creative energy. If you want to emulate the masters, you must embody the masters. What drove them to such fantastic pursuits? Was it divine inspiration, force of circumstance, a particularly moody summer, romance, personal quarrels?” I groaned, the insurmountable task of re-entering my failed poetic vocation creeping up on me.

“It wasn’t a real career, anyway. I wanted to be admired and to stand out, not to create anything all that beautiful or provoking.”

“But you did!” He reassured me, “I read your anthology. Your descriptions were crafted like little windows. I could smell the salt wedge, feel the Cypriot breeze, taste the saffron and coriander.” I smiled broadly and felt compelled to return the compliment.

“Did you know I read your dissertations?” I muttered shyly, “They were fascinating. Talk about little windows! You possessed the minds of those ancient thinkers to the point I was convinced those were your own words, flowing from your lips like sweet wine. God, you were so— so convincing!” The engine quieted to an inaudible purr. Cesaire was so startled his foot had raised from the peddle enough to slow us to an inertia-led coast.

“You never told me that,” he said, dumbfounded. “I thought you didn’t know. Or care. Or *care to know*—” He swerved around to stare at me. “You’re telling the truth? You really read my work?” I nodded enthusiastically. He made a gasping sound of overjoyed laughter. “Wow. Um, wow! Okay,” he stuttered out in a flurry of meaningless expressions. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Whichever song had just been playing came to an end and the sound of the engine harmonizing with the roaring road-wind consumed my ears again. Unlike every other silence we had shared, this felt like one of comfort. It reminded me of years that felt long

passed. Hours spent lounging in the sun soaking up each other's presence, wandering Marseille searching for nothing in particular, sharing lunch on the edge of a fountain filled with water-lilies. It was a good life.

We arrived in Fairbanks as the sun was beginning to ripen in the western sky. Eurynome had arranged for us to stay in a homely rustic hotel. It was clean and well-managed, but had a home-brewed atmosphere, like a gas lamp or an autumn stew. We pulled into its parking lot— a small patch of asphalt coated in pothole puddles the color of cotton-candy sunset. The truck's back tires dipped into one of the crevasses as we parked, splashing the body of the car with murky water. I swung my door open, hopping out with weak legs. We both stretched, our aching bones cracking and creaking like unoiled iron. The woman at the front desk raised a thick brow as we strode in. She had a massive bush of teased auburn hair, and her dramatic eyeshadow made her appear much older than I assumed she was.

"Reservation for Eurynome?" Cesaire said meekly. Save for a few store runs, we had largely stayed to ourselves during our time here. Being on our own was intimidating, but having to interact with strangers was even worse.

"You're upstairs," she said brightly, handing him a key on a shiny ring. He immediately tossed it off to me, and I felt the obligation to take the reins. I squinted at her crooked name tag pinned to her blouse.

"Thank you...Gale," I said politely. She returned a customer service smile.

"Call if you need anything," she chimed. "Enjoy your stay." We both awkwardly showed our thanks before scurrying down the carpeted hall to the stairwell, desperate for sleep.

Our room was tidy and small, containing two twin beds, a desk, a bedside table, and a lamp. The walls were orange with flecks of yellow,

and a toasty brown carpet coated the floor. Cesaire clicked the door shut behind us and tossed our bag of spare clothes and toiletries into the outcropping of a shallow closet. We both immediately dove onto our respective beds, our bodies aching from the long ride. I stretched, arching my back like a cat and yawning all the same. I tucked my arms beneath my bed's pillows and curved my spine into the snug comforter. Cesaire was looking at me from across the narrow gap dividing us.

"What a day, huh?" I sighed. He murmured some agreement and slowly closed his eyes. He looked so peaceful. The warm light of the corner lamp painted him in an evening ambience, and his diaphragm rose and fell with quiet breaths. Seeing him lying there, I began to really *look* at him. We had always gone to bed in the dark, met in our ill-lit flats, talked in hazy ballrooms. I had forgotten what his still form looked like in the light. I itched my wrist, nervously deliberating where to take the situation next.

"You know..." I started ambiguously, "we've been sharing a room for so long, I don't think I could sleep alone anymore. Once all of this comes to an end." His brows raised but he did not open his eyes.

"Is that so?" He asked, unmoving. Somehow this prompted me to continue.

"I just wonder how much of our old life I'll be able to return to. Now that I've witnessed the future. That I've experienced luxuries beyond my previous comprehension. That I've changed so heavily." I paused, prompting him to speak.

"I'd return," he said, "if only to see Zenobie."

"Would you still wed her?" I asked tentatively. His eyes came to life at that. I saw his fingers twitching, trying to speak where he wanted to be silent.

"I- uh." He gave in. "I don't know." He rolled over onto his back, his hands clasped on his lower stomach. "Sometimes I wonder

what my life would be like if I never saw her again,” he continued, his voice hardly above a whisper. I lifted my head, my interest fully piqued.

“You’d miss her,” I prompted. He shook his head, his eyes transfixed on the popcorn-textured ceiling.

“No,” he replied hollowly, “no, I wouldn’t. I need her, but I don’t *want* her.” I hesitated to speak, but the words arrived on their own.

“What *do* you want?” I asked. Caught off guard, he launched into a non-sequitur.

“These past few months have been the greatest journey of my life. I understand what you said, about not being able to resume our old way of life. I’ll have new insights, yes. But I’ve also become so much more.” He rubbed his eyes in frustration. “I guess what I’m– I’m trying to say is. Is that what I want– I want to keep being with you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked gently. He buried his face in his hands, unwilling to look at me, or even in my general vicinity.

“This,” he answered, stuttering. “I want to keep living life with you. It’s Alaska, and it’s strange, and it’s being *alive*.” He inhaled. “You make it that way. I’d be lost without you. Your banter, your habits, whatever. It’s just...you.”

“Okay,” I said calmly. I rolled off of my flank and dropped down from my bed. I climbed onto his, my knees filling the space where his legs splayed apart. I leaned over his frame and brushed his messy hair aside.

“What are you doing?” he asked me so fast it spilled into a single word. His chest was beginning to rise and I could see the confused panic in his pupils.

“Is this not what you were asking for?” I mumbled. He began to shake his head before he stopped– nodding it slightly.

“I’m not sure, I–” I placed a finger to his lips.

“Do you want me to stop or not?” I asked more firmly this time.

“No,” he responded.

“Alright then.” I continued to let my hand fall down the side of his face, catching on the edge of his jaw and circling on his sternum. I flattened my fingers into a palm and rested it on his chest. I leaned forward, my lashes fluttering closed. My torso was halved over his bent legs. My elbow slotted into his side. My lips placed like dewdrops on his cupid’s bow. I pressed harder, sealing us together. I worked my lips over his, gentle and desperate, but I felt nothing on the other side. My eyes flickered open and I slowly pulled away.

“You didn’t kiss me back,” I said shakily. He wrestled himself from under me, unpinning my hand from his chest. I sunk onto my thighs, my arms slack on the rumpled bed sheets.

“I’m sorry, I—” he choked on his words. “I didn’t expect—”

“What?” I cried, “What did you not expect? That I *care about you*?” He groaned in frustration and tangled his fingers in his unkempt curls.

“I don’t know!” He exclaimed. “I want you. I *want* you. But like that? It— it’s wrong! It’s wrong, Auguste...”

“It’s who I am,” I whispered, hurt. He inched closer, his shaking hands wrapping around mine. It was painful to look at. I tilted my head away.

“Please forgive me,” he said. “I will care for you and be there for you but there are some things I cannot depart from. From my obli—”

“—Your obligations, yeah,” I cut in. “I’ve heard it a thousand times.” I grew more offended, my hands clenched into fists. “I thought you had moved past this! We don’t exist in that world anymore, Cesaire!” I gestured to our humble hotel room. “We live *here*. We have *this*.” I motioned between the two of us, my hand drawing a line between our chests. “We are *us*.” He bowed his head in shame. I held mine high, unafraid of myself for the first time in years. I took his hands more solidly

in mine, trying one final time to allow him into me, one last respite. “I can be here for you, but only if you let me.”

“You don’t understand. What if we find Zenobie? She would never accept whatever this— this thing is.” I laughed— short and bitter.

“Eurynome seems content not making passes at Cleon,” I pointed out. “I do not see why Zenobie would not be the same.” He faltered, something clicking beneath the surface of his mind. “What,” I said, “What is it?”

“Uhh...”

“No, no, out with it.”

“I really shouldn’t—”

“Cesaire!”

“Erm...Eurynome kind of...told me that Cleon and Archaeus are...you know.”

“She said what!?” The irony of it all came crashing down upon me. “And you never took this as a sign that we might be perhaps compatible?” He smiled nervously, lopsided and defensive.

“I didn’t want to believe it?” He offered. I threw my head back and groaned.

“Oh my *God*, Cesaire.”

“Wha-a-a-at?”

“Seriously!?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay!” He chewed his lip, a moment of silence giving him just enough time to rethink the situation. He pulled himself closer, his chin resting on my shoulder. A sudden embrace. I carefully positioned my hands on the broad of his back, shocked to say the least.

“Why are you—”

“Shh,” he interrupted, “let’s just try this. Just for a second.” I blinked, confused. My neurons must have been misfiring, because I felt like I was dreaming.

“Okay...” I agreed timidly. I sat in relative stillness, allowing him to test the waters. We used to hold each other this way when we were much younger. Before my mother’s light began to fade, before he had considered courting Zenobie, a time when the only thing that mattered was blind hedonism. He breathed into me, our bodies becoming two lungs beating in sync. I could feel his muscles shifting and rippling beneath his skin, his bones splintering and melding, his blood pulsing and pumping. If I listened close enough, I swore I could hear his very thoughts.

“How do you feel?” I finally asked. He angled his chin up to look at me. There were soundless tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Happy,” he said. And then, quieter, “I hate that this makes me happy.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, instead cupping the back of his head in my hands and pulling him back to my shoulder, shushing him.

“If you are brought joy, is it really such a terrible thing?” He sighed, shyly peering back up at me.

“No, I reckon not,” he answered. I smiled, mellow and calm.

“Then why don’t you embrace it? Forget about anything outside of this room. Pretend we are isolated pinpricks in time. We’re floating in an abyss.” His eyes flashed, this seemed to resonate with him.

“An...abyss?” He repeated. I pet his soft hair down, smoothing it to his temple.

“A place of nothing but this very moment,” I explained. “What would you do if the context of everything was entirely irrelevant?” He exhaled dramatically, gazed to the ceiling as if to pray, and clutched my face in his hands.

“Probably this.” He dove in, awkward and unsure, but driven nonetheless. Our lips met, intertwined, became one thing. I could feel his rough scars and scabs on my smooth skin. It was perfect. I gripped him harder, my hands wrapped in his curls. His hands traveled down to my

collar, where he pulled me as far as I could go. He made a gentle noise as I bent myself into him. I lost all reference for time. We made that room our own little world. We pulled away after only a handful of seconds. Neither of us said anything at first. We looked at each other. I mean, we really *looked* at each other. Like we were gazing upon each other for the first time, trying to process every winged edge, every haloed wisp of hair, every flawless curve and dip and line. I pressed my palm to his, tenderly, timidly, tentatively. He followed suit, our fingers weaving together. Something firm and true. An old rock worn and steadfast in the flow of a river. I noticed everything about him all at once. His amber eyes reflecting the wallpaper on their wet surfaces. His coy smile revealing young crow's feet. His knuckles salmon pink and bruised. I lifted my arm to tuck a fly hair behind his ear, but he grabbed my wrist and pushed it back into my lap.

“What’s wrong—”

“Please. I need...I need to think.” He curled his legs to his torso, wrapping his arms around them like a safeguard. He looked hesitant. *No, more than that.* He looked assailed. I nodded slowly. I knew he would have difficulty adjusting. He needed time. Time we might not have. Time I had to grant him. Time I hated that I had to.

“I understand,” I said. “Let’s just...go to bed, okay? We have another long day of driving ahead of us.”

“Okay,” he murmured avoidantly. I slid off of his bed, feeling stiff and robotic. I struggled to give him a passing glance. I feared it would hurt too much.

The lamp was turned off. We climbed under our covers. We lay there in the pitch darkness on our backs. Not daring to say so much as ‘goodnight’ to the other. A sickening rot brewed in my stomach. An illness. A disease. *You’re so stupid,* the voice in my head chastised me. *You’re disgusting. You kissed him. You kissed him again and you let him*

*fool you. Foolish, foolish, foolish*— I let the voice continue to drone on, muffling it with a wall of fog in my mind.

It was difficult to sleep. The heater near the plastic-blind-covered window groaned and stirred all night long, flooding the room with dry air. Sounds of car tires running through rainwater pools echoed in the streets. The stagnant buzz of the smoke detector rattled me. I shivered beneath my layers of quilted sheets. I kept replaying that blissful smidge of heaven behind my eyelids. Torturing myself while my iron maiden slept an arm's length away. I drifted off eventually, but when I did, my dreams were haunted. I will never know what images my brain conjured up that night, but the emotions they carried will permeate the landscape of my mind forever. Self-hatred. Pathetic longing. Strange flickers of blazing ardor. Then nothing. Nothing at all.



## XVI: Cesaire

I'd had a fair amount of 'morning afters' in my life. I was used to pulling the covers over my head, averting my gaze, and stealing away to the shower when she wandered off to change. There was no such respite here. He was still sleeping when I crept out of bed and began to pack our things. I changed into a new shirt and jeans, threw on my cable knit sweater from the day before, and tried to brush out my hair. It was frazzled—unnaturally pulled and twisted. I put my fingers to the ends, cringing. *That was where he touched me.* I avoided the mirror for the rest of the morning. I tried to get us out of the door and back onto the road without a word. He seemed to be in agreement, almost pretending like nothing had happened. Then, I was possessed by the unexpected. Doubt crept up my throat, clawing to be heard. We were walking out of the cluttered lobby into the brisk autumn air when the words came to me.

"I'm sorry," I said. He didn't look at me. He was combing through a velvet coin purse, counting our change for gas, his hands gloved against the crisp morning. He was wearing a wool overcoat with a collar that shielded the left side of his face from me so I couldn't tell how he felt. I tried again. "Was it...good for you?" *If he wasn't terribly off-put, maybe I could still salvage this.* His head slowly tilted up and he snapped the purse shut.

"Good for me?" he echoed. He turned to stare at me down the bridge of his nose. "Was it good enough for *you*?" My teeth chattered and I shook my head.

"No, no, I'm sorry," I said. "I liked it, it's just—"

"—Too much for you?" he cut in. I pulled away, my hands dropping to my sides. It was too late. He was already spinning on his heel and making a beeline for the car. He pulled his door open and threw

himself inside, his arms crossed. I followed at a normal pace and sat beside him as quietly as I could manage.

“You have to understand,” I tried, “this is new to me. You have...um...experience. Correct?” He wound his arms tighter, practically squeezing himself. There was a stagnant moment and I cleared my throat, gearing up for my last resort. “I think I-uh. I think I liked it,” I said hoarsely. I stared at the dashboard, my hands growing white as I crushed the steering wheel in my grasp. When I looked over, his eyes were wide. I turned the key in the ignition. I pressed my foot on the gas pedal. I pulled out of the parking lot.

“I liked it too,” Auguste finally replied. I had nothing to say to that. Every time the sensation of our lips meeting returned to me I blinked hard, trying to dispel the memory. Trying to shove down the way it made me feel. Still, my eyes continued to wander over to the passenger side of the car, and each time I stole a half-second from the road to look at him, my fears seemed to dissipate. *No matter*, I thought, dispelling the moment, *I have a long drive ahead of me. Focus on the road. Plenty of time to wallow and deliberate.* Plenty of time to leave Fairbanks behind.

The landscape grew more sparse as we trekked further north. Little towns became fainter. The trees stretched taller and wilder, reaching to the bone-dry sun. Even the road twisted into a winding thin line, hardly a highway at all. I leaned into the rhythm of driving. Releasing the pedals when I needed to let go. Turning the wheel when I needed to change. Checking the gas gauge when I needed to center myself. It was the same landscape for quite some time. I simply rolled our old chariot along. Eventually, we encountered a pale girder bridge spanning a murky sepia river. Auguste leaned out his window to observe the water below—steady and calm on the surface, but moving its varied debris along at a dizzying rate. A muted green sign told us this was the

Yukon River. He unfolded the map and tapped his finger on our location.

“This is the only fording of the entire river,” he said. “At least on this map.”

“The more you know...” I replied. It still felt strange to carry any sort of conversation with him, no matter how much I desired it.

“Will you put another tape in?” he asked out of the blue. I smiled and obliged, slotting what must have been our twelfth tape into the car’s player. This one had been an addition from K’aayhltla, who had a peculiar taste in music. It was rough, obscene, and worst of all, loud. Auguste seemed to enjoy it though. I decided to let the distorted guitar riffs of the tape (and three more after it) carry us to our destination. Speaking was losing its *je ne sais quoi*, after all.

It was only a few hours later that we finally pulled into something resembling a settlement. Small industrial ranch-style buildings peppered a clearing of dirt-razed land. A mixture of dark spruces and bright pines cluttered the surrounding area, alluding to the wilderness. Huge, sloping, jagged peaks held this nobody town in a swooped bowl. I pulled into a muddy ‘parking lot’ beside a few other trucks and two oil-drum-bearing semis. There was a frontier-style truckstop, a smattering of sheet metal houses, and a lot of empty, dirty land marred by filthy muck-puddles. I swung my door open, my boots squelching in the dust-coated mud as I stepped out. Auguste made an uncomfortable face, still not entirely acclimated to the rural Alaskan conditions.

“Did Cleon say where we needed to go specifically?” He asked hesitantly, his hands wrought and tugging up his jean cuffs.

“There’s a contact here,” I responded. “We’re supposed to talk to them at this tavern and ask for the ‘French Special’...whatever that means.” He groaned and slipped on his leathery gloves.

“It’s referring to us, Cesaire,” he explained with a deadpan dryness.

“I gathered that!” I quipped back. I swung open the heavy door, the splintered handle digging into my bare palm. The interior was humble and homely. Folding chairs and tables instead of proper furniture, stuffed trophy animals mounted on the low walls, and a handful of grizzled men hunched over rich American fare coupled with steaming mugs of bitter coffee. There was one woman, and she looked like she had seen better days. Her auburn hair was frizzy but unkempt, as if she had taken a flat iron to a bad perm. Her skin was sinewy and weather-beaten. Her eyes squinted as if they had stared directly into the sun one too many times. I knew almost immediately she was our contact. I slipped past the loggers, truckers, and world-weary men enjoying their only local meal available, and took a seat across from the lone woman. She hardly looked up from her mid-day beer, only offering a barely-audible grunt of recognition. We sat in awkward silence, and I itched to get to the point. As if on cue, a chipper young server was summoned to our table.

“I didn’t know you were taking guests, Winnie,” the baby-faced teenager said. Winnie huffed, waving her crooked fingers in the waitress’s direction.

“I’m not,” she croaked. She glared at us, her stormy eyes piercing my strained comfort. “What’ll you be *having*?” she asked. I hesitated, her scrutiny getting to me.

“Uh- um, the uh, the French Special?” I managed to blurt out. Auguste nodded rapidly.

“I’ll be having that also.” The waitress scratched her nose and awkwardly swayed her hips.

“Oh,” she said, “right. Okay, Winnie, you can have ‘em. I’ll just get y’all some...coffee and eggs?”

“That’ll be fine, thank you,” I said.

“Could you actually throw in some bacon too?” Auguste added. I kicked him under the table and he crossed his arms with a huff.

“Get your act together,” Winnie snapped. We immediately turned our attention to her. She leaned back in her chair and kissed a cigarette to her lips, lighting it with a click. She blew the smoke out in a plume, the scent wafting around my head, reminding me of my old habits. I realized I hadn’t smoked since I left home. “So,” she began again, “do you know why yall’re here?”

“Yes,” Auguste said eagerly, “we’re here to be attuned for travel to the—” she raised a wizened hand.

“Shut up,” she said bluntly. “You’re here because I owe Pet a favor, nothing more. So if you so much as fuck up one little inch, it’s your head, alright?”

“Who do you owe—?” I tried to ask before she shot me a look so grim I forgot how to speak.

“Let’s start with the worst part,” she continued, “your names.” Auguste gestured to me.

“Well, I’m Auguste Marsan, and that’s Cesaire Vielescot, ma’am.” She narrowed her eyes and took a swig from her tan-washed bottle.

“Stupid sounding names,” she said and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “You can call me Winifred. Try not to wear it out.”

“I thought that girl called you Winnie?” Auguste asked naively.

“She *gets* to call me Winnie,” she bit back. He shrunk away nervously, nodding.

“And who *is* she?” I asked tentatively. She gave a haggard sigh, all of the questions waying heavy on her frail temper.

“That’s Misty,” she answered, “...regrettably.” Her voice was thin and weary, and I got the impression that Misty was something of a handful. I leaned over the cold plastic-topped table.

“What do we have to do?” I asked. Winifred exhaled dramatically, accentuating her exasperation.

“Wait for your eggs, boy,” she instructed. She squinted at Auguste.

“You’re a strange specimen, huh?” she said. “Look too clean and shiny for the last frontier. What’d you use to be— some hedge fund manager’s son? A Bahamian hotelier heir? No, wait, let me guess. You went to Cornell.”

“What’s that?” Auguste asked, befuddled. She chuckled, her lips wrapped around the rim of her beer.

“Yall’re from further back then,” she said. Auguste and I shared a look, as if to evaluate whether or not giving out personal information was a safe course of action. Despite my warning eyes, he went for it.

“1846,” he replied, “France.”

“Hah, well, that explains the ridiculous names.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re particularly odd,” I countered. “They’re quite typical for our era and locality.”

“Yeah,” Auguste jeered, “no more unusual than yours. What kind of a name is *Winifred*, anyways?”

“It’s Welsh,” she said.

“You’re from Wales?” I asked. I had scarcely met any British folk in my lifetime, let alone someone from once of the Empire’s lesser principalities.

“God, no,” she laughed. “Don’t know much about America, huh kid?” We both shook our heads, admitant of our ignorance. “I’m not Welsh as far as I know,” she explained. “My maternal grandparents immigrated from Cornwall and my father’s side is Ulster-Scots, but I

couldn't give a crap about that. I'm an American, born and raised. When it comes down to it, it doesn't matter where you're from or even where you've been. Just where you are now." Her words hardly had time to sit in the stale air before Misty arrived to throw two tin plates of syrup-coated eggs on our table. She placed aluminum mugs of staunch dark coffee in front of each of us, and I caught her beaming face. She seemed satisfied with her work.

"That'll be all, Misty," Winifred instructed. Misty nodded curtly and skipped off to the kitchen, her bottle blonde hair bouncing as she did. Winifred flexed her knotted knuckles and cricked her neck.

"Alright boys," she said, "what've you got for me to sort out?"

"We need to be attuned," Auguste said between mouthfuls of sugary sweet omelet. "we're traveling to the Assembly, but we're anomalies."

"Good *lord*," she groaned. "Okay, finish your meal. I know what we've gotta do, but it ain't pretty." She began to grumble complaints under her breath, registering to my ears as a low, gravelly, rumbling.

"Is something the matter?" Auguste asked her. She rolled her eyes and finished the last of her watery beer.

"Pet didn't tell me I'd be— well, ugh. Never mind."

"*Who* is Pet?" I demanded.

"What, you don't know Petra?" Winifred asked. I shrugged.

"No, it was Cleon that said he knew you. Never heard of Petra."

"Hahah, of course," she moaned, "Pet's handing off favors to friends."

"So...Cleon and Petra know each other?" Auguste clarified.

"Ugh, unfortunately." Her voice dropped to a lower tone and she hunched her shoulders. "He's her brother's...you know...*boyfriend*." A wire snapped within my brain, sending showers of sparks down my

spine.. I heard Auguste's light gasp through my muffled ears— fogged over like morning glass.

“Philomena?” Auguste asked, his voice trembling. Winifred's eyes flashed like headlights, hollow and sharp.

“How do you know that na—” she began to ask before her eyes widened, recognition washing over her. “Oh.” She looked at me. “If you're Cleon's anomaly...then you must be...Archaeus.” Auguste leaned his head back, whimpers clawing at his lips. He was biting back tears, I could tell.

“She's alive,” he managed to say. “How?” Winifred glanced at the other patrons, some of whom were beginning to shift in their seats.

“Not here,” she said. “We can go to my house, c'mon.” We followed her as she swung by the kitchen, surprisingly limber for the condition of her body. She jerked her head at Misty, who quickly united her cream-colored apron to follow us out, seemingly abandoning her post. Winifred strode down the wide dirt road, dodging tire tracks and mud water. Her abode was only across the street— there weren't many of them around anyways. The walls were constructed with a rusty corrugated metal painted a garish sort of blue. The ceiling was bogged down by drifts of brown snow. She pushed her shoulder into the front door, showing us into a crowded lodge-style living room. She flicked her hands at us, shoos us inside. “Hurry up,” she snapped, “we haven't got all day.” I perched myself on a peat-green armchair and crossed my legs, impatient for answers. Auguste took a seat on the soft leather couch next to Misty. Winifred stood in front of the ashen fireplace, positioned to lecture us.

“Alright, alright,” she said, “Listen up. First things first, if y'all want to be attuned for travel you've got to temporarily assume an aligned state. It's the only way to trick the continuum that you're not a threat.”

“What does being aligned mean?” I asked. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“You *do* know there’s only supposed to be one version of you in the timeline, right?” We nodded. “Good. Then you should know that you’re currently violating that rule. In order to remedy that we’re going to bind you to another state of yourself somewhere in spacetime. It’s dangerous and definitely unethical, but it will convince the Assembly’s censors that you’re a reunified anomaly. At least for some time.”

“Reunified?” Auguste echoed. She let out another annoyed groan.

“That’s the only way to fix anomalies, boy. You’ve got to fuse them with their Origins. We’ll just be fusing you with a past or future version of yourself as you are now. Temporarily.”

“*That’s* how we save the universe?” I asked quietly. “We cease to be ourselves? We...die?”

“It’s not a physical death per se,” she replied, “more like an ego death. Yes, you’ll become one body again, but you’ll still be alive. Just...alive the way you were intended to be.” Auguste reached over the gap between us to grip my arm.

“We can’t go through with this!” he hissed.

“We have to!”

“Yes,” Winifred added, “you have to. And your time is running out. So, do you want to let reality collapse or will you listen?” Auguste bowed his head, his silent tears returning. “You asked about Petra,” she continued, “and I’ll tell you. She was an anomaly once, but before that she was an ambassador of the Assembly. She traversed millennia in moments, intended to be an unobtrusive guardian angel of the epochs. That was until she betrayed her sacred code. She became enamored with a young man from an ancient Greek colony. She gave Cleon the ambrosia, allowing him to traverse the timeline. He was a civilian, a

nobody. He spread the nectar he had left to his friends, and soon enough our cosmos was destabilizing. Petra was bonded to Archaeus in their little French haven, made to be his sister by their false identities. They still accept this— through a mutual adoption or some sort. How should I know?” She sighed. “Anyways,” she picked up again, “she needed to amend her grave mistake. So, she reunified. Philomena no more.”

“Wh-where is she now?” Auguste stuttered.

“Where do you think?”

“The Assembly...” he whispered, defeated. He tilted his head to look at me. “We have to go, Cesaire,” he said with a dejected sigh. I pressed the heels of my hands to my temples, shaking my head.

“No, no,” I said, “we can’t. I can’t. I’m not ready to— to die.” Winifred groaned.

“God, we don’t have time to deliberate,” she complained, “you’re not going to *die*. Once you get back from the Assembly it’ll all go back to normal. You can choose whether or not you want to fuse with your Origins at a later date. But don’t fret now, because Pet told me this was dire, and like all things these days, time-sensitive.” We exchanged a weary glance. I waited for his signal, not used to having no time to lament about difficult choices. My life had been so easy. I yearned for simplicity in that moment. What I would give to fret over my duties at church, marrying Zenobie, and attending Leonie’s galas. I closed my eyes and imagined an easier landscape. White sand beaches, foamy shores, lush botanical gardens. Opening them only revealed my bleak reality. Gray walls, sooty floors, paper-draped windows. Then, I remembered what I had found in this wasteland world. People that understood me. That needed me. A world I felt uninhibited by. Auguste. I pushed my hair back.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” I forced a meager smile and extended my hand to Auguste, who took it firmly in his. We locked eyes and I rubbed his

fingers reassuringly. He drew a final breath before turning to Winifred with a look of fear-filled determination.

“Me too.” She nodded, her expression hard-set and slightly glum.

“Alright then,” she said. “Follow me.” We got up, careful and hesitant, and followed her outside, through her steel-netted doorway and into her yard. It was a dull afternoon by then— bunched clouds had rolled overhead like a herd of wandering animals hunkering down for the winter. The ‘yard’ as it was lacked much character. Dead shrubbery had been overtaken by invasive weeds, there was an abandoned grill tossed lopsided in the pale dirt, and the yard was only walled by a handful of bony deciduous trees. Winifred strode over to an old water pump coated in overgrown blackberry vines. She cocked her head at Misty, who took the cue to begin ripping off the thorny greenery (although it was so arid and life-sucked it hardly came across as flora at all). Winifred traced her hand along the pump’s rust-ridden edges, searching its grooves with blind tactility. Finally, I heard a faint click, and I noticed a small vial of frosted glass resting on the lichen-dotted concrete slab below the faucet. A few drops of a golden liquid like pearls of sunshine tapered into the bottle, their luminosity quickly eclipsed by its dirty exterior. She pinched the vial between her index and forefinger, holding it up to her squinted eyes.

“Been a while since I made use of this stuff,” she muttered. Misty gazed on in quiet awe. I wondered if she was from this time originally. If she had any idea what conspiracy she was embroiled with. Winifred shrugged, deeming the liquid adequate, and shoved it into Auguste’s quavering hands. “You first,” she instructed.

“What do I—?”

“Just hold it.” She reached into her jean pocket, extracting a miniature cork, and popped it into the mouth of the bottle. “I’ll do the real work.” He held it like it was radioactive— tentative and confused.

She began to whisper an unheard poem. Auguste stood there awkwardly, his feet planted in the dandelions like unsure pillars. I felt a cool slippery object placed in my hands, like a jumping fish. I looked up, startled. Misty had handed me a small jug with a pool of glittering gold gathered at its base. She still looked so young, but her eyes were filled with a confident wisdom that almost succeeded in reassuring me. I held my container nervously and waited for a sign. A seasick feeling coiled on the floor of my stomach. That room-spinning sensation I hadn't felt since I was pulled through time returned to me, and I felt like throwing up. My blood was on fire. My eyes were burning. The bottle left my lips. I yelped, surprised. I hadn't noticed drinking from it in the first place. I saw Misty's face through my spotted vision, her hand guiding it away from my mouth. My sight began to fill with glimpses of a life abandoned. The raggedy yard spilled with reflections of poolside waves. I felt a warmth emanate from within me. The unmistakable touch of a Mediterranean sunrise. I could see it. Bands of yellow, orange, and pink peeking over the frosting-smooth sea. I felt new burdens settle on my shoulders.

“Cesaire?” The voice was distant, a muddied recording playing in the inner recesses of my ear. I turned around, or at least tried to. My limbs were so heavy and bogged down, I felt like I was like I was walking through molasses. It didn't matter, her face appeared to me anyway. Zenobie, the way she was supposed to look. She floated forward, moving through space dream-like and unreal. Her coiled hair was wrapped into a chignon, and she was draped in a periwinkle dress with a boat neck that exposed her protruding collar bones and rich olive-tanned skin.

“Zenobie,” I tried to say. My mouth made the motions, shaping each vowel with care, but I wasn't certain any sound came out. Before she could respond, I was unceremoniously snapped back to the future. I collapsed in the beige grass, my chest heaving, forcing sparkling golden spit out of my lungs. Auguste looked similarly affected— in fact, he

looked rather dismayed. I reached for him, still seeing double, and missed his hand by a few inches.

“What did— where am—? What’s happening?” he rambled. He rubbed his eyes violently. “Wait,” he said, sounding more sure of himself, “Winifred?” She bent down and felt his forehead with the back of her calloused hand.

“You’re going to be disoriented for a few minutes,” she told him. “You’ve been joined with your past self. I mean, ‘past’ is a relative term, not an objective one, but you get the idea.” She leaned back, cracking her back. “Just breathe, I don’t want to watch you all day. Lord knows I’ve got enough of my own shit to deal with.” My mind was whispering to me. Actually, I wasn’t sure what ‘my’ meant anymore. I was in two states of being at the same time. Some freakish mistake of quantum entanglement. Buried beneath my surface was a confused version of myself, young and trapped. It was downright immoral, but still, I had to ignore it. I trembled, hoisting myself to my feet with unsteady arms.

“What the *hell* is wrong with me?” I asked Winifred, my voice harsh and unfamiliar on my own tongue.

“There will be a slight *adjustment* period,” she reassured me, “but ultimately, you’ll be just fine. What’s important now is getting to the Assembly, is it not?” Auguste massaged his head and groaned.

“I guess we’re in a...time crunch,” he managed to say. His words were slurred and unstable, like they weren’t really his own. Nothing was our own. We walked back to the truck, feeling dazed and seasick. Every step I took had an added weight to it, and I wasn’t sure if my body was moving in time with the physical landscape around me. Winifred leaned on the side door of the truck and Misty stood primly next to her. I still couldn’t place why either of them were so involved with our grand conspiracy.

“Who are you guys, really?” I asked, my voice pinched and warped. Misty seemed eager to respond, wasting no time to provide an answer, in fact.

“Field agents,” she helpfully supplied. “I’m apprenticing under Winnie’s brilliant tutelage. She knows *way* more about—”

“—Thank you, Misty, that’s enough,” Winifred cut her off. “You boys should really be going. I don’t want to be getting an urgent correspondence accusing me of holding up a degeneration restoration mission to the Assembly of all places. I’m not exactly in great standing with them, what with me being stationed out here and everything. So, y’all better drive fast.”

“Don’t you think this is all a little rushed?” I asked tentatively. Auguste shook his head and slid into the passenger seat, waving for me to join him.

“She’s right, Cesaire,” he said, “let’s just go. Please.” I gritted my teeth and reluctantly marched myself to the other side of the car. I stared down the two women with my hand on the hood, a last warning of my suspicion. I swung myself inside the cabin and carefully pulled out of the mud-mauled lot, leaving Coldfoot with a new set of burdens, shiny and useless.

From there, our ride home began. Except we were not returning to the land of our birth, we were imbued with warped semblances of our younger selves, and the future was a misted mirror— an unknowable reflection upon the surface of a lake. I watched Auguste flip through our cassette collection as we sped down the highway. His legs were bunched up and tucked into his chest, and he had cracked his window half-down, whipping his curls in the westerly wind. There was something so unsure about the way he furrowed his brow at the titles scrawled on each tape. I squinted my eyes at a passing road sign, and my heart sank when I realized what was happening to us. It took three passes for my mind to

expel a French-coated pronunciation of the words. I gasped, and quickly focused my eyes on the road unfolding in front of me.

“What’s wrong?” Auguste asked me without looking up.

“N-nothing,” I quickly replied.

“Hm,” he hummed, “okay.” I was slipping. I was losing everything I had been given here, everything I had built for myself. We needed to fix Eurynome fast, because I couldn’t stand remaining being bonded with my lesser self for much longer. *Lesser self*, I thought. *What does that even mean?* It was curious. To think that a backup version of myself had been plucked from another timeline and forced to take up residence in the backwaters of my brain. The logic behind it made me dizzy. *Would the Assembly really not notice? Would they see two versions of one person fused together and assume ‘reunified anomaly’ or would it all be for not? Would I ever survive this? Would I lose everything I had worked for? I can’t*, I thought to myself. *I finally have a life that’s not suffocating me. I have to fight for it.*

“What are we listening to?” I asked Auguste without turning my head. He leaned in to squint at the tape in his hand closer, turning it over to examine its scuffed exterior.

“Three...Dog...Night?” he responded after a second of hesitation. “Three Dog Night. What a unique name for a man.” I cocked a brow and laughed under my breath.

“I’m not sure it’s a man’s name,” I said. “Does the track list look good?”

“Seems to be. The last song is called ‘Joy to the World’...”

“Like the Psalm?”

“You’re going to be so awful when you can attend Mass again.” There was a pause, and then we both started to laugh. It was peaceful, almost meditative. I leaned into the growl of concrete on thick tires, the

rising and falling of his breath, and the little pitched whine rattling within my skull. I couldn't hear any of it after a while.

## XVII: Auguste

We pulled into Moose Pass late on the third day, when the pin-straight sticks of dead trees were only backlit by starlight and the cloud-obscured moonface. It was a short and silent trek from the gravel driveway to the cabin, and our shoes scuffed against the ground in a tired, dragging pattern. There was an unmistakable feeling of weariness hanging over us. Cesaire swung open the door, revealing the welcoming glow of the living room with all of our housemates crowded inside. Phebah perked up, flashing me a nervous grin.

“You’re back!” she exclaimed. I gave her an awkward hug, my arms feeling heavy against my own body. Cesaire and I hastily untied our boots and collapsed onto the couch, squeezing into the armrest next to Phebah and Azeem.

“Where’s Eurynome?” Cesaire asked.

“She’s upstairs resting,” Cleon answered from the shadow of the doorframe. His arms were crossed and his face was bowed. I pressed my lips and nodded.

“Can we see her?” I asked. Phebah looked at Cleon expectantly, as if to urge him on. He groaned, pinching his nose bridge.

“Very quickly,” he said. “We’re going to leave for the Assembly first thing in the morning, and I want her to reserve her strength as much as possible.” He began to walk up the creaking stairs and Cesaire and I followed him, our damp socks squeaking on the hardwood. The upstairs was stuffy and dry, and I recoiled at the thick musk of illness. Eurynome was sprawled across her bed, the bunched quilts layered on top swallowing her frail shape. The lines of her face were more heavy-set and prominent now, carved like canyons into her skin. The front of her hair had completely silvered and grayed, leaving her looking washed out. She shuddered, coughing quietly.

“You’re back...” she mumbled. I crouched beside her bed and clasped her hands in mine, reassuring her.

“Yes,” I said, “we’ve returned, and don’t you worry. We’re taking you to get healed of all your ills at first light. You are going to be perfectly fine.” Cesaire leaned down to gaze upon her, and it was no doubt more difficult for him to muster than for me. The wizened and broken face of a woman he once loved—hardly that person at all. I saw his eyes growing wet but he quickly wiped it away with the sleeve of his shirt. Eurynome’s thin mouth curved into a slight smile. She dropped my hand and moved her attention towards Cesaire. It was a simple moment I didn’t feel entirely privy to. Cleon must’ve felt worse than all of us. I avoided looking in his direction.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered. Cesaire nodded, his fingers rubbing her protruding knuckles tenderly.

“I’m right here,” he said back in a hushed tone. “Right here, right here...” I suppose neither of us were expecting her to have deteriorated so quickly. A few more seconds passed in deep silence as Cesaire comforted Eurynome like a madonna cradling her infant child.

“I think you should go now,” Cleon muttered, placing a stern hand on Cesaire’s shoulder. He recoiled from the touch, still visibly uncomfortable with contact from his Origin. Cleon brushed his hands off on the hem of his tunic and stepped aside to allow us to file out of the room. He carefully shut the door behind us, staying behind to have some conversation with Eurynome. Despite my curiosity, I opted not to eavesdrop, instead walking across the hall to fall into the embrace of my bed. Cesaire lingered outside of our bedroom, one leg dragging behind him.

“Care to join?” I asked. He dithered for a moment before shaking his head. I frowned, leaning back on my stiff pillows, and watched him disappear downstairs.

There must've been dinner that night, but whatever it was, it didn't register with me and I did not attend. It wasn't until a handful of hours later that I snuck down to the kitchen and assembled a few snacks from the pantry to eat on the couch alone by the flicker of lamplight. I was curled up with a bowl of straight hummus and a scratched spoon when I heard the chatter of late-night voices. Phebah, Azeem, and Cesaire were standing on the front porch, obliviously talking after a starlit stroll. I sucked on my spoon, admittedly a bit jealous I hadn't been invited. I leaned my head on the curtained window, trying to catch a word or two. It was a quick relapse for me, as I had resolved not to be a snoop just two hours prior.

"-You're going to love it there," Phebah said to someone. She sounded more virtuous than usual and I shoved my cheek into the glass to get a better listen.

"-I'm not so sure," Cesaire's voice responded, loud and clear. "It's only intended to be a temporary trip and I'm not sure how much longer I can stand sharing my psyche with a regressive sliver of myself."

"Think of it as a path home. You won't get closer to a shot at normalcy than the Assembly." There was a pause. I strained, hoping to catch what may be whispering. Alas, it was only a lapse in conversation.

"I'm not sure 'normalcy' is what he is seeking, Phebah," I heard Azeem say. There was a shifting of weight on creaky porch boards.

"It's true..." Cesaire admitted. "You've heard how that road trip went. I like it here! I'm a changed man. What am I supposed to return to? I'd even rather stay in the Assembly." I heard muffled laughter.

"Ahahah, stay in the Assembly!" Phebah snorted. "You haven't even seen it yet! And trust me, you won't be terribly incentivized to stay when you do."

“Oh, you’re just jealous that you’re not a denizen,” Azeem cut in. There was some inaudible tussling before I finally heard Cesaire’s voice slice through the fray once more. I lifted my head to listen.

“–There’s nothing wrong with Antibes on principle, no, it’s just that I’m not sure that Auguste and I could...” He trailed off. “Well,” he resumed, “you said that the Assembly is a place devoid of judgment. That’s all. The sea may be rejuvenating in my hometown, but I will be judged.”

“We can all stand to be judged a little...” Phebah quipped. I heard the rustle of footsteps and fabric, Cesaire had no doubt shoved her. I laughed a bit in spite of myself. Still, the conversation sat uneasy with me. *Was Cesaire finally coming around to what I had so dangerously proposed the night before? Hell, what I had been proposing for many years? Well, he had admitted that he was becoming fascinated with the future, what with his research and all.* I supposed it could be plausible. Before I could think much more I heard the click of the lock being unbolted and quickly turned my attention down to my bowl as to appear inconspicuous when they walked in. Phebah was startled by my presence, jumping as she caught sight of me huddled on a swaddle of blankets chowing down my hummus. I must have looked like a fright.

“Oh!” she yelped, “I didn’t– uhm. I didn’t see you there, Auguste!” I shrugged and continued to nibble on my spoon. I glanced at Cesaire, meeting his eyes accusingly. Hopefully he got the hint and would come clean to me eventually.

“You should all be sleeping soon,” I remarked nonchalantly. Phebah nodded in agreement while Azeem and Cesaire shuffled their feet. I raised a brow and leaned back with a sense of self-satisfaction.

“Well,” I said, “that settles that. Care to follow me upstairs, Cesaire?” Phebah and Azeem turned to him expectantly. He obliged and began walking towards the stairs. I stretched with an exaggerated yawn,

set my bowl and utensil on the coffee table, and made my way there with him.

“Goodnight Phebah. Azeem.” I said with a plain smile, “Bright and early?”

“Yeah, mhm, yeah” they agreed. Cesaire leaned into my ear.

“Don’t push the niceties,” he hissed, “everyone knows those windowpanes are thinner than pencil lead, you were clearly eavesdropping.” I scoffed in mock astonishment, pressing my hand to my chest as if his scorn had wounded me.

“I would do nothing of the sort,” I defended, “just nonsense!” He rolled his eyes and began climbing the stairs.

“Whatever.”

“Oh, come on, it was some light listening in. You have a loud voice! Booming and echoing in proclamation for the whole house to hear! Like a town crier you are.” He spun around at the top of the staircase, his hand gripping the railing.

“You don’t get it!” he snapped. “There are some things I can’t tell you because you’d mis-contextualize them and make it a whole...issue!”

“Since when have I ever made anything an *issue*?”

“Seriously?” He retaliated. I crossed my arms and stomped up the uneven steps, making a beeline for our bedroom.

“I thought we’d come to an understanding,” I grumbled. He pursued me, leaning into the doorframe with a cross expression.

“You’re acting childish.”

“Well, *you’re* being secretive!”

“Haven’t we always been discretionary?” he asked. I let my shoulders untense and sighed, crumpling onto the freshly-made sheets of my bed.

“Not since we *kissed*, Cesaire,” I said wearily. I massaged my temples, the glaring irony and obviousness of the situation weighing on

me like a poorly skilled poet's first attempt at symbolism. "We kissed," I started again, this time more firm. "We deserve to have an open dialogue. We've tried being forthcoming friends, we've tried being reticent acquaintances, Hell, we've even tried being nothing at all, but it's clear none of those routes will deliver us to our desired destination." He slowly shut the door behind him, backing into its wood and turning the lock all while maintaining intense eye contact with me. He said nothing and I threw my hands in the air in frustration. "Jesus, Cesaire, you know perfectly well what I'm implying. *You* initiated it the second time. The responsibility is ours to share."

"I'd call it blame," he finally responded.

"Would you just come here?" I asked. He didn't move. "Come on, Cesaire. We're going to the Assembly tomorrow. We have no idea if anything will ever be the same again. I mean, look at us now. Nothing is as it was, but it could be drastically different. We may never have the liberty of normalcy once more." I thought for a moment, his earlier words dawning on me. "Is that why you want to take residence there? As an escape from our previous life?" He cast his eyes downward.

"I don't wish to escape from *you*," he said.

"Litotes," I teased, "how direct and unsubtle of you."

"Irony," he replied with a wavering smile, "how civil and polite of you."

"*I am* a proper gentleman," I played along. He slowly approached me, tentatively sitting next to me on the small edge of the bed.

"I'll admit this is terrifying for me— what we have set into motion," he said. I joined our hands, caressing his cold fingers.

"I know. But it is of our own volition, no other hand at play."

“...For that would be an act of God,” he finished my phrase with a soft laugh. “Quoting your own verse, Auguste? Not very gracious, is it?”

“I knew you would recognize it,” I explained, “and to recycle my own feeble words feels more genuine than employing the acclaimed words of another man.”

“I suppose you are right,” he said. He leaned into my shoulder, and it took a great deal of restraint not to begin stroking his soft locks right then and there. “So it is a cruel fate that has led us here.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said. He sighed, playing with our entwined hands.

“What should we do?” he asked, almost to no one. “What are we *doing*?” I pulled him closer to me.

“We’re just being people.” He smirked, peeking up at me.

“You make it sound so simple.”

“I often do when I am so very tired,” I replied. He lifted his head from my flank and stretched out, yawning.

“You’re right,” he said, “I’m on the verge of collapse.”

“Perhaps it would be wise to sleep then.”

“I’m gonna...brush and floss. Get ready for bed...you know.” I heaved myself off of the bed, and he followed suit.

“I know,” he said, walking out of the room. There was a calming, domestic feeling to our nighttime routine. It always sucked us out of the whirlpool that was an argument or likewise heavy mood. We were equally fascinated by the modern amenities of electric toothbrushes and backlit mirrors as we were by the time-tested pleasantries of washcloths and hand soap. Most of all, I think we just appreciated the ritual of each other’s company. Soon before bed I had retreated to our dark bedroom to change into my night boxers while he was still washing his face across

the hall. I leaned against my bed and observed him comb over every careful detail of his appearance.

“And I thought I was the vain one,” I said coyly. He lifted his head from the sink, his hands still dripping water and his face still wet.

“What did you say to me?” he said with each syllable drawn out slowly. I crossed my legs and stretched my arms onto my knees.

“Why don’t you come on over and find out?”

“Oh, I—” He charged over, tackling me onto the bed. I laughed. Loudly. He covered my mouth with his still-damp palms and I squealed, squirming to get out from under him. He wouldn’t budge, and I struggled for a second before successfully kicking him square in the stomach. He buckled onto the carpet. There was a moment of dramatic eye contact before we both began to laugh uncontrollably.

“This is nice,” I said as sweetly as I could muster between gasps. He rested his chin and forearms on the edge of the bed.

“I wish it could last. Be this way. Longer.” I frowned, folding myself over to meet him at eye level.

“We can’t stay here forever, Cesaire. Eurynome is disintegrating or something awful of the sort. Zenobie needs to be rescued from her turnstile-time hellscape. The entire universe—”

“I understand what must be done,” he interjected. “That can differ from what I desire could be true.”

“I understand,” I said softly. His somber glower lit up almost instantly.

“I— Well. I don’t think you’ve ever said that to me before,” he said.

“But of course I have,” I replied, puzzled. “Haven’t I?” He shook his head and sighed wistfully.

“We’re always knee-deep in disagreement,” he pointed out. I sat up, feeling peculiar.

“Huh. We are, aren’t we?” He nodded. I glanced at the clock on the bedside table that separated our beds. “Wow. We should really go to bed. Actually.”

“Oh, Gosh. Yeah.” He shot me a parting smile before carefully slinking off to his own side of the room while I remained in mine. I slipped under my covers and stared at the dark ceiling. I didn’t need to ignore his breathing anymore. It made me grow drowsy now, after all. So, without much fanfare, we slept in those beds for perhaps the final time.

That morning was early and frantic. Everyone was rushing somewhere, clamoring about to ensure they had everything in its rightful place, and that they hadn’t made any grave mistakes that would prevent them from safely traveling. My air of anxiety was mainly sourced from the fact I still had no idea how we would actually be *getting* to the Assembly. I meandered into the kitchen, feeling a bit disoriented. K’aayhltla was packing a wicker basket with stacks of jams, preserves, and metal cans full of berries, shredded fish, slaws, and beans. Phebah was raiding the pantries. She was stretched on her tippy toes and swiping blindly through the cabinets for spare food. Azeem and Melem-Iram were out front, hauling the last of the firewood into a secure shelter. I watched them through the lacey curtains as I reclined against the turquoise countertop. I wasn’t allowed much time to relax before I saw Cleon stepping into the room, his arms cradling a bundle of laundry.

“We don’t need to do that!” Phebah pointed out without turning away from her frenetic task. “We can always travel back to this day exactly. No clothes-washing necessary.”

“You forget the changing chanceful nature of fate,” he said coolly. “We leave this place unattended and it could go to ruin, we have no idea if the house will even be standing once we return. Time is fickle like that. Remove one keystone of its ecosystem and you stand to destroy the entire system. That’s the consequence of nonlinear living, my dear

Phebah.” She groaned and dropped down to her flat bare feet, a can of split pea soup in hand.

“Always the intellectual, *Cleon*,” she grinned wily. He didn’t answer, his mind clearly preoccupied with more dire straits. He instead turned himself to me and jerked his thumb towards the backdoor.

“You’re needed in the shed,” he said. “We’ll be ready to leave in just shy of twenty minutes.” He swiped K’aayhltla’s hamper from her supposed iron grip. “There will be plenty of sustenance there, you know that. Let’s get going.” She glared at him, her wrinkles forming harsh cuts on her forehead.

“They have edible morsels,” she said, “not food.” She gestured to the non-perishables she had packed. “*These* are food. You best believe I’m sustaining myself on the real thing as long as possible.” He rolled his eyes and began to walk away. I got the memo and followed him into the backyard, giving K’aayhltla and Phebah an awkward parting wave. Cleon strode with purpose, nearly slamming open the shed’s door with all of the force he strangled into it. In only a handful of days, the building’s interior had been completely gutted. Gone was the monstrous network of wires, beeping lights, and metal bits sticking out at odd angles. All that remained was a small chestnut table with eight pearly vials of nectar-like liquid set on its sheen surface and waiting to be consumed.

“This must be the ambrosia I have been told of,” I said lightly.

“So they are,” he replied. “Cesaire and the rest should be here shortly. Then we shall all drink from time’s unholy spring and pray that nothing goes awry.”

“Do you mean *pear-shaped*?” a weak voice said from the ajar door frame. I spun around, shocked to see a hardly-stable Eurynome slumped against the wall. Her dark curls were slick and stuck to her face with beads of sweat, and her skin was alarmingly green-ish and pallid.

“Oh my God!” Cleon yelled, rushing to her aid. He wrapped his arms around her to stabilize her lopsided posture, holding her in her armpits as his best attempt of support. “Where did you come from?” he asked worriedly.

“Don’t worry,” Melem-Iram said, stepping into the room with Azeem close behind him. “We brought her.” Cleon dragged her, with some effort, over to the table and slowly let her crumple onto the concrete floor, smoothing her thinned hair down as he did.

“Good Lord,” he muttered. “No need to frighten me like that.” He surveyed the room, attempting to take roll call with a quick scan. “Are we all in attendance?”

“Phebah and K’aayhltla are still on their way,” Azeem volunteered. As if on cue, the remaining members of our entourage crashed through the door, a ridiculous amount of cargo in tow.

“Present!” Phebah shouted enthusiastically. Despite her added jolt of high-energy, the mood in the room almost instantly simmered to seriousness. Neutral faces, stoic poses, and grim thoughts.

“Join hands,” Cleon instructed. We all obeyed— I took Cesaire’s on my right and Phebah’s on my left. The whole scene was eerily reminiscent of the fateful seance that had delivered me to this moment in the first place. The dust motes that filtered through shafted window slats. The veneered table we congregated around as if we were strange cultists. Even the feeling of hands clasped against mine reminded me of that day. That day which felt a thousand lifetimes past. So distant and unreachable, and yet here I was. Coming nearly full-circle and ending up farther away than ever. I drew a heavy inhale, centering myself somewhat.

“Drink,” Cleon said. We dropped hands, opened our bleary eyes, and reached for the shimmering glasses resting in front of us. I turned it over in my hand, investigating its glossy surface. So similar to the

substance Winifred had given us. Cesaire must have been thinking the same thing because he leaned over and whispered to me.

“More witchcraft, hmm?” I suppressed a smile and unceremoniously gulped down the contents of the bottle. It was not the artful sacrament I had imagined, but there is no room for poetic flair when the sky is falling. As the edge of the tube left my lips I glanced over at Cesaire, who was still musing over the ambrosia thoughtfully.

