

Book of Dreams

By Sinjin Jones

## **Origins**

I.

You dream.

The lights of a million billion stars flickering in one mind's eye

Everything that you know and all that you do not wound up together in a tapestry of cosmic chaos connecting consciousness to the chords of eternity.

Music.

Playing endlessly in a world created by those that came before and in the key of all that will come after.

We start at the beginning.

The first closed eyes of the first sleep of the first child of the first race of being that had ever created sentient dream.

From nothing we emerged, as all things do.

It was a simple dream

That first one:

a dream of unflickering light.

Unwavering in its veracity to exist where there was none before.

Pure and existential.

Majesty.

And from the light, sound

Booming and formidable -

the chariot call of our world -

ushering forth all that would come with bells and chimes and the rumble of creation

All sounds created and disseminated like raindrops in vibrating equilibrium humming in eternal light.

Up and then down.

Gravity.

Modeled after the worlds of all sentient beings

We were given directions

Both cardinal and relative.

And thus our world was created by her.

Lillith, the first one.

The first to dream.

The dream ended but the memory remained and so we were created forever.

Until the last conscious being falls.

II.

The bounds of imagination are infinite and so too are the boundaries of dream.

From the grains of sand and the blades of grass to the crawling insects and rodents and the trees to the birds of fire and the elemental spirits and the giants and the demi-gods and the clouds of lightning and the acid rain and the demons and the volcanoes and the houses of sweets and the

monsters and the planets of smoke and the eons of stars to the madness and the fear and the envy  
and the hope and the destruction and the rebirth.

A discord of all.

At the start, Chaos was king and he ruled with a mighty fist that deftly harnessed that which the  
early sentient beings held so dear

He was the bringer of that which is indescribable - all things at once and never

It was a world of fire and ice, the inside of a volcano on the surface of an icy celestial body.

The writhing hands of ideas reached helplessly through the primordial ooze only to be swatted  
down by Chaos.

His laughter was the only sound then

The broken cackle of a thousand dying children and a thousand beautiful doves woven together  
seamlessly and echoing across our eternity endlessly.

This would have been our existence if the sentient did not evolve and move past chaos toward  
understanding.

If the sentient did not find each other and form tribes and attempt with tongues to young to speak  
words to explain the world around them

They wondered why the sun arose and then fell

Why the non-sentient came to kill them

How the white powder fell from the sky when it was cold outside.

And then the gods came to our world.

One first, then many.

A peculiar creation of the sentient

The need to explain the inexplicable - to create order.

What is dreamed is our reality.

And so they came one after another asserting dominance and reshaping our world in their image.

Gods come like generations.

The flight and fancy of the sentient.

The dreams and the beliefs nurture gods and their like and in turn the gods create order in the world of dreams.

Delicate scales of ego and submission.

But the sentient are fickle and as the winds blow their desires and fears change and their needs of beings are altered

And the gods die.

And there is new order.

III.

There are many beings here created spontaneously by the unordered minds of sentient beings that are our creators and sustainers.

The aberrant.

When two incongruous ideas are linked in the mind of a sentient being.

We do not interact with these beings because of their instability.

There are angels here.

Angels are created in an explosive combustion of the energies of Hope and Hopelessness coming together in the mind of a sentient being in a moment of weakness and the demanding of a sign that the world in which they live is not all bad and in that moment in the world of dreams there is a paroxysm of incompatible ideas and an angel is born.

Angels and all other beings formed from these paradoxical sentient whims are beings of counter existence. Those who interact with them are negated from existence.

There are elementals here.

When a sentient being dies it is meant to be final.

There are no second chances

But

Whether by technology or luck

If a sentient being is lost to the world of living and finds its way back an aberrant force is created

Elementals are not dangerous or aggressive

Rather, they are as ghosts.

Waiting.

A force that connects the reborn sentient being to the world of dreams until they return.

They do not speak

Perhaps the most unfortunate of the sentient beings are the Riders

So called because they ride an invisible force of air through the sky places wailing unendingly

When a sentient being is murdered by someone for whom they feel love they become the  
Wandering Dead

But the sentient cannot reconcile an act of such chaos and so a piece of them splinters from the  
rest

That piece of heartbreak and betrayal and confusion and love

And is added to the sea of voices above.

Another instrument in the cacophony of misery until that being is forgotten

There is no knowledge of interaction with these aberrants.

IV.

It takes a rousing and guttural scream of creation to bring a life into the world but only a whisper  
to take it away.

A snap of the fingers.

Extinguished.

But it is a peculiar predisposition of the sentient that they do not let go of existence easily.

They hold on with proverbial white knuckles and refuse to filter into oblivion with the rest of the  
creatures that exist alongside them.

It is a constant battle to survive through memory and dream and prayer and anger and joy and  
happiness and the love that lodges in the heart and mind.

And so it is that the dead reside also in the world of dreams for the time it takes for them to be forgotten in the land of the living.

Existing in sentience as a shadow of their former selves

Without recollection of the time past

For memories are pain when nothing can be done.

It is a pernicious persistence.

In times past the dead were left to wander aimlessly with nothing but a sense of self to sustain them.

In times past the dead were used as slaves to the gods

their duty to obey in the world of dreams those rules which the sentient themselves created in the world of the living but only seldom followed themselves.

In times past the dead were a ritual sacrifice to those which the gods themselves looked up to a timeless cycle of painless pain and deathless death that would be carried out until they were forgotten and ceased to exist.

In times past the dead themselves were worshipped in the world of dreams as the closest link to the world of the living.

V.

The gods are now unpopular with the sentient and so there are no rulers - merely those gods and emotions and whims of the sentient that wish to rule always being overthrown.

The sentient move quickly in their whims.

And so there is structure now.

There must be.

We use the cardinal directions like they do in the land of the sentient.

In the South we have contained the Wandering Dead

those lost souls that are unable to take on tasks because of their continued attachment to the land of the living.

They are allowed to wander there for the years or millenia it takes for them to be forgotten  
wiped from existence

In the Northeast are the Wildlands

It is our attempt to confine any and every occurrence of an aberrant creature in these lands so as not to disturb the existence of those other ideas that are of importance to the sentient.

This is the only place in which we have created rulers

The sentient do not care about order in this way

Though, perhaps, they should.

Those Unfiltered that are new to the world of dreams

The fresh and the reimagined

Appear at the edge of the Wildlands

To rise, fall, or move in the way that they are destined.

In the Northwest is Fear.

Every dream and emotion associated.

They stay and propagate together

bounded by the sentient dead

It is a tribal part of our world because of the old places those feelings reside in the minds of the sentient.

Fear is an old and somber ruler who takes his duties seriously and is never swayed from the task at hand.

In the West is Imagination

Dreams bound by nothing and no one except unpredictability and exploring the far reaches of what is possible in this place.

Imagination rules capriciously in a manner similar to chaos.

She is a trickster and has often grown her kingdom by duping others.

In the Southwest is Daydream and Lucid Dreaming

As far as possible from the Wildlands.

This is the place considered by most in the land of the living to be happy.

Two-headed ruler, endless fun and connection

They are known for their openness with those who are lucid and their accommodation of those only here for a short time.

In the West is Joy and all of the positive dreams of the sentient.

Joy has no form and is more accurately described as an infection of the mind.

Everywhere and in all things at once but often silent.

Joy is cautious and often curious about those that appear long term

Very few do

Nightmare roils at magnetic center.

A storm that attacks the other realms on whim.

Above is Light and below is Darkness.

Twins

And the only among us who have been since the beginning

They have not been seen for a time

But remain

We know not what they do or how they do it.

There are duties and roles and jobs for those of the sentient dead that are waiting to be forgotten.

There is a system made by those here who have become the gatekeepers of this place.

Not the gods or the dreams but the ideas that have been ever present in the minds of the sentient  
for a time.

There is leadership from Joy and from Fear and from Light and from Darkness and from and  
from Dream and from Imagination and from Logic

And from Nightmare

That rolling black cloud that is at the center of this world.

There is balance.

In the space between Joy and the Wildlands

in a small spot in the strip of the Unfiltered and bounded on all sides and managed by a chosen member of the Sentient Dead are the records of all of us

This story and all others in existence from the beginning until our end.

It is the Book of Dreams.

## **First Movement**

What I shall give here  
on these last pages of the book  
is a true and forthright account of what has happened.  
How this world will come to be destroyed.  
And while I have a clear opinion on the matter  
I will attempt to make this account as free of editorialization as I can.  
The Book of Dreams knows all things  
every event.  
But it does not put things together.  
And I think that this  
of all occasions  
deserves to be placed together  
with each event placed in a manner that gives it the meaning it deserves.  
This is the end of this world, after all,  
the destruction of the world of dreams.  
Shall we begin?

Alder.

He does not have a surname here.

Surnames carry with them the knowledge and wisdom of generations

and the memories of family

and the weight of all that that one lives for

and one is only allowed to carry their heart into the world of dreams.

Nothing more.

This is the rule.

Alder was born in the early years of humankind and in a time and a place that was unfitting to someone of his skin color and his proclivities toward the company of other men. He did not know this when he was young. He played with the males and with the females equally and considered himself to be quite popular considering the circumstances. He would often play games of pretend even into his teenage years because he loved to be other people with other interests and other skin colors. He saw this as harmless fun even though it was not. Unbeknownst to him the leaders of the town in which he grew up approached his mother several times about the freeness with which he played with the kids who did not look like him. This was not strictly a rule in the place where they lived but a preference of those in power. A truth of so many forms of injustice. She shielded him from this because he was only a kid but tried to lead him in a direction that was more suitable and it was successful. Soon Alder did not play with anyone at all. By gentle nudging and by growing up he had come to learn that his type of playing and his interest in imagination was not shared by those whom he considered his peers. Those who had a

skin color that was different than his. There were no others that looked like him in his town and so he made the assumption that imagination dies when you become a teenager. It was a decision that many teenagers continue to make.

The dreams of Alder also changed. They moved from being about dragons and warlocks and heroes and destiny to being about discomfort and popularity and hopes and disappointment. His nightly excursions into the world of dreams became less and less interesting and so he no longer had a reason to remember them.

Alder fell in love for the first time in the summer of his sixteenth year. This was not the love of adults but it was strong and fierce and it consumed him. He had fallen in love with a Boy that neither shared his skin color nor his feelings. And so they would remain friends and Alder would have his first experience of pining. He was quiet with his feelings because he had learned that what happened in his head was not for others. The closest the two boys came to something beyond friendship was on one evening in an empty field looking up at the moonlight. They lied with each other there for many hours and they both felt like there was something magic about the moon that night. They held hands. Without words or explanation they had created intimacy. Perhaps the other Boy knew that change was on the horizon and so wanted to give something new a chance. Perhaps the moon truly was magical that night for that other Boy. Perhaps true feelings truly had begun to blossom in the heart of the other Boy. But this is not his story.

The Boy left the next day and Alder was alone once again. Older now. And more sad.

It was peculiar that in the months that followed both the mother and father of Alder died. They both died under mysterious circumstances that Alder did not look into. He was overcome with grief. But old enough to work and so given work to survive.

Alder amassed an impressive amount of wealth for a man of his upbringing and color and proclivities in the years that followed. He was a blacksmith. He made strong weapons for the wars that humans are wont to wage. He devoted life to work and nothing else and proved himself worthy of the town in ways that others did not have to. He bought a very large house at the top of a hill that overlooked the town he had grown up in and he continued to work until he did not have to anymore. Alder retired in his fifty-first year. It was an old age in his time.

On the windy nights in the place where he lived his home on the hill would often overflow with raucous debauchery and in the mornings that followed the red wine upon the wooden floors would puddle in patterns reminiscent of art that would come much later in human history. Alder became an avant-garde artist of lasciviousness who practiced his craft with deft and dexterity like clockwork every time the moon rose. It was a release from the time before. Everything that he was never able to do. All the pent up imagination of one in their teenage years matched with the wealth and time of one much older. The affairs were small at first and then grew lavish. Men and women of all ages and types and skin colors were invited. They began to arrive from destinations domestic and abroad as the new spread. Every night began with a dinner prepared to excellency and served in a buffet style. Libations would flow in excess. Sex took all forms from the tame to the dangerous and Alder tried it all. This was what he had waited for.

The sex made him weak and the alcohol made him old and the rumors made him hated and the ego made him blind to the immaturity of the world in which he lived. He fell in love with a Man after a full night of drinking and sex turned into a full morning of sunrise and conversation. This Man had been coming to the parties for several years and Alder had noticed him frequently. He was younger and more attractive. But Alder never approached him. He did

not want to have sex with this Man and so he did not know what to do. On one evening the Man approached him and they sparked conversation. They retired early to the master balcony and sat and looked up at the moonlight and spoke about life and love and sex and hopes and dreams.

Alder shared things with this Man that he had never spoken aloud to another living being. There was a comfort that was immediate between them. And so Alder fell in love again. He remarked at the time that he could not imagine a more cataclysmically beautiful experience that alters one's perception of the meaning of life. They sat in that spot for more than a dozen hours before falling asleep in a way characterized by the best human fairytales.

Alder woke up the following morning to the siren sound of the Man screaming. When his eyes opened he saw that his house was on fire and that the Man was no longer beside him. He stood and turned and saw the elders of his town at the door into his bedroom. They were the same elders that spoke to his mother all those years ago. But Alder did not know this. Another scream bid Alder turn around and he saw others slide steel across throat and and the second Man to whom the moonlight was magic expired and limply crumbled to the ground. The elders and many others from the town held him by his arms and paraded him through the burning home. Everyone was dead. Many murdered in their sleep with peaceful looks upon their faces. Many more were frozen in writhing agony. Impaled or cut or gutted or burnt alive. Alder was dragged outside and he watched his house burn. He was told that they had killed his mother and his father and that they thought he had learned his lesson. He was tied to a pole erected in his honor atop a pile of his furniture and his clothes were ripped off. His anus was impaled by a broomstick while dozens of people that he had grown up with and many more for whom he had made weapons watched and laughed. He screamed but could not hear his own voice through the jubilation. The

elders of his town watched with satisfaction. It was an example of persistence of the tribal nature of humanity. A blade was brought forth and his penis was cut off with steel that he had forged himself. And the pain stopped. He knew now that he did not want to give the satisfaction. Alder was stoic and strong by any standard as he was burned alive with fire created from burning furniture he'd spent his entire life collecting.

Bridgett, Huston, and Feld looked up from their morning game of mud castles to see the house on the top of the hill burning. It was a curiously beautiful sight for them to see flames jumping into the sky and to see a man quietly burning to death. They watched until their mother called them in for lunch. They learned that human flesh burns for a long time.

They had known the man that lived in that big house on the hill. They often saw him at the market and he would buy them sweets and fruit when they came to greet him. He was nice but they got the sense and always spoke on the way home about how it seemed like no one was nice back to him. They always wanted to be nice to him. Why not? He had a kind smile and a gentle way and he gave them sweets and fruit for no reason. They had asked their mother about him and she just told them not to worry and that he had many friends who would come to his house in the night and leave in the morning. The three always thought that it was strange that your friends would only come over in the night time. The night time was for sleeping and you couldn't have fun with friends if you were sleeping. And anyway the man was so bright and cheerful at the markets in the morning. People who did not sleep were never bright and cheerful in the mornings.

Bridgett was eleven and she was the oldest and so she led the expedition to the smoldering house the next day. They woke up early and put on their heavy pants and jackets and their boots that were made for the mud and they left early in the morning before the sun started to rise. They would later recall that the hill was much steeper than any of them were prepared for and it took them nearly two hours to traverse the distance between theirs and the house on the hill. But they would similarly recall that the trip was worth it.

No one had bothered to clean any part of the destruction because it was a monument to a man who lived life too fully and without considering limitations that others put upon him and so the entire hill smelled of both burning and rotting flesh simultaneously. Feld was six and he puked more than once that morning. Huston was proud that he did not. They wandered the grounds like it was a magical place and pointed out sights to each other like they were in a museum. A severed arm. A skull with skin melted off. Crisped bones. They went into every room in the house and quietly observed the destruction in a way only suited to kids. They did not have fear or sadness or anger or joy but instead a simple and full sense of wonder. They would not know until much later the depth of human darkness they were witnessing. When they came upon the master bedroom they stopped their search. This room was mostly untouched by fire and so offered a peculiar glimpse into the life of the nice man from the market. There was a painting of a woman hanging above the bed. Her skin was darker than theirs and darker than his. She looked down on the three kids with a strength that held Bridgett's gaze for long after the two younger boys had moved on. Elsewhere in the room the boys came upon beads and silks and jewelry alongside iron and hammers. They found it a curious juxtaposition because they did not know that he had been a blacksmith.

When the three kids finally stepped onto the balcony they felt their first negative emotions. The sight of the man tied to a tree and naked and burnt to almost nothing except a screaming skull shocked them still. This was wrong. No matter the purpose or the motivation. Though they did not communicate this to each other with words each felt and internalized this sight and this feeling in a place in which it would remain forever and be brought up frequently. They also made the silent decision to never speak of this to their mother or any of their schoolmates. This was a moment that would stay theirs.

When they were walking home the back way through the woods the sun was high in the sky. It was hot and humid and silent and somber. It was the opposite of the raucous complaining and jubilated excitement that guided the long trudge up the hill. The walk down felt longer and it felt more difficult to the three kids. There was just the crunching of leaves and the kicking of dirt to fill the space between bird calls. Bridgett could not stop thinking about the portrait of the woman hanging above the bed and how strong she looked in the face of the destruction around her. Six year old Huston remembered the man's fleshless face hanging open on the wooden pole and how different it looked there versus when he had seen it in the market smiling and kind. Feld was too young to have many cohesive thoughts but the image he remembered over and over again was the severed arm and how it looked like it was reaching.

Dinner was silent and the next three days of play time were less about mud and adventures and more about looking longingly out at the house on the hill. Bridgett, Huston, and Feld could not fully process how they felt and in some ways never would. But they knew that they would never forget.

Alder appeared in the place at the edge of the Wildlands where all of the Unfiltered Sentient and Wandering Dead enter our world first. His arrival was marked with no pomp and circumstance and in fact he was one of two thousand and thirty seven to arrive at that exact moment. A pop out of and into existence.

When one enters our world they are greeted with endless wandering hills and grass. There is a peacefulness that comes with hills that is a universal feeling and many of the lands in the world of dreams are therefore populated with this aesthetic. One can often remember rolling hills in dreams in which one feels free. The transition can be challenging and so this feeling of calm is of great importance. Alder is Sentient Dead. He was recorded entering with no trace of connection with the world of the living and even with a sense of relief in his passing and so he would not be Wandering even though he would not recall these feelings. And there were three souls that remembered him. That dreamed of him. And so he was not lost.

It is a shadow that enters the world of dreams after having died. No memories of life. None of the pain or sadness or joy or love. Such feelings are for the living and have no place here. This place is in service of those who dream and all those that reside here would do well to remember this fact. It is not the old times and every being has a purpose here now. A task. A job. There is order and there is structure and there is comfort for those who use this place to dream. To escape the land of the living for the briefest possible moment.

Alder breathed in the air and was met with dissatisfaction.

It was full air but it was empty.

Devoid of flavor or perspective.

It was serving its purpose to provide sustenance to his lungs but it no longer brought joy to breath.

Eyes open.

First light.

Winter sunlight

The sun low in the sky

Angles sharp

But it was not bright or dark.

Persisting was how Alder would describe it because it served its purpose as well and satisfyingly so.

A soft light that would never strain the eyes and yet allow him to see far into the distance of the rolling hills all around him.

There were wisps of shadow appearing and disappearing all around him.

Some meandered and spoke in strange tongues

and some played on imaginary play grounds

and some grew to the size of dinosaurs only to be squashed by invisible feet.

There was nothing shocking or scary about them but Alder found himself intensely curious about their existence.

He could see millions of these wisps all the way to the horizon on every side.

They seemed to move in motion much faster than he did and playing out every moment in whatever fantasy they were a part of more quickly than Alder had time to recognize and he would only see the beginning and the end of their journey and sometimes not even that because some ran away quite quickly.

Shadow shimmers reflecting as though off a lake.

Exquisite perfection.

Alder watched for what might have been generations before realizing that he did not know where or who he was.

He looked around.

The rolling green hills were peaceful but there was nothing on the horizon.

Except.

Far off in the distance.

It was a dark spot that was slowly getting bigger as Alder watched.

It was a man.

Navy blue robes and a white shirt.

Pale skin and dark hair and green eyes.

The man had an air of importance about himself and a strong sense of duty in the way that he walked.

As he approached Alder instinctually made himself taller and more straight-backed and cleared his throat for no rational reason.

The pale man stopped and and looked Alder up and down.

“Come.”

The voice was more exhausted than demanding.

It was seasoned and resonant.

The pale man said nothing more.

He turned and began walking back toward the direction from which he had come.

The light did not change as they walked.

Constant

No matter the hill they climbed or the valley they sank into it was the light that persisted

Calm and reflective.

Alder had many questions but he was not confident enough to ask them and so he merely

followed and looked at the back of the head of the pale man that was full of thin hair

But it covered something else tribal in nature and Alder could see lines winding around each

other in an intricate pattern that weaved and crested and shone and sparkled through the hair like

hidden treasure.

The markings were crisp and clean and felt new even though the hair covering it was long but the

discomfort and the unease inhibited Alder from asking about it.

Although he could not indicate to himself why, Alder knew and felt that this was inconsistent

with values he held deeply

Respect and integrity.

The pale man did not once look back to see if Alder followed and so Alder took to exploring the

land with his eyes as he walked almost floating

The immediate surroundings were constant and unchanging

A calming and endless sea of grass rising and falling - wandering landscape of constancy in the most peaceful possible terms and Alder could see interesting things taking shape at the edge of the horizon from the top of the hill

A massive storm to his left that seemed to boil in the sky with anger and turmoil and clouds that reached up as far as his eyes could see and thunder and lightning that struck out in all directions like some cataclysmic destruction washing across the serenity

From the vantage point of the tallest hills Alder could just see down into a deep valley far to his right that seemed to stretch on forever with small dots of moving creatures wandering aimlessly in chaos that he could not see but could not stop himself from feeling

It was a rolling fear inspired by the unknown and the inhuman that began in his toes and churned up his legs and waist and arms and skull leaving behind a shiver and a cold that he had not felt before and which lingered far after he turned his eyes from that place.

It was a definition of wild that he had not considered previously and even though he could not make out details of anything or anyone that was far below in that grizzly valley he knew that those creatures were massive in both size and impact and that he was not alone in the unearthly tension it caused him.

The pale man worked hard to avoid looking in that direction entirely.

Far behind was a gate that Alder could tell was ornate from a distance because it glistened like gold in the shallow light and grew toward the unchanging sky.

It was an odd feeling looking back in that direction because Alder was certain the gate had appeared very near the spot he must have and yet he had no recollection of seeing it or the two

small figures now standing guard on either side even though there was no additional barrier to speak of.

Couldn't one just walk around?

There was a sense of importance emanating from the gate and a strength and an air of knowledge that was palpable.

The sense of these things surprised Alder as he walked.

His sense.

His ability to see.

Or to feel.

Or to connect.

Was not something he felt in touch with.

Though he could not remember what came before this place.

Was there something that came before this place?

He knew and felt and understood that he was not the kind of person that connected meaningfully with the world around him.

He knew and felt and understood that this was different.

They came to the crest of another hill and Alder could see where they must be headed.

A serpentine line of people appeared in the next valley and wound and wove toward three wooden podiums that Alder could barely see on the edge of the cliff into the land that Alder avoided looking into.

All wore gray.

Alder wore gray.

They descended into the valley and into the third line.

The line closest to the cliff.

The pale man turned to look at Alder for the first time since their walk had begun and Alder saw that his eyes were a pale gray and that his skin was flaking as if he were made of ash.

Ethereal or nonexistent.

The pale man dug deep into his robes and pulled a single sheet of parchment from it and handed it gently to Alder.

Alder leaned into the man and grabbed his hands and asked, "Where am I."

The pale man had skin that was like paper and Alder withdrew immediately because he had felt the cold and shapeless and uneasy touch of something that was not quite alive and not quite dead.

A being that was created for a purpose and not built for any additional interaction.

"We will meet again."

And the pale man was gone and Alder was at the back of a line of gray and shapeless and featureless creatures shuffling slowly forward toward hopeful clarity.

Alder did not know that this moment was an anomaly.

This place was not silent.

There was murmuring coming from in front and to the side of Alder but he could not make out the content of what was being said.

The hooded gray figure directly in front of Alder turned around and he recognized a female.

Her eyes were gray.

Were his eyes gray?

She smiled at him.

He smiled back.

“You are lucky. Mine said nothing to me when he gave me the paper. And he walked away slowly. Yours spoke and disappeared.”

Her voice was both silky and full of gravel and her hair was dark and she had an air about her that was drenched in knowledge.

She was unequivocally beautiful in her wisdom and the way in which she carried herself.

“Lucky me.”

Alder noticed that his voice was hoarse and heavy.

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know. I think the same thing that happened to you and to me happened to all of the people here.”

“How long have you been here?”

“It’s hard to say. The light doesn’t change. It feels like a long time. But it might have just been an hour. Time is tricky like that. I’m Malaya.”

Alder paused and considered that he did not know his name or he did know and simply could not remember.

Malaya stared at him with unchanging eyes and then looked away.

“It will not come to you. You just make one up.”

The line seemed to exhale as it moved one step further.

Alder looked behind and up to the hill he had come from and saw three more people wearing gray robes and three more people wearing the navy and white robes headed down into the valley and he understood that this must be happening constantly like some peaceful machine churning cogs one against another and pushing people through to...

What happens next?

Alder let his gaze wander over the edge of the cliff to his right and down into the valley below.

He followed the movements of one particularly erratic creature.

He could not make out the features with any clarity because of the immense distance between the top and the bottom of the cliff but he knew that this creature was as big as three men and it moved in a strangely melodic fashion with limbs that extended out and around its body to step forward and pulled tightly and quickly inward to spin like some grotesque ballet dancer with six arms.

After each step the creature would wobble and shake and shimmer like the shadows that popped in and out of existence everywhere in this world but this creature would strengthen from its shimmer and appear larger and more strong each time it took a step.

Alder was mesmerized.

He watched the dancing creature for what seemed like an eternity.

And then the creature looked up.

It had a single golden eye that reflected the sun in the same way that the gate had and its gaze seemed to pierce something inside of Alder.

A face.

Warm and inviting with strong jaw bones and olive skin and eyes that drink in the moonlight on a clear night.

My dark skinned hand reaching out to touch the bright red beard and running my fingers through the hair and feeling comfort.

Whispered wisdom.

Interlaced fingers.

A night spent intertwined in every manner possible.

Learning and growing.

Alder did not know that this moment was an anomaly.

Malaya looked at him for a moment with confusion.

“What happened?”

“Alder. My name is Alder.”

Isabella Garcia was a human female who grew up and lived in the new city of **Dynasty** in the state of California three decades before the fall of the United States of America. She was born one hundred and twenty-five years before the collapse of the New American Empire and one hundred and fifty-six years before Alder was born. She grew up in Mexico and moved to New California when she was thirteen years old and the borders were officially opened. Her parents were both doctors and pushed her to go into the medical field to aid in the support of the

ongoing turmoil on the North American continent. She resisted. She believed that her talents and her ability to support in the conflict were in another area.

Isabella graduated with degrees in political science and law and immediately pursued a political path in representing the rights of the newly welcomed immigrants in her community and beyond. Her first political victory was on her thirty-first birthday when she was elected mayor of Dynasty. During her eight year tenure she often made news as a strong and vocal leader who would stop at nothing to secure rights and privileges for those new citizens of the state. She marched at the front of seventy rallies and raised her voice loudly and publicly.

She met her **husband** and her first campaign rally for governor of the state of California after they were sat next to each other by her campaign manager. They were married and had three children.

Isabella won her campaign for governor and continued to lead for the next thirteen years even though the term limit was eight years. She was an incredibly popular leader in the state and many began calling her “New Mother Liberty” as a symbol for a new wave of liberal values sweeping the United States. There was an opposing force of more traditional values that referred to her as “Queen Mother” in reference to their belief that her ideas were not representative of a democracy and that she was more like the mother of a queen than even a queen herself.

