

1

He's at work today, well his body is there. His mind continually wanders around. Every time he's forced to snap back to his boring reality, he drags himself further into his fantasies. Between fatigue of less than optimal sleep and the boredom of his repetitious actions at work, his eyes gaze further and further away from the here and now.

Am I...?

A question he cannot bring himself to finish much less answer without some break in composure. He's never been one to hide his emotions well, in fact, the few times he had cried out of privacy, that were well called for given the circumstances, were embarrassing enough.

It's almost fi- what does it really matter? I have nothing waiting for me.

He quells that thought with the reassurance that a dab or two will ease his nerves, although secretly knowing it only treats the symptoms of a larger beast.

His robotic greetings and scanning items feels so mundane. They only last a minute or two, but to him they last for hours. Finally, five o'clock rolls around and he leaves. A silent, unblinking drive home yields no results for the evening's plans. With a clunk the little honda climbs the steep drive and parks.

He lights a cigarette. The flavor and tartness punches him in the throat. *Remember when they tasted fine? Not like the poison they are?* He just closes his eyes and takes another draw as he lets the door swing shut.

He pauses to return the gaze the wisps of clouds give him and makes another of his own. He plops up on the trunk and lays back on the window. A familiar feeling accompanies a song pushing it's way in his ears. *Hello, it's me... or seeing anything as much as I do you... it's important to me, that you know you are free.* He shakes it off and puts out the embers.

Once inside, shoes and work shirt off, he checks his phone for news. *Turd sandwich is still up in the polls. No surprise.* His dog greets him fervently. He makes a sandwich. While he eats he pulls a small rig from under the coffee table and the plastic canister full of wax. He scoops out a chunk about the size of two grains of rice, then doubles it instead. Chick, chick, fhurr. The wax melts and boils, sending smoke flying off like a firework, only to be pulled back into his lungs.

"Hey, it's me... yeah, I quit. I just can't do it anymore." He sets his phone back on the table and leans into the couch. The cheese and ham in his dinner begin to taste better than when he made it, and soon enough it's gone except for the crumbs left by the crunchy toast. Standing to brush himself off, he ends up walking to the bathroom. He gives the mirror a 'just another day' look, that looks more helpless than controlled. Luckily the toilet faces away from his reflection,

not would be a real curse. *I don't care about sitting to take a leeeaaaak, if I don't have to watch myself do it.* By the time he's finished, he can't remember what he was doing prior, so he gazes into the mirror again. Dull blue eyes stare back at him. His hand shuts off the light, cutting him off. He goes back to the couch and turns on the tv. He selects the current show he's dived into and sprawls out to watch. A couple of episodes later, he decides he can't get into it today. Once silence envelopes the house again, he stares around the room, just like at work. Nothing really catches his interest.

He wonders if lesser creatures, like dogs, can feel boredom the same way he can. *No, dogs have such a limited memory for everyday things. It's more likely all this dog knows anymore is that I'm her owner.* The thought of playing god comes vaguely in and out. Dogs are entirely complacent the way they are until their master teaches them otherwise. *Until the master changes the frame.*

Seven thirty. His mood turns, down. His shoulders relax and slump. Thoughts seem to hang in the untainted air. His eyes close again.

I'm not happy. Now the tears held back earlier come. They're hot on his cheeks. *Can't remember the last time I truly was. Sure, there was that fling... last year? Has it been that long?* He thinks of all the things he's done in that time. *Work to live; live to work. Wake, work, smoke, sleep, wash, rinse, repeat. Anything else just costs money, which is really just hours from my life.*

A scent, fabric softener, sparks a memory. Another girl, filled with happiness and love. She had a subtle way of letting things unfurl between them. In fact, the first time she slept at his home, he relinquished his heated bed and slept on the couch. Little did he know, she would have rather had him wrapped around her. Too little, too late as the story goes: she decided it was, literally, the **idea** of him she loved. *So she faded away, just like everything else.*

"Hello, it's me." He opens his eyes, *I never want to make you change for me* hopefully expecting to find something new to coast him out of this hole he's dug again. Brrv. His eyes lock on the blinking blue light at the top of his phone. Reluctantly, his arm moves to pick it up. *Just another app notification or something.*

This time it was Ray. After some trouble getting it unlocked and the message opened, he was disappointed again to find all Ray had said was some platonic love for his new wax. He should have known, that's all Ray ever has to update. If it's not that, it's some squawk about unattainable materialistic dreams, or conflicting ideologies against such things.

He looks back at the rig. *Might have just peaked an hour ago...* He grumbles a little, then pulls out another dab of the same size as before. At least letting some emotion show makes him feel better for a while. He nearly lit his shirt on fire lighting the torch, but chick, fhurr, anyway. In and out, just like always. After catching his breath from a lungful, he stands to step outside. He has

to laugh a little at his stumbling to the door. No matter how hard he tries he still makes a clamour closing it, not that it matters when you live alone. It's cold out, but he detests the scent of cigarette smoke. He smirks at the irony of it as he lights one more. Time is slowed. Thoughts enter and leave his mind like leaves floating down a lazy stream.

That makes four for today... I think. His smirk fades back into an indifferent line. Tobacco always heightens the high, but they become too harsh too quickly. He paces back and forth in the drive, still in the stumbling nature. He takes a drag, thinking about the realities in the shows he watched recently. He yearns for the love between the characters, romantic or otherwise, the adventure, and most of all an ending worth being content over. He's unsure if his own ending will be any good. A few more puffs later, and it's becoming a chore to hold his head up, or even pay close attention. Being able to forget feelings has always been a blessing for his highs.

Humans can only perceive about a tenth of all light. Only that in our visible spectrum of color. He surveyed the surroundings absently. It's just as likely that entities live outside our perception as not. Another thought purveyed his mind, ringing gently.

...they fear the human's creativity. All they can do is disillusion us to our own reality.

He extinguishes the stoag, and heads back inside.

Fear creativity? The silence inside still carried on. The idea a true evil exists and influences the earth sends a chill through his heart. He wonders briefly if this is the only fate humans will know.

Things seem to pulse and shift as he stands staring, hand still on the knob. He relaxes and his hands fall to his sides. He takes automatic steps to the faucet and fills a glass. The water flowing down his throat feels foreign, cold and dizzying. He pursues the cabinets and fridge, but again, nothing takes his interest. Soon, he's walking upstairs.

He undresses and lays down under warm bedding. *Being awake takes more effort than sleeping this stoned.* He lays on his back, like a chalk outline. He relaxes immediately, and his feet and hands begin to numb from stillness.

The only noise is his slow steady breathing. He lays still, eyes closed again. The image of his room slowly aparates, feeling like his eyes aren't shut. Under closed lids, a silver rope slowly descends from the imagined ceiling of his room. His heart beats harder as his mind reaches for it, oddly dangling within reach. He can no longer hear his breath, only the rhythmic beat of his life. Everything else seems dim, the rope is certainly to what he should pay attention.

He feels his right arm reach out for it.

The thudding in his chest sounds higher, almost to his neck.

He takes hold.

An intense feeling of bursting through some mental barrier shocks him into awareness. He'd felt it before, psychedelics do the same thing as they kick in. He realizes he's holding onto the rope, floating above his bed, as if it carried him up. He stands beside his bed.

But he's still in his bed, laying on his back, eyes fluttering under his eyelids. The beating from his core morphs into a heavy vibration.

Where...? Then the rope sends another impulse. Calling him with a dreamlike urgency. He takes it again, not noticing he had floated up to it. Hand over hand it guides him up.

"Wait, what's this?" A soft voice. The rope disappears, and he falls to the floor. The voice gasps loudly. He opens his eyes to see a girl peering over him. He's not in his home. In fact, he doesn't know where he is.

"Who.. who are you?" her voice prods without fear, only curiosity. *I.. I don't know.* His bewilderment is enough to tell her without words. Then she sees a silver thread emanating from him. Her eyes widen, and her voice peaks with excitement.

"How are you doing that!" She points to the thread. She glides around him, barely toeing the floor, following the thread up to a window and outside.

"How are **you** doing **that!**" He responds, as incredulously as she had. She pokes her head back through the window, then her whole body. She's wearing a frilly red dress with matching stockings and shoes. But they don't look like his clothes, not for the obvious; there is almost no stitching, like it was just made that way.

"Oh this?" She gives a delicate kick. "I just reverse the gravity under my feet." She smiles, a little too proud of herself. "I told you, now you tell me! What is this? What do you do with it?" Her shoulder length blonde hair perks up, too, raising the ends into a curl. She acts as if she already knows him.

"This is one vivid dream.." He mumbles to himself. "I.. I don't know. I just laid down for sleep and then there was this rope, and now I'm here!" *Maybe I've lost my mind for real.* He sits up. "What time is it?"

"Midday! I was just about to go into town. Actually, I had just gotten dressed when you showed up." She giggles nervously, clearly glad he had that cigarette after all.

"No, like is it eleven thirty? Noon?" He trails off after seeing the confusion on her face. "Okay, um. Where am I?"

More confusion at this, he guessed this was her what-are-you-talking-about voice. "Aurdia." *What... what. Wait.* He looked down. Only in his boxers. "Well.. here put this on, I can't have you

tagging along in **that.**" White trousers and an odd shirt and shroud. "Sorry, they're a little girly." She grinned apologetically. The pants were too tight, and the blouse too big.

A frown clouded her face. She hummed a tune, one he'd never heard, and traced her thin fingers along his arms, down his chest, around the waist, and down the legs. As she nearly danced around him, the same stitchless fabric she wore fitted itself to him. His mouth was still hanging open when she finished humming and turned for the door.

"Hey, wait!" He called after her, feeling the softness of these clothes, like flower petals, as he hurried to catch up. As he went through the door, he froze. *Shit I can't move. What's happening now?* His vision is whitening. He couldn't make out what she said last.

His eyes fly open, heart, yes, beating away steadily, unlike the purr from before, pounding away. Grey-blue light floods his room from a moonlit night. With some effort, he manages to sit upright. *My body is so stiff... how long was I asleep?* Midday. That's what the girl said. *Have I been asleep for two days?* He tries to throw his legs over the side, but they protest much worse than his back and arms. He gives up and flops back down. Without noticing, he succumbs to the warm softness of his bed. He dreamt of a jaguar prancing in a field of tiger lilies and rose petals.

"No, no.. not the good forks..." dribbles from his lips, still half asleep. He hardly recognizes he's awake, and drifts in and out of consciousness several more times. Eventually, his eyes open all the way, peering through the morning sun for the time. *A quarter to seven?* He climbs out of bed, strips the boxers and starts a shower.