“You’ve got to drink it!” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“I know, I know,” he said. “But aren’t you the slightest bit afraid? I mean, what could happen to us? You heard what Winifred said about your sister—”

“Please don’t mention that to me right now.”

“Okay, I’m sorry I—”

The world disappeared. No, I faded from existence. Ceased to be an entity at all. I felt the many layers of my essence ripped from the fabric of my skeletal structure, warped and molded like clay, played with by thankless gods somewhere in a rift between logic and dreamscape. I struggled to form cohesive thoughts. To construct language. To even force myself to process what was happening to me. I wanted to stretch my arms towards the nearest warm body— even the white-hot surface of the sun— but I had no limbs to move or command. I was nothing. And then I existed in everything. I could feel molecules buzzing, neutrons spinning, even quarks quivering in subatomic ecstasy. This sensation continued to spread until my entire physical form had been rebuilt. One merciful, painful cell at a time. Weaving tissue, organs, muscles, and bones into the vessel that captured my soul.

Sunlight shot straight into my eyes. I quickly clenched them, and upon discovering the presence of my hands, covered them and curled up on the lacquered floor. I rolled around in that encompassing dark for a few moments before I dared to peel my fingers away and untuck myself

from my wounded position. It was so incredibly bright, but I couldn't help but stare. Through an icy window I could observe an entire intricate metropolis more incomprehensibly magnificent than anything I'd ever seen before. Buildings rose like pillars; echoing Punic architecture infused with Hellenistic and Roman flair, but constructed in such a contemporary manner I hardly recognized them. The skyline was spiked with spired towers and turrets, dark shapes like giants. Even more concerning was the presence of strange floating vehicles making rivers of traffic through the sky!

"Where...are we?" I asked, my vocal chords unnaturally raw. I saw the unfamiliar face of a woman beaming down at me, her russet hair haloed by the unbearable light that flooded that world.

"Greetings," she said. "Your hosts welcome you to the resplendent citadel on the sea, the gem of all empires, the Celestial Assembly...New Carthage."

"What did you just say— who are you!?" I exclaimed, scuttling backwards. The woman stretched her hand out to me and wrapped it around my wrist to hoist me up. I reluctantly let her pull me to my feet, and immediately felt nauseous. I looked down at my body and was met with immediate shock.

"What am I wearing?" I screeched.

"That is the attire all guests are fitted with," she said. I spun around the room, searching for a reflective surface. As if reading my mind, she spoke.

"We do not have mirrors in the guest quarters."

"What? How come?" Before I could give her time to respond another more pressing question came to me. "Where are my *friends*?"

"In their separate quarters, being tended to in the infirmary, or being held in front of high court," she replied. She traveled across the shimmering ground like light skimming over water. Her ethereal silken

dress created a floating effect, and the reflective surface of the floor made milky images like the surface of a lagoon.

“What do you mean by court?” I inquired. She spun around, her heavy sleeves flying away from her like bird-wings.

“Why, don’t you know your injured acquaintance has violated chronological law, and most of the others are accomplices to her crimes?”

“*Crimes?*” I shrieked, my worry building. She stared at me like the answer was obvious.

“Yes,” she said, “one of the women attempted to connect with her anomaly through nefarious means. It’s unstable and strictly prohibited.”

“Eurynome,” I said quietly.

“Ah, yes,” the woman agreed, “that was her name, wasn’t it?” I walked towards her, my knees weak and my fingers twitchy.

“Please, can you take me to them— to my friends?”

“All in due time. I do not tread this city idly.”

“I wish to have an audience with Cesaire Vilescot. He is my dear friend and I already miss him very much.” She waved her hand in a twirling manner.

“That is a simple request. It shall be done,” she replied. “This way, my guest.” She began to glide away, and I realized just how large the apartment was. Sleek white leather chaise lounges, silver wind chimes sparkling from the high-vaulted ceiling like pendants in the light, polished chrome surfaces mixed with crystalline glass and matte cream. The woman walked through a wall. Or rather, a circular section of the wall hissed open like an airlock and opened for her to step into the hallway.

“How far away is Cesaire?” I asked.

“The guest quarters are arranged rather sporadically, but he should only be a few floors down. At least, that is what my manifest

delegates.” We entered an empty rotunda with a domed skylight ceiling. The floor was decorated with marble tiles depicting strange scenes from histories I had never learned. In a semicircle formation there were seven tubed elevators, but they appeared to me at the time as strange translucent chutes.

“We will take the fifth elevator,” she instructed. “After you, guest.”

“I have a name, you know,” I retorted, stepping into the capsule. She pressed a button on the sleek keypad, causing a pleasant *ding* to play overhead.

“Names are fickle things,” she replied. “You may appear one way yet happen to be called something else entirely. Like you and your Origin for instance, before you were unified.” I gulped, remembering the risky plot Winifred had helped us pull off to get here. It suddenly occurred to me that my true Origin might reside in the Assembly. What foolishness if anyone were to discover our deception!

“R-i-i-ight,” I agreed as normally as possible. The elevator dinged and we were deposited on a lower floor that looked near-identical to the one we had left. The only distinction was the addition of Turkic-like tapestries draped on the lobby’s walls. They looked out of place against the stark white backdrop.

“So,” I started to make light conversation as we strolled down the endless hallway, “how does this happen to be *New Carthage*? Wasn’t that city abolished long ago, even ages before my time?”

“Time is irrelevant,” she answered. “And you must know our city’s founderess was one of the first to master it. No matter her first attempt at utopia was foiled by the follies of ignorant men. It is what we have cultivated for all the peoples of the universe that matters now, isn’t it?”

“So this *is* Carthage,” I clarified. She paused, pursing her lips.

“Yes.”

“So the ocean I see in the distance...”

“Is the Mediterranean,” she confirmed. I gasped, unable to contain my excitement. After all this time, I was finally reunited with my beautiful sea.

“Thank God,” I said through choked-up laughter. “Oh, oh my. I thought I’d never see it again.”

“Civilization was born on this sea. Time often swirls around it. It’s a very distinguished area with infinite history. I could go on really, in fact I just might, it’s very enticing, but oh— we’re here.” We stood in front of a plain circular door, nothing to distinguish it from the rest. She pressed her palm into its slightly-indented center and it began to hum and glow, spinning open to reveal an undecorated apartment. I immediately darted in.

“Cesaire?” I called out desperately. There was a second where I thought he might be gone forever, but then—

“Auguste!”

“Oh my God, Cesaire!” I ran towards him, immediately holding him fierce and steadfast in an embrace. I pulled back to see what he was wearing. It was similar to my outfit: long silken robes with golden trim and his hair tied up in a ponytail. “You look ridiculous,” I laughed.

“So do you!” He said. I traced my hands up the nape of my neck and felt the bare skin exposed where my hair had been pulled up.

“This is so strange,” I whispered, eyeing the mysterious woman. “Do you have *any* idea what’s going on? Where has everyone else been detained?”

“Not really, and I don’t know,” he said dejectedly. “I only woke up a few hours ago...it’s been strange. They told me not to seek you because you were taking longer to regain connection with your corporeal form.” He strolled over to a sculpted couch built into a vast wall and

took a seat in its carved dip. I sat next to him, crossing my legs and letting my clasped hands fall into my lap.

“If I’m being honest,” I started, “I had no idea what Eurynome was doing was in violation of the law! I mean, well, I didn’t have the faintest idea of the law’s existence, but I was willing to follow her lead. She seemed so...sure.”

“I doubted her more than I’d care to admit,” he said, his voice echoed and hollow, his gaze fixated solely on the broad window stretched out before us. “I saw in her a sickly desperation. She wanted so badly to understand Zenobie, to force her mind through time while abandoning her body. She forgot that we are not lifeless beings. We are, for better or for worse, grounded. By disturbing the natural order in that manner, you risk dismantling more than the temple of your own flesh.” I bowed my head, stricken with solemn silence.

“Yes,” I said plainly. “Yes, that is true.” Our heads both turned to look at each other at the same time, and my memories of the past few days came rushing back. “Oh my God,” I said, “holy shit—”

“—Did you just remember?”

“Yes!” I gasped, a sense of urgency building in my chest. “Where is my sister? She is here, is she not? I must see her!” He raised his hands, hovering them around my chest as if he wanted to comfort me but was afraid to really touch me. I was buzzing with excitement and stomach-flipping anxiousness.

“And we ki—” I began to say.

“—Yeah, we did that too,” he interrupted, laughing nervously. I leaned back into the cupped backplash of the couch, my eyes wide.

“And now we’re here. Good God.” He nodded slowly, adjusting the smooth cloth draped across his torso.

“Philomena is at the Basilica,” he said. “It was one of the first questions I asked when I woke up.” I sighed a heavy breath of relief

before craning my neck around the apartment to search for another silk-clad woman.

“Thank God...where is the assistant who told you such?”

“I dismissed her,” he replied. “She was unsettling.” I groaned, slouching over.

“You can *dismiss* them? Mine is terribly unpleasant, I wish I would have considered that.” He patted my shoulder awkwardly and made some noise of condolence.

“Perhaps she will be useful for navigation? Mine has a log of sorts that feeds her a whole host of information! She’s encyclopedic.”

“So is mine,” I said. “I suppose you could be right.” I shouted across the room to my guide who was still stationed patiently by the door. “Hey! Do you have a name? Come over here!” She immediately turned her attention to my voice and walked across the floor to us with swan-like grace.

“You may call me Sophonisba,” she said. “What do you require?” I shook my head and patted the space next to me for her to sit. She did not oblige.

“Listen, we want you to reunite with us with the rest of our party, could you take us to them? And we’d appreciate it if you rolled back the cryptic language, just be direct on everything if you can.” She crossed her arms and I finally saw emotion on her face. A quirked brow, a slight smirk, even the birth of a smile.

“I am not your servant,” she asserted, “nor am I your tour guide. I am your hostess. So you will not command me, but I shall follow this directive because it was already determined to occur.” I shrank back from her words, my face blooming in embarrassed heat.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “Would it be at least possible to take me to the Basilica? I have heard my sister resides there, and I have not seen her in many months.” She nodded.

“That is better,” she said, “and it can be done. You are in a confusing land, young and impatient, I understand. What *you* must understand is that I know more than you and that I will not play with you like marionettes, only do what is appropriate to be done.”

“I fear we have little time to spare,” Cesaire said with some conviction. “Could we depart now?” She appeared perturbed but beckoned us out of the room anyways.

“Fine,” she said, “but we do not often make haste here. Fate has been conquered. Bridge-falls can be mended. There is nothing to worry about.” I walked faster, struggling to keep up with her determined pace.

“Well, that’s simply not the case,” I argued. “Fate *does* truly hang in the balance. See, there’s an anomaly who is unreachable and her existence is wreaking havoc on the timeline! The sooner we can reunite with our friends, the sooner we can reach her. And my sister carries some authority here, I’ve heard. So she will be splendidly useful in saving, well, everything.” Sophonisba seemed undisturbed by this fact. As if she was used to underlings urging her to prevent the death of the universe. I hoped she wasn’t.

“Yes, yes,” she said dismissively. “That is all well and good. We shall travel to the Basilica as you wish. Do not fret, my guest.” I frowned, a sour uneasy feeling forming in the pit of my stomach.

“Okay...” I replied. We entered an elevator and began our descent down the spine of the tower. The walls were transparent, so we could see the central turret courtyard as we traveled downwards. There were boughs of greenery climbing its surfaces, outward-facing sun decks with distant figures lounging upon them, and an open top that let grand shafts of Mediterranean sun cascade onto the shaded floors below. Even from inside the elevator I could feel the arid heat of the outdoors mixing with the greenhouse-like humidity of the inner complex in a balmy concoction.

“You must admit, this place is rather beautiful,” Cesaire said as we neared the bottom floor.

“Yes,” Sophonisba affirmed, “New Carthage was designed with all of architecture’s best achievements in mind.” The elevator slowed to a hissing halt, and we jostled ever so slightly as it clunked into place. The doors slid open and we stepped out into a wall of heat. She raised her hand to point out a set of sconces shedding light on an outcropped underpass leading out of the building.

“Note the gilded ormolu style of the fixtures,” she said. “You might recognize them— they are French. 18th century.”

“So you admit our designs are exquisite?” I quipped.

“Hardly. Our selections are rather global. According to the manifest, only around two percent of the architecture here maintains French influence.” Cesaire and I both sighed. Gone were the days of our empire it seemed. We walked through the passage— a curved half-circle of emblazoned brick. It was so shadowed compared to the upper levels of the city that I could feel my arm-hairs rise from the chill. Stepping into the sun, I was suddenly struck with the scale of the city. We were standing in an enormous plaza surrounded by levels of mammoth buildings on all sides. They were built with such sheer scale I could scarcely believe they were possible under all known feats of engineering. They featured Grecian pillars, tiled roofs, grand steps, and a host of exquisitely carved reliefs and statues. To say I was in awe would be an understatement.

Sophonisba stuck out her arm and began to wave it wildly to signal some sort of hovering bicycle to stop for us. She flashed a small metallic disc embedded in her palm, and the driver— a shabby-looking fellow— let us on without a word. If I had found cars to be shocking vehicles, this was a whole other level. The contraption was garish at first glance, but ultimately slender in its design. It was bare and stripped—

some rods and wires welded to a thin body with a rickshaw-type carriage seating fastened to the back. The driver was forced to grip two protruding handlebars, and it was propelled by a hefty barrel of molten fuel. I would later describe the propelling contraption as a rocket engine. The main leg-up it had above cars was unimaginable speed. We were catapulted through the tangled streets to the point that all identifiable landmarks were swirled together in a dizzying mixture of burnt siennas and tans. There was no time for light conversation either; we had arrived before I had even processed the journey. We slowed to a sudden halt and I thought I might hurl. Sophonisba hurried me, shoving me out of the carriage. I hopped off of my cushioned seat and onto the ground. Cesaire took my hand as I helped him down— he was afraid of heights.

The structure that stood before me was indescribably massive. It looked as if it could contain an entire city within itself. Countless stories of windows were stacked on top of each other for, seemingly, forever. It had a brutal appearance with its flat, stoic walls and grave entryway, which was a staggering arch. A steady stream of people marched in and out of its hallowed doors like ants. They were all clad in shimmering cloaks, lightly draped shawls, and laced sandals; which made them reminiscent of a theater troupe's poor attempt at costuming Oedipus.

“The Basilica,” Sophonisba announced with her straight-tone voice. We began to walk up the steps, which were so set apart from each other it strained my knees.

“Wow,” was all I could say. We stepped through the grand gateway into a massive entrance hall lit by staggeringly tall stained-glass windows depicting scenes from histories long gone. Some I recognized— conquests into Asia Minor, religions conventions, off-kilter depictions of Genesis. Others were unfamiliar— shining kingdoms upon hills, the dawn of new inventions, human suffering in off-putting, contorted shapes. She beckoned us up the grand staircase onto a terracotta-floored balcony, the

walls reddish and silty. Bodies poured like wine all around us, drowning us in a cacophony of noise and busybody-like motion. We were led down an arched hallway lined with ornate doors, suddenly stopping at a seemingly inconspicuous and similar door to the others. Sophonisba grabbed its knocker, a lion's golden head baring its teeth around a thick ring, and slammed the door thrice. There was a short pause before I heard a muffled voice beckon us in. The door timidly swung open, cracking just enough to reveal bright beams of light streaming through an empty window. I glanced over at Cesaire, watching him tense, not realizing that I was shaking myself. It only became evident when I reached out my hand to push the door further aside, only to see I was trembling too hard to move.

"It's alright," Cesaire reassured me. "We've been through this sort of thing before, you will survive this."

"But she's my sister, Cesaire," I whispered. He nodded and rubbed the tips of my fingers between his.

"Just breath," he instructed. I sucked in through my teeth and finished pushing the door aside, stepping through the threshold to the next leg of our endlessly arduous journey. The room was different than I expected. The ceiling was dizzyingly high, with a large window spanning the entire length of the back wall letting in a near-panoramic view of the sprawling city before us. The other walls were lined with bookshelves, posters depicting fashionable women in strangely revealing yet elegant styles, and pressed insects mounted in picture frames behind glossy glass. None of it aligned with how I remembered my sister. In front of the window, there was an intricately carved mahogany desk littered with office clutter, and leaned against it, there was her.

She was draped in a simple sleeveless black dress with a plunging back that revealed her protruding shoulder blades and a hem that practically choked her neckline. A long string of pearls hung down her

chest, her pale face was painted with dark red lipstick and heavy eyeshadow, and guarded behind bedazzled sunglasses, her rich brown hair was piled atop her head in an elaborate chignon. Most surprising of all, her fingers were curled around a bubbling glass of lemon-yellow champagne.

“Philomena?” I said, my voice hollow in my own mouth. Her thin eyebrows raised in bemusement and she shifted her jagged hips to face us.

”My, my, boys,” she said, her voice silky smooth and unfamiliar. “It’s about time you paid your dear friend a visit.”

“You look so—” I began to say, stopping because I simply lacked the words. She was so unlike what I had known her to be, so unlike any person I had ever seen.

“—Fabulous?” she answered for me. When we said nothing, her smile drooped and she took on the serious pout I knew her for. “Well then,” she continued, collecting herself. “It’s been a much longer time for me than it has for you two, I imagine.” She perched herself on the edge of the desk, her heels knocking against its lacquered wood. “How long?”

“About four months,” I answered quietly. She nodded, her lips pursed and face somber.

“I see.” She paused. “You want to know how long it’s been for me?” Cesaire and I exchanged a look, both nodding nervously. “Right,” she continued, “...according to my personal standardized time...over two hundred years.” I gasped, baffled.

“How is that even possible?” I stuttered.

“Time is standardized to The Assembly,” she explained. “I was an agent for a long time, I spent many lifetimes in many locations of space time, it added up. Of course, recently, those mistakes my friends and I made so long ago have started to catch up to us.” She gestured to Cesaire and I, implicating us as her mistakes. Not as if she had been my world.

“But you’re my *sister*,” I protested.

“Never was,” she countered. Seeing the panic on my face, she pivoted. “You’re my brother as much as Archaeus is my brother— not by blood, not by choice, but by circumstance. I love him just the same, but you must understand that I did something illegal. I gave away ambrosia, traipsed about an unsanctioned space time period, and spent far too much time there only to leave without enacting any protocol.” She shook her head at the memory. “What did that do? It left behind a false impression of a life I never should have lived. Created you— time clones, effectively. Not truly real people, simply imitations that formed their own narratives, corroding the truth until we come to the danger we were in now. I don’t blame you, of course, you’re a product of my own misgivings.”

I gawked, her words unbelievable to my ears. “You are, however, essential to my needs to restore the stability of the multiverse,” she said, “and you are technically aspects of my good friends manifested into flesh, so I am poised to care for you. Plus, Archaeus is my brother, in a way.” She gestured to Cesaire and said “Cleon is dear to him, so I shall be dear to him, and by extension you.” She sighed, pinching her brow. “Sometimes, we don’t choose our families, we just make ‘em.”

We remained silent. She frowned, walking around the back of her desk to grab a sleek bottle of champagne. “This must be a lot to take in. Why don’t you join me for a drink?” I gulped, although my mouth was dry, so it really did nothing, and took a seat opposite her at the desk.

“You must see how difficult this is for Auguste,” Cesaire said darkly. “You aren’t being very pleasant with us, you know.” She said nothing in response, only poured us our beverages with a smirk. I turned my neck around to see that Sophonisba had left the room. Philomena handed each of us our glasses. Mine was a delicate crystal slotted between my fingers, as fragile as dragonfly wings.

“Thank you,” I muttered, not looking up from the bubbling surface of the champagne.

“So,” she said, “there must be a reason you have come to me. State your case, boys.”

“Sophonisba, our guide, has told us that the rest of our party is locked away until they can be tried for our crimes,” I explained. “She will not bring us to them. We’re certain they are not truly guilty! They were only trying to do the right thing, only trying to *save the entire multiverse*, really.” I looked up to stare at her squinting eyes. “Can you release them? Or at least let us have an audience with them? I mean, I was hoping for a reunion with my sister, but...I can see you will not entertain that. So, I shall ask you for this instead.” She took a careful sip from her glass, her lips curling around the rim just-so in order to not stain it with her dark rouge.

“Do you know my position here?” she asked, her voice delicate. We shook our heads. “I manage the timeline,” she said, sitting down to meet us at eye level. “It’s all here, in my office, the entirety of eternity across all possibilities, and it’s my job to manage it.” She grinned and leaned back in her chair. “I’m also a bloody traitor.”

“What?” Cesaire asked.

“You heard me. If I weren’t so attached to some accidental time travelers from Ancient Grecian Gaul I’d be perfectly content in my position, but alas. I maintain my connection to you, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I asked Winnie to attune you two, so that you could come here. So that we could find Eurynome’s anomaly and put an end to this once and for all.”

“We know,” I said, “that’s why I was so surprised you were insistent you weren’t my sister, weren’t Philomena—”

“—Petra,” she corrected, “Petronilla if you please.”

“Right, sorry. Names are...”

“Difficult, I know.” She sighed, crossing her legs. “What I mean to say is, what I’ve done is highly illegal. Allowing anomalies into the Assembly is a grade-A offense. That’s dangerous. You could cause the collapse of everything with only your presence here. I’ve done it, however, not only because it’s my job to maintain the space-time continuum, but because I care about my friends. My chosen family. Whether you like the way it is or not, you are a part of that family.” She turned to look at me, her hands folding around mine in reassurance. “I know I can never be Philomena for you, but please trust me when I say she is a part of me. We are one, but that does not mean that she is gone. I will be your sister how I can, although Archaeus will always be my brother first. Please, do not despise me for this. It is the tragedy of life. Especially for how long I have lived it. I brought you here because I care for you. When this is through, you will be pawns no more.”

“But we will be as you are, won’t we?” Cesaire asked shyly. “Fused with our Origins, not truly our own men with our own agency?”

“Perhaps,” she said slowly, “perhaps not.” She stood suddenly, pacing over to the wall of her office plastered with framed insects and butterflies. “Walk with me boys,” she instructed. I set my glass down carefully and walked over to her, unsure of where we were walking *to*. She wrapped her fingers around one of the smaller frames, exposing the pinned bugs within to the outside air. She reached in, pinching the brittle frame of a chrome beetle and twisting its exoskeleton. There was a small shuddering in the room, and then a section of the insect wall indented, giving way to a secret passageway.

“This way,” she said, “we shall enter the catacombs and rescue your friends. Hopefully Eurynome has been cured by now. Then we shall go on to the most important thing— saving this world. Or at the very least, setting it half-right.”

“You have catacombs?” I asked, “What is this, Paris?”

“Every good city has a necropolis,” she quipped, stepping aside to reveal a dark passage burrowing deep into the stomach of who-knows-where. “Ours happen to traverse pretty much everywhere. We may not die often, but when we do, you’d best believe the tomb’s gotta be worth something.” I ducked under the ceiling of the entryway, the peeled-back drywall crumbling on my head like shedding. I brushed my curls off, and was pleased to find I could straighten my back and walk down the tunnel just fine. I motioned for Cesaire to follow me, and he did.

“So...how long do we walk?” I asked not long after we had begun our descent into the chilly depths. She paused, rubbing her bare shoulders for warmth.

“This prison is a few miles from the seaside,” she said. “It shouldn’t take more than an hour of walking. I know that may sound tiresome, but it’s the only way to slip in unnoticed. If we are caught, however, I can always use my stature as an excuse. It might cause us to abort the rescue, though.” I nodded, my nerves subsiding slightly. We started to jog down steep rugged stone steps, seemingly worn by centuries of footsteps. As we did, the lower walkway began to glow with the amber light of wall-mounted torches guiding our way through the dark. As we walked, I started to learn more about my not-quite sister. About Petra, or Petronilla, or Pet as Winnie would have it. *Names. Endlessly complicated*, I groaned to myself.

“What’s the story behind your dress?” I had asked after a long stretch of trudging along in silence. “It’s...rather formal for a casual day at work.”

“There is no such thing as casual or formal,” she had answered. “My fashion is inspired, of course. This particular ensemble I owe to a woman named Aubrey Hepburn. You wouldn’t know her, obviously,

but I spent a reasonable stint of time in an era where she was quite popular, and I daresay I fell in love with her style.”

“I used to care so much about fashion,” I had sighed. That life was impossibly distant from me now.

“I remember,” she had whispered, the words uneasy for her to say. Traversing the undercity led to other discoveries as well. Pockets of exposed rock face and dirt revealing neat piles of skulls and assorted bones, abandoned rest-stops with dusty limestone benches, and even the occasional other traveler. We passed an older man towards the end of our journey who barely paid us any mind but still managed to fill me with unease.

“He’s of no threat to us,” Petra reassured us. “These passages are not unknown, in fact, the more morose among us may even utilize them for their daily commutes. Some of the entrances and exits, however, aren’t to be seen by the public eye.” She diverted us off the path, through a tiny gap I hadn’t even noticed before she dragged us down it. “Like this one,” she said with that sly smile of hers. “This leads to the prison,” she whispered as if she were gossiping, “only a few minutes now. I’d suggest we fall silent.”

We ascended out of the deep, and I felt my senses return to me in a rush. The fresh wind blowing on my face, whipping my curls around. The scent of salt wedge and sea foam rolling off of the sea and filling my nose. The sight of blue skies peaking through the gaps of a raised walkway. I gasped, realizing that we had emerged dozens of stories above ground. We were on a stucco skybridge covered in ropes of grapevine. It hardly looked like a prison at first, but turning my head upwards revealed a looming tower peppered with tiny barred windows that spelled otherwise. It was absolutely massive, casting an impossible shadow over our bodies like a giant blotting out the sun.

“Good lord,” Cesaire whispered sharply, “how many prisoners must you have here? Is this city such an offending society that you must create a behemoth to lock them in?”

“Not at all,” Petra said back, beginning to briskly make her way across the walkway and into the prison building itself. “We maintain prisoners from every corner of space and time, as evidenced by our friends. New Carthage is a fulcrum for multiversal travel, most of its residents are employees or life-bound constituents of the Assembly, such as myself.”

We crept up to the yellowed exterior wall, and she silently ordered us to press ourselves against it, signaling to a guard tower on a diagonal across from us. I saw figures moving around inside of it, toting large firearms of some sort. I held my breath anxiously while Petra ducked down to attempt at picking the lock of the bolted door leading to the interior of the tower. Cesaire tucked himself behind a pillar supporting the last trellis of the walkway, and I stepped off the side of the wall, crouching on a ledge. It had no guardrail to prevent me from falling many stories into the concrete courtyard below, so I tucked my knees in tight to prevent myself from moving so much as an inch. The courtyard was shaded by palm fronds and exotic plants I did not quite recognize. There were a few shaded guard stations at each corner, and several small doors and passages leading to other sections of the complex.

I glanced up at Cesaire, who was staring straight ahead, not daring to un-plaster himself from the pillar. Although Petra was not one to explain the intricacies of her plan, I caught on to my role quick enough. My eyes widened as I saw a dark figure enter my line of vision from behind the watertower’s shaded glass.

“We’ve got a scout on our two o’clock,” I whispered just loud enough for Cesaire to hear. He didn’t even nod, only blinked rapidly to indicate he had heard me. Just as soon as the lookout moved on to

another section of the guard tower, I heard the incoming echo of voices below me. I peered over my nose to confirm my nerve-wracking suspicion— a tour of four guards were marching into the courtyard, dispersing, and taking up station. “*Shit, shit shit,*” I whispered to myself. “Cesaire,” I snapped, demanding his attention. His pupils met mine and I jerked my head to motion to the guards.

“Petra!” I heard him say under his breath. There was a short pause, and then a clatter. She must have dropped her tools on the ground in shock. *Oh, no,* I thought. *We didn’t even get inside the prison.* I clenched my eyes tight, but nothing happened. The guards were still laughing boisterously with each other from their respective stations. I exhaled in relief, only for a sentence to cut through our quiet victory.

“Wait, wait, wait,” one of the men, quite young by the sound of it, said over the banter and laughter. “Did any of you hear that? Just a second ago, I could have sworn I heard something like metal.” He shielded his eyes from the sun and pointed up. I tried to meld myself with the wall, my lips bruising its dusty surface, praying that the bottom of the ledge would hide me. “Up there,” I heard him say.

“Are you sure?” another guard from across the courtyard asked.

“I’m nearly certain.”

“Ugh, we just got to our posts, though.”

“It’s our *job*, Toscani.” There was a ripple of groans throughout the group before the begrudging shuffle of a lazy company in movement.

“*Fine,*” the guard by the surname of Toscani relented. Panicked, I climbed off of the ledge and back onto the walkway, crawling over to Petra, who was hunched in front of the door’s lock.

“You have to hurry!” I urged her, “guards are coming and we’ve no other way out.” Cesaire clamored over to us as well, his face twisted with nerves.

“I’ve almost got it,” Petra grunted, “just be patient.”

“We don’t have time to be patient!” Cesaire countered. I heard the guards’ voices sounding from just around the bend of the staircase leading up to our position.

“They’re nearly here!” I yelled. Petra said nothing, her fingers still working over the metal tools. Finally, the sound of a click in the locking mechanism brought us peace, and we quickly shoved our way inside, bolting the door behind us.

“I think I saw something!” one of the guards yelled from the other side.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, man.”

“Toscani, go check it out.”

“Aw, c’mon Koyuncu, we were just gonna play cards.”

“It’s *your* turn.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

We bolted down the hall, which was so shaded and empty, it was nearly too frigid to be in with our summer-y silks. I heard the lock rattling behind us, and the muffled sound of Toscani entering. Petra yanked my arm, pulling us up a dimly-lit staircase.

“We need to get to the upper levels anyways,” she said, “we can get him off of our tail that way.”

“How do you know which way to go?” Cesaire asked, his eyes darting over his shoulder to check behind us.

“I know this city’s system inside and out,” she explained, “agents who violated Assembly protocol will be held between the forty-third and fiftieth floors. I would know...I was detained there once.”

“After you returned from Antibes?” I asked as we rushed down the hallway, twisting and turning around corners faster than I could process.

“Yes,” she answered simply. Our feet pounded the stone floors as we ran deeper into the prison, I didn’t even see cells yet.

“Where are the prisoners?” Cesaire yelled, struggling to keep ahold of her arm as she darted up another tight staircase.

“This is only the outer sector of the prison,” she explained, not even turning back to face us as she did. “We still need to make our way through the inner security rim if we want to access the cell blocks. These halls are only for guard patrols and storage.”

As if on cue, I heard the footfalls of the guards tailing us and possibly more approaching. They were gaining on us fast, and barring a torchlight of sorts that cast wild shadows on the walls, portraying their burly figures as terrible monsters contorted into uncomfortable shapes. Petra’s eyes darted around the tiny corridor we were trapped in, seeing the only way out was the staircase the guards were coming down.

“Quickly!” she hissed, shoving us suddenly into a spare supply closet. She slammed the door behind us, and I flinched at the sound. We were pressed against each other in there, with our cheeks rubbing up with the wood of the door. I squinted my eyes, peeping through the crack to observe the guards prowling the hallway, diligently searching for us.

“They’re around here somewhere,” one of them insisted. “Open the doors.” I suppressed my gasp of surprise, shoving my hands over my mouth to do so. *We’re going to be caught*, I thought to myself. The loud banging sounds of the doors opening one by one caused me to tremble, and I felt Cesaire’s steadying hands wrapping around my waist to reassure me.

“It’s fine,” he whispered in my ear, “we’re going to figure this out.” By the way his voice was wavering, I knew he wasn’t so sure. The guards came closer and closer to us, but even through the static darkness of the closet, I could see that Petra wasn’t scared. Hell, she was scarcely worried at all. Her face was placid if anything. Then, in a sudden action

cutting through our thick nervous anticipation, light poured into our eyes, and we saw the silhouettes of several men standing in front of us.

“Found ‘em!” the one who had busted the door open announced. Before they could get any other words in, Petra cried out in mock relief, stumbling forward and falling into the closest guard’s arms.

“Oh, thank goodness!” she said, batting her lashes. I was so confused I nearly burst out laughing. Why was she behaving like such a damsel in distress? “I thought you were...dangerous,” she admitted, frowning like a scared child. “Escaped prisoners, I thought, what with the way you were pursuing us. Relentless I say! Good job, boys.” The guard blinked, clearly as lost as I was.

“Huh?” he mumbled, “Excuse me, miss, am I missing something?” Petra huffed, stepping away from his chest and crossing her arms in a fit.

“Why, don’t you know who I am?”

“Err...” The guards crowded around us, unsure of what to do. She threw her hands up in frustration and tussled with her dress, pulling out a thin chrome card from a slip pocket near her hip and shoving it in his face.

“Petronilla Nikolopoulos, Head Timeline Magistrate of the Assembly, at your service.” She gestured to Cesaire and I, who were hugging each other in fear in the closet behind her. “And these are my unfortunate prisoners. They’re in direct violation of Clause 27-8, Section E. I’ve taken matters into my own hands on the subject of detaining them, due to the caliber of their crime.”

“O-o-oh, serious offense,” one of the guards said, nodding.

“Wait— no we’re not!” I shrieked, “we did nothing wrong—” my protest was cut off by Cesaire lifting his hands from my waist and covering my mouth, muffling my shouting.

“They’re a troublesome pair,” Petra sighed wearily.

“Well, no doubt,” the guard called Toscani pointed out, “they haven’t got any proper restraints on them.” Petra laughed, waving her hand around as if the statement was obvious.

“But of course!” she said, giggling. “I was so preoccupied with the prospect of personally escorting offenders that I forgot protocol. My apologies, you must understand that with the position I maintain—”

“We understand quite well ma’am,” Toscani reassured her. “Why don’t we take you to the closest outpost and get your prisoners outfitted with their restraints. We can even take them from here if you—”

“No, no, that won’t be necessary, I’m quite capable, my boy.”

“Well, yes, but ma’am, you forgot a very basic protocol, and—” She held up her hand with an accusatory glare.

“Do I look like someone you want to argue with, sir?” He stepped back, his hands up in anxious defense.

“Oh— uh, no, ma’am. My apologies, ma’am. Just...follow us to the outpost and you can continue on your way.” Her sweet smile returned and she grabbed both of our wrists, thrusting us into the arms of the guards.

“Perfect,” she grinned, her voice like honey. “Lead the way, captain.”

“Oh, I’m not—”

“I’ll call you what I please.”

“Er, right. Of course, ma’am.”

The entourage delivered us through the maze of winding halls, their functions seemingly meaningless. Compared to the sunny coastal environment outdoors, this place felt like a medieval dungeon. They surrounded us on all sides, marching at a brisk pace, facing forward with grim faces. Petra was made to lock her elbows with Cesaire’s and mine, playing her part as our prisoner. Looking at her face, dead-set on the task at hand, her brow furrowed and lips pulled tight, she reminded me

of my sister— how she really was. Always fighting with me, self-serious and uptight, constantly rushing to defend our mother or chide me for my social missteps. The illusion was broken as soon as the flickering fluorescent light of the guard post crept over her features, exposing the crinkle to her eyes, the curve to her mouth, and the glimmer her eyes once lacked.

“Bring the captives first,” one of the guards instructed, opening the door into a small room with a few eclectic chairs strewn around a card table with racks of supplies bolted to the white walls. There were no windows, and the brightness of the alcove’s artificial lighting made my head throb. We were fitted with restraints— metal handcuffs around our wrists, and ill-fitted vests of thick quilted fabric, intended to shock us if we dared to escape. I stared into Petra’s eyes, attempting to communicate with her, to parse her solution. *Even if we made it into the cell complex, how would we possibly escape unnoticed? What with us being bogged down by these fastenings?* She made no indication that this worried her, instead, she shoved us back into the hall, thanked the guards for their goodwill, and proceeded to march us into the prison with her head held high.

“Petra,” I said once we were out of earshot, “do you have a plan?” She said nothing, only laughed lightly under her breath.

“Do you even know which cells they’re being held in?” Cesaire asked anxiously. She tutted, shaking her head as if we were asking childish questions.

“Have I not made myself clear? I’m kind of a big deal around here. I’ll just *ask*. The escaping, now, that’s the fun part. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there, I think.”

“You *think*?” I said.

“I had no idea when I was to be expecting you, it’s not as if I had this plan all picked out and deployed ahead of time. Sometimes, our lives take unexpected turns.”

“We would know about that,” Cesaire said disheartenedly.

“Oh, right,” Petra said, “you two have probably gotten on by now, haven’t you?” I felt my face flush and cleared my throat. Cesaire began walking a bit faster.

“Err...I don’t know what you quite...mean by that,” I said, my voice scratchy. She smirked, pushing aside another door that opened up into a covered glass walkway surrounded by a lush botanical garden.

“Gotten together?” she said, her words lilting upwards. “*Romantically?*” I felt the need to itch the back of my hand, but couldn’t reach it due to the handcuffs rubbing around my wrists.

“No idea why you would say that,” I sputtered. Cesaire nodded enthusiastically.

“Y-yeah,” he agreed, “and even if it were true. Um. That would be private, would it not?” I whipped my head around to stare at him. *Jesus Christ*, I thought, *obvious much?* We reached the end of the walkway and Petra held up her hand to indicate to us to stop.

“Alright, alright,” she said, bemused. “I’ll stop pestering you on this obviously *touchy* and *blatantly accusatory* topic. Our destination is on the other side of this door. I couldn’t tell those guards I had no key card, so I’ve got another lock to pick, I’m afraid. Wait one moment, boys.”

“I mean, you don’t have to stop *asking*,” Cesaire mumbled. “That’s perfectly within your rights and...everything. It’s just that sometimes personal lives are personal. Not that *we*—” He gestured between us, “—have a personal life. We’re just friends. You would know that, considering you know Cleon and Archae— oh, well. I mean I guess they’re a bit more than friends, aren’t they? But that’s just them, I mean we aren’t—”

“Cesaire,” she said, “you can shut up now.” He nodded rapidly, stepping back with his hands clasped together and head hung in shame. I

avoided eye contact, which I found fairly easy due to the fact he was already making it with the ground.

“What– what about you?” I said awkwardly. “Do you have anyone here? Anything to keep you grounded? You were always vying for romance back home. Uh, in Antibes I mean. Never found it in the way you wanted, though. Mother always came first.”

“I remember,” she said, her focus concentrated heavily on the hefty lock in front of her. “It was a long time ago, but I could never forget. I have no idea how similar our memories are, considering the anomaly I fused with was from further in the timeline than when you left, but I remember Mother.” She chuckled coolly. “Hah, she wasn’t anything like either of our real mothers. Addicted, cruel, and judgmental. She just came into existence one day. We talked about her as if she was real and then, boom. She was there. Fucked up, if you ask me. That you can mess with time so much you can simply will life into being.” I looked up, trying to prevent my welling tears from dropping.

“Oh,” I said, my throat choking up. “I always thought the rest of our family were from outside the proper timeline, too.”

“Nope,” she answered, still funneling all her attention into her work. “We were just a few fools, that’s all.” She leaned in, twisting a dial and pressing her ear to the door. “I heard a click. She’s open. C’mon, boys.” She linked her arms around our elbows and shoved us into the inner fortification of the prison complex, marching us down a steel-encased hall. We soon arrived in a lobby of sorts, helmed by a petite old woman sitting at a plain-looking desk. The room was lit by a single draped lamp, and there were several barricaded hallways leading to branches of the cell units in every direction.

“May I help you?” the woman asked, still hunched over a stack of paperwork.

“Yes,” Petra said, “I’m here to deposit two prisoners of high importance to the Assembly. I also have a special request from up the chain to detain them with the rest of their accomplices...for better interrogation access...since there are so many of them.” The woman raised a single painted-on brow.

“And on what authority?”

“This one,” Petra answered, flashing her badge. The woman snatched it with her taloned nails, and squinted hard, reading it over several times to validate it.

“Hmm...” she grumbled. “You’re a big shot, eh?”

“You could say that.”

“Well, alright, Miss ‘Petronilla,’ which unlucky folks d’you wanna imprison these hellions with?”

“Do you have a record for a prisoner under the name of Cleon Avlonitis, fourth century BC, Pre-Roman Gaul?” The woman leaned over to a holographic screen floating above her desk and clicked a typing pad beneath it, her eyes strained and jaw working. I bounced nervously from foot to foot, scanning the ceiling for interesting divots.

“Yeah, I’ve got a hit for that,” the woman finally said. “I’ll have to escort you, of course, since his group is implicated in some pretty heavy accusations. Real messy stuff. Possessing anomalies ‘cross timelines and whatnot.” Petra nodded stiffly, dragging us towards the exit the older woman was hobbling to.

“Yes, it’s rather unfortunate,” she agreed, “very grave crimes. That is why I’m personally attending to their trial and punishment.”

“Good for you.”

“I wish it was...but sadly it brings me no joy to deal with such delinquents.”

“I’m crying for you, I really am.” Petra grinned sarcastically, turning back to us to roll her eyes. I stifled a giggle, and the woman

bolted the door behind us, revealing a brightly-lit hall of round cell doors. She reached into her blouse to retrieve a key card, opening an empty cell.

“Put the short one in here,” she instructed, nudging her thumb towards Cesaire.

“Wait,” Petra insisted, “I want all of them in the same cell—supervised, of course. I need to, um, conduct an interrogation. It’s essential.”

“You’ll need some proof of higher approval—”

“I *am* the higher approval. Ma’am.” She tilted her head, smiling in a concerningly passive aggressive manner. “Or do you want to face the council knowing you’ve directly disobeyed their passion project?”

“I *know* who you are.”

“Great. Then I needn’t remind you.” The woman sighed wearily and waddled down the next five cells, hitting them aggressively with her key card. They hissed, expelling steam, and opened.

“They’re all restrained,” she explained, “I’ll open an interrogation room for you and signal some guards to deal with ‘em all.”

“Oh, that really won’t be necessary—”

“Ma’am. Magistrate. Do you really believe you can adequately watch and wrangle *seven* dangerous prisoners?” Petra remained silent, her mouth open, but ultimately defenseless. She slumped, defeated.

“Fine, bring the guards. They can escort us to the room, but they are not permitted to enter, do you understand?”

“Yeah, whatever.” We were led to a sealed room with a mirrored wall and a single metal table surrounded by a smattering of uncomfortable chairs. The three of us sat there in silence, waiting for the guards to usher our friends in. My brain was racing, trying to calculate whatever plan Petra had concocted. I could never seem to guess her next move, she was just as cunning as I had remembered, that hadn’t changed.

Finally, we heard a shuffling of feet and the sound of the door unlocking. My head, which had been resting on the cold surface of the table, perked up. I heard Cesaire's light gasp as Cleon, Melem-Iram, Phebah, Azeem, and K'aayhltla walked in, escorted by solemn guards and restricted by restraints like ours. Only Eurynome was missing, but I recalled Sophonisba mentioning that she was still recovering in the infirmary of the prison— no doubt too sick to be summoned to the interrogation room.

Petra immediately rose to her feet. She started laughing and rushed to embrace Cleon, but remembering the presence of the guards, stopped herself and wove her hands together modestly.

"I'm just so...happy...that uh, that I can finally bring these dastardly criminals to justice," she explained to the looming guards. They said nothing. "Would you be so kind as to leave? I can take it from here, gentleman," she said, smiling sweetly. She really did put on a convincing display of innocence. The guards shrugged, nodding, and exited without uttering a single word. She sighed in relief, drawing Cleon in tight. She smiled politely at the rest of the group, and motioned for them to sit down.

"I am so glad you're alright," she said. "I was worried that Auguste and Cesaire would be detained as well, but fortunately it was recognized that they were not agents, simply travelers, and so they were not implicated with Eurynome's crimes as you were. Therefore they were able to alert me of your arrival— and what a joyous moment this is! Tell me, how close have you gotten?" Cleon hung his head, his cuffed hands supporting his chin.

"Err...we managed to source two out of the three anomalies, obviously, but we lacked such success with Eurynome's anomaly."

"Zenobie," Petra clarified.

“Right, yes. That is why we had to come here when we did—Eurynome was deteriorating from her efforts. She was attempting to inhabit Zenobie and her own corporeal form at the same time. This superposition was harmful to her, and we were left with no other choice than to come here and face the consequences so that she could be healed. Your assistance with Winifred was appreciated for that.”

“Alright, so that lines up with your communique, seems like I’m all caught up in that regard.” She suddenly stood up, her hands on the table. “So, you can’t stay here if you want to save the universe.”

“What do you mean?” Phebah asked, “we *have* to stay here—we’re imprisoned.” Petra smirked and cocked her head.

“Girl, we’re here to break you out.”

“*What?*” Cleon exclaimed. Petra reached into her dress, pulling out a small chrome hand-pistol and cocked it, holding it close to her chest.

“Move,” she instructed. We all immediately scattered, and she ran forward, ramming her shoulder into the door and dashing into the hallway. I whipped my head around, staring at Cesaire.

“Let’s go!” he yelled, and we ran after Petra as she darted down the hall. We passed an armament rack and she started grabbing every gun off of the stand and tossing them into our arms.

“Go, go, go!” she shouted, and I clumsily caught a heavy rifle, the strap whacking my face. I struggled to sling it on as I ran, but there was a bigger problem at hand. The guards were swarming us from all sides. Petra used her pistol to shoot a pipe above the hall, sending steam everywhere, and collectively blinding us. I shielded my face, pushing my way through the heavy fog. There was shouting all around me, chaos and noise, spinning, spinning, and spinning. I saw flashes of light in the mist, accompanied by thunderclaps of sporadic gunfire.

“Run!” Cleon’s voice cut through the chaos. I burst out of the smoke, coughing and hacking into my sleeve as I did. I saw Phebah grabbing onto Petra’s shoulder, using her as a shield from the guard’s onslaught.

“Which way to the infirmary?” Phebah shouted. Petra slammed another magazine into the base of her gun and motioned its tip north.

“That way!” she shouted back, running in the direction she had indicated. I followed her, desperate not to be lost in the confusion. Cesaire grabbed my wrist, allowing me to tug him along. I didn’t make it far before I was stopped by Melem-Iram slamming a guard into the wall in front of my path. He dropped the guard’s slack body to the ground, drywall peeling off with his bludgeoned body.

“Oh my God,” I said, feeling suddenly ill.

“Do you want to make it out of here alive or not?” was Melem-Iram’s response, as he continued running, not looking back. My gun started to weigh heavy in my arms and I dreaded the concept of actually having to use it. Petra kicked in a door and we tucked behind it, peeking out periodically to shoot at our pursuers, until all of us could make it through. I felt Cleon’s hands grab my gun from me, the strap tugging and scratching at my neck as he used it to shoot. The sound rattled me, and I felt dizzy.

“You have to defend yourself!” he barked, and I nodded rapidly. As soon as he said this, a stray bullet whizzed past my nose and lodged itself in the wall behind me. I shrieked, clenched my eyes, and fired rapidly into the corridor.

“Let’s go!” I heard Petra shout as K’ayhlta finally ducked behind the door, her left cheek bruised like a wine stain. We continued to make our madcap escape through the levels of the prison, each room we entered another gamble. The halls were flashing red, as the alarm had been raised by now, which only increased my pounding anxiety.

“We’re just two floors away now,” Petra alerted us as Azeem rushed forward, blasting open the lock on double doors blocking our path. With a loud bang, the lock rattled to the floor, and the doors parted. To our dismay, they featured a large cohort of armed guards waiting for us.

“Shit,” Cleon said.

“This is what happens when you go out guns a’ blazing,” K’aayhltla dead-panned. “No planning, easy to anticipate.” I snapped my head to stare at Petra. *She’s never easy to anticipate*, I thought, willing her to act out of the ordinary when we needed it the most.

“You’re surrounded,” one of the guard captains alerted us. “No way out now, put down your weapons and surrender yourselves.” To my surprise, Petra complied, beginning to drop her weapons to the floor. One by one, they clattered out of her hands. Spare clips, her pistol, a dagger in the sole of her shoe. Then, in a flash of color and light, she lunged at the guard nearest to her and juttied the barrel of her rifle into the base of his neck.

“I’ll shoot!” she exclaimed, “I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot! Stay back!” The crowd of guards panicked, jumping away from us and looking at their commanding officers for guidance. The man who had ordered us to surrender appeared utterly lost at what to do, and offered his underlings no help.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he warned, raising his hands slowly. Petra spun around, her free arm locked around her captive’s struggling mouth.

“I know *exactly* what I’m doing,” she snapped. “Take us to the infirmary. Let us enter by ourselves. Post yourselves outside for all I care, but just know we’ll be taking—” she gestured her head toward her victim.

“—Guido,” the captain offered.

“Right. We’ll be taking Guido as collateral. So, you better think twice about whatever you’ll be sure to be plotting. Capiche?” The captain nodded and waved his men down to escort us. “No,” Petra said, stopping him in his tracks. “Only you. The rest can stay behind.”

He squinted at her, as if she was so insane she had wrapped back around to satire. She laughed coolly. “You don’t want to game these odds,” she said, her voice dripping with threat. “I’ve got seven free guns and an eighth on your little friend’s neck. You’ll do as I say or it’s his funeral.”

“She’s crazy!” I whispered to Cleon, my grip on my gun trembling in a mixture of fear and awe.

“Always has been,” he said back as we began marching down a flight of stairs. “Ever since I first met her. And that was back in her supposed delinquent days.”

“She’s not exactly a law-abiding citizen now...” I pointed out.

“Not with this much on the line.” I rolled my eyes and jerked my thumb towards her gleefully sadistic expression.

“I’m pretty confident she’d jump at any chance to do something like this.” Cleon laughed.

“Haha, yeah. She may be a part of the hierarchy now, but she’s always hated it. Couldn’t even wait to play the legal system, had to stage a *prison break*.” The tile ceiling above us transitioned into glimmery chrome, and signage indicated that we had entered the infirmary wing of the prison complex. The captain inched forward, fumbling with his key chain as he opened a small door leading into the patient rooms. Petra shoved her gun further into Guido’s neck, threatening the captain to move faster. He was practically dripping in sweat but quickly managed to unlock the door, leading us down a thin corridor until we reached a cubicle boxed off by a satin curtain.

“Here,” he said, his voice wavering, “the manifest indicates her here. I’ll just—”

“—Be on your way,” Petra interrupted sternly. She glared at him as he slowly backed off, breaking into a sprint once he was far enough away. As soon as he was out of sight, she swung open the curtain-door to reveal a small hospital room. There was a mess of peculiar futuristic machinery, a small metal chair, and plain gurney with a few sheets strewn over it. Within those sheets rested a painfully familiar face. Eurynome, weak and weary, but with the flush back in her cheeks at the very least. Her eyes were closed, and she appeared to be sleeping. Cleon approached her carefully, his hands hovering over her slumbering form, gentle and patient, as if he were handling a child. He let them fall on her shoulder, shaking her awake. To my surprise, her eyes immediately snapped open.

“Cleon!?” she screamed, jumping up in her bed. The flimsy pillows propping her up fell onto the floor and she revealed her hair had tangled into a rats nest.

“Don’t panic,” he assured her, his hands still hovering around her carefully. “We’re all here for you.” He stepped aside to give her a view of her now-crowded hamlet of a room. Her mouth was agape and she scanned the space in silent awe.

“But...how?” she asked. “*Petra?* What are you doing he—”

“We’re breaking you out,” Petra explained, stepping forward. She was smirking, but I could tell from the grin she was suppressing that she had missed Eurynome very much.

“Oh,” Eurynome replied, clearly blind-sided. She blinked a few times and rubbed her tired eyes. “How long until the guards bust this whole operation?”

“More than you think. We took one of them hostage as leverage.” She gestured to Guido, who was cowering in the corner. Eurynome

began to laugh, a hearty one that I had seldom heard before. It was surprisingly strong for how worn out she appeared.

“God, only you,” she said. “Well, I suppose we should see if I can even walk then. If we ever plan on making your efforts worthwhile.”

“Yes,” Petra smiled, “that would be wise.” She held out her hand for Eurynome to steady herself on as she hopped off the bed, her legs wobbly as a newborn fawn when they hit the ground. She wasn’t even wearing shoes, and she was only dressed in bunched cotton pants and an oversized smock. “My you look a fright,” Petra remarked. Eurynome simply shook her head, chuckling to herself.

“Just get us the hell out of here.”

“Whatever you say.” Petra spun around, Eurynome clutching the crook of her elbow for support. She used her free arm to signal the group. “Let’s move. Take Guido with us, Melem-Iram.” We got into a makeshift formation, stalking the winding halls of the infirmary to search for an inconspicuous exit. It was, upon reflection, rather embarrassing to be crawling around with our weapons drawn and loaded, taking ourselves so seriously. Of course, the employees and residents of the hospital wing did not appreciate our soldiering demeanor. We frightened many nurses and doctors, causing them to duck behind desks, lock office doors, and on one occasion, grab a patient to sacrifice.

“Very professional,” I murmured to Phebah with an eye-roll. She giggled, which was extremely off-putting considering the tense tone of our entire operation.

“Ahead of us!” Petra whispered sharply, motioning to lines of light filtering into the maze of dark corridors. I brandished my weapon, bracing for whatever was to meet us on the other side of the door, whether it be empty space or a hoard of blood-thirsty guards ready to capture us. I could feel my teeth grinding against each other, the eyes of nurses cowering in a corner, scalpels held to their chests in wary

anticipation of self-defense. We leaned against the door, its small barred windows shedding natural light on our faces. I squinted, peeking through to see a large open hall with an empty wall overlooking the city from seemingly hundreds of feet above. However, I did not see anyone stationed to intercept us.

“What is that...?” Cesaire asked, still dutifully clenching the crook of my arm.