Isabella did not know that while she ran for president a group of young and extreme militants that called themselves **The Resistance** were organizing. They created a plan to surge and attack the victory party should she win and take as many lives as possible. This plan never came to fruition because Isabella did not win the election and instead lost narrowly to her

opponent. It was the content of her concession speech that cemented her place in the minds and hearts of many humans. The text of her speech is:

*New American citizens.*

*When I set out on this journey, I did not do so because I believed that I was the only one that could fix what is wrong in our incredible country. I began in public service in order to raise high the voices that would not otherwise be heard. In the last 100 years, this country has moved and changed and accomplished incredible things. But we are not there yet. We still have so much work left to do. As a proud immigrant to this country, I know how incredible some people have been in welcoming us. And I know how deep prejudices go. But it has been my experience that every single person in this country wants what is best for them. They want what they think is best for this country.*

*No one person is perfect.*

*We all have room to grow.*

*That is how I have tried to live my life and how I've tried to run my campaign. As a woman who is grounded strongly in the belief that with conversation and civil discourse, we can solve every problem that is thrown at us. We can become the country that we always dreamed of: A country that welcomes people in with open arms, assumes the best, and helps each other grow. A country that gives a leg up to citizens that need it. A country that celebrates that all of us are created equal so loudly that other countries can hear it. That's the New America that I heard about in my youth.*

*This evening I speak to you as the second place candidate. I speak to you as the proud second place candidate because even though I will not be holding the highest office in the land I have had the opportunity to do what very few have: I have gotten to meet all of you. I have had the pleasure of touring this great nation and shaking hands with some of the most incredibly proud and thoughtful and strong people in the entire world. I have had the pleasure of disagreeing with people and talking civilly about it. I have had the pleasure to push the conversation in this country forward. And so I am proud.*

*My mother always said to me that winning isn't the reason we go out and try things. Winning is a bonus. We go out and try things because it is our job to be the change that we want to see. Now, my mom wasn't the first to say something like that and she won't be the last. But as a woman who fought tooth and nail for the open borders that this country so desperately needed, as a woman who protested and raised her voice and worked her butt off, as a woman who raised two children to be activist and leaders, I think she had a pretty good perspective on living the change.*

*Today, we lost a battle. But you can be damn sure that this is only the beginning because tomorrow morning I will wake up with my wonderful husband and my three incredible children and I will be at the Capitol knocking the door down. I will be at the Capitol knocking the door down every single day until this country is as perfect as it has always been in my dreams. I will be at the Capitol knocking the door down in good times and in bad times. My voice will be heard loudly and clearly and often. If they thought I was obnoxious before, tomorrow is a new day. And I hope that you will join me. I hope that you will join me on the streets and at the grocery stores and canvassing in homes and at the public meetings and at the ballot box and at the Capitol.*

*Because I am only one person. I am only one voice. One voice is weak. Even with a voice as strong as mine, one voice is weak. We gain power, we gain strength together. It is easy for the leaders of this country to ignore one voice. But we are many. We are progressive and we will be heard.*

*This is not the end my friends.*

*So, get a good night's sleep.*

*Dream well.*

*Because tomorrow we get up early.*

*And we knock the doors down.*

*Thank you. God bless you. And God bless our New Union.*

Many found the content of this concession speech to be inspiring and thought-provoking. And many left the event feeling energized and excited about what was to come next. But it was not the speech alone that inspired the movement that would continue through the end of the New American empire.

Isabella left the stage after the speech and immediately connected with her family. She hugged her children and her husband and they all went into a back room so that they could decompress without the thousands of people in attendance. They were brought to the back entrance of the stadium seventeen minutes later to get into a waiting car that would take them home. Hiding there was a member of the Resistance that had been chosen to attend the event. He had left the stadium in the middle of the speech and was waiting there for thirty-seven minutes before Isabella arrived.

Isabella Garcia was shot three times in the chest and died at 11:56pm on her way to the hospital.

Knock the doors down became a refrain muttered by many and ensured that Isabella would remain in memory and in dream for centuries.

The parchment that was given to him was devoid of words.

As far as he could tell.

Alder looked at it from each and every angle as he shuffled forward in line at a pace that could only be described as glacial with the murmurs all around becoming more and more faint as time elapsed.

People had run out of things to talk about.

Malaya showed her paper to him and it was full of similar emptiness.

“Do you think we are dead?” She asked.

“I don’t know.”

“It makes sense, right. This is how we get into heaven.”

“Or hell.”

“Right. It feels a lot like Saint Peter at the pearly gates.”

“It does. Maybe it is.”

Alder stopped to think about himself being dead.

There were many implications of a life lived that he did not remember and of which the only record was a piece of parchment that was empty to his eyes.

Was he a good person?

“It’s probably not worth thinking about. It is what it is now, I guess, right?”

“Right.”

Malaya arrived at the front of the line first and a man wearing robes that were yellow and bright against the sunlight beckoned her forward.

They had watched anxiously as the three people in front of them had approached the podium of the yellow-robed figures and stood for several long moments before they popped out of existence where they stood.

Alder watched.

Malaya arrived at the podium and reached her hand up to give the parchment.

She looked back.

She was confused.

The yellow-robed man looked over the parchment carefully as though he was reading invisible ink written as clear as day.

He looked up at her.

And she was gone.

There was a sound like something falling hard onto the ground as she disappeared from view and Alder became anxious immediately as the yellow-robed man beckoned him forward.

He walked slowly and never took his eyes off the man who had an unchanging expression.

This man was younger and his hair was longer and he seemed brighter than the other man not just in demeanor but in overall life-force.

This man felt alive.

He did not have the hidden tattoos so far as Alder could tell and he held himself in a way that spoke of his high regard of position.

Alder smiled as he handed over the parchment.

The yellow-robed man did not smile back but instead poured himself into reading the parchment.

His eyes darted quickly over the page that contained nothing and Alder strained to look as well in case something might have become visible.

It did not.

The moments were long and Alder felt sure that he was being judged harshly.

The yellow-robed man looked up and leaned in and nodded.

“This is a difficult assignment that I will give you.”

His accent was strong but clear.

“The place of the Wandering can be both frightening and enticing. Many do not last very long there. But I can see that you are capable. Do not stray, my friend, and you will have a long and happy and easy time in this place.”

The man leaned back.

“You will know what you are to do when you arrive.”

Alder felt a tingle that began in his toes and rose like a tidal wave through his body in catatonic undulation.

Pop.

Bridgett left home when she was sixteen because she wanted more than anything to visit a place larger than the town in which she had grown up. She often felt and spoke of a feeling of

being stifled and held back to her friends and they often shared her sentiments even though none of them would ever leave their town for fear of what was beyond. Most of the people in town only knew what was on the outside from rumors they heard from their parents because when the formal organization of the country had fallen many had retreated to small environments like the town of Hillston. That was many years ago and those who held the memory of moving to Hillston were infirm or dead.

Many would have called Bridgett an adventurer and many more would have called her reckless in her time. Very few residents left Hillston during this period and no one that left had come back. This was because of the seventeen people that had left Hillston in the thirty years leading up to the departure of Bridgett fourteen had died before they made it to another habitable town. Bridgett would come to know that the parties at the house atop the hill were not only a feat but a feat of the extremely wealthy members of the post-American society and those wealthy that resided abroad. Excess. She would come to know that the man that resided in that house on top of the hill where her siblings had visited almost a decade ago was well known across the country. She would come to know a lot about that man from the stories of others.

But Bridgett did not know any of this on the overcast and windy day that she left in the month of October. Her only thoughts were about how the man on the hill had died because he had chosen to stay in a town that was not meant for him.

She left in the middle of the night after waking up her siblings with kind words and well wishings. They were not awake enough to recall what she was saying and both would always wonder why she had chosen to leave in the middle of the night without properly speaking with them. The midnight departure would fill Huston with a deep anger that would echo like waves in

and out of his life and would fill Feld with the feeling that she had left because of him. He would never feel good enough.

For the first three days and nights Bridgett would not see or hear anything. There were no people in the immediate vicinity of Hillston because the major cities of the mountain west region of North America had been among the first to fall. An older man in her town had recalled that his granddaughter had gone south when she had left and Bridgett was lucky that this was the piece of wisdom she chose to heed because both north and west were the immense rocky mountain ranges and to the east was a canyon that seven of the previous residents of Hillston had died trying to descend. South would eventually lead her to the largest city left in the western part of North America.

Bridgett spent many hours on that walk thinking about why she had made the choice to leave. Her thoughts always came back to the burned man that her and her siblings observed. He had grown up in Hillston and had done a good job making a life for himself. She remembered him being kind and helpful and soft of spirit. He was friendly. But he had been stuck in town for his whole life and people did not like darker skinned people in Hillston. She had also heard rumors when she was in middle school that he had been gay. People in Hillston did not like that either. The man should have left and gone out to another place and made a life for himself and Bridgett could never figure out why he did not. He seemed to be rich and have all the resources needed.

Bridgett decided that the man must either be blind or dumb and she would not live her life in that way. She would find a place that made her into the woman she wanted to be or she would die trying.

She made it first to the town of Lakeview after seven days of travelling. Lakeview was a newer and a bigger town than Hillston and it was made up of people who did not like living in the bigger city of New Winchester and so it was used to visitors and no one paid Bridgett any attention. She quietly explored and eventually got a job.

Pop.

His fingers and his toes tingled.

The hair on his head and his arms stood up straight and it felt as though air had been ripped from his lungs even though he did not know if he even had lungs in this place.

He gasped and opened his eyes.

A massive metal pole stuck in the ground before him and rose up twenty feet into the sky with a sharp point atop.

Next to it another.

And another.

Every twelve inches as far as the eye could see to his left and right like some sort of sideways staircase reaching into infinity.

As the yellow robed man had said he knew why he was in this place.

There were those that wandered here as dark souls unable to exist as the rest because they preferred chaos over order and harm over peace and in this place that sentiment drives them insane to the point where they cannot cope and they become a true danger to all.

One of these kind would be easy enough to deal with and two or three would be manageable but the robed men discovered a horde that threatened the core of this place degrading into chaos and so they made an enclosure in which to keep them.

They are called the Wanderers.

The rulers identify these dark souls and put them in the Wandering place so that they can cause no harm.

They are dangerous.

Alder knew this and he had heard this story in the voice of the yellow robed man.

As he looked inside between the thick metal poles and saw four of these Wanderers clawing at each other and drawing blood he knew that these people.

These creatures.

Must be kept inside.

The wall was long or perhaps unending based on the estimation of Alder.

He walked for a long while exploring for difference or change and found none.

He found no others like himself.

No one else guarding.

The creatures inside were sometimes hard to watch because although they had different aspects there was a madness in their eyes that was unsettling to Alder.

He saw several of them digging holes alone or with a group and several fighting each other and ripping flesh from bone and several simply running in a never ending pursuit of some unknown objective.

He did not know if they were aware of him and they gave no indication that they were.

He did not know if they were awake in the same ways that he was or if they had thoughts in the same way that he did.

But they were difficult to look at.

And none of them approached the metal poles.

An easy enough task.

Although he walked and walked and walked and walked in the same direction in the same unchanging fashion.

Had it been hours already?

Days?

Weeks?

The light was constant and he did not get tired or hungry so it was difficult to tell how long it had been.

He occasionally looked back but it gave no perspective.

He knew that he could not go back in that direction because he heard the yellow robed man in his head telling him that it was not for him.

“Choose a direction and maintain.”

And so he went on.

He maintained.

And it was only now that he noticed the shadows again

The shadows that were appearing and disappearing around him in some sort of silent melody sliding across the landscape opposite the metal bars.

There was a beauty to the lack of pattern.

A comfort.

Like watching a grand design being built and collapsing simultaneously in front of your eyes.

It brought Alder peace.

As he watched he noticed one shadow that appeared near him and seemed to watch.

It was the shadow of a young girl.

It happened in the blink of an eye when she would appear somewhat near him and her eyes would meet his and she had an air of determination and drive and she would move and observe and then flit away like smoke in the wind.

Less than five seconds.

Over time he noticed that she came often although she never stayed for long.

Other shadows might engage in an activity in fast motion but she did not.

She just stood.

And watched.

Did he know her?

He did not know his name when he awoke in the world of dreams and he would not learn his true name for a very long time. The name he gave himself when asked was Milo. He gave himself this name because he thought it sounded good in a moment of tension at the altar where new arrivals are sorted and the man in the yellow robe asked what he would like to be called. He did not know that it was a particularly apt name for him because of his Greek heritage and accent. Milo had many rememberers in the land of the living and would have under normal circumstances existed comfortably. It was written that he would spend two hundred and

forty-three years in the world of dreams. But he did not. He could not spend two hundred and forty-three years in the world of dreams because it would be destroyed. It would be destroyed because of him.

I should have watched him more closely. There are many things that one wishes they would have done differently in the stark light of memory but perhaps it would have made no difference. I have lived over the events seven hundred and forty-seven thousand times and I have read them from the book nearly double that number. My memories do not betray an opportunity for me to intervene more than I did and the book still does not predict the outcome. I cannot believe that this was a systemic failure but choice does not exist and the book predicts everything and yet I write this next to a book that has failed to predict a systemic collapse that centered on one single choice that should not have been possible. It could not have been possible. It was not possible.

Not. Possible.

Not.

Possible.

I digress.

Milo was given the duty of tracking the movements of the roiling storm that was Nightmare through the center of this place. There are very few unpredictabilities in world of dreams but Nightmare was one of them. The cataclysmic tempest coiled tight at the center but changed course often in a fickle fashion. Only few in our world knew that Nightmare themselves still lived within. They had not been seen for many generations and many iterations of leadership

and many would have believed that nothing but the absence of light controlled the tumultuous cloud. But the movements were well calculated and slowly changed course over decades in order to force other rulers into some sort of negotiation like some grand game of chess where there was only one King. Though few knew that Nightmare lived (and how could they not still live and thrive with the frailty of humanity rising rapidly) none knew the form they took or the game they played. It was a rumor that Nightmare was genderless and did not reside within the storm at all but instead roamed freely and used many disguises to get what they wanted. Complete conjecture that was perhaps contrived by Nightmare themself.

The Board decided long before I was created that it would be prudent to track the movements of the storm that was Nightmare and so seventeen Sentient Dead were assigned at any one time. Milo was one of these. He was told two simple truths. The first that none that enter the gargantuan cyclone return and the second that many are saved by observing the direction the storm takes. And Milo did his job well. It is a curious fact that the sentient dead that are devoid of their memories will most often take to duties without asking questions. It is a sense of purpose that drives humans and it is memory and experience that seems to create this purpose in the land of the living. Without it they cling to any rationale as though it were the basis for existence. Simple and effective. Except when it is not.

And it was not effective on this occasion because in one moment after two hundred and forty-five thousand three hundred and sixty two moments of compliance Milo walked into the storm. I have the book in front of me and I know the exact moment and the position of millions of other entities in relation and I know every detail of what came before and what came after but I do not know why.

“List

The names of my ancestors in alphabetical order

Anayi

Allegra

Adana

Adelita

Alonzo

Alberto

All the children are burning in their beds

All the pale men are celebrating with their beer

Hold on tight

My loves

I will be back one day

And I will always be here in spirit to watch over you

To hold your hand

Holding

A book

Leather-bound and down

Inside

Soft pages and destructive words.

Do not look at it

Do not let it know that you know what is inside

Just hold on to it

Let it think that it is winning

Even though words do not win

Even though actions are only powerful when they are violent

But it is okay my sweet child

My sweet children

My sweet husband

I heard that a heart can only be complete once it's been completely broken

Fixed

Fixing

Hold on

Scream

Yell

The pale faced man with the gun is coming

Bloody shirt with signs of unbroken America

America is gone

Does he not know?

Peace now

Breathe

I cannot scream because my lips are sewn shut

I cannot run because my legs are lead

So instead I will trudge.

Green

Green grass and hills

And a gate taller than the one that kept me out and let me in

That way

That is the way

That is the way out of...

Who am I?

Why am I holding a book?

Where am I?

Throw it away.

There.

Good.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

List

The names of my ancestors in alphabetical order

Anayi

Allegra

Adana

Adelita..."

Her eyes darted wildly back and forth and she scratched her skin so deep that it bled.

She was not fully here

But her thoughts seemed deep

Like oceans underneath trash islands.

Alder watched her for a long time and saw that she had a cycle that began with counting and ended with observing.

Over and over again her cycle persisted in machinations of insanity.

A broken unbroken automaton.

He was bewitched and pulled into her eyes.

There was a fire there that was lit somewhere beyond this place and by something that was struggling to get to the surface and just out of reach.

What was beyond this place?

He watched her and the spark in her eyes until something changed and she sped off beyond the closest hill on her side of the metal rods

He recognized that he did not know what he would do if she tried to get through.

She could get through.

The metal bars were far enough apart.

He could get through.

Alder looked to his left and to his right and behind him to the sea of shadows flitting in and out of existence.

The shadow of the girl was there.

And then she was not.

He looked back and saw a thin and pale green book upon the grass that blended almost seamlessly with the ground around it.

It was close.

The book looked like it could fit into the palm of his hand and the binding was used such that the pages splayed the book open in greeting with its rough tanned pages facing Alder.

Without a second thought he slipped through the metal pillars and took three steps and picked up the notebook.

He paused a moment and looked around at this side.

It was the same.

What separated him from the woman wandering aimlessly on the other side?

Why was he supposed to be watching her or making sure that she did not get out?

But in a moment he became afraid that he would not be able to get back to the other side and that he would become like her.

Alder slid easily back through the bars and to the side he decided he belonged.

He opened the notebook and found it's pages similar in texture to the parchment he was given before he was given this duty.

It was thick and dense and devoid of words.

He wondered as he leafed through the pages

He wondered if there was writing on this paper too

Writing the he could not see because either he did not possess the ability or because he was not from here.

He ran his fingers along the pages and it felt different.

This book

This journal

Felt real.

Alder did not know what this meant when the thought came to him but he felt closer to this notebook than he had to anything else he had touched in this place.

He reached out and touched the bars.

They were not cold and they were not warm and they did not feel like metal even though they looked as such.

He reached down and ran the grass through his fingertips.

The blades existed and they moved like blades of grass but there was something missing.

Like some key detail of this world that was supposed to give it depth and meaning was left out either accidentally or on purpose.

Missing.

But when he moved the book through his fingertips there was a spark of

Existence

It was the only way he could describe it to himself.

It felt alive and dense and textured.

He ran his fingers across the grass green cover and the parchment pages and found that something was tucked into the back binding.

He turned it upside down.

He shook.

And a pencil fell to the ground.

Alder could not recall ever using a pencil

But the sight of it illuminated some part of his memory where that object existed in permanence.

He picked it up and turned to the first page and wrote

Pencil.

Another odd sensation.

He did not consciously know what he was doing or how he was doing it but the act itself brought the thought into being.

The words slid smoothly onto the parchment in hurried but well-composed letters that Alder could not totally recognize until he stared at them for a long time and even then it was as though he was convincing his mind to form the random assortment of shapes and lines into something that held meaning.

But his fingers knew.

His fingers knew the shapes and lines and knew that the way they were formed had meaning and that the constructed word was a nominal representation of the thing he was holding in his hand.

And that was good enough.

He wrote something else as he said it out loud.

“Alder.”

*Dark wood floors.*

*Rooms lit by candlelight.*

*Sunshine peeking through over the horizon.*

*Town below.*

*People just waking up for the day.*

*A feeling of excitement for the day that was to come.*

*A party.*

*Like and unlike many others.*

*Today is a day that will change my life.*

The last letter slid into disarray as the flash overtook him.

It felt real.

It felt like holding the pencil and the notebook.

It felt like a memory.

Alder sat.

He began to move the pencil back and forth across the page.

He let his fingers and his arms guide the shapes and he closed his eyes.

He thought very specifically of the two flashes and of everything that had happened to him in this place so far from the first moment he opened his eyes here to the walk and the creatures below the cliff to Malaya and the man in the yellow robe to the cycles of the woman on the other side of the bars to the fake feeling of the grass between his fingers.

He wrote.

The shadows flitted in and out of existence around him.

The girl was watching.

And then she was not.

The house was on fire.

Bridgett awoke suddenly to the smell of smoke and the warmth of flames and she opened her eyes to see dark clouds pouring underneath her door from the usually bright hallway. She stood up quickly and put on her clothes and walked toward the door and opened it so that she could get a better sense of what was happening. She had only been at this motel for three weeks and already this was the seventh time she had been awakened in the middle of the night by some sort of escalating disaster.

Smoke billowed into the room and Bridgett immediately knew that this was a bad idea. She closed the door and felt her way to the window on the other side of the room. She opened it. Smoke rushed out as cool night air rushed in. She packed. She put everything she owned into the large black bag that her job had given her and climbed down the fire escape into the street below. She was not feeling particularly attached to this place nor was she feeling particularly heroic and there were no phone implants or network coverage in this part of the country anymore and so Bridgett just walked away.

It was a cold night. December. And it was going to snow. The night sky was gray and white and it filled Lakeston with an eerie glow that would have been considered by some to be the brightness of the holidays. Those people were few and far in between now. The motel she

was staying at was in the old factory district. After the second war many of these cities shrunk toward one side or another leaving entire swathes of uninhabited buildings that would slowly morph into something new if the town was lucky. Bridgett learned that not many of the towns in this part of the country were. She had learned that Lakeview was one of only three towns between Iowa and the coast that still consistently had visitors. At least that is what people told her.

Bridgett observed the interesting fact that this town was remarkably similar to Hillston in that many of the residents had never left to see what else was out there. The visitors stayed in the rich part of town to the north where the lake was and where there were hotels and restaurants. It cost a lot of money to charter small aircraft these days and so Lakeview made sure those people did not have to see this part of town.

The walls of the old factory district were covered in graffiti that might have been a hundred years old. A layered history of collapse in words and images. As Bridgett walked by she saw the image of a young hispanic woman that she had seen many times growing up but this rendition was dark. The woman had fangs and her hair was made of snakes. Bridgett knew that this was an image of Isabella because underneath the phrase everyone knew her for.

Knock the doors down.

I want your children were the words that followed on this interpretation. It had caught Bridgett's eyes several times as she walked this path on her way closer to the middle of town because she had never seen an image of Isabella in such a negative context. She had heard in her classes back in Hillston that not everyone thought Isabella was a figure for good but she could not figure out why the woman would be demonized so strongly. This was not the only such

portrait that Bridgett had seen in Lakeview. She counted twelve in the streets that she walked alone in the times she was not working. Some were small and hidden and some were massive and took up the sides of abandoned buildings but they were all very similar in construction. Knock the doors down would be followed by some addition that made it about others coming and wrecking or taking.

Bridgett did not have the courage to ask anyone that she knew about these interpretations. She had already been in Lakeview for over a month but she still only knew three or four people and those were just the people she worked with at Reclamation. They were not fans of casual conversation. There might be several hours of sifting through materials in one part of town or another during which none of the women would say anything to one another and the moments of silence would only be punctuated by the shoving of papers into plastic bags or them being filed away for later storage. Bridgett gleaned that Reclamation was a job often and easily given to those that crawl into Lakeview looking to make a new life in one way or another. That was not an often occurrence and so Bridgett was the first new addition to the team in perhaps ten years. She surmised that it also did not help that she was young. The other women on the team were in their early fifties and so must have come in their thirties or after. She wondered if any of them had walked like she did but she did not ask. It was curious that there were no men as a part of the Reclamation team. Bridgett wondered if it was because none made it here or because they were given different duties.

She had the distinct concern that her muscles were frozen to her bones as she arrived at the back door of the Reclamation office. Half hidden behind an unused dumpster was one of the Isabella paintings in graffiti.

Knock the doors down and burn them as they run in.

This one reminded Bridgett of the man she saw burned back at home. How she still dreamt of him walking aimlessly and looking for something that she hoped he would find someday.

She knocked and several seconds passed and she knocked again. Shuffling. The door opened. It was Barbara on the other side looking back at her in her yellow nightgown that clashed with her pale skin.

“I can’t live at the motel anymore. There was a fire.”

“There’s always a fire.”

“I wanted to live alone and try it out.”

“I know.”

“Can I come in? It’s freezing out here.”

“Yea you can come in. You get the basement though. The rest of us are comfortable.”

“Okay.”

The others were sleeping and the office was dark. Bridgett knew that there were rooms on the second floor of the building because it looked like it used to be a small hotel but she did not know anything about the basement and no one had ever showed it to her.

Barbara walked her to the door at the top of the stairs that was situated behind the pantry in the office kitchen. It was well hidden. The door opened and Barbara flipped a switch to the right of the open door and the dark stairs were marginally illuminated.

“It was storage before the Riots seventy-five years back. The people who ran this place apparently turned it into a bomb shelter because they thought another Civil War was going to happen. It’s dark down there but it’s warm and there’s a bunch of old food if you need it. There are a few beds to choose from and everything is clean. I keep it all clean.”

“Thank you.”

Barbara left and Bridgett walked down the creaky wooden stairs. The walls were gray and textured as though someone had sprayed them with a substance that made them bubble out. Likely the insulation that made it warm. Bridgett immediately felt ten degrees warmer. The floor was plush carpet that looked like it had never been walked on and there were four beds situated around the room. The rest of the space was filled with shelves that held cans and boxes of food that was meant to be non-perishable. Bridgett dropped her bag next to the one closest to the stairs and looked around. All of the food was branded with weird phrases that she had never seen.

We are all in this together.

Don’t let them drag you down.

Hope is action.

Government works for you.

A citizen is a fighter.

Bridgett had never seen or heard of these but she found them unsettling. Many of the can labels were dominated by these statements and artistic representations of the old American flag. She sat and thought about what it must have been like with this bunker was made.

It was the first snow of the year and the school bell chimed out across Hillston signalling that school had been cancelled and Huston could not contain his excitement. He was jumping around his bed in his pajamas and fighting the urge to scream. That would be bad. If he screamed too early then his mother would wake up and would probably make them go to school anyway. But Huston was so happy. He loved the snow more than he loved most things and even though his teachers kept telling him that Hillston was a mountain town and that snow was bound to come he had only seen it a handful of times that he could remember. The teachers were liars. Whatever might have happened when they were little was definitely not true now.

Huston sat down and looked out at the snow. He felt calm watching the gigantic flakes falling casually to the ground. It was like he was in some magical dream world that was different than the boring world that he lived in usually. Anything was possible. He could explore the world outside of Hillston or climb to the top of the mountain that was on the West side of town even though everyone told him it was impossible or he could dig a hole in the ground and reach the other side of the world. Anything. He got lost in the swirling snow as the wind began to pick up. This must be like the cinema. The teachers had told him about the cinema and about how people would use cameras to film performers and how the most incredible things would play out in three dimensions in front of you as you sat in the dark. The funny thing was that Huston was smart enough to know that none of them had ever been to the cinema. They must have heard the story from their parents or their grandparents. They told him cameras were mostly gone in this country except in the antique shops in the big cities on the coasts. And no one had money for actors or sets or anything like that anymore. So how could they have been to the cinema? They were liars.

The sun was finally rising and Huston turned the handle to his door knob as quietly as possible so that it did not make any noise. He knew that the slower he turned the handle and the faster he opened the door the less noise would be made. He was well practiced. It had been a whole year since he got to move into his own room because Feld was finally old enough to sleep on his own but they were still best friends and so whenever something exciting happened in the morning Huston had to get over to his younger brothers room fast and quietly. The hallway was still dark and the floor of the old house was very creaky but Huston stepped on all the right spots and made as little noise as possible as he tiptoed past the room of his mother. His heart was racing. He had already changed into his winter clothes and the crinkly material added an extra layer of tension.

Feld was asleep and so Huston jumped on his bed and whispered about the snow day as quietly as he could. It worked. Feld was up in an instant and getting dressed and the two were sneaking outside before Huston knew it. They built snow castles with rocks forming the base and some of the more important walls. The two had developed a strong technique of using cold water from the stream at the bottom of the hill on the other side of the school to help pack down the snow and two years ago their snow castle stayed standing for four weeks after the snow in a shady spot. They brought their friends to it over and over again to brag. They were often very focused during the building process but today Huston was feeling talkative.

“This looks like the pictures of the White House that I saw!”

“What’s that?”

“I dunno. My teachers were telling me about it when we were talking about history. It was like a big castle where the president used to live and no one could get in.”

“That’s cool. Do people still live there?”

“No, dummy. No president anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I dunno. We haven’t learned that yet. But the teachers probably don’t even know. They don’t know anything.”

“My teachers know stuff.”

“You just think that because you are little.”

“No! They tell me smart stuff all the time.”

“Like what.”

“I don’t know. A lot of smart stuff.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Leave me alone!”

“I told you!”

“Like Bridgett is probably dead already because no one ever makes it to another place unless they are rich.”

Huston stopped talking and the air around the brothers was silent and sad. It was easy for him to not think about his sister because there was so much going on between school and chores except for in moments like this. He hoped she was still alive. He hoped with all of his heart.

There was a loud sound like a boom in the sky far away and Huston looked up instinctively. He had never heard a sound like this before. It was like an explosion followed by intense silence. Stillness. Just the sound of his breathing and the wind.

A small and fast object zoomed through the sky with impressive speed from East to West and it was out of sight in moments. It was silent as it passed but a wave of booming sound came after that was so loud that Huston put his hands over his ears and saw Feld do the same. They watched for a long time after the object disappeared before they spoke.

“What was it?”

“I think it was an airplane. My teachers told me about those. Or a jet.”

And then Huston saw something falling.

“Three steps.

One

Two

Three

Good.

Four steps.

One

Two

If I would have just gone the other direction

East

West

Up

Sky

It used to be blue and now it is not

No color now

No sky now

No me now

Me

Me

Me

Watching Me

Someone is watching me

He has brown skin

And he has my notebook

And

And

Ancestors in alphabetical order

No.