I must have been really gone last night. He's still stumbling around, like gravity isn't pulling as hard today and he hasn't adjusted. The water drones on in static while he empties his colon into the toilet. He lets his eyes droop, and shut. *That girl.* He steps into the tub and turns down the heat. *Everything was so vivid.* Shampoo, scrub face, wash body. He towels off, waking up a little more.

He tries to remember any other dreams that come close to it, but he hasn't dreamt in so long the idea that's what they're like overrides his suspicions. While the coffee percolates its earthy aroma, he goes outside. Leaning against the ashtray *heheh, asstray* is a half finished smoke. *But I remembered smoking it in that dream...* He decides to finish it, and pulls out his phone. Nothing new, just the same dribble about the election status, thanksgiving posts.

As he's flipping through the daily propaganda, it pulls up another screen. It's Ray calling him. He answers and remains silent while connecting headphones.

"You've reached an ASSassin, who'dya need porking?" He says, once he's ready.

"Everybody would be nice."

"Alright, that'll be one fuckload monies." They exchange a half awake chuckle. The first few lines of any good phone call comes with a fair joke. Their chortling dies off and Ray starts.

“We started taking Douche signs last night, and guess who had one?” Ray pauses, as if he would be able to guess at all. The answer comes and goes. It doesn't really matter, so he just listens politely to his friend rambling on.

“So I had one hell of a dream last night.” Ray never really cares about his virtual experiences, always been one to live optimistically in the real life. “It felt so real..” He goes on to explain some more details, losing his audience a little more with every word.

“What was that article you sent yesterday?” Ray cuts in. His voice has a hurtful twitter to it.

“All the leaks?” He counters defensively.

“So pedophile satanists rule the world, right?” The twitter evolves into chortling laughter.

“Dude, paper trails don't lie. Right from the hors-”

“Whatever, man.” His laughter dies off. “I bet you're a douche supporter, too?”

“Yep.” He replies apathetically. *As if it means anything.* Then Ray, and someone else apparently listening, explodes with hyena's laughter, and they hang up.

Fucking cocksuckers. He doesn't close his phone right away. He opens the browser and searches for dream imagery and meaning. *I'll do this alone then.* He finds typical things like color symbolism (the same for any color connotations), common themes and feelings found in dreams (also self explanatory), but finally stumbles across an article about lucidity and astral dreaming.

He reads some basic lucid dreaming techniques he already knew, though he hasn't been doing that evening ritual lately. Having total control over a lucid dream feels closer, but most things mentioned are the dreamers control. *Also not particularly helpful.* Further down, the part about projection is mostly meditation driven, a skill he doesn't use much and therefore isn't very good at. *You may encounter other beings on the astral plane, and perhaps other humans.* That's the only helpful piece of advice in the whole article, and it doesn't say much more; merely that they should be treated like strangers in our plane.

A weak pain rises in his stomach. With a groan, he pockets his phone and goes to refill his coffee, and hopes to find something to eat while he's there. Morning glazed eyes shift over everything, absently denying much of what's left. After probably five minutes at idle, he plops some bread in the toaster and reaches for strawberry jelly. He stops, hand hovering over the jar, looking at the eggs. After another second of weighing whether to make them or not, he takes both. Soon enough, they're out of the pan and smothered with cheese and salsa. A heavy yawn is produced before chowing down.

Humans are so fickle; too little sleep and we're useless, too much and we'd rather we'd never have woken up. Doggo eyes the plate, then to him, then back to the plate. He fills her dish and slips in a bite of egg. “You're just **so** neglected,” he whines playfully as she munches along. “You act like I never feed you!” He pets her head with a good scratch to top it off.

He presses his forehead against the window facing the back yard. Breath from his nose fogs up in two teardrop shapes before dissipating. "What to do, what to do.." Another good period of thoughtless idle passes. He opens his phone again, first looking through messages (nothing), then social media (nothing), and finally stops at the home screen (nothing). It's only nine in the morning and the sensation of a long, lonely day ahead sucks the life out of him.

He returns to the couch. The mischievous boredom urges him to have a smoke, and he can't find any excuse not to, not that he tried that hard. He exhales another piney white cloud. *Wakey wakey eggs annnd bakey.* This prompts a chuckle. *Can't believe I thought it, annnd laughed at it.* The smile hangs dumbly on his face. *What was I going to do now..?* The small click of metal on glass pulls him back. He'd never remembered to set it down, and on top, he's still grinning deftly at his forgotten joke. He corrects himself, and flicks on the tv.

It's on the news. *At least the morning banter isn't as irritating as the evening. All it is anymore is part of the whole to fit the narrative.* Still, he watches the last hour of the chatter. None of it feels real, though, maybe from being high or maybe just from the ridiculousness. *Funny how cartoons hold more meaning than 'real' events.*

He thinks for a moment about finding another job. *The scheduled broadcast will be postponed indefinitely.* He figures he has probably a week before crunchtime; one day off won't kill him.

After killing the tv with an odd hesitation, he goes outside again. It's a bright, still day. He just stands at the opening of the garage door, but he doesn't know for how long since his phone is elsewhere. He just gazes out at the same features as yesterday and prior. His car that he's not particularly proud of, the slight bend up the road over a hill, and finally finishing the cycle at the several memorabilia boxes shelved behind him.

Everytime he looks back, without even opening the boxes, he feels the pang of regret and disappointment of days past. How he's wasted his life so far, or how emotions blur the future, weighs on him. *Even the good times are saddening because of this anxiety.* Lighting another smoke, he briefly wonders what his neighbors must think of him. The only time he sees any of them is as they're leaving to go out and he never has a reason to talk. *All they see is someone standing outside, nothing more.*

A few hours pass, with a few cigarettes and globs of wax. *Hours literally doing nothing. Nothing productive anyway.* With this, he drags his fluid thoughts back inside.

They only drift further away. *Not that infinity is a physical concept; it's as possible as impossible, as tangible as imaginary. That brings us to timelines. If the earth was a mystical place, like in fairy tales, what changed us into what we 'are'?*

"The fall of man, recognized around the world in religions, describes a dramatic decrease in our abilities... so" *it could be that she is in a timeline where the fall never occurred.*

This thread of truth hangs in him. The idea humans are a damned race because of a demon doesn't really seem right. *Afterall, if there are no gods, there cannot be devils to counter them. Then...* He stops his thoughts, feeling the pounding in his chest again. Its rhythm feels oddly familiar. He listens to the beat. Suddenly, a sense of importance surrounds him brought by his heart.

He lies down, closes his eyes, and sees a dim blue light extending from above. The vibrations from his chest come easier this time. It reminds him of slipping on ice, but there is no fear of falling; it propels him out of his body. Floating up toward the light, he sees the silver thread. It's connected to both of him, like a global positioning system to the way back. The thread pulses, and his eyes are drawn upward.

The rope! I can go back! He grabs it, followed by the membrane, then he's watching his house begin to melt away. He sees dark figures through the blur. They appear to be surrounding the grey-blue world melting off, like layers in a jawbreaker. He feels a dissidence, foreboding but not directed at him. This goes on for minutes, or maybe hours, he's not sure. The evil sensation soon dries up and falls off from his perception. A brief flash of iridescent light erases the feeling from memory.

2

The brightness deafens revealing a town below. His grip on the rope tightens, and he searches for the silver thread. *There, flying off into the clouds like before.* During the calm descent, the clouds seem to wisp at him, much more playfully than in his drive. As he sinks lower in the blue, untainted sky, he sees a marketplace of houses and awnings. The people flow around the streets taking no notice of the man above.

About ten feet from the ground, the rope dissipates again, sending him flailing. He lands hard on his feet, causing him to roll forward on his stomach. The pain in his knees and hands is real. *This can't be a dream. It never was.* He thinks picking gravel from his palms. He stands and continues to brush himself off. He walks through a break in buildings, taking in the normal seeming brick, that's a light red, and the white cloth over tables out front.

The stands sell everything from foods and medicinal herbs to odd looking animals, apparently for pets. One, a rabbit-like thing with bright purple eyes, glides and floats around its cage. *Must be the gravity thing that girl did.*

He glances back and finds his silver thread. It seems to be attracting some attention, but all he can tell the confused onlookers is "it's my way home". The vagueness of the response only causes more curiosity, but they understand, disappointedly, that he doesn't really know either.

He continues walking through the streets, laid with stone pavers and tall lamps presumably powered by some magic. He knows this isn't entirely true, and that there's more to it than superpowers. His eyes find an apple like fruit on a counter. *Best to not assume American money is good here..* Instead, he fishes around his pockets. Coins. *Maybe?* He offers them to the vendor.

"Will you take this?" He extends a quarter and a few dimes. "It's silver and copper." The farmer inspects the bits of metal, then cups them in both hands. He pulls his hands apart with his thumb and forefinger, like he's tying a knot. Two small balls of metal, one silver and one copper, fall to the table.

"A'write, her'yu go." The farmer hands over a sack with a dozen fruits. He isn't as shocked by this skill as he supposed he should be. However his expression betrays him.

"Erm," He starts. "Keep the rest, I only wanted one.." *Guess I was wrong, forty-five cents is worth more in metal here.* The man curiously hands him a single apple.

"Strange, on'ernt'ya?" He doesn't really understand this drawl, but thanks are given anyway. Up ahead, there's a square lined with tall oaks. Naturally, he takes a seat under one, munching contently on the apple. *I wonder... that girl seemed to be expecting me, but not everyone else I've seen today.* He looks at the short shadows around his tree. *Midday. Curiouser and curiouser.* He takes a deep breath. The air feels crisp and clear. The scent of roses blows in from somewhere.

"You!" He jumps, startled by this shout. "I've been looking everywhere for you!" Blonde hair and red dress appear from around his side. It's her. She looms over him, expecting an answer.

"What? Looking? You-"

"Yes! You can't just drop in and leave, how rude."

"I don't even-"

"I was looking forward to-" She stops herself, realizing what he was trying to say. "You didn't know..?" They return an awkward silence.

The pause is broken by a bubbling giggle rising up from her piecing things together. A smile creeps from his lips, and soon he's infected with her laugh.

"Well, let's go. Unless, you're going to ditch me again." A silent curl on her lips bets he won't.

"There's something I need to tell you." With a flourish, she's turned and walking out of the town.

Once out of sight down a hill, she starts again.

"I'm Mereina, by the way." There's trees ahead, the start of a grove around the path. "What's your name?"