“Appears to be a hanger of sorts,” K’ayyhltla answered. “Look, you can see propellers. They’re storing heli-craft there.” He gave her a dumbfounded stare. “Airplanes,” she elaborated. His eyes widened. I remembered how enamored he had been with those vehicles back in Moose Pass. That suddenly felt like a lifetime ago, when in fact it had only been a handful of days.

“Well then there’s no doubt security for them,” Phebah pointed out, her hand poised on the door-handle. “But we’ve got nowhere else to go, so let’s do it.”

“Now, wait a minute, Phebah,” Cleon warned.

“Wait a minute? Look around! We’ve got a dozen crazies with surgery tools waiting for us to aim down our guns for one second, we’ve gotta get outta here.”

“And into an even more dangerous environment? Where they *also* have guns?”

“What other choice do we have?” There was a moment of silence within the group as we reflected. Finally, I heard a heavy sigh to my left.

“She’s right,” Petra conceded. “But I have a plan.” We wasted no time, after a quick meeting of deliberation and explanation, we collectively shoved the doors open and ran into the chamber, ready for anything. It only took a few moments for the pre-positioned guards to reveal themselves.

“There they are!” a voice shouted, sending all of their reserves in pursuit of our capture, or worse yet, nullification. Guido wrestled himself from Melem-Iram’s grasp and ran off to join their ranks.

“Just run to the nearest craft!” Petra directed. Bullets began to ricochet off of the sleek matte-silver bodies of heli-craft in our path. While we dashed off in one direction, Azeem and Melem-Iram ran in another and turned towards the guards, firing at random, hoping to shield us. It was a crude diversion, but it was all we had. We reached the heli-crafts, which we parked in rows of landing strips near the edge of the open baydoor. Phebah clenched her fingers on its slanted door, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Just break a window!” Petra shouted. Phebah rolled her eyes and hoisted herself onto the dash, scrambling over the slippery surface of its alloy casing. Staring at her bare fist, she made a split decision, biting into her sleeve and ripping it off with her teeth. Still holding it between her incisors, she wrapped it around her knuckles and palm a few times before tearing it away with the jerk of her head. I watched in horror from below as she straddled the window frame and punched it in, raining showers of glittering glass on our heads. I ducked, quickly covering myself with my arms. It was possible that Cesaire shrieked, but it was hard to hear through the rattling of guns and shouting of combatants. Phebah jumped into the heli-craft through the top window, and within a handful of seconds she had opened the main door to let us in. Eurynome, still weak on her feet, was ushered in first.

“Let’s go!” Cleon shouted at the edge of the doorframe, beckoning Melem-Iram and Azeem.

“We’re comi–” Melem-Iram began to shout before one of the guards he was locked in melee with jugged the butt of his gun into the side of his head. I saw a swath of blood before he collapsed, Azeem catching him, but buckled under the weight of the much taller man.

“We have to go!” Petra yelled to Cleon, who was still standing in the doorway. To make matters worse, a shadow began to pour over our sight, darkening the interior of the heli-craft as well as the floor of the hanger. They were closing the baydoor.

“Oh my God,” I said. “We can’t just leave them behind!”

“I know that,” Cleon said, turning away and jumping off of the entrance platform to retrieve our stranded friends.

“Cleon!” Petra screamed in frustration. She shook her head, tears clouding her eyes, and slid into the pilot’s seat.

“What are you doing!?” Phebah exclaimed, attempting to pull her away from the controls. Petra shoved her off, and began clicking switches above her head and gearing up the engine for lift-off.

“I didn’t sign up to get captured and have my betrayal of everything I’ve ever worked for be for nothing,” she said. “I’m here to fix the biggest mistake of my life once and for all, and nobody, not the Assembly, not even Cleon, is going to come in the way of that.” She pulled on the knob to engage the thrusters, sending a thrumming pulse through the floor of the craft. I, who was now surely in a panic, ran to the back entrance and stood at the edge, my hand outstretched to Cleon, who was struggling to pull Melem-Iram’s limp body while Azeem bashed in the heads of guards in a desperate flurry of combat.

“Hurry!” I yelled, the craft beginning to pull off of the ground. The baydoor was nearly halfway closed by now, and our timeframe of escape was literally narrowing by the second. Wind generated from the engines whipped my curls around my face, and we were nearly five feet in the air now. Cleon jumped, his arm reaching for mine. I caught him around his wrist, but my grip was quickly slipping. I felt Cesaire come up from behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist to steady me as I pulled.

“Both...of your weight...” I groaned through gritted teeth, “It’s too much.”

“Then let me go,” Cleon said.

“N-no.” I shook my head, not giving up so soon. Phebah and K’aayhltla joined in dragging me away from the edge. I dug my heels in, finally hoisting Cleon into the craft, Melem-Iram wrapped around him, his bleary eyes opening to a mess of mid-air confusion. Just as we were hauling them up, a flare of red flashed through my vision. A single expertly-pointed gunshot had grazed Cleon’s hand that was holding onto Azeem. An isolated scream, and sooner than I could imagine, Azeem was dropping into the unknown.

“No!” Phebah screeched, letting go of Cesaire to run to the edge of the craft. But it was too late. We were flying away. More gunshots rattled the metal to the side of the doorframe, and I dragged Phebah away from the brink.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I murmured, brushing her hair away from her slick brow. “It’s going to be okay.” She sobbed, burrowing her face into my chest. We sat there, on the cold metal, the craft rattling with trails of smoke. We banked hard, bursting through the nearly-closed crack in the baydoor. I watched the prison fade away, an imposing palazzo of stucco and stone. I let Phebah go, stumbling to my feet, the still-open door funneling fast rapids of wind into the cabin. I shambled over to Petra, who was gripping the wheel fiercely, her eyes trained on the horizon. Cleon was standing next to her, his hand bloodied but cauterized from the heat of the wound. I could see his charred skin, and it smelled worse than anything.

“Where are we going?” he asked in a low voice. She began to pull us down into the traffic channels of other crafts traveling through the arid city skies.

“Archaeus,” she said plainly. He groaned, pinching his brow.

“We can’t just go to the Sanctum District? We’ll be given sanctuary there, or even immunity, you know.”

“They’ll expect that. Everyone goes to the goddamn Sanctum.”

“Don’t you know anyone else in this city?”

“Name one other person who would agree to harbor a group of fugitives, including their own fucking *anomaly*.” He did not reply to this.

“Petra...?” I asked nervously.

“What is it?”

“Are we going to go back for Azeem?”

“Do you want me to answer that question?” There was a stifling silence. I looked at the weary members of our ramshackle group. Some bloodied, others bruised, all somewhat hopeless. All people I cared about in one way or another. All people who had pledged to do one thing. One thing we still had yet to do.

“No.”

## XVIII: Cesaire

Petra landed the craft in a public lot a few miles from our destination, tipping the young lot manager a reasonable sum for him to not submit any overstay complaints for at least a week. I expected us to take the same sort of rickshaw-bike Sophonisba had used to deliver us to the Basilica, but we were instead made to walk. Petra had cited something about not leaving any traceable records with our funds-spending. Still, the city was, admittedly, rather intriguing from the ground. My anthropological instincts were on full display as I ogled at corner-merchants lounging on Persian carpets under palm fronds, selling an exotic array of wares; everything from alleged ancient artifacts dug up from deep desert sand-fields to artisan-crafted ivory jewelry boxes to hand-carved children's toys to even simple necessities like bottled water and bright plastic toothbrushes.

The economy wasn't the only fascinating aspect of this bustling metropolis. Its residents were a global bunch. Young girls draped in white sarees walked in lines down the rickety wooden footpaths that covered the gutters, humming in unison as they did. Pilgrims donning heavy goldware and embroidered vests congregated at compact shrines built between crowded apartment buildings and busy storefronts. Old women fed plums to macaques that scurried through the streets, young boys in tunics recited religious texts in shaded courtyards, and chatty teenagers exchanged gossip over honeyed coffee and lox bagels at cast-iron cafe tables. It was a lively, living city. It was a confluence of every time period, culture, and person that could ever exist. I was fascinated.

After an hour or so of wandering through seemingly endless alleys, marketplaces, plazas, and avenues, we stopped at a beautiful apartment complex that strangely combined a Spanish Mozarabic facade with intricate Baroque architecture. I was amused by this improper mix,

but also pleased by its lovely design. Its pillared arches almost gave it the appearance of a theater.

“Is this the place?” Auguste asked, ever-curious.

“Sure is,” Cleon said, sounding less-than-enthused. That confused me, because I surely recalled Eurynome informing me that they had relations. Perhaps it was complicated. I knew all about complicated relationships. We entered the lobby, which was decorated by an arboretum of assorted flora, gilded walls, and shiny linoleum floors. Cleon took charge of the group from Petra, who was left to aid Eurynome in limping to the elevator. We cramped into its mirrored interior, Cleon selecting a floor with the back of his thumb. It was admittedly, very awkward and somber. Cleon was still bloodied on the back of his wrist, Melem-Iram was nursing a concussion, Eurynome was in an ill state, and the rest of us were left to dwell on Azeem. I inched my gaze over to Auguste who was tapping his foot and staring at his reflection on the ceiling. I wanted to say something, anything, but there seemed to be nothing left to say. With a ding and the jostling of the lift, the elevator slowed to a stop. We wasted no time spilling out of the doors as soon as they opened, revealing a small hallway of paneled wood. It was cool and dark, with only vaulted skylights filtering daylight below. I deduced that we must have gone to the top floor.

It was a quick jaunt down the hall before we reached our final destination. An unassuming red oak door with a brass knocker rubbed golden from years of use. I was puzzled when all we did was stand there. For a good thirty seconds nobody knocked. Then, after some prolonged eye contact with Petra, Cleon stepped forward and did it. Tenderly, carefully, with more than a little hesitation, he knocked two times. It only took a handful of seconds before the door swung open. I couldn't see perfectly from behind everyone's heads, but one thing was apparent. A man who looked disturbingly like Auguste was standing in the

doorframe. He had longer hair than Auguste had ever had, the scruffy beginnings of a mustache, and was wearing an airy patterned button-down. It was downright uncanny. I saw Auguste's eyebrows raise and his throat bob nervously. Archaeus combed back his hair with his hand and his mouth fell open.

"...Cleon?" he said, his voice cracking like a youth's. Cleon shuffled on his feet, not answering. Petra rolled her eyes and shoved her way forward.

"Hello, Archaeus, good to see you," she said. "We're here on some urgency, so would you be so kind as to let us in? Questions later?" He stuttered, clearly baffled.

"U-uh, oh, yes, come in." He stepped aside, and Petra briskly marched into the apartment, followed by the rest of us. Archaeus shut the door and stumbled into his living room. His apartment was a brightly-colored and well-lit studio, in great contrast to the muted, moody flat that Auguste had owned in Antibes. The furniture was all peat-greens, salmon pinks, butter yellows, and teals. We sat down, congregating on his various chairs and couches. There was a window with its curtains drawn back illuminating the room with the bright Mediterranean sun, and a generous amount of eclectic light fixtures and lamps.

"This is..." Archaeus said, "...this is not who I expected to be knocking on my door today. I mean— Eurynome! You brought Cleon and I's *anomalies* to the Assembly? How did that go unnoticed? How were you not all imprisoned? And why do you look so..."

"Well," she said, "Winifred was kind enough to attune them, and we did technically go to prison." She lifted her hands up to save her point "But! It wasn't for what you think. I err..."

"She tried to inhabit Zenobie in order to pull her out of the timeline. Really genius stuff," Cleon deadpanned. "Oh, and Petra and

the anomalies sprung us from the prison. That's why we're...here." Archaeus balked, totally at a loss of what to say.

"You *will* take us, right?" Eurynome asked incredulously. Archaeus groaned and massaged his temples.

"Yes, Eurynome, I'll take you. Even if you were insanely stupid. You will always be my dear confidant and friend." They smiled at each other until he abruptly whipped around to face Cleon again, who was lounging nonchalantly on the couch with one leg lazily strewn over the other.

"And you!" Archaeus said, "You are— ugh! You haven't answered any of my tapes since I took this job!"

"Are you sure you want to do this right here—" Eurynome attempted to say.

"I've been worried sick!" Archaeus interrupted. Cleon's facade crumbled and he looked into his lap abashedly, blush blooming on his face.

"You know I wasn't happy that you chose to stay..." he mumbled.

"You should've been," Archaeus replied, sounding hurt, but trying to look cool and composed. "I wanted this job so badly! I really worked for it."

"And what about what I wanted?"

"We can *have both*. You just needed to not *ignore* me!" Cleon chewed his lip and his eyes crinkled like he was going to cry. I knew his tells, because they were my own.

"I hated it," he said, his voice breaking, but his expression firm. "I hated ignoring you. I'm always thinking about you, dreaming about you, wishing I had—"

"Then stop wishing," Archaeus said. He swooped down, cupped his face, and kissed him. It was plain— they leaned into it and broke

apart. My face fell and I immediately felt infinitely weird. *What. The. Fuck.* I thought. To make matters worse, Cleon stood to meet Archaeus at eye-level and flung his arms over his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he cried, and they kissed again, this time slower and deeper, like they had done it a thousand times. I stared at a very interesting spot on the wall in front of me. They pulled apart, but Cleon remained on his arm, swinging shyly from side to side. I felt genuinely ill.

“Thank God,” Eurynome said, leaning her head back on her chair’s headrest in relief. Petra grinned and elbowed Auguste.

“They’re always like this,” she said cheekily. “Bet you are too, hmm?”

“Oh, lay off it, Petra,” Eurynome chastised. “Let the lovebirds sing, but remember we’ve got other matters to attend to.”

“I am *so hungry!*” Auguste burst out anxiously. “Could we at least eat before all of the important business?” Phebah stared at him, her eyes still rubbed red with tears. Somehow, she almost looked like she could laugh.

“What has gotten into you?” she asked. Meanwhile, Archaeus waltzed awkwardly over to his kitchen and leaned against his small speckled countertop.

“You’ve all traveled so far,” he said, “I could, uh, cook something up. I mean, I can’t deny how overjoyed I am that you’re here. A meal with friends, no matter the circumstances, is a good thing.” A few exchanged glances later, and the room had agreed that some dinner and rest might be beneficial. I seemed to recall Phebah mentioning the food here was peculiar, so I wasn’t quite sure what to expect.

“You’re being weird,” Phebah told Auguste quietly. She was glowering, and I could taste the uncomfortability in the air. He leaned his chin onto his fist and gazed out of the window.

“Maybe because *this* is weird,” he muttered back. “I don’t think I need to point out why. Don’t forget we left Azeem—”

“Shut up.” I raised my brows in shock. That was abrasive for what I knew of her. Still, Auguste took the memo and backed off, retreating into his snug corner of the couch. *Jesus*, I thought to myself, *this has got to be one of the worst situations I’ve ever been in*. By invoking the Lord’s name in vain, even within the confines of my mind, I felt the urge to pray. I’d likely sinned a lot in those times. I pulled myself out of my chair, my vision fixed ahead of me to avoid making eye contact with Auguste, and walked over to the kitchen where the others were congregating to discuss what to eat.

“Err, do you happen to have a restroom here?” I asked. Archaeus nodded and pointed me down the single hallway in the apartment. I found it with ease and quickly shut myself inside. It was small, but not modest. The floors were marbled tile and the backsplash was mosaic. There was a footed bathtub with glossy chrome fixtures, a luxurious conch shell sink, and lace curtains that fluttered in the warm breeze wafting in from the ajar awning window. I braced myself against the edge of the sink countertop and stared into the mirror. I wasn’t sure who was staring back. He had my dirty blonde curls, but they were overgrown in the back and cropped towards the front. He had my amber eyes, but they were hazy with a tired malaise. He had my body, but his shoulders were broadened, his forearms were tanned, and his nose bridge was sunburnt. He was myself but he did not wear my clothes. He was myself but he had no idea what anything meant.

I turned on the faucet, allowing cool, pure water to flow over my tattered hands. I let them turn under the steady stream, lulling myself into peace with the rush of water into the bowl. Then I dipped down and splashed my face, attempting to wake myself up. I remembered, rather intimately, Auguste and I on our little road trip. How it was an

infant version of what I had just seen in that living room. How that terrified me and I would do anything to run away and hide from it. Then, my vision became splotchy and dark and my head bobbed, only barely giving me enough time to catch myself before I hit the floor. I dizzily steadied myself, startled. Images of Antibes flashed in my mind, and it was then I remembered the bargain I had made to come here. *I was still sharing a piece of myself with some other version of me. My time here was likely limited before the effect wore off.* I rubbed my eyes and groaned.

“I would just love,” I said to the reflection in the mirror, “for everything to be normal.” That was a foolish wish, and I knew it even before the words left my lips. I finished cleaning myself up and walked back to the main room to find the cooking was already well underway. As far as I could detect, it smelled like real food. Dill, fennel, and egg yolks. Aged cheddar, peppers, and pear slices. Still, upon looking at it, there was definitely an oddness. It *looked* like food, but there was no cooking involved. Simply the unpackaging of dissolvable capsules over heat, letting them simmer into fully-formed meals.

“Modern wonders never cease,” I remarked, leaning over Petra’s shoulder, who was un-casing a capsule of gelatin.

“It doesn’t get much weirder than the Assembly,” she said. There was a ripple of giggles throughout the kitchen, and I got the feeling we could almost pretend nothing was wrong. Still, Phebah was sulking in the corner, Melem-Iram hadn’t said a word, and Auguste looked downright traumatized. I assumed I appeared the same. This was all contrasted by Cleon being carefully bandaged and spun around by Archaeus. They were now leaned against each other, swaying back and forth, as they simmered some omelets. *Absolutely sickening*, I thought, resisting the urge to cry at the sight of them. Throughout the entire next hour I attempted to suppress the ache that was building in my throat every time I laid eyes on them. When Cleon, who I had known to be

composed and serious, grinned like a schoolboy any time Archaeus spoke. When Archaeus, who looked so very much like Auguste, gave him that sweet smile that *I knew*. That *Auguste* had given me before. It was then that I could only pray I had not returned his looks with Cleon's juvenile grin.

When dinner prep was complete we all took up residence where we could. Auguste, Cleon, Eurynome, and Petra sat on barstools around the counter, Phebah remained in her couch spot, Melem-Iram and K'aayhlta both took an armchair, and Auguste reluctantly sat next to me on the other side of the couch. I resisted the urge to jump up and lock myself in the bathroom. I figured it might be better not to say anything at all. Unlucky for me, he made the stupid decision of attempting to initiate conversation.

"These eggs are...pretty great, huh?" he said, poking at his plate with an intricate silver fork. I briskly shoveled some into my mouth and nodded. Still, I couldn't chew forever. He asked me another question.

"You reckon we'll be able to explore the city at all? Any pressing quests that will send us off into the urban sprawl?"

"...I wouldn't count on it," I said.

"Ah no, you're right. We've got a mission to complete, haven't we?"

"Damn right we do," Petra said, sitting cross-legged on her barstool with her plate balanced in her lap.

"That's the thing," Eurynome said, "doesn't anyone think any of this is peculiar?"

"What do you mean?" Petra asked.

"Well, we were detained immediately upon arrival, no explanation, no representation, no trial date, nothing. Plus...we shouldn't have had to come here in the first place. I was too weak to properly examine it critically back in Alaska, but I *should* have been able

to access Zenobie. She shouldn't have moved so much, she shouldn't have—it's almost like she was being hidden from us."

"Who do you think—"

"Who do *you* think?" There was a prolonged silence as we all exchanged looks, the implication drawing on us.

"The...Assembly?" Auguste offered.

"Precisely," Eurynome said. There were murmurs of confusion and Archaeus waved his hands around to slow us down.

"Wait, wait wait," he said, "why would they try to stop you? You're field agents with a respectable job. You're doing your due diligence to put an end to your past grievances. If they were to stop that, they'd put themselves at risk! They don't want a bridge-fall of that caliber."

"That's *why* we have to find out," Eurynome countered. Archaeus rubbed his arms and settled back in his seat.

"Are you...sure?" he asked.

"We have to try. We have no other choice."

"Okay...well. There's going to be an opera in two night's time. The Empress and her cabinet will be in attendance. I'm sure Petra knows all about that as she's expected to attend. Although, I doubt her invitation is still extended based on what I've heard about today's activities." He leaned over the counter to smirk at Petra. "I mean, seriously? Were you just dying to desecrate your reputation again?"

"I was just *dying* to keep the *entire universe alive*."

"...Fair enough. Anyhow, while the Empress is away, the palace should have reduced security. We should have a better chance of breaking in."

"Why would we want to do that?" I asked.

"That's where the archives are hosted. Any data on the timeline could be accessed, including an individual being hidden from retrieval."

“How’re you gonna make sure she doesn’t change her mind and head back?” K’ayyhltla asked from the corner. “She’s finicky, that Empress, she is. Can’t please that woman.”

“We can always send a few of us to attend and create a diversion if she makes an early leave. Yell fire in a theater, and an important person doesn’t go *home*, they stay at the scene to make their involvement known.”

“Hm, very well,” K’ayyhltla said, shrugging. We all mumbled our agreements, the plan forming as we did.

“I’ll attend the opera,” Auguste volunteered. “I, uh, I miss the arts...” he admitted shyly. I smiled at that.

“I’ll go with him,” Phebah said glumly. “Can’t be bothered with another mission, but might as well have one last glamorous night out.”

“Very good,” Petra said. “Archaeus, Melem-Iram, K’ayyhltla, Cesaire and I can carry out the palace infiltration.”

“Me?” I squeaked, still feeling inferior in my abilities.

“Yes you. You’re rather clever-seeming, you know.”

“Oh. Thanks, I s’pose.”

“You’re welcome. Anyway, Eurynome will have to stay here and continue recuperating and uhh...Cleon can stay with her.”

“Why Cleon?” Auguste asked, an edge of suspicion to his voice. “Isn’t he a valuable asset? More so than Cesaire and I?”

“He’s, um, he’s injured. Needs to heal,” Petra replied and smoothed out her dress. Auguste narrowed his eyes but relaxed into the crook of the couch, her explanation appearing to satisfy him.

“Alright then,” he said. “Well, what are we to do until then?”

“Just lay low,” Petra replied. She leaned across the counter to look at Archaeus. “I hope you don’t mind us sleeping here, we’ll be out of your hair before you know it.”

“No, no, it’s fine. We can post some folks up in the guest bedroom, some others in my office.”

“And you and Cleon can share,” she quipped, grinning like a fool.

“Oh my God,” Eurynome groaned and threw her head back.

“You are such an instigator,” Phebah giggled, sounding like herself for the first time since our arrival. Cleon reached across the counter and flicked Petra on the side of the head. She pretended to bite his ear in retaliation. If it didn’t make me feel so gravely ill, I would acknowledge that it was rather adorable.

“Okay, that’s enough, you two,” Archaeus said. “Once everyone’s done with their plates I can show them to their rooms and we can divide up sleeping areas. Is there anyone willing to do dishes?”

“I’m good for it,” K’ayyhltla volunteered.

“Great, thank you.”

“Yeah, ‘course.”

From then on we launched into regular conversation, winding down for the night as lavender dusk descended on the city, its millions of lights illuminating the skyline like a swarm of fireflies. I was posted up in the guest bedroom, sleeping on a floor mattress while Phebah and Melem-Iram took the beds. I ignored the bitterness I felt when Auguste was led to the room across the hall. I found it best not to analyze those feelings. I spent a bit more time in the living room, but found the conversation confusing. I had always enjoyed engaging in philosophical dialectics— it was my job to teach the subject after all— but the topics covered here were alien to me. Debates on the Assembly’s intricate political system, critiques of various historical figures that were in my future, and a host of century-spanning inside jokes, all set to the staticky background music of a faded bossa nova record. I politely excused myself and went off to prepare myself for bed.

The sleep was peaceful at first as I realized that I was bone-tired, but waves of strange nausea continued to lap at my heart, constricting my lungs and stealing my breath. I woke up in a cold sweat during the depths of the night. I carefully pushed my cotton sheets aside and shambled over the carpeted floor into the hallway. I tip-toed into the bathroom and craned my mouth under the faucet to parch my thirst. Wiping my chapped lips dry, I went to return to my bed, but was stopped by a soft orange glow and quiet whispers emanating from the living room. I crept down the hall and pressed myself against the wall to listen from the shadows. As far as I could see, Eurynome and Petra were seated at the bar table while Cleon was curled in Archaeus's lap upon the couch. There was a single night light plugged into the wall, casting the smallest bit of brightness upon their purple-gray shapes.

"...You'll have to go without anyone noticing..." Eurynome whispered.

"I'll do what I have to," Cleon replied, his fingers playing with Archaeus's. There was a pause, something unheard was said, and Cleon sat up, facing Archaeus with a puzzled look.

"Take me with you," Archaeus said. "You just got here and I don't—I don't want us to be separated again."

"Are you sure that's what you want? I mean, you said it. You wanted nothing more than to have this job— this opportunity."

"Don't be stupid, there's definitely something I want more." Cleon batted his arm and collapsed against his shoulder.

"Shut up," he mumbled.

"If I may, Archaeus," Petra introjected, "you'll *have* to come with us if we want to fix things. You have an anomaly that's doing just as much damage as Cleon's or Eurynome's." I subconsciously clenched my fists. *They don't need to speak about us like that*, I thought to myself.

“The rest of them, Phebah and the like, are anomalies as well,” Eurynome pointed out. “Do you think they’ll be dangerous one day?”

“Can’t be. Their Origins have been eliminated. They’re the functioning Origins now.”

“Eliminated— oh. That’s...our other option? That’s what the Assembly...does?”

“Hate to break it to you. But, yeah. It’s not all sunshine and rainbows here. They do what they have to do, which is why we’ve gotta do what we have to do, too.” A stifling silence. Cleon nodded.

“I’ll do it,” he agreed. Archaeus embraced him, brushed his curls off of his forehead and gently kissed him there.

“We’re going to win this, love,” he said. “We’ll figure everything out, we’ll find Zenobie, and then maybe...well, you know.”

“Yeah. I know.” They shared a moment, wrapped around each other under moonlight and a flickering tangerine bulb.

“Very cute,” Petra said slyly. Eurynome elbowed her hard. I waited for more words to be exchanged, but they all seemed to just simply be sitting there, basking in their collective presence, reunited at last. I managed a smile and slunk back into the dark, retreating to my bed. As I dug into the covers, and all was silent, I could finally hear the thumping in my chest. My heart fluttered, and being as tired as I was, I simply let it.



## **XIX: Medley (Auguste/Cesaire/Cleon)**

- Auguste -

I combed my hair back nervously and pulled my lended dress shirt down to my waist in an attempt to smooth out its wrinkles. It obviously fit perfectly, considering it was Archaeus's. I hated how well it fit. It wasn't mine. It shouldn't be. Plus, I still wasn't used to him, and I wasn't sure I ever would be. I had no idea how Cesaire managed to keep his composure so well around Cleon.

"It's going to be a very simple evening," Phebah said, craning her neck to speak into my ear. We were standing in a line of exceptionally dressed high society, waiting to be admitted into the dazzling theater. There was a red velvet rope blocking us off from the more sparsely populated aristocracy and celebrity line, which was being peppered by the camera flashes of eager photographers and paparazzi. Phebah hung onto my arm, attempting to sell our cover as young lovers. I didn't find it particularly convincing, but played along nevertheless. Archaeus still had his position at the Assembly and had crafted us some nifty IDs that he swore would be passable. Mine was slotted into my silk-lined pocket, and I twisted it between my thumbs in a display of nerves. It had obviously been some time since my last night out, something that used to be a regular fixture for me.

Phebah was clad in a baby pink evening gown, a diamond choker, and teardrop earrings. She braided her hair, which was now piled on top of her head in an intricate web. She began fussing with her gloves, which were creamy white and extended to her elbows.

"You look wonderful," I reassured her.

"Oh," she said, a dusky blush appearing on her cheeks. "Thank you." The line began moving in front of us and we approached the

ticketmaster. I smiled at him and extended our ticket stubs, my arm wrapped around Phebah's waist like a dutiful gentleman.

"Here you go, sir," I said helpfully. The man flashed us a pleasant smile back and clipped our tickets, handing them back to me after he was done.

"Identification?" he asked. Phebah and I each showed him our cards, and I noticed that my palms were slick with sweat. *Please work*, I thought anxiously.

"Great," he said, barely looking at them.

"Oh!" I said, surprised. "Thank you—"

"—Next!" he called out, prompting the next couple to step up, forcing Phebah and I out of the line. We stumbled under the marquis, looking at each other with satisfied grins.

"Well," she said, "that was easier than I thought it would be."

"The gods favor us tonight, my dear friend!" I replied giddily, draping an arm over her shoulder. She covered her mouth and laughed, swinging around like she was tipsy. "Shall we?" I asked.

"We shall."

We strolled into the theater under the neon lights of the display sign, through the glassy french doors, and into what I prayed would be a regular evening of art, enjoyment, and good old-fashioned escapism. The lobby was enormous—carpeted in dark velvet with chestnut walls, lit by an army of crystal chandeliers, and teeming with everything from gaggles of young girls out on the town to graying old couples flaunting their season tickets.

"I missed this sort of thing," I sighed wistfully, taking everything in. My neck dipped back to stare at the fresco on the vaulted ceiling, and I was taken aback at how grandiose the interior was. "I haven't seen such impeccable architecture since I was in Paris," I admitted. "And oh, that was more than a lifetime ago. I can hardly remember it." Phebah laughed

softly and shook her head. We began walking up the grand staircase leading to the box seats. She traced the golden railing like a lingering dew.

“There was never such beautiful craftsmanship in my childhood, and I never went to Europe, but there was one building that always left me awestruck,” she said, nostalgia coloring her words. “It was a cathedral, on the island of Puerto Rico.”

“Oh, really? What was it like?”

“Regal. Traditional and Catholic. The most magnificent turquoise ceilings. I prayed there the first time I landed on the island.” She paused to adjust her dress in a floor-length mirror mounted in the corridor we were strolling down. “I haven’t been to a church in the longest time.”

“Me neither.”

“Do you still pray?”

“...I’m not sure.” She nodded and leaned against the wall.

“I understand.” I swallowed my words, whatever they were, and we looked at each other with a reflective silence in the middle of a bustling crowd. “I think our box is another floor up...” she said to break the tension. I itched the heel of my palm and hummed in agreement, following her up another flight of stairs.

I was subtly impressed by Archaeus’s last-minute ticket-cinching; we were located in an enclosed box coated in red curtains with a direct side-view of the stage. There were two rows, one of which was already occupied by a young mother and her two fussy children. Phebah offered the woman a fond smile and we took the front row, settling in easily with the amenities of cushy armrests and complimentary opera glasses. Phebah picked hers out of their small black case on the stand between our seats.

“You know,” she said, turning them over between her fingers, “these are really called lorgnettes.” I stared at her for a second before nearly doubling over in a fit of laughter.

“Oh,” I giggled, “Phebah, darling. You *do* know that I am French? They are called such in my native tongue!” She quickly jumped to defend herself.

“W-well! I don’t know! You could speak Occitan! You’re from the south, are you not?”

“I studied in Paris,” I quipped back cheerfully. She rolled her eyes and slumped in her seat.

“For goodness’ sake. I really can’t win with you.”

“I speak Occitan too, of course.”

“Absolutely ridiculous!”

“Well, you must speak more than— wait. I don’t actually know what languages you speak. Oh my. That is peculiar isn’t it?” She perked up, the revelation dawning on her.

“Hm! I guess you’re right.” She settled back into her seat. “Bahamian Creole, English, and some passable Spanish and Dutch,” she answered. “No French though...which does surprise me, if I’m being completely honest. Guess I never needed it. Maybe if I had been there longer...”

“You really got around, huh?” I said. She frowned.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I did.” She turned her head away from me and stared out at the stage, letting the roaring conversations of the audience below us overtake our own. The lights were beginning to dim, indicating the start of the show. She reached her hand over the barrier balcony and pointed at an isolated box high above the nosebleeds. “That’s the Empress right up there,” she told me. “Allegedly.”

“Have you seen this opera before?” I asked. She chuckled and shook her head.

“I’ve never seen *any* opera before.”

“Oh! Well, then. I’ll watch the Empress so you can enjoy the show.”

“But I thought you wanted to—” I held up my finger to stop her.

“Just let me,” I said. The lights flashed, indicating the final call to be quiet. She pouted and crossed her arms, but as darkness fell over the theater, I could see her smiling out of the corner of my eye. I kept my watchful gaze trained on the blurry dark shape of the Empress hidden far up in her gilded turret, but I still allowed the music to wash over me. It had been far too long since I had immersed myself in a proper classical ensemble. Despite only half-paying attention, I soon caught on to a few key details that peaked my interest. Some time in, I leaned over and whispered to Phebah, who was peering at the stage through her glasses.

“Is this not...*The Aeniad*? Or at least the part in Carthage? As in, the city we are *currently in*?” She laughed to herself softly.

“Ah, that’s the tradition. I’ve never attended one of these shows personally, but of course it’s quite well known. Whenever the Empress and her court are in attendance they show this opera because she’s one of the title characters. It’s called *Dido and Aeneas*.”

“Wait,” I said, turning to face Phebah directly. “The Empress...the ruler of the Assembly...is *Dido*?”

“Uh...this is New Carthage is it not? She founded Carthage, reasonable to believe she would preside over its most perfect incarnation. She was the one who started all of this, you know.”

“That’s just fantasy, though! She was— she’s a mythological character! Phebah, I’ve no idea of your Greek literary knowledge, but she’s billed next to Aeneas in this opera. An imaginary man!” She blinked a few times, unsure of what to say.

“Is this city anything short of fantasy?” She asked plainly. “What did you expect?” Before I could respond, the young mother behind us

shushed our disruptive bickering and I, now disoriented, went back to keeping watch on the Empress. All of the sudden, I had the knowledge that she was the legendary founder of an ancient Phoenecian kingdom on the northern coast of Africa. *Absolutely nothing confusing or astonishing there*, I groaned to myself. *My life is far too strange for my own good.*

The opera continued without much disruption. The singers were all of high quality—sopranos soaring over the tinny high notes with ease while spry young tenors jumped between thrumming belts and plucky falsetto, all underscored by the pulsing bellows of the basses. The costumes were flashy, the set expansive, the symphony played with full passion, and the audience was packed to the brim. It was the sort of artistry I fantasized about before I went to sleep.

I phased in and out of sluggishly watching the stage or checking in on the Empress's status, and then something changed. Towards the end of the second act, as Aeneas prepared to leave Carthage, Dido got up as well. The real Dido— she was leaving her box in the middle of the opera. I shook Phebah's shoulders to get her attention.

"It's the Empress!" I hissed. "She's leaving!"

"Oh! Err, uh," she stuttered, looking glassy-eyed like she'd just woken up.

"Well, what do we do?" I said.

"I don't—" she looked frantic, but just as lost as I was. Panicking, I jumped out of my seat and leaned over the balcony. I gave myself no time to think. I just said it.

"Fire! Fire! Fi—!" I screamed, my voice echoing throughout the hall. Phebah grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled me down. We crouched behind the balcony, shielding ourselves from the audience, which was now rising in volume like a tidal wave about to slam the shore.

"What are you doing!?" she cried.

“Archaeus said to call fire if—”

“—It was a metaphor, Auguste! You’re a poet, shouldn’t you, I don’t know, be able to identify such a thing?”

“I panicked okay? We had one job and I don’t know what—”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she reassured me, rubbing my arm. She stood up, looking out over the theater, which was now stampeding. “Well...shit,” she said before grabbing my wrist and tugging me up to my feet. I turned my head to check the box. The Empress was gone.

“Ughh,” I groaned. “I think I just made everything worse.”

“She could still be here,” Phebah said. “But yeah. You probably did.” She dragged us out of the box and we began to attempt our escape. There was a flood of theater-goers pouring down every staircase, out of every hallway, and into every cloister. She hiked up her skirts and shoved her way into the river of suits and gowns.

“Remember what Archaeus told us?” she shouted over the panic.

“Yeah!” I yelled back, “the Empress has her own exit and entrance! It’s in the back of the coat room!”

“That’s right! I’m taking us there now.” She skidded around a corner and we approached the grand staircase, which was literally spilling with escapees. She tutted and shook her head. I watched in awestruck horror as she launched herself out of the crowd, landed on the slippery golden railing and proceeded to use it to slide down to the lobby floor. Meanwhile, I followed by clamoring over the mob and tumbling onto the floor with far less grace and in much more time. I stared at her as we ran to the coat room— not a scratch.

“How did you do that!?” I exclaimed. She grinned and jumped into a running cartwheel. Flipping out of it, her hair flying in her face, she curtsied.

“Pirating does wonders for acrobatics,” she shrugged. I laughed in impressed shock, shaking my head.

“You vex me, Phebah,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah.” She swung around a hickory post bracing the ceiling beams of the lobby’s overhang, which led to a small door I recognized as the entrance to the coat check. She pushed the door open and we entered an expansive walk-in closet complete with an administrative desk and shelves for lost-and-found items.

“See any...hidden doors?” I asked. She scanned the room, which was mostly full of the expected— racks of suit jackets, top hats, and opera coats.

“Wait!” she said, pointing to the back corner. “I think I see something.” We ran to the back, finding a small exit obscured by a pile of unopened boxes. I quickly dug them out of the way and pulled on the handle.

“Shit,” I snapped. “It’s locked.”

“Just kick it.”

“What?”

“Just— oh, you know what, never mind.” She wound back, collecting the tresses of her skirts, and slammed her leg into the door, blasting it open. It was a display of blunt force executed with exquisite precision. I stared at her.

“You *continue* to suprise me, Phebah,” I said, dumbfounded. She waved me off and clamored over the boxes, walking out of the coat room and onto the street.

“Yeah, whatever,” she said, blowing a piece of her hair out of her eyes. We walked out onto a wide alley paved with tan bricks that practically glowed under the yellowed moonlight. On the main street, the frantic opera attendees were pooling, screaming abound.

“I don’t think we’re going to find her out here,” I said. “Looks like we definitely missed her.” No sooner than I said that, I heard howling sirens echo down the front avenue of the theater’s marquis. I

slapped my hands to my ears as I was unaccustomed to such sounds. Phebah did not. Instead, she yanked my arm like I was a small child and dragged me out of the alley to enter the commotion.

“Look!” she exclaimed, “there’s the Empress! She’s addressing the crowd!” Indeed she was. Empress Dido, Queen-Founder of New Carthage, was standing plain as day on the roof of an armored heli-craft, the sharp blades literally at her feet. The swelling masses looked up at her in awe and adoration, having to be constantly culled by security as they attempted to swarm the perimeter of the craft.

“Archaeus was right...” I said. “But what do we do now?”

“I think we get the Hell out of here.”

Before we could so much as move, a shockwave rattled the city, and I felt the ground swallow me whole. I lay there in a fetal position, my arms wrapped around my neck, my ears ringing too loud to hear anything at all. My vision blurred with spikes of light and encroaching shadows mixing like clay. I could make out Phebah in blurry swatches; her dress was torn and her hair mangled, and she was struggling to pull herself off of the pavement. I touched my knees and drew droplets of blood, evidence that they were scraped and bruised. I could feel torn skin everywhere from my cheek to my palms. I turned my head and immediately saw the source. An imposing plume of smoke had erupted in the sky over the palace less than a mile away, blotting out the sky and raining New Carthage with apocalyptic hails of fire.

“Oh my- oh my God,” Phebah sputtered, tears running her mascara like twin rivers down her cheeks. She stumbled towards me and shook my shoulders. “Oh my God, Auguste, what do we do?” she cried desperately. I said nothing. I stared at the explosion with hollow eyes and a dry throat. There was only one word on my mind.

*Cesaire.*

I was inching across a thin stone ledge. My arms were pressed to the cold wall the ledge was mounted on, my vision was obscured by my curls blowing in the biting wind, and all of my joints were painfully sore. Every time I took a cautious step, crumbling pebbles fell into the emptiness below. Essentially, I was not having a thrilling time. I silently wished they had left me as the look-out instead of Melem-Iram, but apparently they didn't trust my judgment enough to leave me alone. *Awesome.* The ledge was a considerable distance above ground and was located on the inside of a pulley-chute meant to deliver cargo up and down the scale of the daunting palace. Archaeus had insisted that it would make for the most inconspicuous entry to the complex, as it lacked sufficient security due to the Empress's outing. This didn't make it an enjoyable one.

"We could've just taken a door," I complained over the wind. "That's how you, Auguste, and I broke into the prison." Petra slotted her cloth-wrapped hand onto a protruding stone and hoisted herself up onto a delivery platform.

"Yeah but that was a considerably lower-stakes operation," she shouted back, offering me a hand to haul myself onto the platform. "We were going to blow our way out of that prison no matter what happened and there weren't any potential universal secrets at hand. Just institutional injustice."

"We still lost Azeem," I countered, pulling myself off of the floor.

"Now's not the time to bicker," K'ayyhltla cut in. Petra grinned and flashed me twin thumbs-ups.

"That's what I'm talkin' about," she said. I sighed wearily, not finding the purpose in arguing. The platform we stood on was sparse. There were some locked cargo crates, a powered-down forklift, and a

small hatch door leading into the interior of the palace. Petra immediately identified it and began tracing its seam.

“Still know how to lockpick?” Archaeus asked her.

“Just because I have an office job doesn’t mean I’m a sell-out,” she said, her thumb pressing an indent on the seemingly smooth chrome surface of the door. A raised locking mechanism popped out and she sifted around her cross-body satchel for her tools.

“She did this at the prison too,” I said. Archaeus laughed lightly and leaned against the wall with crossed arms.

“Figures. She’s always been a rule-breaker.”

“Kind of trying to fix that...” she muttered.

“By breaking more rules?” Archaeus said, leaning down to grin in her face. She glared at him and stuck out her tongue. K’aayhltla rolled her eyes.

“What children,” she groaned.

“And proud of it,” Petra said, completely serious. I watched her silvery lockpicks clack against each other like spider mandibles. They were a unique technology— ever-shifting quicksilver tendrils burrowing their way into the stomach of the lock. Not long after I began admiring their make, there was a tell-tale click and Petra hopped back to her feet.

“Got it!” she announced. With a gentle push, the door slid into a pocket within the wall and allowed us entrance to a low-ceilinged maintenance hallway. She rummaged around her bag to retrieve a folded and creased paper map, worn by years of exposure, and likely left to collect dust in a closet until recently.

“Haven’t seen one of those in a while,” K’aayhltla remarked.

“Yeah, well there’s a warrant out for my arrest and I’m locked out of my Ether account, so analog is going to have to do. Fortunately I was able to call in a favor to the Royal Cartography Corps...they owed me

one after I saved their asses in the surveying of the Jakarta bridge-fall. What a mess.”

“So that’s where you went when we all played cribbage yesterday,” Archaeus said glumly.

“Yeah, well this is a little more important than card games, don’t you think?” Petra said as we walked through the depths of the tunnel. She tapped a button on her bracelet and a small diode of light shone upon her map.

“You never liked playing with us,” K’ayyhltla sighed. Petra scoffed.

“Of course not! You’re a gambling addict extraordinaire, and I am not here to be an enabler. I saved you from the timeline because I was sick of playing the oldest. See where that got me…”

“Weren’t you just reveling in your childish-ness?” I asked.

“Be quiet,” the others said. I raised my arms in defense, clearly out-numbered.

“O-o-okay. Clearly some dynamics I don’t have the full frame of reference for here, I’ll leave it be.”

“It’s best if you do,” K’ayyhltla deadpanned.

“Let’s not be so harsh—” Archaeus tried to say.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Petra assured. “I don’t know what to make of him yet. Too unlike Cleon in my opinion. A bit flighty.” The tunnel began to descend, growing tighter and grimier as it did. There were etchings on the walls left by years of vandalism, and snapped-off rungs of unused ladders appeared sporadically throughout the rustic scaffolding. It grew harder for me to hold my tongue.

“I’m my own person you know,” I said. My words seemed to echo through that claustrophobic space, louder than I had intended, sharper than they had expected. I heard them reverberate in my ears and instantly cringed. *Why did I feel the need to say that?* I chastised myself.

Archaeus broke the awkward silence, which was almost louder than my voice in the first place.

“We know,” he said. “It’s just. You look so much like him...and. You’re a physical manifestation of one of Petra and I’s worst decisions.” I rubbed my lips together, tasting bitterness in my mouth. “*But,*” he tacked on, “it was also the event that brought us together. That set us on the path we are on now. It brought Cleon and I together. So, for that I thank you.”

“Don’t,” I said.

“What?”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t do anything. I’m only here because of you, remember?” We didn’t say much after that. I resigned myself to trudging through the canister-esque tunnel in silence, staring into the hazy dark ahead like I was facing nothing at all. Eventually the maw of the tunnel opened into a subterranean chamber with an echoing stone spiral staircase. Petra quietly informed us that it led to the kitchens. We followed it, ensuring to stick to the side of the wall to obscure our shadows from any stray patrol groups. We eventually came across an enclave towards the end of the staircase containing overflow from the wine cellar. We crouched down beneath racks of cherry-red bottles, crowding around the map.

“The back entrance to the archives is in the servant’s hall that goes from the non-perishables storeroom to the back-order stacks,” Petra told us. I tucked my arms under each other and stayed huddled towards the back of the group, pretending as if I was aloof as to what she had to say.

“What’s the catch?” Archaeus asked.

“Well, kitchen staff aren’t going to leave the premises for an outing to the opera, so it’s still fully operational— or, at least the night staff is. So, we’re going to have to get creative with our identities.”

“Why didn’t you feel the need to brief us on this?” K’ayhltla asked with a tinge of annoyance. Petra shrugged and slotted the map back into her bag.

“I didn’t want to give any of you a chance to develop a character. Improvisation will always be the more natural artform.” Archaeus shook his head in disbelief.

“You are the absolute worst, you know that, right?”

“Proudly.” I forced myself not to be endeared by their sibling-like tussling. We proceed to duck out of the wine dug-out and make our way to the kitchens. Petra pulled bunched and wrinkly waist aprons out of her bag and tossed them at us, instructing us to tie them around our all-black ‘infiltrating-a-building-illegally’ ensemble. As we wandered closer, we began to see actual people in the expansive chambers of the palace’s belly. Waitstaff pushed carts of fine cheeses, bowtie-clad men carrying clipboards pursued the halls, making note of every imperfection in the stone, and a cohort of young women with their hair in intricate braids carted bolts of fabric to elevators. I gathered the sense that the palace functioned as its own society, with thousands of aristocrats, bourgeoisie, and servants playing a balancing act to sustain a living building.

We eventually came upon a timber archway built into the crumbling walls that functioned as an open door. It emanated a warm light like furnaces or midsummer bonfires— no doubt evidence of kilns and stoves. A steady stream of staff walked in and out of it. They carried everything from sacks of sugar over their shoulders to tubs of unseeded grapes in their arms. We hung our heads and fell in line with a large group that was escorting a few carts piled high with jam jars. The actual kitchen workers around us did seem to notice our addition, but made no effort to tell us off. We were in uniform, more or less, and there was no need to complain.

“I can’t believe this is working...” I whispered to Archaeus.

“Aah, don’t jinx it!” he hissed back. Still, with my fingers crossed behind my back, we entered the kitchens with ease. While the crate-bearers started unloading their jams and marmalades onto a dock near the entryway, Petra immediately diverted us and made a beeline for the storage center.

“Just don’t make eye contact with anyone,” she instructed us. “Try to look normal.” I nodded and fell in line. We speed-walked past stations of sommeliers bickering of which wine to pair with monkfish, interns delicately dressing chicken with lemon juice and fennel, and teams of bakers working the rows of fiery wood ovens embedded in the walls.

“Hey!” a voice cut through the clattering, arguing, and rushing of the kitchen floor. I slowly turned around to see a teenage girl in a white chef’s uniform pointing a metal spoon at us. “Do you four have a station?” she asked. “Because top-down says we’ve got guests late tonight and we can’t be falling behind!”

“Uh, er, we’re retrieving some...dairy products?” I answered nervously. “From the uh, the storage rooms?”

“We’re on soup and stews,” Petra added helpfully.

“*I’m* on soup and stews,” the girl countered.

“Oh. Um, as in we’re collecting some materials for a—oh, we really must be going, I’m sorry.” There was a moment when neither moved. And then Petra turned on a dime and bolted away. The rest of us followed after her, seeing as we had no other option. We shoved our way through the crowd, shoulders knocking violently against each other. Petra darted into the closet we were aiming for and as soon as the rest of us had been ushered inside she bolted the door with a broken shelf leaning in the corner. She tapped the bracelet on her wrist and held it up to her lips.

“Melem-Iram?” she said, “Melem-Iram, come in.” There was a crackling noise and then a muffled voice on the other end of the line replied. Archaeus tore aside some crates to reveal the door we needed to enter, and we made a run for it as we heard the ruckus in the kitchens growing.

“You need to get in the lift and head to entryway ‘B’ *now*,” Petra directed. “We don’t have much time. We’re going to try to escape and gather the information we need, but I’ve no idea how long we’ll be able to maintain our location.”

“Affirmative,” Melem-Iram’s staticky voice responded, and Petra clicked the device off. We found ourselves in a tight passageway lined with stone bricks laid at awkward angles.

“Hopefully they don’t know this is down here,” K’ayyhltla remarked. I nodded, my throat feeling stuffy in the close-quarters. Unlike the maintenance tunnel we used to get in, this passage didn’t run for very long. We were emptied into a large windowless chamber with vaulted ceilings lit by a host of bronze braziers. It was dusty and full of stacks—library stacks.

“Books! Paper books!” I exclaimed. The group quickly shushed me, but seemed at least somewhat amused by my excitement.

“Yes,” Petra said, “they do keep archival texts down here, but that’s not what we’re here for. We’ve got to consult the Ether.”

“What is that?”

“Absolutely no time to explain the internet to you...anyways. I used to have access, but it has since been revoked due to my...choices. So, we’ll have to go about it the old-fashioned way.” She approached a small stone pedestal in the center of the room. Upon closer inspection I saw that it had a glossy screen embedded in its basin, which she grazed her fingers over. “Alright K’ayyhltla, do your thing.” I glanced at K’ayyhltla who flexed her knuckles and crouched beside the pedestal. She traced a

groove along its base, discovering a small port, which she inserted a prong-shaped tool into.

“I still know the passwords and encryption keys,” Petra explained, “I just need a quick rigged account to enter them into— hence what K’ayyhlta is doing.” In all honesty I was completely lost, even with Petra’s narration, but I nodded as if I understood, if only to be polite. The screen began to waver and glitch. “Yes!” Petra celebrated, her fingers flying to enter the program as fast as possible.

“Do you see anything?” Archaeus asked nervously, rubbing his arms.

“Hang on...I’m just searching for...Zenobie...oh.”

“Oh?”

“Jesus.” She beckoned us over and we stared into the glittery well of the pedestal. Through the ripples I could finally see the unmistakable image of Zenobie. I wanted to cry.

“We finally did it,” I whispered.

“No,” Petra responded solemnly. “No, we didn’t.”

“What?”

“See these red lines?” she gestured to the crimson bars criss-crossing Zenobie’s shape. “They’re indicators. It means her location is being scrambled. We can’t get to her unless we have an admin override, which is beyond our reach.”

“But— why? Who would do this?”

“I...honestly don’t know.” We didn’t have any more time to ponder before a large cohort of guards burst through the double iron doors on the left of the chamber.

“Well, shit!” K’ayyhlta cursed, snagging her tool out of the base of the pedestal. “Let’s go!” It didn’t take much for us to get the memo and start running.

“Stop! Hands about your head!” I heard a commander’s voice shouting. I didn’t look back. The twisting halls snaked by us in a gray blur. I was starting to become accustomed to running from authority. The hall ended in a large loading bay full of tarp-draped trucks and rusty oil drums. The guards, being right at our heels, entered right after us. What happened next went by very fast.

We ducked behind a stack of barrels. Petra mounted her hand pistol on top and told us to run. She held her ground as beams of light rained down on her. “I try my best.” I smiled and followed him inside, carefully shutting the door behind us just in case anyone showed up, although it fit a bit unevenly in its frame now. There was a small lobby and a few halls with dorm rooms, nothing spectacular. All of the lights were off, but there was enough natural light to see the details. I was used to living without electricity anyways. A few razed her cheek, drawing blood. Another seared a chunk of her hair off. The next knocked the oil drum over, spilling slick black liquid all over the concrete floor. We jumped off of the loading platform and into the back of Melem-Iram’s lift.

“Don’t go yet!” I shouted, “Petra’s still up there!” We heard a shot echo louder than the rest. A roaring blaze and a fan of fire. The oil was lit. Petra sprinted away, leapt off of the platform, and rolled into the lift, her shoulder hitting the seat, blooming a dark blue bruise on her skin.

“Go, go, go!” She shouted. Only a second later; the entire back side of the palace erupted in an explosion. The lift bolted away, bolstered by the shock wave. My ears rang, my vision spun, and my skin seemed to shake. The orange-red smoke illuminated the night sky in a wild display of colors, like a midnight sunset, or a hellish supernova. We huddled close to each other, our limbs tangling and spilling together. I watched my hands fade in and out of each other, colliding like kaleidoscopes.

Archaeus clamored over us, climbing to the back of the lift and slinging himself over the side to watch the palace grow smaller and smaller as we rocketed down the avenue.

“...We are *so* screwed,” he said. None of us could argue. Petra, wincing from her pain, tapped her bracelet and drew it close to her face.

“Cleon? Yeah, we’re going to need a rendezvous. Stat.”

- Cleon -

Light fluttered through the iridescent curtains, pushed by a honey-scented breeze. I rubbed my eyes and stretched, my arm finding purchase on Archaus’s chest. I pulled myself into a sitting position and leaned against my pillow, gazing out at the sunny morning cityscape.

“I miss the birdsong,” I murmured, my arms binding my knees close to my heart through the cotton sheets. His arm reached up and tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear.