No.

No!

The man is still watching

Has he always been there?

What does he want?

What do I want?

What does the grass feel like if I move it between my fingers?

It is not soft

It is not green  
It is not grass  
Not like in my backyard  
Not like with my mom  
My mom had grass  
It was green  
Like my notebook.  
My head is wavy  
My head is heavy.  
Lift my head.  
The hill is not there.  
Turn my head.  
Wrench it over to see  
The metal poles to keep me in.  
The man holding my notebook  
Writing.  
Watching.  
I need to get my notebook back.  
Get it back.  
Stand.  
Put one foot firmly on the not grass  
Put the other foot next to it

Move the rocks from my back  
Push the blood into my veins  
Clear the dense fog  
Leave the ancestors behind  
Run.”

There were images flowing through him.

Large house

Fire

And hands clasped tightly together

And anticipation

And release

Alder let his mind control the images and let his hand control the pencil and he did not know if what he was writing made any sense or if it had worth

But he knew that the more his pencil moved across the pale green notebook the clearer the images became.

It was like the vision of his memory was becoming more defined.

With every stroke of the pencil the colors became more vivid.

He was not remembering more

Just more sharply

Like moving closer to a photograph hanging upon a wall where all the details are less obscure but the photos around become invisible.

And every single detail was like magic to Alder

He knew that they were a part of him but he did not know how or why or when or what this place had to do with any of it.

He did not know anything beyond this place and yet...

Alder looked up from the ground and the notebook and towards the metal poles and saw that the wandering woman from before was shambling quickly toward him.

She could not run quickly because her legs were not sturdy underneath her.

But she tried.

Her face grimaced painfully and her fists clenched and her legs mechanically lurched forward

One

And then the other.

She was pushing with all of being in a way that Alder could barely comprehend.

A force that was unstoppable

and determined

and somehow majestic in its sheer power.

Alder stepped backward as the woman creature moved forward

She was not stopping

And Alder knew that she would not stop.

They were not supposed to be able to get out but he did not know how

And so he backed up further and held the notebook tight against his chest and did not break eye contact with her.

There was everything and nothing in those eyes and they did not blink as they stared  
down deep into Alder

Unflinching.

She ran faster and faster

Her legs becoming more certain underneath her

The weights lifting from her shoulders so that she became more graceful.

Alder tripped and fell backwards as he stepped away more quickly and could not bring himself to  
get up and run as she got closer and closer to the metal bars and his grip got tighter and tighter  
against the pale green notebook and her eyes looked down at it for a single moment and Alder  
knew that it was hers and that she wanted it back and that she would do anything within her  
power and she sped up and she reached out with her left arm as she got to the metal bar so as to  
reach through and toward him and her arm crushed violently against something invisible and her  
body thudded hard against that same force and Alder winced as her entire body crumpled to the  
ground.

Alder breathed.

Nothing moved except the shadows flitting in and out of existence.

And then he stood and slowly made his way closer to the metal bars

He held the notebook tightly to his body.

She was sprawled like some sacred spirit with her eyes peacefully closed

Her legs crossed like she might have been flying

But her arm was mangled in an unnatural mess that seemed devoid of bone and structure.

Alder moved closer but did not cross the metal bars.

There was no blood

Or bruising

Or sign of harm

Or damage at all other than the arm

She looked like she might be sleeping.

He knew that he was supposed to call out if something like this happened

In his mind he knew that he was supposed to scream a phrase so that the man in the yellow robe would know that something had happened and so that it could be dealt with.

But Alder did not know what that would mean.

Would the woman be taken from this place?

He had guilt.

He knew that the notebook belonged to her and he wanted to give it back because it was the right thing to do but he could not bring himself to even consider it.

The images of fire and of holding hands and of a party were so clear in his mind and he wanted more.

There was another phrase that could take him away.

The yellow-robed man would place him in another position.

But he could only do this once.

“Everyone has a duty. Even I. This is my duty just as the Wanderers shall be yours. I do not make mistakes. Mistakes cannot be made here. But perhaps you are not as strong as I believe.

That is possible. And so you will take this appointment and you may be switched. You do not do this except in the most extreme circumstances. But you may and only once. You are the only one

that knows what you can handle. Know that you will be here for quite a long time, Alder. If the first position does not work out, the second one must.”

He heard the words as if the yellow-robed man was speaking them.

But if he called out they could find the notebook and take it from him

He could not let that happen.

And so he would not.

One having over neither.

Alder sat and watched the still body and wondered if the man in the yellow robe was watching.

It was possible that they could see everything

At any moment they would be here

They would take her and they would take the notebook

They would stop him from remembering.

But that moment did not come.

Alder looked around at the shadows and saw the girl and she seemed to look older

When she disappeared he looked further away and saw that there was a boy on a nearby hill

The boy was watching him.

He was very young and was covered with ash or smoke or dust

He had a curiosity about him and looked like he was trying to figure out who Alder was as he walked slowly and carefully toward Alder in fast motion.

He watched and Alder watched back.

And then he was gone.

And the woman was screaming.

Feld was coughing and choking and there was something on top of him and he could not open his eyes. He wiggled his fingers and felt them move through dirt and mud and so he moved them furiously forward and back and up and down until he felt cold air on his skin. He moved his hands around until they found his face and moved dirt and mud and snow until his face was clean and he was breathing in air again.

He opened his eyes.

It was Huston on top of him and Huston was not moving and so Feld shook him wildly and screamed his name and even though he was a much smaller boy he felt his older brother moving a little bit and heard him moaning. Feld shook harder and harder and yelled louder and louder and felt Huston finally wrench awake. Huston rolled off and onto the ground next to him and Feld sat up quickly and took deep breaths. He could see the town and the tops of buildings he could see fire and he could not see the top of the school because he was too small. He looked at Huston and saw that his coat was ripped through at the back with long tears from the top to the bottom and that the back of his head was bleeding. Huston jumped on top of him and saved him. He was a good brother.

“Huston, are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? You’re bleeding on your head.”

“It’s okay. Are you okay?”

“Just cold.”

Feld looked behind him and saw large stones that had landed in the water and were smoking and he understood that these stones were the things that tore Huston's jacket and that they might have hit him in the head if Huston had not tackled him.

"Thank you, Huston."

Huston was slowly getting up now and Feld rushed over to help him. He knew he was not helpful but he still tried his hardest.

"Don't mention it."

"What was that?"

"I don't know. It was like a bomb or something."

"Why would there be a bomb?"

"I don't know, Feld."

"I don't think the school is there anymore."

"What? Is our house..."

"I couldn't see."

Huston was standing now and they were wiping dirt and mud off of each other. Feld saw Huston looking back at Hillston for the first time and saw his face drop.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He was lying. Huston always swallowed hard before he lied and he did it this time too and his face looked very sad.

"Is our house okay?"

"I can't see it either. It's probably fine."

He lied again and Feld started to feel worried and Huston turned to him and saw that he looked worried and knelt down.

“Look. It will be fine no matter what. Will you stay here while I go check it out?”

“No.”

Feld did not want to be alone and it was cold and he was worried.

“Please. I just want to make sure it’s safe.”

“I want to go. It’s too cold out here.”

Huston took a deep breath and grabbed Feld’s hand.

“Walk fast, okay. And don’t run away.”

Feld nodded and they walked away from the stream and toward their house.

It was much more quiet than Feld thought it would be as they walked because no one was in their house. As they got closer to the school it felt like everyone was walking in the same direction but they did not turn around or look any direction other than forward and they did not talk at all. Feld thought it was kind of like a funeral. He held on tight to Huston and walked as fast as he could even though his legs were not that long. Huston walked faster and faster the closer they got to the school and they kept seeing stones on the ground and holes in walls and when they came around the corner Feld could clearly see that the school not there anymore. The whole top of the building was gone and the things inside were on fire. There were people going in and out of the fire but no one was making any sounds. Just standing.

They walked past the school and around another corner seeing that a lot of the buildings near the school were gone or half broken down. The school was one of the biggest buildings in Hillston and it looked like the giant stones from the top had burst off and fallen on a lot of the

buildings that were near it. Feld did not know what could do this. They came to the front of their house and the front and sides were still standing but there was a big hole in the roof and a lot of the top of the house had caved in. Huston stopped them and held his hand almost too tight. Then he let go.

“Stay here.”

It was not a question this time and Feld did not argue. He watched Huston run into the house and he counted his breaths. His teacher taught him how to count his breaths when he was too nervous because it was supposed to help change his focus. Feld was not good at getting in front of the class to give a presentation or even talking to other kids and so the teachers were always giving him new ways to help him. This was the only thing that ever worked except that he would count out loud because he was not good at counting in his head yet and so the kids all thought he was weird. It was not working right now because he could not stop wondering if all of his stuffed animals were okay. He had three stuffed animals that he kept at school and only one at home and they had belonged to his grandfather and only a couple of other kids had stuffed animals so he was really proud of them. Were the teachers there to save the stuffed animals? Were the teachers there now?

When Huston came back out of the house it had been one hundred and two breaths. Huston was walking backwards and dragging their mom with all of his strength. Feld ran over as fast as he could and grabbed her arm and started pulling too. They pulled her out into the middle of the road and Feld let her go and looked at her for the first time. Her body was limp and she had bruises on her arms and legs. She was still wearing her pajamas and her hair was messy and

dark against the snow on the ground. Feld thought that she must be cold and so he started to take off his jacket so he could give it to her but then he saw her face. It was crushed in the middle and there was blood and Feld could barely make it out. There was a lot of blood. Feld jumped back and let out a scream and noticed that Huston had fallen to his bottom and was holding her hand and crying and saying that he did not know what to do and that he did not want to leave her in there. And Feld knew that his mom was not cold and that she did not need his jacket because she was dead.

Feld did not cry right away and he felt bad that the tears did not come but he could not stop looking at her arm and how heavy it looked. It looked heavy like the arm of the man they saw hanging at the house on the top of the hill. And Feld could not stop himself from wondering if all dead people looked heavy like that. He did not want them to feel heavy. He did not want them to be weighed down because they were dead. Dead people should be light because they were not here anymore. They should be like leaves and fly away. He thought that was how the world should work.

And then the tears came.

It was the loud sound of the jet that woke Bridgett up from her sleep. Even in the basement it was booming and the shelves shook violently all around her as she jolted upright. She had never heard a plane before and it was only by parsing together the stories of her teachers and the reactions of the other women that helped her pinpoint what it was over breakfast. It was not common here either but some of the women and Barbara in particular had theories about

what it could have been. The conversation was fascinating to Bridgett because she did not know that the world was such a big place.

“It’s the anarchists and the destructionists. They’re working together now. Before I came here, I was in DC and you could tell something was brewing. It’s been brewing for a long time. People are not happy over there. Why would they be? It’s the only place where the government still exists in this country and it’s better over here. You might not think it’s better but it is. At least over here everyone accepts that there isn’t a government and hasn’t been for fifty years. And it’s quieter. So they try to prove a point that the government is useless by getting their stuff and people together and blowing things up.”

“Why here though?”

“The government still talks over there about how it controls the country but no one can prove that it isn’t true. No planes anymore. Not on this continent at least. Except the super rich. And they don’t have to share anything. They don’t care. So if they bomb over here and have video it can prove that the government doesn’t do anything.”

The girls listened intently over the entirety of their breakfast of steel-cut oats that Delilah had helped harvest in the early fall and then the five of them were silent when they were getting ready to work. Bridgett was wondering where the jet was heading and Barbara said that it was probably nearby and so her mind went to her home and wondering if there was still a home and if her brothers and her mom were still there. It was the first time she had thought about them in a while. There was an eerie mood in the room where they were all putting on their rubber boots and pants and jackets and masks because they had just talked about how the government was going to collapse and they were still trying to reclaim space from the last time it happened in

gear that they pretended would protect them even though they knew it would not. Barbara was always pale and coughing and weak and they all noticed and told Bridgett about it and told her to get out while she still could. Denise and Frida were best friends that were in their forties and were the mothering type. They were the most excited when Bridgett had to move into the basement because it meant they could keep tabs on her and help her get a new job. They both said that neither of them were fit to have any other job and that they were just happy to have made it to Lakeview anyway. They were not ambitious except for wanting to be with each other and sometimes Bridgett thought that maybe they were more than friends.

They were on day seven and floor fourteen of a twenty-three floor office building near the lake side of town that had become laborious and unpleasant to sift through. The town wanted it cleared and reclaimed as soon as possible because they wanted to build a new hotel for the increasing population of out of town guests that were coming to Lakeview in the winter to explore. Barbara had told them that the goal was to turn some of the floors into rooms and some into experiences so that guests could see what it was like to live here before the collapse. Complete with radiation gear. Many of the buildings left to reclaim were still soaked with radiation and Bridgett learned not to ask questions about it. If they did not speak about it perhaps it was not as bad.

Bridgett was always assigned to papers because the others did not trust her to treat the larger items with the proper amount of care even though all she saw them do was dump them into the bags in the same way she did. The real reason was that sometimes there was jewelry or other valuable artifacts that would come from sifting through larger items and the other women wanted the items for themselves. It was a fair system as far as Bridgett was concerned because

she was the youngest and the newest and did not yet have a settled life in Lakeview. It did make her acutely aware of the papers she was looking at.

Halfway through their twelve hour day and halfway through the fourteenth floor the women were sweeping across a large office space that contained sixty-seven desks. It was a massive space that that was strewn with papers and computers and phones and the technological remnants of an advanced society. They were high enough off of the ground that they could see the whole of Lakeview and many of the surrounding mountains in addition to the clear winter sky. There were bullet-holed windows making up three entire walls of the office and Bridgett could not stop herself from getting swept up in the view. She had never seen anything from this high off of the ground before and it was entrancing to look down at the rich people at the pool in the hotel next door or to look off at the horizon and wonder what else was out there. It was the first time that she wanted to take off her gas mask since she had started the job. She knew the dangers all too well and was reminded of them constantly but there was a sense in her that she wanted to see the view more clearly. Bridgett was reaching for her mask when she heard Barbara calling her name. Always the taskmaster. And so she returned to the papers.

This was a news office. There were piles of papers that were emblazoned with the title “New America Southwest Times” across the tables and across the floors. Some were stained with old blood. Bridgett knew this must have been a profitable newspaper and part of a larger conglomerate because she learned at school that newspapers were lost until the rise of the New American Empire and then were run by central offices on the east coast. They wanted to seem local and so they created satellite locations in different regions of the continent. It was only the larger regions that got news made out of real paper. Her teachers were always telling Bridgett to

imagine what it must have been like to have everything digitally in your hand or in your glasses or even flashing across your eyes if you were rich enough but that it would likely never happen again in our lifetimes or perhaps ever. Even her teachers did not really know what it was like. They had gotten stories from their grandparents who did not even have enough money to afford the most impressive technology. Her teachers would always remind her of how technology became a caste system.

A large majority of the papers that Bridgett sifted through were stories of the collapse. The photos were of the armies of drones belonging to the uprising peppering cities with bullets and gas and destroying swathes of of the continent. Bridgett knew there would be no images of the events that started the uprising because the newspapers took the side of the New American Empire. These would have been some of the last papers created before the drones came here. Before the gas.

And then there was a sound. It was quiet at first but became a deafening rumble as the windows of the fourteenth floor began to shake and rattle. The Reclamation team held their hands to their ears and looked up and out of the windows and toward the range of mountains to the east and saw seven jets flying low across them toward Lakeview. Someone screamed but Bridgett did not know who because she could only hear it in like her head was underwater. She watched the sleek silver snakes slithering toward them and marveled in their beauty as they danced through the sky. There was nothing else. And her heart beat faster. She noted that she might die here as the bellies of the great beasts of the sky opened to drop dozens of smaller things. She had never seen anything like it. Something man made flying through the sky. And

then the smaller things landed and clouds of fire rose up toward them. And then the glass shattered and Bridgett felt herself rise from the floor and into the air. And then her eyes closed.

Alder leaped to his feet when the screaming came from the woman on the other side of the metal bars

Her eyes were open

They darted in every direction

He was drawn closer

She looked directly at him.

And then the ground began to shake underneath him

And all at once the grass began to wither

And the sky was purple and pink

And clouds rolled in

And something exploded far off in the distance

And one of the poles fell in the distance

And then another

And another

And there was the sound of crying children echoing in their ears.

And all of the shadows were gone

And Alder looked down at the woman and saw fear in her eyes

Fear that was clear and present

And he felt as though this world was falling apart

Or ripping at the seams.

They both looked at the poles disappearing and there was nothing in their place

Gray and white nothing

Alder grabbed the hand of the woman and she grabbed his back

He looked up at the cataclysm sky and he yelled.

“Adaru!”

Alder felt the tingle that began in his toes and he held on tight and with both hands to the woman.

Tightly.

He closed his eyes.

Pop.

Huston and Feld had not moved from the ground outside and the sun was high in the sky and Huston could not feel his knees from both the cold and the stiffness. The tears on his face were freezing as they fell and he felt weak. He had nothing left. He looked up at the house and at his younger brother who was no longer crying but just staring blankly at the ground and he wondered why no one had come to check on them after all of this time. He felt alone and lost.

There was a sound that started like a low rumble and came from over the top of the mountains and he heard screaming coming from the other streets that was getting louder as they screamers got closer and then rushed past them. The rumble became deafening like the scream of some gigantic monster and Huston looked over to his brother who was entranced by the sky. He

grabbed Feld's hand and held it close to his heart with their mother in between them. He did not look up. Feld looked afraid and so Huston smiled at him.

An explosion.

Malaya was watching.

And it was boring.

No matter how horrifying the nightmare cloud must be or why it was important that it was tracked.

It did not move.

From her position on top of a hill and in a special gated pen she could see the edges of the cloud in both directions.

Below her and on the ground the cloud was rolling like waves in a methodical circle.

When she first arrived here she found it mesmerizing.

Especially when the ground cracked and split from inside of the black cloud and spread outward like sun rays.

She was afraid that one of the chasms that opened up would swallow her up but it went to the side and she was thankful.

It was especially cool because inside the crack next to her was gray and white instead of darkness like she expected.

It was light and nothingness.

The sky turned a different color when that happened.

It turned pink and purple.

After the crack she noticed that if she squinted her eyes and focused hard she could see another pen just like hers at the edge of the horizon on the top of another hill.

There was someone else in it.

But that was a long time ago.

How long ago?

There was no way to keep time in this stupid place.

This could not be all that there is and ever was.

She had decided that.

Malaya looked over and squinted her eyes to see the other pen.

She did not do this very often anymore because nothing was ever happening over there either.

But it was different this time.

As she watched the man spotted something at the bottom of his hill.

She tracked the direction of his eyes and saw three people standing at the edge and then walking into the black wave of clouds.

She looked back up

Squinting as much as she could

And saw the man climbing out of his pen and running down the hill toward the blackness.

He was following them.

Malaya looked to her left and to her right and made the quick decision that she wanted to be a part of whatever was happening.

Anything would be better than this.

She leaped her pen and began running down the mountain.

She called out to the man as she ran.

## **END OF FIRST MOVEMENT**

### **Second Movement**

She was always watching. Even now with the book and all it contains disintegrating before my eyes and this world coming to a finite and destructive end I feel her eyes and her hands and her snake-like mind moving around me. She is invasive like a disease that starts somewhere small and spreads spasmodically in fits and starts without any regard for what is and what should be. She has played the game longer than us all and she plays it well. Imagination was one of the first and will be one of the last. Long after me. She will reshape this world in her image. This was a war from the beginning and we all should have known it.

Adrian was born in the fringes of the **European Union** seven years and four months after Alder. He was readily accepted and thrived with the wealth and circumstance into which he was born. A pillar of the elite in a society that had come to honor and respect opulent flamboyance in lifestyle. His family owned the border city of Orestias and his education was consequently both rigorously structured and remarkably loose. As a child he would travel once per week on private jet to the center of the Union in Paris and receive one-on-one tutoring with the top educator on

the continent. This tutoring session would last sixteen hours with little interruption. The remaining days of his week would be spent in whatever manner he saw fit. He would eventually take to the responsibilities of owning what his grandfather had bought after the Arabian South Russia Conflict but as a child he found himself more concerned with exploring the ruins. The boundary of **Orestias** was marked by a the end of civilization itself and the charred and melted remains of advanced society were just on the other side of the fence. Adrian would often leap the fence with friends and go exploring. It was in these ruins that he would see his first dead body and where he would meet his first love and lose his virginity. It is most important to note that this is the place where he ran after his father found out that he was gay when he was eighteen years old and disowned him. He ran for exactly fifty-eight minutes before collapsing in the ruins and trying to take his own life by using a charred shard of plastic. It did not work and his father soon found him by helicopter. His father crafted a way to spin the news and so they made up and Adrian was sent on a pleasure trip of the ruins of the New American Empire as an apology gift and as a way for his father to work out the details of his return as a worldly gay man who had discovered himself abroad.

It was a popular trend among the hyper rich on Earth at the time to watch a once great civilization pretend that it was **not crumbling**. Some would stay on the east coast of the continent where it was still safe and slum it in centuries old amenities to get a true experience. Others would embark to the middle or west of the country to massive and unregulated complexes of every imaginable human vice built upon the backs of the labor of others in the human fashion. Adrian did both. He delighted in every fancy of a young human man during a four year and ten

month span. He never did the same thing twice except for a party that he attended every year during his time. It was a raucous party somewhere in the middle of the country in a town called Hillston. It was in Hillston that he met his second love in a man named Alder. It was here that Adrian was ripped from a bed on a chilly morning and felt a poorly made steel blade sever the arteries in his throat in what seemed like slow motion while Alder screamed in front of him.

Adrian arrived in the world of dreams with thousands of mourners in Orestias and would become a saint there because of the mystery surrounding his death and the clever weaving of story from his **father**. He arrived in the world of dreams ready to be sorted into his duty. He took the name Milo.

Alder took deep breaths.

He felt his arms and his legs.

They moved

Like tentacles without his permission

Some sort of liquid beneath him.

He was floating

Light and limitless.

With each breath

Chest expanding

Lungs full.

It felt to breathe.

It felt good to breathe.

And then: a memory

The woman.

He opened his eyes and still saw nothing

Infinite dark

Moving fingers tentatively downward

Reaching.

-Deep breaths-

The bottom.

Only a few inches below.

He sat up

Cold ground beneath him now

His weight enough to sink.

He moved water between his fingers

Feeling around and up and down.

Ground and water, nothing more.

And then the thought:

the notebook

He felt for it around and frantically.

Why was he not holding it?

His hands splashed around as it moved across the surface of the shallow pool in every direction

in a blind search for the thing that had given him meaning

That had started to unlock him to himself.

His hand landed on an object that was square and firm floating on top of the water and he grabbed it and pulled it toward himself only for it to disintegrate into sand between his fingers.

He thought he heard laughing in the distance

But...no.

A sound, though:

Splashing.

Chaotic movement far away.

How far away was it?

Choking now, there was choking.

It was her.

It must be her.

Alder crawled to her, feeling the ground shift between his fingers

Feeling dirt under the water.

She could not die, not now.

He could not lose the notebook and the woman and so he crawled faster as the choking became louder, like the woman was turning in and out of the water and unable to breathe each time her head went underneath but trying hard anyway.

He felt water splashing on his face and knew that he was getting close and redoubled his speed and reached his hands out in front of him as he crawled on his knees until he came in contact with something.

Skin

He was touching her.

He was touching the woman.

He was grabbing her arm.

And suddenly she was still.

Two laboring breaths.

Two rapidly beating hearts.

No

Other

Sound.

They were both unmoving and Alder was afraid.

He suddenly considered that this might not be the woman at all.

It might not be the woman that lumbered toward him with all that intensity.

It might not be the woman with the eyes that he saw become conscious in front of his.

It might be someone else.

Some thing else.

He did not move his hand.

It did not move.

Was it afraid?

“H...

He...

Hell...

hi.”

The words wrenched out sound by sound as though the letters were being formed for the first time.

It was her.

“Hi.”

And he squeezed her arm in an attempt to reassure her.

She pulled away.

“I...my name is Alder.”

And he waited.

He could hear her mouth making sounds

Trying to find language.

“I...

A...

M...

Isabella.”

The name rolled from her mouth with certainty.

There was pride in her voice.

“Hi, Isabella.”

He smiled even though he knew she could not see him.

Alder was relieved.

At least he had this.

At least she had made it with him.

Alder did not know why he was so attached to her other than that she had been a part of his journey.

She was there when he started to remember who he was.

She helped him in some odd way.

And there was something about her eyes.

“Th

A

N

K

You.”

And she exhaled and Alder could tell that this took everything from her.

“It’s alright. You stay here. I’m going to look around.”

And he did.

Alder stood and tentatively walked in one direction

slid his feet inside the water instead of lifting them.

Careful to keep his arms stretched out in front of him.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Step.

His hands touched something hard and cold.

Stone.

And he moved his hands up and around and found that he could not reach the top.

He called out and heard it echo up and up and up until it disappeared somewhere far above.

He heard Isabella inhale sharply.

“I had to test. I’m sorry. This place is big. Maybe we’re in some kind of pit. I’m going to try to find a door.”

Alder moved his hands carefully across the wall, feeling from top to bottom as he moved to his left.

He moved slowly.

Step.

Step.

Step.

A sound just behind him.

A hiss over his left ear.

Close.

He jolted around with his arms directly in front of him.

Nothing.

A breath.

And he kept moving.

The wall and the room must have been circular because there were no corners and Alder could tell by the sound of Isabella breathing that he was on the other side of her now.

And then his hands fell upon something else.

It was not the wall.

It was a form, moving and breathing and still and Alder pulled his hands back and punched out and hit nothing and reached out again, slowly, and felt the form again

**A face.**

Cold and firm to touch

but flesh

Alder withdrew and whispered to it.

“Who are you?”

He tried to sound brave but his voice faltered and he was met with silence in return.

He took two steps backward and felt himself run into something else.

Something else unmoving.

And he felt arms wrap around his chest and whispers in his ear from the front and from the back and he could not tell what they were saying to him but he was being squeezed tighter and tighter and he could not breathe and he screamed out for help but did not know where Isabella was or if she could help and he got his arm free and elbowed the figure behind him and it disintegrated.

And he thrust his foot out in front of him and made contact with the other figure and it collapsed into a sad around his shoeless toes.

Alder swung his arms around wildly to make sure there was nothing else around him.

Splash

Coming from the other side.

One at first and then many.

Spread out and moving across toward Alder.

Choking and coughing.

Thrashing and writhing in water.

The gargling of water.

It was Isabella.

Alder ran toward the sounds as quickly as he could through the water until his feet made contact with another form, this one thrashing.

He reached down and grabbed at the figure only to feel it too dissolve between his fingers and the sounds disappear.

And there was silence.

Complete and deafening.

Alder was still

Listening.

He was standing directly on top of where Isabella had been sitting, he knew this to be true.

But did he?

How far had he walked around the room?

When was the last time he had heard Isabella?

Was that her at all?

The room felt like it was getting smaller and Alder could not tell if it was his feeling of loneliness or the room closing in on him.

A click.

Alder looked up.

A blinding white light from above.

An angelic figure floating in from the top of the room.

A voice like wooden windchimes

“I am your guardian angel.”

Feet on his face.

“Just kidding. All those idiots are long gone. Now move before I crush you.”

It was war.

**Barbara** was right and the destructionists were working with the anarchists. They decided that the areas in and around Lakeview were going to provide the most proverbial bang because of the massive tourist population. Everything else was acceptable collateral damage.

Bridgett barely made it out of the news office alive and it was only because Frida grabbed her after the first explosion and pulled her to the stairwell where they frantically ran down fourteen flights of stairs. They heard seven more explosions while they were in the staircase and when they opened the door to the outside most of what they saw was fire. They made it across the street before another jet flew over them and a small missile sailed over their heads and into the open front doors of the bottom floor. The twenty-three story building began to collapse underneath itself. They did not turn around to watch.

They ran as fast as they could until they were sure that they were not in danger and then Frida realized that there was no one following them. She fell to her knees and cried. She screamed.

“She was right behind us. Denise...”

Bridgett dropped next to Frida and hugged her and they sat like that for several minutes in the midst of the explosions and the destruction. Bridgett tried to pull Frida up but she would not move.

She did not care if she died.

People started to join up after that. They started to pick sides because they knew that they were a part of it now. War. Frida joined up the next day on the side of the government. The destructionists had killed the only person that she had ever loved and she could not stand to keep going on in her everyday life. She could not and would not move on. Frida left the following week to go to a government authorized training camp on a bus that would never make it to its destination because of a bomb placed strategically underneath the right front tire by a person that had joined the other side.

Bridgett did not join up at first because she did not have a stake in the war. Her pay went up as she took on new responsibilities and others told her that it was unlikely that the same town would be struck twice. It was not until thirty two days later when she got word that Hillston had been destroyed that she joined. She heard from a new member of the crew that she assigned to papers. The woman said that she had hitched a ride on one of the new government caravans that passed right by the town. Bridgett could not help picturing her brothers looking up at the sky and helplessly watching as death rained down on them and she could not stop dreaming about the burned face of her mother. How similar it must have looked to the man on the hill. Everything, she thought, looked the same after fire.