What's a name, but a legacy? He remembers the grey depression he'd left at the door, and the boxes in his garage. She looks at him patiently, awaiting his answer. He'd been so engrossed

with being in Aurdia again, to know that it's real, that he was beside himself until now. *But how real is Earth, compared to this reality? As tangible as imaginary...*

"I.. don't know anymore. I'm clearly not who I thought I was."

He bends a branch out of way. The thickening forest is becoming more lush. Berry brambles and some of those gravity rabbits from the market who pick away at them line their path.

"Oh... I know all this must be a lot like I-" She stops herself again, and her hair straightens.

"You know you give yourself away when you do that," he says playfully. "You act like you knew this would happen."

"Okay, alright, I'll talk! Enough interrogation." She tries to hide her nervousness with that jest and a short 'ha', but not well enough. The forestry opens into a clearing with a much larger tree at the center. It stands fifteen feet across and, though he tries, he can not see how tall through the leaves. He's not sure how he missed it as they walked. The air is filled with warmth and calm, pervading to his core.

"I had... an intuition a new aura was coming soon, but it didn't feel like any other I've seen." She picks her words carefully. "So I came here." Mereina looks around, and grins, still nervous and hair still flat and dull. "Do you know why?"

"It's a Yggdrasil tree, isn't it? The tree of life?" She seems genuinely surprised, and her hair turns slightly wavier. *She can't help but let her aura play with her hair as her emotions change.* It's not an extreme change, but enough to notice her relaxing.

"Yeah! I've never heard it called Yggdrasil though..."

I came here to meditate. The aura from this tree showed me why yours was weird." Mereina pauses, leaving room for questions, but he just waves her to go on. "Your aura is stifled, so you can't interact with your world like I can." Her mouth quivers open and closed as if to say more, but remains silent.

His mouth had dropped open while she spoke. *I have aura like she does? Does that mean I can...?* She hurried on, seeing his shock.

"But! I'm supposed to help you, I think. I mean, why else would I be warned?" She smiles hopefully, a few tufts flipping up. He closes his mouth. The warmth of the sight flows through him. *It's not just her laughter that's infectious.* This thought brings a real smile to him.

"So you'll do it?" Her hair and complexion rises with her happy tone. He just smiles deeper, and before he could look up, the familiar cloth of her clothes was against his neck that smells oddly of roses.

“How do you get your clothes to smell like that?” He says through muffled hair. She pulls away, inquisitively.

“What do you mean?”

“Your dress smells just like flower petals?”

“Uh, yeah, duh!” she chuckles. “I found a whole field of them the other day,” she says, arms spread wide, twirling around her imaginary field. “and I liked it so much I made my dress out of rose flowers!”

“That’s amazing! But it doesn’t make any sense.” He scratches his head, like someone trying to understand a nonnative language.

“Sure it does!” *Great, she’s gloating.* “All I had to do was transmute more of the petals so that they were thicker, obviously bigger, and smelled as sweet as the real thing!” He stops scratching.

“Is that how you hemmed my clothes? How do I do that??” But when he turned for answers, Mereina had already begun skipping merrily back to town.

He takes a deep breath, feeling rejuvenated. A whirl of sensations and memories seem to be emanating from the tree, even the horrid, depressing ones. Except he doesn’t feel remorseful; he thinks this tree, symbolic of this world, loves him unconditionally as a member of it’s own life. A familiar hope and joy floods his heart. *It’s been so long... since I’ve wanted to be known.* He feels a beat, like how a fish would feel someone tapping on their glass tank, similar to the membrane and the silver rope. As he runs after her, he can’t help smiling, because this is the most alive he’s been for years.

As they walk along, through the town Mereina calls Basilik, she pelts him with questions.

“But if you can’t transmute, how do you make or get anything?” *At least she’s foreign to my reality, too.*

“We pretty much buy everything we need from other people who can manufacture things.”

“You don’t make anything for yourself?”

“Erh.. no.” It takes him by surprise, hearing the question and answer out loud. Mereina cheers at a group of kids playing something similar to soccer.

“Your people must be awfully compassionate if you have to rely on each other just to survive!” She sounds unsure, like she just wants to hear what he’ll say.

Her smile fades once she sees his answer never formed. “Or maybe not?” *Such an easy going girl. Even her worry sounds chirpy.* “We don’t need anyone but ourselves to survive. Most of us can make clothes like my dress, and once you can do that, making a house is child’s play. It just takes time, and patience.”

“Child’s play?!”

“That’s what I said~! Well, it was for me. I was making little stone things when I was old enough to walk!”

They trot on, taking glances at his thread, Mereina feeding his endless curiosity. Similar to the schooling he received, she was taught the history of her world, philosophy, and perhaps most important: the energy that flows from the universe into all living things.

“Really I’m just an average girl. I live with my family, you should meet them, my parents taught me a lot of what I know.” She gives a delicate smile. “They’re so much better than me.”

Soon the forestry is cut off by rolling hills topped with grass. Just like the sanctuary, the air is fresh, almost purifying in cleanliness. He takes a deep breath, letting it out with a quiver.

“The air is pristine, it’s so much cleaner!” He turns his head for her response, but she wasn’t there. The wind blows grass in it’s signature manner.

“Huh?”

Something brushes his head. He looks up, but only finds blue sky and clouds. More air pets his face. He turns around, still seeing nothing. There’s a shiver down his neck. He whips around. *Something’s up and I’m not in on it. I guess it makes sense she can cloak, too.* He feels a crossbreeze on his face, and an ever soft snicker trail off following a part in the grass. *She’s playing with me.* He gives a confused look, pretending to not have noticed. *3..2..1.. Pounce. Kill, pussycat, kill. Fucking life is strange.*

Just as expected, he snags his antagonist. Except, it’s not Mereina. It’s a bright red haired girl in twin tails, with the same green eyes Mereina has. The pair exchange confused and horrified looks. The real bubbly laughter erupts from the opposite side of the road. Then the other girl jumps up.

“I told you he couldn’t tell the difference!” Mereina laughs.

“Shut up, Merryleap! You didn’t get pounced!” says the other girl.

“Merryleap?!” This time it’s his laughter. “How did you get that nickname?”

“When she was younger, she would only leap up and gravwalk everywhere!”

“Vivian!” Her hair strands out like with static electricity. *I wonder what she looks like raging mad?* He chuckles a little more, hoping he never finds out. “At least I didn’t get stuck up a tree because I couldn’t walk down!” Either Vivian’s hair doesn’t reflect her emotions, or she’s just better at hiding them.

“It really wasn’t fair, messing with him like this.” Mereina continues. “We have a huge advantage since he can’t doubletalk! I even told you he won’t know anything!”

“I didn’t see you objecting while we were doing it!”

“**You** taunted him, not me!”

“Getting awfully defensive, aren’t you?” Vivian throws a curious smirk at her and back at him. “What? I- You- He’s no- How dare you turn this around on me?” Her hair falls flat. Vivian tosses a gust, frizzing the whole mess. “Ugh! What’s your angle!”
“I’m your sister: it’s a special deal I worked out.” With that she raises her nose, showing her superiority. “Have you thought ahead about this? It is a once in a lifetime event, after all.”

“Thought about what?” He interjects, detecting it is him.
“Well...” She starts. “I’m going to try to open his aura..?” *She doesn’t have a plan.*
“Oh yeah? How are you going to do that, without killing him of course?” He stifles a laugh, prompting a dirty glance from both of them for poor timing.
“I.. I was **hoping** someone at home would have an idea...” She replies with hair as flat as a trumpet on a cold morning.

“Y’know what I think you should do?” She pauses, apparently for effect. “First, he needs more of a name than foreigner.” She cocks her head back to him. “Sorry, I get this is quite an ordeal, but it’s simply courtesy. So, Honeybee, I’ll pick for you.”
“Honeybee? Really? You don’t think that’s a little affectionate?” *Not a strong defense, but I’m not in a great position to argue... well anything.*
“There are millions of bees, **beeing** the sweetest kind isn’t so bad, Honey!” Mereina’s teasing now directed at him, and his cheeks practically glowing, he stays quiet. Meanwhile, she laughs out her mediocre pun, hair curling all the way.

“Second, I don’t think shocking is a great idea. I mean, it could work, but it’s more likely that he’ll just die. Slow and steady is your only option here.” Vivian sounds annoyed and impatient with it, but she sighs in indifference. “Which leads us to the last thing. Don’t let him die, or kill him by accident. The council would have your head.” *Great, more terminology I don’t know.*
By this time, after walking for a time, they had begun to come upon a stone wall. Clearly, seeing the expansive golden-green plains stretching far to the horizon, this is Mereina and Vivian’s home. The quaint gate is guarded by black marble panthers on either side. He slows to let them walk ahead as he takes in the sight. *Black, and yellow, and...red.* He stops entirely, eyes wide. A memory flashes through him: a dream with tiger lilies and roses. He’s paralyzed.

I was warned too. But... why so late? Wait, no. I had that dream after meeting her the first time.
Slowly, as the pieces start falling apart, his mind is bricking itself in. *I don’t- How could- Wha-* It’s overwhelming. He falls to his knees. *It’s not just deja-vu. That’s child’s play.* A shock crumples him further. He loses himself. For a while, there’s no sound. Pure silence. A single word echoes heavily in the abstract blur.

Alone...

Alone...

Alone...

Alo-

Instantly, he snaps back. He feels the breeze on his face, the grass tickling his hands, and a tender touch on his cheek. “***, are you okay?” He looks up. His mother is kneeling beside him, with a pained expression, one that only a mother can pull when her child is suffering.

“Don’t worry, you’re just running a fever.” She sounds so close. Her voice fills him with a calm compassion. “*Your people must be really compassi-*” He’s lying on a couch in his childhood home. Everything is exactly as he remembers: The deer head hanging in the corner, the fireplace roaring, and snow falling outside on the country road. He’s crying now. “Mom, I’m.. I’m sorry. I’m just so scared, I don’t know what’s happening.” He barely makes his words audible under the intense stress.

A long silence ensues.

“***, it’s okay, there’s no need to cry.” She coos to him, sitting on the edge of the couch and petting his head lovingly. “I just need you to wake up now. Your friends are worried. You’ll always be my honeybee.” She hugs him.

Always.

He gasps the fresh air. Eyes flutter open. There’s blond hair in his face. *It was all in my head...* “All in my head...” He whispers, feeling half alive. His tears start falling again. “It was so real, I don’t- I can’t- I-”

Vivian says nothing, merely surveying her sister. Mereina holds him tighter, whispering things like, “I know, it’s okay. I know.”