“There’s an aviary in the Arboretum District,” he said. “Maybe I could take you there sometime.” I laughed quietly and shook my head.

“Yeah...maybe.” He sat up, throwing his arms over my shoulders.

“You never know. I mean, hey, I had no idea when I would see you again, and yet...here you are.” I folded my fingers over his, leaning into the steadiness of his presence.

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to see you again. After everything. I wasn’t sure I wanted to bring this upon you.”

“But you thought about it, didn’t you?” he taunted softly. I smirked and shook my head, gently throwing his arm away and looking back to the open window.

“Of course I did,” I said. “I thought about it when the snow piled so high we couldn’t open the door, when the summer sun beat down so hard I couldn’t feel my skin, when the water was frigid, when it

was just right. When I plunged into a lake and didn't know if I would reach the surface." His breath hitched, and he swung his legs off of the edge of the bed to sit next to me.

"I thought about it too," he said. "When I sat alone by the glow of the watchtowers and ate my dinner on the floor, when I recorded those tapes and was forced to keep my tongue about how much I truly missed you. When I saw the entire universe, which still paled in comparison to the world I envisioned in you." I leaned my head against his and sighed.

"Wow. We are really such a mess, aren't we?"

"You can say that again." Our hands laced, loose and languid, and I planted a kiss on the corner of his lips.

"So. You're going on another crazy errand for Petra today, huh?" I asked, breaking the tension.

"We have to. If the archives have information on Zenobie's location— we could finally be free of this. Also, you're the one who's going on an *errand*, I'd prefer the term quest for my mission." I laughed and pushed him gently.

"Alright, alright, we're both equally important." I paused, pondering the question that had been hanging over me since we got here. "Do you find it at all strange? That Cesaire is going with you? Isn't it...just peculiar? That he isn't me?" Archaeus sat with the question.

"Everything about our lives has been strange ever since we first left Massalia. There's really no changing that. Plus, I can't be bothered about him when I have the real thing right here." He hugged me tight, pulling me back onto the bed. I let us rest there, laughing and staring at each other like we were on our honeymoon— which I supposed we were, in a way. The only world that I could describe it with would be 'nice.' It was nice.

“Alright,” I finally said, grunting and heaving myself up. “We’ve really got to get ready to head out now. No more dilly-dallying.” He pouted and attempted to drag me back, but I shook him off “Come on now, don’t want Petra on our backs,” I chastised.

“Okay fine,” he groaned, holding his hands up in surrender.

The morning passed quickly after that. It was a last glimpse into a routine we had fallen into so many times before. Standing next to each other in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing our teeth, washing our faces. Spreading hummus on toasted bagels sprinkled with chard and pepper, and laid with strips of lox. Brushing hands as we walked out of the door and onto our respective missions.

I had a few hours to walk across the city, the first time I’d been alone in ages. Strolling through the endless footpaths, walkways, and open squares reminded me of my first ventures through Europe. The way the sun glared on glass, orchid petals incensed the wind, and travelers congregated in small, gated gardens to fill their canteens with water from the mouths of rusted fountains. It was nostalgic to say the least. The further I walked towards my destination, the denser the cityscape became. Gothic turrets rose out of the skyline, wax candles flickered in broad daylight on corner side altars, and flocks of various clergy made their presence known; whether that be through the ringing of hand-held bells, mumbling of mid-morning prayers, or heralding of the end times. The melting pot was comforting, in a way. After narrowly avoiding a particularly persistent group of preachers waving pamphlets in my face, I was able to retreat into a dim den of destitute—a ramshackle bar operating out of the alleyway of an abandoned cathedral. I pushed aside a curtain of beads, their rattling announcing my arrival, but nobody turned to look at me.

“What d’ya want?” the bartender asked, not glimpsing up from the scratched whisky glass he was cleaning out with a ragged towel. I slid onto an uncomfortable earthen barstool and leaned against the counter.

“Sloe gin,” I said calmly, “Yorkshire.” The man looked up, setting his glass down behind him. A slow grin spread across his face.

“Well, I’ll be,” he chuckled, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it’s my boy!” He unlocked the gate separating the bar from his station and walked over, embracing me in his broad arms. He leaned back, getting a good look. “Ya don’t look a day over...well, however ya looked the last time I saw ya!”

“Eh, add four years or so,” I replied. “I spent some time on an assignment, it gave me time to age.”

“Well, damn ya don’t look like it, son.”

“This lad’s your *son*, Owen?” an older woman with thick tresses of gray hair who was nursing a glass of scotch at the other end of the bar asked.

“No, no,” he said, waving his calloused hands. “This here’s the famed Cleon Dimitriou! He was quite the frequenter around these parts before he got all wrapped up in Assembly business. Used to keep the books for me in exchange for some good talk and gin.” I extended my hand to her.

“Please ma’am, call me Cleon,” I said. She shook it timidly, batting her lashes.

“My, my, what a gentleman!”

“Now, Margie, don’t be that way,” Owen scolded. She simply took a sip of her scotch and leaned back in her wicker chair.

“Mind if we move to the back?” I asked, my voice lowering. He stepped away, his expression growing serious, and led me around to the back door.

“Oh, ‘course,” he said. We entered the crowded back room, made more cluttered by rows of stored liqueurs and empty bottles lined up for recycling. I leaned awkwardly against the wall, which had been coated in various layers of paint dozens of times, giving it a coagulated feel.

“Listen,” I started, crossing my arms, “things have gone sideways on my assignment. I’m in some hot water and the Assembly is monitoring my temporal phaser. I can’t travel in or out of this time, I’m trapped.” Owen huffed, concealing a small smile.

“So, ya finally did yerself in,” he mused proudly. “Alright. I know what yer askin’ for, and I’ll give it to you— at a price.”

“Really?” I said, subtly astonished. “Okay, sure! Whatever you need.”

“Ya remember my brother?”

“Dylan? Yeah, he and Petra had something for a while didn’t they?” Owen shook his head and laughed.

“Ah, so they did.” He lowered his voice. “But anyhow...he’s been on assignment for a long while now. I ‘aven’t been able to get a communication through to him. If I give ya a phaser, yer gonna need to go to him and send me a message letting me know if he’s alright or not.”

“Where’s he stationed?”

“Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Edwardian period.”

“But that’s— he’s protecting—” my voice faltered and faded away. “I can do that. I promise you, Owen, I’ll see to it.”

“Aye, that’s right. And I’ll track ya, too.” He began sifting through the metal crates lining the cramped shelves. “What is it ya just said, though? What’s Dylan protecting?”

“Oh...um...it’s a command center...in the Lake District,” I answered ambiguously. “The Assembly uses them to execute timeline commands from top-down. It doesn’t matter.” Owen hummed in response and snatched a cracked wine bottle out of the crate.

“Ah! Found it,” he said. “That Assembly shite is all nonsense to me anyhow. I bet Dylan will be glad ya know what he does...makes not a lick of sense to me...”

“You make illegal temporal phasers,” I laughed, “shouldn’t that constitute some knowledge on time law?” He uncorked the bottle and a pencil-sized metal object fell into his palm.

“The less I know, the more innocent I’ll appear when they catch me. Even the most slippery fish can’t always see the net. Might as well be blind so as to have an excuse.” He slipped the object into my own hand and I pocketed it quickly. I didn’t even feel the need to give it a once-over. Owen was worth trusting, and truth worthy.

“Thanks,” I said, and turned for the door. “I owe you one.”

“That ya do. So don’t ya forget it. Or I’ll let the Assembly know yer little posse is back scheming again.” I froze, facing my slowly, my fingers clenching the phaser in my pocket.

“I never said—it’s only me, nobody else.”

“Do ya take me for a fool, Cleon? Ya don’t have many friends, and I doubt you’d betray a mission for anyone *but* them. Plus, the command center piqued yer interest. C’mon...I’m not *that* stupid.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No. Don’t be. Dylan’s a rebellious soul, he’ll help ya. Still pining after Petra I bet, so bring her with ya.” My eyes crinkled and I finally smiled, feeling a pang of guilt for leaving him so soon.

“Thank you, Owen. Really, thank you. I won’t let you down.”

“That’s my boy. That’s the Cleon I know. Go get ‘em.”

“I won’t—” A rumble rippled through the ground, knocking us off of our feet. I ducked, covering my head, as a shockwave shot across the sector, rattling the windows like a tornado. Sifts of dust fell from the clay ceiling, and bottles were dislodged from the shelves, cracking as they hit the floor. I crawled over to Owen, my eyes blinking from the debris.

“Owen!” I cried, shaking his shoulders, “Owen, are you okay?” He groaned, bringing himself to his knees.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m— I’m alright, son,” he said. I steadied him concernedly, and pulled both of us to our feet. The door was jammed in its frame, so I shoved my shoulder into it. The old woman was cowering under her barstool, but evidently unharmed. I dashed outside, Owen following, and we climbed the twisting stairs out of the hoveled alley and onto the main street. Hundreds of people were clamoring over each other, scrambling to save spilled merchandise, calm crying children, and get a glimpse at the source. It didn’t take much shoving to see it— a fiery mushroom of smoke hovering over the palace in the distance. I gasped, my hands flying to my mouth.

“Ya alright?” Owen asked. “Anyone ya know there?” I simply stood there, my thoughts racing, but my feet planted firmly in place. I thought it was over.

“I—um—” I stuttered, pausing when I heard a crackling from my wrist. I looked down to my ether-bracelet.

“Cleon” Petra’s voice said through the static, “Yeah, we’re going to need a rendezvous. Stat.”

“Oh! Uh, copy!” I said, my eyes spinning for a solution. I latched onto Owen, attempting to look as sorry as possible. “Owen, I need to borrow your lift, you can enable a tracker so you know where to pick it up. Please.”

“Wha— why would I do that?”

“Archaeus— Petra— they’re—” I said, stumbling over my words and gesturing to the palace’s fire-washed silhouette. He seemed to understand and nodded, fishing a key fob out of his pocket and tossing it to me.

“Don’t let me down, kid,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied, and clicked the key, summoning a rickety outdated lift through the river of people filling the street. I hopped in, the people parting for me as I raced towards the palace, driving into the maw of the flame. With one hand on the wheel I clicked my bracelet on and brought it to my mouth to speak.

“Talk to me Petra,” I said, “what’s your location?”

“Speeding down the main avenue!” she said, her voice popping through the scratchy speaker.

“Copy that.” I leaned my foot into the pedal, the engines whining, and began swerving through the web of streets. I took a shortcut through the empty granite canals, and soon came to a stop in front of Archaeus’s apartment.

“Eurynome!” I shouted over the comm channel, “you’ve got to come down!”

“On it!” she replied, and I saw her move away from her anxious watch-position on the balcony.

“What’s going on?” she asked as I heaved her into the back seat. Her hair whipped in the wind while we drove, and her voice was muffled by the roar of the city, but I could hear her clear as day— I was glad to hear anyone, really.

“I don’t know,” I replied, my vision narrowing onto the road ahead of us, “but they’re alright. Petra told me to rendezvous with her on the main avenue— we’re headed there now.” As we drew closer to the city center, the traffic became more dense, and we found ourselves stuck.

“What do we do?” she asked, leaning over the barrier between the front and back seats.

“Sit back,” I directed through clenched teeth, pulled the toggle up, locked the wheel, and engaged the thrusters.

“Cleon!” she shrieked, her body hitting her seat as the lift jumped its regulation maglev capacity, soaring over the other vehicles, and slamming onto the avenue, the metal definitely bruised.

“Sorry, Owen,” I said, wincing. We didn’t have to drive long before I saw the rest of our party rocketing towards us, stuffed in their own lift. We skidded out on the road, tumbling out of the lifts and running towards each other. *Oh thank God*, I thought, *everyone is accounted for*.

“We got Auguste and Phebah from the theater,” Petra explained, “and I see you’ve got Eurynome— great. Okay, we need to leave. Now.”

“Do you have it?” Eurynome asked, leaning on my arm to steady herself. I nodded, and pulled the temporal phaser out of my pocket. It was a small silvery cylinder with an internal vial of ambrosia locked inside, and spinning gears making ridges on its otherwise sleek body.

“Listen, there’s no time to explain, but there’s somewhere we have to go,” I said as everyone began to wrap their hands around the phaser, “you’re going to need to trust me, Petra.”

“Trust you? Wha—” a blinding whiteness erupted from the core of the phaser, eliminating all sound, blanking out vision, space, and time. I was used to the sick feeling it brought, but I would never adjust to the lack of identity. The disconnect with physicality. It was a small death. Gradually, my senses returned to me, the floating feeling subsiding, and my hands finding purchase in wet gravel. The pellets dug into my palms, and I soon felt raindrops beating my skin, the ammonia of dirt filling my nose, and gray early-evening light saving my eyes from the blindness. I stretched and pulled myself to my feet, the majority of us doing the same.

“What?” Petra finished saying, rubbing her eyes, her navy eyeshadow coming off on her wet skin. She stumbled, turning around to get her bearings, the realization dawning on her as she did.

“Where are we?” Cesaire asked, rubbing his arms as he shivered. Petra whipped her head around, glaring daggers at me.

“Why here?” she snapped, “Is this really the only place you could think of?”

“What?” Cesaire asked again, “What’s wrong?”

“This was Owen’s condition for the phaser,” I explained apologetically. “Plus, this could be of real use to us. How many allies do we have? How many allies do we have in a place with a command execution center?”

“But...this isn’t even a secure location. Auguste and Cesaire—you, Archaeus, and Eurynome—you’ll all start experiencing the entanglement again.”

“What else was I supposed to do? Let us be imprisoned?” She groaned and rolled her eyes. “Well?” I said, feeling at a loss.

“Whatever,” she huffed, and stomped off down the muddy street, the rest of our cohort following her. Before I could say anything, she lifted her fist to the clouded sky.

“I know the way!” she shouted. I sighed a winded breath of relief, falling into stride with the limping Eurynome.

“Well,” she said, “this is going to be interesting.” I shook my head, stuffing my shaking hands into my pockets.

“You can count on that...what happened to you guys anyways? Blowing up the palace? I mean, do you have a death wish?”

“No...” she whispered, “I think we wish for the exact opposite.” My smile fell, and I stared up at the wintry sky with tired eyes.

“Oh,” I said. “I suppose we do.”

## **XX: Auguste**

My teeth chattered in the biting cold, made worse by the heavy sheets of rain falling on my bare skin. We were huddled on the stoop of a small townhouse, which still hadn't been explained to me. Cleon shuddered, rubbing his arms, and rapped his knuckles on the slick wood of the door. A flickering light blossomed from behind the doily curtains of the living room, and I heard rustling from inside. A small slat slid open, revealing a pair of eyes peering down at us.

"Hello, who's there-?" he started to say, before disappearing from view and unlatching the door. It swung open to reveal a lanky young man with a side-swept coif of dark hair, dressed in a crisp white shirt, dark green trousers, and laced calf boots. His posture was awkward, but it paled in comparison to his expression.

"Hi, Dylan," Petra said, absolutely dead-pan. "Care to let us in? It's raining like Hell out here. England is awful."

"Um, what- what are you doing here?" he stuttered, ushering us into his foyer- which was cluttered and dark in the fashionable way.

"The Assembly," Cleon explained, and snagged a coat off of the hanger, handing it to Cesaire for warmth. "They're on our tail," he continued. "We needed to escape, and your brother said we had to come

here if we wanted a phaser.” Dylan groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Owen...” he said disgruntledly. “You need to tell him I’m fine. I’ve been posted up here for ceremonious reasons, really. There hasn’t been a single threat for me to address.” He stepped back, looking at our rag-tag group. “Well. I suppose until you got here– wait.” He ran his fingers through his hair, visibly confused. “Did you bring– are those– *anomalies?*”

“Now don’t panic,” Cleon said, “but that’s majorly why we are here.”

“Has the worst come to pass?”

“It hasn’t...but it will, if we don’t act, and act fast. You don’t have to help us, just shelter us for the night, and we’ll leave for the facility in the morning.” Dylan shook his head.

“No, no, this isn’t right,” he protested, “I need to be hospitable. Please, come to the parlor and sit down. I’ll make some tea, get some leftovers, anything. You can explain comfortably and over a steady meal.” We looked around at each other, silently weighing the possibilities.

“Sounds great to me,” K’ayyhltla said with a shrug and flung herself onto the couch. The rest of us followed more hesitantly, but gradually filled the living room. It was an eclectic home, but somehow traditional all the same. Floral wallpaper adorned the walls, paired with novelty clocks, various knick-knacks (busts, hunting trophies, heirlooms etc.), faded portraits and photographs from a wide variety of eras, and all of the furniture felt overstuffed. I sat in a maroon armchair, my aching body finally getting to relax. Dylan sauntered off to the kitchen to prepare our tea and food, leaving us to wait.

“So...” I said, “where are we?” Petra crossed her arms and slumped in her seat.

“A friend of the family,” she replied sarcastically.

“My friend’s brother,” Cleon supplied with a more optimistic tone. “He’s an agent, like we were until recently. He’s in charge of guarding an Assembly-operated facility a few hours from here.”

“Here being?” I asked.

“Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom. Sometime in the Edwardian period. They cycle out agents here every decade or so to ensure no-one gets suspicious. They’ve essentially been living out the same ten years with different people for...who knows how long. Dylan’s just the current assignment.” I struggled to wrap my head around that one, but nodded anyway.

“Oh. So...*why* are we here?”

“It’s partially a favor for this,” Cleon said, holding up his time-manipulating device. “His brother manufactures them under the table and the two of us go way back. However, the proximity of the facility serves us well. It’s one of a select few locations where alterations and manipulations to the timeline are executed. If we discover that this is where the Assembly is editing Zenobie’s position, this could be invaluable to finding out why...or at least the source of it.”

“We know the Assembly has something to do with it,” Archaeus said. “But we still don’t know why.”

“The facility only follows the instructions of command centers,” Dylan cut in, entering with a large tray of piping cups of herbal tea. “You will still want to go there, though. If you discover they are in fact manipulating the timeline around your target, you may be able to locate the source they are following orders from.” He set the tray on the coffee table in the middle of the room. It rested on an intricate Persian rug, which I admired.

“You aren’t obligated to help us, you know,” Petra said, wrapping her arms tight around her torso.

“I know that. Doesn’t mean I won’t want to, when I hear your story, at least. I mean, it’s been what? Over eight common years? I evidently have a lot to learn. I don’t even know half of the people here. So, please...enlighten me.” We took the time to explain to him the situation, each of us chipping in at various points to elaborate the story so far. Through this, I realized just how far-fetched our predicament was. *I mean, it was positively confounding— we were trying to prevent the collapse of the entire multiverse— what was normal about that?*

“So,” Eurynome said, “it seems as if our mission has only been a throw-away this entire time. They posted us up in Alaska, claiming that we had an obligation to locate our remaining anomalies, and made that impossible for us. I still have no idea why they let us access Auguste and Cesaire. I mean, none of it makes any sense.” Dylan leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands together and leaning his hands atop of them.

“Hmm...” he said, “perhaps they thought that hiding all of them was too heavy-handed. They wanted to distract you, keep you occupied with the chase for as long as possible. They simply didn’t think you would get Auguste and Cesaire at the same time.”

“I would say you are likely right,” Eurynome agreed. “I hope you’re not offended that we’ve betrayed the Assembly.”

“Pfft, as if I care. They’re a bunch of stuffy ivory tower dwellers anyhow. I only took this job for the lap of luxury. Really beats living with Owen. I mean, seriously, for running an establishment as ship-shape as he does, his personal organization is horrendous.” We all laughed a little at that. Petra bit her thumb, gearing up to speak.

“So, um...” she said, “still into all of the same stuff? I mean, the last time I saw you, you were just ecstatic about that—”

“The CD player?” he said giddily. “Oh, don’t worry, she’s still the love of my life— uh, no offense.”

“...None taken,” she said, although her fallen smile said otherwise. He set down his tea and darted off to fetch whatever mechanism Petra had referenced to him. I dug at my plate, which was piled plentifully with pesto pasta and half-frozen meatballs drizzled with mozzarella sauce. I looked over at Phebah, who was seated on the chair next to me with her legs tucked under her, and who had been silent for some time.

“This is pretty strange huh?” I said openly. “Do you know him?”

“Oh, uh, no. I’ve only heard about him a few times, and that was a couple of years back.” She leaned across her chair’s armrest to whisper in my ear. “He and Petra used to have a fling of some sort, and his brother is Cleon’s best friend I think. They all met in agent training ages ago, after they’d all redeemed themselves and were living in the Assembly for a while.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“No. Cleon’s a pretty closed book, and I’d never officially met Petra until you had. Eurynome and Cleon rescued me on their first mission, and so she had already been assigned to the Assembly at that point. I heard all about her, though.”

“What about Archaeus?” I asked, my voice falling even lower, as he was sitting quite close to me.

“Yeah, I’d met him before...once,” she said. “We visited him right before they were assigned to Alaska. It...wasn’t pretty.” I cringed, all of the possibilities playing out in my mind.

“I can imagine,” I whispered. “When Cesaire and I fight, it’s unlike anything else. I mean, I hate it, but it’s so— I don’t know—”

“—Impassioned?” she suggested. My face grew hot and I shrugged.

“Err, I don’t know. Maybe. Something like that.” Before we could talk any further, Dylan waltzed back into the room, holding a large chunk of metal in his arms.

“Tada!” he announced, twirling. “Let’s get this party started! Nothing like a little dancing before driving into the face of danger!”

“Seriously?” Petra asked, “we’re tired and injured. This doesn’t seem like the best use of our time.”

“You’re the one who suggested it!”

“I was making small talk!”

“Now, now,” Melem-Iram said, standing between the two of them. “I’m sure you two can work this out...with a little friendly dancing! Come on now, Dylan, enlighten us with your music.”

“Now, this I *have* to see,” Phebah laughed, getting to her feet. “If the track list sucks, I’m judging your romantic choices, Petra!”

“Shut up,” Petra snapped, but the smile she was suppressing still managed to shine through.

“Aw, c’mon, I know you love this stuff,” Dylan goaded her, clicking down one of the large buttons on his musical contraption. An upbeat song began to play, with a vibrant drum and an enthusiastic woman’s voice.

*Ooh, baby, do you know what that’s worth?*

*Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth*

*They say in Heaven, love comes first*

*We’ll make Heaven a place on Earth*

*Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth*

Dylan reached for Petra’s hand and pulled her into a spin. She laughed, and then immediately covered her mouth, as her expression betrayed her. Phebah skipped towards Melem-Iram, begging him to

swing her around in a similar fashion, while Archaeus and Cleon danced around each other with their own strange, fluid movements. K'ayyhlta took it upon herself to violently pretend to play the drum line. Only Cesaire and I were left to ourselves. I walked towards him, my palms open.

“Well,” I said, “we haven’t had fun in a while, huh?”

“Just dance with me,” he said, and wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me close.

*When you walk into the room  
You pull me close, and we start to move  
And we're spinnin' with the stars above  
And you lift me up in a wave of love*

We danced there, by the flickering reflection of the fireplace, casting wild shadows on the walls, doused in the mist-shrouded moonlight peaking through the curtains, surrounded by friends. With the onset of the instrumental solo and key-change, he spun me around, dipping me in his arms. My eyes widened, and I could feel everyone looking at us. *What are you doing?* I wanted to say. *Don't stop*, is what I really felt. So, I let him. I had no idea what possessed him to do this. Usually, I was the one pushing the envelope. Perhaps it was the end of the world knocking at our door, the thrill of coming off of the tail of danger, or maybe, just maybe, it was a good song and a will to share it with the people you love.

The night flew by without incident. Petra, in her staunchness, slept on the floor of the living room in a pile of coats, with Cleon posted on the couch to keep watch. Eurynome was given the bed in the master bedroom, and the rest of us took to the empty rooms in the upper levels of the house, which weren't hard to find. There were a few more

candlelit hours of planning for the day ahead, but by the time the church bells were heralding midnight, we were all headed to our sleeping places. As I retired for the night, I pressed my hand on the chestnut wall of one of the upper halls, guiding myself through the dark. There were sconces on the walls, but they were unlit, leaving only the gaps between the swallowing shadows to light my way. As I turned to enter the small children's room I had found to sleep in, I heard a yawning creek whine from behind me. I turned, slowly, and saw Cesaire standing quietly in the dark.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. He shuffled his weight, as if his entire body was weighing what to say.

“I found a room, but...well, I don't want to share it with Phebah and Melem-Iram, and, can I...can I sleep with you?”

“Uh...”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, covering his face, “In the same room, I mean!”

“Err, right, right. Yes, of course,” I sputtered, beckoning him in. We hadn't had a proper moment alone since we left Alaska. I climbed onto the single bed in the room, small enough for a young child and draped in heavy quilts with a smattering of pillows. Cesaire curled onto the carpeted floor, dragging a spare blanket off of the bed to wrap around his body. I gazed down on him from above.

“Wait,” I said, “are you really going to sleep on the floor?”

“Yes?” he said, blinking as if confused. I looked around anxiously, my jaw clenched, and then patted the space next to me.

“You don't—you don't have to do that,” I said meekly. “I don't mind.”

“Would you really trade places with me?” he asked, smiling. I stared at him and nodded slowly.

“Err yeah...that’s what I meant,” I said. I slipped off of the bed and sat next to him on the floor. He handed me the blanket and climbed up to tuck himself in. I laid there, staring at the ceiling, wondering what I had done wrong.

“...Are you alright?” he asked me after several minutes of silence. I heard the rustling of sheets and saw lines of light from the window catching on the angles of his face as he turned to look down at me.

“Oh. Yeah,” I said. “I mean, I’m as alright as one can be in a place like this.”

“It’s not all bad...” he said, “I like the architecture.” I laughed softly and propped my chin up on my forearm, looking up into his half-lidded eyes.

“Hmm, you always did like to admire the manors on the cape,” I said.

“They were just hideous– such lavish displays of wealth! Absolutely nonsensical. Do you remember Leonie?”

“Zenobie’s friend?”

“Yeah, her. She had the most ridiculous estate. I went to a dinner party there just a week before...” his voice trailed off and he lowered his face.

“Before what?” I asked.

“Uh...all of this, I suppose,” he said contemplatively. He inhaled heavily and rested his arms beneath his chin. “See, it’s getting to the point where...I don’t...*miss it* anymore. I used to dream of Antibes every night, I used to beg and plead in my prayers that we’d return, and even though the Assembly wasn’t the utopia I was looking for–”

“–You still feel more at home in the life of a stranger than the comfort of the safe harbor you always knew?”

“Y-yes,” he stuttered. “I’m ashamed to say it, but, somehow I finally *like* who I am now that I’ve shed those pretenses I’d always relied

on.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t expect you to relate, you’ve always been so non-conforming, so outgoing and bold, so—” I held up a hand to stop him.

“Cesaire,” I said firmly. “We are not so different. I was as divorced from myself in that life as you were. Living to escape, to defy, to hide. To ignore, mostly. Now, I don’t have the luxury of any of that— and I don’t want to!” I gestured to the room. “I may not have chosen to be here, but I am okay with that. And— well. It’s even better that you’re here with me.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I said as if it were obvious, “I *like you*, Cesaire.” I laughed, rubbing my eyes. “Back home I felt like I had to judge you, like I had to shy away from you. Now the universe is so much larger and I know that we should feel inconsequential, but somehow you and I feel more important than ever.”

“Oh,” he said, his voice light and airy like a wisp of breeze. “*Oh*,” he said louder.

“What is it...? What’s wrong?” I asked, my mind racing with nerves.

“It’s just that...I...um. We should probably go to sleep.”

“A-are you sure?” I asked. He hesitated, chewing his lip anxiously.

“Um. I don’t know.” I sat up, letting my blanket pool around me on the floor. I crawled to the edge of the bed and rested my face next to his.

“Talk to me,” I said. “How do you really feel?” He pursed his lips. Our noses were nearly touching. We were on the edge of everything.

“I’m so unsure,” he whispered, searching my face with fast eyes. “It’s all been moving so *fast*. I can hardly keep track of anything

anymore.” He paused, exhaling harshly enough to flicker my hair. “Except for...this.” I curled a brow, puzzled.

“This?”

“This. You know...*us*. This routine we’ve been dancing around. This repertoire we’ve built up. No matter how alone I feel, how unknown the future seems, we keep coming back to this one conversation. Over and over. But...we never seem to grow tired of it.” He was silent for a moment, playing with his fingers.

“I like you too, Auguste,” he said gently. “I like this.”

My breath felt heavy in my mouth. We said nothing, but our movements were a symphony. He reached out, tentatively, grazing my jawline with his fingers. In turn I leaned our foreheads together, closed my eyes, and breathed in time with his pulsing heart. I pulled us closer together, mending the seams we had ripped out so many times. Our noses bumped into each other, my hands found their way around his neck, and my knees sank into the carpet, relinquishing any reservations.

Our lips met in a wordless kiss. He leaned his head into my hands, letting me hold him completely. He rolled onto his side, allowing me to simply fade into him. It didn’t take long for him to pull me onto the bed, his spine running against the wall to make room for both of us, lying intertwined on top of the bunched quilted comforter. The darkness was so quiet that it echoed its own muffled sounds, like the ocean melting on the shore, or the constellations burning in the night sky. We pulled away and came together, over and over. Every touch was a conversation. Every breath was an argument. Every kiss was an apology. His hands gripped my hair and ran through it. I wanted to get lost in that moment forever. I finally dipped my head away for good, still keeping my hands on his shoulders. He sighed contentedly and rolled onto his back.

“Cesaire...?” I whispered.

“...Yeah?”

“I, um. I think you’re really lovely.” He curled onto his side and grabbed my hand, caressing my thumb. We stared at each other through the grainy darkness.

“We’re not going to make this a...*thing*, are we?” he asked. My open-mouthed smile grew faint and I tucked my hair out of my face.

“Err, no, no...that would be...” I said quietly, laughing through my words.

“Right, it would just be...”

“...Yeah.” I folded my hands on my stomach and pressed my lips together. “We can...I mean...we don’t have to *stop* if we ever want to in the *future*...uh.” He laughed awkwardly and tilted his head towards the ceiling.

“Oh yeah, totally,” he replied timidly. “It doesn’t have to...mean anything...it’s not really, uh...” his voice grew dimmer until it trailed off into nothingness. The loud silence of the darkness ringing in my ears was thicker than fog. I opened my mouth to speak, but choked on my own breath. I pursed my lips and carefully rolled off of the bed. He didn’t make any move to stop me.

“I’ll just...” I mumbled as I took to my place on the floor.

“Right,” he said, his voice somehow shaky and stiff at the same time. Those were the last words we said to each other that night, and I felt the entirety of the ensuing silence, because I didn’t sleep for a minute.

The next morning was another exercise in polite avoidance. Pretending everything was normal. Another regression to the people we were back then, standing at the marina, pretending we had nothing in common. If the awkward tension was apparent to us, it wasn’t to anyone else. Dylan was making biscuits, pepper omelets, and sliced pears dipped in honey to the upbeat track of his favorite mixtape. Whatever that was.

“New Wave,” he announced to the bustling kitchen, “is possibly the most perfect genre of music ever conceived.” He flipped the sizzling eggs in his skillet and began shamelessly poorly dancing to the thumping beat of the song. He checked his hip into Petra, who glared at him and marched away. “Aw c’mon,” he said, “you can’t deny the best British invasion! Nothing compares!”

“The best?” she said, rolling her eyes, “it came second, Dylan.”

“Right! And everyone knows sequels are always more compelling.”

“You have no idea how much I want to burn your entire record collection right now,” she said. “How did the Assembly even let you keep all of this stuff in the god-damn Edwardian period?” He grinned, scraping the omelet onto a ceramic plate.

“I’m just that charming,” he said. “Oh, and also I neglected to declare the majority of my possessions to customs.” She smacked her forehead dramatically.

“Kill me. Just actually kill me.” Dylan grinned and flicked her on the side of the face, to which she responded by aggressively batting him away. Childish as it was, their catfight was the sort of pleasant entertainment we needed that morning. We sat down for breakfast at the large dining table, which was set with a mix-and-match assortment of plates and cutlery, indicative of Dylan’s carefree maximalism. Despite the heavy air hanging over us, I sat next to Cesaire, with Phebah blissfully unaware on my other side. Eurynome brought a large platter of braised cod to the table, which reminded me of how much I missed seafood. There had been salmon in Alaska, of course, but it was often dried or salted, not fresh.

“Your diet here is miserable, Dylan,” she said as she added the dish to our banquet. “Not a single spice in your cabinets.”

“There’s salt and pepper!” he countered.

“That definitely doesn’t count.” The table all hummed various noises of agreement, their mouths already stuffed.

“Anyways,” she said, sitting down and smoothing out her apron, “we certainly need to discuss logistics. For instance, how do you propose we gain access to the facility? These remote satellite locations are too small to infiltrate under the nose.”

“Ah, yes. Well, information traveling as slow as it does across time periods, I sincerely doubt the facility has as of yet been notified of your escapades. Therefore, they shouldn’t be on lockdown or high alert, and I should be able to smuggle a group of you in via the trunk of my carriage.”

“Sounds risky,” Melem-Iram said, spooning himself a hefty serving of pears.

“Everything we do is a risk,” K’ayyhtla pointed out. “Exhibit A: our little adventure *blowing up* the Assembly.”

“Okay, well, that was purely an accident I had no part in.”

“You were an accomplice to the crime—”

“—Could we please focus on the subject at hand?” Cleon cut in, pinching his temples. He sighed, lifting his hand to Dylan. “Please, continue.”

“Thank you,” Dylan said. “As I was saying, there is a plan in place. However, the participants will be limited, and I want no part in anything beyond sneaking you into the facility. I may have my reservations about the Assembly but I’ve got to admit— this is a pretty sweet gig, and I’d like to keep it.”

“Who’s willing to volunteer?” Eurynome asked, peering around the table.

“Count me in,” Petra said as she chewed on a spoonful of eggs.

“Same here,” said Archaeus.

“Me too,” Phebah added. There was a pause as we waited for someone else to speak up.

“Perhaps one more person...?” Dylan prompted. There was a scraping noise on the floor beside me, and I realized that Cesaire was rising from his chair. He held his hand over his heart in a pledge.

“I’ll do it,” he said. I nearly choked on my omelet and pressed my fist to my chest to dislodge it.

“Oh?” I said, “Are you so sure? After what went down at the palace?”

“It’s the least I can do,” he responded and sat back down silently. I looked at him, puzzled, but he offered no further explanation to his cryptic statement.

“Well,” Eurynome said, dabbing the corner of her mouth with a cloth napkin, “that’s very helpful of you all. As I am Zenobie’s Origin, I will also be in attendance. I see her as my personal responsibility.” She placed a hand over Cleon’s. “And do not fret, I shall be more careful with myself now that we know what is really going on.”

“To be fair,” Phebah pointed out, “we don’t know the *whole* story. That’s kind of why we’re doing this.” I rolled my eyes and picked a pear off of her plate.

“Hey!” She yelped.

“You’re a know-it-all,” I said.

“Um, proudly!”

“*Alright*,” Eurynome scolded, “break it up, you two. As much as I just love to see you children bicker, we’ve got some real work to attend to. Everyone finish up your breakfast, we’ll be hitting the road in half an hour.”

The conversation subsided as we all focused on finishing our respective meals, fitting ourselves for the day, and lining up on the cobblestone street outside under the oppressive sleet-rain. If Newcastle

was depressing at night, it was utterly devastating during the day. Where there should have been sunlight and greenery, there was only a swath of muted grays and various patches of dirt strewn over poorly-paved stone. Dylan took us a few minutes down the road to a carriage house, where the local neighborhood stored their vehicles; or at least those affluent enough to afford it. I assumed that he received a hefty pension for his work, especially considering his omnipotent insight on Edwardian culture. For me, however, it was simply another stroll through a futuristic cityscape I struggled to understand.

“Here she is,” Dylan said as we circled around his carriage. “Isn’t she a beaut? Of course, she’s nothing without her power. Petra, would you be a dear and head ‘round to the mews to fetch the horses in the eighth stall?”

“Me? Fetch horses?” she said. “Guess I’m just your errand girl!” She threw up her arms sarcastically and trudged off to the stables, although she followed through and came back a few minutes later leading two small brown horses with white-dipped legs by their leather reins. Dylan exclaimed gleefully, brushing his hand through their manes before hooking them up to the carriage.

“This is Suede,” he said as he tacked up the sturdier of the two. He gestured to the smaller horse with an affectionate grin, “and this is Kula. She’s a real gentle giant.”

“I know *exactly* what you did with their names,” Petra hissed, squinting her eyes at him.

“Aw, c’mon,” he protested, “you say that as if you didn’t commission a tailor to recreate outfits from every Hollywood Golden Age film you could think of.” She crossed her arms and spun away.

“That is totally different.” We all snickered, only piping down when she shot us a death glare as she hoisted herself into the carriage. *If looks could kill*, I thought.

“Well,” Cleon said to the departing group, “we’ll see you off now, yeah?” There was a general simmering down, and the leaving parties were loaded into the back of the carriage, hidden under a few layers of tarp stretched across barrels and crates. I reached over the side, extending my hand to Cesaire.

“Don’t mess it up,” I whispered. He peaked out from under the tarp and smiled at me softly.

“I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He wrapped our pinky fingers together, but the rocking of the wheels let me know it was time to let go. I watched the carriage draw out of the mews and into the morning rain. No sooner than when they were out of sight did I feel alone. Without Dylan as our guide, Phebah as my friend, or Cesaire as my comfort, I suddenly felt uncomfortably stranded in the river of time.

“It won’t be long, kid,” K’ayyhltla reassured me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s head back...Dylan left us the key under the entry mat.” I was silent for a moment, still trying to see the carriage as a little black dot in the distance, even though it was already far gone. Finally, I let my eyes relax and my shoulders drop, although my heart was still pounding against my ribs.

“...Okay,” I said, and we began to dredge back down the road. My feet dragged through the deep puddles scarring the street, with every ripple distorting my reflection in new ways. I lifted my head to see Cleon walking several paces in front of us, his hands shoved into his pockets. I wondered why he hadn’t volunteered to go with Archaeus. I wondered why I hadn’t fought to go with Cesaire. I closed my eyes, and instead of the droning drizzle pattering my face, all I could hear was a ringing in my ear, and the muffled popping of fire on dry timber.

## XXI: Césaire

The dreary English landscape rolled out ahead of us, a myriad of flat rolling hills washed in drab gray rain and dotted by fens and copses of reedy trees. Every once in a while I stuck my head over the side of the carriage to get a better view, only to be met with biting wind whipping my cheeks. The road we traveled on was muddy and flooded in its lower dips. Occasionally it ran parallel to ancient crumbling walls that dictated the boundaries of the countless farmlands. The closer we got, the more the countryside towered above us, becoming hilly and verdantly green. Thicker groves of greenery coalesced on the roadside, enclosing us in time-worn hollows of elm and yew.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wet wood of the back of the carriage, my hood pulled tight over my curls. It was bitterly cold, we were huddled between crates and barrels, and there was a heavy tarp draped over our hidden forms— to put things mildly, I felt miserable.

“Auguste should have come with us,” I grumbled as a large raindrop hit my nose and I flinched.

“Didn’t think you’d miss him so fast,” Petra teased, bumping our shoulders together. I glared and shoved her off.

“I do *not!*” I protested. “Miss him...so fast.”

“...Yeah. Sure.” I cleared my throat and tucked my knees under my arms, avoiding her eyes.

“So-o-o,” Phebah said awkwardly, “Has anyone been to England before? You know, I’m not particularly fond of the British. Troublesome sort, really. Much like their weather. Cold.”

“Petra and I have been,” Archaeus answered, shivering. “I don’t prefer it to some other places, though. Like you said...cold.”

“I almost came here,” Phebah said, her voice small. “Once.”

“Wait, why?” I asked, peering up from my hunched position.

“I got a job on a shipping boat,” she explained. Her eyes were downcast but her tone was soberly earnest. “Real, honest work for the first time in my life,” she elaborated. “Then everything went sideways. Somewhere in the timeline, my Origin, whoever she was, died for good.”

“So, that was when—”

“Yeah.”

“Oh man, I’m so sorry.” She sniffled and shrugged, her eyes tired.

“Don’t be. It’s all in the past.”

“Yeah...the past.” We all fell silent after that, letting the drizzling rain resume its endless drone on the pebble-ridden road. Minutes of silence passed. Then the carriage jostled, causing me to bump my head on the backboard. I rubbed the pain, peeking out of the tarp to see what had happened. We had stopped on a rocky dirt road that was blocked by a high stone wall. There were two shadowy figures emerging from inside the compound walking towards us across the grass. They each toted rifles strapped across their chests, and the emblem of the Assembly glittered in the pale sun as they grew closer. I ducked myself back in, tucking my body behind a crate.

“Everyone hide,” I whispered sharply. I didn’t need to explain myself further, everyone slid into their various hiding spots within the maze of cargo and held their breaths, praying we wouldn’t be discovered.

I heard the click of the driver's door opening, and a mushy thump as Dylan dropped onto the damp ground below.

"Miss me?" I could hear him say, although his voice was muffled.

"Your delivery isn't due for another week, Dylan," one of the men said, his tone flat and unimpressed.

"Ah, but see, I got everything early! I thought you'd appreciate this swell gesture. It's really an act of kindness to be ahead of schedule."

"It's just going to take up more valuable storage space on the base."

"Ugh, don't even bother with him," the other inspector's voice cut in. "He's a handful and a half. A regular thorn in my side."

"Fine. We'll just need to inspect the delivery."

"Oh!" Dylan exclaimed, his voice wavering, "I assure you that won't be necessary."

"No, I'm quite sure it will." Before Dylan could protest I heard the inspectors' boots dragging through the drifts of mud, closer and closer until they were hovering right above us.

"What's with the tarp?" one of them asked.

"To keep the rain away," Dylan explained. "I wouldn't want to risk damaging the components." A small bit of light shone through as one of the inspectors lifted an edge of the tarp. I squeezed my eyes tight, expecting the worst was about to come.

"We'll just have to examine—" the inspector who was beginning to lift the tarp said. Through the gap I saw Dylan grab his wrist and set the tarp back down.

"—Do you really not trust me?" He pleaded desperately. "This is a waste of my valuable time. The Assembly's time, I'll have you know!" He coughed nervously, attempting to take hold of his composure. "If you keep up with this useless interrogation I might have to report you!"

"Are you serious? This is just routine protocol—"

“And I’m your superior!” There was a heavy pause, and then I heard their shoes trudging away from the cart, accompanied by some hushed complaints my ears couldn’t quite grasp. I leaned my head back and my shoulders loosened as I let out a shivering sigh.

“That was close,” I whispered, shuddering.

“Yeah, maybe this Dylan guy isn’t as smart as we thought,” Phebah mumbled, rolling her eyes.

“He figured it out eventually!” Petra argued indignantly. We all turned to her blushing face, offering knowing looks. She huffed and turned herself away, but I saw the smile tugging at her lips. The carriage rocked forward again, and we began to roll through the gates. I grew exceptionally silent, knowing that now was the time for me to pay attention. From this point forward, every detail of our plan had to be executed perfectly. If not, we were— as Phebah put it— toast. The carriage slowed its roll and settled into rest, gravel crunching under its wheels as it did so. I heard Dylan’s shuffling feet grow louder, and he lifted a slip of the tarp to whisper to us.

“We’re at the storage barn,” he said quietly, his eyes darting around. “I’m going to unload the cargo. I need you to exit the carriage through the left side. Hide behind the wheel well and enter the second door on the left when I give you the signal. I’ll stall as long as I can, but you have limited time. Try to locate the time editing lab, that’s where any answers would be stowed.” We all nodded in agreement and he let the tarp drop back over us. We followed his instructions; dropping off of the carriage’s side that was shrouded from the courtyard, ducking behind the wheel well, advancing forward with our heads bowed as soon as Dylan flicked his hand discreetly towards us, giving us the go-ahead. We sprinted across the stone-laden barn, slipping inside the door that had been indicated to us. I saw Dylan’s worried expression as it closed behind us, and I silently gulped, fear gathering beneath my skin like pinpricks.

We found ourselves in a dark hallway with a linoleum floor and various locked metal doors. There were no lights as far as I could see, only moss-coated skylights that filtered an eerie gray-green light onto our faces. The roof was tin, and it amplified the sound of falling rain, creating an intense atmosphere.

“The control center should be in the central portion of the compound,” Petra said quietly, stalking down the hall with careful footsteps. She pressed herself into the wall at the corner and pulled her handgun out of a holster on her thigh, clutching it tight to her test. I gritted my teeth, sliding up beside her.

“We entered from the left, so we should go right to get deeper into the building, theoretically,” I said. She nodded curtly and stuck her gun out as she slunk around the corner and continued down the hall, the rest of us following with far less gusto. Every step she took was carefully calculated, and while her bravery grew my assurance in our safety, the longer we didn’t encounter anyone within the compound, the more nervous I grew. As we advanced further, the building began to change. Fluorescent lights suspended on chains swung from the ceiling, floor-to-ceiling windows revealed overgrown internal yards, and mysterious metal contraptions adorned the corners of every hall.

“There’s too much advanced electric technology for the time period,” Petra observed. “They must have an on-site generator, although I’m unsure of how they manage all of this without connection to a grid...”

“Isn’t it dangerous and unallowed to possess technology inappropriate for the era?” I asked. “I mean, I thought Dylan was pushing it.”

“Oh, absolutely. But they must have a need. I mean, they’re making edits to the timeline. The amount of energy that requires...I’d bet they have to refine their own ambrosia.”

“Hey guys?” Phebah cut in, “a little less talk-y a little more walk-y?” Petra cracked her head back and glared at her.

“I *know* what I’m doing,” she hissed. Phebah grinned and shrugged. Her stride was peppy, despite the situation being anything but.

“Yeah, alright,” she said, twirling. Petra ruffled her hair and shook her head wearily. I opened my mouth to add something to their back-and-forth but stopped when I heard what was coming around the corner. Several voices sounded from only a few paces away and we all quickly scurried into the closest alcove, ducking behind a trash can— or at least trying to. I watched a cohort of three agents dressed in lab coats stroll by, oblivious to our presence.

“I heard they were going to call in the protocol,” one of them said, stopping in the middle of the hall to tug her hair into a ponytail.

“Well, it’s about damn time!” another complained. “The deadline is converging on us, and the last update we received they’d captured the rogue agents, but the anomalies are still at large. What a headache that must be!”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I’m the one who’s running the obscurer day and night. Every month it’s the same thing, I’m ready to finally get into gear.” They all hummed noises of agreement and continued their conversation down the hall, their voices fading out of ear. I slowly turned towards Archaeus and Petra, my brows raised.

“Do you...think that was about us?” I asked.

“I don’t doubt it,” Archaeus said. “We still don’t have definitive proof they’re executing the editing commands on Zenobie specifically. We should go down the hallway those people came from and see if we can locate the lab for further proof.”

“Maybe we can figure out what that protocol they were talking about is,” Phebah added. We all nodded, indicating our mutual agreement, and quickly darted back into the maze of hallways to locate

the editing room. It wasn't long before we realized we were heading in the right direction. The drab concrete walls became pristine and well-lit white, and the featureless doors now had labels and small windows offering looks into their contents.

"This feels so risky," I said nervously, holding onto Archaeus's shoulder to steady myself as we crept down the hall, hunching so that we wouldn't be seen.

"Well, whatever choice do we have?" Petra said back. I was about to answer when she stopped dead in her tracks and dropped to the floor, her handgun hanging in her lap.

"What is it?" Archaeus whispered.

"I think we found it..." she said. She used her gun to gesture to a set of double doors diagonal from us at the end of the hallway. There was a sign posted on it that read '*Authorized Personnel Only: Editing.*'

"That's a smoking gun if I've ever seen one," Phebah noted.

"But how do we get in?" Archaeus asked. "And what if someone comes out right now? We'll be caught— we're completely exposed out in the open like this!" There was a moment of silence. Petra began looking around, her eyes eventually locking on something in the distance.

"Follow my lead," she said rather cryptically. She ran towards the double doors, crouched down and hand steady on her pistol; and we followed her nervously. I was surprised when she turned and kept running past the lab, instead stopping further down the next hall.

"What are we doing?" I whispered. She tilted her chin and pointed towards the ceiling.

"Look up. There's a pretty intricate vent system in here," she pointed out. "If one of you can get into those grates it's possible you can spy on the room without being detected."

"But how?" Archaeus asked. "And who?"

“Cesaire’s the shortest,” she determined. She turned to me with a gleeful smile that, I admit, disconcerted me. “Archaeus will give you a boost.” She patted Archaeus on the shoulder and he begrudgingly kneeled, allowing me to step into his hand. He lifted me, and although it was shaky, I was able to clamor onto his shoulders. Once there, I found the vent wasn’t far out of my reach. I grazed the edge with my fingers, feeling around the edges for a seam to lift. I dug into the metal, my nails scraping as I did, but I was ultimately able to remove the vent cover.

“I’ve got it!” I whispered excitedly. I passed the cover down to Petra who gave me a thumbs-up of encouragement.

“Could you hurry up?” Archaeus groaned. “My back is *dying* over here!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve got it,” I said and reached inside of the vent to hoist myself up. I grunted, struggling as I wasn’t particularly athletic.

“Shit!” I heard Phebah cuss as I entered the ventilation system, “I think I hear somebody coming!”

“What?!” I exclaimed, prepared to jump back down to the floor below.

“No!” Petra scolded, “you go. We’ll deal with this.” I set my brow and nodded somberly, climbing into the vent with my mission in mind. It was a tight crawl, and my pants chafed against the cool metal, but I pushed ahead, digging into the ribbed surface with my forearms. The further I got, the less I could hear the hallway, until all was silent and I had no idea how the others were doing. I prayed they hadn’t been caught. Soon enough that quiet was replaced by the low hum of a fan and the murmur of voices below. I stopped at the edge of a vent opening, suddenly able to peer down into the lab. There were chrome tables, blinding white walls, and a host of confusing contraptions. Not to mention all of the technicians milling about the place. I leaned my ear into the grate to catch their conversation.

“...So I says to him: Hey! You’ve gotta *pay* for that coffee!” one of them said, chuckling to himself. Laughter rippled through the room and he leaned down to press a keypad on the side of one of the machines. “Ahh, anyways,” he sighed, “I’ve got to get to work now, really. As you might have heard, we’re really getting things into motion.”

“Finally,” one replied.

“About time!” another said, exasperated.

“Are we implementing the ‘*Ry Qrb* Protocol?” a young-sounding lab assistant asked hesitantly.

“That’s right,” he confirmed. “We’ll all be evacuated by the end of the month, don’t you worry.”

“I’m not worried!” she squeaked, and everyone began to laugh again. I furrowed my brow, wondering what the name of this protocol could mean. *I thought I’m supposed to be able to understand any language or dialect now*, I thought to myself, puzzled. I leaned further forward, adjusting myself where my arm was beginning to bruise on the cold metal. The vent creaked beneath my weight. Loudly. The main lab technician’s head snapped up and he squinted at the ceiling, his gaze just barely missing the vent.

“Did any of you hear that?” he asked, his voice deliberate and slow. Most of the room shook their heads, but the young assistant nodded.

“Yes!” she reported. “I’m not sure where it came from. Perhaps we should monitor the diagnostics on the machinery?”

“Yes...yes, that would be wise,” he responded, his eyes not leaving my general direction. As much as I wanted to fade from view, I was too nervous to move, and found myself frozen in place. I clenched my eyes closed and waited for time to pass. I heard a buzzing building in my ears, which quickly turned into a clattering and banging distinctive of an altercation. The people below me all exchanged worried glances before

hurrying out of the lab. Once I was sure the room was clear I inched forward, lifted the grate up, and dropped onto the floor below. I rolled upon impact, but my shin still shook as the took the brunt force of the fall. I ran over to the machine the man had been toying with, searching for any sign of Zenobie, but I couldn't make head nor tail of it. There was, however, a logo emblazoned on the walls and the majority of the technology in the lab— a bright flame hovering over ocean waves. I whipped my head around, locating an office desk, and picked a ballpoint pen off of it. My breath was rushed and my hand unsteady, but I managed to record the logo on my wrist.

“All clear!” I heard a voice call out from the hallway. My breath hitched. *Shit*, I thought. *I didn't really think this through*. The grate was still on the floor, revealing the ventilation shaft entrance, and I had no apparent place to hide. Essentially, I was screwed unless I figured something out very fast. I saw the light peeking out from the gap beneath the doorway darken with the fast-approaching shadows of the workers returning to the station. I panicked. The door swung open and they stepped into the room. I cowered under the office desk with the vent cover in tow, tucked into the desk corner, and hoped that none of them would think to sit down. I held the pen tight to my chest as a last line of self-defense. *How in God's name am I going to get out of this?* I fretted, my mind racing with adrenaline. I sat there, paralyzed, for a solid few minutes, not even paying attention to the conversions of the workers, before I noticed what was built into the bottom of the desk. A ruby-red panic button. *Well*, I thought, *desperate times call for desperate measures*. I squeezed my eyes shut, shying away like the ball of nerves I was, and pressed the button. No sooner than my hand had left its surface the entire compound erupted in a cacophony of noise and sound. The room was washed in violent crimson and a loud warning sound blared through the halls.

“Evacuate!” the main man commanded, “There’s been an emergency!” I wasted no time, high-tailing it out of the lab as soon as I was sure they were a reasonable distance away. I stood frightened in the hall, desperately searching for my group. *Had they instigated that altercation?* I wondered. *Are they alright?*

“Psst!” a whisper interrupted my thoughts. I spun around, searching for the source. “Up here!” the voice called again. I gasped, looking up.

“You’re in the vents!” I yelled. Petra grinned, grabbed the sides of the empty grate-hole, and swung herself down.

“We had to take some desperate measures,” she explained. Phebah and Archaeus fell out after her, visibility uncomfortable.