Bridgett joined the government side.

The insurgents were calling themselves Emergent and so the government began referring to themselves as the Army of Endurance. It is the way of things with humans. Wars begin with misunderstanding, escalate through branding, and end with devastation. The war escalated.

Bridgett met the man who would become her husband on her fourteenth day of training in an improvised Endurance camp built in the mountains twenty one miles from where Hillston used to be. It was after a long day of physical training when everyone was in the mess hall eating dinner together. The dorms were kept gender specific but dinner was a time for intermingling because the Endurance knew the power of camaraderie.

Bridgett would often spend these times sitting alone. She had not made many friends or acquaintances yet and she found the food difficult enough to eat without the pressures of social interaction. The training was hard and she did not want to give away that her legs had taken to shaking when they were at rest and so she sat with her chair pushed all the way up to the cafeteria style table. She always sat near the middle.

She did not know that a man named Jameson had been moving closer to her each day.

He could tell that Bridgett was not interested in socializing and so positioned himself several humans away from her and slowly frog-jumped them in her direction so as to be discreet. It took five days for him to be sitting across from her and another two for him to say hello.

Jameson joined up on the east coast after the Emergent had made a show of burning flags and government officials in the city in New Jersey where he had grown up. The city was in chaos. **His mother** was secretary in a small government office and so she quit immediately and their family was just leaving town when their vehicle was overtaken by rioting groups attacking the exodus. His mother and father were killed in the chaos and he blamed the Emergent. He

escaped into the woods and found his way to the closest city and joined. The Endurance Army were moving thousands of soldiers out west as a show of force and Jameson was among the first to volunteer. It took them three weeks to arrive by caravan.

“My legs shake, too.”

“What?” Bridgett looked up from her food at the man that had only ever said hello to her once over the past three days.

“They make you do so much running and climbing. I’ve been in training for five weeks total already and my legs still get shaky. It gets better though.”

“Oh...” Bridgett felt nervous in a way that she could not remember feeling but relieved that the leg shaking might be normal. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jameson had run out of things to say and so they sat in silence for awhile. The food at the camps was mostly freeze dried and reconstituted. It was not so different from the food that was available on the east coast where natural resources were scarce after the formal collapse of the New American Empire. It was high in protein and fiber and could be made in large vats with fire packs. They ate.

“I can even hold my legs still when I sit now.” Jameson said.

“Oh. Good.”

“Yeah. I think they want to prepare us for all the mountains out here.”

“Maybe.”

“No mountains where I come from.”

“Where do you come from?”

“The east coast. New Jersey. Do you know it?”

“No. But I hear the coast is beautiful. I hear there are lots of things over there that aren’t over here.”

“Different things. But that’s for people with money. We didn’t...I didn’t have much money. So it’s mostly the same. Except, you know, more of it. And closer together. And bigger. And not so many trees. And...well maybe it is a little different. So...you’re from around here, then?”

“Yes.”

“That’s cool.”

Bridgett liked the way that his black hair made soft curls that fell onto his forehead and Jameson liked the way that Bridgett always looked like she was thinking about something that would change the world.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. It’s Jameson.” And he wiped his hands on his pants held it out to Bridgett. She took it.

“Bridgett.”

They smiled at each other and pulled away and continued to eat.

“This food is kind of hard to eat. But I think I’m getting used to it,” Bridgett said.

“Oh. It would be different for you, wouldn’t it. You all must have loads of fresh food out here. We don’t have that where I come from. It’s all like this.”

She looked up at him with pity.

“I’m so sorry.”

Jameson choked at true sadness in Bridgett's face and food came out of his mouth. He looked up at Bridgett, embarrassed. She laughed.

It was one hundred and fifty three days after her seventeenth birthday and in the cafeteria of a war camp twenty-one miles from where she had grown up that Bridgett fell in love for the first and only time of her life. It was in the exact same moment that Jameson **fell in love with her**. It was his first and final time as well.

Jameson had friends. He had met a few people before he was moved west and many of them had traveled with him. Bridgett was introduced to Paulette and Kane and Vera and the five of them became close during training.

**Paulette and Kane** were a couple that joined up together from the Badlands in the middle of the country after the same jets that destroyed Hillston and Lakeview dropped bombs on their town in a trial run. They were madly in love with both each other and the idea of combat for the sake of ideology. Both died two months after meeting Bridgett during the first deployment to the coast. Kane rushed prematurely into an unsecured building near the water and Paulette followed in an attempt to stop him. Bridgett and Jameson lay silently in bed after hearing about their deaths. They listened to the cacophony of explosions far in the distance and held hands.

“There was a man that died when I was a kid.”

“A man?”

“He was a blacksmith in our town and threw these big parties. And one morning, really early, the party got attacked and he got killed. And...”

“Wait. Attacked by who?”

“I think it was the town elders but it doesn’t matter. My little brothers and I went up once everything was clear and we saw him, hanging there, burnt.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. He was a really nice guy. I remember meeting him in town. People can be so...”

“Why would people attack him?”

“My classmates said it was because he was different.”

“Did he do something illegal?”

“The town just said that he ‘lived too fully’. They came to class and told us that.”

“That’s really messed up.”

“I can’t forget his face.”

And Jameson pulled Bridgett close and kissed her forehead and they both spent the rest of the night thinking about uncertainty of living.

“Did you see it? Did you see what I did?”

Eyes, sharp and golden.

Skin, dark and faultless.

Tall.

A graceful goliath

dancing with such little movement

in front of Alder.

She could be fifteen

or four hundred.

But was in fact much older.

Alder felt it

in his bones.

A knowledge.

A tactical brilliance.

Wisdom.

She was wearing white.

Flowing fabric following form

but not attached.

She was close to him now.

Leaning in with breath of lavender

and silk.

“It was only the first step. The opening salvo, as it were. But still, very impressive, don’t you think? It took me two thousand years to plan.”

Alder did not move.

Hands and knees sinking into loose dirt.

Pants soaking wet.

“Did I get it wrong? You do speak English, do you not?”

Her curly hair bounced on her neck as she backed away.

“Speak.”

And, compelled:

“Yes. Yes I do. I speak English.”

“Better. Much better. Let us continue this trend, shall we?”

“Okay.”

Alder heard his voice shake and felt his body shiver.

“You are afraid?”

“Yes.”

“You should be.”

Alder smiled.

“Not a joke. Stand.”

He stood.

Was it by his own volition?

“Where is...”

And he wondered if Isabella was her name or if that was an illusion.

“The woman you cleverly came here with. Yes, her name is Isabella. It is her true name. As

Alder is yours. You are worried for her?”

“...yes.”

Snap of fingers.

The woman dropped directly in front of Alder and fell into his arms.

He caught her as she struggled to catch herself.

She looked around wildly and pushed him away.

Afraid.

“Afraid she’s a bit feral at the moment.”

Another snap.

And Isabella froze in place.

No movement.

No breath.

“I was not expecting this. Isn’t that interesting. All this planning and all of this observing and all of this thievery of the books secrets and I never saw this part. It is inconvenient.”

She looked at Isabella closely.

“I wonder if I just...”

A swipe of the hand

Isabella’s leg fell to the ground

shorn below the knee.

Blood and sinew spilled out continuously.

Isabella’s eyes watered.

No movement.

“Or...”

Another swipe.

An arm.

The woman moved her hand through the blood spilling out.

A waterfall splashing.

“Stop!”

His voice was louder than he anticipated.

The woman slowly turned from Isabella to Alder.

She seemed to remember something.

“Oh shit.”

A wave of the hand.

Isabella gulped in breath.

Then screamed.

She started to fall.

Snap.

Frozen again.

“What are you doing!”

Alder tried to move forward

and realized that he could not.

“I had to let her breathe. I always forget.”

“But, why are you--”

“You know you really don’t need to breathe. It’s just that humans get so used to it. I’ve never had to do it but it seems wonderful.”

Alder felt tears as he looked at Isabella.

She was going to die.

She was going to die without being able to express her pain

and he was going to have to watch.

The woman watched him for a long moment.

“This is not going well.”

The woman closed her eyes

and took a deep breath

and moved swept her arms upward over her head

and the room swiped upward as well.

Alder could not fathom what had happened except that the dark and dingy pit moved upward and through him with water and dirt and stone passing through every inch of his body and underneath it came a rushing brightness.

Alder fell over and found that he was sitting in a chair.

Isabella sat next to him and her limbs were attached and she was breathing heavily and looking around.

The woman stood in front of them.

She was wearing gray now and Alder could tell that her form was not quite human.

An approximation.

As if done by research.

“Do you like it?”

She saw Alder looking.

“As much as you can, I suppose. That’s the point.”

The room was bright with the red sunset light that Alder had seen before.

Windows on all four sides.

Three chairs and a desk.

There were no shadows flitting in and out of existence here.

“I think you might be the first human folk to see this room. And the last. Which, I suppose, is fitting.”

Isabella screamed.

The woman looked at her.

Silence.

“She isn’t quite right. And I can’t fix...that. There’s so much that I want to tell you. But I can’t. Alas, fate is a tricky business. But I’ll start you off on the road and we can follow up soon. How does that sound?”

There was excitement in her golden eyes.

“That sounds okay, I guess.”

“Great. You did not have much of a choice in any case. Here is what I will say. And Isabella, I would recommend that you listen as well. You are, both of you, dead. Your lives in the land of the living came to complete and dramatic ends and now you are here. You were assigned a duty, a task to accomplish. Something to keep this place moving. And, in this case, because of my beginning of a small war along with some quick and clever thinking from you, Alder, you are both here. This is what I say to all of the former humans that are in my service. The sentient dead. Or somewhat sentient, as it were. There is no use pretending that you are not dead. You are. The interesting bit is what happens once you know. Some people remember. Most do not. Many have something else happen entirely. What happens will determine whether or not you will get to stay here with me. In the meantime, have anything that you, and most importantly, they can **imagine**.”

Snap.

The windowed room slid upward and they flew through the floor and through levels and levels of rooms and halls that Alder could only catch glimpses of and he held his breath tight and shut his eyes and when he opened them:

Silence.

He heard Isabella exhale.

He turned and saw her walk to a corner and huddle like a caged animal.

He wanted to help her

But

He was afraid of her.

He looked around.

Dim but not dark

same stone

with smooth floors.

Grand.

A door

here.

Old and wooden

but sturdy.

Alder could see the lock

and knew they were not prisoners.

And hoped they were not prisoners.

A window

here.

Looking out to the same rolling hills Alder knew

but from above.

Were they in a building?

He could not remember seeing buildings in this place

in the land of the dead

if that was true.

He looked at Isabella and wished that there was a blanket to cover her.

And there was.

A blanket popped into existence above her and lovingly fell across her back as she huddled in the darkest corner of the room.

It was red.

She looked up at him and there was fear in her eyes

but she accepted the blanket and held it around her.

Alder looked up and around and tried to find the source of the blanket but found none.

He looked out of the window and thought it must be more than a hundred feet to the ground.

Could you die if you were already dead?

But now a ladder was there.

Not a regular ladder

one that moved and weaved out across the air like a staircase that landed five hundred and forty-five feet away and a hundred and twelve feet down in the grass.

They could leave if they wanted.

But now Alder was curious.

There was something that the woman said that replayed in his mind:

“The interesting bit is what happens once you know.”

And he did not know how he felt.

He was dead?

The more he said it to himself

He was dead?

the more he came to feel

He was dead?

that it was true.

The more he said it

He was dead.

the more he started to recall

He was dead.

the things that had happened to him

He was dead.

right before he woke up here.

The images came in flashes at first.

Like before.

The holding of hands.

A long embrace at night.

The sounds of screaming.

But the images weaved together

in a way that they had not before.

They coalesced

piece by piece

moment by moment

into moving images sliding in and around each other.

A tapestry of time.

Of what came before.

He remembered.

He remembered everything.

A flood of all that was himself washed over and he stumbled backwards only to feel a soft covering stop him from hitting the hard stone wall with his head.

And then the tears came.

It is a particular horror to relive your own death and Alder could not stop playing it back in his memory over and over again and feeling himself burn from the bottom up.

He felt his crotch and found nothing.

A reminder.

Alder slid down the wall and onto the ground

head in hands

for two hundred and seventeen minutes.

He wanted to relive every single moment of his life alive

good and bad

so that it would give him some meaning

some sense of purpose then and now.

A larger sense of being.

But he could not find it.

And when he lifted his head

and looked over at Isabella

he found that she had not moved from her position.

She was still huddled in the corner

with the blanket draped over her back and held close.

“Isabella.”

He called to her and she turned her head to look at him.

She knew her name.

He went to her and sat in front of her

careful not to touch.

“I am Alder.”

Her eyes met his but were unmoving.

Did she understand?

He could tell that she did not remember like he did.

But she did remember something.

She did know something.

He saw her putting it together back before the poles leapt into the sky and the world turned upside down.

It would just take time.

What Isabella knew

was  
that she had hands  
and feet  
and she could breathe here  
even though she did not have to  
according to the insane woman  
that took her breath away  
with her movement  
by accident.

What Isabella knew

was  
that the man sitting in front of her  
with his dark skin  
and his kind face  
was the same man that was trying to help her  
when she left the fog  
in her mind  
and screamed out for anyone to hear  
while the world was ending  
but before this place.

What Isabella knew

was

that she was dead  
because the insane woman told her  
and that woman did not need to tell lies  
not to Isabella.  
Isabella knew these things  
but not much more  
as she huddled in the corner  
afraid of what might come next  
if she dug deeper into her mind.  
She wondered  
if she wanted to know  
what happened before  
what happened before she died.  
Isabella knew how to talk  
in theory  
and her thoughts were shooting by  
like stars  
a million miles per second  
but when she tried to form her mouth around them  
when she tried to catch her thoughts  
in her vocal cords  
they did not come out.

She was not fast enough.

Yet.

And so she waited

patient

and listened

to Alder speak

at her

for her

but not really to her.

This went on for two hours and fourteen minutes of learning about the life of Alder before he came to this place when Isabella put up a single hand and caught a word in her mouth and said:

“Stop.”

He did.

And she caught two more:

“Thank you.”

And there was silence.

Alder liked to speak

and she hoped that he was also a patient listener.

She opened her mouth and tried to catch more words.

“You

had a

shit

life.”

And she felt herself fall into a giggling fit  
that she could not stop  
even though it was hurting her stomach.

When she looked up  
she saw  
that Alder was laughing too.

They laughed  
and laughed  
and laughed  
until Isabella could not breathe  
and had to stop herself by taking deep breaths.

“Thank you.”

He said.

“Thank you.”

She said.

Isabella could tell that he wanted her to talk about herself  
about the life she had before this one  
and a part of her wanted to oblige.

But she did not remember.

She closed her eyes  
and concentrated

for what seemed like minutes

But she only saw blackness

and she only felt pain.

It was a sharp and stinging sensation

in the front of her head.

She knew of things

things that only living could help you know

but the memories were not there.

When she opened her eyes

she knew that it was not as important to her

as it was to him.

She knew that it was not worth the pain.

“I don’t remember

the life before.”

And he said to her

“That’s okay.

This is your life now.”

She could see the disappointment in his eyes.

He wanted her to remember

to be like him

even though she was not.

She did not remember.

But that did not matter.

Not to her.

Not now.

It mattered that she was here

and able to think

in a way that she was not before.

She hugged him

tight

and stood to look around.

“This place is very interesting.”

He was watching Isabella look around.

“Anything that you want or can imagine it will create for you.”

She imagined a great work of art on the wall in front of her.

And it was there

glittering and golden

with abstract shapes and odd colors

in a golden frame

stark against the dim gray wall.

She wanted light to make the room brighter.

And it was there too.

Too bright at first.

Alder shielded his eyes.

She thought it should be dimmer  
and it was dimmer.

Isabella saw no end to the amount of enjoyment she could get from creating things in her mind to  
decorate this room to her liking.

She turned and saw Alder looking at the door.

“Where  
does it  
Go?”

She walked toward him.

“I don’t know.”

It must  
be locked.”

Everything she had  
experienced  
told her this must be true.

He turned the handle  
and it was not.

The door squeaked  
the handle clicked.

She grabbed his hand before he pushed.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“What is on  
the other side?”

“I don’t know.”

He shrugged and she looked at him.

**Fear**

of what she had seen  
and what she might see next  
welling up in her eyes.

He saw it.

Pulled hands away.

The door handle turned anyway

on its own

and the door opened

slowly

inward.

Isabella backed up.

She held on tight to Alder.

There was a person on the other side.

Short golden hair

and

tight fitting black clothes

and

dirty fingernails

and

a silver beard.

A smile.

Isabella tried to smile back.

“Hello.”

The second set of explosions knocked Feld up into the air and he fell fifteen feet from where he was hunched. Fifteen feet from the body of his mom. There was smoke and fire and people were screaming everywhere and he could not see anything in front or behind him. The sounds were so loud that he could not hear himself think. He put his hands over his ears and pressed as hard as he could and closed his eyes and hoped that when he opened them everything would be different.

This does not happen in the world of the living.

When Feld opened his eyes to peek at the world he found that it was not changed. It was chaos. Through the thick dust and smoke he saw objects flying over his head and legs stumbling by him. There were people lying on the ground. They were not moving. Like his mom. There were explosions off in the distance and the ground was shaking after each loud boom echoed in his ears. He felt tears welling up because he did not know what to do.

He screamed out for his brother.

Huston would know.

He just needed to find Huston.

He wondered if anyone would be able to hear him. There was already so much screaming and the people that he could hear sounded like they were in much more pain than he was. They were screaming out for life. They needed help. Feld only wanted help. He thought that maybe it was selfish to be screaming out. Maybe he should try to be brave and find his own way. He could find Huston later.

He stayed low to the ground. He crawled on hands and knees in the direction he thought was the forest. He thought he would go back to the river and wait there. Huston would know to come there.

He tried to keep his head down as he crawled. One movement at a time. One hand in front of the other. Careful not bump into anything or anyone. Moving in a straight path.

It took Feld fourteen minutes and seven seconds to reach the edge of town on his hands and knees. There was much less smoke where the trees started and the screaming seemed like a whisper to him comparatively. He stood and turned around.

Hillston was destroyed. There were barely any buildings standing and the ones that were not the shape he remembered them being. It was a different place. Like something Feld had only seen once in a nightmare. Fire coming from everywhere and people running in all directions trying to find the people that they loved.

He did not know what to do next. But at least he was out of the town. At least he was alive. And he hoped in his heart that Huston was on his way. Feld did not think he could bare to lose two people that he loved in the same day. And he was afraid of being alone.

Feld stared out at the devastation in front of him and breathed through the tears and tried to be strong.

He heard a twig crack behind him and turned around to see Huston limping from the stream toward him.

“I’m so sorry,” he heard Huston wheeze through a clenched throat. And Feld could hear the relief in his voice. “I thought you might have come here so I ran to the stream and then I didn’t see you and I was...”

And Feld was hugging his big brother. And he breathed in the smell of Huston and felt comforted and knew that everything was going to be okay. He dug his fingers into Huston’s back and never wanted to let go.

There were more twigs snapping in the forest. These ones were further away and Feld could only hear them because his ear was pressed up against his brother’s chest and the sound of the town burning was muted. He pulled his head away and saw, far off in the distance, a group of people moving toward them. Feld could tell it was more than twenty even though they were wearing clothes that made them disappear into the white and brown. He looked up at his brother and tapped his arm and pointed in the direction of the people creeping toward them.

They ran.

They ran back toward the town but only enough to cut up the hill toward the house where the nice man used to live. They ran at the edge of the smoke and fire with Feld holding tightly onto the hand of his big brother. Feld was tired but he knew that he could not stop.

Huston led them to the garden where the pole holding the dried burned body of the man was still standing and they crawled into the furniture underneath it and they laid.

No one came at first but Huston did not let them speak. Whenever Feld looked over to and tried to whisper to Huston, he just held a finger to his lips. They laid in silence for what felt

like forever. Just the sounds of fire and a constant cracking sound from far away. Feld started to get bored. He kept looking over to Huston in hopes that he would get the sign that it was all over. He just wanted to leave. But Huston did not make eye contact. He just scanned around them in every direction.

After fourteen minutes Feld fell asleep.

He dreamt of the man who lived in that house on the top of the hill and about the time they had seen him at the market the day before he was killed. The man had a smile that looked smart to Feld. He could imagine the man doing important math problems at an old wooden desk in his gigantic house. The man smiled at them and they all said hello. It was Bridgett who spoke first because she was the oldest and she asked the man how his morning was going. He smiled.

“It is going very well so far. Thank you for asking.”

And Feld looked at his bag and saw that it was filled with wine.

“Are you having a party?” Feld asked.

“Yes, in fact I am,” the man responded, “I hope it will be a very big party.”

And then Huston spoke up.

“I love parties!”

“Oh you do, do you?”

“Yes,” Huston replied, “I once had a birthday party where all of my friends came and we played in the forest.”

“He doesn’t want to hear about your lame birthday party, Huston,” Bridgett said as she stepped forward. “I like parties as well. But our mom says that drinking is not okay.”

“Well, your mother is correct. Drinking is not something that young people should do. It is only for when you get older.”

At this point Feld turned his head away from the man and noticed that they were not in Hillston. This was someplace different, someplace that Feld had never been. There was a big building at the top of a hill but it was much closer and much larger than the man’s house would have been. It was a castle. And it soared into the sky in impossible ways with hundreds or thousands of people that he could see through the windows doing strange things. When he turned back, the man was staring at him. But it was different. The man was different. He didn’t look as happy. Bridgett and Huston were gone now and it was just him and this man standing outside of a castle. The man looking confused and waving his hands through the air.

Huston shook Feld awake and he opened his eyes. Huston put a finger to his lips and pointed out. Feld followed his fingers and saw a group of masked people walking through the area. There were a lot of them. Feld recognized the guns they were holding from books he read in school. Feld could tell that they weren’t hunting. They were just looking around.

After a little while most of them went inside the house while the rest looked around the grounds. Three of them<sub>5123</sub> stopped and Feld held his breath as he watched their old leather shoes shuffle slowly on the ground with the hole at the tip of their guns casually directed at Feld and Huston. He looked up and saw that they were pointing and laughing at the old dried and burnt body of the man above them. He turned to Huston and saw that his eyes were closed tight and there was a tear on his cheek. And it occurred to Feld for the first time that they might die here. It was something that he never thought about before in a real way. He joked about it with his friends and he knew that the man above him had died and he even knew that the explosions were

really close to killing him. But this was different. These people with the guns had the power to stop Feld from existing. And Feld had never once considered what it would be like to stop existing. It was scary.

The feet in front of them turned and walked toward the house. One of them let out a whistle and soon all of the others around the yard were moving inside as well. When they were gone Feld started to move but Huston placed a hand to stop him.

“We should wait until it’s night and then go.”

“And then we can go home?”

Huston shook his head.

“I don’t think we can go back down into Hillston.”

“Why not?”

“These people stopped there first. Those were gunshots, Feld.” Tears welled up in his eyes and Huston hugged him close. “It will just be like we’re on an adventure for awhile.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know, buddy.”

“But it’s cold. It’s winter.”

“I know. But we’re dressed warm and I know all the good places to hang out in the forest.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. What do you think I do with my friends when I’m not with you?”

“I dunno.”

A silence between them until a thought crossed Feld’s mind.

“Huston?” Feld whispered.

“What?”

“Are we going to die?”

And Huston was silent for a second and Feld could see him thinking about whether or not he was going to lie<sup>1387</sup>.

“I don’t know, Feld,” Huston said. He didn’t make eye contact and Feld knew that he was ashamed of his answer. But it was the answer that Feld wanted to hear. He scooted closer.

“I guess I better nap then if we’re going to die later.”

And Feld closed his eyes again.

Huston waited until night came before he woke his little brother up. He could not get himself to fall asleep even though he tried. He did not think the people would come back outside but he did not want to take the chance. What if they came back and Feld was snoring or they moved accidentally in their sleep?

He shook Feld and put his hand over his mouth and they both slowly stood and moved into the forest. Huston put his arm around Feld and held them both close to the ground as they moved. There were lights on in the house and people moving around and yelling at each other. Some sort of party. It was too cold for them to come outside. The nights in the winter in Hillston were not for the faint of heart.

When they made it to the tree line grabbed Feld’s hand and they broke into a full run. Huston knew the woods around Hillston well. He and his friends would often play hide and seek for full days when there was no school and Huston was the second best. The first best was

always his friend Lyra<sub>831</sub> because she could fit into strange places and she had a memory that was second to none. Huston had always secretly liked Lyra more than he said out loud to her and he hoped now that she knew that. Wherever she was.

Huston and Feld hid out in a small cave a small distance from the town that was no longer Hillston for seventeen days. They had both learned basic survival skills as a part of their schooling but the reason for their survival was a lack of interest from the troop occupying Hillston in going back into the forest. They were almost caught only twice<sub>3045</sub>.

They did not argue as much over the seventeen days as Huston had assumed they would. Feld listened to everything that Huston told him to do without question. This was a departure from their normal relationship but Huston did not question. They built a fire in their cave and kept it going through the days and nights. They went out only to hunt for food or check their traps. Huston was fourteen now and so he had learned in school how to catch small animals and how to tell edible berries from the ones that would make you sick. He mostly sent Feld to gather wood and they would both return excited to share their bounty with one another.

Huston and Feld would eat together every night and try to find things to talk about. It was mostly silence but Huston thought that it was okay. He was almost eleven and would never stop talking when they were walking home from school<sub>716</sub>. It was like Feld had grown up just a little.

Huston could tell that Feld was getting anxious even though Feld did not say anything. He had started to draw in the snow outside of their cave<sub>443</sub> and at home he only did that when he was worried that something bad was going to happen. Huston was worried about him.

That night they were eating a small rabbit beside the fire and Huston turned to Feld.

“What do you think we should do,” he asked.

Feld stopped eating for a moment and looked up at Huston and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. And he took another bite, “I thought we were just staying here.”

Huston looked over at Feld and Feld avoided eye contact.

“We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s cold enough now but when it gets warm they’ll have to come back into the forest.

They’ll find us.”

“So then we should wait until it’s almost warm before we go, right?”

Huston could tell that Feld was trying to be brave so he asked, “Is that what you want?”

They looked at each other and Huston could see tears in his brother’s eyes.

“Whatever is going to make us most safe.” Feld’s voice stayed strong.

Huston moved closer to his brother and put an arm around him. They sat in silence for twenty-seven seconds.

Feld looked up at him, “It makes me nervous being in this cave. It feels like people are still out to get us and I can’t sleep very good.”

“It makes me nervous, too. I think we should go.”

“Really?” There was true excitement in his voice, “We can go back home?”

“No,” and he saw his brother’s face fall, “We can’t. Not now at least.”

“But why not? All of the men are probably living in that man’s house.”

“Maybe. But they had uniforms, Feld.”

“So what?”

Huston thought for several moments about how to help his brother understand. He remembered something he had learned when he was almost Feld's age in school.

"Do you remember the 15 Year Conflict<sub>1191</sub>?" His brother's eyes lit up.

"Yeah! It's such a cool war."

"What," Huston asked, confused. He had never heard anyone refer to the war that way.

"I mean, not cool. But interesting. A lot of people died but the right people won. And we read about Isabella and all of that." Feld held up both of his fists. Huston knew he was trying to recreate the **famous posters** of Isabella from her final speech.

"Right. It was a war. And there were two sides. The sides that were okay with people coming over and..."

"And the people that were afraid!"

"Yes. Do you remember who was on each side?"

Feld thought.

"Um...not really. We only talked about it a little bit so far."

"That's okay. It doesn't matter. The thing is that each side, once things got going, each side wore something different. Different uniforms."

"Okay."

"That happens whenever there's a war. And the uniforms all had different patches for the sides and stuff, right."

"I guess. I haven't seen any pictures."

"Those people were wearing uniforms. They were all wearing the same thing. And they all had guns."

Feld looked down and Huston could see him figuring it out. He saw confusion and sadness.

“But why would we be at war? Who would we be warring with?”

“I don’t know,” Huston responded, “But Hillston is a small place. It’s on purpose that we don’t know that much about other places. The adults wanted to keep us away from all of that stuff. But...” His voice trailed.

“But it didn’t work. They sent bombs and people.”

“Yeah.”

There was a long silence. Neither of them wanted to say what they were both thinking but Huston knew that because he was the oldest he had to. He hugged his brother closer.

“We can’t go back home. It’s not our home anymore.”

They finished their dinner and fell asleep close to each other and the next morning Huston and Feld left their camp. It was eighteen days after the bomb had hit Hillston.

Huston led them East through the forest even though he did not know where to go. They moved slowly in their winter jackets and snow boots and stopped frequently. Huston was skilled at catching small animals that hid from the weather in holes and there were plenty of streams to the east and so the two remained well fed and hydrated as they walked. It was not an easy journey.