“What was that.” He asks flatly, after regaining himself.

Mereina frantically looks to Vivian for help, but even she’s at a loss.

“What... what was it? We looked back and you were on the ground saying alone over and over...”

“I had a dream after we first met, about a panther playing a field of tiger lilies and roses.”

Vivian’s eyes spark.

“A dream?”

“That’s all it was though.”

“Then what?” She pushes forward.

“Then all I could hear was that word. Then... it was my mother. I was sick as a kid and she was.. She was...” His eyes water up again.

“Go on.”

“She told me my friends were worried about me.. Everything was so vivid, I-”

“Let’s get **Honeybee** to the house, alright?” Mereina actually seems worried, but not worried enough to quit her banter, unlike Vivian whose curiosity feels more selfish than empathetic.

Everything seems normal. Or as normal as anything has been lately. He stands up, Mereina follows. Once through the gate, the plains continue. A little off in the distance he can see their house.

By his standards, it's quite lavish: beds of rainbow flowers along the walk, striking red wood peeking through the black brick walls, and all three floors. *Back home, this would cost a small fortune. But I'm not home, am I?* He concludes that all houses of manipulators like Mereina's family must be as handsome as theirs, if it's as easy to build as she says. In the center of the approaching courtyard, a grey stone well bathes in the sun. He catches a glimpse of a modest lake around the side accompanied by a grove of willow-like trees. There aren't any visible windows, just patterns of brick where he thinks they should be. Right of the courtyard, a circle of trees so tightly knit that if they were in his reality, they'd strangle each other. It's a ways off, but he barely spies the odd animals within.

He'd been gazing all around, he hadn't noticed Mereina gliding back and forth and three dimensional spirals, until she landed beside him, taking up a gait.

"It's wonderful, isn't it~?" Her hair's curled back up. "The flowers were my idea. Bisnth wanted the animal sanctuary, he's our brother, and the house is all our father's work!"

"It is quite inviting." He replies. *If it were in my reality, it'd be intimidating, rather than inviting.* Mereina beams.

The inside is just as phenomenal as the exterior. Just as he thought, there are windows hidden in the patterned brick, but they don't just let light flood in. The windows disperse the brightness all along the halls, effectively lighting the whole house. Because of this, everything is lit evenly, no shadows or hard to see spots. The next thing that takes his attention is the ambiance. Sounds of a piano delicately tapping away at it's strings doesn't just echo: the soft sounds of fluttering notes surrounds him, almost penetrating him. Manipulated photographs shine on the walls, as if they were windows to the past. He sees pictures of Mereina and Vivian playing in the fields as children. They're ridiculously life-like, so much more detailed than any high definition image he had seen.

"Are you hungry? That apple must have worn off by now~" Mereina takes him down a set of stairs into what he assumes is a kitchen. There's another set of stairs in a corner with a vase and grape vine sign over top. *Wine cellar?* Despite much of their home being simple and stately, this room is as lavish as any celebrities kitchen he can think of. *Well, without fashionable stainless and a contemporary island.* He was already beaming upon seeing another wonderful room, so his humor goes unnoticed.

"Can't you just manipulate food out of thin air?"

"Of course not! Gourmet and medical manipulation are some of the hardest to master, and easiest to make mistakes." She turns for a door opposite the cellar. "You have snow rooms in your world right?" She asks as she pulls her hair into an effortless question mark.

“Snow room..?” She throws open the room, and just like she said, it’s filled with snow and ice. It’s not a very deep room, maybe the size of a walk in closet, but the chill can be felt from several yards away.

“Yes, indeed! Keeps food frozen and fresh”

“Oh! Like a freezer! Except you manipulated the temp down, right?”

“See, you’re not completely hopeless~! You’re pretty smart... for a **honeybee**.” Mereina punctuates herself with a careful wink. Then, she glides over, taking his whole arm in her hug, and pulls him inside.

“Just pick anything! I’m a great cook I swear~!”

“But I thought you said-”

“Cooking and manipulating food are different~”

Most of the animal parts are hanging by Mereina’s gravitational skills, but some larger beasts lay cleaned in the white fluff.

“How exactly is this fresh?” *Not that I doubt the method, but nothing’s covered!*

“Well, Bisnth is good with animals and life. My teacher does more with gravity and sound, and his is a doctor.” She frowns, realizing she hadn’t really answered the question. “He’s got some way to purify the air in here, don’t ask me how he does it...”

After a moment of decision, he picks up a rabbit-like carcass.

“Oh, those are my favorite~!” She snatches it, and prances out. . “Alright! Ready?” She’s holding the meat out and lets go. *Of course it just hangs there. I should have expected that.* Then Mereina douses it with seasoning, while catching the extra and tossing it back on her roast. When he looks up at her, she’s pretending to sit in a formal chair, floating of course, and twirling one hand to spice, and the other under her chin.

She can’t hold a serious face for long though, and soon the same laughter forms.

“I get it, you’re amazing, you don’t have to show off.” He replies, cheeks perked up as well.

Then, she balled her dainty fingers into a fist, and the rabbit was evenly coated.

“You said you were hungry, and you do enjoy watching us manipulate because you can’t yet!”

Why did she say it like that?

“Why wouldn’t I? I’ve never dreamed of anything like it.” Now she glides it into the oven. *Heh, no need for baking pans if you can do that.*

“Oh, and watch this!” Mereina snaps, and pulls a fully cooked rabbit from the oven. “Can you guess how I did it?” She did everything with less than a hand... particularly fingers.

“You focused energy into your fingertips and then-” He’s less confident now. “-created a ripple in space-time for about half an hour?”

“Uh, yeah. How did you know that?” She whispers in play-suspense. “And what’s half an hour?”

“It’s a measure of time? Like twenty-four hours is a whole day?” He’s whispering back, playing along.

“We calculated it, a few hundred earth years ago.” He’s talking normally again. “How do you know what time of day it is?” She hums thoughtfully, while putting together about a half dozen modest pot pies.

“Hmm, I don’t know. I don’t think anyone really does; nature is just a part of us.” She gives another snap, and pulls the side dishes out. *It’s only been five minutes in here and she’s almost done.* “Do you want cake?” Her green eyes shine, expecting a yes answer. She gets it, and sets off around the kitchen tossing ingredients, not much different in appearance than his own, into the mass floating along with her. Another snap, and she’s finished. “Don’t worry, we have cutlery~!”

He can’t remember anything he had eaten before that tasted half as good. The pot pies are vegetable filled, which again he felt like he should have expected, but this was a minor surprise for his day. The rabbit he picked out from the snow room has no gamey taste and no tough spots. And he’s almost positive there’s coke in the cake, at the rate he’s eating his part. Mereina just giggles to herself and eats away with small bites as if to savor them. After they’ve eaten their fill, Mereina puts bubbles around the remaining meal. She explains the bubbles are a vacuum, something she learned from Bisnth. “I’m not very good at this, so I’ll probably have to have him redo them later..”

As if on cue, the door opens and another blonde woman comes to greet them. She’s bigger than Mereina, but looks just as old. Somehow, he knows she is actually older, though. Six freckles under her eyes accentuate their looks.

“Oh, you must be Honey! Is she trying to fatten you up now?” The woman gives a familiar bubbly giggle. “We are delighted to have you with us, I’m the mother of this one.” She ruffles Mereina’s hair with a smirk. Mereina flattens her hair out and fluffs it back to it’s usual liveliness. “Honey is going to stick to me, isn’t it?” *How disappointed can I really be though?... Bee though, ugh.*

“As long as you keep up your anonymity~!” She replies with a motherly kind of Mereina’s signature flair. “I am Lavion, for example!” She turns her attention to her daughter again, and their banter continues.

Lavion talks with her offspring with a calm, unfearing tone: one that many parents in his world would kill for. It’s hard to be misunderstood when in actuality, their auras dictate much of what they’re saying. He doesn’t know what it’s like to have a form of telepathy, but he thinks they don’t use it for everyday conversation. *My thoughts are kindred and half formed most times, they just get pieced together as I think it. There must be classes they’ve taken to paint a mental picture so clearly for each other.*

While he was zoning out on his last thought, Lavion had gone down into the cellar with the plaque.

“Would I be wrong to assume you have plain wine, or will I be amazed again?” Mereina just laughs at his assumption.

“Yes we have fruit wine! But there’s also special brews for, you guessed it!” She gives a kick and rises in the air. “Aura!”

Before he has a chance to think about it, Lavion comes back, floating three glasses and a plain red bottle in front of her. She hands off two glasses, and takes hers and the bottle. She apologizes that she has work to do and bids farewell. He doesn’t notice anything unusual about his drink, and he stifles a grin at the possibility of the switcharoo.

He’s mulling over the intricate flavor, when a worrying thought sprouts: *How do I know I can trust them?* As his thought ends, Mereina coughs and a hurt expression takes over. *Shit, did she... hear that?*

“Please, feel at home here.” She assures. “You heard Vivian, if anything happens to you we’ll all be in trouble!” She smiles and pats his shoulder. “C’mon, Dad has been so patient.” Mereina leads him back upstairs in her usual excited fashion, yet carefully tipping her glass back to her mouth between sentences.

They walk through the halls into a lounge room. Here, too, calming tones emanate from the walls. A fireplace sits in the middle and, expectedly, arm chairs and sofas stately relax enjoying its heat.

“Piano?” *Did they know I’d recognize it, or does it exist here, too?*

“Hm? Oh, yes.” Vivian answers. “Believe it or not, you’re not the first traveler to come to our world, but you are the first we’ve ever met! A long time ago, a man came and brought this wonderful music with him. It spread around quickly, because, well, it’s very enjoyable.”

“The second time he came he said he couldn’t hear his sweet music anymore. His host helped while he was here... but he had to go and lost it again.”

“Mereina! You’re home.” A youthful man with dark hair, yet a baritone voice entered. “Did you- Ah, I see you found him again.” The man gives him a genuine smile. Upon a closer look, Honey sees stray white hairs peeking from under the black.

“Yes! I found him lazing off in town. This is my father, Ferran.” *Father? He can’t be much older than Mereina or Vivian!* “We’re calling him Honeybee for now, until he remembers his name.” She tosses a knowing smirk his way. Ferran sits next to him, extending a hand awkwardly. They exchange an equally awkward, too limp, too tight shake.

“You don’t have to go far out of your way, things are odd enough.” He says apologetically. To his comfort, Ferran just laughs it off.