“Yeah...me too,” I said.

“Evidently.”

“We have to get out of here,” I urged. “They’ll be onto us.” She nodded and began running back in the direction we came from.

“Hopefully we’ll just blend in during the chaos if anyone sees us!” she said, rounding a corner with complete confidence.

“Hopefully,” I echoed, feeling slightly stomach-sick after all of the desperate running and hiding I’d had to do. We retraced our steps, and although we passed others, they were too focused on their own tasks to question us. We arrived back at the cargo barn with sweat on our brows and heaving chests bobbing up and down. Dylan was pale as bedsheets, pacing back and forth when we arrived.

“Finally!” he shrieked, “They set off the alarm! I thought you’d been caught!”

“Err, I actually tripped it myself,” I admitted, scratching my neck.

“What!? They’ll lock down the facility! We have to get out of here!” He started shaking his hands, the stress evident in his shaking

body. “Everyone in! Now!” We obliged, hopping into the back of the carriage and tugging the tarp over our heads. It jolted forward wildly, and I thought I might lose my lunch. The wheels lurched over the rocky ground, pulling into the wall checkpoint with urgency. I heard Dylan hop out of the carriage’s cabin on his own accord.

“I have to leave,” he explained desperately. “I know you must be putting the compound on lockdown but I’ve received an urgent request from the Assembly.”

“Do you realize how suspicious this looks?” the guardsman asked him. “We have a potential security breach soon after you arrive—unscheduled, mind you, and now you’re attempting to leave? With what proof?”

“I can’t show you, it’s— it’s confidential.”

“Oh, give me a *break*, Dylan. Do you really find yourself so important?”

“Uh...um. Find *this* important!” There was a rustling of fabric, a yelp, the abrasive sound of skin against dirt, and a flurry of footsteps. The carriage pitched, and we all slid to the other side as it flurried forward.

“Go!” I heard Dylan command, followed by the thunderous stomping of hooves. I stared at the rest of the group in total confusion.

“Do you have any idea what just happened?” I asked, to which everyone shook their heads.

“I think...Dylan might have just beaten that guy up?” Phebah suggested. I slumped over myself and pinched my brow.

“Oh my Gosh,” I groaned, “why is it that no matter where we go, we always make such a mess?”

“Because we’re fugitives of the most powerful beings in the universe, duh,” Petra responded plainly. I lifted my head from my knees and stared blankly at her.

“Right. Because that’s amazing,” I dead-panned.

“I’d rather we be time criminals than complicit in mass death,” she replied nonchalantly. While I was busy contemplating that statement she threw the tarp off of the carriage and leaned herself against the backboard of the carriage-bed.

“Hey Dylan!” she shouted over the wind, “What happened back there, man?”

“Nothing to worry about! All of the other guards were headed to the emergency response area, so they shouldn’t put two and two together until we’re long gone. At that point all I have to do is deny, deny, deny.”

“Well, you’re great at that,” she said, leaning on her palm seductively. He was focused on the road and couldn’t see her, but I noticed him smile all the same.

“Hey Petra?” I asked when she sat back down, “can I run something by you?”

“Yeah, sure,” she yawned. I pulled up my sleeve, showing her the slightly ink-rubbed symbol I had etched on my skin.

“I saw this image all over the editing lab,” I explained. “You were a high-ranking member of the Assembly, do you recognize it?” She leaned forward, squinting, but no look of recognition crossed her face.

“I...no. No, I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Well, that’s alright. There was one other thing, though. I overheard the lab workers discussing that protocol– I assume the same one we heard about while we were hiding in the hallway– except they gave it a name.”

“Really?” Archaeus cut in, his interest piqued. “What was it called?”

“Well, that’s just the thing,” I explained, “I couldn’t understand it. It was in some foreign language.”

“What...?” Petra whispered. “But that’s impossible, that’s— you’re supposed to be able to understand *anything* and *everything*, I don’t— do you remember what they said?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “They called it ‘*Ry Qrb*.’” Petra was silent, so I tried prompting her again. “Do you have *any* idea what that means?”

“Yes...” she said, her voice airy. “It’s Phoenician. The native tongue of Dido— the Empress. It means... ‘Sacrifice in Fire.’”

“Why couldn’t I understand it? Why didn’t it translate for me?”

“Because Phoenician is only used for the code terms of the highest level of confidential operations. I have *no idea* why these base-level employees were using those words or why I don’t recognize them at all, but whatever it is, it cannot be good.” I sighed dejectedly.

“So, you have no idea what it means?” I asked.

“I really don’t. I’m truly sorry, I wish we could have gleaned more information here.”

“It’s fine,” I reassured her. “We still have time.”

“Yeah, but how much?” There was an awkward pause and none of us felt the need to resolve it, leading to the rest of the ride being led in silence. I propped myself up on the side of the carriage to watch the scenery move by in peace. The woods and peaks of the Lake District quickly faded, turning back into the gentle hills of the countryside, now drowned by the lilac light of the foggy sunset. There were piles of old rocks deposited in ripples across the landscape, faded roadways criss-crossing the grange, and an endless sky being swallowed by the night. It was beautiful in a way I was too tired to appreciate.

I leaned my head onto my forearm and felt myself beginning to drift off to sleep. As I did, an eerily familiar feeling crept into the edges of my mind. Tendrils of darkness curled around me, holding me in a cold grasp. The shock of midwinter water flooding my lungs. The heat of pillars of fire sweltering on my skin. Flashes of pain exploding beneath

my bones, burrowing their way in like root-sparks. Obelisks stood as heralds of God and I bowed before them, hellfire bathing me like a cradle-born baptism. The heavens turned and flickered, their light dimming in a supernova as triumphant and melancholic as the final chord of a symphony. Out of the destruction, there was nothing. My vision was black.

I gasped, my eyes fluttering open. I was lying on the grainy bed of the trunk with the group hunched over me in concern.

“Wh-what happened?” I mumbled and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. Phebah leaned down and pressed the back of her palm to my forehead.

“His fever’s gone,” she reported before turning to address me. “You went out,” she explained. “Just collapsed and started tossing and turning in a cold sweat.”

“How do you feel?” Petra asked, her tone brisk and stern but ultimately concerned. I groaned, biting back the pulsing ache within me, and propped myself up. I wasn’t sure how I felt.

“I had a vision,” I said. “Hallucinations, really. I’m not sure what to make of it.” Petra and Archaeus shared a knowing glance.

“Did it feel familiar?” Archaeus asked. “Perhaps similar to what you experienced back in Antibes as the timeline started destabilizing?” I nodded slowly, the pieces clicking into place and the familiar feeling settling within me.

“Yes,” I confirmed, “it was just like that. But...more violent somehow. I’m not sure how that’s possible considering that I coughed up blood last time, but—”

“It’s getting worse,” Petra interrupted. “We can’t stay here much longer. We have to leave tomorrow morning. I don’t care where we go, but we have to.” I curled in on myself, the fear that stemmed from my episode finally coming crashing down.

“Okay,” I agreed quietly. My lips quivered, and I wondered if it would be easier if I never spoke again. Suddenly I remembered why I was here in the first place. I was a monumental error. A smudged inkblot on the pristine page of time. Now I was facing the consequences. Then, the worst dawned on me. My head flicked up and I ran my eyes over Archaeus.

“Auguste,” I said, “is this happening to him right now?”

“If it were, it would be to me as well,” he replied calmly. “We’re connected in that way.” His eyes crinkled with a sad composure. I inhaled sharply, another realization smacking me in the face.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, “Cleon! Oh...I hope he’s alright.”

“He will be,” Archaeus assured me. “He’s resilient. Plus, he’s not alone. Just like you have me here, he has Auguste there.” Petra and Phebah nodded encouragingly, even offering me a clumsy side-hug as comfort. That wasn’t important to me then. Archaeus’s words echoed in my ears, drawing an uncanny feeling out of a deep well in me. *Like you have me, he has Auguste.* I knew we were our own people. I knew I had agency. I knew Cleon and Archaeus had each other and needed no one else. *Still, what had I done separating myself from Auguste again? Why did I feel the need to run from him when I always pulled myself back immediately after? Why was I punishing myself in this way? Why couldn’t I just be rational for once? Why–*

“–Cesaire?” Phebah’s nasally voice interrupted, “Earth to Cesaire?”

“Wha–? Oh, yes,” I replied, blinking rapidly, “I’m here.”

“Good, because we’re almost back to Dylan’s.” I rubbed my eyes and stared at the horizon as I pulled myself out of my trance. The sun had set, leaving the sky to be dipped in bands of velvet navy to dusky heather. We were at the edge of Newcastle and the dirt road had transitioned into a steadier cobblestone.

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said, feeling disoriented.

“Yeah, clearly,” she laughed. “What were you thinking about?” Her question made me shrink. I didn’t reply, and she backed off, her expression panicked. “Oh! I mean, you don’t have to tell me anything, it’s perfectly alright—”

“Auguste.”

“Huh?”

“I was thinking about Auguste.”

“Oh.” Her pained face melted into a warm smile and she tugged my hood over my head like a schoolchild. “That’s lovely,” she cooed. She brushed my hair with her soft hands and closed her eyes contentedly, leaning her head back against her crossed arms.

“I wish,” I muttered after too long, but she didn’t hear me. I tucked my legs into my chest and let the little conversation fade away until we reached our destination. I tipped my nose up towards the night sky and observed the stars. They were only silver flecks of brightness in a whole swath of nothing, but they meant something. Enough to have earned stories and names, at least. I tugged at my lip and let my thoughts turn bitter. *A rose by any other name would smell as sweet*, I thought. *And yet here I am, cursed to live amongst a twin rose who is sweeter than I*. I shook my head, attempting to banish the self-loathing that was encroaching on my thoughts. *Less than a night star*, I thought. *How can that be?*

We finally pulled into the mews under the dead hand of midnight, when the city had settled into a stillness and not a soul dared stir to make a sound, which made our movements all the more jarring against that perfect silence. I stumbled when my boots hit the ground and Petra offered me her arm to balance myself on.

“Thank you,” I mumbled shyly.

“Don’t mention it. You’re still weak from the destabilization, no doubt.” Dylan came up behind us after securing the horses in their stall, looking concerned.

“Wait,” he said, “what’s wrong with him?”

“Time is beginning to collapse here,” she explained, “we’ll have to depart in the morning.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. We can discuss this further at your home with the rest of the group.” The conversation was left at that until we arrived at Dylan’s townhouse. I stood in the cluttered foyer feeling ever-so-small amongst his wild assortment of knick-knacks in all shapes, patterns, and hues. It wasn’t until I saw Auguste emerge from the kitchen that I felt I could finally breathe.

“You’re back!” he exclaimed with a beaming grin. “Did all go well?”

“About as well as it could’ve,” Petra replied. “Come, sit down, we’ll debrief.” We all strolled into the kitchen and perched ourselves around the table. K’ayhlta had made some shepherd’s pie, and served it to us on chipped and coffee-stained plates. I wrapped my shivering hands around a mug of black tea, which had a calming effect. It didn’t take long for us to launch into conversation and we all took turns explaining the events of the mission. Once we got to the subject of what I had seen in the lab I tugged up my sleeve and showed the symbol I had drawn on my wrist to the table.

“I believe this is associated with their plan,” I said. “They call it the *Ry Qrb* protocol. It’s a Phoenician term that means ‘Sacrifice in Fire,’ and we have no idea what it indicates— not even Petra knows.”

“Wait, what?” Dylan said, sounding lost. We all turned to look at him. “None of you have *ever* heard of that protocol?”

“Um, no?” Petra said. “Should I have?”

“Uh, yeah! It’s only one of the most important prime directives of the entire Assembly. How have you not– I mean, Petra– aren’t you supposed to be *in charge* of timeline operations?”

“That was essentially my job title, yes.” She rolled her eyes and prodded him in the shoulder in annoyance. “Just get to your point.” He nodded grimly and took a breath. His eyes looked far too serious and I felt off-put.

“It’s the code name for a doomsday protocol.”

“What?” Petra said, her face pale.

“It’s distributed to a select number of agents to perform pre-indicated tasks in the event of a mass-fallout of the timeline. It would enable three locations to act as ‘islands’ that would continue to exist while the rest of the timeline collapses; those being an archive center, the central editing command facility, and the Assembly itself.”

“How have I never heard of this?” Petra cried. “Why would the Assembly keep something of this scale from me? And how?” There were a few prolonged stares and dry coughs around the table before it dawned on her. “Oh...” she said. “Oh, I see.”

“You were implicated in the original threat to the fallout of the timeline,” Dylan said, voicing her thoughts. “I assume they still saw you as untrustworthy when it came to a failsafe protocol.”

“Either that, or...” she trailed and shook her head, “ah, no, that would be preposterous.”

“No, no, what is it, Petra?”

“I– well.” She pursed her lips and gave herself pause. “What if...the Assembly intends to purposely collapse the timeline? How else could they know to activate the protocol? Perhaps they did not tell me because they knew I would object?”

“You forget why we are doing this,” K’aayhltla said as she sat down. “The timeline is doomed to collapse in only a few weeks. They are

obviously aware of this fact and they did not alert you because you are the *source* of this collapse. They fear that you could worsen it. They just plain don't trust you."

"Yes...yes I suppose that must be right," Petra accepted. "It's logical."

"I know. Otherwise I wouldn't have said it."

"Dylan, how do *you* know about the protocol?" Petra asked.

"I'm the steward of an editing center. It's in my training to be made aware of the safety directives. In the event of a collapse I'd attempt to migrate to one of the islands with the rest of the team at the compound."

"Where is this island?" Cleon cut in. He was sitting away from the table with his arms crossed, and had been uncomfortably silent the entire evening. I avoided looking at him. I knew what he had been through just an hour before, and I found it best to avoid thinking about that. "If it's so important to the timeline editing process and Zenobie is of apparent top priority, shouldn't the decisions surrounding her place in the timeline be made at the most secure and fail safe facility possible?" He asked.

"Yes," Dylan replied, "that seems like it should be the case. The command center is in Lima, Peru— 22nd Century. It's one of only five places, including the Assembly, where timeline edits can be officially requested and permitted. And it's the only non-Assembly site that is built to withstand both a manual and entropic collapse of the timeline. If Zenobie is being concealed from us purposefully, it's undoubtedly being done there."

"Good," Petra said. "We should leave there in the morning."

"Wait!" I interrupted, "do we even have proof Zenobie was being edited at the facility we just infiltrated?"

“They’re obviously aware of her effects on the timeline,” Cleon replied, his voice slow and calculating. “Otherwise they wouldn’t be preparing for the failsafe...but she’s also being edited somehow. There’s only two explanations, and both of them are incomplete.”

“What would they be?” Phebah asked, leaning forward in her chair.

“Either a rogue editor is purposefully trying to trigger a collapse...or the Assembly itself is.”

“It has to be the former,” Petra asserted. “The Assembly would only suffer from collapsing the timeline. That’s our nightmare. Our doomsday scenario.”

“Right,” Cleon said, lacing his hands behind his head and closing his eyes. “It wouldn’t make sense at all, would it?”

“No,” she said firmly. “It wouldn’t.”

The conversation pivoted after that, but I could still feel the uncertainty hanging over me like a thundercloud. We had no idea what situation we had really implicated ourselves with. I felt like a pawn unable to see the board, brandishing his weapons without a cause to fight for. There was a cause, though. *Zenobie*. Her name felt less and less familiar on my tongue as time passed me by. Once my most likely future wife, now a fleeting ephemeral concept. Petra suggested that we head to bed early that night, seeing as we would be leaving bright and early. I obliged, trudging up the stairs to the bathroom. I grabbed a toothbrush off of the shelf— the bristles were prickly on my teeth— and stared dead-eyed into the mirror. I heard the door creak on its hinges and the padding of socked footsteps indicating someone had entered behind me.

Auguste’s face faded into the reflective glass of the mirror. I bit down my toothbrush and spat into the sink, hastily wiping my mouth with the side of my sleeve. I turned around and attempted to casually

lean against the cork countertop, but I assumed I looked more awkward than anything. I pushed my curls out of my face with a sheepish grin.

“Hey,” I said, suppressing my smile. He laughed, just barely, and pressed himself into the wall across from me. It was coated in a patterned floral wallpaper that was peeling at the edges from the humidity of the shower. The soft glow of the sconce mounted next to the mirror gave him a rounded appearance, with the gentle shadow smoothing his angles.

“Rough day, huh?” he asked as an open question.

“You have no idea...” I fidgeted with my knuckles. “I— it happened again. I phased out into another part of the timeline. I was destabilized.”

“I had a feeling,” he replied somberly. “It happened to Cleon. He wouldn’t talk to us about it but I assumed...”

“...Yeah.”

“I’m so sorry, I remember how jarring it is.”

“It’s okay. I’m just glad we’re getting out of here before it happens to you.” I looked at myself in the mirror and adjusted my shirt.

“I just have to wonder how long we’ll have to live like this,” he said. “We’re not safe anywhere. We can’t go back to Alaska, certainly not the Assembly, and we’re ultimately doomed unless we find Zenobie and fix this.” He pushed his hair back and sighed, his hand rubbing his forehead.

“It’s a whole mess, isn’t it?” I said. I stepped closer to him and put my hand on his forearm, reassuring him. He nodded and collapsed onto my shoulder.

“I just want this to be over, Cesaire.” I leaned my chin onto the crown of his head and pet his curls, my fingers running through his black ringlets.

“I know,” I said gently. “Me too.” We stood there for a moment, swaying in place, our body weights balancing off of each other. I exhaled

and pulled away. “Let’s get to bed now, yeah?” I murmured. He hummed in approval, and I locked our arms together, dragging us into the dark hallway. As I opened the bedroom door, I watched the pale light of the moon brighten his face, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“It’s really going to be alright,” I assured him. “I promise.” I collapsed onto the quilted bed, my legs swinging out like a child. He followed, falling deep into the river of cotton and wool. His limbs were strewn out like a stretching cat, and he yawned like one too.

“Cesaire?” he asked sleepily.

“Yes?”

“Why did you volunteer to go on that mission? Without me?” The fuzziness of the dark clouded my ears. I wasn’t sure what to say. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“I—” I choked, stumbling over my words. “I couldn’t tell you. I don’t...know.” He didn’t say anything for a while. I sat, unmoving, in the bitter silence.

“Cesaire?” he finally said, “Are you...scared of me?” I gasped and spun around to look at him, lying so still. I took his hands in mine and shook my head.

“No!” I promised. “No, no, never.” He frowned and sat up, bringing us to eye level.

“Then why,” he asked, “are you fine treating me like I’m your whole world when no one else can see, but act like I’m a stranger when they can?” I shut my eyes in quiet grief. My grip on his hands should have loosened, but I only held them tighter, steadfast against his words.

“I’m just not ready for whatever you think is happening here,” I whispered. “We need to keep this non-committal. I— you deserve more than me. You deserve more than this— this *brokenness*.”

“What are you talking about? It’s what I—”

“It’s what you *want*?” I interrupted, dropping his hands. “If that’s what you think you want, you’re mistaken.” I curled into myself. “I can never give that to you, Auguste. I can never *be that* for you.” I tucked my face into my knees, too afraid to face the terrible music I had orchestrated. Luckily, he did it for me. I felt his hands cupping my chin, pulling my face up to meet his.

“I understand,” was all he said. I whimpered, my eyes desperately searching his own for a single sign.

“We have so much to worry about right now,” I whispered, drawing away. “Maybe we should get some rest.” He continued to stare at me, almost pleadingly, almost desperately. “Please,” I said faintly. He let me go, his face painfully somber. It was a magnificent show of restraint. I felt like sobbing. I slipped off of the bed and took the floor. I motioned to the blanketed cot, “I’ll just...you know,” I mumbled. He said nothing. I sighed and fell back onto the cold, hard surface. I saw him, through the cover of the night, tuck himself into a fetal position and face the wall, falling completely still. I clenched my eyes, blinking away tears, and began to pray. My lips mouthed the words I had said so many times before, and my fingers begged to be anything other than empty.

“Amen,” I whispered the final word, sending my plea into the heavens, unsure if I would ever receive an answer.

## XXII: Auguste/Cleon

- Auguste -

I felt cold hands grabbing my shoulders and rocking me awake. I sputtered, blinking, and bolted upwards from the comfort of my bed. Cesaire was holding onto me, his expression desperate. I covered my mouth to suppress a scream. The entire room was fluxing in and out of reality. Shaking, phasing, ripping itself open. Books fell off of their shelves and into piles on the floor, the wallpaper changed itself through a carousel of patterns, and the ceiling wavered in an explosion of light.

“What is going on!” I screamed, scrambling to get out of bed.

“I think the destabilization accelerated a lot faster than we anticipated!” he yelled back and grabbed my wrist to pull me into the hallway. I stumbled, my hand reaching out to the wall for support, and I was surprised when it passed right through. I tugged my hand close to me and shook it squeamishly. We ran down the tight spiral staircase, which seemed longer than it should’ve been. I stuck my arms in front of myself to guide me, but only succeeded in giving myself vertigo. Once we reached the foyer we managed to unite with the rest of our group, including Dylan.

“You have to get out of here!” he yelled over the roar of the wind pulsing through the house, tearing up everything in its path.

“We can’t jump in such a small space!” Cleon shouted, waving the temporal phaser above his head. “We have to get outside!” The response was unanimously coordinated. We joined hands, bracing ourselves with locked arms akimbo, and pushed our way out of the townhouse and onto the street. I hugged the iron-wrought railing for support as the funneling wind slashed my face. There were hundreds of citizens flooding the streets in a sea of navy and gray, and we desperately

shoved our way through them to get to an open space. The cobblestone street tore itself up, coiling like a spine. Windows shattered, roofs caved inwards, lampposts curved and bent. We crashed through the crowd and into a small local park situated in the rotunda of a plaza, jumping the small steel fence and grazing our knees with grass stains.

“Join hands!” Cleon commanded, and I quickly obliged, clasping Cesaire and Eurynome’s hands in mine. I turned my head, looking at both of them nervously. We stood in a misshapen circle under the dim glow of daybreak. Cleon flicked a switch on the phaser, revealing its nectarine interior. We all pushed our hands inwards, ensuring that our skin would make contact with its unnaturally unblemished metal. I closed my eyes, bracing for the time sickness I’d come to expect. As soon as my eyelids touched, I saw everything. A violent flash. Ribbons of flame swallowing ivory statues. Curls of deep raven billowing in an ember-flecked wind. Dirt tarnishing smooth olive skin. Blank white.

Bird song. The smell of a fresh-mowed lawn. A lazy breeze carrying the scent of burnt street food and seawater. I woke beneath the low-hanging boughs of a summery green grove, my cheek pressed into dewey grass and my face warm with beams of lemony light. I groaned, rubbed my eyes, and gradually pulled myself off of the ground. The rest of the group looked similarly disoriented, swaying on their feet as they attempted to combat the jarring feeling of the jump.

“Is everyone alright?” Eurynome asked, her voice gentle in my ear.

“All good here,” Melem-Iram reported, flexing his knuckles.

“I’m okay,” I heard Cesaire say, followed by more voices colliding and confirming their relative health, myself included.

“Where...are we?” I said, spinning around to catch my bearings.

“It appears to be some sort of botanical garden,” Cleon determined. He cupped the waxy leaf of a large bushy shrub and

squinted his eyes to observe it. I was suddenly awed by the sheer scale of the arboretum we found ourselves in. There were dozens of interwoven footpaths paved with coral pebbles, sculpture gardens interspersed with thousands of specimens all identified by metal plaques, and an impressive city skyline in the distance. It felt different than the Assembly. Less empty and theatrical. More lived-in. I watched as a group of families strolled into view, and I panicked, realizing that we were in the exhibit.

“We should get out of here,” I said, to which everyone quickly agreed. We hopped over a few bushes and undergrowth, stumbling onto the pristine path, right in the way of the tour group. I waved awkwardly at a young girl who was staring at us with some interest. We walked past her family uncomfortably, and she rolled her eyes, turning her attention to a small glossy glass tablet in her hand. We picked up our pace for a brisk walk, but the garden was massive. I was in awe of the sheer volume of taxa it presented, most of which looked completely alien to me.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been to this city,” Petra remarked. We all looked at her expectantly, as we had not anticipated a guide. “Oh, stop it,” she said, smirking. “They may have kept me in the dark with their foolish doomsday protocols, but I oversaw regulation of the timeline. I would be useless if I did not know about the command center for all timeline manipulation.”

“So, do you know where we need to go?” Eurynome asked curiously. Petra rubbed her neck and shrugged.

“Um, not exactly,” she admitted. Eurynome sighed, exasperated.

“I should’ve known,” she groaned.

“Listen, I said it’s been a long time,” Petra defended. “Plus, they didn’t take me to the main command center when I visited. I just spent a few hours playing diplomat at the embassy.”

“They have an embassy here?” Archaeus asked. “That’s great! We should head there.”

“I know,” she said. She turned around and began walking backwards down the path with her arms crossed smugly. “See? I am good at something.”

“You’ve always been a pain, Petra,” I quipped. She glared at me and slugged me in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“Haha, that’s what you get!”

“Rude!”

“Whiny!” I saw Cesaire swallowing his laughter as we bickered, and Cleon and Eurynome shared an unimpressed glance.

“Siblings,” they both said. We finally reached the end of the garden as we stepped up to a whitewashed stucco wall adorned with chunky pebbles. There was a main archway with a ticket booth that visitors were traveling in and out of, and we fell in line with a leaving party, avoiding the ticket-sellers with averted eyes. As soon as we stepped out of the garden, I was hit with the full force of the city. A wide city street lined with shadow-casting trees stood in front of us. Sleek cars that looked like bullets in a rainbow palette of neons drove upon it with their rubber tires to the ground like carriages. Buildings built in a combination of maximalist old European styles and brutalist modernism lined the city grid. They featured intricate minarets, statues of glorious figures, banners rippling in the wind, shiny storefronts, metal spires, digital billboards projecting holographic films over the streets, and brassy revolving doors catering to a flood of people everywhere.

There were women in snappy button-up jackets tugging their children to cello lessons, young men in ill-fitting business suits entering imposing all-glass office buildings, college students sharing empanadas on the edges of grand fountains in bustling squares, and dog-walkers wrangling yowling packs of hairless hounds. Above it all there was a brilliant blue sky dashed with whips of clouds and framed by palm trees.

Off in the hills I could see clusters of houses painted in a buffet of colors. Somewhere in the distance I caught the distinctive sound of waves crashing onto shore. It was an undoubtedly beautiful city. Petra approached a bus stop on the street corner and stared at its map; which was a tangled mess of lights dancing on a sheet of glass built into the waiting shelter. She tapped a cluster of lines, and the image expanded, showing her tiny glowing street labels.

“We should take a bus to this district,” She said. “It’s a lot of walking to get where we need to go from here, and we haven’t any time to spare.”

“What is a bus?” Cesaire asked. I had been thinking the same thing, and nodded encouragingly.

“Think of a car,” Phebah said. She was clutching onto his arm, and leaned close to his face when she said “Now think of how many people a train car can carry.” I frowned and rubbed my arm. “Now put them together, and voila! That is a bus.”

“Fascinating!” He said, his eyes brightening as they always did when he was genuinely interested in a subject. I kicked a crumpled soda can around the ground. Phebah leaned down and plucked it up, tossing it in the bus stop’s trash can.

“Thanks, Pheeb,” I muttered.

“No problem!” she replied cheerily. I huffed and walked away, sitting on the rest stop’s bench with my chin tucked into my chest. *Why is he standing over there with her?* I wondered bitterly. *He’s not even friends with her. She’s my friend. He should—* I didn’t finish my thought. Cesaire attempted to make eye contact with me, perhaps to reconcile something, but he didn’t walk over. I turned my head, shying away from the entire ordeal. Everyone went on chatting about something inconsequential, but I kept my eye on the scuffed concrete ground. When the bus finally arrived, I trudged on without a single word.

“Ma’am, your group needs to pay,” I heard the bus driver say to Eurynome after I had already sat down.

“She doesn’t owe you crap,” K’ayhltla said with her gruffest voice possible.

“We’re diplomats, sir,” Eurynome explained. “I am so sorry for her behavior, she’s um, she’s seen a lot.” The bus driver gave us a once-look-over and then resigned to rolling his eyes and waving the rest of our group through.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, “I don’t get paid enough for this nonsense, anyways. Just stop making a darn scene.”

“Thank you-u-u!” Phebah said brightly and took her seat between Cesaire and I. The bus hummed to life and we merged into traffic. I rested my head on the window, watching the landscape fly by. I had grown accustomed to the manner in which the world moved while inside an automobile, but I was still entranced by it even then, even now. No matter how much time you spend away from your original time, you will always react as a foreigner. There will always be little details that don’t sit quite right, even when you come to understand them.

The bus dropped us off on an arched bridge overlooking a turquoise man-made lake in a bustling central district. There were many large official-looking buildings built in the Roman style, which indicated to me that we were in an area dedicated to government affairs.

“Lima is the capital of Peru,” Petra informed us. “Other international entities host their embassies in this parlor of the city, so our ever-clever Assembly decided the most logical place to put ours would be where everyone else has established theirs. It’s disguised as an administrative building between the El Salvadoran and Uruguayan embassies.” She pointed across the bustling thoroughfare at a cluster of small buildings with barrel roof tiles and humble outer facades.

“They’re very...quaint,” K’ayhltla said, cocking her head.

“They’re respectable,” Petra countered. “And perfectly unassuming. No one has ever suspected a thing as far as I’m aware.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Cleon asked.

“Well,” Petra answered, “since the embassy is only the staging ground for operations, there’s bound to be some communication between here and the command center. We should expect to see some people going back and forth. If anyone leaves for any business that doesn’t scream ‘lunch break,’ we tail them.”

“What if they use a vehicle?” I asked.

“Then you best believe we’re hijacking a car.”

“Wow,” Phebah laughed, “who knew you were so feisty, Petra?”

“I think we all did,” Cleon groaned. We decided to sit inter-dispersed on a few park benches across the street from the embassy and enjoy some lunch while we waited. I walked into the park, sauntering down the walkways, and looked for a food cart that seemed easy enough to steal from. Phebah soon skipped up behind me with a mischievous grin on her face. We stood a few yards from a man selling grilled pork, and I had to pause my salivating to talk with her.

“You’re not seriously thinking about stealing from him, are you?” she asked with an impish smirk.

“Well, we have to eat somehow,” I defended myself. “They told me to find some lunch, we don’t have any money, I’m sure this is the solution.”

“No,” she said and shook her head, “*this* is the solution.” She reached into her pant pockets and pulled out a handful of silver coins.

“Where did you get those?” I exclaimed.

“Take it from a professional pirate— it’s much easier to pickpocket and pay than to steal and run.”

“Well I’ll be,” I said and laughed. She waltzed up to the cart, pointed at which foods she wanted to purchase, and ever-so-kindly

dropped the coins into the owner's hand, receiving two hefty paper bags in return.

"So, folks just have spare change in their pockets, huh?" I asked.

"What? Oh, no. I stole a guy's wallet."

"Oh, yeah. That makes a lot more sense." We strolled back through the park in twin strides, and I leaned my head back to catch the fresh air. I closed my eyes, listening to the sound of car engines passing, children laughing, and the lake water rippling.

"I wouldn't mind settling down in a place like this," I said somewhat quietly.

"Is it better than what you have at home?" Phebah asked.

"Err, I don't know about that. Antibes is really beautiful. I just like to be in places that inspire me, that make me want to write. And I think this is just one of them." I settled back into my seat on the bench and Phebah began to hand out lunch to the group.

"Just wait until you see the beaches," Petra cut in. "Well, if we end up over there. I have no idea."

"You are so peculiar, you know that, right?" I sighed. She bit into her pork and half-shrugged.

"It's all a part of my mystery and charm."

"You might be the least charming person I know," Archaeus ribbed.

"And you're a twat." There was a chorus of laughter, and I again was under the illusion that we were normal people living normal lives. I could imagine it easily— we all had our own apartments, we went out to lunch together, we people-watched and made up stories about the passers-by, we had met somewhere simple and easy. We were friends without any extenuating circumstances attached. As I was dreaming of this carefree alternate reality, my eye caught Cesaire. There he was,

staring at me through his honeyed curls again. I stuffed the rest of my food down and hit my chest with my fist to clear my throat.

“It’s good, right?” I said, staring straight ahead with my eyes trained on the embassy, but completely aware of where he sat in my periphery.

“Fantastic,” he replied in a monotone sort of way. “Thanks for getting it.”

“Don’t thank me, Phebah was the one who bought it.”

“Ah...right.” We sat in mutual silence, and while there were conversations running around us, I could hear nothing but the whisper of my own breath.

“So,” I started, “do you want to talk about it?”

“About last night?”

“What do you think?” I heard him inhale. I braced for what he was to say.

“I—”

“Hey!” Phebah interrupted, jumping out of her seat, “there’s some agents on the move!” She was right. There was a large cohort of people leaving the embassy, all possessing one unique feature— blue satin bandannas. It was a strange choice of fashion, and none of us seemed to know what it meant. What was the issue was the sheer volume of them. Dozens. All of the cars parked on the block.

“Oh my God,” Eurynome said. “Why are there so many?”

“Not sure, but we’ve got to follow them!” Petra replied. She marched over to the nearest car, juttred her elbow into the window to break the glass, and unlocked the door from the inside. She reached into her pocket and took out her glistening silvery tools, which she inserted into the key fob, and the vehicle roared to life.

“Everyone in,” she said and revved the engine. We listened to her, but tensions remained high. I sat in the middle row, squeezed between Eurynome and K’aayhltla.

“I’m pretty sure everyone in the park saw that!” I squealed as the car twitched forward before barreling down the road.

“We’re definitely wanted by the Assembly at this point anyways,” Petra replied with one hand firmly on the wheel, the other fiddling with a digital map embedded into the dash. “The Peruvian police matter a lot less to me than one of those agents eliminating us. If there’s that many, something huge is going down, and we don’t have any allies here to help us.” The car swerved, taking a sharp right. “Hang on! It’s gonna be a bumpy ride! I don’t think the motorcade knows we’re tailing them, but they move fast.” I gripped the seat in front of me, finding myself dizzied by the chase. My eyes widened as I stared out the car window. Blue bandannas. Everywhere. Weaving through the sidewalk crowds, crossing boulevards, communing in front of coffee shops, and even driving past us in pedestrian cars.

“Look,” I said, tugging at Eurynome’s sleeve. Once she realized what I was pointing out she gasped, and she motioned for K’aayhltla to look as well.

“What is going on?” she asked nervously. We alerted the rest of the car to our predicament and I sank in my seat, afraid they’d spot me at any minute and want to have my head for my crimes.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Petra said, “but I know the protocol. They’ve centralized their resources. The entire city will be crawling with agents.”

“And they all know our faces...” Cesaire lamented.

“Yes,” she confirmed, “but don’t give up hope yet. The more of them there are, the easier they are to assimilate into. It’s unfeasible to give

all of them facial authentication technology on hand, so some cheap haircuts and bandannas should do the trick for our needs.”

“You make it sound far too easy,” I said, slumping.

“That’s because most folks are plain idiots, my dear boy.” She changed lanes, pulling us through a red light just in time to keep up with the motorcade. “All you have to do is be a little bit quicker on the draw, that’s all.”

“Until you get caught!” K’aayhltla shouted out. Phebah leaned over the back seat and gave her a high-five.

“Haha, nice one,” she laughed. I giggled too, and I just knew that Cesaire was rolling his eyes. He could never shed his serious demeanor, as much as it perturbed me. The cars in front of us finally came to a stop, parking on the curb of a large parkway near a palatial colonial-era building painted bright yellow and framed with towering palms. Hundreds of young people milled around its grounds lugging backpacks and satchels, tossing disks, kicking around balls on the green, and sun-bathing on towels near a row of fountain features. Dispersed throughout were flashes of blue on dark hair, indicating we had come to the right place.

I slid out of the car and slammed the door behind me. Although the picture was unfamiliar, I was able to piece together that these people were students, and that this large campus was likely a university. To my aid, there happened to be a large stone sign with tapered metal lettering at the sidewalk entrance we were walking over to.

“National University of San Marcos,” Cesaire read aloud. He smiled and planted his hands on his hips. “Well,” he said, “a research university isn’t a half-bad place to house such an experiment as time manipulation.” He sighed happily and rocked back on the balls of his feet. “I forgot just how much I missed institutions of education.”

“What is wrong with him?” Petra asked concernedly.

“School teacher, remember?” Archaeus answered.

“Oh-h-h, right.”

“So, if this is the location of the command center, how do we plan to get in?” I asked. Everything felt far more daunting without any allies to help us get by.

“The same plan as I mentioned in the car,” Petra replied. “Fake identities. I’m pretty sure we could all feign college age. At least as graduate students.”

“Maybe doctoral candidates...” K’aayhltla commented, to which she received a host of ugly glares. “Hey, just saying it as it is,” she said.

“Wait, hide!” Phebah yelled, pointing at a triad of bandanna-bearing girls walking down the sidewalk right towards us. Not seeing my options I ducked behind the school’s sign, tugging my hood over my head to hopefully shield myself further. The girls walked by, showing no indication of seeing us. I peeked out from my hiding place apprehensively.

“Huh,” Cleon said as he brushed grass shavings off of his legs, “that was unusually easy.”

“Maybe we’re not wanted yet?” Phebah suggested.

“No, there’s no way,” Petra said. “This is a major communication hub. They would be hearing everything first with as least delays as possible. It’s been over a week in Assembly time, so they should have found out at least yesterday morning.”

“Well,” Eurynome said, “wanted or not, we can’t just waltz into the university. It has to be a coordinated effort.” We all nodded in various stages of agreement. “I think we should identify a base of operations on the campus, alter our appearances, and send our most qualified to complete this mission.”

“You mean, like, those of us who are *actual* agents?” Petra said sarcastically, feigning shock. Eurynome, looking rather unamused, nodded.

“Yes. You, Cleon, Archaeus, and I should do the mission. Meanwhile, the rest of you can scout the city for further information on the influx of agents.”

“It seems sound to me,” Archaeus said. Nobody could argue, and so it was decided. We walked deeper onto the campus and sat in a circle on the vast common lawn to further parse out the details. I dug my fingers into the dirt below the well-watered turf and let my eyes wander over the dozens of colorful and ornamented buildings that built up the campus. I wanted to feel cheated out of participating in another mission, but I frankly found it hard to complain now that Cesaire and I weren’t being separated by it. I twisted a few strands of rubbery grass between my fingers and let them scatter to the wind, watching them as they floated off into the balmy summer afternoon.

Petra and Phebah wandered off to search for a drug store where they could buy hair dye and scissors, and Cesaire and I were told to scout the campus for a potential base of operations before the infiltration began. We strolled side-by-side down the winding paved footpaths criss-crossing the quad, hoping we looked casual enough to blend in. I was wearing one of Dylan’s old band tee-shirts he had stowed away and Archaeus’s jeans from his apartment in the Assembly, as well as his beat-up sneakers. I felt painfully unfashionable, but at least the outfit was functional. The students all had more elegant styles— ribbon-adorned skirts, sequined dresses, ripped denim, layers upon layers of crystal necklaces, centerpiece headbands, and platform sandals among other bold statements. While I should have found it gaudy, it struck me as rather artful. As we passed cohorts of students we peeked around

buildings; examining air cooling units, going up and down glass staircases, and ducking into the alleyways of dining halls.

“Wait,” Cesaire finally said, “let’s look in there.” He pointed at an unassuming two-story building built into a small grassy knoll just off the path and situated across from a sparkly performing arts center. It was made of toasty brown stucco with plain wooden doors and a flat roof with a balcony wrapping around the upper floor.

“Why this one?” I asked.

“I think it’s a dormitory,” he replied. “But look, there’s a construction sign on the front door and all of the lights are off. There’s nobody here.” I blinked, looking around, and realized that he was right. We had wandered off into a sector of the campus that appeared to be a recent expansion, or at least under renovation. There were chain link fences, fresh piles of dirt, newly-made gulches, and closed-off buildings. This dormitory resided at the very edge, with only a small grove of trees separating its far side from the road. There were a few digging machines parked further away, but they appeared to be unoperated and not currently in use.

“This is perfect,” I decided as we approached the main entry. I tugged on the door handle, but found it to be locked.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, and pressed his hand to my midriff to push me aside. I stepped back tentatively. He inhaled, curled his leg, and kicked the door with a rattling slam. Dust sifted from its hinges, and it swung open. My mouth dropped, and I was pretty sure my cheeks must have been glowing.

“How did you—?”

“I trained in Alaska,” he said, as if that answered anything. I shook my head and laughed under my breath.

“You never fail to surprise, Cesaire.”

“We should try upstairs for a better vantage point,” I suggested. He nodded, and we took the carpeted stairs to the second floor. He tugged the handle of one of the rooms and found it fortunately unlocked. We headed inside to find a barren and unfurnished room with dusty floorboards and a single curtain-less window.

“It’s not the most glamorous,” he said, “but it will serve our needs.”

“Well, not *our* needs,” I joked. “We’re not the ones going on this mission.”

“What do you expect we shall do while we wait?” he wondered aloud, abruptly interrupting our conversation. I crossed my arms and walked towards him with slow strides.

“I can think of a few things,” I said coyly. I waited for a response, but there was none. *Oh, shit*, I thought, internally cringing. *That was idiotic of me*. He said nothing for a while. We just stood there. Almost looking at each other. I begged for some higher power to make me fade away right then and there. He turned to face the window.

“Great,” I coughed, “Should we head back then?”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose we should.” He bowed his head while my eyes crawled across the ceiling. *Why are we just standing here?* I wondered painfully. *Why aren’t we saying anything?* I waited in his shadow, which was cast by the late afternoon sun trickling through the open window. I watched the hair on his arms raise as a draft flickered over us. I wanted something.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered without lifting his gaze from the floor. I sighed and rubbed my arms.

“I know,” I said, somewhat surprised at the turn this has taken. “It’s okay.” He turned around, his face drowned in shadow.

“No,” he said. “It’s not.”

“We don’t have to do this right now, Cesaire.”

“We always do this,” he said, his voice cracking. I smiled glumly and rubbed his shoulder.

“And aren’t you tired of it?” I asked. He stared at me. There was nothing left to say. “Well?” he asked, “aren’t you?”

“I’m not the issue here, Cesaire,” I said. “I can’t rely on you to make up your mind and keep it that way. So, what am I supposed to do?”

“How do you expect me to fix myself overnight?”

“I expect you to at least stop making everything so awkward!” My voice rang in my ear and I stepped back, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, “I really am.”

“God, Cesaire. I know.” I pushed my bangs back, avoiding his soft eyes. It was all too much. I turned and left, walking out of the dormitory, doing everything in my power not to look back. Just as I reached the precipice, with the light of the outside shining through the crack in the ill-fitting door, I slipped a glimpse. There he was. Behind me whether I trusted he would be or not. I sighed, stopping to let him catch up.

“Do you want to walk with me?” I asked quietly.

“Please,” he said. And so we did. We walked back to our meeting place on the grange with no words spoken, but an overwhelming sense of calm to placate our troubles. As we walked through the main common area I spotted a pack of bandanna-sporting students and panicked, thrusting us into a random crowd.

“Why are there so many of them?” I hissed, shielding my face.

“I’m curious to find out...” Cesaire said. The agents passed, but the friend group we had hid with gave us strange looks. We laughed awkwardly and ran off, leaping and tumbling through the grassy field until we reached the place where the rest of the group was lounging under the early sunset. Phebah held up a few plastic boxes of dye with bright colors plastered over their covers, while Petra snipped a pair of

scissors towards Archaeus threateningly. He cowered, protecting himself with a canvas bag filled with clothes.

“Hey guys!” Phebah chirped, waving us over. “We went shopping!”

“I can see that,” Cesaire said, peering into the clothes bag.

“Were you successful?” Eurynome asked us.

“Yes,” I said. “We found an empty dormitory that is either still under construction or not ready for use. The site seems safe, however, and it should make for a good temporary headquarters.”

“Excellent. Does it have running water?” Cesaire and I looked at each other guiltily.

“Erm...we sort of forgot to check that,” I admitted. She sighed and shrugged, obviously defeated.

“Nothing I can do about that, I suppose,” she said. “We’ll just have to check when we arrive. If it doesn’t, I’ll find a bathroom where we can do our hair.”

“Do we *all* have to alter our appearance?” I asked, combing my dark hair with my fingers.

“It would be the safest option, but since you’re not directly infiltrating the command center, you can opt out. Just try not to draw attention to yourself tomorrow.”

“Okay...thank you.” The group began to get up, and Cesaire and I started down the footpaths to lead the way.

“I didn’t know you were still so vain in your appearance,” he whispered to me and jabbed my ribs playfully. I rubbed the sore spot and stuck my tongue out at him like a bullied child.

“I happen to have standards for my image, I’ll have you know. Becoming a blond is not included.”

“Agh! Why do you wound me so?” he said dramatically, and pressed his stomach as if he had been pierced by an arrow.

“Oh, come on, you’re a dirty blond at best.” He ruffled my hair and ran away with a resounding laugh.

“And you’re a pretentious git!” He skipped away, his silhouette almost melting into the fiery setting sun that hung low on the horizon ahead of us. Eurynome walked closer beside me.

“You two are getting along well,” she remarked.

“Well, believe it or not, we were fighting just an hour ago.”

“Hah, I *can* believe it.” She motioned her eyes to Cleon and Archaeus walking hand-in-hand behind us. My smile dropped into a frown, but I still nodded politely. We had reached the dorm building anyhow. It had grown rather dark inside with the setting sun, but luckily Petra was able to locate the electrical box and provide us with a dim current of light. The building had plumbing too, and we chose a dorm room across from the upper floor’s bathroom unit. There weren’t any mattresses, blankets, or pillows, so we simply laid our old clothes on the floor, and changed into our new ones to sleep. It wasn’t glamorous by any means, but it was enough.

I sat on my pile of clothes, feeling rather bored, as the others finagled with their hair in the bathroom across the hall. I could hear the spray of water, screeching and boisterous laughing, a few curses, and the aggressive snipping of Petra’s scissors— which she hadn’t allowed another soul to lay their hands upon. I leaned back on my bundled-up tee-shirt, which I was using as a pillow, and stared out the window. The sky was now a deep cloudless violet, but there was still a tangible warmth emanating from the outside. It was a comfortable sort of humidity. The kind that floated off of the ocean streams, that wafted through swaying branches heavy with ripe fruit, that wrapped around your body while you laid in soundless sleep. I ran my fingers over the grooves in the floorboard, tracking dust onto my thumbprints. *You two are getting*

*along well*, I heard Eurynome say somewhere in the back of my mind. I wondered if we were. I wondered if we ever would.

- Cleon -

I shook my hair over the sink, dye dripping into the industrial metal bowl. Eurynome took a ratty shirt we were using as a towel to my head and scrubbed furiously. I lifted my head to look in the mirror. My light whisky curls were stained dark blackberry with an almost purple quality and a bright sheen around the edges. I laughed, astounded.

“Oh my God. I look so different,” I said. Archaeus wrapped his arms around me and lifted me up, kissing the edge of my forehead.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I like it.” I squirmed out his grasp.

“Careful!” I scolded, “you’ll stain your shirt!”

“Ah, I don’t mind.” His own hair was all chopped up, and had been dyed a gentle brown. I couldn’t decide if he looked different or just the same. Petra had made him shave his beard, which left him appearing unusually young. Not much older than Auguste. I pressed my fist to his chest and leaned onto his shoulder.

“Look at you,” I said, “that baby face isn’t doing you any favors.”

“And you’re a dark horse now,” he said. “The outside finally matches the inside!”

“I’m not *that* moody,” I scoffed.

“Hah!” Petra yelped, “yeah, right!” I couldn’t help but laugh as everyone around me seemed so content and entertained. I had missed these people so much. Of course, I had been around them, but it had been ages since we had all been in the same place to complete a mission. There was a comforting familiarity to it, despite the fact we all seemed so different now. Eurynome, once a bright-eyed girl with curly raven hair and a deep tan, was now a pale, line-faced woman with her long hair

hacked into a russet bob. Archaeus, originally a broad-shouldered man with a thick cropping of dark curls, now stood in my arms thinned, aged, and with a tired look in his eyes. Petra had the largest transformation; that slender, uptight, coco-haired girl was gone, instead replaced by a sharp-browed young woman with long amber bangs and an air of maturity and poise. It was so fascinating to see them transform, and deeply tragic all the same. Regardless of how many years of aging we could prevent by jumping through time, I knew we would never live forever.

We arrived at the university the next morning with fresh clothes, new identities, and a mission; albeit less of a plan. I had a few things figured out, but this operation was more of a winging-it situation. Nevertheless, I was sure that we would be successful. We were a team, and we always had been. We worked like a well-oiled machine. *These agents didn't stand a chance*, I affirmed to myself. We walked confidently through the campus, almost like a clique. I knew we must have looked ridiculous, but I felt oddly emboldened by the whole affair. I tugged my crisp white graphic tee down over my acid-washed jeans. It had been a while since I had felt so young. I had never been to university, of course, but I had studied to be a scribe, and that had to count for something.

“Okay,” I said, “here’s the plan to obtain student identification...” that was the first step, and largely simple. All we had to do was figure out where the sports lockers were, sift through them for IDs, and use Petra’s portable camera she towed in her tool bag to take photos of ourselves and paper them over the images presently on the stolen IDs. The group thought it sounded too easy to be true, but they were unaware of how shockingly negligent young adults are. After salvaging enough of them for all of us, I stood, leaned against a pink shower curtain, and stared down at my new identity for the coming day or so.

“Luis Sandoval,” I read aloud. “Huh. What did everyone else get?”

“Maritza Yupanqui,” said Petra.

“Beatriz Molina,” said Eurynome.

“Ernesto Gallardo,” said Archaeus. I stared at my unfamiliar new appearance, my incorrect name. Something itched in the back of my mind, but I swallowed it down.

“What’s next?” Eurynome asked.

“We’ve got to figure out where the command center is,” I said. “The best course of action would likely be faking an allegiance to the agents. It’s my hunch that not all who bear the bandannas are officially employed by the Assembly. They wouldn’t so boldly integrate themselves.”

“I agree with your assessment,” Petra said. “There’s definitely more to the story. Something we’re not seeing. Let’s go.” We left the gymnasium building and made our way across campus to the science wing, where we assumed the command center would be located. When we finally arrived, I noticed a metal detector at the front door.

“What are you going to do about your handgun?” I asked Petra. She reached into her bag, and my eyes widened as she began to pull it out in broad daylight. My panic subsided, however, when it melted into a chrome liquid around her hands, reforming as a metal hairbrush.

“There,” she said primly, “all better.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“You are really spoiled rotten with the technologies of the Assembly.”

“Oh, these aren’t allowed there. I picked it up on my travels. 30th century— mass manipulation as afforded by the particle acceleration alchemy masters. I miss them.”

“Yeah, wow. That sounds fantastic.”

“Anyhow. Mission. Need to focus on that,” she said.

“Right, yes.” We walked through the doors, with Petra placing all her unassuming metal objects in the machine, and allowing us to pass through undetected. It appeared to be the lunch hour, because there was an abundance of students milling around the halls, chatting arm-in-arm, and sitting down to eat. The interior of the building was massive, with huge skylights and vaulted windows filtering bright sunlight onto the concrete floors below. We walked into a circular atrium with a domed ceiling covered by glass, a wrap-around balcony, hundreds of plants giving the rotunda a jungle aesthetic, and little coffee tables and couches tucked away for a place to study or enjoy some food. We perched next to a large orchid tree, sitting on a slatted bench around its base, and Archaeus signaled to a hallway across the plaza from us.

“Agents at 8-O’clock,” he indicated.

“Roger that,” Eurynome said. She strided across the tiled floor, picking up an abandoned coffee cup from a table, and pretended to trip, spilling it over the ground in front of the cohort of bandanna-clad agents.

“Smart girl,” Petra grinned. We watched her apologize voraciously, her hands desperately fluttering around her, and receiving the desired prize— a helping hand from one of the agents. They launched into some conversation we couldn’t hear, and it went on for a while. We observed intently, and I gripped Archaeus’s hand to settle my nerves.

“C’mon Eurynome....” I whispered through gritted teeth.

“She’ll get it,” he reassured me. “She’s a people-pleaser at heart.” Just as he said this I watched as the girl she had been conversing with reached into her purse, pulled out a turquoise cloth, and tied it around Eurynome’s bowed head. It settled onto her bob perfectly, giving her an

unusually youthful appearance. Eurynome smiled and poked her thumb in our direction. I laughed, squeezing Archaeus's hand gleefully.

"Hey guys," she said innocently as she strolled over with the group of agents. "I was just talking to these girls. They so kindly helped me with my spilled coffee when I was being *such* a klutz, and you'll never believe what they told me." I blinked as absent-mindedly as I could manage.

"And...what's that?" I asked.

"They're a part of this just *fascinating* campus organization, and they've offered to let us join. You know those bandannas everyone's wearing? Well, we were so ignorant, we thought it was only a passing fashion statement! Turns out it's anything but."

"We're a personal development collective," one of the agents chirped cheerfully. Her smile was stretched unnaturally over deep red lipstick, and she clutched a clipboard in one arm as she stuck out a hand for me to shake. I took it, and her manicured nails clawed into my palm as we shook. "Charmed to meet you," she said. "I'm Valeria, a representative of the Assembly. And you are?" I nearly choked on my own breath.

"Uh— the Assembly?" I sputtered, "is that what you said?"

"Yes. That is the name of our organization." I cleared my throat and swallowed back any other comments I had.

"That's very...cool," Petra managed to say.

"Amazing," Valeria said, her voice hollow. "Just tell me your names for organizational purposes and I'll hand you some bandannas and brochures. Assuming you'd like to begin a trial membership."

"Yes— of course!" Petra said, and we all hurriedly agreed. I squinted at the student ID hanging from a lanyard on my neck.