The chances were one in seven hundred and forty-three million sixty-six thousand three hundred and twenty-two against their survival. The chances were one in fourteen million two hundred and three thousand four hundred and seventeen against the survival of Bridgett.

They should have died. Three children were the only connection that Alder had to the world of the living. If they had died he would have been gone, whiffed out of existence like the pestilent nothing that he is.

But no. Even though the odds were grossly out of their favor, all three of them survived leaving Hillston. Imagination must have had something to do with it.

I wish that the Book of Dreams was better at predicting its own destruction.

Or, perhaps, better at connecting the strands of this web.

Alas, it is not.

The book was here, had been here since the beginning.

No one knows why.

Some strange quirk of the Universe.

For a time no one of its existence. When the first gods began their battle for supremacy - Light and Dark, Chaos and Order, the mono and polytheist gods that humans create - they merely threw the Sentient and Wandering dead at each other. Many souls snuffed from existence but nothing of importance.

It was Nightmare that first discovered the existence of this book and sent Sentient Dead to retrieve it. **Joy stopped Nightmare** and created me.

I am Keeper of the Book. A necessary addition to the already formidable number of robed entities created to help this world function as the species of humanity has grown. The Yellow Robes are the Keepers of Peace. They sort and maintain the world. The Purple Robes are the Guides, leading the newly arrived toward their fate. But Alder did not meet a Guide. Alder met someone in a purple robe. Alder met an agent for Imagination.

It is my job to hold close the secrets of this book. To protect it with my life. Joy outlined my duties clearly when I first appeared on this hill in the middle of the only trees that dot the landscape of the world of dreams. And I have only strayed in one respect.

I have read the book.

It is with great trepidation that I admit this fact and with more that I disclose that I have read the end. I have read the final word of the final page of the Book of Dreams, that which contains the knowledge of all of humanity. And time, it seems, is short.

The only reason that I write about my discretions now is because I am certain that by the time anyone can read this, the world of dreams as I know it will cease to exist. I don't think that I can stop it - Joy told me that the book is infallible - but I think, I hope that I can change it. I hope that I can stop Imagination.

She began her onslaught on this world further back - before I was created. And since no memory is written in the Book of those who are created here<sub>121</sub>, exactly when cannot be known. But she must have found out about the Book from Joy or from Nightmare. Imagination occupies a peculiar spot in the world of dreams because she connects most directly with those of the human species. They come to her, unknowingly, for every conjured thought and fantasy. And she has a sick fascination with power. I have read the lengths of her manipulation in the stories of others, in the story of Alder. But I can only glean the faintest glimmer of what her purpose is.

She wants this place destroyed.

She wants it to be recreated in her image.

That cannot happen.

She plays with them like pawns on a board. Humans are nothing when compared to the power of this place, when compared to the knowledge of the Book, but she has placed the fate of this world into their hands. It is why no one has taken notice. It is why, now that they have left me and I have failed, I must tell the only being who might help.

I must find Joy.

It was odd work.

It required immense focus

and a clear mind

and bold assertions

to imagine something that had never once been imagined before.

Alder thought that this job must be made much easier

and much more difficult

by not remembering your life on earth.

It meant that

for most

they would remember a general sense of things from the world of the living

but could not fathom the boundaries of the human imagination.

He saw this first hand on their first few days.

Isabella would create magnificent animals that were merely amalgamations of others.

She created a turtle horse

and a crab pig.

Kinth

the being that greeted them at their door

would do much the same but with items.

Kinth created an electric spoon

and a cloth made of beeswax.

Alder saw that these items were taken with the same amount of fervor as all the others but

fundamentally knew that they were not very good.

The point of this exercise

as Kinth had shared with them

was to create things that were at the cusp of humanity.

Things that had not been imagined.

Not yet.

A storehouse for the human imagination to choose from.

And Alder knew

because Alder remembered

the near limitless bounds of the human imagination.

Alder created items that he believed were phenomenal in their singularity.

He created an instrument of wood that played whispered words.<sup>7803</sup>

He created a weapon of steel that had teeth on the inside of a crooked outstretched arm.<sup>7774</sup>

He created a saw-blade furred animal with a single tooth that dripped poison.<sup>7889</sup>

It was work that Alder enjoyed.

But  
he could not stop  
a suspicion  
that something  
was not right.

They did their work in the rooms in the middle of the castle or outside on the grounds and created several dozen items and they gave their creations to those in the purple robes around them and they took breaks to go back into their rooms at their leisure but none of it seemed to matter.<sup>4021</sup>

Kinth told Alder and Isabella  
in their room on that first day  
that very few did anything other than this.

Kinth had seen many like them  
come and go  
doing only the item creation.

“The purple robes,”

he had told them in his strangely soothing accent,

“get to do special assignments. They get to go other places on her behalf. I don’t know how long I’ll be here, but I hope I get to do that.”

“What do you mean how long you’ll be here?”

Isabella looked curiously at him.

“Oh yeah. She doesn’t say that part. We don’t get to stay here forever. The rumor is that we only stay until we get forgotten by the living folk.”

“And then what?”

Alder heard the tension in Isabella’s voice.

“Poof. I seen it happen a buncha times. You just disappear. Gone. I been here a long time. Guess I’m lucky. Somebody remembers me out there.”

“You don’t remember?” Alder asked.

“No. Not many do. I think it’s those people that get to do the purple robes. But that’s just my opinion. The purple robes won’t talk to us. Do you remember?”

Isabella shook her head.

“You’ll fit in just fine.”

Alder did not answer.

Kinth did not notice.

Kinth was not a single gender

as far as Alder could tell

and had chosen to wear a gray beard with short coiffed blonde hair

and all leather attire.

No one gave a second look as they walked through the halls.

He did not stick out at all.

Sentient Dead had chosen a wide variety of looks to

express themselves.

With no rules

there are no rules.

Kinth was assigned

to help them get settled

and was proud to do this work.

“It’s the best thing I get to do. I think they’re starting to trust me. Purple robe here I come!”

The rooms for work

as far as Alder could tell

were all the same

and separate from where people tended to rest.

They could work in any room in any part of the castle or outside on the grounds

as long as they did not pass the purple robes at the boundary.

Several proud guards

eagle eyed

around the edge.

They were in item creation.

They created items.

Alder stayed near Isabella because she never quite seemed to settle down.

Many

they learned from Kinth

switched sleeping rooms and work partners often.

“And everybody just has sex indiscriminately. Everywhere. You’ll get used to it.”

Alder did not.

Since everyone took breaks at different times and no one slept it was not uncommon to see seventeen or eighteen people in a hallway having sex on the way back to the room.

Alder stayed close to Isabella

in these moments

and made sure that she was okay.

She still did not talk much.

But

he thought

this might just be her way.

So he did not push her.

He knew that she did not want to remember her time living

and he worked on being okay with it.

He could not fathom why a person

a dead person

would not want to remember their life before coming to this place.

But he said nothing.

Even as he noticed that the shadows followed her most.

Even as he noticed that she noticed.

He said nothing.

But he could not shake a dread.

This could not be it.

This could not be the sum of the after life.

He had heard many stories

growing up

of Heaven and Hell

of Paradise and Damnation

but none of eternal purgatory.

This place must be the in-between

the place where one must stay

before one goes.

There must be a heaven.

But why was no one talking about it?

Why, whenever he asked anyone,

did they shrug and not seem to care?

That woman

Alder decided she must be the arbiter.

He must find out more about her.

But Isabella would not talk to Alder of this.

She would not engage.

So he kept it to himself.

The more they worked together

the more she would open up to him about her creations.

She would excitedly share her news about a new fruit that was a kiwi banana hybrid

or a wolf that made the sound of a spider monkey and had seven legs.

They laughed

a lot.

But still

Alder could not stop

feeling

that something

was not right.

Time passed.

Exactly how much was difficult for Alder to recall.

Everything blended together.

The woman

Kinth called her Imagination because he said she was the ruler of this place and this place was

about imagination

only came out to watch their work twice.

Kinth seemed shocked both times.

“She never comes.”

In fact

he said

the first time she glided into the courtyard where they were working was the first time he had

seen her since he arrived.

She greeted him personally when he arrived.

She greeted everyone personally when they were assigned here.

He said he loved the way she smelled.

Her eyes washed over the large ballroom they were working in.

A slow

pensive

gaze.

She did not seem to pay particular attention to Alder and Isabella

and said nothing to anyone.

She just observed

and smiled.

“Did that seem strange to you?”

Alder and Isabella were taking a break in their room.

Isabella usually closed her eyes during these times

or bounced a ball from wall

to hands

but she was doing neither.

She simply sat on the bed she created.

“Did what seem strange?”

“The imagination woman. Today was the second time she came.”

“So what?”

Isabella seemed uninterested but Alder could not let it go.

“Kinth said that she never came before we got here. And now she walks through twice. Into places where we are. This place is so big.”

“Maybe it’s just chance.”

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter either way. I don’t want to spend any more time with that woman. I almost choked to death.”

And Alder knew that Isabella was serious  
and finished with the conversation  
so he dropped it.

But

on their next break

as they opened the door to their room

they saw purple robes hanging from the wall

with a formal note<sup>5487</sup>

and a map.

Isabella firmly declined the invitation.

“I am fine doing this, I don’t want more.”

“But why not? We could learn more about this place.”

“I don’t need to know anything about this place, Alder. I died. Whatever life I lived is over now.

And this place is just some cruel joke, some waiting room until people forget me. I can only hope that it happens sooner rather than later.”

“But what about the shadows, Isabella?”

Alder had not intended to bring this up.

It was something that he had diligently ignored and more diligently refused to bring up to Isabella.

He knew it would not make her happy.

“What are you talking about?”

She looked down at the floor and he knew she knew what he was saying.

Alder had noticed a peculiar fact about Isabella when they were working on the first day.

At first he thought it was a fluke.

But Kinth mentioned it to him later.

And he could see others staring at her while she worked.

Alder knew she knew but decided not to speak of it so that she would feel more comfortable.

“You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed. Everyone is watching you. All the time. There are so many of those shadows around you, Isabella.”

“Everyone has them.”

“You have a lot of them. You know it. Don’t you want to know, to find out?”

“No I don’t!”

Her voice echoed in the room and then she caught herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay.” Alder backed off.

“I don’t like being the center of attention. I don’t want to know because what if I don’t like what I learn?”

“I understand.”

Silence.

For a time.

“Some pretty bad stuff happened to me when I was alive. The way I died was...”

He trailed off.

“Would you come for me? To help me? You don’t have to learn anything about yourself. I just have to know. That woman, that imagination woman, she seems...”

“Evil.”

“Yeah, maybe. She has something going on. I just want to see if we can learn more about this place. More about her. I asked Kinth. No one else almost got killed coming in here. None that he knows. I think that something is going on. Please?”

“Fine.”

And then she said, “I don’t know if I would be allowed to say no anyway.”

The robes

darkly purple

fit better than the gray.

They were softer

in a way

that did not matter

but did

to Isabella.

In a way that made it easier to walk

to sit.

She learned this  
during the ceremony.

The note  
in its scrawled handwriting  
invited them to a small room  
to be given duties.

It felt  
to Isabella  
to be quite formal  
until they walked into the room.

It was a table  
seven chairs  
and that woman  
alone  
in a corner  
when she and Alder entered.

They were the first.

But

Isabella noticed  
there were no shadows in here.

She was relieved.

They followed her everywhere

a stifling mass  
of faces  
watching  
for just a moment  
before they flitted out of existence.

She has started to remember  
and what she remembered  
was pain.

So she tried to forget.

Shadows made it hard to forget.

The woman did not address them

just a smile

and a gesture

to sit.

They did.

Others filtered in

one

and two

at a time

and sat silently.

No one dared speak.

Kinth was one of them.

He had a toothy smile.  
He sat next to Isabella.  
All seven chairs filled  
and silent  
the woman walked in a circle around them  
moving for the first time  
from the corner.  
She looked at them  
one  
by  
one  
in the eyes  
connecting deeply.  
When she looked  
at Isabella  
she smiled  
in a way she had not for the others.  
Isabella did not know  
if she should be proud  
or terrified  
but the moment passed quickly.  
Perhaps it was just her imagination.

She made the full circle  
and landed in the same corner  
and clapped her hands together  
once.

The room went dark.

Her heart raced.

The woman spoke.

“There are many things that you do not know. Many things that you will not know because you could not handle the information. You are visitors here, and I am a resident. The needs are different. The desires are different.”

Isabella heard Alder breathing hard

he grabbed her hand.

The woman continued

“You have seen others in purple robes and you have heard rumors, no doubt, that they get to do more things. Better things. This, friends, is true. Earning a purple robe is no small feat. It means that I feel as though two things are true - the first is that you are a longer visitor than most, the second is that you have the mental capacity and loyalty to handle a different set of tasks. Purple robes, my soldiers, all have different roles. I have chosen you for your unique personalities and skills to do this job. This one job. And my expectation is that you accomplish it well.

Understood?”

Murmurs of assent.

“What?”

A chorus of “yes.”

Isabella said nothing.

Two claps

and the walls

fell away

like a cardboard box

collapsing outward

to stars.

A brilliant night sky

from the middle of space

that Isabella knew

but did not quite

remember.

Awe.

Gasps.

The seven looked up and around

illuminated by starlight.

And then the stars moved

slowly at first

then fast

whipping past their faces

at unfathomable speed

until they came to stop  
looking at a green sphere.

Isabella knew  
but did not  
remember  
her world.

This was the place  
she must have lived.

Silence in the room.

Confusion.

Isabella looked at Alder  
his brow furrowed  
confused.

The woman spoke

“Depending on when and where you lived, depending on how long you have been here, you may know what this is. This is the earth. The land of the living. It is a hilarious and tragic fact that most of you will not have seen an image of your world like this. Humanity is dying. Such a strong proclivity toward war and destruction cannot end well.”

Isabella looked around  
and saw the same  
perplexed faces  
on all but one of the others at the table.

Only Kinth looked

knowing.

And she wondered

how long she had been

in this world.

How long was it

that she was lost

counting the names of her ancestors?

And

who

remembered

her

still?

“This world does not matter to you anymore. You have no way of getting back and no way of changing things. At least, that is what this place would have you believe. The powers that control you here, the systems in place, are designed to help you separate yourself. This place is designed to use you. You must be here because this is where they dream of you. Your essence is still in use, though not by you.”

A jump in the stars around them

closer

and

closer

to the earth.

All seven at the table leaned into it

held on tight to the side

to escape the motion.

Closer to a landmass

closer to a mountain

closer to a pointed top

tent

into the tent

to the face of a young girl.<sup>9211</sup>

Eyes closed.

“She, and all other humans, still dream. They dream of someone or something. That is what this place is for. To serve the world of the living. You exist only for them. And, what’s more, the powers here have decided that you are a waste of energy. Long ago, you were able to roam freely. You were able to do as you please. No more. They thought: why not put the Sentient Dead to work - why not make them help. You are enslaved to the entities that control this world.”

A silence.

“That is not my philosophy.”

A clap.

The walls reappeared.

Audible relief.

Isabella

looked around

and saw betrayed faces.

They agreed with her.

It was obvious.

She spoke with passion

and explained convincingly

but

Isabella thought

who was she

if not the ruler of this place

the ruler of imagination.

Was she not in charge?

“I can tell that you don’t like it either. That’s good. It’s why I chose you. Let me be clear, no other purple robed soldiers know this. You are a unique group. You are unique because I need your help. I need your help to change to system. To empower you and millions of others like you to have more control over this place and over yourselves.”

Isabella saw

people getting riled up

now.

Shifting in seats

nodding of heads

sounds of agreement.

Isabella felt

respect

for this woman.

Everything she said

had a twinge of

something

hard to pinpoint

some untruth

or deception

but the way she spoke

her manner of being

was impressive.

Isabella tuned out for a moment

to think about how she might do it differently.

She thought that she might

instead

take a softer tone

or

admit she was part of the problem

a difficult path

in a setting like this.

The question remained

though:

did they really have a choice?

“Do you think you can help me with this?”

A chorus:

Yes.

“Good. Allow me to explain how you, how this particularly special group, will help. You have a new duty now. And it is of the utmost importance.”

And she did.

The woman explained that the shadows

the ones that followed Isabella

could be

manipulated

“Adjusted,”

she said

to a different path.

They were

humans

living humans

that were in dream.

The people that

remembered them.

The people that remembered Isabella.

When the woman said this

Alder and Kinth turned

to face her.

Isabella looked down.

There were dozens of shadows around Isabella

every moment.

Many dreamers

dreaming of her

it seemed.

Why?

Who was she?

Why would anyone want to remember her?

She did not even know if Isabella was her real name.

The pain in her head increased

and she took deep

unnecessary breaths

to calm herself.

When she looked up

everyone was standing.

They went to work immediately.

A different part of the castle

separate

from the other parts.

Separate

even

from any other purple robes.

The shadows came back

as they walked.

Everyone

looked around them

carefully.

They tried to recognize something

someone

in the shadow.

They were trying to remember.

Isabella did not try.

Isabella kept her head forward.

Alder did not try

either.

Alder knew.

When they walked into the other room

they saw tables

all facing walls

and

wordlessly

sat

one at each.

A clap.

Isabella turned back to see

the woman

watching from the center of the room

and when she turned back

the wall was no longer a wall.

It was a face.

**A young man**

pale skin

dark stubble

long brown hair

a soft

kind expression

in his sleep.

Dreaming peacefully.

Isabella looked around.

Different faces

in front of each of them.

“Now”

There was a smile in the woman’s voice.

“Tell them what to imagine.”

Alder knew that he was right.

He knew that there was something more.

This was proof.

Imagination was clever

to employ those of hers that were most excited

and most emphatic

to do this work.

The group of nine took to it

quickly and effectively.

Every time they walked in and sat at their table

a name would appear on wooden surface.

When they touched the name

the face appeared on the wall in front of them

and they watched.

At first

they watched a lot.

Alder loved seeing the lives

of the living.

He loved to see their love  
and hate  
and fear  
and joy  
and all of the things that were not  
in this place.

Because he remembered.

Alder remembered what it was like to love  
and what it was like to have love taken away.

He could not help but think of the face of Adrian  
the man he had fallen in love with  
being dragged  
screaming  
from beside him  
and killed.

He could feel what he felt  
in the moments before he was lit on fire  
as a monument  
warning others.

Warning the other.

When he got to Paradise  
or whatever happened after this

when he popped out of existence here like so many had<sup>9312</sup>

he would ask about what happened to those that burned him.

But there was something about watching another life.

There was something about watching another person smile

and cry and fear and hope

that made it all seem so

objective.

Everyone had struggle and heartbreak and faced danger and crisis

and none of it was fair.

None of it was fair.

But that

Imagination had told them

was the point of this.

She said that none of it was fair

especially once they had all arrived here

and that she was trying to fix it.

She saw it as her duty to adjust the injustices of the world

using her knowledge of this plane.

And Alder believed her

at first.

And so

after he watched and observed the lives of the people on the wall

and the instruction would appear on the table underneath their name

he would carry them out.

He would influence their imagination.

They were instructed to read the name

imagine the person

observe

read the adjustment

and enact it.

The act of observing was a challenge.

Their lives moved in fast motion on the wall

as though time was moving more quickly for them.

“You must focus to see it all.”

The best way to enact the adjustment

they were told

was by placing their hands on the wall and pushing the thought toward that person.

“It really doesn’t have to be that way, but it often helps for humans to have something to do with their hands.”

It was an odd sensation

like being inside of the empty home of another human being

just for a moment

and leaving a small coin of an idea on the table as you depart

and trying to leave the rest

undisturbed.

His first experience was messy at best.

The young woman

Liza Veelun<sup>4806</sup>

must have been from the European continent

based on what Alder observed in the world around her.

She lounged in coffee shops and spent days speaking in hushed tones.

Its seemed

to Alder

that she had a significant amount of influence on the people around her.

They all seemed to bow their heads when she arrived

and thank her as she left.

She was wealthy.

The wall could not play sounds

and so Alder gleaned what he could

from observing body language.

She had power

except with her husband.

She acted differently around him.

After Alder watched for a small time

the adjustment appeared on the table:

*A life without your husband.*

And since Imagination was watching  
Alder tried immediately to put his hand to the wall.  
He closed his eyes  
he did not know why  
and placed his hand flat  
but felt nothing.  
He heard a voice behind him.  
“Think the adjustment clearly.”  
And he did.  
He thought.  
He focused  
and repeated the thought over and over.  
*A day without your husband.*  
*A day without your husband.*  
*A day without your husband.*  
And he felt something.  
He felt the suggestion move through him toward the woman.  
And he felt satisfied.  
Alder opened his eyes and looked back at Imagination  
standing behind him.  
But she was not pleased.  
She pointed down at the table.

The suggestion was still there.

“It will disappear when you have done it correctly.”

He looked at her,

“What did I do then?”

Liza was moving through the world

and she was going on a vacation

without her husband.

Alder lowered his head.

He had gotten it wrong.

“It’s more about timing than you think. When to make the adjustment. And making it clearly.

Try again.”

So Alder watched

until a moment passed and he saw her husband talking down to her.

He put his hand to the wall and thought about the adjustment once

clearly.

*A life without your husband.*

He opened his eyes

and the adjustment had disappeared from the table.

He had done it.

Alder smiled.

He was the first to achieve an adjustment successfully.

“I knew you would be good at this.”

Alder smiled.

And he was.

Alder was good at making adjustments.

They were not always as easy as the first one.<sup>5499</sup>

And often it would take multiple attempts

over long spans of life

to get the adjustment to take hold.

People

especially if the adjustment was counter to their core being.

The more Alder completed

the more difficult the assignments became.

And he felt like he was doing good.

Earning points

perhaps

toward his eventual acceptance into whatever place came after this.

The adjustments were innocuous in nature

small thoughts that change a trajectory.

Simple things for the person to imagine.

After the first day

Imagination did not come back.

She told them that she trusted that they would do this activity

and not speak of their duties

to anyone

not even other purple robes.

And Alder took this with pride

even though Isabella seemed skeptical.

Isabella was not good at making adjustments.

“It feels wrong to me”

she would say when they were back in their room.

“It feels like people’s lives shouldn’t need adjustment.”

“It’s making their lives better!” Alder would respond.

“How do you know?”

“It’s what she said. It’s to help them. You heard her, things aren’t fair out there. You don’t know because you don’t remember. But I remember. I got killed just for being attracted to men. I got burned on a pole with fire set from my own furniture. I know you don’t want to remember, and that’s okay, but you have to realize that it isn’t fair out there. And I don’t know about you but I want to help if I can. So people don’t end up like me.”

Alder had not shared these details before.

A silence.

Isabella responded

softer

“It doesn’t bother you at all that we have no idea what happens to them after we make the adjustment?”

“No.”

And Isabella turned away.

Alder did not know what to say to her.

He trusted Imagination.

At least

he reasoned

she was trying to do something

trying to change the status quo

in any way she could.

People

living people

deserved some sort of justice.

Justice that he never had.

Alder believed this

wholeheartedly

until his nineteenth assignment.

The face of a teenage boy

Juno Bream

looking at his baby sister crying.

The tent around them

filled

with angry faces huddled together.

He tried

unsuccessfully

to quiet the child.

Many evenings similar to this in quick succession until one

where the angry people in the tent sent the two away.

Juno held the child close to him as he ran into the forest and away from the tent.

Many days of tense moments as soldiers patrolled past.

Many moments of quietly hoping the child did not cry.

The adjustment appeared on the table:

*Can we both survive?*

Alder read it

and read it again.

It seemed like a simple thought

at first

and something that may have occurred to Alder in the same position.

But what would Juno do if this adjustment was made?

The simple fact that this was an adjustment

and not already a thought in his mind

implied that it was not something that Juno would consider.

Perhaps there was a reason for that.

Alder did not know the proclivities of Juno

the context of his life

only flashes of difficult trudging through the wilderness.

Alder could only think of worst case scenarios  
and did not know what would be done with a baby in this place  
though there must be millions.<sup>2409</sup>

He sat back from the table and looked over at Isabella.

Isabella had taken to lazily watching the lives of the living for exceeding periods.

She would accomplish only one adjustment in the time it took Alder to complete five  
and that was only if she agreed with the adjustment after watching their lives.

It would often take longer her longer to decide.

She had completed three adjustments.<sup>5601</sup>

Isabella looked at him and he pointed down to his adjustment.

They were not meant to share so Isabella looked around before leaning over.

She read the adjustment and looked up at him.

She stood and turned.

She walked out of the room.

Alder looked around him

noted that no one turned around

and followed her.

As the door closed behind him

she almost yelled,

“Are you going to make it so that someone dies?”

Alder looked anxiously around and replied in a hushed tone,

“No. Of course not.”

“What is that adjustment about, then?”

He hesitated.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know. What’s this person’s life?”

“It’s not good. I mean he’s carrying around his baby sister around the forest somewhere.”

Isabella shook her head.

“You can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, I can’t do it? I have to.”

“No. You don’t. Say you can’t or something.”

“I’m really good at making adjustments, Isabella. She wouldn’t believe it.”

“How would she know, she’s not here.”

Alder raised his eyebrows.

“You really believe that.”

And Isabella stayed silent.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad”

he said

“maybe it’s about him reaffirming love for her.”

Something changed in the eyes of Isabella.

“You do what you want, Alder. Honestly. But think about this. Think about how every time we leave this room you talk about justice and about making the lives of living folks better. Think about how you talk ad nauseum about how it wasn’t fair for you and how you want to make it

fair for other people. Think about how you want to earn your way into whatever heaven you've invented for yourself."

As she spoke, Alder noticed the shadows around her flitting in and out of existence.

Her eyes were full of fire.

Her hands moved simply, gesturing with words that gave maximum impact.

"And then think about how the boy - that teenager - is probably going to leave his baby sister on a rock somewhere in the middle of the forest if you make that adjustment. Think about her freezing to death, alone and crying. And think about what that boy will have to carry with him for the rest of his life. That is not justice. Not to me. You can think that woman is trying to do good and we can disagree about that. Fine. But nothing good can come of this. You know that. Or you wouldn't have shown me. There's something else going on, Alder. And it isn't good."

Isabella put her hand on the back of her head and closed her eyes.

Alder stepped forward to help her but she put out her other hand.

"Don't. I'm going to go lay down. Do what you want. But if you do it, tell me. I'll move to a different room."

And Isabella walked away.

Alder watched her walk away

her hand still firm on her head.

He had never heard her speak so much

or with so much passion.

He took a deep breath

and looked at the door.

He went back in.

Her head

throbbed

like burning oil

pushing outward

to escape.

Isabella laid in her bed

and closed her eyes

focusing

intensely

on the breath

she did not need

to survive.

But when her eyes were closed

the flashes came.

Bright lights

flashing

across her vision.

They did not seem

internal.

They came from

beyond  
her eyelids  
but when she opened her eyes  
she just saw the stone ceiling of the room.  
She held onto the back of her head  
the pressure inside  
released  
the more pressure  
she put outside.  
She closed her eyes again  
and the flashing  
stopped  
and she saw beyond.  
A massive crowd.  
A sea of blue and white.  
Signs that she could not read  
through the brightness.  
Papers  
typed  
in her hands.  
A white dress.  
Professional and classy.

The sound of a door on the outside

of this.

Not a part of this.

A chant.

Her name.

Over

and

over again.

Raising volume.

A hand on her back

encouraging.

The pain

gone.

Then:

Words.

“Isabella? Are you okay.”

Not a part of this.

Her fist

raising

into the air

in celebration.

A smile

growing across her face.

A hand on her shoulder.

Not a part of this.

The pain ringing again.

Isabella opened her eyes

Alder

over her

concerned.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

“Yes. Sorry. My head was hurting.”

Isabella sat up.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I don’t know anyone else that has pain.”

“I’m fine. Maybe it’s what you feel when you’re going to disappear from this nightmare.”

A joke

partly.

Alder did not laugh.

A silence.

“I didn’t do it.”

“Do what?”

The pain was dulling

slowing pushing away.

“The adjustment.”

She looked at him.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t. I tried. I just. I actually couldn’t. You were right.”

“I know.”

The pain

gone.

Deep breath.

Not satisfying

but almost.

“Did you just leave it?”

“No. I did something worse.”

She looked at him.

Worry.

Fear.

“What did you do?”

“I made a different adjustment. I said that his sister was the most important thing to him.”

There was a smile

the first Isabella could remember

cracking across her face.

She looked at his eyes.

He smiled too.

Pop.

He was

not.

She felt

a tingle.

Pop.

Bridgett and Jameson remained on the front lines of the Endurance forces for three years<sup>842</sup> before they were both promoted and moved to an operational outpost in the territory that was once northern Nevada. Bridgett was given tactical command over seven units still fighting Emergent forces in the small communities that made up northern California. Jameson was put in intelligence and spent days interrogating captured Emergent soldiers for information before either killing them or placing them in confinement. He did not like the brutal nature of the interrogations and would often find himself throwing up following the death of a captive. But he remained strong in his conviction that Endurance was on the right side of history and in moments of weakness he would remember the death of his mother and those responsible. It was this memory along with the love of Isabella that kept him engaged.