“Good. You humans have such weird customs. And that silver thread! That’s strange even by our standards!” He looks to Mereina, still talking to him. “I know I look young to have a family, but, as you may have guessed, manipulators don’t age if we don’t want to.” *Great, just when I thought I understood.*

“How.. how old are you all then?” His eyes reflect the sensory betrayal.

“Oh, time doesn’t translate well in your case. I guess you could say I’m...” He scratches his bare cheek in contemplation. “Let’s just say I’d be the oldest living thing on Earth if I were there.” *Of all the mind fucks, this tops them all. What is the oldest thing on Earth, anyway?* He feels inferior to be in their presence, and much more welcomed and adored.

“I just had my 480th not too long ago.” Vivian answers.

“366!” Mereina chimes, knowing it won’t surprise him after the first two. *It seems the girls are more in touch with Earth time..*

“Do manipulators die? That sounds pretty god-like by human standards..”

“Sure everyone dies eventually! We just don’t die from old age.” Vivian crosses her legs with some pomp. “Most of us die off from disease or by accident. Which reminds me, father, Honey here had.. an episode at the gate.”

The three explain what happened, even though he could have done it on his own. Ferran’s eyes dart around, looking at whoever adding the next piece. Between Mereina and Vivian talking over each other, and him, the gears in Ferran’s head turn. When they come to his flashback, he visibly realizes what had happened.

“Sounds like you had a reciprocate. It happens to us sometimes, mostly as children. I believe it’s similar to your ‘common cold’.” He says common cold like a scientist would a newfound theory.

“When aura isn’t allowed out, it surges back into its host, oftentimes overloading the senses and triggering visions. It’s not dangerous, but if you can’t control your aura, it can feel very traumatizing. If you’ve been around these two using their abilities, then your energy recognized the familiarity and wanted out.”

“So if it’s a commonality... does that mean it’ll happen at any time without notice?” He throws his worried looks around at everyone present.

“Nope~! We’re- er, I’m going to show you how to control yourself!” Mereina gives him a delightful wink. “C’mon! Let’s go out to the lake!” She leaps up and drags him out the room, leaving their glasses. “We’ll be back later~!” Ferran wished them luck, and smiles warmly at Honey’s protests at being drug around so easily.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mereina’s hair perk up like that before.” He says curiously.

“You know, **they’re** going to catch on soon, father.”

“You think so?” He replies, still thinking about his daughter’s hair.

“Every visitor that’s come lately hasn’t come back. They only make two trips.” Vivian lowers her voice, darkly.

Ferran sighs and strokes his chin. “His people can’t prevail like we did, none of the travelers have after all.” He pauses weighing possibilities. “But, Honey is stronger than the others. He just doesn’t know it.”

The back side of their house nearly butts up to the waterfront. After a short trip down the banking, Mereina picks up a pole leaning against a willow. She stops, standing proudly and pointing the stick out like a saber.

“The first thing you need to know is what your aura feels like and how to recognize it!” She takes a deep breath, as if she was going to dive in. As she lets it out, slow and precise, her hair flips at the ends and she rises off the ground. *A foot...a yard...! I guess it's nothing new, but she usually walks up.* She opens her eyes to reveal golden cores. She effortlessly pivots to face the lake. He can't hear or see it, but he feels her draw another breath.

She raises the pole. With a quick snap down and a heavy exhale, the water throws itself to either side. Some fish flop helplessly in the dry path down the middle. The water then furls up as she inhales for the last time. Finally, her display of raw power ends with an exhale that sends the water crashing back together and her feet lightly to the ground.

“My teacher specializes in gravity based manipulation, which is quite strong and versatile. Others use light, or water, or even lightning, and my teacher taught me a little about light and sound, too. That's how Vivian and I talked while we walked through the fields, and how we hid from you.” She hands him the pole. “But right now, all you have to do is feel your spirit.” He nods, still in awe at sheer force this dainty girl has.

Mereina instructs him to sit at the edge of the lake. Legs crossed, back straight, and hands gently grasping the pole across his lap. *Her strength comes from her breath.* So he begins calming his own.

“How did you know to breathe like that?” She whispers as she sits beside him.

“Well, I saw you do it, and it's a basic part of meditation, right?” *If I meditated to get here, what happens if I feel the vibrations now?*

“Oh! I guess it is the same process~ So just think of an orange lotus flower with six petals, okay?”

But he's already focused on it. The quietness of this little valley reveals a symphony of natural sounds: the sloshing of water against the banks, flapping and chirping of birds in the rustling trees, and his heart, tick-tocking away as relaxed as ever. The absence of white noise in the background gives the impression that this little piece of the world is just for him, like there's nothing to fear right here. Nothing about himself, or his life. Every breath he takes quiets a shouting worry in his mind.

Then, he feels a light warmth around his body. The more relaxed he is, the hotter it feels. He draws deeper breaths. Soon it feels more like he's wearing a snowsuit, but it never gets too hot. Something brushes his head. He doesn't notice it at first, until it's in his face. *Leaves?* He panics and his eyes flash open. Before he knows it, he's landing on his back. *Was I levitating?*

Apparently Mereina couldn't contain her laughter any longer and let it out. "You did it~! That's it! How does it feel?" Her hair looks almost like glass tubes because it's so curled. He's at a loss for a moment, but describes it, leaving out just how anxious he has been. "That's great! Now hold on to that image, it'll help you to flex your aura!"

"Wait, didn't you hand me that pole?" He glances around the ground, but finds nothing. Mereina just pockets another laugh and points up. It's still hanging in the air. "Oh, that's right, hands are the best outlet, so it charged it enough to hang where I was!" His eyes gaze up at it with a new ferocity and hope. *I thought she was kidding! I didn't take her seriously when she said she could help. This changes everything.*

He contemplates how, if at all, these skills will transfer if he ever leaves her. Then, another odd thought: what if he never leaves? He pictures his dog and her half full dish in a daydream. The rest of his home unfurls, room by empty room, finishing with the garage, full of his old boxes.

"Now that you can do that *mu-.. sss ow oo er~!*" She wasn't talking, but he could hear some whisper in his mind. The only way he knew it was her was the musical tilde punctuating her notes inside his mind.

"I didn't catch *thaa, b- I thnn- I know wha- yoo meant.*" It felt strained, but by the end he could hear the thought as clear as speech. Mereina's face lights up with every finished syllable. *This doesn't really feel the same as telekinesis... but I'm not Carrie, so I guess I wouldn't know.*

"Ah~! You're doing so well already!" The golden locks atop her head wave and set in a style that would take hours to perfect if she had to use a brush and spray. While he knows she's just as normal as anyone else he'd met, aside from a few things, this bright contrast from his dreary life feels almost oppressively unreal. *Like every girl before...No. This is unlike anything I've known. She's unlike anyone I've ever met.* He blushes out of contemplation

"C'mon!" Her trill makes him jump, compared to the astral whispers of doubletalk. "I'll take you to meet Bisnth, too!" She rises, and pulls him up with her. *"Except you're not allowed to walk there."* When she let's go, he drops, almost landing back on the grass. *I just reverse the gravity under my feet.* He gives a little kick, maintaining height and takes off for the ring in long bounds. At first, he thinks of it like jumping on a trampoline, flexing mostly to propel himself forward and up.

Of course, Mereina strolls alongside him, making his technique childish once again. *"Having trouble?"* She airs through her girlish laugh. He just gives a grunt of disdain. *She always takes the steps despite of her ability. Well, I'm not going to.* It's not easy to emulate two vectors at once, but he focuses on his feet and propels himself forward without moving. It's strange to basically relearn walking, just like riding a bike, but after a few yards he's attracted her attention again. She frowns and tries to copy the motion, but she only manages to fall forward on her feet.

“Not allowed to walk, huh?” He floats, hand stately placed in his pocket. She rises again and brushes herself off. “If you’re so good, *why can’t yoo doo both?*” Her hair frizzes at the ends, in faux anger.

“I don’t know how **you** can. Guess you’re *stronger* than me...” She glances around and grins. “*But I’m just better.*” Silently and effortlessly, she turns translucent.

“*Definitely not fair, Mereina.*” He tries to sound hurt, but his flushed face betrays his intentions. Nervous fear answers him, not her sweet voice. *Ever playful, that’s sure.* He scans his surroundings, of course finding nothing to give her away. He glides forward, leaning this way and that still searching for a draft in the breeze or depression in the grass.

If this is the game she wants to play. Think, how did she do it? He looks at his hands. Maybe with light? If gravity runs with breathing... wait, there’s no parallel between that and light... As he thought harder, he began to see the delicate hands indecisively quivering above his own. But when he focused his eyes on their owner, they faded back into space.

Then, Mereina knocks him over and perches on his waist. “Who’s unfair again?” She gleams, holding his shoulders down.

“Still you.” He replies cheerfully. His red cheeks perk up at her, as he’s helplessly pinned.

Suddenly, it all feels too familiar, like many others who had taken advantage of him for his caring nature. That one, who said she didn’t know what she wanted out of their relationship, only to leave him for a girl. Or that one, who was so sexually driven she eventually tired of his sincerity. Or **that** one, whom he let down so many times and never gave up on him until he called it over. Or-

“*All’s fair in love and war, you know.*” With those simple words, a song began in his mind with a crackle of vinyl records.

♪Let’s just think, about it Honey

Let’s just fall in love-♪

And without another thought, the virgin-like worries of what was unfolding became marginal. Even the experienced woes collapse under the feather-like weight of an eager hearted, bubbly Mereina that he feels like he already knows.

“*I guess you’re right.*” He smiles back. They pause a moment, eyes still locked. “Bisnth, right?” “Hu- Oh!” She jumps to her feet. “Of course. That was a pretty song, by the way~ Y’wanna see the gravvits?” *Gravvits, rabbits.* He rises, and hurries along.

“Say,” Another thought. “Can manipulators shape shift?”

“Not really, but you can change your appearance if you know how to rewrite light.” She shrugs.

“But I don’t know enough about light manipulation to do that, I can just cloak. Maybe-”

A bird in the outer edges of the ring chirped a jesting “Merryleap!” interrupting her. It flutters its little wings and takes flight. He was busy admiring the bright blue eyed pattern under its wings to see to whom it flew.

A man, presumably Bisnth and of much greater stature than his siblings, looks away from the even larger bear he was grooming. As they neared, the dark brown fur covering his head, around his jaw, and spurting out from under his shirt became clearer. While his bulky limbs and more masculine detailing, unlike Ferran’s clean face, gives the impression of a distant and cold personality, the golden brown eyes resting below bushy brows softens Honey’s initial impression. Bisnth spoke in a level smooth voice.