“Er, I’m Luis,” I said. “Luis Sandoval.” She scribbled my false name onto her clipboard, and the rest of us reported their stolen identities as well.

“Fantastic,” she quipped. Another agent dug into her travel bag and distributed packets to all of us. They offered us a final round of plastic smiles and strode off, leaving us with the disguises we needed.

“What the Hell is going on here?” I said as soon as they were out of earshot.

“I’m not sure,” Eurynome said in a hushed tone, “but we definitely need to find out. Put those bandannas on, hopefully nobody will question it.”

“There could be secret passwords and the like,” Petra pointed out.

“Well, this is our best bet. What other choice do we have?” There was an air of agreement between us, and we migrated out of the main atrium and into the winding halls of the science facilities. We were greeted by mid-day sun shining through glossy window panes, stark white doors, and a speckled pearly floor. Ever so often we passed a cohort of students, but they paid us no mind, our disguises ultimately working. We roamed up and down staircases suspended in tangled metal, through open causeways, and right by more nook n’ cranny coffee shops than should be reasonable. Eventually, however, we hit our target— a small cluster of bandana-clad students donning white lab coats. Petra curled her finger at us, dragging us into the crook of a hallway. We watched the students begin to unlatch a locked stairwell.

“What do we do?” Archaeus whispered hastily.

“I think—” Petra began, “I think we just have to go for it.” She bolted out of our hiding spot and approached the unsuspecting group. I cringed before anything happened, but it seemed my preemptive reaction was for nought. The students at the door didn’t so much as bat an eye. I

got up from my hunched position and casually strolled over to join Petra. Eurynome and Archaeus followed me closely.

“Headed to the lab?” one of the students said, rocking on his heels. I nodded dumbly, and I could see Archaeus doing the same in my peripheral vision.

“Yup!” Petra confirmed, just as the magnetic lock clicked, and the door swung open to reveal a concrete staircase. We began to descend, and I couldn’t deny the way my nerves were racing. The stairs opened up into a tight and chilly subterranean basement hallway lit by naked fluorescent fixtures swinging on wires. There weren’t any doors, and we quickly pivoted at the end corner to reveal a troubling vintage cage elevator. We all loaded in without a second word, and we were packed like tinned sardines. One of the students punched a key with her knuckle, and the contraption jostled, rocking to life. We began to descend into the dark chute, the only sound the rattling of the cables.

“So...” Eurynome said awkwardly, after it felt like we had been in the elevator for an abnormal amount of time, “what’s the plan for today?”

“Oh,” one of the students replied, “just the usual, I think. I mean, I don’t know what you’re heading down for, but I’m submitting my weekly tithe.”

“You’re submitting your *what* now?” Eurynome cut in. I shot her a pointed glare, as if to telepathically communicate: *Don’t ask suspicious questions!*

“Err, you know,” the student helpfully supplied, “to the Assembly? Our student body government?” My eyes nearly bulged out of my head. I stared at Archaeus, now attempting to relay a very different message. *That’s what they think the Assembly is? What the Hell is going on here?*

“Oh, right, right, yeah,” Eurynome coughed, “how could I forget?” The elevator grinded to a halt, destabilizing my stance, and causing me to fall onto Archaeus behind me. I tipped my chin up at him and he grinned down at me. I shoved him off, hiding my smitten smile behind a glare. The woven iron grate doors slid open and let us spill out into a blinding white compound.

“This is a very...clandestine operation,” Eurynome remarked to the same student from before.

“First time down?” she clarified.

“Um, just about.” She quickly gestured to us. “But my friends are regulars.”

“Well, you’ll get along just fine. Anyone who’s eyes have been opened to the god-ways of time is a friend of mine.” Eurynome blinked. Hard.

“Excuse me?” she said, but the girl had already wandered off into the steady stream of Assembly adherents filling the hallway. I shrugged and patted Eurynome on the shoulder sympathetically.

“Let’s just do what we do best now, shall we?” I suggested. She smirked and then broke into a smile. “Atta girl,” I said. We fell inconspicuously into the crowd, navigating the current adeptly and discreetly. The large majority seemed to be pouring into a room labeled *DEPOSITS*, but a smaller portion, identified with lanyards, were entering the entrance to the *EXPERIMENTS* wing.

“How much do you wanna bet that’s our ticket?” Petra said.

“How much do you want to bet we don’t have a chance at gaining access?” Eurynome countered glumly.

“Don’t *worry*,” Petra reassured her, “I’ve *got this*.”

“You clearly cannot just walk through with an aura of confidence, Petra. So, don’t even try it. Okay?”

“What’s a reward without a little risk?” She grinned. Eurynome pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned.

“Always ruining our lives, you are,” she sighed.

“Oh come on, Nomi, be reasonable.”

“*I’m* the one being unreasonable? And don’t call me that!” By that time, we were clogging up traffic, so Archaeus quickly intervened by stepping between them.

“Alright ladies, let’s break it up. We have a mission at hand, and I think I might have the solution to our dilemma.” Petra sighed dramatically.

“What,” she said, sounding deliberately bored.

“Our classic,” he explained with starry eyes. “The insistent deliverymen.”

“Oh good lord,” I groaned. Eurynome did the same, but Petra jumped up and down, clapping her hands gleefully.

“Now you’re speaking my language!” she laughed. She spun around with a determined look hard-set on her face. “Let’s do this.” I swallowed a laugh of mock-annoyance and followed her overly-confident lead to the entrance of the wing. She walked straight on through, not a care in the world. She held up her bag and nodded, pointing to it as if that explained anything. I balked, but the guards didn’t seem to blink an eye. We followed her with our chins raised high.

“Delivery, delivery coming through,” Archaeus announced, waving his arms to clear the space. One of the guards placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. I internally cursed.

“What delivery requires such an entourage?” the guard questioned.

“Why, we’re locksmiths!” Archaeus answered pleasantly. “Everyone knows that a good locksmith always brings backup. You never know how many doors you need to fix, and how complicated their

mechanisms might be. Don't worry, we'll be in and out." The guard narrowed his eyes, but his coworkers already looked bored and concerned with some other issue, so he lifted his hand from Archaeus's shoulder and let him pass. We waltzed into the wing, our pace a touch too fast and a bit too eager.

"That was close," Eurynome sighed.

"We always pull through, though, don't we?" Petra replied chipperly.

"Wait— look," I interrupted, my eye caught by two large bolted doors at the end of the hallway. A scientist-looking fellow was just exiting them, carrying a thick binder peppered with bookmarks and tabs. "We should check that out," I said. The scientist-ish man stopped in front of us.

"Check what out?" he asked innocuously.

"Err—that room?" Eurynome said, panicking. I gritted my teeth.

"Oh, are you new recruits?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, precisely!" I cut in. "We're uh— we're recently committed members. We were told we could begin our work at the facilities as soon as possible. Is that...so?" The man scratched his goatee thoughtfully and nodded.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "We could always use a helping hand 'round here. I was just leaving for my lunch break, but I could show you around a little bit. My boss should have more time to assign you a task."

"Oh, wow!" I said, "that would be lovely, thank you."

"Yeah, sure." He led us through the heavy-duty steel doors, which opened up into the second-story mezzanine of a large laboratory. The floor below us was crawling with agents and science-types, some clad in lab coats, others dressed much more informally. They hovered around desks, argued over results displaying on large monitor screens, and pushed carts carrying vials of unidentifiable liquids; among other things.

The man beckoned us down a metal spiral staircase and into an office situated under the overhang of the balcony.

“Here’s my boss’s space,” he said. “I’ve got to run, but if you need any help, my name’s Victor and I work on the floor.”

“Luis,” I said, and shook his hand. Victor rapped on the window of the office, “Geni!” he yelled, “I’ve got some freshies without a job to do!” He gave us an encouraging thumbs-up and darted off, leaving us standing in front of the dark window, awaiting the mysterious ‘Geni.’ There was a lapse of silence, and then a voice from the other side of the door beckoned us inside.

“Come in,” I heard the voice say. It was uptight and husky, the voice of a woman who had been around the block— or the cigarette, rather. We followed the voice into the office— a dark, meager space lit by a flickering lamp. At the desk sat a frazzled middle-age woman in an ill-fitting suit.

“Hello?” I said cautiously. She waved her hand, drawing us closer.

“Come, come,” she said, assuring us. “I had no idea there were new workers arriving today, I’m so sorry, I’m just a bit—err.” She adjusted her glasses and sat upright with a lopsided grin bordering on a frown. “Nothing’s wrong!” she yelled.

“I’m...sure everything is fine,” Eurynome assured her. “Still, we’re happy to help in any way we can.” Geni gulped and combed her fingers through her frizzy hair.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “So, what do you already know?”

“Umm...” Eurynome stalled.

“This is a dependency of the Assembly,” Petra cut in. “You employ students of the university to execute whatever tasks you need to do.”

“Yes, exactly,” Geni confirmed, her shoulders relaxing. “Now, no need to be humble, but I assume you joined because of...the Power. Or perhaps, whatever the student government told you the power was. Their grip on the student body is immeasurable, always scooping up innocents like the lot of you.” She descended into talking to herself. “Although, I suppose if you’ve been promoted to work in the lab, you must be somewhat competent...oh, but then we are preparing for—ah.” She shook her head and refocused herself. “Excuse me, I may be running this operation, but I still have my own deadlines, I must admit it’s not doing wonders for my focus.” She shuffled around with a large stack of paper on her desk and handed a few to Petra and Eurynome.

“What are these?” Eurynome asked.

“They’re company maps. Helps you get around the compound.” She slid her glasses up her nose and squinted at the computer monitor emanating soft blue light onto her face. “Ah,” she said, “it looks like we need some lab assistants to handle waste disposal. Seems like they’re firing up the machine in a few hours. It’s a temporary position, but it’s what I can do for you right now.”

“The machine?” asked Petra.

“It channels the power,” Geni smirked. “It’s how we access the time rift this place is built upon. How we...make extraordinary contact. You know.” Petra’s eyes nearly fell out of her head at the mention of time, and I sneezed rather violently to cover my surprise.

“Oh, oh, wow,” Petra stuttered, “that’s lovely, thank you.”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” Geni said, shrugging. “All of you spring chickens are obsessed with the Power, aren’t you?” She stared at us. “You may be dismissed,” she said, “use the maps I gave you to find the lab. Don’t dilly-dally, they haven’t got all day.”

“Oh, uh, right,” I said apologetically. “Thank you, Madame Geni, thank you.” She raised a brow at the superlative I used, but said nothing of it, simply waving us off.

“Yes, I’m quite generous, now off you get.” I gave one last bow of thanks before we swiftly exited her office. As soon as we were a good distance out of earshot we all stared at each other, jaws dropped, and joined hands, screaming with frantic joy and confusion.

“I think we got what we came here for!” Petra exclaimed.

“It’s a tad insane though, isn’t it?” Archaeus said. “I thought they’d come up with some other front to take advantage of these civilians . Never in a million years did I believe...”

“...That they’d use the draw of mystical time-control prowess as a recruitment tactic for brunt work?” I supplied. “Neither did I!”

“It’s astounding,” Eurynome agreed, “but now we’ve got a shot and we have to take it. It looks like this place isn’t very well-led and organized right now. Perhaps due to the growing instability of the timeline, and the pressing deadline of the end of the world? Well, whatever it is, we’ve got to act.” She unfurled her map and beckoned us down a hallway, “Come on, I think it’s this way. There’s also a PPE station on the way we should take advantage of. Don’t want to look any more suspicious than we already do.”

We quietly entered the station and suited up in crisp white lab coats, tinted goggles, and latex gloves ranging in color from lilac to chartreuse. My eye was, of course, drawn to Archaeus in his new disguise. The way his broad shoulders fit snugly into the coat-seams, the way its hem trailed just above his knees, the way his hands looked so defined in the too-small gloves. I wanted to tell him about it, to kiss him maybe, but I resigned myself to an abashed glance instead. It was these moments that made me long for simplicity. For the off-chance that one day we wouldn’t be lying and manipulating our way into the bowels of an underground

labyrinth in an impossibly far-off century and city. For the possibility that we might eventually forget this ever happened, and find purchase in the elysian pasture of our company.

The tranquil illusion of my silent pining was broken when I heard Eurynome's voice in my ear, announcing that we had arrived at the lab. I blinked, looking over my shoulder, and realized I had been daydreaming down the entire length of the hall. The lab doors were opening, and I stepped through, suddenly feeling impossibly small. The people inside were like worker ants—roaming around huge mechanisms roaring with raw energy, stressing and fussing over piles of paperwork, and arguing over minutia written across switchboards and punch cards. There were machinists, and chemists, and electricians, and philosophers, and all of the sorry coffee-toting interns darting between them in a flurry of messy ponytails and half-tied sneakers.

I carefully approached a huddle of young men and women staring at a large control panel towards the center of the room.

"Excuse me?" I said, beckoning their attention. "My associates and I are new recruits? We've been summoned to assist—"

"—The editing command process," Petra cut in, her silver tongue easily leaning into her useful lie.

"You're aware of that?" one of the researchers asked with a suspicious glance.

"We're very qualified on the matter, I assure you," Petra replied. "And we have specific clearance from Madame Geni— who I believe is your foreman here?"

"I suppose you could call her that—"

"Great. Show us to our station?" Petra tapped her foot and crossed her arms impatiently, which quickly prompted the researchers to assemble and rally around us. They beckoned us over to a row of desks lined with computer monitors.

“Listen, we’re kind of in a crunch and we don’t have much time for orientation, so we’re just going to need you to monitor data,” the researcher who had directed us over said. They gestured to a sleek contraption slotted into what seemed to resemble an old school wire telephone hook. “Those are interfacers,” they quickly explained. “You can use them to access timeline data, such as where one might appear in the continuum. Your job is to make sure the data incoming on the monitors doesn’t cross the designated threshold. If it does, use the interfacer to identify the anomaly and contact us.” They folded their hands over their lap, satisfied. “You got all that?”

“Yeah, think so,” I replied with a plastic smile.

“Great. Appreciate you...new recruits...filling in on such short notice.” They glanced around and leaned down to briefly brush their lips to my ear. “We’re approaching a very dire situation here, and I assume you aren’t new recruits at all, but I can’t handle another stressor right now, so I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt.” They leaned up and as they walked away made very pointed eye contact, mouthing ‘*don’t fuck it up*’. My eyes widened in tacit fear and I nodded as they faded away into the maze of technology and white-coated 20-somethings. Archaeus itched his neck and leaned over to my station.

“What was that about?”

“Err...” I stalled, my eyes flickering over the low divider of my cube. “It means I have a plan, but we need to be as calm as possible,” I said, my voice dropping down to a near-unintelligible level. “Do the work, make sure the girls do it too. We’ll leave when everyone else does.” He gulped, but nodded in confirmation.

“Okay. I trust you.” I smiled and felt the light hovering touch of his fingers snaking over mine. I resisted the implicit urge to stare down at our intertwined hands, but my skin buzzed with confidence just feeling it. I peered at the flashing blue screen, but was met with only an endless

scroll of numbers— raw data I had no idea how to read. I was a field agent after all, not an accountant. I sighed, tapping my fingers on the desk. Archaeus eyed me, and I knew the sound annoyed him, but I needed to think. Chewing on a pen, I traced my hands over the sides of the computer, searching for any hidden functions.

It wasn't until a cloud passed, illuminating a bright shaft of sun onto my face, that I saw the grooves etched into the side of the monitor's chalk-white case. My eyes narrowed, then slowly grew. I peeled up my sleeve, peering down at the slightly faded sharpie markings staining my inner wrist. I flicked back and forth between them, but the symbol was exactly the same. It was the 'Sacrifice In Fire' Protocol. This facility was, without a doubt, editing the timeline in accordance to the ripple effects of Zenobie's existence. We were, mercilessly, unfortunately, terribly, correct.

"Archaeus," I hissed through my teeth, tugging on his sleeve. "Look at this."

"What are y— oh." His breath caught as he checked his own computer for the image, revealing the same thing. He quickly alerted Petra and Eurynome, careful not to speak loud enough to alarm the other workers. I caught their eyes, nodding to confirm what they now already knew.

"This is the island location..." I whispered, if not to anyone but myself. "They're prepared to end it all..." We knew the Assembly was editing Zenobie's location in the timeline to trigger a collapse of spacetime. Still, the true question weighed heavy over all of us. I could almost hear it sounding throughout the room. *But...why?*

### XXIII: Césaire

I peeked over the edge of my flimsy paperback (which I had snatched from the free clearance table of a bookshop down the road), and observed Auguste and Phebah clinking tall glasses of lucuma milkshakes together, their mouths open in laughter. I flicked my eyes over the yellowed, faded pages of my book, but I couldn't read a thing. Not in earnest, at least. It was some tale about the scum of the Earth—the needy, the poor, and the destitute, rising from the ashes of an apocalypse and joining themselves in a new utopia. I found it torturous in its meandering philosophical quandaries, but I assumed it would fascinate Auguste's inquisitive mind. Its pointed critiques and allegories of the Church didn't make me any more comfortable with it, either.

*Revolution will free society of its afflictions, while science will free the individual of his.*

I rolled my eyes at the line and set the book down on the metal-slatted cafe table, the pages folding into themselves. I sighed with one finger to my temple and let my gaze trawl across the scenery. The sun was wandering wistfully through the heavy canopy of trees lining the idyllic city street we had perched ourselves on. Their leaves made a steady rustling noise that blended perfectly with the rumbling of streetcars on the cobblestone. I breathed deeply, inhaling a mixture of pollen, cocoa powder, and gasoline—the scents of a restaurant district in early summer. *Nearly reminiscent of home.* At that thought I bit my thumb and slumped back in my chair, looking into the cafe through its wide storefront window. Murky shapes milled about inside, unassuming figures floating through their day. I heard the door swing open, jangling

the bell hanging in its frame, and watched the remaining members of our party step into view, cradling brown paper bags stamped with the café logo in their arms.

“Any luck?” Auguste asked them, his lips wrapped around his striped straw like an incredulous child.

“None,” K’ayyhltla answered, sliding into a chair at the table across from me, with Melem-Iram joining her silently.

“That’s unfortunate. Those laundry women must’ve given us a faulty lead...”

“We could’ve simply gone to the wrong café,” Phebah suggested.

“Could be...” he mused hesitantly. “Or perhaps we’re not supposed to be asking how we’ve been asking.”

“Curious tourists wondering about a city’s youth subculture isn’t the *worst* defense we could’ve come up with,” Phebah assured him.

“No, but it could be better.” He picked at his nails, locked in thought.

“...I have an idea,” I volunteered with a half-raised hand. He perked up at the sound of my voice, a smile painted on his lips.

“Of course,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s hear it.”

“We play ourselves as locals,” I explained, “but not just *any* locals. A truer degree to who we are— detectives.” I grinned, satisfied with myself. “The law is not to be trifled with, no matter where or when you are. We’ll sell ourselves as representatives of the private sector being licensed out, and hope that the good folk of Lima don’t sweat the details.”

“It could be worth a shot,” he muttered.

“I’d make a good muscle,” Melem-Iram agreed.

“I’ve been a cop before, anyways,” said K’ayyhltla. I chose not to question that. Instead, I jumped out of my chair and combed my hair back slickly like the suave main character of a pulpy noir flick.

“Put on your most dashing faces, my friends,” I said. “To the streets we fly, with our lies towering, but our mission true.” Auguste shook his head and slotted an arm around my shoulder.

“Leave the poetry to me, my dear boy,” he said in a mock-mentor voice cut with gruff laughter. His smile sweetened and he leaned in, nearly toppling me over. “But it’s a good idea, nevertheless.” He ruffled my hair and swayed off, taking a sly sip from his glass. His brows raised casually above his crooked sunglasses. I coughed and pretended to flick a very interesting piece of lint from the shoulder of my jacket.

“Um, thanks,” I said and crossed my arms. “I guess.” He snapped his fingers and grinned, setting his milkshake jar onto the nearest table.

“Great,” he said. “I say we wander the streets— the real ones. Get into the soft underbelly of this city. See what lies dormant to our eyes.” I hugged myself and attempted to ignore my jittering foot as the others went inside to pay. For some merciless reason, Phebah had decided to go with them, which left him and I alone. Again. I tossed my head back, scanning the clouds for patterns. He leaned against a table and itched his wrist. We ignored each other so much that the act of ignoring became a presence itself.

“Eurynome was right, you know,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“About us getting along,” he elaborated. “We should do it. More often, that is.” He pulled at his shirt’s neckline awkwardly. “Are we alright? Today? I never know what it’s going to be...”

“Oh,” I said, my voice cracking embarrassingly. I cleared my throat with a fist to my chest. “Yeah. We’re great.” I shuffled my feet. “Auguste, I—”

“Let’s do this shit!” Phebah wailed like a coked-out rockstar, unceremoniously interrupting our conversation. I brushed my curls out

of my face and stood to attention, still feeling oddly weak in the knees. Auguste and I broke eye contact.

“Err, yeah,” I agreed, saluting Phebah’s enthusiasm. She saluted me in return, although hers was executed with two fingers and a sailor’s swagger. It was from there that we began our miniature journey into the heart of Lima. It was in my faded memory that Peru had only been recently reinstated as its own nation separate from Bolivia in my time. That had been the extent of my knowledge. Perhaps if I had known this would happen to me I would’ve done more diligent research. *If only I had known*, I sighed to myself as we turned into a crowded marketplace. The atmosphere in the inner streets was peculiar. The walkways were still clean, but no longer sparse, instead being cramped with a random assortment of people, all in various states of vagabounding.

Odder still was the thematic impression of this neighborhood. One of ancient tales woven in with a modern doomsday attitude. I saw an old woman draped in colorful cloth heralding the end times on a street corner, believers huddled around her like a flock of fools. Religious iconography was tacked on every door, in each window, and painted on every wall from stucco to exposed brick. Portraits of the Virgin Mary, haloed saints, and even folk icons I did not recognize, were all portrayed in various states of highly-adorned idolatry. Young men and women lined up outside of an open-air shop in the bazaar touting the sale of weapons. I saw a boy brandishing a gold-plated rifle, while a girl appearing to be his sister or cousin ran her soft fingers over the edge of a sheathed machete. She quickly drew it from its casing, and it glinted in the high-noon sun, catching my eye. I saw the unmistakable emblem of a Catholic cross painted in deep reds and golds upon its blade. Never had I thought I would see an instrument of death dedicated to God in such an overt manner. It made my stomach flip.

“This is...strange,” I said plainly.

“That’s putting it mildly,” K’ayhlta commented. “Look, they’re all wearing bandanas. Some of them are veils, but it’s the same hue.”

“Looks like we’ve stumbled into the nest,” Auguste said. I glanced over at him— he was smiling. *Smiling!* I crossed my arms.

“Disperse,” K’ayhlta instructed quietly, “but do it carefully. Don’t appear so excited,” she directed to Auguste, “and maybe drop the detective act,” she told me. I frowned, disappointed, but let it slide.

“This is more than I was expecting us to handle,” she said. Auguste took my hand and guided us into the chaos of the crowd. Children ran past my knees, bargainers and hagglers heckled with each other— each raising their voice higher than the next— and my senses were overwhelmed with a spice from every corner of the globe. While Auguste immediately started questioning any local he could coax into a conversation, I kept my eyes trained on the details. The herbs hanging in bunches from rafters, the medallions jangling on school bags, the rusted statues in the center of the square raising their fists to the empty sky, the laughter, the car horns, the yelling, the crying, the chatting, the gossiping, the—

“Wait,” I said darkly, holding my hand out to stop Auguste. “What is that?” He retracted from a lively engagement with a young paperstand seller and turned to look at what I was pointing at. A mural, painted on the large facade of a cathedral. The paint blended in with the gothic spires, the large circular window, even the vaulted door. What it dedicated, however, made my heart stop.

“Is that— are they—” Auguste struggled to say. My mouth grew dry and my tongue heavy as I spoke.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I think...I think that’s a very large, very religious painting...of...us.” We looked up at the art on display. It was plain to see. A shining city on a hill, a bastion of safety across the perils of time and space, peeking out from a sea of flames— no doubt Lima itself

judging by the accentuated skyline. On one side, two young men and a woman, each draped in a Greek chiton. The first, a man with amber curls, clutching a scroll in his right hand and a spear in his left. The other man, dark-haired and taller, carried a blazing torch. The woman was empty-handed. Her palms faced outward and she donned a crown of grapevines. I blinked.

The image was mirrored on the other side of the flame-sea. The same first amber-haired man with a thick tome tucked under one arm and his other held steadfast on the shoulder of the same tall man from the other side of the mural— except now he had longer, looser hair, and was dressed in a formal blouse. He carried a quill and brush, the tools of an artist. The woman was no longer empty-handed. She appeared younger, more spirited, somehow, and clad in a deep fuschia evening gown. She cradled a vase in her arms. Over each of the six figures' heads was the bright yellow circle that wreathed the temples of idols, of saints.

As if by some instinct, I wetted my mouth, took a careful step forward, and set my hand upon Auguste's shoulder. He looked at me, open-mouthed, down to my hand, and back up to my eyes, all in one uncomfortable second. I swallowed, and nodded, affirming my intent. We turned around, a perfect reflection of the faces staring down at us. Except, those weren't the only stares we were getting. The ocean of market-browsers, sellers, beggars, pick-pocketers, and church-goers had begun to slow and gather around us. They closed in, inching closer and closer. We stepped backward, my hand sliding down to catch Auguste's hand. I tilted my head at him, attempting to communicate. *What do we do?*

“By God,” a frail voice swam out of the crowd. I swung my gaze down, meeting it with a small old woman hunched over a gnarled cane. I recognized her as the woman with her wizened hands to the sky, cursing life and heralding death to those streetcorner doomsday acolytes. “By

God,” she said again, now addressing the crowd, “they have come! By God, they have come!” The crowd murmured, rippled, and roared. The old hag pointed a crooked finger at us, as if marking our heads with death itself. “They come in our hour of need! As the fire boils the underside of the city, as the power mounts to its zenith, as we are all cut as stalks from the rotting field, the prophesied martyrs herald us into the dawn light!” She thrashed her head back and slammed her cane into the ground, leading the maddening masses in a chant. “Praise! Praise! Praise!” Auguste stared at me with wide eyes.

“What the *fuck* is happening,” he said dumbfoundedly.

“I have no idea. But we need to leave this place. Now.” He nodded and in an instant bolted into the cathedral, pulling me with him.

“Woah!” I yelped as I was dragged through the pews.

“I was wrong to let us come here!” he yelled as he jumped over the altar. “We should’ve stuck to protocol!”

“How were we to foresee ourselves as the subject of a cult!?” I yelled back, dodging a stack of communion wafer boxes in the back room of the church. He shook his head and we broke through the backdoor into a new street. *Shit*, I thought, seeing the swarm was already rounding the corner.

“Why-y-y are we always being chased,” I cried.

“We’re irresistible!”

“Au-u-u-gh.” The city began to swell with activity, and we seemed to be its beacon. Heads turned on dimes, voices squawked and barked, hands reached out to grab fistfuls or pinches.

“It’s them!” shrieks came from the windows of apartments and bellies of cellars, “It’s the omens! They’ve come!” There didn’t seem to be a single skeptic in the city. Eventually, we caught up with Melem-Iram and K’ayyhltla again, but we were stranded across a small urban pedestrian bridge with a mass of people between us. It spanned a

concrete canal filled with discarded belongings and street dwellings. I jumped up and down, waving my arms to get their attention.

“Over here! Come on!” K’ayyhltla’s eyes darted around, searching for a way out, and she soon caught it. She met my gaze and nodded firmly. I watched astonished as she hiked her boots over the side of the railing and slid down the slope into the canal. As soon as the crowd realized what was happening, they followed her, tumbling over the bridge with far less poise than she did. I winced, seeing some of them land on the hard ground in less-than natural positions. K’ayyhltla began dashing up the other side of the canal, with Melem-Iram taking wide swings at any of the hungry hands daring to pull her back down into the trenches. I crouched on the side of the dip, extending my hand.

“Grab on!” I instructed. She grunted in response, her fingers digging into the rough surface of the concrete, the tips blooming with bruises. Just as our hands were poised to meet, her back foot slipped, and she dipped back into the ravine, causing Melem-Iram to go tumbling behind her. A street urchin, who was perched under a multi-colored tarp lined with bells, lurched out of the shade, wrapping their arms around her ankles.

“The omens are mine!” they shrieked, their nails digging into K’ayyhltla’s bare skin. She hardly seemed bothered, and shook the beggar off with ease.

“Scram!” she yelled. Her feet dug into the ground, she jumped in place once, twice, three times, and bolted up the slant, leaping fully over the rail and sending herself tumbling onto the ground. She grunted, dusting herself off and leaned back over the railing to offer a hand to Melem-Iram. He finished twisting an arm and let his poor victim’s body drop to the ground. It wasn’t a chore for him to get out of the canal either.

“Jesus,” Auguste muttered as soon as both of them were standing tall in front of us, barely having broken a sweat.

“Yeah, what the hell,” I said. Then, suddenly being struck with my mind’s omission, I gasped. “Wait, where’s Phebah?”

“Oh,” Auguste said, nudging me, “I thought you noticed her.” I followed his finger to the gilded roof of a nearby building. She was crouched under a large antenna, connecting a thick wire to a small device mounted on her waist.

“What the—”

“She’s contacting our counterparts,” K’ayyhltla explained.

“Not just a pretty face, is she now?” Auguste smiled.

“I never said she was,” I mumbled, rubbing my arms. We took a roundabout way through the mob to get to Phebah— down two alleys, through an apartment, and up a fire escape. When we got there she was listening intently to someone’s garbled voice on the other side of a small headset. The bright sky beat the sun down upon us from our rooftop vantage point, and the wind was far more blustery six stories up.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“Petra,” she answered, adjusting a dial on the device in her hand. “They found the symbol. They’ve infiltrated the university, but they can’t leave without blowing their cover.”

“Tell them they have to!” K’ayyhltla said, shaking her head.

“Err, alright.” Phebah slipped the headset over her ear. “You have to get out of there, I don’t care how. You’re all professionals, please just...” she looked to K’ayyhltla for guidance, receiving none, “...think of something.” She sighed, running her fingers through her coiled hair. “We can’t stay here long, we’re going to need to advance to the university and rendezvous at the dormitory.” Just as soon as she said that, I heard the clanging of hundreds of bells sounding metallic tones across the city. My

head shot up, and I was met with the sight of alarming red flashing from every light source I could see.

“What the...” Phebah immediately dove into her headset.

“Do you know what’s happening?” she asked them urgently. She nodded a few times, uttering confirmations *uh huh, yup, okay, mhm, yeah*. She dropped the device, letting it clatter to the roof, and quickly unplugged the wire from the antenna. “We have to leave,” she said. “Now.”

“What’s happened?” Auguste asked.

“The Assembly is onto us. They’ve disabled time travel privileges in this slice of space time.”

“Shit!” K’ayyhltla cursed, throwing her head back in frustration.

“There’s no time for that,” Phebah chided, “we just have to leave. The others will meet us there and we’ll sort this out, I promise.”

“Okay,” she said, and we were off. The University was eight blocks away, and all public transit had been disabled across the city. Our faces began to flicker across the holographic screens that floated above every building, and panic infected Lima like a plague.

“It’s over!” I heard a young woman scream, “we’re going to burn!”

“No, we won’t!” her friend assured her, shaking her shoulders, “we have the power on our side! They can save us!”

“It was foreseen!” another voice interrupted, a businessman running past with his papers flying in a flurry around him.

“Good lord,” I said to myself. Auguste heard me and clasped my hand in his reassuringly.

“Now, go,” Phebah said, and we bolted out of the shadows of the alley we were hiding to and into the bustling street. We jumped in front of a car hurtling down the street, and it swerved, honking at us furiously. The remainder of the journey was similarly arduous— plenty of

stealthily, sprinting, and screaming. Nevertheless, we managed to arrive on the University campus relatively unharmed. Instead of the unbridled chaos unfolding in the surrounding city, the University was well-organized, focused, and strictly locked down. We reached our hold-out in the dorm by sneaking beneath the road behind it through a large drainage pipe that emptied into the construction site. My shoes were muddied by the mountain of dirt kicked up by the machinery, but we managed to make it inside undetected.

I pulled the thin curtains of our room back and peered at the scene outside. There were ranks of agents patrolling the campus in waves, and we would no doubt be discovered soon enough. I sighed raggedly and slumped down the wall. I felt defeatist, and my stomach was queasy.

“Where are they?” I asked nervously, chewing my thumb.

“They’ll be here,” Auguste reassured me, holding out his hand. I took it gratefully, and we sat next to each other in joined silence. Phebah paced back and forth, anxiously toying with the dials on her device

“We’re a bit closer to the source now,” she said, “but I’m still struggling to catch a strong enough signal. They must be underground or something...”

“They need to be above ground!” I cried with my head in my hands.

“Be patient,” K’ayyhltla snapped. I sobered at that and sat up, adjusting the hem of my shirt self-consciously.

“Oh, wait!” Phebah said, stopping her anxiety-ridden pacing. “I’m getting something!” She leaned her ear into the device and turned the dial ever-so-slightly. Loud fuzzy static melted into a faint voice—Cleon.

“—On our way,” I heard the transmission say, “we might— a solution— time stasis— don’t move— soon.” Phebah grinned and pumped her fist in success.

“Thank God,” I shuddered, but hearing the rising swell of voices outside, I silently prayed for them to hurry. Finally, mercifully, they burst through the filmy cork door, rushing to huddle around a bulky metallic object in Cleon’s hand.

“What is—” Auguste began to ask, but Cleon interrupted him.

“It’s called an interfacer. We can use it to finally search for Zenobie’s location. It will take some time though, time we don’t have.” He dug into Petra’s bag and pulled out our rag-tag temporal phaser. “Since time travel is locked down, we’re going to need to jailbreak the phaser.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding.

“There’s one issue— the jailbroken controls are completely unpredictable. We could be sent anywhere. It will cease to be functional, it’ll be a random escape that we can only truly risk to take once.”

“Well, shit,” I cursed.

“Yeah, that,” Phebah agreed. Petra shook her head and snatched the phaser out of his hand.

“We have to do it,” she asserted. “We don’t have any other choice.”

“Perhaps we should think about this?” Eurynome urged

“*No time.*”

“But—”

“I said there’s no time!”

“Petra—”

“Stop resisting!”

“Shut up! Both of you!” Archaeus’s sharp voice interrupted. Both women’s heads turned to him, their faces betraying their shock. Eurynome blushed and stood down, allowing Petra to have the floor. Before she could speak, however, the sound of fists banging upon the downstairs doors echoed through the building, and we froze.

“It’s now or never, Petra,” Cleon said, his eyes wide. She inhaled and turned the object over in her hands, letting the metal cool her callouses. Then, she pulled a silvery tool out of her sleeve and popped open the electrical panel on its outer body. The liquid of her instrument weaved its way into the copper and steel, infecting and corroding every criss-cross. There was a fizzing sound and a bright light like magnesium, and it was done. She tugged on her lower lip and held the phaser up to her eye, rolling it between her fingers.

“So,” she said, “who wants to give it a whirl?” The sound of footsteps on the staircase added a harsh underscore of urgency to her question. Cleon nodded, his mind made up, and snatched the device from her hands.

“Circle up,” he instructed. The noises reached the start of the hall. One by one, doors were being kicked open and rooms were being ripped apart by the ruthless pack of students sacked upon us. We joined hands. The sounds reached the room next to us. Cleon brought the phaser to life. A boot pounded on our door, causing dust and silt to fall from the ceiling. We closed our eyes. The door was busted open. I opened my eyes for a flicker of a second, catching the image of a hoard in motion, and then the light swallowed everything. Once again, in that hovel of a room, we were gone.

## XXIV: Auguste

The sun wavered on the horizon, casting midday mirages and mixing with the salty Atlantic air, an overwhelming potion of senses. We had been walking for ages, our feet stumbling and catching on rouge rocks that jutted out of the crude sand-blasted path. The land here was so flat and the sky was so bright that it felt like walking through a void. Finally, through my squinted eyes, I saw a blotch of color in the distance. An oasis in the wasteland. I picked up my pace and jogged down the rolling dune. The blotch was a singular structure— a flimsy shack made from muddied stone and driftwood. A few colorful linens danced in the heavy breeze out front, and I saw a small figure hunched near a dug-out fire, stoking it with a poker. Fried fish roasted on a spit, and I smelled over-salted sea bream and sardines hanging on wooden racks outside of the small shed. The figure raised her head, shielding her eyes from the blinding sun with a tanned hand. Her hair was dark, sheen, and half-covered by a faded maroon cowl— or headdress— of sorts. Her wrists sang with golden bracelets, but other than that, she looked exceptionally downtrodden.

“Hello?” she spoke, and I realized she must only be a young teenager. I was curious, but also concerned, as to what she was doing selling briny seafood by herself in the middle of the desert.

“Are you looking to buy?” she prompted again. I looked to Cesaire for answers, but he only shrugged. Eurynome took charge of the situation.

“I’m so sorry, but we don’t have any money,” she said as maternally as she could muster, which definitely wasn’t much.

“Uh alright. Then what *do* you want?” the girl asked, sounding annoyed. She poked the fish grilling over her small fire.

“We’re looking for directions,” Eurynome explained. “To the nearest settlement, that is. Would you happen to know such a thing?” The girl shrugged her hunched shoulders.

“Sure.”

“Great!”

“But it’s going to cost you, of course.” Eurynome’s composure shrank. The girl smiled reassuringly. “I know you don’t have any money, I’m just curious about news from the north.”

“Who’s to say we would know about...that?”

“You’ve had no word of the Banu Marin? The Marinids?”

“Well, uh,” Archaeus stepped in, “what was the last thing *you* heard?” The girl raised her head, pausing to think for a moment.

“It was about three years ago. Uthman I was assassinated by one of his slaves— a Christian. His brother Muhammad succeeded him. That is all I know. We heard it from an old Castilian soldier who came through here. He lived in the city for many months and I do not know where he went after that.” She sat back on her ankles and let her poker drop. “Are you familiar with this news?”

“I’m so sorry,” Eurynome said, “but we are from much farther than wherever we are now. We came here on a ship, and I’m afraid it was wrecked some days ago a long distance down the coast. We know nothing.” The girl’s eyes widened in intense interest, and she stood.

“Shipwrecked wanderers from a far-away realm?” she said with a sense of wonder. “That is all I needed to know.” Eurynome looked as puzzled as I felt.

“Wait, really?”

“Yes. Please, follow me, I’ll take you to the city myself. There is someone you should meet.” She jumped up, grabbing the thin linen tarp covering her stand, and let it fall to protect her merchandise from the

punishing silty winds. I saw that she walked near-barefoot, with cloth wraps around her feet instead of shoes.

“Where is this city, exactly?” I asked as we walked across the flat sands.

“Safi,” the girl clarified. “We used to be a part of the Caliphate, but the conquests by the Marinids in the north have dismantled that. Now this is Amazigh land.” That last term flipped a switch in my brain. I grinned, turning to Cesaire.

“Morocco!” I whispered excitedly, “we’re in Morocco!” His eyes glittered in recognition.

“Of course!” He said, and was quick to discreetly tell the rest of the group. Soon enough, we were on approach to Safi, which was a magnificently ancient port city decorated with buildings of sea-battered stone, dirt streets cluttered with markets, and intricate Mosques and Synagogues that towered above the riff-raff and sparkled under the infinite sky. Better still was the impossibly blue Atlantic crashing on Safi’s rugged, sandy beaches, and the surrounding hills peppered with scrub brush and date palms.

“So,” the girl said as we walked past a mudbrick guard tower on the outskirts of the city, “What sort of travelers are you? Where do you come from?” We all exchanged wary glances.

“Greece,” Petra said, “we’re from Greece.” My brows raised. I had never asked where Petra was from, really. It didn’t occur to me she would be Greek just like Cleon, Eurynome, and Archaeus. I wondered if that meant I was Greek, ethnically speaking. *Well, it didn’t matter anyhow, I had been raised as a Frenchman.*

“Some of us are Greek,” I amended. “He and I,” I gestured to Cesaire and myself, “Are French.” The girl cocked her head thoughtfully.

“I’ve never met a Carolingian before,” she said, “only Iberians.” I wondered if my translation implant was off due to her likely archaic and

unknown dialect. She turned towards Eurynome. “I’ve met some Greeks, however. Byzantine traders come through here on occasion.” She hopped onto a small retainer wall and skipped, kicking rocks up with her feet.

“We meet all sorts of Greeks here. Latins, Crusaders, Venetians.”

“Venetians?” Cleon asked accusingly, “they are Italians, not Greeks.”

“It’s all a mess of little countries,” the girl said in a sing-song voice, “where’s the difference?” Cleon simply shook his head, and Archaeus rubbed his shoulder unhelpfully. We passed beneath an arched gate and the city began to fill out. I couldn’t parse the century, but it had to be some time in the Middle Ages based on its crude technology, confusing politics, and lack of good transportation. Most people tugged rugged carts or walked on foot, although I saw a few reigned horses. Additionally, Safi wasn’t much of a city at all. There were buildings, yes, but they were low to the ground and built to withstand the harsh seaside desert air. The streets were paved in dust, and the largest sector seemed to be the port, where several ships were docked. Other than that, it was an outpost on the edge of a vast sun-drenched ocean and an endless wasteland of windswept dunes.

“You know,” the girl said as we turned down a small side street, “you lot are very strange people. You dress in such peculiar ways, and you do not seem to know many things. For travelers, that is. Usually travelers are filled to the brim with news and have come to trade it for gifts. I see none of that from you.”

“We are weary,” Cleon said, “news may come with lodging and a good meal, if we can find one with whoever you are dragging us to meet.”

“Do not worry, she is very generous,” the girl assured. “Especially to the likes of you, especially if you bring a mystery.” We arrived at the outskirts of Safi, with the sun beginning to waver and hang low in the sky, drowning everything in a rose pink light. The girl led us to a

two-story house scattered with smaller dwellings, horse stables, and small shops— largely tea houses, restaurants, and wares stores. She pushed aside a beaded tapestry covering the door, and we entered a cool and decorated home, protected from the still-blazing heat of the African sun.

“Fadhma!” a woman’s voice exclaimed as we walked into the house. I saw a small circle of women of various ages crowded around colorful pottery with horsetail paintbrushes in their hands. There was an open door frame that led to a large brick kiln outside, its flame lighting up the dusky evening. One of the women painting the pottery got up and ran to hug the girl.

“Hey, Thiyya,” the girl, presumably named Fadhma, said awkwardly. I assumed based on their first-name basis reunion, they weren’t mother and daughter. I wondered if Fadhma had any parents at all, or if this was it. Thiyya stepped back, surprised at our presence. The other women were bewildered as well. They adjusted their headscarves and tugged down their sleeves, but looked curious about the whole ordeal.

“I’ve happened upon some vagabonds,” Fadhma explained. “Travelers from far-off places.” The women began to murmur. “I want to take them to see Herru.”

“Well, they are very strange-looking. I’m sure she’d like to get at least one look at them.”

“She always does.” Soon enough, we were being beckoned upstairs into a large and airy flat that mimicked the layout of a family home. It seemed to be so, because there were three children playing on the balcony, and a young man smoking a long pipe watching them from his perch on a well-worn chair. There was also a woman, seated on an ottoman in the living room, whose face brightened as soon as she saw us.

“I thought I heard you, Fadhma,” she said, standing to greet us, “who are these people with you?”

“The usual waywards. I picked them up at my cookhouse around noon. They claim to be shipwrecked— and *French— and Greek*. Imagine that!” Herru smiled amusingly and motioned for us to join her around a low rosewood table in the middle of the room. I sat, my legs criss-crossed on a colorful pillow. An oil lamp and various candles flickered, adding ambience to the purpling sky, which now doused the world in a thick plum tone. The intoxicating smoke of her husband’s pipe wafting in from the kitchen made me feel hazy, too.

“Bring us the tea from the kitchen, will you, Fadhma?” Herru asked. Fadhma obliged, nodding to us as she walked through the empty door frame to the other side of the flat. I rubbed my knees uncomfortably. Herru was staring us down, her eyes aflame with questions. Still, she said nothing to us directly. Fadhma eventually returned, set small cups down for each of us, and poured a steaming mint tea. I lifted it to my lips, and was enchanted by the flavor, quickly committing the taste to memory in case I wanted to describe it through poetry later.

“So,” Herru said coyly, “who are you, *really*?”

“Simply lost people, I assure you” Eurynome said, “Nothing more.”

“Of course. And you don’t think I haven’t met many *lost people* in my time?”

“Well, I would assume so—”

“You are too peculiar, even for rogues or mercenaries. Are you alchemists? Exiled aristocrats? Eccentric portraitists? Or something else entirely...?”

“We’re only trying to find our way home,” I said, suddenly finding my voice. Cesaire turned to stare at me.

“He’s right,” he said quietly, “that’s all this is.”

“Well,” Herru said, crossing her arms, “you can’t expect me to believe that ‘home’ means the same thing for all of you, can you?” She gestured to Phebah. “See, she is clearly from the southern caliphates and kingdoms, or an Egyptian or Nubian of some sort. She has a curious look about her, but she seems settled. She doesn’t need home to be anywhere physical.” She waved her hand at Cleon.

“But him, he is of course a European. A Greek or Frank, you said? Something of that sort? Well, whatever he may be, he is surely desperate for stability.” She pointed her index finger down to Cleon and Archaeus’s legs, which were leaning into each other. “He anchors himself to this other traveler, he only desires to have a home that does not move with him, that is defined by his people.” She raised her brows playfully and took a sip of her tea, clearly satisfied with herself. Our group had nothing to say to that.

“You would think that my husband would be the philosophizer,” she said plainly. “But no, I run the pottery business and I entertain the guests. I manage the household and consume worldly literature all the same.” She shrugged with a simple smile. “He is content to sit by the window and watch the sea swell.” She poured herself more tea from the pot. “The point is, we all want different things, and these desires are often more coated by our identity than they seem.” She laughed softly. “Despite this, they are easily revealed through our actions, even the most subtle twitches of the face and hand.” The room was staunchly quiet, save for the muffled laughter of her children, and the distant crashing of waves. “So, I ask you again, who are you *really*?” None of us spoke. Somewhere, I heard a gull cry.

“We’re– we,” Cleon struggled with his words, “we simply need a roof over our heads. Just for one night. Please.” Herru frowned and wiped her mouth with her embroidered sleeve.

“So be it,” she said, “but these sorts of things do not come free of charge. Entertain me, tell me your names, and a good story. It is this way that you will earn your night of my hospitality.” She pointed at Petra. “You, you go first. You seem to be a strange sort of woman. Bold, unbridled, that type.”

“Call me Petronilla,” she said. I smirked at that. I never heard her use her full name. It seemed to be a safeguard of sorts.

“Petronilla,” Herru repeated, “give me your tale. This tea we drink is the water of life, it will breathe spirit into your words. All you must do is drink. And speak.” Petra obliged, taking a hefty sip from her cup. She leaned back on the heels of her palms and allowed the misty atmosphere to play into her dramatic side.

“I wasn’t always such a rover,” she said solemnly. “I was born quite privileged, really. My father was a prominent merchant and my mother came from a guild family with their hands in every politician’s pocket. I grew up in Salonica, you see. Not feeling quite Greek, or Turkish, or Sephardi, or anything for that matter. Despite all of the relative political unrest, I led a comfortable childhood. My brothers were religiously educated, of course, but as the only daughter, and the youngest, my father had a soft spot for me.” She smiled grimly and combed her fingers through her hair. “He allowed me to learn the family trade—metalsmithing. I made everything from necklaces and bracelets to spears and scimitars. It was wholly inappropriate for a young girl, but that was just how it was. We were living in a society heavily divided by hierarchy, religion, and class. We couldn’t be bothered to step outside our designated little worlds and take a look around.” She exhaled, as if saying this next line pained her. “We all just wanted to stand shining in the sun.”

“Fascinating,” Herru said as if she truly meant it. “So, what went wrong? What sent you on the road and made you come here?”

“Time,” Petra said truthfully. “I let time slip away from me. I forgot my limits and became foolish. Then, I made a series of grave mistakes, and I lost a friend.”

“Oh no, is this friend not with us?”

“She’s alive.” Petra dropped her head and swirled her tea wistfully. “All we have to do is find her.” She played with her fingers, the rest of the story coming to her. “I built up a shield, you see. A shield based on a weaving of truths and lies. I let my identity slip away from me. That little girl who played in her father’s smithy, I don’t know where she’s gone.” Petra frowned “I don’t reckon I’ll ever see her again. But I can set my mistakes right. For her sake.”

“I believe in telling me your tale you may have revealed your goal,” Herru said. “It’s funny how these things happen, isn’t it?”

“How do you know that you’ve got all the details?” I blurted out foolishly. She laughed, spotting my lack of foresight.

“And do you wish to provide me with them?” she asked. I shrank into myself and shook my head. I heard Cleon sigh from across the table.

“That’s what I thought,” she said. “Well, I’d say you’ve earned your board for the night, but if you want a way out of here and a warm meal in the morning, I’d select one more tale for good measure. A fable, an epic, a poem, whatever you see fit.” I opened my mouth to volunteer myself, but I was stopped.

“I’ll go,” Cesaire said, his voice laced with unexpected determination.

“The tale of the Carolingian...” Fadhma whispered excitedly.

“I’m French,” he corrected. I stifled an eye-roll. “But that’s not what’s important about me,” he continued. “I will tell you the fable of the faithful chamois.” I smiled at this, and leaned inwards to listen to his story.

“There was once a young chamois that lived in the rocky peaks of the Pyrenees. That’s a mountain region in France, if you don’t know. The chamois was very talented at prancing, and everyone commended him for this, but he could only jump, not travel. He stayed on the same ledge his whole life, never going anywhere. All the other creatures would pass by him and say ‘Look at him go! That old chamois is so reliable! Always doing the same thing in the same place!’ It went on like this for some time. That is until one day...a curious marmot weaseled out of the rocks and asked him a question– ‘Why are you jumping in this same spot every day?’ The chamois had never been asked a question before, but the answer seemed obvious.

‘Why, because I have always been told that I am an excellent prancer,’ he answered proudly. ‘I trust that the more I prance, the more beautiful my life will become right where it is.’ He thought this was a satisfactory explanation, but then...” He paused for dramatic affect, “The marmot laughed in his face! ‘You are too faithful,’ he said. ‘You’d sooner die here than change your life! This mountain, these rocks, the whole sky, they won’t even start eroding away long after your own body has faded back into the Earth.’ The chamois was deeply dismayed. ‘So, my whole life has been hopeless, then?’ he asked. ‘I wasted my time?’ The marmot shook his head.” Cesaire shook his own head, looking somber.

“He looked the chamois dead in the eye and said ‘The only waste of time would be to ignore my warning now that you’ve heard it. You spent all of those years being faithful to nothing, but it made you happy. Now you will be less happy, and that is my fault. I am sorry.” Cesaire shrugged and took a sip of his tea. “And so the chamois, being as faithful as he was, believed the marmot. He pranced off into the sun, never to be seen again, not knowing that the marmot was following him the whole way. He didn’t need faith to understand that his words would live with him forever, and that was enough.”

“Goodness!” Herru cheered, “what a saga! I have never heard such a story. I’m desperate for more, but I know my limits. You have certainly earned your keep.” She got up and stretched, yawning. “The travelers that come through here, they always tell me the same stories. Grand conquests and battles, mainly. Seldom have I met such mysterious folk who are willing to be humble with their words. It is sobering to hear.” We all began to rise from the table. It was completely dark outside now, leaving the house as a flickering beacon of warm light in the sea of desolation. Fadhma showed us to a large guest bedroom lined with mats and small pillows, obviously intended to serve as a low-rate hotel service. There were a few candles on copper dishes to catch their dripping wax, and they cast wild shadows on the walls. I collapsed on one of the bedspreads, not caring how hard and cold the floor was. There was a huge open window that revealed the wine-dark sea churning off the coast, and it allowed a warm breeze to meander through my curls. Fadhma and Herru bid us goodnight, but they only retired to the sitting room, where I could hear them mumbling to each other. I crawled over to Cesaire to accomplish some mumbling myself.

“Look at this,” he said as soon as I came over. I stretched my neck to look over his shoulder. Cleon and Petra were sitting next to him, hunched over the interfacer they had stolen from the lab back in Lima.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I didn’t feel the need to whisper, somehow, almost as if the dry heat was thick enough to coat any sound I made.

“We’re trying to locate Zenobie,” Petra said. “We’ve almost figured out how to catch the signal. I have a plan.” I smiled at that. Petra’s plans had really grown on me. They reminded me of Philomena— of how executive she had been. A knot twisted in the stomach at that thought, and I quickly shoved it back down my throat.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Carthage,” she explained.

“The Assembly!?”

“No, no, Carthage now. It’s a failsafe, you see. There’s a dormant emergency device with the ability to facilitate spacetime travel located within the ruins. It’s a constant across every reality and layer of time. All we have to do is get there.” Eurynome walked over and sat next to us, cradling her chin in her hands.

“We may be in the Maghreb, but it’s still far,” she said.

“I’ll come up with something.”

“You always do.” By that time, all of us had coalesced into a circle, and it was that way we remained for a very long time. We probably spent hours lounging around the interfacers, submerged in total silence. The candles burned down to stubs, the rest of the house finally retired to their rooms, and the moon near-completely crawled across the sky. Then, finally, we saw the glow. I startled, and Cleon’s fingers nearly slipped. He pushed a small button on the side of the device, and the screen began to run with data and numbers.

“What does it mean?” Phebah urged.

“I– it’s coordinates,” Petra said. “Wait, I know how to read this. It’s spacetime locator code. My job finally comes in handy.”

“Where is she, Petra?” Eurynome asked desperately. Petra squinted at the small screen and gasped.