This stability represented the most security Bridgett had felt since leaving home almost five years prior and she often noted feeling comfortable and happy. She felt that it was something of a pastoral life they were living and she liked it. For the first time Bridgett understood why towns like Hillston were formed. There was something incredible about knowing everyone around you. There was something safe about it, even though it was a tactical military base. The battle felt far away and when they had both accomplished their duties for the

day, they would retire to a comfortable home together. The outpost was assembled around a long abandoned town<sup>1825</sup> and permanent staff were given homesteads. Some mornings Bridgett would look around and try to imagine the tall buildings of the mega-metropolises she had read about in school. Just the thought of it made her feel small and insignificant.

Jameson proposed to Bridgett on an evening walk in the middle of winter by kneeling down and presenting her with a stone he had found on the first day that he had mustered up the courage to speak to her. He noted that he had never been nervous going into battle, not even his first time, but the idea of Bridgett saying no filled him with an intense dread and nervousness that he could not shake for days before hand. He had never loved anyone else. He practiced in front of the mirror several times but could never quite get the wording to his liking.

They had taken to evening walks once a week so that they could take advantage of the silence around them. The desert was quiet and only the distant sound of periodic night time bombing interrupted. They would walk far off into the night and to the top of a hill that overlooked the base. They would not speak much but instead enjoy the silence and each others company.

The moon was bright and full. Jameson would recall it like a sign from his God that he was doing the right thing and that his timing was correct. Bridgett could feel Jameson's hands sweating and the tenseness in his muscles but she said nothing. She assumed that a rough day and he often did not like discussing the details of his work. Instead she pulled herself closer to him and hugged her other arm around his as they walked.

When they found their spot and looked over the bright floods illuminating the base, Bridgett sat. It was a warmer than average day and she was feeling a bit tired. She lost three

soldiers. Soldiers that she had families. It was always difficult for her. But the peacefulness of being alone with Jameson made it all okay. If just for a moment. As she finished a deep exhale she turned to see that Jameson was still standing.

“What’s wrong? Sit down.” She laughed because she knew he could be silly sometimes. He was staring at her.

“Just one more second.” Jameson stared down at Bridgett and noticed how bright the light was in her eyes. He tried to memorize everything about her face in this moment. He focused on the way the wrinkles around her eyes perfectly framed them and how her nostrils would flare when she was confused. He took in the three stray hairs that fell across her forehead, released from the tight bun she usually kept her hair in at work. She was, in his estimation, perfect.

He knelt down

He smiled at her and took out his rock.

He said:

“Bridgett. I remember our first conversation in the cafeteria and how horrible and awkward it was but how I knew that I was in love with you right then and there. I didn’t even really know what love was but I knew that’s what I felt. When we left the cafeteria, I found this rock and I said to myself that I would use it one day to show you how I knew immediately. It’s really difficult to find a wedding ring in the middle of the desert but on days like this, on hard days, I look forward to our walks because it means I get to spend time with you. And even if it’s an outdated idea or even if we are both dead tomorrow, I still want to marry you. I want to know that it’s forever.”

She said yes.

It was not as loud or joyous as Jameson had been expecting. Her voice was calm and steady. Certain. It was something that Jameson would reflect on many times in the future - how strong Bridgett was, in the face of everything.

They hugged and kissed under the moonlight and sat in silence for the next two hours before wandering back to their home.

When they told the rest of their co-workers the next morning they were met with raucous applause and physical exultations befitting of a group of soldiers forced to sit behind desks.

The ceremony was small and they invited only a few of their closest friends<sup>2004</sup>. They were married by the military chaplain using traditional vows. Jameson mentioned his parents and a grandmother he had never met. Bridgett mentioned her mother and brothers and Barbara along with the man at the top of the hill. The man who died for living his life.

The couple and their friends drank at the barracks as a reception and Bridgett shared with them the story of how she and Jameson met and how she knew she had fallen in love with him.

Time passed.

Bridgett unexpectedly became pregnant after a particularly raucous evening of celebrating a major Endurance victory. Bridgett and Jameson found themselves in the bathroom of the unused second floor of the barracks - a building that had previously been the towns only hotel. They danced in silence in the moonlight. Their side was gaining ground and both of them had played a major role. There was a romance to it, Bridgett thought.

Bridgett gave birth to a female child, Erma, on her twenty-third birthday. There was not a significant medical presence in the outpost and so a field medic managed the birth. It was done in the bathroom at their home. Labor lasted for seven hours and the child was born, with relative

ease, at 4:34pm Mountain Standard Time. Erma was seven pounds six ounces at birth. The moment Bridgett looked into the eyes of Erma was the moment that Bridgett fell in love for the second and final time.

The child was fussy but manageable and only cried when she was hungry or lonely - which was not, statistically speaking, often. The first several days were filled with joy and exhaustion as the new parents adjusted to life with a child that would not sleep through the night. They decided to use it as a bonding experience and would both awaken every time the baby needed something.

Bridgett developed a postpartum hemorrhage during birth that worsened over the seven weeks following the birth. The field medic incorrectly asserted that it was normal bleeding for the first four days. It was caused by a uterine blood clot that would not pass. Bridgett would often wake up moaning in the middle of the night with blood covered sheets and so the two decided that they would sleep with tarps underneath them.

Jameson took the entirety of the fifty-six days of the illness away from his duties to be by the side of his wife. The difficulty ebbed and flowed. Jameson would think, at times, that this was the most perfect version of life: two parents raising their child together with no work or other influence necessary. Other times felt to Jameson like a cruel joke. Bridgett would have fatigue and bleeding and Jameson would do his best to care for her and Erma with the field medics providing only the most basic necessities for pain and blood management. And Jameson knew that whatever he was feeling could only be a fraction of the toll that Bridgett was experiencing.

It was decided that they would move Bridgett south for medical care in the eighth week as the pain worsened and the base ran out of essential medical supplies for her condition. The field medics had cared for Bridgett in the best way that they could but advised that she needed advanced medical equipment for further diagnosis.

They loaded into a military caravan with two drivers so that they did not have to stop and headed south. The roads were long decayed and so the journey was bumpy. The caravan was made for short soldier transport and was only partially covered on the top and sides by fabric that flapped in the wind. But the weather was nice enough for Jameson. He hoped it was not too painful for his wife. As the caravan rumbled to life and the wind blew past them, Bridgett fell asleep immediately. Erma followed suit. Jameson could not sleep. He was too nervous. So he put his head against the pole behind him and let his mind wander.

It was fourteen hours into the trip when Jameson noticed that Bridgett was waking up. He sat on the bench in the back of the truck with Bridgett's head on his lap as she held the still sleeping Erma.

"I didn't think I was going to ever have a child," She said slowly. The pain in her leg had become intense and woken her up.

"Why not?" He stroked her hair.

"It just didn't seem like I was living that kind of life. I always just wanted to explore and get out of Hillston."

"Well, you definitely succeeded at that."

Isabella laughed. Winced.

"I suppose so."

“Finding your way to a big city alone. Getting bombed. Joining a war. Killing a bunch of insurgents. Leading. Pretty adventurous.”

She laughed again.

“Don’t make me laugh. It hurts. It’s not a war. Just a conflict.”

“Oh right. Of course.”

They sat in silence.

“Having a baby is pretty adventurous, too. I think so at least,” Jameson said.

“How very romantic and gross.”

Jameson leaned down and kissed her forehead.

A bump in the road moved a clot out of the leg of Bridgett and her pain subsided. She felt a tingling in her ankle and adjusted her position on the bench to help. It was the third time in the previous three weeks that this leg pain had increased and then subsided suddenly.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you should rest.” Jameson said.

“No. I just want to look at Erma. She’s a good looking baby.”

“You’re welcome.” Jameson smiled. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Of course it is. We’ve been through much worse. What’s three weeks? I feel better anyway - maybe we should just turn around and go back.”

“Hilarious.”

“We need to make sure she doesn’t grow up like I did. Or like you did. She has to see the world. Explore.”

“We saw the world.”

“The worst parts of it.” Bridgett looked up at Jameson, an idea. “We can take her south. All the way. People say Argentina is nice.”

“People only say that because no one remembers where Argentina is.”

“We’ll take her there anyway.” Jameson looked hard at Bridgett, trying to figure out if she was serious. He could not tell.

Many thoughts about her possible death swirled in the mind of Bridgett during the previous seven weeks. She thought that it would be irresponsible not to consider it. But she had decided that it was important to speak to Jameson as though she would not die. Even if she thought she might. If she died, Bridgett reasoned, Argentina could be a good place for Jameson and Erma to settle down. It would be safer than the New American Empire. Jameson, she had learned, was not a big ideas sort of person. He was strong and kind and smart, but did not often think out of the box. She had been secretly planting a few ideas. Just in case. And if she did not die, this talk of visiting Argentina would have, at least, seeded many vacation ideas.

There were three times that the pain in Bridgett’s leg had subsided significantly following the birth. These were the three times a growing blood clot had freed itself from her leg and began moving upward. The first clot made its way to her lower stomach as she was celebrating the one month birthday of Erma and briefly caused an immense amount of pain before dissipating on its own. The second was a clot that dissolved in the leg itself two weeks prior to their departure from the base. This third did not dissolve. As the caravan bumped along the road, it dislodged itself from the leg and traveled upward toward her lungs.

Bridgett fell asleep in the absence of pain.

She died of a pulmonary embolism four hours later as she slept on the lap of Jameson who was holding their child. They were one hundred and seventeen miles from the medical facility and twenty-two miles away from the Emergent base that had once been Hillston.

Jameson awoke to see Bridgett unmoving. He noted that she looked peaceful as silent as tears slid down his cheek. He remembered how strong she was. He banged hard on the window into the cab of the truck and the vehicle pulled over.

The two soldiers attempted resuscitation. It was not successful.

The decision was made to bury the body on the side of the road rather than carry it back north. Jameson did not think he would be able to ride in the back of the caravan with the corpse of his wife and he did not know what impact it would have on their child. Jameson and the two soldiers driving said quiet prayers.<sup>2481</sup> Jameson cried. The caravan turned around.

Jameson tried hard to think often of his wife in times when he was with his daughter. He told Erma stories of Bridgett nearly nightly as they readied for bed even though she would not remember anything for the first four years of her life. He believed it was important. His stories were the stories Bridgett had told him of her childhood. They were sometimes stories of Bridgett as a superhero. And on several occasions Erma would request the story of the man in the house on the hill. When she was six, it became one of her favorite stories. The way Jameson told it to her was a story of good and evil - the story of a kind man who did things that the bad people did not like. The bad people sought out retribution and no matter what the kind man did, he could not win. Jameson used the story to teach Erma of the dark things in the world, to encourage her to always stay vigilant because the world was a dark place.

Pop.

Bright

and

cold

and

silent

all at the same time.

A hand

grabbing

her arm

pulling.

Eyes adjusting

Did they need to adjust?

to the world.

Then

fear.

Isabella knew this room.

She

saw it

before.

A room

open and sparse

windows on all sides

and no entrance

and

no exit.

Three chairs.

A desk.

The woman

opposite them

waiting.

It was Alder

holding her arm

breathing hard.

He looked

afraid.

The woman blinked.

Waited.

Alder composed himself.

She spoke.

“The job, I thought, was remarkably simple. Difficult, perhaps, in execution, but not in understanding. Certainly not in understanding. And you both seem very intelligent. Is that incorrect?”

Isabella opened her mouth

but no sound

emerged.

In fact

her mouth

did not open

at all.

Lips sealed before parting.

“It was a rhetorical question darling.”

She clawed at her mouth

scratching furiously

hyperventilating.

She knew that she did not need to breathe

and that she could

but

her body was convinced otherwise.

The woman

just waited

as Isabella dropped to her knees

and writhed

and moaned

and choked

but recovered.

Lips still sealed.

“I have all the time in the world, darling. You, on the other hand, do not. Let’s keep the theatrics to a minimum.”

The woman turned to Alder.

“I have had such high hopes for you, Alder. You, with the knowledge of all that has come before in your life. And yet it was you that betrayed me.”

A silence.

“You may respond.”

“I couldn’t do it.”

Isabella looked at him.

He was indignant.

Brave.

“Do what?” her head cocked to one side.

“He would have killed the baby.”

“Is that so? And how do you know that?”

Silence.

“What else would he have done?”

His voice strong

but quivering.

“So you know more, know better than I do?”

“I’m saying...”

And then her form grew

six feet

seven

eight nine

until she towered

tall and lumbering

her back bent

looming

like death incarnate

hunched

over Alder.

“You think that you, a dead human waiting to be forgotten, know more about what is necessary than I do.”

Her voice

made the glass walls

shake

and Isabella put hands over ears

to stop vibration

in her skull.

A flick

of a wrist.

Alder flew into the glass behind them.

And she was small again

and she was directly in front of Alder  
at the wall.

“You think that you have some sort of knowledge that I do not have?”

Isabella

heard Alder whimper

but could not see him.

“Answer me.”

“I knew that I could not take the risk.”

A gust

and all was back as it was.

Alder was beside Isabella again.

His face

trembling.

The woman opposite them.

She smiled.

Then

she moved

effortlessly

through the table in front of them.

She slid close to Alder

and moved her hand to his head.

She leaned in

to his ear  
and whispered  
something  
Isabella could not hear.

“People can be so cruel, can’t they?”

Isabella watched  
as the body of the woman  
shimmered  
twitched  
and morphed  
into something different.  
Into someone different.  
She turned into a man  
portly  
balding  
short  
and angry.  
She pulled away  
and Alder saw.  
And his fear turned to anger

and surprise  
and Isabella knew  
that whatever form this was  
he recognized it.  
And he screamed  
and swung at her.

“You!”

Alder heard himself yell through flailing arms.  
His punches found no purchase but he could not stop himself from trying.  
It was the man.  
It was the man that had wrenched him from his bed in the middle of the night.  
that personally tied his hands  
and watched him burn.  
It was the man that had led the others  
in destroying his home  
and killing Adrian  
the man that Alder had known as Quentin Marchman  
the leader of the town council.  
This man  
was standing in front of Alder  
a smug smile on his paunchy little face

as Alder whipped his hands wildly through the form.

A ghost almost laughing.

Alder felt fury boiling.

An explosion of release as he swung and swung and swung  
breathing heavily.

He could return the favor and kill this man if he could only land one punch.

Maybe the form would become stable again.

But no.

Alder remembered that this was not the land of the living.

The rules were different here.

They were her rules.

He pulled himself together.

It was some sort of cruel entertainment for Imagination.

He would not give her the pleasure

not anymore than he already had

with his show of useless battering or the fear that came before.

Alder dropped his hands and turned away and tried to compose himself.

He felt ashamed.

He knew what she was doing.

She knew exactly what to do.

Imagination was angry and so

by her logic

Alder should be as well.

Moreso.

Maybe she felt like he betrayed her by not sentencing that baby to death.

But he could not do it.

And nothing of her clever torment would change that.

Alder dropped his head.

He heard her voice behind him.

“I want you to know that this could continue forever. Well, at least as long as you are here. This could be your existence.”

Her voice was calm and direct.

Certain but not goading.

There was a terror in that.

She was not even trying.

Not yet.

And then, a question formed in his mind.

He spoke it out loud.

“How do you know?”

He heard his voice.

Frail.

Greeted with silence.

He turned to see the form of Quentin but the voice that answered was hers.

“Excellent question, Alder. But you know the answer.”

It was easy enough to consider.

If she could conjure the ability for the purple robes to look into the lives of others it would not be difficult to see into his.

But that was not the question he was interested in.

The how was not as curious as the

“Why?”

His voice was stronger.

“A better question certainly.”

She was enjoying this now.

Alder could tell that this was what she wanted.

“I told you. I had high hopes for you. ”

He turned to Isabella and saw concern in her eyes.

Mixed with the hatred.

She would not have any part of her games.

She was strong.

She barely did any adjustments and boldly so.

Alder turned back to look into the eyes of the man that had killed him and saw the otherworldly thought behind the eyes.

He saw her depth.

A spark of some sort of ancient and all knowing power.

And he thought about how powerful Imagination must be.

He thought about the adjustments he had made.

The adjustments.

“I have a strong curiosity about what guides human decisions, don’t you?”

And he felt confusion

“You must admit it is a fascinating topic. Even with your limited experience. Those glimpses into the imagination of a person, into what makes them tick.”

that gave rise to understanding

“And how one small spark of an idea can settle into an ember that catches wind and grows into a flame, humble at first, but strong. Flickering in the darkness where there was nothing before.”

that gave rise to rage.

“You know the thing about fire. It spreads.”

And in a moment, Alder knew.

He knew

as he looked into the eyes of the man that had killed him

that the idea had come from somewhere else.

From someone else.

She was telling him

in her despicable way

that she did it.

Imagination

or some other purple robe

made the innocuous adjustment

that turned Quentin Marchman into a murderer.

Alder took three steps backward and turned to meet the eyes of Isabella once again.

She looked confused

He felt alone.

Helpless.

And he dropped to his knees.

And he dropped his head.

And he let his hands fall to the ground.

Some voice in the back of his head told him that it could be a joke.

It could be some cruel manipulation.

But it did not matter.

Something in Alder broke.

He wanted nothing more than to see God but maybe this face was the cold way the universe responded.

No.

Or hopefully

not yet.

Maybe Imagination was as close as Alder would get until he stopped existing here.

She was cruel and powerful.

Alder did not know how long he would be here but he knew that he could not live it out in this manner.

He shook his head.

“You win.”

A wrinkled finger touched his chin and pulled it up.

Quinn looking back at him.

Smug.

“I know that it is difficult. But you will help change the lives of so many living humans. The adjustments we make are pivotal. I know that, from now on, you’ll make me proud. No more missteps. Understood?”

Alder nodded.

She let his head drop again and turned the balding form of Quinn to Isabella.

She morphed as she did.

Back to the angelic white they had seen when they first arrived.

She looked at Isabella deeply.

“Do you need a reminder...”

A wave of a hand and the leg of Isabella fell.

A scream stifled as her mouth disappeared from existence.

Choking as a wave wiped the nose from her face.

Alder watched Isabella claw at her face from fingers that were burning.

Alder could see the bones of her fingers.

Isabella’s eyes rolled back and she began to fall.

A wave.

Isabella kept falling.

But Imagination caught her.

All of her pieces reassembled.

Blood gone.

She slapped Isabella in the face and her eyes opened.

“...of the things that exist in your imagination?”

She lifted Isabella to her feet.

Isabella shook her head but did not speak.

“Good. I trust that the two of you will do good work in whatever time you have left. Now that

I’ve met you, it cannot possibly be long.”

Imagination turned and lifted a hand.

Snap.

The room slid upward.

Stonework and dirt passed through them.

A thump.

They landed in a large chamber of stone.

Alder looked around and recognized the entrance chamber where many entered and exited the castle to create.

But the room was empty.

Stone steps to their left and a door to their right.

The cold and uneven cobbled stone beneath them.

Silence.

Breathing.

Isabella was barely standing.

Alder was not.

She looked at him.

“I hate that woman.”

And Alder agreed.

It was the worst form of prison

to be locked in

by fear alone.

He wondered

how many people

she tortured in that way.

How many people dared to disobey and paid the price?

“I’m not staying here.”

Isabella’s voice was low and grave as she looked over Alder.

“What?”

And her voice lowered as she knelt down to him.

“I’m not staying here. I can’t. I’d rather die.”

Alder looked up at her.

“You can’t die. That’s the thing, Isabella. She could torture you forever. Or until time runs out, whatever that means.”

And Alder watched the shadows start to appear and disappear around Isabella and she looked around herself and they both wondered how long they had.

He thought he saw the shadow of a young girl in the midst.

Someone that looked vaguely familiar but not quite.

She pulled him up to his feet.

“I don’t know or care about how any of this works. I can’t stay here. Do you think this is as bad as it will get? Suggesting to some kid that he leaves his little sister behind? Who knows what that woman is capable of. We don’t know what she is doing or why she is doing it. We don’t know what other things she can do or if she’ll ask us to do worse things. We have to take a stand in whatever time is left for us here.”

Alder watched as Isabella became strong again.

Her body stood up straighter.

Her voice became deep and resonant.

But he shook his head.

“Where do you even want to go?”

A voice from behind the grand staircase answered:

“The storm.”

They turned to see short blond hair and a beard.

They turned to see Kinth.

Kinth continued.

“I’m sorry. I was told to take a break and I wandered down here and heard you all fall from...somewhere. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I just thought it was weird that no one was in here.”

“It’s okay, Kinth.”

Isabella answered.

Kinth rushed over and looked up to the ceiling confused.

“Where did you come from?”

Alder answered.

“Imagination. She is--”

“Evil.”

Isabella interrupted.

“We need to get out of here. I need to get out of here. What is the storm?”

“Why would you ever want to leave here?”

Isabella exhaled deeply twice.

“Please, Kinth. What is the storm?”

“I don’t know exactly. I can see it from my room. People say that it’s the opposite of this place.

The opposite of Imagination. They say that if this place has all the imagination of the living, that place has all the nightmares.”

“If this place is imagination, I shudder to think what nightmare is.”

Isabella said and she turned and started walking to the door.

Alder grabbed her arm.

“You’re going to the place where nightmares are made?”

“This is the place where nightmares are made, Alder. I’m going to the only place that might be able to save us from her.”

“We’re fine! As long as we do as she says, we will be fine.”

Alder spoke the words but knew in his soul that he did not believe them.

He knew

they were not safe.

He knew  
there would be another line he would be asked to cross  
with or without Isabella.

And how many would he cross over if he stayed here?

“Okay.”

He agreed.

Something still seemed off.

Something seemed wrong.

The door was already open.

Isabella walked out.

Alder looked at Kinth

saw confusion

and ran after her.

Part of him believed

Imagination would not let them leave.

This would all end poorly

with her meeting them at the edge of the grounds

and arresting them

or whatever it was she did with people.

But that did not happen.

They walked quickly

Alder keeping a weathered eye over his shoulder

seeing the castle get smaller and smaller.

Kinth kept up with them

at first staying far behind

watching

and then

when they were far enough away from the castle

catching up.

“I didn’t think I could just leave. I thought we were stuck. Who would pass up a chance to explore this place?”

Alder was quiet.

It still did not make sense to him.

If everyone could leave

why were there not more leaving.

Why would she be so harsh to Isabella and Alder if she thought they might leave?

It did not seem long before they crested a hill

and a monstrous black cloud became visible.

By his estimation

it covered at least a hundred miles from one side to the other.

Lightning sparked out and upward

into the eternal purples and oranges and pinks of the sunset that Alder had come to know well.

It roiled in a slow circle counterclockwise with a pure darkness he never saw before.

They stopped at the top of the hill and watched it for a long moment

silently observing the contained chaos and the sheer size.

Alder noticed

at regular intervals

there were towers

and

even at this distance

he could see one figure in each of the closest two.

He wondered why the storm was being watched

and what the duties entailed.

Isabella started down the hill

silent

and determined.

And Alder and Kinth followed.

There was no wind

as they approached.

Instead

an eerily calm stillness

with a low rumble

pervaded the air.

It was unnerving for Alder.

To see the monstrous storm

but feel none of its impact.

He kept a weathered eye on the towers and the forms on top of them.

Isabella did not stop.

“What are we going to do when we get in there?”

He managed to ask as they rushed downward.

Isabella did not turn but spoke loudly

“We just find whoever is in charge and talk to them.”

“And say what?”

Kinth chimed in.

“We tell them what that woman is doing. It can’t be okay with them.”

Kinth nodded confidently

and Alder wondered if he was the only one that had reservations about this plan.

It was a wall

of wind

reaching the sky

as far left

and right

as she could see.

Terrifying

and exciting.

Isabella knew

this was right.

This was the only way.

That woman

must

be stopped.

The ruler of this place

if there was

a ruler

would help.

And

either way

there would be help here.

They would be safe.

She pushed her hand forward

into the moving darkness

and

felt

nothing.

No wind.

No cold.

No warmth.

It was like reaching

a hand out

into nothing.

She pulled it back.

A glimmer.

Sparks of black

reflecting light.

She wiped them but they did not come off.

She turned

looked at Alder

and Kinth.

She took a brief look over her shoulder

two figures

coming down the hills

from different towers.

It was now

or never.

She smiled

and stepped through

into darkness.

Our world will be broken and there is no one that cares but I. There is too much faith in what has been and what has always worked. But I can see the book. I am the only one that can.

And the book says that the world of dreams will be destroyed. It says who will do it and how it will be done. So I cannot fathom why action will not be taken by others.

**Joy said no.**

I summoned her here and shared every detail of what has and will continue to transpire. I shared the deception of Imagination and the trajectory of Alder and the other worthless dead toward me as I write and what they will do to the book. What they will do to me.

Joy did not budge.

She held me by the hands and looked into my eyes and told me that I must trust whatever will happen. She said that it is not my duty to alter fate. She said that I am afraid because I might cease to exist.

I am not afraid.

I was created for one purpose and I intend to succeed at my duty. I will protect the book. Survival is merely a measure of my efficacy. A data point and not a goal. It is not my fault that my fate is tied up with that of this world, with that of this book. But I will not stop it from pushing me toward my destiny.

Thus far I have only used the pages of this book to record my part in this. An editorial commentary that will let whatever future version of myself know what has transpired here and what part I have played. I have been careful not to interfere. But I am left with no other choice.

I know not what the effect will be. But here is what I do know:

At this very moment as I write, Malaya and Milo cross into the roiling storm of Nightmare.

I know that they follow Alder and Isabella and Kinth.

I know that Isabella plans to find Nightmare and make her ridiculous plea.

I know that Nightmare has some plan that I cannot see.

And I know that their next destination is me.

So I will turn the pages to that moment and I will do what I think **is best**.

**End of Second Movement**

### **Third Movement**

Jiang Fa Lin was born in the Independent Republic of Hong Kong in the year 2229 to her parents Jiang An and Jiang Qiuyue - a family of old wealth in the country since its inception in the year 2143. The Jiang family funded the initial rebellion against China using their significant fortune derived from investments in space commerce and weapons of war in the early twenty-first century.

Fa Lin was sole inheritor of the fortune and influence of the Jiang family and so was treated not only with the utmost care and attention, but was taught deeply about finances and the power of suggestion from an early age. She quickly rose to the top of her class at the prestigious Kaiman British International Boarding<sub>7222</sub> School where she spent four months out of the year. Of the remaining eight months of the year, four were spent shadowing members of both the government and private businesses beginning at the age of six and four were spent in independent study with various tutors at her disposal.

When she turned fourteen, Fa Lin was made aware of the reality that, while the Jiang family owned no businesses or held no official offices, they were primarily responsible for much of the public and private business deals in the International Republic of Hong Kong<sub>4432</sub>. If there were any business of a major scale, the Jiang family or their representatives would be consulted.

If there were any proposition of new taxes or governmental projects of any scale, the Jiang family would be a part of the business. Fa Lin learned that the secret of wealth was not about ownership or money, it was about leverage and respect. The island and most of its inhabitants trusted her father, An, to say and do what was in their best interest. They trusted her mother, Qiuyue, to a shrewd business broker. And they trusted them both to raise a child in Fa Lin that they would trust in turn.

Fa Lin took to her duties with pride. She was immediately lauded by those she shadowed, her instructors, and her peers. A beacon of strength and thoughtful kindness. Those that knew her best called her funny and witty. When she appeared on the street, the people of Hong Kong cheered for her and she smiled and waved. Fa Lin loved seeing the people of Hong Kong. Those that chose to spend a part of their day waiting for her made her feel as though her learning, her family's legacy, was important. The people believed in them. They had a responsibility.

She was allowed, at the age of sixteen, to sit in on the prominent **deal between Hong Kong and China** that would reopen trade for the first time since the inception of the country. She, for the first time, was able to sit in on the negotiation of the brokerage fee that the family requested for their services. And, for the first time, Fa Lin understood the true wealth her family commanded. The 421 million yuan fee with the power of the Chinese yuan in the global community, would amount to a fortune most people in Hong Kong would never even be capable of fathoming. It was a financial wealth that would have been impossible for most humans to acquire at most times in the entirety of human existence. For her family, it was one deal that represented six months of labor that she would consider minimal. A drop in the bucket.

When she was eighteen, she was officially awarded the first of seven trusts held for her by her parents and Fa Lin became the seventeenth richest human being on earth<sub>3215</sub>.

The onslaught was immediate.

Offers of marriage from both suitors and their parents arrived in the hundreds. Business propositions both from individuals and governments flooded in daily. Fa Lin was given an office at the capital and spent the first thirteen days sifting through requests and writing diplomatic responses by hand - as was the custom of the family. She had learned that any potential business partner, even if not so today, could be an ally for the future. Burning bridges, in the words of her father, will eventually lead to drowning.

She wrote seven thousand two hundred and fourteen responses.