“Sorry, I promise I didn’t teach them that.” The beast before him groans impatiently. He mumbles something to himself, and runs a great thumb along the bear’s cheek, much like Honey’s habit of petting his dog. *All to scale I guess.*

“I told you he was good with animals. So, this is our anonymous guest from our sister time~!” Mereina chimes, throwing her arms up in a grandiose gesture to Honey, now more shy than when meeting the others.

Bisnth gives a slightly confused look while doubletalking to Mereina, *“Sisters in time don’t have neat auras, but he does?”*

“Well we have been working on that..”

Bisnth waves him over. *“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”* Don’t worry, she won’t harm you. I’ve raised her from a cub, so Tia is quite the sweetheart.”

“Vivian and father didn’t seem to mind.”

“Mereina, why so flat?” Honey laughs, as Tia the bear romps him around with ease, unaware of the conversation they started. Never minding the answer, he continues. “How much smarter are your pets for comparison?” He asks, sounding a little winded, as Tia lays in his lap.

“We’ll finish later, Em. Well...” He pauses, scratching through his bearded chin. “They’re not really pets to me, since I can communicate pretty well with most of them.” He throws a hand over to the far end of the ring. “Except for the reptiles, but that’s a story for later.” He raises his eyes, remembering the original question. “Honestly, I’d wager some are as smart as you, they just don’t have the means to prove it as often as you do. Speaking of, it seems you’ve come quite far in your short time here. I must admit, I am impressed.”

“Do all visitors take to it this quickly?” He tries not to let this compliment go to his head.

“Um, see, most people- I mean most humans- well...” Mereina stops herself with a humph.

“No, visitors rarely inherit manipulation, or even an awareness of their aura is what she means.

Relax, you shouldn’t worry him with a mere suspicion.”

“Yeah, haha, I lost my words there.” She ruffles the back of her head with some real embarrassment. *I wonder...*

“Anyway, I suppose you’d like to know what I’m capable of, since Mereina’s shown you what she knows.” He says with slight frustration.

“She mentioned you’re good with life, biological things.” Tia gives a deep bark. “And she said your teacher is a doctor.”

“Right, so you understand that this isn’t for beginners, other worldly or not.” Bisnth looks between them and sighs. He places a hand on his own arm and burns a handprint, grimacing slightly.

“But you should know how to at least heal yourself and others in case you have to. Broken bones, burns, cuts, the method to heal is all the same, but it can be troublesome on others.” He closes his eyes and waves the same hand over the burn mark, erasing it as he goes. “All you have to do, and this goes for any degree of injury, is focus on the pain and direct your aura to it. The tricky part is knowing how your aura will affect it, so pay attention to the color: it must be whole green to heal completely.”

Honey isn’t sure how he intends to teach this to him, and before he’s quelled his anxiety, Bisnth cuts him across the bicep.

“Bisnth! The council-” Bisnth holds her away with a flick of his wrist.

“Forget them, you wanted me to teach him, didn’t you?” His frustration from before comes out again.

“Now, just like I said.” Blood was dripping off his fingers. Bisnth speaks quicker, seeing his pale face. “Close your eyes and see your aura. Turn it green, and force it into your wound.”

He sees a blue/green/teal color around his arm under his eyelids. *He said whole green..* He tries it anyway, despite Bisnth’s warning. His arm goes cold and tingly, how hydrogen peroxide would feel.

“Stop!” His hand is smacked away, and the cool feeling is replaced with an almost hot pressure.

“I told you **whole** green. It was teal, wasn’t it?”

Honey fumbles for an apology or any words.

Bisnth steps back after seeing his fear.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s not an easy thing to learn, much less teach...” He steps away apparently feeling more disappointed in himself rather than his pupil. Tia the bear follows him across the pasture, and Mereina lets him go.

“Good job, you broke Bisnth!” She laughs, as she’s seen it before. “Always self conscious about his abilities, and he knows he’s the best of the three of us~!” They start walking to the lake, because Mereina doesn’t know any animal linguistics. “Let’s leave him be for now.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon meditating and playing with their abilities. It wasn't long before she started splashing, forcing him to defend himself using manipulation. And it wasn't long after that that Mereina completely abandoned any more lessons today in lieu of her flirty playfulness.

After both had sufficiently tired themselves out, he lays back on the grass. She lays next to him, at first resting her hands in her lap, then she makes a walking motion with her fingers and his arm is quietly drug around her. He says nothing, just closes his eyes again. With no protest, Mereina wriggles snug against him, clinging to his arm. She buries her head in his shoulder, taking in all his still different scents. He cocks his head against hers, breathing in the sweet rose he'd smelt before.

"I don't want you to leave again..." She whispers. "I didn't expect to like you this much when I first saw you; you were quite the sight." A nervous giggle punctuates her thought, and fades into a concerned frown. "But if you leave again..." *Her hair straightened again. If there's ever a time to be clitché...* He does it. The instant his lips touch hers, he see's several snapshots. *She's mediating. Eating dinner. There's Vivian.* He hears Mereina's memories pour out, Vivian is telling her that he can't stay forever. *Now she's pacing her room, with her hair straight and dull. Wait, what's this?* As he thought it, she said it. *That's me! It's when I dropped in the first time!* Then the frame skips ahead, she's talking with a visibly older man. She seems worried, like in all the other scenes. *"Isn't there anything we can do?!"*

He pulls away from her. There's tears in her eyes. *What did she see...?* She lunges for him, holding him tighter than anyone has. After wiping her eyes, she speaks up.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you that would happen... and, well," She nearly breaks down again, letting her voice quiver. "I've been watching you for a while... ever since Lacey-"

"I... I was hoping I wouldn't have to talk about that..." He realizes what she could have seen, and yet, he doesn't mind that she's been playing guardian angel. *Everything. She knows everything.* "You worry too much about me, why am I so," here come his tears now "important to you? I don't matter to any-" Mereina interrupts his broken voice.

"Because! Because I've been waiting for you for so long, I always knew you longed for more than your world could offer, but...! You **have** to stay!" She's huffing and puffing through teary eyes again. Her voice is fading out. He can't hear her.

His vision is whitening out. *No, god damnit! Not now! TAKE ME BACK!* It's no use. He's being hurled back toward the grey-blue world he left. Except this time that deep, foreboding presence is the one pulling him back. He tried breathing, hoping that he could manipulate his way out of

this. *It's no good! I'm not strong enough to escape this grasp!* Now everything is darkening. Blackness surrounds him.

"I told you it's just some pitiful human." A voice drills itself into his head. "What makes you think you can give **us** orders, huh? You think you're undefeatable because you learned some parlor tri-

"Listen, human!" Another dark tone cuts off the first. He can feel its power from just this audiation. "We **cannot** allow you to continue. You are **not** permitted to travel across timelines. You are **our** property. Now go back to your meaningless existence."

Then he's thrown back to earth.

When he wakes again, his body is frozen. The best he can manage is to force his head to the side to read the clock on the wall. It's a struggle to keep his breathing under control, and he feels if he panics, the tightness in his chest will cause him to pass out. The clock reads four thirty, presumably in the evening. He can't find his dog, and he can't even croak to see if she's here. He does the only thing he can do in this state: stare at the ceiling and control his breath. *What was that? I felt it on the way out earlier...but it ignored me then. Could this be related to my aura?* "You're **our** property." A pang hits him in the chest, in his heart, like a needle forced its way through his ribcage. It stops his thoughts entirely.

"Mereina..."

3

"Why are you always looking at your hands?" His dad asks, setting down a box from the truck. It's cold, and winter's snow is beginning to melt.

"Huh?" The dirt and white dryness across his palms has his attention. The many thin lines fanning out and up his slim fingers tells the solemn story of a stressful life he feels he's hardly lived.

"They're just so dirty..." His excuse is met with speculative silence. He's still gazing down at them, like a thief in disbelief whose treasure was snatched out of them.

"I know things haven't been going perfectly well, and I just want you to know you're always welcome here." His dad speaks softly, perhaps even timidly. "Even though I don't show it... I love you, son."

The words just hang there, Honey's not sure how to respond.

"Thank you.."

Moving takes a lot out of any normal person, much more from one who wears his mental pressures freely, like a car with water balloon wheels. Aside from the physical strain, especially in the hands with cuts and pinches, he's once again entering a period of change in his life;

change that he should rejoice in. However, all it means is a greater expanse of solitude in the mess of boxes, not long ago packed, but ages of emotion passed regardless, that merely insist recollection of his darkest days and remind of the dreary ones that await him.

"I'm sorry to have to burden you again..." He says more thoughtfully after a time. His dad opens a beer can and hands him one as well.

"All you have to do is ask." His father replies in a tired, pained voice, and he takes a drink, instead of saying what he wants, like he has for many years. There's a hardness in his throat and a looseness in his sinuses as he thanks his father again, feeling it more superficial than he means.

They stand in the father's garage, sipping away without many more words. He half expects him to question about his job, or his dog. He fights back tears again while a sorrowful expression clouds his once bright eyes. He's aware that his own father surely sees the broken face beneath the neutral cover he wears. He takes a drink to quench that lump growing larger wherever his mind turns.

"Hello, it's me." He turns, almost expecting someone else to be standing behind them. *"I've thought about this for a long, long time."* His lips are mouthing "I want you to know you are free", even though it's not the next line of the song.

He mumbles about getting some sleep and trudges into the house. His dad's home is newer and nicer, he guesses; it's not his home, so he doesn't care. His house was delightful: always bright and cheery, wonderfully large and a park nearby. That's all he can remember about his previous residence however, and he's had trouble remembering other things, too. So it's been challenging to care about anything for so long, never knowing what's real and what he's dreamt or watched. He's caught himself, in real time, losing interest in the last few things that's kept him preoccupied, and the worst part is he can't figure out why.

"Five names I can hardly stand to hear,
Including yours and mine and one more chimp who isn't here."

They had worked together, once upon a time it felt. Her name was Lacey, although the name once as sweet as cotton candy now has a repulsive sound in his ears. Lacey was quite foxy, in every sense of the word: hair a flittering strawberry blond, eyes bright with mischief and curiosity, a slender body with bosom and buttocks to match, and a shy, curious personality that appealed to him the most. All in all, he wasn't interested in taking her, though he was tempted at every turn, because her foxiness did arouse his heart and loins. She came about like most others, an idle friendship ignited.

“Oh my god, Life is Strange is soo good! I can’t believe you’ve just played it!” He loved the involuntary way Lacey’s widened her eyes when excited.