“I have the location.” The world fell silent. Finally, after everything, we had what we needed, and it felt impossible.

“Where is she?” Cesaire repeated, gulping nervously.

“1850,” Petra answered quietly, “Trois-Îlets, Martinique.”

“She’s in the Caribbean...?” Cesaire whispered. “Six years after I left?”

“It would seem so.” He sat up, his face twisted.

“Oh. Well.”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat.

“I guess we’d better go along with your plan. If we can.”

“I guess so.” The air was awkward and light at the same time. We were suddenly filled with a daunting prospect— our quest was coming to a close. We were one step closer to decisions we were desperately avoiding. The end was nigh.

“Wait,” I heard Archaeus say from across the room. He crawled over, grabbing the interfacer from Petra. “I’ve used these in the field before.”

“You have?” Petra asked

“Yeah. They have a cosmic time scale function. We can see how much budgeted time we have left until continuum collapse.”

“Huh. Alright.” He pressed a few buttons and opened a new screen. It blinked a pale green light into the dark room. There were Phoenecian symbols running across the screen that I couldn’t read. Archaeus’s eyes widened. Petra held in a gasp.

“What?” Cesaire asked. “How much time do we have?”

“I...” Petra stammered. “One...one week.” She inhaled. “We have one week.” Her words fell heavy over us like a fog. I wanted to shake myself from the haze, but it consumed me.

“How are we going to get to Carthage in less than a week?” Eurynome asked.

“Um,” Petra said, “Uh, well. Let’s just. Uh.” She ran her fingers through her dirty, coiled hair. “Let’s just sleep on this. We can talk to Herru in the morning. Get some much-needed rest. Everything will make sense after we get a little shut-eye.” I nodded nervously and slinked off to my bed pad, lying down with my hands folded over my chest. I heard Eurynome, Archaeus, Cleon, and Petra continuing to whisper to each other in a huddle, but ignored them. It was all too much. I turned my head and looked out at the open-air balcony covered by translucent

silks fluttering in the warm desert breeze. The dark shapes of palm trees swayed upon the rolling purple dunes, and the sea rolled onto the rocky coast beneath the cover of a sky spilled with a million stars. It would feel peaceful if I wasn't actively attempting to suppress an internal panic.

"Now," I heard Archaeus whispering, "you understand the universe isn't going to just *die* next week? It's simply likely that the Assembly will be able to locate us in Carthage by then...they'll be expecting it."

"I know, I know," Petra mumbled back. "But still...we have so little time left." She laughed and sank into her hands. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"The universe doesn't do fairness," Cleon said. "The only person experiencing dramatic irony is God." They sat in his words for a while. I let them ring in my ear, too. I had given fate a thought many times in my life, ultimately decided it was a useless folly, and continued to let it sway me anyhow. The cruel truth of living in a society dominated by religion. The world is a church whether you pay your tithes or not. Somewhere between Purgatory and Hell, I fell into a dreamless sleep.

I woke up to the sound of white terns calling above the riptide of a clear estuary flowing into the surf. I rubbed my eyes, caught sleep on my fingers, and yawned. Petra was already awake, but everyone else appeared to be either slumbering or refusing to move from their beds. I sat up, watching Petra's silent movements. She was leaning against the wooden railing of the balcony and nursing a cup of spiced coffee. The air was warm in the way that only a perfect summer morning could be, and I breathed it all in deeply. I rolled over to Cesaire and gently shook his shoulders.

"Hey," I whispered gently, "wake up." There was something calming about seeing him sleeping. It was almost enough to make me forget the stressful note the previous night had ended on for all of us. The remainder of our room gradually came to their senses and stumbled

out of their sheets, slipping on shoes, tugging tunics over shoulders, and finger-brushing untamed hair. We wandered into the main complex of the flat where Herru was working away at the cook pit, filling the room with billows of smoke that rippled out of the many open-air window-walls. Fadhma was hunting through a cabinet for spices that were jarred in tiny glass-fired bottles, pinching them over a spread of sardine-avocado-toast, crispy almonds and honey, creamy white cheese, and the fresh-brewed coffee Petra had already been enjoying in company with the dawnbreak shorebirds.

Herru's husband Abu was seated at the intricate inlaid table and studying a scroll of bound paper, mumbling the words through his wiry beard. Their children were scattered to the wind— the eldest, a pale lanky girl with a bushel of black hair was flipped over on the ottoman, kicking her feet and counting the tiles on the ceiling. The middle child, a chubby boy with sunburnt cheeks, was seated next to his father, hanging onto every word. The youngest, a tan sweet-faced girl, was wrapped around Herru in the kitchen, her nose buried into her mother's skirt. I had never craved such domestic bliss, but somehow it made my heart swell.

I took a seat at the table and folded my hands in my lap. There was food on my plate soon enough, and it melted in my mouth. I felt like I was always chasing flavors. Herru and her family soon joined us, and we were sprawled all throughout the house— some of us on floor cushions, others leaning on window sills or sitting on the countertops. I wondered how she seemed so fine with allowing strangers into her home. Especially as many as us.

“So,” she started through a mouthful of oiled bread, “Where do you plan on heading now? I assume it is not your wish to remain in Safi, what with your lost friend and all.”

“You would assume correctly,” Petra said. “We’re seeking quick passage to Tunisia, the ruins of Carthage more specifically.”

“Carthage? I have not heard of this ‘Tunisia’ but I shall search for it on a map.” She leaned over to her husband. “Abu, would you find the cartography scrolls for me?” He obliged, getting up to sift through their towering bookshelf. He came back with beautifully detailed parchment that painted a not-quite-accurate— but still impressive picture of the world— or at least as far as it stretched from the middle of Africa to Asia Minor and the northern tips of Europe. Her eyes scanned the map, her finger following with them, and she stopped on the northern cape of Tunisia, near Bizerte, where the ancient city of Carthage stood as a corpse. She hummed, nodding.

“Ahh, so you wish to travel to Ifriqiya,” she said. “That is where the Hafsid Kingdom rules. They are Sunnis, and Berbers, too. We do not trifle with them often, but I can think of one quick way to travel there.”

“What would that be?” Petra asked.

“You could take passage with a Berber horse caravan. They travel through the Sahara and up to the coast of the Maghreb— they’d surely pass through Tunis, which it appears is only a few dozen miles east of Carthage.”

“Well, that sounds fantastic,” Eurynome said, “but how are we to afford *horses*? That seems...expensive.”

“If you have no funds or means to obtain funds, perhaps you could seek work here in Safi,” Herru suggested

“We don’t have time for that.”

“Hmm...” We were silent for a while, pondering our options.

“I know what to do,” Petra finally said. I raised my brows and looked at her expectantly. “I have a few possessions that will fetch a high price. We can purchase horses, supplies, and new clothes fit for the terrain.”

“What could you possibly have to pawn?” I asked curiously. She smiled, a grim and sad smile, and reached into her tool bag, retrieving her set of liquid metal tools. We gasped collectively.

“Petra, you can’t!” Archaeus chided her.

“I must.”

“I don’t understand,” Herru said. “What are they?”

“Foreign technology,” Petra explained cryptically. “They’ll arrive here shortly...” She dropped her gaze.

“Well, they seem intriguing. But then, I am fascinated by outsider oddities. Who knows if your estimate is truly how much they’ll fetch.”

“They will. Trust me.”

“Alright...” Our conversation gradually turned elsewhere, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that Petra was relinquishing the last part of herself that belonged somewhere else. That getting to Martinique and saving our world meant more to her than anything else. I supposed she must still feel responsible. That was a heavy weight to carry. We finished our breakfast regaling Herru with embellished tales of our exploits filtered through a shabbily-done medieval lens. Our great prison break from the Citadel made her jaw drop, Phebah and I’s night at the opera left her confused, and earlier ballads from before I arrived were equally baffling. I remembered just how much I relished in storytelling, and it was exhilarating. Feeling satisfied, she let us go, and directed us to the local market to purchase the goods needed for our journey, as well as directions to the stables where the caravan would be departing come late that afternoon.

“They come and go every day,” she said. “This is their land after all.” I began to wave goodbye, but spotted Fadhma eyeing us from the doorway.

“This is the worst part,” she said glumly. I shook my head and patted her on the shoulder.

“No,” I said, “you are just young. When you are of age, you will stop watching others ride off into the sun and start claiming life for yourself. You are already so capable, what with running your own business and all.” She smiled abashedly and slung me off.

“You are too straight-forward, stranger,” she grinned.

“That’s what we like about these folk,” Herru added, stepping up from behind. She wrapped Fadhma in a backwards hug. “They will carry us with them. That is what travelers do. They are never empty-handed.” I stared down at myself, holding my bare palms up to my face.

“I beg to differ,” I said. “...But I see your allegory.”

“And they are always too smart for their own good,” she added. “Safe travels, strangers. May your roads be ever-winding.”

“Thank you,” I said, and bowed. She winced, and then laughed.

“So formal and so crude at once! Fabulous.” We gave our last goodbyes and acknowledgments, and then left that little house for the great wide expanse once more. We walked past street canals drizzling with clear blue water, over cracked mosaics embedded on crossroads, and into the bustling bazaar at the heart of the port city. Petra was stoic, parting with her jewelry and tools without shedding a single tear. I felt as if it hurt me more than it did her. If anything, her advanced technology was of extreme use to us. It was the art of letting go. We donned our new clothes to fit the unflinching harshness of the Sahara— flowing hooded robes, slippers, caftans, headscarves, embroidered dresses, indigo-dyed fabric, the whole works. Spare horses were leased to us for the journey— far less of an expense, but still a complete hit to our funds nonetheless. We didn’t have to wait much longer for the caravan to start, either. We let them know we were there at Herru’s behest as she had instructed us, and nobody batted an eye. I assumed her influence was strong.

We assumed a quick pace, and it required more thigh strength than I had remembered. My history with equestrianism was largely limited to summers in the countryside— only a few weeks throughout my childhood— and the month-long tour I had taken of England shortly after college. Being poor as we were now, I shared my horse with Cesaire. She was a gray beauty, an Algerian Barb. I thanked God we were riding in the saddle. The more difficult aspect was the fact Cesaire was given possession of the reins, so I had to wrap my arms around his waist in order to secure myself. We struggled to hear anything, or each other, over the roaring wind blowing the sand in sharp shards across our faces, so we hardly spoke at all. I had to relinquish my pride and lean into him, allowing him to take the reins, quite literally. I scoffed at the absolute poetry of it all. In fact, in the screeching silence of our gallop across the endless sands, I found myself composing poems in my mind once again, just like the old times. How fateful.

*Tamarind sun scape poured into a poor man's cup  
Still, he worships the God of the gentle touch  
That cradles elegies for mornings long deceased  
And nighttime serenades within the mind impeached  
Praying at the temple of desert wind and albatross  
To scorch the verdant scores of marshtides and seagloss  
Deities that will never answer, scream  
A ringing cuckoo in his ear, an unforgotten dream*

By the time that I had finished fantasizing about the craft of language, the world had once again been sunken into dusk. I hardly recalled stopping for water and lunch, or even the bows of ibises that had flown above us, casting winged shadows on our caravan for miles. I had even forgotten the footprints we left in the sand, which had undoubtedly

been wiped away by the winds by the time their imprints came back to me. The horse-people set up pyramidal wool pitch-tents close to the ground with carpets and baskets of goods beneath. Our group was assigned to our own, although we had much more meager belongings to store. I watched as the men sat outside, cross-legged, smoking hashish through pipes and philosophizing. The women crowded around the large bonfire towards the center of camp, tended to and tacked the horses, and doled out dinner—ewe's milk, goat cheese, lamb sausage, and semolina balls coated in coriander, mint, oil, and onions. I was finding Morocco to be a land of salvation.

Being foreign travelers guising as merchants, we weren't readily welcomed into the group. Herru had warned us they might be isolationist. I didn't mind this. It was Cesaire I was more interested in talking to. Knowing this, I walked over to him with two apricots in hand, tossing him the riper of the bunch. He scooted over on his patterned carpet, patting the seat next to him. I responded by sitting down gratefully. We gazed out across the dune-swells, watching where the firelight blurred into periwinkle night. It cooled down quite considerably out here, and I found myself rubbing my arms to keep warm.

"Here," he said, tossing a tasseled wool blanket over my shoulders. I smiled in return, and bit into my fruit, letting the orange juices trickle down my chin. He chuckled and used the back of his knuckle to spare me from the drip.

"Thanks," I said, my voice muffled by the apricot in my mouth.

"Course." I looked around to see if anyone was nearby, but they had either retired to their tents or migrated to singing quiet dirges around the fire. Seeing this, I inched closer to him, and yawned. My arm stretched up and dropped clumsily around his shoulder. He grunted in surprise, but I pretended like I didn't hear.

"It's been pretty wild, huh?" I ventured softly.

“Uh, it certainly has been unexpected...”

“Yeah, Lima was a real shock, wasn’t it?”

“I’m still dwelling on it, really.” He chewed down the remainder of his apricot and tossed the core into the dark sand behind us. He gulped and pressed a hand to his chest before continuing. “Just the concept of our fates being some intrinsic thing. Doesn’t it concern you? That this city we never should have gone to, full of people we never should have met, made us the omens of their doom?”

“Well, obviously it’s disturbing. I think I might just be acclimated to confusing and complicated phenomena now. Or perhaps I’m numb to it. I don’t know.” I twisted a low-hanging curl around my finger. “The worst thing is...I sort of expected it.” He furrowed his brow and turned to me.

“How so?” He asked.

“I always desired fame and fortune, of course,” I explained. “Or at least to be admired and memorialized by my contemporaries. But...” I tilted my head back and basked in the starlight, thinking. “...I also felt an inherent pull within me. A feeling that I was meant for a greater orchestration than the one line of music I could play and see in front of me. It was narcissistic of me, but...well...”

“It’s sort of come true,” He finished for me. I nodded.

“Yeah. It sort of has.” I gestured to where we were. “I mean, look at us now. Traveling through space and time, on a mission to save the universe, stirring shit up. It’s absolutely inconceivable, and yet somehow it makes a whole load of sense.”

“Oh man,” he tittered, “we really *have* gone off the deep end.” I tightened my lips and looked at him with consideration.

“Yeah...” I echoed, “I guess we really have.” My voice dropping in tone must have alerted him to some shift below my emotional surface,

because he changed too. I felt him shiver beneath my resting arm and set his jaw nervously.

“It’s pretty late. Want to retire?” As much as the same old trick off the page sounded appealing to me, my tired brain had other ideas in mind. I shook my head and flopped back onto the carpet.

“I have a better idea.” I tossed my hand out towards the night sky. “Let’s stargaze. We don’t have to say a word, and we can go to bed when we’re truly tired.” He didn’t have to think it through, he just nodded and laid on his back, crossing his hands over his stomach contentedly. We both exhaled at the same time, getting in sync with each other the way we did when both struck by natural beauty.

The way the world wrote poetry was with its grand displays and its little wonders. The heavens fell into the first category without question, and they never failed to leave me awestruck. Still, there was a special quality to this particular slice of sky. All of those myths I had heard as a child– metaphors about the night looking like a domed blanket tossed over the Earth with pinpricks for the stars– it felt especially truthful. The vastness and lack of unnatural light out here, it created an effect I had never experienced before. Not in the English moors, not in the Alps, certainly not within the city limits of Paris. No, out here the world was ancient. Humanity was only a passing fleck of dust rolling across the giant armoire of existence. I was stricken.

“It’s so...beautiful,” Cesaire finally whispered after a very long time of laying side-by-side in a mutual trance. I wetted my lips, realizing I’d barely breathed.

“I’ve scarcely seen anything like it,” I said back. “I mean...I’ve dreamed, but. This is the work of the ancients dancing right before us.” I raised my finger and traced lines between the glittery specks above us. “There’s Orion’s belt...and Cassiopeia...and Scorpius...”

“And there’s the Big Dipper...and the Southern Cross...and Jupiter!” He looked so excited just to be observing what billions before and after us had already seen, what he had seen all of his life. But then, we had never seen it quite like this. Not so big, bold, and raw. Not together.

“Are you tired now?” I asked. He looked pained to admit it, but he nodded.

“Regrettably,” he sighed. He pushed himself off of the carpet, and reached his arm down for me to take. Our hands slotted into each other, and we walked into our peaked tent, still holding each other. It only felt natural. We slipped into the bundle of blankets, pillows, and barren belongings, curling around each other in the blank darkness of the tent. A small opening at its conical peak let the most conservative beam of moonlight drift in, making Cesaire’s pupils shine in the blackness. I wrapped my hands tight around his and we faced each other.

“I wrote poetry again today,” I whispered, my voice barely above a breath.

“Funny,” he whispered back, “I did the same thing.” My mouth opened in quiet shock and I raised a brow at him, suddenly seeing him in a different light.

“You did not...”

“Did too!”

“What was it about?”

“Well, why don’t I just recite it for you...”

“Okay, but this better be good...”

“I promise, I promise!”

“Don’t blame me, you’ve never written before.”

“Well...”

“Well, what?”

“In another life, maybe.”

“Oh, so you’re a philosopher now.”

“I’ve always been a philosopher, son.”

“Haha!”

“What?”

“No, it’s just– ah, man. I love it when you do that sort of thing.”

“Do what!?”

“It’s alright, it’s fine. Just...when you get all professor-like. It’s–”

“What.”

“It’s– it’s endearing alright! It’s just endearing.”

“Ah, I knew you liked me.”

“You’re only figuring this out now?”

“Some of us take longer than others...”

“Ohh, just say your ballad, old man.”

“Very well...ahem...”

*An angel weaving morning dew, beady and thin  
Opens the curtains, lets light pour in  
And hums along with hoofsteps and hallway doors  
Escapes reality in the highlands and the moors  
Takes the lyrics back to the chateau, leaves the melody  
Hanging in the rafters like a remedy...like a piece of dawn...like a  
quiet memory*

“Oh,” I said softly; although I was thinking so much more.

“Did you like it?” he whispered hesitantly, clutching the sheets.

“I thought it up as we were riding. Just to...pass the time y’know...I thought if you could do it...” I held a finger up to his lips.

“Cesaire. Stop.”

“What?”

“I...I loved it. It was perfect.” His eyes crinkled in silent celebration.

“Thank you...” he mumbled. His hand raised from under his pillow and gently brushed my hair out of my face. It dropped slightly, tracing downwards, and catching on every feature. I saw the flicker in his eyes. I knew how this ended. I caught his wrist and set it back down.

“Cesaire,” I said seriously. He frowned, confused. “I need you to listen to me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“We finally know where Zenobie is. She’s real. We’re going to see her— *you’re* going to *have her*. It’s not just— an ephemeral fantasy anymore, alright? If you want to keep doing what we do...you’re going to need to let her go.” I inhaled, my breath shaky and uncertain. “You can’t...you can’t have both, Cesaire. Not with me.” He frowned deeper now, truly seeming upset.

“I’m still trying to parse this all out I— I hadn’t really thought it out—”

“Exactly. You haven’t *thought*. About who this might harm. Her and I both.”

“I’m not trying to have my cake and eat it too—”

“But you are, Cesaire. That’s what I’m telling you.”

“*Why* are you telling me this? Why can’t we just...” I cupped his face in my hands, staring into him like his eyes were the barrel of a gun.

“Because it’s more than that. You and I both know that. We deserve more. If you still desire Zenobie, *she* deserves more.” He shook his head, pulling away from me, retreating to the furthest side of the tent.

“I can’t believe you,” he bit. “That you would ruin this. It didn’t— it didn’t have to be anything. You didn’t have to take it so personally.” I scoffed, my voice raising.

“But isn’t this personal, Cesaire?” I shook my head in disbelief. “Isn’t it?” He didn’t respond, only rolled over onto his shoulder and refused to face me. I laughed mockingly and mirrored the action, my

hands tucked as balled fists beneath my head. *Whatever*, I spat in my mind, *I don't care. I didn't care. I really didn't. Not at all. I couldn't care. It wasn't right to care. It didn't mean anything.* We went to bed angry for the thousandth time. Except now, it wasn't with the inflection of a brooding couple or a pair of bent-out friends. No, this time it was dark. Dark and swollen with hurt. Damaged emotions. Stress. Fear. Anger. And I cried. I cried until my eyes were itchy and raw, until I was sure he was asleep and couldn't hear me anymore. Until my body couldn't keep me awake. And although I welcomed sleep on one level, another voice inside me begged to stay awake. To stay awake and fix this. And for what twisted reason?

Now that was the mystery of love.

## XXV: Cesaire

Every day felt the same, and ever since Auguste and I had clashed the first night, they were laced with a dull, thrumming pain as well. We rode across the scorched Earth, burning up under the flaming sun. We ate our dinners in stilted silence. We bumped shoulders as we passed and just kept walking, no matter how much the touch made us sting and twinge. We coerced our friends to allow us to ride on separate steeds. We finally made our way out of the Sahara and onto the coast without ever saying a word. It all blended together and I thought it might never end. I never wanted to look him in the eye again. And yet, absence cruelly made my heart grow fonder. I found myself on our second-to-last night, awake in the tent I now shared with Melem-Iram, staring up at the small slip in the roof, trying to drown the ache that was now so clear in my mind. I attempted to telescope away from my body, imagining where I was—somewhere between Algiers and Annaba, as far as I could tell. I squeezed my eyes shut and widened them again. Melem-Iram tossed and turned in his sleep. A fly buzzed. I was going crazy. I slipped into dreams full of honey and laughter, only to wake up in the dead of night slick with sweat and tears budding in my eyes. I hated it. What he could do to me. Even when he wasn't there.

Seeking mercy from the punishing fascinations of my own mind, I crawled out of the tent and into the shivery seaside early morning. The sun was still several hours from rising, and the sky was cloudless, but the sea sprayed us with the saving grace of a Mediterranean breeze that mitigated the temperature somewhat—only enough to not be deathly freezing. I rubbed my bare arms as I stumbled to the firepit, which was now a lonely burnt hole reduced to ashes and flickering embers. It was all the same to me. I crouched beside it and hugged myself, looking to the stars for guidance. To God, if He would listen. I wanted more than

anything for Him to listen. I was forgetting the comfort of his presence, but I craved it nonetheless.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice frayed, “tell me where I have strayed, Lord. Why have I become torn in this way? Fixated on this object of desire— nay, of sin? Tell me how can I redeem myself? How can I find mercy for my soul?” Of course there was no burning bush, no parting of the clouds, no glaring sign. Only the soft nothing of nature, and my own bated breaths. I groaned in frustration, digging fistfulls of sand and scattering them to the wind. My head dropped into my lap and my shoulders began to shake with heaving sobs that made my ribs ache. I bit down on my quivering lip to suppress the sound, but the feeling would not leave me be.

“How?” I asked myself, “how could I have let this happen?” As much as I expected someone to hear me, to wander out of the warm comfort of their bed, to sit out in the cold and hold me tight, to rub my cheek and tell me *it’s alright*, nobody ever came. I was truly alone, and I’d put myself there. I curled into the dirt and drifted off into a half-awake state of pitiful daydreaming. Fantasies of Zenobie’s comforting voice swirled around me, and I tried my hardest to hold onto them, but somehow my mind always wandered back to Auguste, back to his warmth. I wondered if I would have frozen to death had it not been for his ghost hovering over me and possessing my body. *Where was my God? My life? My very self?* I raised my hands to the heavens one last time and let out a prayer of desperation. *When has this godforsaken continent ever been my church?* I wondered venomously. I cursed it all until there was nothing left to tear apart. Until I collapsed into the cradle of pitch darkness and fell asleep with tear stains on my chin.

The next morning was humbling to say the least. We all pretended I wasn’t discovered curled up in the open air like a stray dog on the streets. I refused to make eye contact with anyone, just to avoid

the subject ever becoming a possibility. When Auguste sat on the far side of the firepit from me, when he tacked his horse, when he made smalltalk or packed up he and Phebah's tent, when he did anything— everything— and I saw it, I averted my eyes. But only enough to divert that I was practically tracking his every move. It was embarrassing to the very point of the word. I hated it, but it was my compulsion. It was only riding that took me away.

We raced down the seaside, only a day and night's journey from Carthage at that point— only one more sleep and early morning until our arrival. I wondered if this swift end was the answer to my prayers. I didn't want to take any chances, I let the rhythm of hooves and the battering of wind in both my hair and my stallion's mane bury any doubts. It was a mind-numbing ritual in the best way. Escapism. I trained my eye on the sun and watched it set, waiting for my final miserable evening. I would fix this somehow, but now I could at least pretend there were more urgent matters at hand.

*Does this make me selfish?* I wondered as I sipped my poached egg soup at dinner that night. I let myself be mesmerized by the fire. *Does it make me a fool?* I glanced up, watching Auguste's face through the fan of flames. It wriggled and shifted like ripples on a pond. He was talking to Phebah. I wondered if he could love her. *He wouldn't need me then,* I thought miserably. *That's all he needs me for anyways. He's willing to let it all go just because I can't meet his every demand.* I furrowed my brow, remembering our fateful evening. *Just because I can't love him exactly how he wants me too.* It was almost hilarious, how he had turned our tables. Once the carefree butterfly, flitting throughout Europe, taking lovers without a care in the world, he had looked to me as the pillar of objectivity. Now he believed he had such a moral authority over me, that he was so much wiser, and that I was only a spineless child. It nearly made me laugh, just how sick it was.

I tucked myself into bed earlier than usual that night, but Melem-Iram was already asleep. August wasn't, though. He, Phebah, and Eurynome were crowded by the fire. I quietly excused myself from the tent under some mumbled tale about going to the bathroom, and crept behind the tentline to spy on their hushed conversation from the stark shadows cast across camp. I hunched down, concealing myself, and listened.

"It's ridiculous," Phebah was saying, patting Auguste's shoulder.

"I completely agree," he replied. "He won't even look at me! I don't understand him at all. We both know perfectly well how much we care for each other, but he still can't make up his mind!" I cringed, pinching my hand to remind myself not to make a vocal objection. *It's not that straightforward, you prick.*

"I know this is hard to hear," Eurynome said, "but he needs time."

"Oh that's rich. Time we do not have."

"It's the sorry truth, Auguste." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I don't want to hear it. Not anymore." He stood up and waved his friends off, stumbling back to his tent. I cursed, *I had wanted to hear more!* Still, the women remained seated at the fire.

"I can't understand it," Phebah said carefully. "They're meant to be together."

"They're not exactly the same people as Cleon and Archaeus," Eurynome replied sadly. "Not anymore."

"I know, I know, it's just...they've hardly seen what they could have."

"We'll show them. I promise. When all of this is over."

“God...I...I hope so.” They sat in relative silence and I gulped, shame clouding my previous ‘surefire’ judgment. *Shit*, I thought, *this was a mistake*.

“What are you doing,” came an all-too familiar voice from behind me. I jumped, turned around, and was met face-to-face with my possessor. *Dammit*.

“Taking a walk,” I lied pitifully. It was obvious what I had been doing.

“Hah, sure,” he said coolly. He turned to walk away but stopped before he could fully commit to the action. “Not a word,” he said. “You haven’t said a word to me, and now you’re *spying* on me.”

“I—”

“Can you even stand me?” He looked so hurt. I suddenly felt ashamed for mulling in my own despair.

“Of course, Auguste,” I answered hoarsely. It was the truth. *Wasn’t it?* It had to be. Whatever it was, it didn’t work. He sighed, sounding exhausted, and slumped over. I watched him walk away, fading into the shadows. I didn’t move from my place in the grainy sand for a long time. We didn’t cross paths for the remainder of the journey. I made sure of it, or he did, or perhaps it was a joint effort. I let myself fade into the patterns of the rocky African coast. The songs of the seabirds, the shifting of the high sun, the crushing of fine dust and rocks beneath my feet. Anything to escape. Again.

Time passed as it often did, and we finally descended upon the ruins of Carthage— ancient bones of glory left to rot in the sun. There was a settlement only a few miles away, and the caravan left to stop there and trade their wares. I realized I hadn’t bonded with a single one of them, had scarcely learned their names, and had no one to say goodbye to. Auguste did. He always did. They hugged him and talked excitedly and shook his hands and fluttered around like songbirds in an apple tree.

I loathed that. Our group splintered away for good, finally alone with each other, but not in any good way. Regardless if the others noticed Auguste and I's aversion to each other, they had their own weights to bear. The stress of Zenobie, for one. I had to pretend as if it didn't drive me wild either.

We wandered through the dead stone city by the turquoise sea, and while it was a feast for the eyes, and a great attraction to my antiquity-occupied mind, it felt eerie. Like the empty streets and mossy sea caves on the marina all had something to hide. My eyes darted, seeking any sign of motion.

"Where is the failsafe?" I asked Petra.

"In the forum," she replied, "the center of the ruins. We're on our way now." While her confidence was assured, I couldn't shake my nerves. We walked into a large plaza with a small slab of stone in the center.

"There it is," she said. I raised a brow.

"It's very...unassuming," I commented.

"That's half the point." She crouched next to it, brushing her fingers over the salt-crusting ridges and bumps. I watched intently, but it didn't last for very long, as a sharp object shot down from the crumbling turrets above us. I gasped, whipping my head back to see a coalition of Assembly agents clad in black masks coalescing upon us. Some of them carried sleek bows loaded with arrows like the one that had just lodged itself inches from Petra's hand, while others bore black pistols.

"Halt, fugitives!" one of them barked. "Hands behind your head!" I glared, but seeing their weapons, I decided to comply. "On your knees!" We all obliged and I couldn't shake the humiliation of it. We were too late, they had found us.

"We assumed you would go for the failsafe," their apparent leader drawled, circling us like a hawk priming for a dive. "A rookie mistake."

“You know nothing,” Auguste spat, dropping his hands. She grabbed his wrists painfully and tutted, binding them with a silver cord behind his back. He winced and yelped, tugging at his binds.

“It is you who are ignorant,” she replied calmly.

“What did we do to you?” He cried. “Why can’t we go in peace?” She laughed, shaking her head and crouched down to his level. I could feel my body shaking, fearing for him. *Why did you have to speak, Auguste? I fretted. You could’ve just kept your stupid mouth shut!*

“Because...” she said, her hand moving to her mask, “this is personal.” She tore the cloth from her face and stared at him with a satisfied smirk. My jaw dropped in a dramatic display of shock.

“*Misty!*?” Auguste and I exclaimed.

“*What* is going on?” Petra said.

“Wait, who is this again?” Asked K’ayyhlta.

“It’s uh—” I stuttered, “It’s complicated.” I walked towards her hesitantly, my arms raised in defense. “What— what are you doing here, exactly?” I lowered my voice, “Are you here to...*rescue us?*” She laughed mockingly.

“You wish.” She flicked a speck of dust off of her shoulder. “Quite the contrary, really. No, I’m here to seek some much-needed...revenge.” Her words were laced with an unexpected darkness that made me quiver. I glanced at Auguste, who was struggling and shaking in his constraints. Petra took a tentative step toward her, daring to go even closer than I had.

“What do you mean, Misty?” She asked hesitantly. Misty paced, her fingers running through her tangled hair.

“It’s all Winifred, really,” she raved, “as soon as you left us, as soon as you were done abusing her goodwill,” she snapped around to point at Petra, “*your* abuse of her goodwill,” she clarified, “we lost everything. She was a traitor, she abandoned the Assembly all for her

faith in a few near-strangers and an old friend she hardly knew anymore. She thought it was all worth it, that they'd redeem her just as they did you, Petra. But she was wrong." She shuddered at her memory. "They took her...they took her away from me. They would've imprisoned me too, but I had the foresight she lacked. It wasn't the Assembly that wronged us— no, we betrayed the Assembly, just as she had done before in the past— which she did all in your name of course. It was *you*. And now you're going to ruin everything."

"We're not ruining anything!" Auguste protested, "we're saving the goddamned universe!" Misty stared at him and then broke out into laughter.

"You seriously believe that?"

"Of course!"

"Then you are truly ignorant."

"Explain it to me." She smirked and crossed her arms.

"It would be my pleasure," she said. "As time goes on, the timeline splinters larger and larger, until it becomes practically unmanageable. Your little anomalous escapades have put an even greater strain on it, it's too far gone. If you were to 'save' the world as you put it, all you would succeed in doing is extending the lifespan of an overgrown beast already under stress." She placed her hands on her hips to ensure we were following. "The one good thing you could do would be to leave Zenobie well enough alone, allowing the timeline to collapse, and the Assembly and its islands to continue to prosper. We can rebuild, of course, but it's the existence of the Assembly that matters the most, not the preservation of trillions of meaningless souls."

"That's absurd," Petra scoffed. "A lie you've been fed in your anger and loss. Your judgment is clouded by grief."

"You don't know me."

“I know Winifred, your *aunt*. And I know this is not what she would have wanted, not what she sacrificed her freedom for.”

“Then she shouldn’t have left me behind! She shouldn’t have gotten us exiled when I was a girl! Shouldn’t have betrayed the Assembly over and over in the name of *you* instead of *me!*” The other agents were standing dumbstruck now, shuffling their feet. I was shocked as well, but I didn’t want to show it. She was uncomfortably volatile, and disturbing her seemed unwise.

“None of this is your fault,” Petra said, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, “you can let this go.”

“What? So you can destroy my livelihood again? Get me expelled to some other wasteland? All alone?” She shook her head. “I don’t think so. I’d much rather redeem myself. I’d much rather do the right thing.”

“Please, please, Misty. Let us pass. The Assembly will never know— *that* is the right thing.” This turned a switch somewhere in Misty’s brain, and she snapped.

“You know nothing about this!” She exclaimed. “And I won’t fail the Assembly again!” In one clean movement she pulled a small pistol out of her baggy pants pocket and cocked its mechanism, causing it to glow with a warm amber light. It whirred to life, and she pointed it downwards, firing an entire round into the ground. The pellets ricocheted debris, kicking up a whirl of dust, and when it settled, my heart sank at what she had destroyed. In the perfect light of mid-day, clear as could be, was the shattered failsafe, smoking like a cookfire. Utterly destroyed. I expected Petra to be furious, to fume and scream and claw. But she did no such thing. No, she simply sank to her knees, and Misty followed her. The gun clattered to the ground, and all I heard was the swelling sea and their heavy breaths.

“You can come with us, Misty,” Petra said quietly and grabbed her hands. “We’ll take care of you. No matter what happens. I know I’m

not Winifred, but I've been here your entire life, haven't I? I'd do anything for her, and I know she'd want me to protect you with my life. So I will, but only if you let me." Misty's breath hitched, and I saw her painfully swallow.

"The Assembly will guard me," she said, gesturing to the agents retreating into the labyrinth ruins around her, "they—they took me in. They offered me salvation. I can earn my honor back."

"But Misty....when did you ever lose it?"

"I—I have an obligation to the Assembly." Petra watched her carefully, and then wrapped her in an embrace.

"You still have your phaser, yes? You can get us out of here, and—"

"Oh, hah," Misty said darkly, pulling away. "You're just using me. Again. That's all I am— all this is. Just another unreturned favor to you." She got up and began to walk away, flicking her hand to direct the agents to begin marching in on us.

"Wait!" Petra pleaded, grabbing her wrist. "Winifred saved my life, Misty. Please...let me save yours." Misty turned around carefully. "Who knows what the Assembly will do to you when they're done with you? Winnie— she thought she would be given amnesty live I was— but she just wasn't valuable enough. They didn't *see* her. Not like I did. Not like I see you." She stood tall in the sea breeze, her wild hair flying. "You can be valuable. Just do this one thing."

"You...you really want to take care of me?" Misty whispered, her voice breaking. The agents shifted, growing closer. She held up her hand to stop them.

"Yes, Misty. I owe you that much. I owe *you*."

"I— okay."

"Okay?"

“Before I...change my mind. Before I...realize I’m just repeating my aunt’s mistakes...take care of me.”

“I promise.” And so Misty reached into her pocket and drew out her phaser, ushering us around. We all ran as fast as we could, placing our hands upon it like it was a holy relic. The agents began firing, raining down shrapnel and light. We clasped our hands together, staring into Misty’s eyes, showing her the way. Petra’s fingers flew, inputting the coordinates, the world frayed into whispers of light, and we were gone. I embraced the blind abyss, and dreaded what I might find.

## XXVI: Auguste

I blinked and groaned, hard cobblestone digging into my head. I went to scratch the sore spot, but my hands would not move. I struggled, tugging at them, and realized from the painful digging into my raw skin that they were bound in silver wire. *Oh.* I thought to myself. *I remember this now.* I raised my head and unsteadily pulled myself to my feet. Waxy leaves and sweet-scented hibiscus brushed my nose and I suppressed a sneeze. I looked through the wall of plants, and saw a woven stucco wall separating me from a white courtyard. On the other side, staring through the slats, was a pair of brilliant emerald eyes. Her scream was deafening. I jumped back, nearly tripping over Archaeus, who was picking himself up. When he stood beside me, creating a near-twin image, she let out a sound half-way between a strangled cat and a whining teapot.

“Don’t...panic,” I said slowly.

“Are you angels?” She whispered, her hands shaking.

“Do you *see* any wings?” I heard Cleon’s deadpan say from behind me. I had half the mind to face palm.

“*Cesaire?*” She asked woozily.

“Oh-h-h,” Archaeus groaned, “oh, no. This is not happening.”

“*What is going on?*” she squealed, practically vibrating with anxiety.

“Hi,” I said, trying again, “Hey, hello. Why don’t you, uh...sit down?” I walked around the wall and guided her to a vine-covered bench beneath a faded fresco. She scarcely made a sound, just collapsed into herself with an expression indicating her mind was racing to understand. I stepped back to look at her. She was wearing a frilled white dress with a plain shawl, her hair was tightly wound and tucked into a large hat with a ridiculous display of feathers and ribbons, and there was a soft pink sash accentuating her waist. It was a far more overstated look than I had

recalled her wearing. Of course, that had been over half a decade ago for her. She showed it, too, on her face. The corners of her mouth had developed crow's feet similar to Eurynome's and her eyes were heavy with a maturity she previously lacked

"Give her some space," I heard Petra say, and we all backed up. Some of us— namely Cesaire and Eurynome— receded further behind the others. Who knew how that would go over when all was revealed.

"Wh-who are you?" Zenobie whimpered. I gritted my teeth, looking to the others to provide answers.

"Listen," Petra said sternly, "what we're about to say is going to seem...insane...and I'm certain you're in shock, but you must listen to us."

"I *know* who you are," Zenobie asserted with clenched fists bunching the layered skirts of her dress. "You're Auguste's sister. Philomena. You live with your mother and scarcely leave the house. Ever since he left you've been a shut-in."

"How could you know such a thing? We're not in France."

"No, we're not," Zenobie replied, bewildered. "We're at my villa in Les Trois-Îlets, in the middle of the Caribbean, and I haven't seen you or your brother in years. And now here you show up...with my...with *Cesaire*." She pointed her finger at Cleon and he shook his head, not wishing to be implicated. "You— you died!" She accused him, her voice cracking. "You left me as a spinster! I fled the continent, I— and now you're here? How is that even possible! You're a *ghost*! And there's two of Auguste, and all of these strangers, and I must have hit my head—"

"It's more complicated than that," he sighed. I bit my tongue as I watched him gesture for Cesaire to step forward from his hiding place behind Melem-Iram. Misunderstanding his gesture, Eurynome revealed herself with them, stepping into the light as a demon would reveal itself to a sinner. I resisted the urge to shake her silly. We stared.

“Oh fuck,” Petra stuttered, “Well– I– um. Looks like we have a lot more explaining to do.” She rubbed her neck and sighed deeply.

“Y-yeah,” Zenobie whispered, “clearly.”

We migrated to her sitting room, which was decorated with elaborate coral-hued furniture and opened through french doors to the gorgeous aquamarine ocean– it almost reminded me of my home in Antibes. Phebah was nearly brought to tears seeing her waters again. We gathered around, drinking fresh lemonade, and told her the whole story. It was longer than I had expected it to be, and full of interruptions. It was often that we laughed, cried, re-filled our drinks, got mixed-up and confused, and had to start over. It was just as often that she was left so disturbed that she had to get up from her chaise lounge and pace around the parlor until she could set her mind straight. I couldn’t blame her. What we were telling her was verifiably insane, and our existence was the only proof she had that it was all true. And of course there was the case of Eurynome– Zenobie wouldn’t even acknowledge her– but who could fault that?

We learned things from her as well. The fact she had built a life for herself. That she’d divorced herself from French society and Cesaire’s existence alike. She had purchased this land and villa herself, cultivated and cared for its grounds full-time, and spent her spare hours writing short fiction from her candle-lit bedroom table and wandering the island by the sea. Still, she wasn’t entirely settled. She confided in us what was her most compelling evidence that we were telling the truth to her.

“The nightmares,” she said, gripping her crystalware, “or the visitations I like to call them. They come to me, yes. Ever since Auguste and Cesaire vanished I’ve had them. It’s partially why I ran away. They haunt me, you see.”

“What are these visions you speak of?” Petra asked.

“The same symptoms you recounted to me, truly. Dreaming or hallucinating at random intervals. Images of archaic, crumbling metropolises, engulfed in a hellfire, the faces of my past staring thousands of yards through me. The deep-seated feeling that everything in my life is wrong. No matter what I surround myself with...I can't escape it. Not that feeling.”

“But you're still...alive?” I asked hesitantly.

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“Well, I thought you might disintegrate. I don't know, it's—”

“You're mistaken.” She adjusted her skirt and set her beverage down on her coaster. “I'm perfectly fine. Until you all came along.”

“That's the thing,” Petra said hesitantly. “We need you.”

“So you've said.”

“Well, what we're going to ask of you will be...difficult.” Zenobie sighed, almost sounding annoyed, and waved her hand.

“Then fetch me a cigarette.”

“Err...okay.” Petra fumbled around the coffee table until she found a pack and handed it to her. Zenobie flicked her lighter and inhaled the smoke.

“So,” she said languidly. “What have you come all this way to ask me?”

“It's less of an ask more of a—”

“Just get out with it.”

“Okay.” Petra wrung her hands nervously, her eyes shifting around the room for support. All she was offered were a few well-meaning smiles. “It's you anomalies who are causing all of these issues, and you have to go.”

“You're going to *kill them*?” Misty explained, choking on her drink.

“What, no!” Petra rubbed her temples. “We’re going to *meld* them.” She pointed to her chest. “Just like I was. Melded with Philomena, that is.” She gestured to Eurynome. “So you will be with Eurynome, and Auguste with Archaeus, Cesaire with Cleon, and then the timeline will stabilize, and we will all be saved.” I rubbed my eyes. This couldn’t be right. I was sure there was another way.

“I thought we could—” I protested.

“No,” said Petra forcefully. “This is it.”

“I’m not a lunatic!” Zenobie exclaimed. “I’m not killing myself for you!”

“It’s not death!”

“Isn’t it though?” Her words resonated in my ear. I was taken aback, but somehow I also knew. Somehow I wasn’t completely averse or afraid.

“We won’t do it,” Cesaire said harshly. “None of us will.”

“That’s right,” said Zenobie with a staunch nod. They both looked at me expectantly with their hard-set expressions. I hesitated.

“I—well—uh” I fumbled over my words. “I’ll do it.”

“*What!?*” They both yelped.

“Don’t *betray* us like this!” Cesaire scolded.

“The Assembly is on our tail!” I defended myself. “And everything is going to collapse into a little speck of nothing! I’ve made peace with that. I can handle it. Plus, we’ll still be alive, just...in a new way.” I gulped at that, forcing my fears down.

“Absolutely not,” Zenobie said, crossing her arms. She jumped out of her seat and stormed onto the stilted deck overlooking the pristine beach below us, her skirts trailing behind her.

“Wait!” I called out, “Come on! Can we please just talk this through!” She huffed, slumping onto the railing.

“I think I’ve had enough talking for one day,” she said bitterly. “You can just...” she trailed off. Her face looked pale, and I watched in disgust as she heaved, and then vomited over the side of the deck. She spat, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “Jesus...” she muttered. I raised my hand to her back and attempted to comfort her, but she only swatted it away.

“Spare your sympathy,” she grunted. I nodded, backing away feebly. She stood up straighter and made a beeline for the kitchen, where she downed the lemonade pitcher until it dripped all over her white blouse and ran across her skin like a stream system. I didn’t know what to do. None of us did.

“Is...everything alright?” Cesaire asked, awkwardly fidgeting with the rocking chair he had been sitting in.

“Does it feel alright to you?” She shot back. He gulped, shaking his head. “Great,” she said. “We’re on the same page.” She sighed, pinched her forehead, and gestured to the group. “It’s– it’s late. The sun is setting and we’ve been talking for hours. I feel– I feel sick– and.” She moaned, swaying. “Crud. Ugh. Okay. Go upstairs or take the couch or the courtyard or whatever you need to do. Just. Find somewhere to sleep and when I wake up in the morning I’ll decide if this is real or if God is playing an elaborate trick on me.” She squeezed her arm with a grimace. “Whatever it is, no matter how surreally lucid it seems, I don’t think I’m dreaming.” Without anything to say, and lacking anywhere else to go, we all obliged. I trudged upstairs and found a suite of guest bedrooms. My hand lingered on the doorframe of the first single I could find, and I stumbled inside, submerged in a glazy haze. It was a modest yet exquisitely decorated room, just like the rest of the villa. Every piece matched and fit a glamorous color palette, there were antique vases filled with fresh flowers on every table top, and even the bed was well-made and decorated with plush pillows and a ruffled shell-pink duvet.

I collapsed into the comforter and buried my face in the pleated fabric. Despite the calmness of the warmth and sun-drenched shadows, I could still smell Zenobie's sick. Still hear Cesaire and her voices accusing me. Still feel the pit in my stomach from Petra's not-so eloquent announcement. *How could this happen?* I lamented. *How could everything get so wrong and serious so fast?* It had seemed much simpler only days before. When the only goal was finding Zenobie. Now that we had obtained that, I didn't know what to make of our reality. The absolute unfairness of it all. Of course, I was prepared to sacrifice, but it was the concept of Cesaire losing himself, too, after he had only begun to find himself, that terrified me. I knew we weren't on good terms, that I loathed him for never giving enough, but I could never suppress the fact that I loved him for giving as much as he could.

As much as I tossed and turned on top of my covers, I couldn't find the will to sleep. Night hadn't even fallen yet. I could still see the peak of the sun waving over the watery horizon, melting bands of orange on the cresting waves. I carefully slipped downstairs, hanging onto the lacquered banister to relieve my footsteps on the creaking floorboards. To my surprise, I wasn't the only one who had migrated away from our assigned isolation. I heard muffled voices from out of an ajar window in the sitting room. They were slightly blocked by several overgrown potted plants and a bureau stuffed with coats and silk scarves, but I was able to inch my way over well enough. Peering down and past the side of the deck, I saw Zenobie and Eurynome seated on a lower patio, drinks in hand—alcoholic this time from the sight of them—making polite conversation. As curious as I was, I decided to leave that to itself. The concept of a good drink did entice me, however, and I wandered down to the cellar to search for the liquor cabinet.

I was victorious in my search, discovering a well-stocked and frosted glass cupboard unlocked for my pleasure. I found solace in the

silent act of fixing myself a drink, although I filled it by humming nonsensically, adding drumming motions when my hands were free. I mixed myself a cocktail— a typical Dark n’ Stormy— which I had been so graciously introduced to during tasting nights in Alaska. I even managed to source a sliver of lime from the icebox to garnish the rim of the glass. I was so impressed with my bartending skills that I took a chance on one, nay two, nay *three* more delicious drinks. *Ab!* I thought to myself, *What good tidings the whimsies of raiding another’s fine liquors can bring!* As I pranced around the lounge— a humble sun basement room for entertaining company with a sliding door to the lower deck— my next quest came to me.

“Music!” I exclaimed, spinning around with my fourth drink over my head. “Every good old fashioned party needs music!” I marched up the carpeted stairs back to the main level, hunting for a phonograph. As soon as my whim arrived, I recalled the year, and stalled my search. *No good entertainment...* I mused. *What am I to do?* I paced around the patterned Persian couches decorating the open-floor sitting room and took a few not-so-conservative sips from my cocktail in thought.

“Of course,” I said to myself and snapped my fingers. “The sky’s the same.” I bolted back up the main stairs and then a second, smaller spiral to the attic, where I found a sizable stained glass window above a stone ledge. I set my glass down on a pile of old luggage and pried the window open, grabbed my drink once more, and took a bold step out onto the ledge. I found myself three stories up, the warm sea air blowing in my face, and my bare feet scratched by the roughness beneath. Still, I managed to balance myself enough to climb up the shingles onto the roof, which had a flat top guarded by small spires. I hopped over them and took a seat facing the last shimmers of the sunset, sipping my rich orange-red highball until only melted ice clinked in the bottom of the glass.

I fell onto my back and leaned onto my folded arms, staring mesmerized at the constellations, which were blurred by the warm current of alcohol in my veins. I must have stayed that way for a while, because they only multiplied and brightened. That was until a foreign object decided to crash land my tranquility.

“Who is it?” I grunted and sat up. The dark silhouette of the person who had obscured my view planted their hands on their hips and swayed side to side.

“You know who I am,” they said dully. My lips parted, and I quickly wiped them of their ice-melt and spit.

“Oh,” I said. “Hey, Cesaire.” He dropped his weight from one foot to another, not sitting down, which confused me. I was quite sure he usually sat down when we spoke to each other. I rubbed my temples, trying to remember what was wrong. Before I could investigate much further, he spoke again.

“Is now a bad time...?” I shook my head and patted the space next to me.

“No, no, not at all. Please...sit.” He frowned, but followed my directions, albeit further away from me than I would have liked. Watching him from such a distance cut through the fog around my brain and I recalled what was wrong with the picture. I picked my glass up and swirled the tiny ice bits around absent-mindedly.

“So...” He said.

“So-o-o...” I echoed.

“This past week has been pretty shit, hasn’t it?”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose it has.” He chewed his lip, a habit that made me giggle. He looked at me as if I had offended him. “Nothing,” I said. “You just, er, you just chew your lip a lot.” I laughed again, finding this terribly amusing. “You’ve always done it.” He squinted his eyes at me and inched a bit closer.

“Are you drunk?” He asked point-blank. I balked, pressing a hand to my chest.

“Why, I never! I’m a man, Cesaire. I can handle a drink.” He laughed dryly and rolled his eyes, but I was sure I saw a sheepish smile creeping in.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. There was a pause and then I decided to continue.

“Why did you come up here?” I asked. “Have you come to watch the stars with me? Just as we did...oh.” I frowned angrily, recalling our fight in all of its cold and spiteful glory. “Actually, I hope you haven’t come to do *that*,” I amended.

“I have not.”

“Then what *have* you come for?” I heard him inhale, and saw his fingers fidget with each other out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m...I’m worried about you, Auguste,” he explained. “You were so quick to throw it all away today. And as much as I know you must despise me right now, I feel like I’m the only person who can sway you away from this.” He threw his arms up, emboldened. “They don’t know everything! They’re fugitives for goodness sake!”

“What do you mean?” He took my hands pleadingly.

“I mean they could be wrong. About how to save us. We don’t have to be their sacrificial lambs. We can push back. You, me...Zenobie.” I sneered at her name.

“You’re just doing this for her,” I said enviously. I mean, I could practically taste the jealousy on my tongue, just as strongly as the ginger beer and rum. It sliced through my words with the same acidic ferocity as that slice of lime.

“How could you get it so wrong?” Cesaire whispered, his voice broken. I pulled back, feeling deeply confused. *Maybe the alcohol was affecting me after all?*

“What do you mean?” I asked. “You- you’re obviously in love with her. Now that she’s here you’ll want to go back to her. You want to save her from being melded with Eurynome, and I’m really just collateral on principle. Just another cover-up.” I swallowed painfully. “That’s all I am.”

“Auguste,” he said carefully, almost laughing, but sad enough not to be, “she hasn’t seen me in over six years. She’s moved on. Our relationship was already crashing and burning. I mean, don’t you remember?”

“But– you still have all of those...those *obligations*,” I sputtered. “I mean, if not to Zenobie than your morals, your religion, your emotions.” He itched the back of his neck and nodded.

“That is all true.”

“So then, why? Why are you telling me this?”

“Because...I couldn’t stand to lose you, Auguste. I had a taste of that this past week, and it literally tore me apart. Seeing you so utterly disappointed in me, avoiding you, being jealous of you and fucking *Phebah* for goodness sake, even just trying to sleep when my only dreams were of us and me and you– it was everything!” He was shaking, and rubbed his hands on his knees to steady himself. “And without you being there, it also ended up being nothing at all. Nothing that I felt. That I couldn’t *stop* feeling.” He brushed his hair back. “Even if both of us were melded, if I could somehow have some semblance of agency, I would never forgive myself for letting you go permanently. It would be Hell.”

“I have to do this,” I whispered, suddenly feeling strikingly sober. “Saving people, being of service, finally being a net positive in my life...that’s what I’ve been searching for. Through my words, my travels, even through my adoration of you.” I tossed my head back and laughed darkly. “I’ve just been trying to be good. And now I can be. I have a purpose, Cesaire. A real purpose.” He held up his hands and shook his

head violently. I knew he wouldn't accept it. Wouldn't accept *me*. It stung.

"No," he said, "no, no, no. That won't do." He crawled closer to me and took my hands firm in his. "I won't allow it."

"Stop trying to control me," I whined. "You're always— you've always," I threw my hands up in disgust. "You always try to tie me down!"

"That's not what—" He groaned and let his head fall onto my heaving chest. "You never listen!" His voice echoed louder than it should have. He peeled away from me, his mouth open in an unformed apology.

"I— I'm sorry," he stuttered, "that was too much." I looked away.

"And you always back out," I added. "You always chose to *leave*." He looked baffled. I hoped I broke him.