Qiuyue died in a plane crash thirteen days after the twentieth birthday of Fa Lin and following the agreed upon appropriate time of mourning, Fa Lin took over her mother's daily responsibilities. On her first day, her father took her aside and told her two secrets of their family business. The first was something she had already gleaned from her time with her mother: the idea that power came more from silence than from speech. An explained that the mystery surrounding the family, the rumors of **mysticism and connection to the divine** could only be propagated through the clever use of people's own preconceived notions.

The second secret was something that Fa Lin had not considered. The second secret was the knowledge that, whenever possible, the Jiang way was to play both sides. It was, she learned, the way that they rose to prominence during the successful creation of the International Republic of Hong Kong. The family silently funded both sides of the conflict.

It struck Fa Lin. It was not something she had expected. All that she had heard and observed of her family's dealings painted them in a positive light. It was true that most people loved the Jiang name. But the understanding of the mercenary tactic of playing both sides of a conflict tainted everything. The legacy was not one of fortune favoring the kind-hearted, it was of greed begetting success.

The thoughts and inconsistencies in the stories she had learned swirled in the mind of Fa Lin for eight months as she took to the new duties assigned to her. She was successful nonetheless. Those that interacted with her found her to be even more reclusive and observant<sup>6294</sup> than her mother before her.

During one such meeting, on a cold winter day, Fa Lin sat in a plainly decorated oval-shaped conference room high above the skyline of Hong Kong. She looked dreamily out of the window at the clouds below gliding past. The others in the room waited for a response from her, but she had taken to long gazes outward before sharing her thoughts. It filled this room in particular with an uncomfortable silence. The room was stuffed with businessmen from Korea and the struggling New American Empire. It was the men that always became uncomfortable and impatient. Shifting in chairs. Coughing. Deep breaths. It was in this moment, as Fa Lin prepared to turn back to the group and deliver her response to the trade deal in question that a thought occurred to her: Are my doubts founded?

It was a simple enough thought but not one that had occurred to her before. She did not see her discomfort with the legacy of her family as doubt until that moment, she only saw the thoughts as her process of learning. Similarly, she had never deeply considered if those doubts, the feeling that her family might be wronging others, could have an impact in anything other than

the quarrels between the rich. It was one thing to play both sides of a trade deal between nations or a business deal between the richest companies in the world, it was another to hurt the lives of real people.

Fa Lin cancelled her meetings for the following two weeks and sat alone in a guest bedroom at their family estate. She did not leave the grounds and servants reported that on the rare occasions that she left her room, her form was pasty and she refused to make eye contact. Something in her had changed, they said, the kindness and hope had gone away.

Fa Lin Jiang was found dead in her room from apparent suicide on November 17th, 2250. She died three minutes before Alder Kemp was woken from his bed and dragged into the yard of his estate in Hillston. She took the name Malaya.

It was dark.

Silent.

Alder held his out in front of him

and felt around.

There was nothing to grab.

It was a familiar

and unsettling sensation.

Alder was the last

to walk into the storm.

He followed Isabella and Kinth

looking over his shoulder

to see the two figures converging  
on their location.

They should have known  
this might happen.

Rules in this place  
were different.

But  
as he reached around blindly  
he knew that those thoughts  
were not helpful.

He called out  
first to Isabella  
and then to Kinth  
but was met with deafening silence.

It was darker than before.  
This was not a room that lacked light.

This was a void  
an empty expanse  
of featureless dark  
and his companions  
were not here.

He would not fight this place.

Alder started to sit.

As he used his hands to find the ground beneath his feet

he saw upon them a small dot

of white

miniscule in size

but the white light was stark against the blackness.

It was on his finger.

He moved his other hand across it

to scratch it

and it skittered up his arm.

He shook it vigorously

but felt nothing

and the speck was gone.

Crawled into some other part of himself

beneath the robes.

He could not shake the sensation

that it was underneath his arm

no

moving down his back

no

up his leg.

And he swatted and hit parts of his body

over and over again  
but the sensation did not cease.  
Every second a new feeling of crawling beneath the robes.  
Now converging on his stomach.  
Now diverging from his elbow.  
He scratched and tensed and tried to remember  
they were not real  
they could not be real.  
The sensation would not subsist.  
It only grew  
until every inch of his body  
was filled with a peculiar itch of a bug  
biting  
and  
gnawing at the flesh.  
Then  
from every opening of his robe  
specks of white light emerged.  
One and then another  
and then another  
and then a dozen  
and then hundreds

pouring forth onto his hands  
and ankles  
and neck  
and they all floated upward  
off of his body  
and he could see that they each had seven little legs that bounced in unison as they swam  
through the air  
and coalesced  
in the center of his vision.  
Alder felt relief as the last of them left his body  
and joined the mass in front of him.  
As they gathered  
closer and closer  
he could hear that they were making a sound.  
It was a low  
droning  
hum  
that buzzed through his ears.  
He had not heard a sound like it before.  
It called to him  
in an odd way  
that beckoned him forward

closer

as it grew in size

but became more dense

simultaneously.

The hum

got louder

and hurt his ears.

The brightness intensified.

It was blinding.

He needed it to stop.

He reached out

and closed his eyes

and swatted the growing orb.

He did not feel tension.

His hands passed through without making connection.

But he saw movement through his eyelids

like a light on the other side

moving.

Alder slowly

opened

his eyes

to see

color.

The space was no longer dark at all  
but an endless expanse of moving rainbow.

The pure vibrance of color was shocking  
and unlike anything Alder had seen.

Bright blues and greens and yellows and pinks  
like the colors of nature amplified a thousand fold  
in moving color blobs.

And then  
in the color  
a scream.

It was Kinth.

Alder turned to see the leathered form kneeling  
hands over eyes and trying to scratch with elbows.

“They’re everywhere!”

“Kinth, it’s okay. They’re gone.”

Alder yelled as he tried to rush over.

The humming was all but gone  
but the colors seemed to scream at them  
and Alder felt he needed to yell over them.

Walking  
amongst the colors

proved difficult for Alder.

The moving amoebas of color

danced around them in random shapes and at random speed and in random directions.

The ground was a moving target.

Alder tripped over a moving bean shape of orange before catching himself on a green semicircle.

With difficulty

Alder arrived at Kinth

and pulled hands from eyes.

“Open your eyes, its okay.”

Kinth did

and immediately squinted at the world around them.

“What the hell!”

Kinth yelled and closed their eyes again

blinking them slowly to encourage adjustment.

“It’s like some crazy virtual reality game.”

“What?”

Alder did not understand.

“You know the glasses with the alternate realities?”

“I don’t know what that is. Come on, stand up.”

And Alder helped Kinth to their feet.

Kinth looked at him

confused.

“I don’t know either, really.”

Alder wondered what Kinth actually remembered  
from his life.

He wondered how long Kinth had been in this place  
and how different the life Kinth led was from that of his own.

The sound of the hum behind them  
and they turned  
and Isabella stood behind them  
eyes shut tightly  
hand reaching out into the spectrum.

She opened her eyes slowly  
and exhaled  
squinting  
at the two of them.

“Better than last time.”

Malaya looked at the storm in front of her and moved her hand in and out of it.

She felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

Seemed safe.

As she readied to step through she felt a hand on wrist.

She turned.

A man looked back at her.

A very attractive man.

Tall and olive skinned.

She could tell he was older than her.

But she did not know what that meant in this place.

He looked different up close but she could tell it was the man from the tower closest to hers.

He had the same job as her.

And he followed her down here when she leapt off to follow the man she knew as Alder.

She was quite the leader it seemed.

She pulled her arm from his hands and slapped him firmly for good measure.

But not hard enough to mess up his face.

He stepped back in shock.

“Why did you do that?”

He seemed genuinely confused.

“Why did you grab my arm?”

“I wanted to stop you.”

“I did not want to be stopped.”

Malaya smirked and turned away from the man to look at the storm.

She stepped one foot in before she heard him speak again.

“I’m Milo.”

She stopped and pulled her foot back out.

“Malaya.”

And she held her hand out.

He shook it.

“Why are you going into the storm?”

He asked.

And she turned to look back at her tower.

“Did you see those people that ran in here?”

“Yes. I saw you running toward them.”

“I knew one of them. I met him when we first got here.”

“When we got assigned duties?”

“Right. So the question is, why did you follow me?”

Malaya looked at him deeply.

“I was bored.”

He said.

And Malaya knew that they could be friends.

“We are not supposed to leave our post. I was told that.”

She quipped.

He returned.

“I don’t know if I remember that. But if we both go together, no one will know.”

Malaya knew that this was not true but she was following Alder either way.

It would not hurt to have someone else along.

“Then what are you waiting for. I will follow you.”

Milo stepped forward toward the storm and turned back to her.

“If I disintegrate or something, you probably shouldn’t follow me.”

And he stepped through.

He was funny.

She stepped through after him  
and into a large circular room.

A table in the center.

Eight chairs around the outside.

It was impossibly bright.

Milo was standing opposite her.

But not quite standing.

He was trembling.

Wet with sweat.

His hand moved to a chair to hold himself up.

Malaya felt a familiarity with this place.

She could not understand why.

She opened her mouth to call out to Milo.

No sound emerged.

She waved her arms in the air to try to get his attention.

But it did not work.

He was focused on something at the other side of the room.

He arm clenched the side of the office chair tightly.

It was like he could not breathe.

And the sweat poured from him more and more intensely by the moment.

Malaya moved toward him.

Even though she pushed chairs out of her way she never got any closer.

The room heated up.

She looked out of the window to see the sun coming closer.

It was odd because she did not remember seeing the sun in this place at all.

She just remembered the endless sunset.

The heat intensified and she began to unwrap her robe to cover her face.

It did nothing to help.

She could feel sweat dripping from her fingers and nose.

She dropped to her knees.

Milo had done the same.

They were both slowly burning to death.

They were slowly decaying into this place.

Until

like a switch the lights went out.

The two were plunged into darkness.

Cold.

Bitter cold.

Malaya felt the sweat on her skin crystallize with remarkable speed.

She moved her hand through her hair and felt it get stuck.

Her skin started to peel and flake as the muscles tensed.

Breathing was difficult.

She thought that if she closed her eyes it might all go away.

So she closed her eyes and clenched them tight.

And it did.

It was like nothing had ever happened.

She felt herself floating in the air.

Weightless.

The air moving across her skin.

Her blood and flesh the temperature it should be.

The perfect temperature.

Like a warm bath.

But when she relaxed into it she realized that something was off.

The air was moving.

The air was moving quickly.

The air was moving quickly past her.

It was moving from below her to above her.

Malaya opened her eyes.

She was falling.

She reached out and grabbed in every direction for something to hold on to but the gray circular walls were smooth and too far away.

She swallowed spit and looked down.

The ground was coming.

She counted down.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

She closed her eyes and braced for impact.

None came.

The air simply stopped rushing.

She was not moving.

She could feel ground beneath her.

But she did not want to open her eyes.

So she moved into a fetal position and held herself.

Listening to the sound of her own heavy exhalations.

Until she heard a voice call out.

“Malaya?”

“Yes”

She recognized the voice.

Milo.

“Are we dead?”

She called back to him from inside of her arms.

“I don’t think so.”

Malaya slowly opened her eyes and saw only the outline of stone in front of her.

She tilted her head upwards to see a statue looking down at her.

Unmoving.

She lifted her head and looked down at her feet.

Another statue stood tall.

Above her another.

“There are a lot of statues here.”

“Yes.”

She responded.

“It’s a little creepy.”

She heard Milo standing up but could not tell how far away he was.

She heard a stifled thump.

Then silence.

“Milo?”

“Milo?”

The arm of the statue to her left moved toward her.

It was faster than she anticipated.

It grabbed her by the chest and lifted her from the ground.

Another statue reached out and clasped around her legs.

The third brought its massive hand across her face.

In unison the statues began to walk.

Huston did not know where he was going. He always had the impression in school that he was particularly adept at directionality but he realized, as they walked for days that edged into weeks, that he was not. He knew, at least, that they were not headed backward. They would not end up back in Hillston. He just did not know where they would end up. If anywhere. As time ticked by, he found himself mourning often. He was certain that at some point they would die. And Huston found it difficult to have that weight on his shoulders. It would only be by some godly grace or some intangible stroke of luck that they would find themselves somewhere safe.

He kept it to himself, though, and was confident in guiding Feld. Whenever multiple paths were presented to them, he made the choice quickly as though he knew the direction they were headed. He did not want Feld to lose faith. A few times and for significant periods, they followed what Huston knew must be a formal hiking trail from some time in the past. The trees along the middle of the path were significantly shorter than those surrounding the path - a distinct line to follow. On these occasions, Huston saw the spirits of Feld raise significantly. And he saw the same in himself. A happiness and a comfort. They followed the sunset and Huston knew that meant, at least, they were headed west away from Hillston.

Their conversation faded after the first two weeks except for what was necessary to communicate. There was a feeling, for a time, that over each next ridge they would see something incredible to guide them. But that ceased to be the case. It was winter and their days were short.

From time to time, the two would find themselves in an abandoned town or city. Coming over a hill or around a bend and seeing buildings were what kept Huston going. He loved seeing the look on the face of Feld when he ran into the buildings. Hillston was small and the buildings

were short. On several occasions, Huston and Feld saw buildings that had upwards of eight floors, things they had only read about. They would run in and out of buildings, looking for any sign of other people, any sign of life but would not find any. Huston knew that this was a long shot every time - the books all said that the West was mostly abandoned since the fall of the New American Empire. He still allowed himself to get excited every time. Maybe this city was their new home. Maybe this is where they could stop.

At the very least it meant that they could gather supplies and sleep somewhere inside for a night or two. This was what he would explain to Feld when they met back up after searching and found no sign of people. Feld's face would fall every time.

Huston felt lucky because they had not run into a significant snow over the first three weeks but that changed when a tremendous blizzard bore down on them. They had been traveling with not town for relief for four days and had crested over one mountain with a valley and a much taller mountain in front of them when they saw the first flake of snow. They rushed into the valley as the snow started to fall in earnest.

There was a small grove of trees next to a stone outcropping and they used to shield themselves slightly as six feet of snow fell slowly over the course of the following seventeen hours. Huston was successful at making a fire for the two of them with the remainder of their materials but it was weak and mostly just stayed in embers. They huddled together for warmth but found that only one of them could be close to the fire at any given time. Huston made sure it was always Feld. He felt his toes get cold and then colder and the sting with pain and then go numb but he ignored it.

They dug themselves out in the middle of the day eighteen hours and twenty-two minutes after the first snow had started to fall. It took them a further three hours to make a path to the other side of the valley using walking sticks they had picked up along the way. They were not well prepared for a blizzard but Huston kept their spirits up by singing a **song they had learned when they were children** and they laughed and the hours passed by more quickly. His leg started to hurt again but he ignored it. The sun disappeared as they reached the base of the West side of the valley. They decided to climb through the night.

It was not an easy climb but not the worst they had encountered. This was a formal path - one they had taken to following three days prior but had lost intermittently. It took them in switchback up to the peak of the mountain previously known as Candland. It took them much of the night. They arrived at the top, exhausted, as the sun started to crest over the horizon at the back of them and they saw they saw what they had been looking for. Below them, in a town that was just slightly larger than what Huston imagined Hillston to be from this height, there was movement. There were people.

Isabella

was first.

Front

as they walked.

Eyes adjusted

over time

and she looked ahead

hands in front  
because there were no walls  
and no doors  
and no ground  
and no ceiling.

She looked  
behind  
often  
to make sure the others  
followed.

She was moving fast.

The sooner they got  
to the center  
of Nightmare  
the sooner  
this would be over.

This injustice.

That woman.

They held each other up

Kinth and Alder

and she liked to see

that she was helping

that she was strong.

She had not felt strong often

not here.

It was hard to see

here.

But

when her eyes

adjusted

she found

pattern.

Code

in color.

The blobs were not random.

In whatever

time

had passed

however

long they

walked

she started to notice.

Blue

bean

red

circle

yellow

moon

pink

semi-circle

green

letter c

and

repeat .

Each spot

had a pattern.

The spots did not move from their location.

Just in their shape.

There were hundreds of spots

and so

hundreds of patterns

but all had the same set of

colors

and

shapes

in the same

order

except

that one

and

that one.

Every once in awhile

something different.

The green c

would be blue

or

the bean

would be red.

Isabella took to following these differences.

She found herself

observing

and turning toward

those aberrations in pattern

while the others

looked down

and followed

her lead.

Pink

moon

yellow

circle

and soon

over time

she noticed

the colored shapes

were getting larger

and so she knew

she was following

correctly.

Or else

something

was closing in on them.

The shapes took up the white space

between themselves

until there was not white

left.

And then

when the colors could no longer

swirl

the walls appeared.

Vibrating blocks of color.

They were walking

in the center

of a massive hallway.

Hundreds of feet

to each side

and

hallways dotted

here

and

there

with blazing white

overwhelming inside.

And there

in the distance

just as the last

bit

of white

was swallowed by bright color

was a spot

of black.

When she saw it

she ran.

She left the others

She assumed whoever ruled this place

must be there

in the darkness

at the center

of the nightmare storm.

She called back

“Let’s go!”

but did not look

to confirm.

Her feet

stomped

color

that seemed to

vibrate

at the footfall.

The black grew

a square

amplifying

until it consumed her entire vision

color

gone.

Only black.

Not darkness

not exactly.

Bright black.

She turned to see

Alder and Kinth

but saw only black.

Isabella ran off and was not looking back.

He squinted to look up

and follow her with his eyes

and saw a blackness that she was running toward.

Who was she?

Much more confident here

and Alder did not know why.

Maybe it was something about this place.

Maybe it was changing her.

He heard her footsteps echo off.

It was the first time he heard anything except the color in here

and he found that the deafening sound he was hearing

was silence.

He tried to stand up straight  
but Kinth was weak and put all of his weight  
against Alder.

Something happened to Kinth.

Something here changed him.

Alder looked up again

and Isabella was gone.

She disappeared into the black square.

He looked behind and saw

white

and color

swirling

and his head started to hurt.

He did not know if the white

if the color

would catch up with them

but he did not want to be lost again

so he wrenched Kinth up

and began to walk faster

tripping on each others feet

until the black was all they could see

and until they saw Isabella

and

someone else.

The throne

silver

spiked

hair

gold with pink tassels

leather-looking jacket

black

small

very small.

Isabella could not

figure out

what to make of this person

this child

laying sideways.

The throne was massive

large enough for three

and

purely silver

and

the shoes

the red shoes

the gigantic red shoes

shot up

at right angles

to both each other

and

the throne.

Mouth open

tongue out

eyes almost closed

but somewhat

rolled backwards

like a dog playing dead.

“Hello.” She called out.

No reply.

Isabella heard Alder come up behind her.

She did not turn back

but instead

tilted

her head

to the side

to put it in line

with the figure

as she

inched

closer

and closer.

She reached out her hand

to push on the shoulder.

Eyes

opened.

“Boo!”

Isabella screamed

jumped back.

Alder and Kinth did the same.

And the figure

laughed

and

laughed.

Some sort of childish trick

as they shot up to sitting

turned head to side

and froze.

Suddenly

still.

“Why have you come to my kingdom?”

Voice booming and deep.

A voice of God.

Then

Silence again.

They jumped

onto the throne

gigantic

red shoes

landing on

throne arms

voice changed

to a guttural

whisper

through gritted teeth.

“Can we help you with something...please?”

Another leap to standing

stiff and precise

like a soldier

at throne center

voice like stones falling on metal

utterly distinct.

“We have always been bored. We have been waiting so long for you.”

A giggle.

And then they laid back down

on the bright black ground

voice exhausted

deep.

“I want you.”

Eyes

met

Isabella.

It was

seductive.

They

did not move

for a long time.

The myriad of voices

was improbable

coming from

one person.

Isabella

did not dare

to move.

She was not

scared

exactly

But deeply

unsettled.

Alder stepped forward

in his masculinity

“We thought you could--”

His voice

cut short

as they disappeared

puff

of

smoke

before Isabella’s eyes

with a sound like

dust

released.

A slithering voice

from behind.

Strong

certain.

“I was not talking to you.”

They were behind Alder and Kinth.

Another puff.

Returned to throne

seated

head turned

eyes

on Isabella

curious

smile

waiting.

Isabella stood straight

and spoke.

“There is a woman...”

“Imagination, I know her well.”

A smile.

Voice silken and calm now

child-like contrasting Isabella’s

determination.

“She is manipulating the living. We don’t know why.”

“And you think we should play with her?”

“Not play. Stop. It’s not right.”

“What is right and wrong? Everything is chaos, child.”

And

the statement was odd

coming from a body so small.

“It is not chaos. Not there.”

“You have not been in a long time, Isabella. We are closer than ever. So why stop her? She helps us.”

“Because...”

And no words

emerged.

No argument.

Isabella looked

at this small figure

almost bouncing

with stillness

energy pent up

waiting eagerly

and

she knew

that they did not believe

in right

or justice

or truth.

They believed

in something else.

Isabella thought

for a long time.

The figure shook

with impatience.

“I AM BORED!”

A scream

that shook the walls.

Isabella turned to

Alder and Kinth

they watched her

expectantly.

She breathed deeply.

“Me too.”

A smile across their face.

Isabella continued

“I am bored too. She tortured us. Did you know that? She took limbs away from me. Took away my ability to breathe..”

“Fun.”

A broad smile across their face.

“You could do the same. Do you want to?”

She took a step forward.

“Go ahead.”

A silence

then

“No thank you. Human suffering is predictable. It all ends the same.”

Isabella smiled.

“I thought so. I agree. I will tell you I think I know and you can tell me if I have predicted well.

It will be a fun game. Do you want to play.”

A leap to the top of the throne

delicate balance

on gigantic red shoes.

“More than anything.”

And Isabella sat

not as some ploy

or part of a game

but because

her legs would not stop shaking.

“First, I think that you are working with that woman.”

“Imagination, yes.”

“One point for me.”

“I think that you are wanting something. I think that she is wanting something.”

“Yes.”

“Two points for me.”

The excitement in them was palpable.

Shaking.

“I think that she approached you. That it is about control for her. She wants control.”

Smile

growing

on their face.

“Yes. Good. You are good at this game.”

“Three points for me.”

Isabella

tried to work it out in her head

what

that woman

might want

and maybe it was

simple.

“She wants to destroy us. To kill off humans.”

“No! A point for me! She cannot kill you all off. We need you. However unfortunate.”

“That’s good. I thought I might win outright.”

A shock of cackling laughter  
echoing through the massive  
bright  
black.

“Control...”

Isabella thought aloud.

“Control.”

They leaned forward to an improbable angle  
only toes touched  
the throne  
they pushed out over air  
eager.

“Come on...you can piece it together...”

“Control...if not to destroy the world...”

“Then...”

“Then, maybe to remake it.”

“Not a point. Not yet.”

“...in her image.”

“Yes! Point for you! Power here comes from the living. If they are ruled by her, by their imagination, she becomes more powerful. So she changes things, she manipulates to make your world more like she wants. She is very smart.”

“Can I ask you a question now? Four points to one.”

“Yes! Please.”

“What is in it for you. What is in it for Nightmare?”

The shoes released from the throne

and they

floated

through the air

toward Isabella

turning on their back

like a swimmer.

“Imagination and Nightmare go together. If she thrives, so do I. We both win. Active imaginations create deeper fears. More chaos. Don’t you think?”

“But only to a point.”

They looked down from above Isabella.

“What do you mean?”

“That woman only is tactical, she plans. She wants to rule. That requires some kind of order, doesn’t it? But you want something else. You want chaos. So you can never be as powerful as her.”

A deep belly laugh in a different voice

round and jovial.

“I do not care about power, Isabella. Power is boring. I just like to see things fall apart. That feels good.”

Isabella turned

to Alder and Kinth and  
smiled.

She knew she had won.

“Then help us. Help us destroy her. Think of the chaos it would cause.”

“And what do you propose we do? You who do not know how this world functions in the slightest?”

They landed behind  
and Isabella felt afraid again.

Now

they were blocked  
from leaving.

Isabella shrugged.

Then

they walked.

It was odd

to watch.

An approximation

of putting one foot

in front of the other

to simulate

movement

by one that

had only seen it

from afar.

“I don’t know.”

Nightmare walked in a circle.

Unsettling

in its normality

and precision.

“There are only two ways to change things here. The first is to change your world, to adjust the whims of humans. That, I am sorry to say, is out of your grasp unless you work for Imagination in one of her silly creations. The second...”

And they paused

for a

long

time

finishing

the circle

and landing

behind Alder and Kinth

who did not

take eyes off of them.

They continued

“...is the Book. You could destroy the book. The Book keeps all things, all knowledge of your plane. A record. If we destroy it, that...that is chaos.”

Clearing throat

from Kinth.

“What would it do?”

And they thought

and they shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

They sucked air

through teeth

and

moaned

deeply.

Pleasure.

But Isabella

was skeptical

“Then why haven’t you done it?”

“I cannot. I am of the Book. The Book is of me. It would be a tree cutting off it’s own branch. It is not fathomable. But you could. You could seek out the Keeper and take action.”

Alder spoke up again.

“Where?”

Eyes did not move from Isabella.

“Do you want me to send you there?”

Isabella looked

deep

into black eyes.

Abyss.

She would have sworn they were swirling.

“Do you want to send us? If the book is ‘of you’?”

A pause.

“Sounds fun.”

“Then yes.”

“But one thing, first. A game of my own. Something that will be truly exciting for me to behold.

But I suppose we must hurry. The aberrations are coming.”

Abioye Ochoa was born in Hwange, Zimbabwe in the year 2072. His family was wealthy and had moved to Hwange to live a simpler life seven years before he was born. His father Itai and mother Efrat were both doctors to governmental staff until a new regime was put in place by the New American Empire as they sought to expand influence in the region. They were given a significant payout by the new government and asked to quietly retire before Abioye was born. They were happy to oblige.

When he was young, Abioye was popular because his family had a large house near the outskirts of the city and his mom would often host parties for his friends. Every spring, his family would take a week long hiking trip along the road to Victoria Falls and sit on the banks to

watch the **shuttles take off**. It was something that he had grown to love and he would often write, in school settings, about seeing the smoke trails headed into space and wondering how **The Conflict** was being fought.

Three weeks after his sixteenth birthday, a shuttle crashed soon after takeoff near very near the outskirts of Hwange and his parents were called in to help with the emergency efforts. He came along and watched his family work. He would later recall the deft with which his parents worked, the kindness and the skill intertwined. He was instantly certain that medicine in this form - helping those on the frontiers of what was possible - was where he wanted to devote his life.

Abioye went to The University of Zimbabwe, was accepted into their medical school, and graduated at the top of his class to a waiting job as a field medic for **Femto Technology** - the private space travel enterprise operating the base near Victoria Falls.

After three years of working, mostly in rehabilitation and emergency on the ground for disastrous situations, there was a discovery of New American interference in national politics. Following this, the worldwide conspiracy of The Conflict made **national headlines** and Femto Technologies closed their base and abandoned space travel amid brewing civil war in Zimbabwe and many countries around the world.

The civil war boiled over and into Hwange in the summer of the year 2100. Because of financial boons brought by the organization, the residents of Hwange had taken the side of Femto Technology and the The Conflict. They argued that, even if details were not true, the danger was real and the town still needed and wanted protection. This was not the popular opinion of the nation at large. As the government was overthrown and rebuilt, forces from the Reunified

Zimbabwe Republic stormed into the town as a part of a concerted effort to make example of those on the side of the NAE. Abioye was at the base, helping with terminal patients as Femto Technologies finished their cleaning efforts. His parents were at home with the troops arrived. Itai and Efrat Ochoa were killed in the street as representatives of those made rich by New American lies and influence.

Abioye came home with no job and no prospects to find his family home confiscated and his parents dead.

Many would call the following twenty-two days the worst genocide in the history of the continent as those seen as sympathetic to the New American Empire and space firms were systematically hunted and killed. Three million twenty-seven thousand and fourteen people were killed.

Through his connections in the technology sector, Abioye was able to escape the country on one of the last convoys headed into Zambia from the base. There he remained a refugee for two years until he was able to secure safe passage and work in the New American Empire. He traveled by boat on a journey that would take six months and twelve days.

When Abioye arrived he observed a similar tension to that he felt before the civil war in Zimbabwe but here the topics were different. Tension around immigration at the southern border mixed with the mistrust of the New American Empire because of The Conflict conspiracy. Abioye was laid off of his job as a doctor in New Jersey because he was an immigrant but he did not blame the employer. As he sat and watched the **news from the East Coast**, he learned that this sentiment was because of the open borders. He learned that it was the fault of all of the new influx of unskilled workers that made it harder for hard working people like himself to get the

jobs that they deserved. He learned that the campaign to degrade trust in the NAE was simply a ploy from one side of this argument to take attention away from the real problems. He became angry.

Abioye lost his apartment and was homeless for three months before he was approached by a group called The Resistance, a group dedicated to stopping the rampant flow of immigrants into the country. He was the sixth recruit in an assassination effort to eliminate key figures. He was assigned Isabella Garcia - the prominent candidate for President - in exchange for a lifetime of monetary comfort and work.