“Yeah, I’m disappointed I didn’t until now! It’s so twisty and turny, but poor Kate though!” He was leaning over the counter at the grocery store. She greeted an upcoming customer, only politely half listening because he’d ranted about this before.

He technically wasn’t supposed to be helping her, his place was behind the desk not at the end of a register, but he knew Chanda wouldn’t mind on a slow Saturday afternoon.

They’d both be off soon, and he knew he’d have to say something before then, if that’s what he really wanted. It didn’t occur to him just yet how much he wanted her, he thoroughly enjoyed her playful and fresh company. It had been a while since his last lover fled him. Love was his drug, and the withdrawals were pure demonry, but for a time, he forgot the empty pain from the previous, and subconsciously longed for new companionship.

“So what are you doing after this?” Except it was her unique voice asking the question.

“Oh yknow, just gonna go home and stone, care to come with?” She took him by surprise, and her answer came without thinking.

“Sure.” She cooed back, clearly attempting to hide her eagerness. There was a tinge of pink in her otherwise white, almost pale, face and he had a deeper complimenting color on his own.

It was February, an appropriate month for budding romance, and the Friday before St. Valentine’s Day, which fell on a Wednesday this year, too. It was always warm this time of year, despite the season, and he thought it perfect weather to sit under the canopy of trees in his mother’s backyard and be a stoner of men.

“Stone a man and he will be high today. Teach a man to stone and he will stone others.” was the saying he’d adopted. At this time he was the heaviest smoker of his friends, so it wasn’t hard for him to rightly bake any guest he invited. Lacey was no exception. She had vomited, barely getting the trash to her in time.

“Are you okay to drive?” was the next question on everyone’s mind who had joined that night, but he was the one to ask. Lacey just shook her head no and gave a sick, tired sigh. “Come on, I’ll drive. Give me your keys.” He said in an uncontrollably loving tone.

“But my parents-”

“Nope c’mon.” He smiled, a common thing when she was around. “Ray, follow behind and wait out of sight.” He was a sneaky teenager then, and he knew how to keep his dealings secret.

He only drove her home that once. The next times, she didn’t refuse his offers to stay with him instead of the fuss. The first time she did, because he still wasn’t aware of what was unfurling in him, he showed her to his room and went to sleep on the couch downstairs. He still wonders sometimes, if he had seen the longing in her eyes as he said goodnight, or if he could have seen it in his, then things would have turned out differently.

It was wonderful. Once again he'd been raveled up in, perhaps, another kind of fantasy, but of course, just like the fantastic shows he drowns himself in, the final episode always comes, and sometimes they just fade without an immediate explanation.

"I don't know, I've been hung up on this girl for a long time now, and I guess I was just trying to fill her place with you..." She didn't want to talk about it, no, she would have had him rather let the idea wither away than explain herself any further. So she didn't.

There was that empty feeling again. It was like a tiny black hole in the center of his lungs that ate everything and left him weak and drained. *Why am I not allowed to be happy?* That was a common question. *What's so wrong with me...?* While in the middle of this, there was more information for his ears.

Two weeks of her seeming even worse for wear than he was getting suspicious, it was not just odd, and after the time, his spirit had recovered some. He didn't bother poking around the fox, even prodding other people was bittersweet. Until the day he was asked about her.

"She didn't tell you? Huh, weird, she rea-

"What was it?" He may have been better, but it wasn't worth hearing how-much-she anything.

"Rape." His informant kept his voice down. "I've been trying to get his name from her, but she's... stubborn." His heart pounded, the imagined scenario flashing through his mind's eye. Burning, stinging hatred filled him; a sharp notion began to form.

"Well," He started to reply, careful not to let this rage fork his tongue yet. "Shoot me a text whenever you do." With a nod, his informer was off.

Her assailant happened to be a delinquent, with several other off record instances. Honey made up some moral story for himself about a child who takes pies from their windowsill. The child had taken every pastry from every sill, until the last house; the house of the sheriff. He took his after dinner dessert, too, but the sheriff's wife caught him with sticky hands. Well, he's not sure whether or not it's a real story, but stealing a delicacy before it's ready is worthy of **inquisition**. In this case, however, it wasn't a couple of pies stolen from their owners. It wasn't really even the fact that she could have been his if this and if that. The thing that drove him over the edge, the final straw in his passive, carefree life, was that he knew the fox would now never be as sweet or coy ever again, and it was **his fault**. She would remember that quick, helpless event always.

And that rat fuck will just go on getting what he wants however he gets it. We always say we want to make a difference, well, today boys, we have an opportunity.

A group of four, including Honey and Ray, potato sacked the coward and brought him into the thick brambles of thorny wood. The last thing Honey remembers is the clunk of the dodge's door closing.

He wakes with a terrible clawing gasp, and it scares him. Another night of pitch black dreams. He wonders if he should quit smoking so heavily, and let his brain produce serotonin normally.

No, can't do that, he thinks in a sardonic tone *don't have the self control after all*. He scorns himself as he splashes water on his face to wake up. He doesn't know what time it is, he never does anymore, just that it's still daylight, maybe into early evening. He pauses to stare into his half dead eyes, bloodshot from a heavy sleep, and pupils contracted to horridly small sizes.

He stumbles into his dad's kitchen for a drink of water, eyes still not working quite right. He gulps down a glass full, refills, and stands there sipping away.

"Huh? The door?" He looks towards the garage door from his spot. Just then it opens, and his dad comes through.

"You haven't seen my tire gauge?" Honey only half hears him, but he makes out 'tire gauge'. He just shrugs back and follows him back out to look. "Well, cause I saw it somewhere when we were moving, but I haven't been able to find it at-" While he was explaining, Honey, still half dead and half asleep, walked over to a tool chest, opened one drawer and produced the gauge. His dad thanks him, and thanks their good luck, but Honey doesn't know how he did that, he certainly didn't know where it was, he just did it. He walks into the doorway and lights a cigarette.

That was odd... He thinks, taking his first draw. *And I could have sworn someone said to watch the door...* He starts pacing back and forth in the drive, puffing and blowing. *It wouldn't be the first of odd things lately, feels like I've forgotten something somewhere...* He fishes around in his pockets for his car keys, a commonly lost object. *Nope, and my wallet's still here, too...* His foot sunk deeper into the ground. He'd walked off track a ways, and he was standing on a small mound of dirt. He steps off carefully, examining the spot.

"*Oh yes, that you did alone.*" He shuttered, spun around, searching for whoever's voice he just heard. He looks back at the filled hole. *No, a... a grave.* His eyes were awake now, scared into working by that creepy, dreadful voice. "*If it helps, she hated you as she died.*" That wasn't the same voice; this one twittered mockingly. He couldn't speak, couldn't think. These aren't his thoughts, he's not thinking them. This realization scares him further and puts out his cigarette. He turns to go, then whispers, "I'm sorry..." over his shoulder, and hears the muffled sounds of snickering behind his ears.

This is how schizophrenia starts, isn't it? Denial on into insanity. He'd heard voices, not always his own, during heavier trips and even taller highs. They often gave him words of encouragement, "Cheer up, it's not all bad", or even as far as bouncing ideas around with him. He was never entirely sure if the personas were of his own imagination or truly other entities communicating to him through some changed vibrational patterns only real crack-ups believed. At any rate, they were far more benevolent than the cackling crackle cacophony of the dark humored miasma getting to him now.

He's hungry, but finds no interest in eating, thinking it an incredibly laborious task today. Instead he opens a can of beer, despite it being directly after waking. It's not enough to get ham-fisted drunk, but enough to draw his thoughts away from the mound of dirt he'd just left.

Everything from his house is piled up in the garage, only partially arranged and definitely not traversable. He gazes through the boxes, much like when they were on shelves in his own garage. *Someone?* An image of dull blue and grey flashed over him. Within a minute, enough time to let it slip from memory, a car pulls into the drive, and a man in a navy jumpsuit comes to the garage door.

"Hi, I'm here for the plumbing?" The man says, with the waiver of question if this is the person he should be greeting. *D-* and before he can think it, his father comes striding out the door, and shows the man in. *Hm, that's two times I've somehow known.*

Lucky guesses, intuitions, or something. Doubtful, he also knows. He wonders where a book of his had gotten to, with all the commotion of moving he isn't sure where anything is, and this would make a good trial run of this clairvoyance. His half dead gaze follows around a number of boxes, subconsciously denying them until it ceases. *A plain brown box, just like all the rest, but still...* He flips up the folded ears and there it was, packed half covered by a stack of composition notebooks.

He takes a hard drink, one that burns his nose with carbonation, in disbelief. Apparently those assholes behind his ears don't believe it either, because they've fallen silent as well. *What about it, fuckers, run out of cheap jokes so soon?* Silence, just as he'd expect if they were human, but they're not, and it unsettles him.

He takes his book, pocketing this piece of new knowledge. He opens its cover and starts on a story called "Everything's Eventual".

4

The door had swung closed, that's when she began watching. Three darkened figures, and one slightly lighter, come into view all eight hands in pockets. Someone pulls a bound and masked person, she wouldn't have known it male or female by the heavy sack over its head. It tripped and hit the ground with a moan, *like a scared animal*. The stockiest of the four groaned impatiently then dragged him along by the wrists, also tied together.

She didn't like this, no, she was stunned in anxiety. This vision was unlike her others, not like the vague happiness and wonder that she usually felt when she used her special trick.

They didn't bring any lights, *because they're familiar wi- justwatchdon'tanalyze*. They trudged through ankle deep vines and the black rabbit scraping behind. He began crying, painfully loud, and begging between yelps from thorns clawing deep in his face. The lighter figure stared straight ahead.

Just when she thought she couldn't watch anymore, the black rabbit was thrown into a clearing, only a few feet across. The third member spoke now, demanding that black rabbit admit to "his crimes against humanity". He ripped off the hood and decked him, she could see that it was a he now, across the jaw. When black rabbit cried, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she could see the blood coloring his teeth. She had a horrible feeling; she had never thought anything this awful could exist in the world, or worse: whatever black rabbit had done to deserve such punishment, assuming he deserved this at all. She had to snap herself back before the scene left her. They all had given a round of blows before the third spoke again, menacingly and softly, "Is that how she sounded?" There's a spat, but she couldn't see that closely to where it landed. "You're an even sicker fuck than we thought." He kicks him hard in his charlie-horse. The larger figure grunted and the third stepped back, almost ceremoniously. *Wait, one..two..three?* She didn't see where the fourth member went, which only worried her more. It gave her feelings of dark dealings that **needed** a watchman.