"Auguste..." he started calmly, looking directly into my eyes. "I don't want to leave you." He hung his head. "You're the one who's so desperate to leave. The one who ran away all of those times without warning. I was the one who had to pick up the pieces." I rolled my eyes, ready for another lecture, but for some reason, he continued. "Listen to me," he said, "I *want* to pick up the pieces, Auguste. *Your* pieces. I don't care anymore. I'm not ready for absence to make the heart grow fonder. All it does is make my heart break."

"What do you want me to do?" I whispered quietly.

"Don't do it."

"But I have to. It's my responsibility. I finally have— I finally mean something." He looked so terribly dismayed, but my clouded judgment could scarcely think of the proper thing to tell him. I was aware I was ruining this somehow, but by the cruel irony of fate, I couldn't fix it.

"How can you leave me?" He asked with the smallest voice possible, "when this is what you gave me?" The unexpected happened, of

course. As it often did whenever he was around. Always confusing. Always changing. Never what I needed. Somehow, terribly, blissfully, beautifully...what I wanted. He kissed me. Kissed *me*. I knew he could taste the gin on my lips, but I didn't care. I let us melt into each other beneath the spinning of the moon, under the heaviness of his hand, without the confines of our bodily borders. I wanted us to spill over our own lines and into the other. I wanted to get mixed up. I wanted to forget. I wanted to—

“Auguste,” he breathed as we pulled away from each other. My vision danced around his face, so wanting to be consumed by his gaze, so wanting to—

“Yes?” I whispered with a satisfied grin.

“You'll stay?”

“I—” my voice cracked and my brow furrowed. “What?” His hands, which I realized were cupping my face, dropped to my shoulders.

“You'll stay, right?” He repeated. I scoffed, backing away.

“That's the only reason you kissed me?” I asked, feeling dizzy.

“What? No! No!”

“Then what is it, Cesaire? What is it?” He tangled his curls between his fingers, looking utterly agitated, desperate even.

“I just— I'm trying to show you how I feel, and I can't say it yet but—”

“The world is about to end,” I said. “The *world* is about to *end* and you can't even tell me you like me.” He smiled, tears welling in his crinkled eyes.

“You really don't see it, do you?” He asked me.

“*Tell me*,” I shot back.

“Okay,” he said in a low voice, visibly shaking. I stared him down, practically daring him to say it. After everything, I just wanted to hear

him. His voice. Only. “Okay,” he said again. He inhaled and exhaled. I waited. The world was still.

“I love you.” I could tell he wanted to look away. That this pained him. That I might have pushed him too far. Or maybe it was the apocalypse. Or the fact I was drunk and he was bone tired. Or any number of things. Or maybe, just maybe, he truly meant it, and he had been trying to tell me that all along. I was just too deaf to hear it, and too stubborn to turn up the volume.

“Oh,” I said, my eyes wide. The world spun. I thought I might fall off the roof and die. That would be alright. “Oh, wow,” I repeated. “I never thought— I mean, maybe I suspected— well, I don’t know—” I cut myself off. “You *love me*?” He blushed furiously and rubbed his arms as if he were freezing.

“I said it, didn’t I?”

“That’s...I mean, that’s brilliant,” I said, stunned.

“You really know how to charm a man,” he quipped deprecatingly. I leaned into him, cupping his chin in my hand.

“I’ve been trying for so long,” I admitted, “I can’t believe I pulled it off. Sort of.”

“We’ve— I mean, we’ve kissed, Auguste,” he said pointedly. I lifted my head and stared at him blankly.

“You literally said it didn’t mean anything.” He gritted his teeth.

“I may have been in a bit of denial...”

“A bit!?” He laughed and we collapsed in on each other, watching the silver moonlight sparkle on the water. Fiery lights of oil and wax burned in the hillside village across the bay. Palm fronds swayed in the gentle air. Nightjars fluttered and flitted through the dancing leaves. Our curls locked and our fingers crossed. Somewhere around the house, there were other hushed conversations buzzing. Somewhere, in the deep reaches of space and time, I knew the Assembly was coming for us.

Despite this, despite the impending doom, the despair, and the fact Cesaire hadn't realized that I still hadn't let go, I allowed myself to sit in the moment. *Who knew how many more times I would get to have this again? If I would even get to have it at all, that was.* I rubbed his thumb and tilted my chin to his, inviting him into another kiss. I tried not to feel guilty about it. Emotions clawed at my throat and I swallowed them back down. The night went on and so did we.

## **XXVII: Winifred/Cesaire**

- Winifred -

I had lost track of how many days I had been pent up in that cramped cell, but this was the day that broke the routine. For one, we were hurtling at a much higher speed than usual (my body had fine-tuned itself to such things), there were no guards present in our hall, and I had not received food on my usual schedule for a concerning amount of time. Growing impatient and restless, I began to pace around the chrome confines of my cell. It was a meager arrangement— only a spare mattress tied to a wall-bolted iron bed frame, a toilet, an industrial sink, and two small wicker bins for my belongings. There was no window. The only light that reached me came from the flickering fluorescents in the hall beyond my bars. The only entertainment was the voice of the man in the cell next me, and even he did not always answer

back. I dragged my rough hands through my hair and down to my neck, walking over to the wall between us. I tapped. Three times. Our signal. I was more anxious than usual for a reply, and I hated how vulnerable that made me.

“Are you there?” I called out. “Have you noticed something’s off?” There was no reply. I banged on the metal with my fist. “Hello!?” Still nothing. I grunted and tried both hands, hammering, pounding. I didn’t let up. I needed him to respond. This could be our moment.

“What is it, Winnie?” He finally replied, sounding groggy. I had forgotten that sleeping our days away was always an option.

“The ship,” I explained, “it’s making a descent. We’re going to land soon. I can feel it in the altitude and the speed changes.”

“And I should care why?”

“Because this could be our chance!” I grinned giddily, even though he couldn’t see it. “We can *escape*.”

“What, you have a way out?”

“Azeem,” I said gleefully, “I always have a way out.” Just then, the entire ship rattled, and I slipped onto my back. I cursed and jumped back to my feet. I dug under the sink and retrieved a small shiv I had fastened with the exposed piping. Seeing the hallway was completely empty, I jammed the pick into the locking mechanism on my cell. I wasn’t a genius, but I sure was handy, I knew that.

”It’s not going to work,” Azeem said dully, “whatever it is you’re trying to do, it won’t work.”

”Don’t be such a debbie downer!” I bit my tongue and twisted my arm, forcing the metal to jam further into the lock. There was a creaking sound, and then a click. I pumped my fist and rattled the door open. I immediately bolted over to Azeem’s cell, where he was lying on his mattress staring at the ceiling with dead eyes.

“Get up, you lout!” I snapped as I fiddled with his cell lock. The bars hissed open, and he raised a brow, slid off of the bed, and walked calmly out of his cell with a satisfied smirk. He cricked his neck and smiled.

“Where do you reckon all of the security went?” He asked.

“Well, if we’re making a landing and something’s gone wrong, I’d imagine it’s all hands on deck. This ship is massive, but as far as I’m aware, we’re the only prisoners, so I can’t imagine it’s worth the resources to supervise us in such a situation.” The ship creaked again, and I grabbed the side of the wall for support.

“If there’s only two of us, how the Hell are we going to escape?” He asked. “It was trying to break out of prison that got me here in the first place.”

“Yeah well, I got you and your friends put in that prison in the first place, because apparently I’m an idiot. We’ve all made mistakes.”

“Ain’t that just the way.” I rolled my eyes and patted his back.

“So, do you just want to wallow here, or do you want to take a stand?” I began moving us down the hall. “We’re just collateral at this point. Only here to make our dear friends cooperate. Who cares? Let’s just blow this whole thing sky-high.” He sighed, but I could tell the fight had left him. He threw his hands up in defeat.

“Yeah, whatever,” he relented. “Let’s go get ourselves killed.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” I grinned. We ran up the metal staircase out of the dark brig and into the upper levels. When we got there, however, we were met with a rather unexpected sight. Hundreds— even thousands— of prisoners clad in white pantsuits milling about an open cafeteria. They were crowded around rows of dramatically large windows under vaulted ceilings revealing the scene below— a rapid descent onto a tropical sea dotted with green islands— Earth. Who knew when. I startled, grabbing Azeem’s hand excitedly.

“We’ve jumped out of time travel!” I exclaimed. “I was right!”

“Yeah,” he said, “and there’s a million other inmates...you were wrong.” I punched him lightly in the shoulder.

“I know what to do, do you?” He nodded with an assured smile. I jumped onto the nearest table, snatched an abandoned metal tray and spoon and began to clang them together.

“Hey!” I yelled, “we’re getting out of this joint! Riot! Riot to the bridge! Ri-o-o-t!” The chaos that ensued was more effective than I had anticipated. The prisoners swarmed, screamed, swung, and stomped their way through the court. They took to the elevators, stairs, and lifts, and began to tear the place apart like flies to a carcass. All they’d needed was a push. Azeem and I gleefully led the charge, using a broken pipe and a fork as weapons, respectively. As we climbed the levels of the colossal ship, we encountered more and more Assembly personnel. They attempted to ward us off with their guns, their fists, even barricades and lockdowns. Still, they were no match for our energy, our determination, our manic violence and camaraderie. I knew none of these people, but I was frenetic to fight with them. The lights flashed red and an alarm blared over the intercom, but that only added to the atmosphere. We overtook staircases, bashed in heads, and battered down doors. It was glorious. As we climbed the tower, our numbers thinned, but Azeem and I stood tall.

We ended up in a stalemate in a small stairwell towards the top compartment of the ship. I was posted next to a window with a stolen energy gun in hand, my breath too hard and metallic for my age. I looked over my shoulder at Azeem and a few dozen inmates behind me. I could hear gunfire on the level above. Sweat dripped down my face. I licked it off of my chin and tasted salt. I charged forward, the battery pack I’d clipped onto my gun weighing heavy in my pocket, tipping me off balance. I tripped on the final step, and saved myself by sliding onto the

glossy floor, firing rounds at a high angle close to my chest. I watched as a man in front of me fell limply to the floor, his flesh seared and burning, his clothes mangled with holes and coagulated with fresh blood. I stepped over his corpse and began running, my ears ringing, ushering the others to follow me. I stopped. We were at the level just below the bridge.

The entire room was coated in sleek onyx, and there was a conclave window with lounge furniture facing it, giving me a perfect view of the island we were bolting down towards. I watched in horror as reality phased around us, cracking and splitting in blooms of color. *They're down there, I thought. The anomalies are down there and we have to find them.*

“Let’s go,” I said to Azeem, beckoning him up the final stairs. Half of our remaining fighters who’d made it to the top without having to secure levels or suffer injury stayed behind to guard our entry. The rest tagged along with Azeem and I as our entourage. I tucked my gun close to my chest and carefully marched up the glistening glass stairs to the bridge. There were a few remaining attendants working overtime on the consoles, headsets, and controls. As soon as they saw us their arms flew up in surrender. Some dropped to their knees, pleading with us.

“Give us the wheel,” I barked. “We’re grounding the ship.”

“You can’t!” yelled a commander. “There’s not enough land to set the fleet down on, you’d have to make a water landing!”

“He’s right!” the captain cried, “This isn’t the flagship, either! If we fell out of line, they’d know something was wrong! They’d fire on us!”

“Who has the flagship?” I asked. When I got no response, I aimed my gun at the captain’s forehead. He winced.

“Oh God!” He shrieked, “It’s Dido’s!” He collapsed into a crouched position beneath his desk, his arms tucked over his head. “This is the royal fleet! Please, please...spare us.”

“Your sparing is of no concern to me. I just need this ship to land.”

“It can’t!” He protested. I tutted and waved my gun. “Okay, okay! Fine! Ah, everyone, p-prepare for landing...” He shook with fear and brushed his slick hair back. “E-everything is going to be fine.” I strutted over to him and nudged my gun into the small of his back, leaning down to speak in his ear.

“Take us down,” I commanded. He nodded rapidly and gripped the wheel, lurching the ship towards the planet’s surface. Everything began to shake violently as the paradoxical rifts and tears in spacetime gleamed brighter. I gritted my teeth and braced myself against the control panel.

“We’re going to go down!” The captain yelled over the sound of screeching metal and popping electrical wires. I shook my head and forced my gun further into his spine.

“It doesn’t matter. Keep going.”

“Are you sure, Winifred?” Azeem asked. I didn’t respond, I just kept my eyes trained on the growing horizon. The great blue expanse of the sea began to swallow the windshield, and I felt my vision blackening at the edges as the shaking grew uncontrollable. Panels ripped off of the ship and flew into the wind, the remaining personnel on the bridge grabbed on for dear life, and their screams were drowned by the roaring blare of impending destruction.

“I’ve lost control!” Exclaimed the captain. He attempted to pull the ship upwards, but all he managed to accomplish was ripping the steering wheel out of its pocket. I groaned and grabbed the emergency stick, attempting to stabilize us.

“It’s no use!” He warned me. I opened my mouth to protest, but it was too late. The ship crashed into the waves, enveloping us with ribbons of briny water that splashed across the windows. My head flew

forward and banged against the dashboard. Everything went black. I felt Azeem's hands gripping my shoulders, dragging me upwards, a wetness in my hair, salt in my mouth, the blinding sun peeking through my eyelashes.

I coughed, choking on the ocean, and gasped. I stood up, looking around. The ship was a giant mess— a corpse of a machine— spewing smoke behind us. We were standing in crystal clear waters just off a small shoal. The shore was a few hundred feet away. Metal and debris bobbed in the waves. Azeem had the captain's limp body in his arms.

"Is he...?" I asked hesitantly.

"He's breathing."

"...Okay. Wow."

"...Yeah."

"Yeah."

- Cesaire -

I heard my glass drop on the floor before it left my hand. Archaeus and Auguste stood before me in the sitting room, their hands clasped tight, the sun fanning out behind their silhouettes in glaring light. I shook my head, said some choice words, and probably cried. I wanted to kick and scream, but my body ached with a tiredness I could not shake. After everything, it was betrayal that shattered me. Eurynome grabbed my arm and guided me to the couch, where I sat down and let my mind race in silence. I felt the silk of the cushions ripple beneath my skin, the call of a petrel in my ear, the overwhelming feeling of *Everything is wrong. This can't be happening*. I was vaguely aware of Phebah picking icy glass off of the floor, letting the chips melt in her palm. I could definitely see Zenobie sobbing and pacing in the kitchen. I could hear her, too. She threw a dish towel against the tiled backsplash. Petra placed

a calming hand on her shoulder. I could almost feel her touch on me. I was dizzy. Sick, even.

“How could you do this to me?” I finally heard myself say as the deafening static cleared from my head. I gripped the arm of the couch and stared at him with desperate eyes. “Didn’t I give you enough?” I laughed through the tears now streaming confidently down my cheeks. “Didn’t I say it to you?” He itched the soft skin behind his ear and swung back and forth with his arms cradled around each other. I wanted to shake him. To get up in his face and just yell. But I couldn’t. Not to him. I watched him instead. Dared him to say anything.

“I’m sorry,” was all he managed. “But we knew this had to happen.” His hands flew all over. “I mean, even if we didn’t know, it was fate. It was just— it was bound to be.”

“You don’t believe in fate,” I spat back.

“But I do believe in purpose.” He looked at his feet in shame. “And I told you last night that this was mine. You just...chose not to listen.” I gasped, my fists practically shaking with fury, and I leapt out of my seat.

“You begged me to confess to you!” I hollered. “If you were going to die—” I stopped myself, stepping back slowly. My face fell, all of the blood rushing out. “Were you just seeking closure? Just a means to an end? A nightcap to your life?” He said nothing. He didn’t even look at me. My head hung low.

“I’m a real person, Auguste. You can’t just manipulate me to say what you need to hear, I— I only said it because I thought it meant something. I was ready to finally give in, to commit! And now you’re throwing it all away. You’re choosing *him*.” I gestured to Archaeus. “He’s not even— He’s just you in another shape! All he wants is for you two to meld so that he can be the only one!” I sighed raggedly into my hand. “You don’t understand. I chose you for *you*. You’re Auguste to me. Not

some anomaly, not some antidote, not some soulless nothing. Auguste.” The room was quiet. Everyone either averted their eyes or stared right into mine. I didn’t care.

“I understand this must be hard for you, Cesaire,” Archaeus said softly. He spun around to look at the rest of us. “There’s no shying away from that– it affects us all. When Petra merged it wasn’t pretty, but...we all survived it. And the world is better for it.”

“No,” I said. “No, *you* don’t get to say that to me.”

“I’m not trying to impede–”

“You’re trying to kill my– you’re trying to kill Auguste!” I scoffed. “I’m quite sure that constitutes impeding.”

“I don’t think you understand what merging is, Cesaire,” Eurynome said, her hands hovering over my body like I was a bird with mangled wings. When she touched me I winced. “It’s not a death. It’s an evolution.”

“He’ll never be the same,” I sobbed.

“Neither will I,” Archaeus said somberly. “But that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make. I lost a part of myself when Auguste came into being. You and him were formed without fundamental essences of yourselves. It’s like two puzzle pieces, each missing a pair, and we’re finally joining them together.”

“I couldn’t live with myself,” I said, reaching for Auguste. “if you did this.”

“You’ll have to do it, too, Cesaire,” Auguste said, his eyes shining with something dark and ugly. “If you want to live at all.”

“I’d do it if it meant you didn’t have to,” I whispered. “I’d do it to save you.”

“Well, it doesn’t work that way, doesn’t it?” He walked over to the sliding glass door, his arms crossed and tucked close to his chest. “And don’t be so selfish. Saving me is saving one person. I’m trying to

save everyone.” He looked back at me. “What’s really more important?” My mind faltered as I searched for an answer, as I gazed into the rolling sea, as the world slowed. And then there was noise. A loud, screaming, fire roaring, death beckoning noise. A reckoning. A mystery. An end. We ran to the window and forced it to budge, running onto the deck, our necks craned towards the wispy clouds. We saw swift doom there, lingering in the heavens. The sky aflame and engulfed in a tar-black plume of billowing smoke. Somewhere in the pale blue of the stratosphere above I could see the faint bellies of monsters. Huge ships floating in the sky. And below them, hurtling down to the sea, was a burning, spinning, out-of-control ship, crashing into the ocean, sending a mile of water spiraling into the air. Making the villa shake on impact.

“Oh my God,” I heard Eurynome say. Someone clutched my hand. *Maybe Auguste?* I couldn’t think enough to tell.

“We have to get down there,” Phebah urged. I wetted my dry mouth and nodded, my lips still parted in shock. There were voices swirling around me, saying things, dragging me down the wooden stairs to the sand below, the shapes of bodies floating in the blue waves on the horizon, and my confusion all mixed up. I wished it was Auguste who had held me then.

*What in God’s name...?*

### XXVIII: Auguste

I squinted my eyes and scanned the waves melting on the white palm-shaded sands for signs of life. The behemoth ship had crashed a few hundred feet off the shoreline, and was spewing columns of smoke into the clear sky. Still, I could spot bodies— some moving, others still and floating over the swells. Then, a miracle. I saw two blotted figures dragging their feet through the surf. One had her arm slung over the other’s shoulder. The other was lugging a limp body in his arms. I shielded my face from the sun with my hand to get a better look, and gasped when I realized what I was seeing.

“Misty!” I exclaimed, “It’s your aunt!” I looked closer. “And *Azeem*?” Both Misty and Phebah yelled in excitement and disbelief. The three of us quickly waded into the warm seawater to meet our weary estranged friends and family. Their hair and clothes were soaked, their skin bruised, and the side of *Azeem*’s cheek was swollen with welts and burns from the fire. Still, they were marching forward. The man *Azeem* carried in his arms looked worse for wear, and his uniform was ripped and waterlogged, but his chest was expanding and contracting to indicate breath. Misty bounded over the rolling waves and launched herself into Winifred’s arms.

“Aunt Winnie!” she cried. “Oh my God, what are you doing here?” Winifred pulled back, awestruck, and brushed Misty’s hair out of her face.

“What are *you* doing here? I thought you were with the Assembly...”

“I was! But...well. They convinced me to desert.”

“Of course they did,” Winifred laughed. “They’re incredibly convincing, aren’t they?” Misty nodded and embraced her once more. Meanwhile, Phebah cautiously approached Azeem, touching her hand to his unharmed cheek.

“I’m so sorry...” she said gently. “We left you behind. I– I thought I was never going to see you again, Azeem...” He grabbed onto her hand and kissed it lightly.

“Hush,” he said. “There was nothing you could do. You had to find Zenobie.” Just then, the rest of the group caught up with us, and we found ourselves standing on a shallow sandbar lapping with small waves.

“They found me,” Zenobie said. “I’m guessing you were a sacrifice towards that goal, then?” Azeem nodded.

“Yes.”

“Auguste would know a thing or two about sacrifices,” Cesaire said bitterly. I swallowed, even though it hurt, and made a point to ignore his comment.

“So,” Azeem said, “if you’ve found Zenobie, then what’s this?”

“Better question,” Cleon shot back, “What is *this*?” He raised his hands to the sky, which was scarred by the shadows of the descending ships.

“Oh. It’s Dido’s fleet,” he explained. “They’ve caught onto your illegitimate activity and they’re here to eliminate you. They’re going to annihilate this entire timeline. The weapons just need time to charge.”

“If they eliminate us...that’s going to cause a paradox,” Eurynome said. “The universe is going to collapse either way.”

“Pretty much,” Winifred said. “Unless you merge before then, of course. Then the Assembly would cross its threshold and fail in the future, which means that all Assembly activity in the present would paradoxically cease to exist, too. But of course, that choice hasn’t been made yet, so...here we are.”

“Here we are...” I repeated.

“*Are* you melding?” Winifred asked no one in particular.

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?” Cleon mumbled.

“There’s no time to ponder that now,” Eurynome urged, “not out in the open like this. We should head back to the villa, seek shelter.”

“I’m taking him with me,” Azeem said, holding the unconscious man in his arms up like an offering. “He’ll be a good collateral, and we can question him.”

“Okay. We’ll just have to tie him up,” Eurynome said. Azeem nodded, and with that we all began to trudge through the waist-level water and back onto the beach. It was a bit of a struggle to drag the man up the steep sandy steps leading to the villa, but with our group efforts, we managed.

“Do you know why the ship crashed?” Eurynome asked as we climbed onto the upper deck. “And why were you on it?”

“We were bargaining chips,” Winifred said. She grinned slyly and leaned against the glass door. “Also, we sank the ship.”

“Of course you did,” Petra said, swooping in, and draped an arm around Winifred’s shoulder. “You were always my little firecracker.”

“And you were always my biggest instigator.”

“Eugh, get a room you two,” Misty complained, sticking out her tongue. Eurynome bolted the sliding door and raised her brows, looking back and forth between the two of them.

“Them?” She asked surprisingly. “That was a thing? What about Dylan?”

“I can have more than one thing, Nomie,” Petra said with a smile and flopped herself onto the ottoman. She flicked her wrist at Azeem, who was setting the man down on the floor, where a briny puddle was gathering. “Now, let’s grill this guy.” I leaned awkwardly against the cool stucco wall and crossed my arms, feeling especially like an onlooker at that moment. The room was crowded, the floor and furniture was wet, there was the looming threat of Dido’s fleet literally hanging above our heads, and there was a complete stranger tied to the glass coffee table coming to his senses in the middle of the parlor.

Petra crouched in front of him and pushed his head up, her hands grabbing a fistful of his cropped dirty blond hair. He had a stuffy mustache, and looked older than everyone else in the room, but not enough to be my father. He was also clad in a black sailor’s uniform with the insignia of the Assembly embroidered over his chest. He blinked slowly, and attempted to rub his eyes, but discovered they were bound. For some reason, it made my heart skip a beat.

“Hey,” Petra said, lightly slapping his cheek, “are you awake?” He groaned in response, still seeming disoriented.

“Wh– where am I?” He asked.

“That’s not important,” Petra replied. “What matters is this– I’m going to ask you some questions, you’re going to give me some answers, and if you tell the whole truth– I won’t leave you at the mercy of Dido.”

“Oh God, I’ve been captured,” he fretted, struggling against his restraints.

“Your ship went down and it was all your fault. Do you really want to meet the consequences of that? Or do you want to live as a free man?”

“Please.”

“Good.” She sat back, pulling her hand from his chin. “Now, what is your name and station?”

“Janus Kjeldgaard, Captain of *The Exaleifon*, ma’am,” he said nervously. “That’s the inmate and cargo ship of the royal fleet.”

“Wait...Janus?” Petra said, her eyes glistening with recognition. “You’re not just a ship captain...you’re the Chief Navy General!” He cringed, but gave an admitting nod.

“Who are you to know that?” He asked.

“We served on the same advisory board. I was the Timeline Magistrate until recently. It’s fine if you don’t recognize me, I won’t blame you.”

“No, no, I do...Petronilla was it?”

“Petra.”

“Right. I– what do you want to know?” She smirked and leaned back onto her haunches, thinking.

“This doomsday that comes upon us,” she said, “how dire is it? How much stake does the Assembly have in ensuring it?”

“Plenty,” he answered. “Without it, the entire continuum will exceed its mass and the Assembly will surely cease to exist. It’s been my mission for some time to use any Navy means necessary to ensure your mission would not be complete for this reason.” He scratched his stubble. “I find it peculiar that this never came to your attention...you must’ve been a decoy.”

“A what?”

“A decoy. A role bestowed upon you to distract from the real work being done. They’ll make an enemy of the state an agent or give them an excessively vain position in order to placate them and prevent retaliation that might arise from silencing or martyring them.” We all looked at each other, and I could see the pieces clicking into place.

“Sounds about right...” Petra said begrudgingly. “Alright, so what else do you know? If we were to stop the collapse, what would be the best way to do it now? Use your strategic brain here, what would Dido least expect?”

“Well...” he pondered, “there’s one detail you likely lack.”

“Spill it.” His eyes darted around anxiously. Petra grabbed him by the chin and looked him dead in the eyes. “Tell me *now*.”

“Alright, alright!” He wrestled away from her grip. “The timeline is so unstable at this point that...” He gulped, steadying himself. He tried to speak, but the words frightened him. “...Just one meld will destroy the Assembly.” My blood chilled. Every possibility raced through my body at once.

“...What?” Petra breathed.

“I said what I said. You only need one more meld. Do it now and it’s over.” He collapsed into his knees and began to sob. “Please...please just don’t kill me.” Petra rolled her eyes and hoisted him back to a sitting position.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped. “We’re not evil.” She scratched her arms nervously and sighed. “I just— we need to think about this.” She held a finger up to his mouth as if he were a child. “Wait here. Don’t try screaming.” He nodded, although he was whimpering, too. It was a rough thing to witness. We all migrated to the kitchen, which was a wide open space crammed with cabinets stuffed with spices, walls in kooky colors, and a mosaic floor. There were lace curtains framing the chipped windows, letting in the salty air and cries of seabirds. We filtered in, filling out the nooks and crannies. The tension was thick and heady. I hated it.

“So...” I said, tugging at my short sleeves, “That was a lot.”

“Are you just jumping at the opportunity to meld now?” Cesaire bit from across the room where he was leaning against the pump sink. “I bet you can’t wait to be the hero and save everyone.”

“Would you let it go?” I shot back. “I’ll do what I must.” He was poised to argue when Eurynome held up her hand to stop him.

“No,” she said, “neither of you are right to meld. You both have such brilliant lives ahead of you. You have each other. It should be Zenobie and I that meld.”

“I’m not doing that for him!” Zenobie protested. “I won’t agree to it!”

“Yeah!” Cesaire yelled. “Are you mad, Eurynome? She’s got a whole life, romance or not! Just because *you’re* so miserable—”

“Enough,” Eurynome said grimly. “Can’t you stop being so selfish? Can’t you look beyond yourself and see that whether you like it or not, it must be done?”

“But...Auguste and Zenobie...they’re both...” I saw tears forming in his eyes, and he used the back of his hand to wipe them away. “I love them both. In their own ways. But I love them.”

“I know,” she said warmly. “And that’s why you can never let them go.”

“But you have to,” I said to him urgently. “You and Zenobie have made peace with your existence, you deserve to see it through. Any other solution is a travesty, I must be the one, and Archaeus already agrees.”

“It’s true,” Archaeus said.

“No, it’s not!” Cesaire cried. “Auguste, you don’t understand, you have so much left to offer! Your art, your poetry, the way you think! The way you have always been so boldly yourself, even in the most stark and dire of places!” He walked across the cool tile. He walked to me.

“The true travesty would be to deny the world of that— of you.” I set my jaw and stood firm. I let the swaying of the sea hold me.

“My true peace will come in sacrifice,” I said. “That is what I will give the world. That will be my requiem.” My words swirled around me like a shield, like a hurricane, like all the energy of the sun. On the inside I was glowing in a resplendent light, and I only hoped Cesaire could see it. He balked instead, stumbling backwards and catching his hand on the rim of the sink. I watched his accosted expression like a hawk. I felt the pain radiating off of him like heat.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice breaking. “But I have no other choice.”

“No,” he said, “no, there’s another choice.” I tried to understand what he was saying, the sentences he was stringing through me like a fish on a spear. The bloody existence that he was painting with his own fingers. The ridges and furrows he was taking me through. The seeds he was planting in the roots of my hair. I tried to grasp it like silt slipping through my fingers. Like seconds passing on an invisible clock. I tried to make it not make sense.

“What do you mean?” I asked hoarsely. He ignored my question.

“I found my true peace with you, Auguste,” he said. “That satisfaction you claim to protect by melding– it doesn’t exist in a world without you in it.”

“You’ll survive– you’ve done it before– this doesn’t mean I don’t want you!” I groaned, my thoughts falling out of sync with my emotions. “I waited so long for you. All of that time, I still would have been okay to resign and die without ever having known you the way I wanted to. It’s possible. It’s okay.” I stumbled forward, grabbing his hands in mine. “The time we received was a blessing, and you deserve to have so much more.”

“And what about you?” He said calmly, almost as if he was nurturing me. He watched our tangled fingers, and caressed mine with a tender thumb.

“What about me?”

“Do you deserve this sacrifice?”

“I’m not seeking it for glory,” I scoffed.

“But you are, Auguste.” He sighed and turned his head, the serene light enveloping all of his beautiful features in a flaxen glow. I watched his movements keenly, waiting for a sign. He gave me it when he stared directly down my nose, our hands still roped steadily together. “Could you find peace knowing that your sacrifice will go unknown and unremembered?” He asked me. “That you could leave this world nameless, without any grand dramatic gesture? That you could feel worthy knowing that just existing is enough for this world?” My tongue caught in my throat. I chose the truth.

“No,” I said. He smiled bleakly and nodded.

“Then you still have so much left to learn.” He let me go. Slowly. Deliberating. Our fingers peeled apart one digit at a time. Sparks rippled across our skin as the contact subsided. I searched him for an answer, but he offered me nothing. Then he gave a firm nod to someone behind me that I could not see. I turned around to find them, but it all happened so fast. He strode past me, his fists clenched. Cleon whispered something to Archaeus and Eurynome and they squeezed his hands tightly before quickly letting go. The two men, twin visions of very different manners, walked towards each other in such a self-assurance, you wouldn’t even bat an eye. Everything about that moment felt natural, normal, typical. In fact, before my breathing slowed and my limbs grew faint, before I realized; it was calm. A wave of sweetness that washed over me. The feeling of old forgotten summers. Stretches of countryside road traversed a thousand times over until my feet made imprints in the red dirt. Statues of the Virgin Mary with their eyes washed out by dirt and grime, until it seemed they were crying. Freshly cut grass on a simple morning. A yearning and a want. A stretching and a seeking. A joining of bodies and

hands. A tranquility so warm and comforting that you would get lost in it for hours. A promise that there was always love. A sigh. A laugh. A stick and stone. An end.

“I meant what I said,” Cesaire said as he and Cleon leaned into each other. “I love you.” He pressed his palms into Cleon’s. “And for the rest of your life,” he said as an azimuth shifted and the wind blew differently, “that will never change.” I wanted to gasp, to scream, to say anything. But something wonderful prevented me. The assurance that I truly believed him. That I held it to be true. That I wanted to search the entire world for why and land on the only plausible answer— *because it always had been*. I wanted to commit it to paper. To memory and language. I wanted to, I wanted to, I wanted to. There was so much I wanted to do. So much I had denied myself. So much Cesaire had empowered me to explore. So, so much. And it was like a burning path extending from my heart to his, all laid out in front of me in effervescent victory.

The world changed in a magnificent way that day. In a show of humanity and connection I had never anticipated to experience in my lifetime. It was painful, genuinely painful to witness. And by God, no matter how blinding it was, it was hard to look away. The world spun itself around a silver spool, danced and played in the flickering light, and two became one. I lifted my hands to my mouth, names and prayers escaping my lips. Tears falling and mixing with them like oil and water. A little supernova exploded in that kitchen. The bare body of an angel spread its wings and died. Something more was reborn in its place. Something no poetry could explain, no heart could describe. Something that made my soul sing. And I hated it. And I loved it. And it was everything.

“I love you too,” I think I said, somewhere in the middle of it all. And even if I didn’t, it was what I had been saying all along. What I

would never stop saying my whole life long. Because it was true, and it would never change.

*And your arm felt nice wrapped 'round my shoulder  
And I, had a feeling that I belonged  
I had a feeling that I could be someone, be someone, be someone*

### **XXIX: Auguste**

Dust rattled from the rafters as the entire villa shook with the violent rain of artillery from Dido's fleet. They knew they had scarcely any time left, and they were grasping at dust, but it still threatened to end us. After everything we had done, the Assembly could still bring us to our knees. Zenobie fled back from the sitting room, where she had fetched a blanket from a cupboard, and draped it over Cesaire– Cleon's– *somebody's* shivering body. I chose not to look in that direction at the moment, instead focusing on our aerial bombardment.

"Misty!" Petra shouted over the shaking beams of the house, "Do you still have your phaser on you!"

"Yes!" She yelled back, holding the small device over her head.

"Good!" Petra ran over to her and held onto the phaser. "Okay, we need to leave this timeline, and fast."

"Do you know where to go?" Petra nodded.

"I do." As they talked, I looked on in horror at the scene outside the window– reality was bending and twisting in on itself, coming apart at the very seams.

"We don't have much time!" I urged, "Everyone just needs to get around the phaser now!" The people in my vicinity obliged, placing their

hands or any part of themselves they could manage on the little piece of metal. Even the creature I could scarcely acknowledge touched it gingerly, as if he knew what it was. I shuddered, squeezing my eyes tight, and contemplated prayer. I wanted to live. I wanted to survive this. Everything was going so fast. There could be hours left in this timeline, or there could be mere seconds. It was all left up to the minds of other beings. I understood Cesaire then— his kinship to faith. I needed it.

“Is that everyone?” Petra asked desperately.

“We forgot Janus!” Azeem yelled.

“Who?” Somebody asked.

“The captain!”

“Leave him behind!” Winifred snapped, “there’s no time!”

“We can’t just—”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Petra said, “just get him!” I clenched my eyes shut, simulating blindness, trying not to focus on the roar of comets detonating around us. Of the threat of death rapping at our door. There were footsteps. Somebody ran off and came back. There was a rustling of fabric. Murmured thanks. Quiet sobs.

“Be quiet!” Petra scolded. “Okay, do we have everyone now?”

“Yes,” a strange voice answered. It made me sick to hear.

“Alright. Place your hands in the center. Close your eyes. Let time take us where we need to be. You’re going home now.” I clenched my eyes tighter and wrapped my hand around the phaser. *It’s not an escape*, I thought, *It’s a return*. And then, just like all of those times before, and unbeknownst to me the final of them all, I hurtled through time and space, blankness and darkness, abyss and void. I felt the sickening sensation of my atoms pulling themselves apart and rearranging themselves again on the other side. I nearly adored it. The thrill of it all. The inexplicable concept of time travel. For some reason, unexplained to me, I thought *I’m going to miss this*. And then it was over.

The most familiar sunbeam in the world caressed my face. My hands wandered to meet it, grazing my lips and brushing my nose, feeling alive. I could feel my body around my spirit, in a way. It was exhilarating. I opened my eyes, and the city I saw was perhaps the most breathtaking sight of my life.

“Antibes,” I said, the name welcome on my lips. I looked over my shoulder. Eurynome, Archaeus, and the Stranger stood in a line facing the wall of the marina, their expressions as wonderful as I imagined my own to be. It was everything my memory had preserved and more. The glittering specks of sunshine upon the bay, the vast blue sky, the cobblestone streets and bustling cafes. The sort of place you wanted to leave and come back to a thousand times. And yet, it was also different in a way I knew wasn’t quite correct. Women walked around in short jewel-toned dresses and glossy sunglasses, pastel cars lined street corners, and the buildings were far more bustling and developed than I had recalled. I knew that despite all of my wishes, there had been a change.

“Misty...” I asked carefully, “what year is it?”

“The first one I could get to,” she said. “Are you sure you want to...hear?”

“Tell me,” I said.

“...1963.” I bit my tongue and nodded. It was over a century past my time. It was jarring and dizzying and maddening all the same. But it was now, and it was the simple peace I had to make.

“Do you think the Assembly knows we’re here?” Archaeus asked.

“I can try to contact them under the false pretenses of my position,” Misty said. “I’ll just pray they don’t send anyone to meet me.”

“Be careful...” Eurynome said quietly. I could tell her mind was racing, too. Misty nodded and pulled a small hand-held communication device out of her pocket. She clicked the button on top and spoke into the grainy speaker.

“This is Agent Misty Pugh reporting in,” she said. There was the click of the button releasing, and then nothing. “Hello?” she asked again, “I repeat, this is Agent Misty Pugh, designation 2-8-9-7-C-5?” Silence. “I repeat–” Nothing. The realization fell on us lightly, like a timid blanketing of snow in early spring. A sweet release. We were free and we had won. The Assembly was no more. And then the heavier side of our victory dawned on me.

“We’re alone,” I said as I stared out at the ships in the harbor. “We’re stranded.” Misty shook her head.

“We can’t be– I– I’ll use my phaser right now,” she said, quickly adjusting the settings. “I’ll be right back.” She turned the switch, but the expected occurred. Or rather, didn’t. Nothing happened. Misty was the same as she ever was, in the same place and time as she had been before. The phaser in her hand was only a useless piece of scrap metal now. For the first time in ages, we existed in a state of permanence. Winifred came to her side, placing a steadying hand upon her shoulder. They both joined me in staring out at the horizon. The unchanging, neverending, eternal horizon.

“It’s going to be alright,” She said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. She pulled Misty in tight, hugging her from the side.

“I know,” Misty replied. “But I’m still sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said, looking over at her. “We’re just...back to the way things should be. Moving forward.”

“At the mercy of destiny once more,” I heard the Stranger say. I didn’t reply. I couldn’t say a word. Eurynome spoke for me instead.

“We’ll make due,” she said. “We always do.” There were some other words spoken most likely, but I didn’t hear them. I just wandered to the edge of the marina, swung myself over the stone retainer wall, and let the mid-day sun sheathe me in its radiance. I could feel so much familiarity. The smell of amberjack and snapper roasting in the

restaurants. The rush of shoppers through the morning market. The bobbing of sailboats and dinghies in the bay. The all-encompassing sunshine that yielded golden-brown summer tans like nothing else. I knew that sun. That warmth. That wall. I wanted to know it all. I didn't care how many tries it took, I knew I had been brought home for a reason. These people, they carried a fragment of my being within them now, and I was embedded with theirs. We were in it together, and that was the beauty of it all. The shadow of the Stranger was only another eclipse to pass, the unknown decade was only a new medium to explore, and I was ready to find peace in everything. I wanted to. Because this was forever.

### **Epilogue: Five Years Later (Auguste)**

Some might say that the train ride from Paris to Cannes is anything short of modest for France, but after the odyssey I'd been on, it felt like only a fleeting moment to me. I had learned how to blur the hours by staring out at the passing landscape and getting lost in its surrealist impression of life. Traveling south in such an uneventful fashion made me feel like a true vacationer rather than a pilgrim, which I found to be a blessing. I spent my journey like any civilized man would—smoking cigars, reading a paperback I'd purchased at the station, and making polite passes at the trolley women. All the while, my mind was painting a new kind of poetry—visual poetry—the language of cinema. I framed shots and keyframes around the way the reading lamp cast its light just-so upon the dog-eared pages of my novel, the bending of the begonia stems in the vases that decorated the dining car, and even the young girl who fell asleep against the shoulder of her father— a very important man, but a vulnerable one all the same.

I wandered through the festival city with the fervor of independence. I rejoiced in my ability to choose which events I wished to attend. Some evening dinner parties I made a scarce appearance at, waiting to see if anyone would recognize me and shake my hand. Sometimes they did, and it felt embarrassingly good. I relished in the

feeling— when someone recognizes the art you create and thanks you for it. When they cite it as ‘inspiring’ or ‘groundbreaking’ or the very best— ‘enjoyable.’ It is always favorable to create media that others truly enjoy watching. No matter how elaborate the art is, it must have a tether to reality. That was my principle, and the guiding rule of my practice.

I found some events more engaging than others. Panels where men inhaled clouds of smoke and tossed around the names of recognizable philosophers made my eyes heavy. Soirees where women hung onto my arm like jewelry and begged to be my next muse committed to screen simply annoyed me. But it was the business meetings that I found the most stifling. The idea that any art could be commodified until it was only a product to be reproduced en masse made my blood boil. *That is not the point of the act of creation!* I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs as I threw all of their papers and briefcases out of the window in a display of rage and indignance, but I had learned better. Somehow.

It was now that I strolled into a screening of a new feature film— one abuzz with chatter from the critics, excitement from the buffs, and careful anticipation from the auteurs. The outdoor beachside theater had a laid-back aspect to it that I greatly enjoyed, and I settled into my seat feeling a true enthusiasm. I loved the way that good cinema could do that to me. It was a rush. I recognized the woman to the left of me. She was an intern at the distribution company that had picked up my sophomore picture. She was a perky young thing with a tower of auburn hair and a dimpled smile. A day pass hung around her neck. I tapped her shoulder.

“Michelle?” I asked her. She startled, and broke into a smile upon seeing it was me. She stuck out an eager hand for me to shake.

“Monsieur Marsan!” she said. “How good to see you at the screening!”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I said, winking. She laughed—a bubbly, cheerful laugh. Good company for a night like this.

“Oh, it’s in English,” she said. “I hope that won’t be an issue for you. They’ve put subtitles, but they’re rarely enough, aren’t they?”

“I’ll be just fine,” I assured her. She didn’t need to know about my unique polyglottal abilities. That was the brilliant thing. Nobody needed to know much of anything. They just needed to see the extensions of myself I released into the world and find them resonant. That was all.

“Auguste!” another voice came from my right. An older man in a large gray suit took a seat next to me and patted me firmly on the back. *Ah*, I thought with some disdain, *my manager*.

“Good afternoon, Serge,” I said. “How are you?”

“Just dandy,” he said. “In fact, you are doing quite good things for me.”

“Am I?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Yes! Your latest project is garnering an unprecedented amount of attention. I mean, we’ve seen the New Wave, but this is truly one-of-a-kind. All of the press will be clamoring to know where you’ve gotten the idea! We’ll have to type up a release.”

“It’s all my imagination,” I lied easily. “If there’s any inspiration to it, you can cite Simone de Beauvoir’s performance in bed and the taste of a good cigarette.” He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Ah, boy, you never let me down.”

“You’d have me drawn and quartered if I did,” I said dryly. This only prompted him to laugh harder, and he even took Michelle along for the ride. The conversation deviated into some other trivial drivel then, and eventually the audience chatter subsided and the lights darkened as the film began. Something magnificent played out before me in that theater. Murder! Music! Mystery! Now *that* was an inspiration.

“I could scarcely believe it!” Michelle raved to me as we exited the screening area and made our way towards the evening press relations party. “I mean– what was the band that played the soundtrack, again?”

“The Yardbirds,” I supplied.

“Oh, yes! Them!” She swooned. “Gosh, it was superb! But such a tragic ending! How fab!”

“Bet you wish you could create something like that, eh, Auguste?” Serge said, elbowing me. I smirked, knowing full well he was right.

“I suppose I wouldn’t mind it,” I said coyly.

“Do you bet it’ll win the Palme d’Or?” Michelle asked me. Awards were of no concern to me, so I shrugged, but secretly I had to admit it probably would.

“I mean,” I said, “it’s all in the hands of fate.” Both of them rolled their eyes.

“You don’t believe in fate!” They said at the same time.

“Guess I’ve really hammered that one home, haven’t I?”

“Yes!” I laughed for real that time, and caught my arm in Michelle’s as we skipped through the meandering crowds back to the hotel in which the afterparties were commencing under the lavender light of evening. The marquis was alight with neon, and a steady line of limousines were queued in front of the lobby doors. We gleefully walked past them, stepping into the grand entrance on foot. The party was located in an upstairs suite with a view of the marina, cast in the bright pinks and greens of the smaller hotels closer to the beach. Serge flashed an envelope at the bouncer outside the room, and we were let in seamlessly. I was still adjusting to the access that these high-level functions afforded me, but I had to tell myself that it was all a game dressed in fashion house perfume– gaudy, but ultimately utilitarian.

“Look who it is!” I heard a man call out as we entered the room. It was a large double suite, and decorated to the nines. A Monte Carlo-esque gambling table was propped up in the corner, shrimp scampi was being served on trays that weaved throughout the bustling crowd of well-dressed partygoers, and a champagne tower bubbled as the centerpiece of the whole overwhelming affair. I craned my neck to search for the source of the voice, smiling wholeheartedly when I recognized it as belonging to one of my actors– the true muse all of those dotting girls begged to be. He was a dark-haired young man with a strong Mediterranean tan and an affection for polo shirts on every occasion.

“Hey, Julien,” I said, and reached out to pat his arm.

“Ah, the debonair filmmaker extraordinaire himself,” Julien said. “It’s good to see you here! Our other lovely cast members are slacking on their duties...”

“Is that so?” I asked, crossing my arms with a playful grin.

“Oh my God, you would not believe it!” He guided me over to a table draped in a billowing white cloth covered in tall glasses of pinot noir. He dropped his voice to deliver the second part of his news. “You might need to get Serge to send a clean-up for Ginette...she hit the bourbon pretty hard and thought a quick drive to Monaco would be a swell idea. We’ve managed to imprison her in her room, but it is *not* pretty.” I groaned and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Great...” I said.

“But it’s alright!” Julien interrupted gleefully. “You’re here now, and we’re going to have fun! Just after you mingle with those dreaded reporters.”

“Augh,” I moaned.

“I know, I know.”

“It’s so *boring*.”

“Don’t sweat it! You’re a genius.”

“You’re only saying that to get another collaboration.”

“That may be so,” he said as he guided me over to the lounge where the press agents were gathering around cards and cigar smoke, “but you also can’t stop collaborating with me in...*other ways*...so I think I’ll be alright.” he waggled his eyebrows wildly and I rolled my eyes, slugging him in the shoulder. He feigned pain, but was still smiling like a lapdog gone silly. He dragged me to a sleek red couch where his arm draped loosely around my shoulder, and he handed me a light for my cigarette. I inhaled, blowing out in a release of stress. I hated being interviewed. That was what any conversation with a journalist felt like, formal or not.

“Oh!” I hear a young man next to me exclaim, “You’re Auguste Marsan.”

“Naw,” I said casually, “I just look like him.” The reporter laughed awkwardly and took a sip from his whisky.

“I heard you were clever,” he said with a grin. “This should be fun.”

“Alright,” I said, “first of all, you can’t be reporting me in *Le Progres* or whatever. This is a correspondence, we can schedule an interview, but no quotes when I’m already edging on drunk from my pre-game, okay?”

“Totally get it,” he reassured me. “I’d just love to get to know the visionary behind *Le Temps est Éternel*, y’know?”

“I’m also here,” Julien offered cheekily. “In case you find the mind of an actor a fascinating dreamscape, too.”

“Oh,” the reporter said, “I suppose my associate could interview you.”

“Thank you-u-u,” Julien said in his typical sing-song, and shook the man’s hand enthusiastically. I stifled a laugh, taking a drag of my cigarette to suppress it. The reporter waggled his finger at someone within

the smokescreen to bring them over. I yawned, taking a large sip from my wine.

“I can’t believe you actually want to interview,” I told Julien. “You’re truly affirming that actors are all attention seek–” my sentence was cut off by a sight that I could only describe as *barrowing*. My cigarette fell out of my hand and onto the carpet, where Julien quickly stomped it out.

“What is it?” He asked me with a tinge of concern. I said nothing, only stared at the person in front of me in abject horror. It was him. *It’s you*. The Stranger. *Cesaire*.

“You,” I said, my voice small. The Stranger rubbed his arm uncomfortably, the blush on his cheeks exploding. Julien looked at me with a confused expression.

“Who’s this?” He probed.

“I–” I set my wine down on the coffee table in front of us and bolted up abruptly. “I need to– uh– I’ll be right back.” I dodged the dozens of patrons filling the hazy room and made a beeline for the hallway outside of the restroom. I pinned myself against the chestnut wall and breathed so heavily that my ribs ached. To my dismay, but with no surprise, I heard The Stranger’s footsteps follow mine. We stood, in relative darkness, facing each other for the first time in five years, since I had left town in the middle of the night and never looked back.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him quietly.

“I’m a reporter now,” he said matter-of-factly. “The history of the present, scribing, it just sort of works. I do editorials for the journal down in Antibes.”

“So you never left.”

“Of course not. I–” He bit his lip, which made my heart throb more than it should. “Archaeus and I do well there. He’s found work

rigging ships in the marina. It's...it's good." I could tell he knew I didn't want to hear this. I let him know anyway.

"You don't need to tell me how amazing your life is with him," I said bitterly.

"I- I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

"You're not him."

"I know."

"You're not Cesaire."

"I go by Cleon now." I scoffed, pushing my overgrown curls back from my sweat-stained forehead.

"Of course you do."

"I know this must be hard for you," he whispered, "I can leave. It's just...a part of me wanted to see you...so desperately."

"Did you know I was going to be here?"

"Everyone knew you'd be at the festival, but no. I had no hopes or thoughts of seeing you. I got invited to this party because my coworker is currently throwing up in our hotel room. And it's a lot less extravagant than this one." I nodded, considering this.

"Okay," I said. "So, how much do you know?"

"Enough."

"Great. Then you know I don't need you anymore?"

"Yes."

"I have Cesaire's love. That's what propels me, that's what inspires me. He's a dead man. A figment of my past. Why should I dwell on that?"

"Because I'm right here. I have Archaeus...I wouldn't- I wouldn't betray him for you. And I understand you've probably found someone else-"

"I have."

"Okay. Then I'm just here to talk. Not as lovers, not as friends."

“As strangers,” I said, my voice heavy. He frowned, but relented.

“As strangers.” I sighed, unsure of how I had found myself in this position, but I grabbed his wrist and dragged him out of the hotel room and down the hall. I pushed him into the caged elevator. I punched the highest button and let us sit in silence as bands of darkness and moonlight within the shaft filtered over our faces. The elevator jostled when we got to the top, and the doors opened to reveal not another floor, but the roof, which was decorated with the lush glow of string lights and picnic tables. There was a small bar, too, which was shuttered for the night. I wandered over to the railing and looked out at the sea.

“The Riviera is breathtaking at night,” I said. “I missed it in Paris.”

“You should come back.” I hung my head and laughed dryly.

“I couldn’t. Not for a long time. I need to find my peace. My way to live.”

“You’re still hanging on to grand gestures. Film-making isn’t exactly a humble profession,” he pointed out.

“It doesn’t need to be,” I defended. “It makes me happy.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re doing what makes you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

“I am.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“Well...people can change.”

“I know.”

“I’ve changed. And you’ve changed.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to hate each other.”

“I know...”

“I’m happy for you.” I licked my lips, thinking about this. Harder than I needed to. Something about those words made my stomach sink. And yet I knew they were real. This was real life. This was the resplendent light I had captured in cracked bottles. This was the film reel flickering in a dead theater. This was the manor on Lake Geneva in the deep heart of a lonesome summer. And I meant every word.

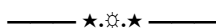
“I’m happy for you too,” I whispered, my fingers shaking. He inched his hand across the railing, and clasped it over mine. I didn’t move away. I didn’t lean into the touch. I just let it happen and sat in its quiet love. That unspoken current of energy that ran between us. That you could see if only you looked hard enough. That could not be severed. Not by God, not by death, not by human hand or distance. It was a permanence that followed me everywhere. And it was a promise I had made to keep forever. It didn’t matter the tides of time or the rifts of space. It was real love.

“Thank you,” he said back, his emanating warmth feeling almost like home. That was the moment. As we leaned on the guardrail, not too close to each other, not as close as we could have been, or would have been, as we gazed at the swelling expanse of the dark ocean dotted with the golden lights of ships dancing on the water, we found a private peace between ourselves. A recognition that nothing would be the same, that everything had changed, and that something dark and raw still remained. That nothing had been as assumed. That the world was still turning on its axis, and we had only ourselves to blame. It was a miracle. And I felt a purpose in protecting it.

**THE END**



## Acknowledgements



To be perfectly honest, I never thought that I would succeed in writing a novel. It is the sort of accomplishment that tends to stay staunchly in the ‘fanciful pipe-dream’ category, and rarely manifests itself in reality. Fortunately, I had the support of many to help me achieve my dream. I began writing *Antipolis* at the age of sixteen, in the midwinter darkness of my bedroom, inspired by a poem I had read by the infamous poet Lord Byron. The image this conjures is certainly melodramatic, and does not seem conducive of a professional final product, but that was not the point. My parents understood this and offered their expert support at every corner. At first it was only to congratulate me on meeting my word-count goals, which seemed so important and insurmountable in the beginning. Then, my talented father began to lend advice on the trials and tribulations of plot, character, and conflict. He did not shy away from pointing out the flaws of my narrative, but also encouraged the carefree nature of my overgrown writing exercise.

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