On the night of the election, Abioye attended the massive watch party but left early to head out back before the concession speech begun. He held an untraceable 9mm glock **with six bullets developed** for The Conflict. He waited thirty-seven minutes for her to emerge and was surprised with the lack of security. He walked with purpose and without hesitation shot her three times in the chest before turning and walking away.

In the subsequent days, his name became widely known in The Resistance as a traitor and a failure. The assassination did not have the intended effect. Abioye was extracted from the group and told to run. He ran south and west to the Texas border and penniless and guilty, Abioye Ochoa hung himself from the remnants of a border wall. His final thoughts were those of regret and disappointment.

He took the name Kinth.

Erma decided with her father on her twelfth birthday to take the last name Unkin in memory of her mom. She found herself often comparing her life to that of her mom. At this age,

Bridgett had already seen a man die and was thinking about leaving Hillston, the only place she'd ever known. Erma's life was not this interesting. Her father had resigned and moved them northeast before Erma was old enough to remember things and so she had no memory of the area where her mom had grown up. She only had memories of the pine and spruce trees of northern Vermont. Her dad had said that he wanted to get as far away as possible from all the things that killed her mom and that this place was, at the very least, remote.

But it drove Erma crazy.

She travelled forty-three miles to and from school twice a week and all of her friends lived almost an entire day away. They could only hang out on weekends when Erma could sleep over. Jameson would not allow guests at their home. It was just the two of them and mostly she tried to ignore her father and stay in her room. It was easier that way.

Erma was not certain of the work that her father did, but she knew that he was well connected to the outside world because he would report the happenings to her in excruciating detail. She knew that the Emergent and Endurance forces were clashing more frequently and further east and that it was called something now: The War of Justice. She knew that the remnants of the NAE was crumbling or perhaps had already all but dissolved just south of them. She knew that her father was getting more nervous. It seemed like every day he was checking their food storage in the basement of the large old house they lived in. He would call her down to help him count and recount and even though she hated it she still did it because it was the only time he talked about her mom.

“She was so strong. Did I tell you that she left when she was sixteen and walked for months before finding another town. Walked! By herself,” he would say.

“Yes, you told me father.”

“I can’t even imagine it. I would have died for sure.”

“I know. You’re not that strong.”

“Hey!”

“Just kidding!”

It was like this everytime. Sometimes he would talk to her about when her mom died and the prayer he uttered even though he was not religious. Sometimes he would talk about the night he proposed to Bridgett and how nervous he was. Sometimes he would talk about friends that were lost during the conflict. But it was only when they went into the basement. She thought there must be something about preparing for disaster that reminded him of her.

Erma woke up to the sound of her father screaming on January 17th, 2275.

“Erma! Get up now! Let’s go. Pack a bag!”

She was slow to move. There was something about the warmth of the blankets in the dead of winter that made it difficult.

She opened her eyes to see her father bursting through the door. Jameson was sweating and out of breath and Erma knew immediately the severity of the situation.

She followed his instructions to the letter and packed a bag of essential and warm clothing. She gathered keepsakes and blankets and met her father at the door of the basement. They went down together and locked both the wooden outside door and the heavy insulated metal door on the inside that cranked like a ships wheel until eight bars blocked the entrance. She walked down the stairs and set her things on the smaller of the the beds in the room, the one next to the canned food items, and she turned to see her father coming in behind and doing the same.

He took the old satellite radio from a shelf over the staircase and turned it on. He had told Erma that it was tuned to an Emergency network that was only accessible by world governments usually, that it was created during The Conflict, but he didn't tell Erma how he had gotten it.

He switched it on.

Only static.

He was staring intensely at the radio as though if he looked hard enough and with enough focus, it would somehow start to work.

It did not.

"Maybe it's broken," she said after they listened in silence for one minute and fifteen seconds. He hushed her quickly without shifting his attention. Erma noticed that both his hands and his knees were shaking and it made her more nervous.

"Father?"

No reply.

"Dad. What's happening?"

He broke his gaze and turned to her and she saw fear in his eyes.

"I don't know." His voice was tense and tight.

It was fourteen minutes and thirty-four seconds later when the static broke into the calm and direct voice of a woman **explaining the status of the country**. Erma listened deeply but could not fully understand everything the woman was saying about melanocytes and the activation of the weaponized substance but she understood clearly the scope: someone dropped some sort of genetic weapon over seventy-two different cities across the world. Billions of

people were already dead or dying and the expectation was that the number would double in the next seventy-two hours.

“If your ancestors lived north of the equator and you are still alive,” the woman concluded, “stay inside and thank whatever God you pray to.”

Then her tone changed to something full of malice.

“Despite the setbacks, it is finally here. It is the beginning of a new world. Stay tuned.”

Erma looked over at her dad and immediately knew that it was worse than she could comprehend. He pulled her into a tight hug.

“We’re alive,” he said.

They walked for a long time.

Malaya counted the footsteps.

Nine thousand four hundred and seventy-six.

Nine thousand four hundred and seventy-seven.

She wondered if when she got to ten thousand something would change.

She knew it would not.

She could not see.

They could be walking in circles for all she knew.

But she was comfortable at least.

She was mostly laid flat and bouncing with the unison footsteps of the statues.

Every two thousand steps she would call out to Milo.

“Are you still alive?” She would ask.

“Yes. Barely.” He would respond.

They did not have much to discuss so it was easier just to keep quiet.

She was curious about reasoning behind this.

Why would someone want this to happen to anyone?

Was purgatory an infinite blind walk until one has some sort of epiphany?

Malaya did not know how but she knew that she did not believe in purgatory.

She might be here for awhile.

Nine thousand eight hundred and eighty-two.

Nine thousand eight hundred and eighty-three.

Stop.

Drop.

Malaya fell to the floor as the three statues released her.

She opened her eyes and found it momentarily difficult to see.

The room was bright even though it was black.

And there was a chaotic square of white that was either small or far away.

Milo was next to her and she instinctively reached out to touch his shoulder.

He jumped.

“It’s me.” She patted his shoulder to calm him.

“I can’t see.” He almost yelled.

“Your eyes will adjust.”

Malaya blinked several times and turned to try and see the room.

There were people behind them.

She recognized one of them.

Alder.

But the rest of the group were strangers.

The same strangers she saw running into the storm.

The same strangers they followed.

Alder turned to her and she smiled.

But he looked past her.

He looked past her to Milo.

His eyes grew wide in recognition.

They knew each other.

He whispered a name under his breath.

“Adrian.”

But Milo did not respond.

Milo looked around at the entire group in confusion.

He turned to Malaya.

“Are these the people you were following?”

“We were following. But yes.”

And she pointed at Alder.

“That’s Alder.”

Alder smiled a big and goofy grin and Malaya looked at him confused.

She turned back to Milo.

“Do you know him?”

Milo shook his head.

“No.” He sounded confused.

“He seems to know you.” Malaya looked between the two of them.

And Alder moved his arms away from the person he was holding and stepped forward.

One step.

Two steps.

And then he was running full speed toward Milo.

Alder dove into Milo and held him close as they lay on the ground.

Malaya stood up quickly and looked down at the others.

A proud brown skinned woman.

A darker person dressed in leather.

And a child peeking out from behind them.

The child was the only person that did not seem confused.

The child seemed delighted.

Milo pushed Alder off of himself and scooted away quickly.

The child spoke.

“He does not recognize you...not yet.”

The voice was gravel and mystery.

Malaya knew immediately that they were in charge.

Alder stood.

“Why not?”

He sounded upset and Malaya did not understand why.

The child responded in a different voice.

“You know why not, Alder. You know that you are the exception and not the rule.”

Malaya saw his face drop as he moved his gaze between Milo and the child.

The woman spoke up.

Her voice was smooth and strong.

“You said yet.”

And laughter burst from the child.

Both playful and horrifying.

“You are so smart. I like you. There are a few of us, the most powerful among us, that can gift living memory. I am one of three.”

Alder took three steps toward the child.

“Do it. Please.”

Malaya observed the sideways glance that the child gave to Alder.

She observed the coy smile.

She looked at the desperation in the eyes of Alder.

As though this was all that he had ever wanted in life.

And Malaya knew he would never get it.

Why were they not answering him?

They just

stood there

watching and smiling

like this was not everything to him.

Alder had died loving Adrian

because of Adrian

and here he was

right in front of them

but acting like a stranger.

They were playing with him.

And it was making him angry.

He stepped forward again.

“Do it.”

He felt his

voice crack

in anger

but he could not hold it in.

They raised a finger to him.

“No.”

And the words had

finality.

Like to question

would be

to die.

And Alder felt his heart

drop.

Isabella spoke.

“You said yet.”

She repeated.

They shifted gaze to her.

“Yes. I did. I can and I will. But not yet.”

“Why not?” Alder blurted.

“Hush, child. I am speaking to Isabella.”

Alder felt his blood boil

but stopped himself from speaking.

He turned back

to Adrian

to see confusion.

He heard Isabella speak.

“What do you want for it?”

“I want what we’ve been talking about. I want you to destroy the book. That has not changed.

But I need to make sure that you will be able to accomplish the task.”

“What does this have to do with the task?” Isabella sounded like she was frustrated.

Isabella was not

playing

anymore

and it made Alder feel good

like someone was on his side.

“This does not.” They pointed at Alder  
and then Adrian.

“This does.”

The finger moved to Isabella  
and then to Kinth  
and then to Alder  
and then  
slowly  
to Malaya.

“What do you mean?” Isabella asked.

They giggled playfully  
and danced in a circle.

“This is the most fun part.

I get to watch.”

And they swirled their fingers  
in the air  
as they spun in a circle.

And Isabella blinked  
and Malaya blinked  
and Kinth blinked  
and the three of them fell.

It was a crumpling.

Physicality overwhelmed

and overloaded.

A disengagement of body

and mind.

Alder rushed to catch Isabella

but she recovered quickly

caught herself.

He watched her blink

in a manner similar

to when he'd seen her

before

when the poles started to fly.

She remembered.

She looked at him

brow furrowed

and then looked past him

and her face dropped.

Alder followed her gaze.

She was looking at Kinth.

She recognized him.

His face was confusion

and terror.

Alder turned back.

She looked afraid too

but it was different.

The fear was guided by sadness

and rage.

Behind her

Nightmare was in silent observation

their hands clapped together

covering an unnatural smile.

She

remembered

everything.

Cascading images

clicking

into place.

Memory puzzle

fitting

together.

Her

last image

the image  
of a dark man  
holding a gun  
to her head  
with  
glee  
no  
with confidence  
as though he had all of the answers.  
The sound of the trigger clicking.  
The sound of the firing of powder.  
The screams of her family.  
Darkness.  
It was  
that man  
that stood  
here  
now.  
It was Kinth.  
Isabella felt  
sick  
and

angry

and

hopeless

and

scared

and

lost

and

sad.

More than anything sad.

She wished

she could hold

her husband

one

last time.

And her kids.

How did they turn out?

What did they grow up to be?

Or

did

he

kill

them

too.

Then

she felt

fury

boiling inside of her.

She felt the desire

to harm

to kill

even though she knew

that was not possible

not here.

A voice

languishing:

“What do you want to do to Kinth? To the man that killed you?”

Isabella could not

make words.

She

clenched

her fists.

The voice

different

sultry:

“I’ll let you do anything you want. Anything. For as long as you want. Death will never come.

Just suffering.”

No sound

from anyone

and they got closer

whispered

in Isabella’s ear

“And I can show you what happened to your family. Some of them might even be around

here...”

Their voice

trailed

as

they moved across the room

gliding

watching.

A different voice now

deep and shocking

“That goes for you as well, Alder. I will unlock Adrian for you.”

The child was headed toward her.

But not in a rush.

Malaya was having a hard time understanding.

Fa Lin was having a hard time understanding.

Which was which?

And why did she have memories of something else?

Of someone else?

Of someone here?

The others were talking but she could not decipher their words.

Her brain was humming.

It was a cacophonous calamity of sound vibrating inside of her.

A hum.

The knowledge seemed infinite.

Malaya did not ask for it and did not want it.

Her brain felt like it was going to explode.

She lifted her hands to her head.

She screamed.

Everyone turned.

Or everyone was already looking at her.

She could not tell which.

The child was walking toward her.

Their voice came through the hum and vibration.

It was crystalline clear.

“I have given you a special gift so that you may understand.”

“What is it?” She heard herself say.

“It is the knowledge of what your purpose is. It is the knowledge of what all of this has been for.”

**End of Movement Three**

## Fourth Movement

Huston was dead.

It was the thought that Feld woke up with every morning for seven months and fourteen days. There was not a moment when he did not remember. He made it a point to bring Huston with him in every activity and in every moment of stillness. He spoke to Huston often in the middle of the night when sleep did not come easily.

They virtually ran the distance between Candland Mountain and the town called Fairview and burst into the closest building. They were exhausted and malnourished kids that had travelled an unknown and improbable distance. People were welcoming and kind and gave them food and places to stay and, more than anything, family. An **older man and his girlfriend** took Huston and Feld in and cared for them. They each had their own bedroom, like in Hillston, and they started going to school again as soon as Huston's foot healed.

Fairview was similar to Hillston except that everyone was nicer. Feld always felt like there was a gloom hanging over their hometown but this place didn't have that. This place didn't feel like the people were stuck in it. People were choosing to live here. What happened to the man on the hill in Hillston would never happen here. Could never happen here.

Feld grew up.

Fairview was undisturbed by the conflicts and they only heard bits and pieces from the outside world. He never could quite figure out what it was all about. Towns like Fairview, people like Huston and Feld were just collateral damage.

After Huston turned twenty and had been working for awhile carving stone from the nearby range and turning it into building materials, the two of them moved into a house together. They rarely spent time apart. Feld knew that Huston still felt guilty for everything, for not being able to protect him after the bombs dropped and the soldiers came. Huston would always make sure Feld had everything he needed and everything he wanted. He was a good big brother.

Eventually it made Feld crazy. They were always together and Huston was always so protective. If Feld wanted to explore the area with friends, Huston would always offer to go with them or insist that he be home by dark. It was like having an overprotective mother.

Feld moved out to a place with one of his friends, **Cedrik**, when he was eighteen years, six months, and thirty days old. It was good timing, he thought. Huston had been seeing a girl, **Lily**, for almost five years at that point. She spent the night often. She was only twenty-one years old but they seemed to match. Feld told Huston that she could move in and he could move with Cedrik and everything would be easy.

It was not.

“Aren’t you happy here,” Huston was fuming.

“Living with you? No! Are you?” Feld fired back.

“I’m just doing my best, Feld. I’m trying to be a good brother. I’m sorry if it’s not good enough for you.!”

“It isn’t about that, Huston, and you know it. We don’t need to live together. The town isn’t that big. You and Lily can live together. We can see each other all the time. I can live with Cedrik. It’s the best for everyone.”

“But--”

“I don’t need to be taken care of. And I’m not asking for permission. I already did it. We have the place.”

Feld watched his brother deflate and tried to look angry even though his heart was hurting. He knew it would be okay eventually. But it took longer than he thought.

Huston did not talk to Feld for four months and three days after he moved out even though they were living one block from each other. Huston would avoid eye contact at the store and would stay silent when Lily made it a point to approach Feld with a hug and a greeting. The silence was broken on a Monday morning before sunrise with a furious knocking on the window of Feld’s room. He jumped up to see his brother standing outside sweating with glee.

He opened the window.

“Hi, Huston.”

“Lily is pregnant!” The words burst from Huston.

“Oh...” Feld was happy but did not know how to react. His hesitation caught Huston.

“Um. Sorry. We just found out and I thought you would be excited but--”

“No! I am excited. Just surprised. I’m sorry.”

And they were hugging and they were crying and they told Cedrik and they all went over to Huston’s house and talked and forgot about everything. It was different then, Feld knew, because Huston needed him. Now they needed each other.

It was the trend in Fairview for people to just have **one name**. No one quite knew what started it, but it was understood that it was more about leaving the past behind and starting new. Huston and Lily named the child Mena, Feld never quite knew why. She was born on March 23rd, 2264. rIn between his work as a teacher, and spending time with Cedrik, Feld loved

spending time with Mena and watching her grow up. When she was old enough, Feld told her the story of the man at the top of the hill and what he learned about the darker natures of people. He told her what the town elders told them whenever they asked about the man: that his type of love was not acceptable. He told Mena how it was wrong and how love was nobody's business.

When Lily was nine years, eleven months, and three days old and Feld told the story to her before bedtime, she gave him a curious look.

“Who do you love?”

He looked at her in silence.

Can I ask that?” She looked nervous. He responded quickly.

“Of course you can. We’re family. I love you and your dad and your mom and my mom and my sister wherever she is...”

“No, not that way. In the way like the man. Like love love.”

“No one. Not yet.”

“No one? Not even Cedrik?”

Feld laughed and then thought.

“Maybe Cedrik. I don’t know.”

“Cool.” She said and smiled.

Feld had not let himself consider that he was attracted to Cedrik before because he knew what Hillston was like and did not know if the rest of the world was different. He liked the way that Cedrik would maintain eye contact when he was listening and how he would make sure that things were safe before Feld tried them. He liked how Cedrik would always see the bright side of everything and how he would remind Feld that everyone was doing their best.

He wanted to talk to Cedrik about it but he did not know how and so he put it off. He wanted to talk to Huston about it but he did not know how and so he put it off.

People started dying quickly on the morning of January 17th, 2275. First it was muscle pain and then the flu. Then they started throwing up. Then they stopped eating and had a hard time swallowing. Then the swelling and some of them got bumps. And then they died. All of them.

When Huston and Feld arrived in Fairview there were two-hundred and fifty-two people. After the Gene Event, only forty-three remained, most with darker skin. Feld was only one of two with lighter. He was lucky. Mena was lucky. Cedrik was lucky. He knew and reminded himself he was lucky every morning when he got out of bed and looked out of the window at the spot where he buried his brother and whenever he looked up at the night sky and wondered if his sister was alive.

He was lucky.

Huston and Lily were not lucky.

Alder watched as Isabella ran toward Kinth

knuckles clenched

screaming in guttural tones.

She closed the distance quickly

but

right before she made contact

fists held high

she stopped.

It was not a magical stop

nothing seemed to prevent her

she just held herself back.

She looked into the eyes of Kinth

and they were both crying.

Kinth was full of regret

Alder could tell as much from his wails of apology.

Isabella was shaking

tears running down her cheeks

knuckles white.

Nightmare spoke

a choir of angels.

“I mean it when I say anything you want. There is no death here. The opportunity is yours to do with Abioye what you please. That is the name of the person standing in front of you, the person that took everything from you in cold blood.”

Kinth tried to respond

but only shallow breaths and half-formed words emerged.

So

many

possibilities.

So  
many  
ways  
to hurt  
this man.

Knives  
and guns  
bare hands.

She saw it  
all  
in her head  
playing  
on repeat.

Alder was certain that Isabella  
would explode  
but she did not.

As time ticked by  
in silence  
and stillness

Isabella contained herself.

Alder was rapt.

He did know know  
if he could do the same  
in her position.

If the elder that killed him  
was in that room  
he would take every opportunity  
to rip him limb from limb.

Alder looked around instinctively  
and did not find the man.

Adrian was still cowering behind him  
more confused than ever  
and Malaya had her eyes closed  
not shielding  
but thinking  
hard  
about something.

What  
could be more  
important  
than  
avenging

family.

To make

a coward

suffer

for his sins.

“There is no life after this. No heaven or hell. No fundamental keeping of the books. This is the end. You are forgotten and you cease, Isabella. This is all that it was heading toward. This. You can do whatever you want.”

Then

she

turned

and looked

at them

at the capricious child

that wanted to play

and she remembered what she fought for.

Isabella remembered all of the violence

and danger of the world

that she left and how she was fighting to bring it together.

She remembered the anger of the faces of people that looked at her like she was something

less than human.

Something more like dirt.

And she looked into the eyes of the man that killed her. And she saw sadness and she saw regret and she saw that he was, he must have been, a victim of circumstance. And maybe that was not the truth. Perhaps this person standing in front of her was a stone cold killer.

But it did not matter.

Nightmare was what was wrong with her world. Nightmare and Imagination both. Isabella saw the bloodlust in Nightmare's eyes and she recognized it. She recognized it from those that preached xenophobia and malice toward others.

“No.”

It was a whisper that emerged from Isabella.

It was certain

and decisive

and calm.

Unflinching.

Alder watched her turn her gaze toward

Nightmare

who

for the first time

looked surprised

and elated.

“I want to see what happens.”

“Ok.”

It was a simple response  
in a voice devoid of affectation.

And Nightmare turned to Malaya  
and walked toward her.

“What about you?”

Fa Lin opened her eyes and tilted her head sideways.

She looked around at the room and saw that eyes were on her.

She composed her body to a stance more befitting someone of her stature.

She looked knowingly at the child.

She was still piecing things together.

The knowledge given to her was vast and personal.

The mind of the entity known as Imagination was plotting.

What she knew was this:

Imagination had been plotting since the year 2016.

Her plan was not about this world, her world, at all.

Imagination wanted control of the minds of the living.

She created a way to influence them.

She created a way to maneuver the world of the living just so.

To give herself more power.

As her influence grew in that world her power would grow in this world.

She aligned herself with Nightmare tactically.

Nightmare was the only one powerful enough to stop her.

Was.

What Fa Lin could not figure out was why this impacted her.

The child Nightmare was watching her expectantly.

This was part of the game for Nightmare.

The child liked watching the wheels spin.

Nightmare was bored.

Confident in their place here and unconcerned about repercussions.

Imagination was not the same.

Fa Lin knew the careful intricacies of her planning now.

It was leading here.

But why?

Nightmare had pointed to her and to Alder.

She knew that Imagination saw Alder as key to all of this.

She had carefully crafted his path on this plane.

She had carefully crafted all of their paths on this plane.

At least until this point.

She had influenced the mind of the man that killed Isabella.

And they stood together now.

She had influenced the mind of the man that killed Alder and Adrian.

And here they were.

And then it clicked for Fa Lin.

Her path was not her own.

She recalled her moment of uncertainty.

She recalled the moment she had the thought that would lead to her suicide.

And Fa Lin knew that it was not her own.

It was designed for her to die.

So that she could arrive here.

So that she could meet Alder.

So that she could be given the duty of watching Nightmare.

So that she would follow him in.

So that she would end up right here.

Imagination had planned it.

Fa Lin looked up.

Nightmare was smiling.

“She didn’t know I would do this.”

The voice was gruff and aroused.

Proud.

“But it’s delicious isn’t it. I’ve seen your life. So much control.”

But was it ever really hers?

Fa Lin ran through her decisions.

She ran through the decisions of her family.

Which ones were theirs?

Was the dynasty just some tactic to get Alder to this point?

Alder was no one.

What made him so important and Fa Lin some prop?

She looked at Alder and felt rage growing inside of her.

She was itchy all of the sudden, sweaty with anger.

The child clapped excitedly and growled through gritted teeth.

It was sexual for them.

Orgasmic.

Heavy exhalations.

Fa Lin stared at Alder.

Time passed.

She did not know how much.

Fa Lin heard their voice again.

It was apathetic.

“I just wanted to see it. Delicious.”

Nightmare turned

to Alder

abruptly.

There was

finality

in the stare.

Alder waited impatiently

frustrated.

Everything he wanted  
was sitting behind him  
and didn't know it.

He would do anything to get a single knowing moment with Adrian.

“One surprise already. Isabella, curious. Fa Lin, predictable but tasty. You, Alder, the apple of Imagination, you are the real meat of this meal. You don't really care too much about this Book business. You did it for Isabella and for revenge. No moral high ground.”

She was circling Alder  
a predator.

“I do not know what happens if the Book is destroyed, but my guess is that this place starts over. Square one with human dreams at the moment the Book is gone.”

A snap echoed out.

“That means no more me and no more Imagination but it also must mean no more you and no more Adrian, right? So I have a deal to make with you, Alder. Forget the Book. I'll give Adrian his memory back and the two of you can enjoy each other's company for the rest of the time you have left. Of course, that is why Imagination worked the system to get you here to me. So you could stay. But what difference does it make? Everyone gets what they want.”

Alder looked around at the others  
and he knew his choice immediately.

He knew he would choose Adrian.

Nothing

else

mattered.

The others

could see it in his eyes.

Isabella furrowed her brow.

Malaya scowled.

“Or go. And he will never remember.”

Alder did not

feel

like he owed

anyone here

anything.

He saved Isabella.

He did not ask Kinth to come.

Malaya was a passing acquaintance.

They worked together

for convenience

nothing more.

Alder

opened

his mouth

to give

his answer

but

Adrian spoke first.

From the ground behind him.

“Do I get to say something?”

Nightmare was silent

watching

eyes narrowed in engagement.

Alder turned.

“Look. I don’t know anything. Which it seems like is the point, right?”

Alder smiled and nodded.

Witty and charming

even without the memory.

Funny the things that stick.

“And it seems like you and I knew each other. Very well.”

Alder nodded.

“I’ll just say that this thing, this whole thing about the book, seems important. All these people care about it a lot. It sounds like we’re all dead. We had our time and it’s over. I don’t know what kind of person I was or am or whatever, but this version of me feels like the other version of me wouldn’t want you to be selfish. No offense.”

Alder laughed

and then he cried

because Adrian was right.

“The book.” Alder said

and he looked at Adrian

and hoped he would not change his mind.

Nightmare floated to the throne

and sat.

“Wow,” they said.

“The best part is that I get to watch Imagination as it happens. And I don’t even know what it is.”

A wave of their hand.

We keep the Book in a glade, protected on all sides from trees. The trees are an aesthetic choice, of course, as the nature of the Book makes it inaccessible to all but a select few: Joy, Nightmare, and myself. Only the most powerful and the Keeper. It is kept on a pedestal that has the appearance of gold a seat behind it is where I most often reside. A river runs around the outside of the glade, an addition I dug out and created myself. I like the sound.

I watched as Alder, Adrian, Isabella, Abioye, and Fa Lin appeared in an unceremonious clump. They looked confused as they got their bearings. Their sidelong glances told me they assumed this place would be more regal.

“Hello,” I said simply, “I have been expecting you.”

I moved my golden robes aside and stood, stepping around the Book to place myself between it and them. I reached my hand out to shake, a custom I expected they would follow.

They did.

It was Isabella that shook my hand first, then Alder and Adrian, Fa Lin, and Abioye shyly shook last. The formalities were uncomfortable. They knew why they had come and I imagine that I was both less of a challenge and more polite than they were intending. So we stood in silence for a time equivalent of sixteen hours and forty-three minutes. A time that felt like several minutes to us.

Finally, I spoke again.

“You have come to destroy the book, but I fear that is impossible.”

“Why?” The question came from Isabella. Her voice was softer than I expected.

It is an odd sensation to read about beings on the page and then see them materialize in front of your eyes. It is discordant. As I took them in, I found slight misunderstandings I had made in analysing the book, small incongruities. Alder, for instance, had a skin shade that was just slightly lighter than I had imagined, and Fa Lin, although clearly one hundred and fifty-five centimeters, seemed shorter than I had thought in the midst of the rest of the group.

I was lost in thought considering these things when Adrian spoke up.

“Hello?”

I shook my head and cleared my throat.

“Yes. Of course. My apologies. The Book of Dreams is the center of this plane. It is the record of all things. It cannot be destroyed as that would mean that this plane would be destroyed which would mean humans...you...could not dream any longer.”

“Yeah,” Adrian said, “but do you know that for sure?”

And I did not. I do not. And I relayed as such.

Isabella stepped toward me.

“Imagination is out of control. She has perverted everything this place is supposed to be. If you’ve read that book then you know.”

“I know nothing of Imagination’s activities, only the repercussions. The Book does not record those who are of this place.”

Fa Lin stepped forward next to Isabella. She did not make eye contact with me but instead looked over my right shoulder as she spoke.

“This book is your duty, is it not?”

I nodded.

“Your duty has been perverted. You owe it to whoever created you to step aside.” Her voice was quiet but strong.

These moments were not in the Book and I did not anticipate being convinced. I was created to protect the Book at all costs but it had never occurred to me that the destruction of the Book would be the only way to protect what it stood for.

“No one may read the Book but I,” I said as I placed my hand on its cover.

Alder stepped forward.

“We don’t want to read it. We just want to destroy it.”

“Wait,” Adrian stepped in to join the rest closer, “do you have powers or something? What can you do to stop us? There are five of us and only one of you.”

“We aren’t going to attack him,” Alder said and I believed him. I believed that they would stay here, in this glade, until they convinced me they were correct.

In the end, I just stepped away and turned my back. I did not want to see it. They did it by ripping the pages out and into tiny little pieces. There was an was in turning around and seeing

tiny bits of paper scattered about the deep green of the grass. They were thorough. Every page torn out and ripped to shreds. By the time I turned around they were already gone, expunged from existence. Beyond the trees I could see the aberrations disappearing one by one with the landscape following soon after like a wave of nonexistence. The nothing looks different than I imagined. Not like darkness or light. It just looks like absence, like universal static.

There was a notebook that fell from Alder. The oddity in which I currently write. I hope that some of this survives. For whatever comes next.

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