"What about Emma?" No answer, so he listed off four more names. "What? I thought you were some kind of smooth talker, yeah?" He picked him up by the collar and leaned him against a tree. Black rabbit flinched grossly when he set him. "Did you think no one else knew? You even talked up one or two before, too. Disgraceful." Black rabbit spits a cheekful of blood in his face and mutters something about disgrace that's cut off by the crack of his nose breaking as the figure's palm slams across his face.

Whatever high ground black rabbit thought he had vanished along with any pride he had left with the start of real flowing tears of pain and realization. Then the light figure stepped forward, hands still in his pockets. He tipped his head up, back toward the truck, and the other two left. Once they were gone, he finally spoke.

"We're all just humans, yknow, fragile creatures, too." He sounded cool and cold. He turned aside and flipped a straight razor from his pocket. "Once we're broken, there'll always be a tender spot, or a **scar**." He quickly and carelessly carved a trickling red "R" in black rabbit's forehead. He was screaming then, just in agony and fear like a cornered rabbit. He humphs. For a moment he turned his back to that crumbling thing against the tree, took in a deep and dark breath, letting it tremble, and returned. *He's..crying, too?* She was mortified and completely confused, but the white figure held her attention.

He whispered one last thing, "Better luck next time," and slit his throat quickly.

That was it, she couldn't take anymore, it was too raw, too painful. She knew she couldn't tell anyone about this, no one else knows she can look through time. She sat up on her bed. Her hair was pointing straight down, like icicles. "I have to see more...have to see how this progresses." She mumbled to an empty room, then fell back to her pillow and fell into a dreamless sleep.

"Everything's Eventual" isn't one of his favorites, not like *Carrie* or *Dreamcatcher*, and he isn't reading it very intently. It has a certain 'je ne sais quoi' about it; 'Eventual' is meant to mean rad, awesome, great, you name it. Though that barely makes it through to the main story, that's the

reason he decided to read it again. It's held his focus though, and before he can look up it's past seven, and he's sitting around the stacks of cans, tripled the time. The words on the pages are beginning to make him nauseous. He thinks he should have some water, or coffee, or maybe just back off the booze for tonight.

Those fucking voices are gone still. Then, panicky now: *What if they can hear me? What if they can see me?* Worst of all he thinks that the voices are just him, that there's nothing going on and he's slipped on his spilt marbles. Maybe, but he's too loaded to be sure, and panic hasn't left him.

He yawns a lengthy yawn, stretching his shoulders. Despite already deciding to stop drinking for the night, he opens a bottle of soda, chugs some down distastefully, and spikes it up. It's getting cold now with the sun long gone for the day, and late February wind blows his hair around carrying the odd scent of nostalgia. He doesn't bother remembering times when he was more full, more alive, and happier; they're all distant memories only kept alive by self hatred and fueled by drink.

"You weren't supposed to kill him either, right? You didn't want to, is that what you monologue?" He senses a spidery sneer.

"Shut your whore mouth," he mutters. The voice was right, though, and he knows it. "It wasn't me, more oftha kinda- the sorta thing **you'd** do." He slurs almost all the way through.

"You can't even imagine the kinds of things I do." It replies, brandishing that annoying psychotic laughter. *"Even today, you think he deserved what he got."*

He contemplates the irony, no, the hypocrisy of the event often. He hates himself for it, for letting his emotions control him so flagrantly, but this entity knows that much, and it knows how humans love their emotions.

He drinks the thought away, still not satisfied with the action. He feels intensely trapped, too scared to think of anything **they** can use against him. He cocks his head back, getting an awful spinning that tells he's gone too far again. He knows this night won't end well as he pulls upright, attempting to steady himself. He claws his temples *it's all in your head, outside your own perception you are fine.*

"Here it comes! Hey, watch, it's the finale!"

"Oh man, I love these episodes."

"This better be better than last time."

He stand up and shouts, "SHUT THE FUCK U-" and retches, launching brown, foamy vomit across the garage floor. They roar with finger pointing laughter, even continuing after gasping in more air as he wipes some gel from his nose.

His hands are shaking, sinuses burning, and ego under heavy fire. Another smaller ralph comes, giving his lap a fresh coat. He looks up through bleary eyes, and *is something there?*

Just a shadow, a drunken hallucination. What else could it be? He spits, wipes his nose again depositing the residue on his already soiled pants, then stands up.

Show yourself. The two words come with dark determination. No answer comes, but the laughter halts. He thinks he hears a murmur, a congregation of decision maybe. *Show. Now.* Still no answer, and they've fallen quiet again.

"God damnit, motherfucking sonofahorse-fucking monsters." Then, after that curse felt very satisfying he adds, "Cowards."

He vomits again, this time standing to avoid tracking anymore in than he must. It doesn't help much, as he lets go another load of watery refuse. *Just get it all out.* He thinks, feeling defeated. Another, and another splash paints the concrete, and soon it's running down in the grout lines. There's no time to gasp for breath, his body is dead set on retching his guts out.

A tired, worryful question forms: *Is this how much you hate yourself?* His stomach forces the last bile out. There's not even a snort of amusement from **them**. He doesn't even think of trying to clean all of it up, he can't. He just lies down in the cold grass and falls asleep.

It's still dark when he wakes, but his mess is gone. He feels a little better, although horribly empty. Standing to go back inside, he remembers his plastered pants lap and goes to strip them off. By the time he gets his buckle undone he actually feels that they're dry. His hands freeze about to slip the button out of its holding. He remembers the hot drenching he gave them earlier; he remembers it clearly despite being near death drunk.

He dismisses the possibility that his father could have come out after he went under. He wouldn't have taken off his pants, cleaned them, and put them back on. He turns it over in his mind several more times while trudging inside. *Someone's looking out for me...* That didn't sound as good as he'd hoped, instead it left him feeling guilty and full of regret for pushing himself so hard.

He gulps down water like a fish finally back in its bowl. Then the second half of his body's beratement begins with a low, shifting gurgle from his abdomen. *Fuck. Me.*

Of all the times he barely made it over the toilet in time; this is a photo finish. When he does finish, he looks back at it, pleased it's out of him, then recoils, drawing an elbow to his mouth. The whole bowl is black.

Mereina was still thinking about her first look at the light figure, even after months had passed in his time. She discovered his name was Lon, *a fitting name*. She had seen more, and he looked, then, like a normal guy for a while: going out on social events, having guests and so on. Then out of the blue, she found him frantically moving boxes into a truck, however she wasn't aware of **what** these conditions were, looking paranoid and mortified. Then Ray came into view.

“How the fuck does this even happen?” He was saying. “We left no papertrail, wore gloves, no one saw us leav-” He grunted in a muted bark.

“I don’t know, man. You don’t think it was one of...?”

“No, there’s no way.” He said quickly and firmly. “If one of us goes, we all go, that was the deal. The inquisition-” Ray seemed to have a habit of interjecting.

“The inquisition must look out for itself!” Ray gave him the same silenced shout. Lon was quiet, and went back to packing.

After he left, she saw how his life took a dive. Every time she had visions of him since then were all the same, without much variance. He was genuinely scared of letting anyone in on his true thoughts, because of his depleting self esteem and anxiety of capture. He didn’t appear worried about legal matters, however, which Mereina found distinctly odd. The routine was so habitual, Mereina didn’t even know when he would come plopping down on her floor. She didn’t expect it to happen, ever.

He pukes back up the water, leaving a clear puddle in the mess. He groans and flushes, scorning himself having forgotten beforehand.

“Fuck,” he whispers as he washes his hands. “Something- something- something-” For some reason, he can’t finish the thought. He looks back up, and everything had gone black; he was standing in a black abyss.

“*Since you’re in deep now,*” That dark, gargling voice seemed to be coming from the air all around him. “*there’s no harm in telling you, **she** can’t help you anymore. Nothing short of a god could help you now!*” Its voice rises into a particularly evil laugh from a chuckle.

“*Don’t worry though,*” it continues. “*I won’t let those other ‘fucks’, as you call them, watch.*” With another hideous guffaw, Lon falls through the floor.

Something disturbing wafts into Mereina’s field of sensation. She wipes her eyes again, tuning in.

“Huh?” Vivian asks. “Do you feel that?”

“Of course I do.” She snaps back with an unusual test. “It’s him, I just know it. What are we supposed to do?! We can’t just let him suffer like **that**.”

“What can we do? The council-”

“**Fuck** the council.” Vivian is taken aback by the word. Mereina never speaks that way, most people don’t; cursing is a decidedly human trait. “I’m sorry, sister...” She stands, leaves the den and runs out the front door.

She knows what Vivian meant to say. The council would even have their hands full on this one.

*What can I do? I got myself into this, I caused this for Lon, and me, and **everyone**.* She’s running, propelling herself through Basilik in long morbid leaps, letting hot tears stream along her

face. She's drawing plenty of attention as she barrels to the forest. *This is exactly how he felt. He couldn't protect Lacey. He couldn't protect himself.* Mereina realizes if she couldn't save him, they would come for her too. She presses on.

Lon falls hard onto another ground, dimly lit around him. *"I just don't know what I want."* Lacey's voice.

"We're going to kill you, punk. We're going to find you and kill you." It's that fucking coward's voice, with others mixed in. Panic stings him. They would eventually find him. Those animals would eventually bleed him dry. *He deserved it! He had no right to defile her!*

"That's not what I wanted." He spins around. It was her, Lacey. "It was all my fault. I let it happen to myself."

"No! What are you saying?!"

"I was too weak to force him away, I knew that, but I went to be with him alone anyway."

"It's **not** your fault! You didn't-"

"You couldn't help me. You only hurt me, if you hadn't been so passive this **never would have happened.**"

Lon sprints away into the blackness, clutching his head. *This isn't real, none of this is real. She wouldn't say th-*

"You're right, nothing is real. It's all made up." The voice is here, too, in his personal crack-up, beating him down further. His heart is racing, and he's sure it will burst from his rib cage any moment. He trips and lets a scream pump out as he falls through another layer.

Mereina feels this as well, she's running out of time. Finally, she arrives at the tree of life, as calm and wise as any other day; completely unaffected by human suffering. She wraps her arms around the trunk, crying into the bark.

"Please, please, spirit of Mondetou, give me the wisdom I require to save my love." Barely above a whisper she repeats this again and again.

He lands firmly onto wood floors. He knows where he is, it's Mereina's bedroom just like the first time, but the girl before him is unrecognizable. Once blonde hair is soaked in blood, some drying into a brown rust colored streaks along the ends. Her clothes are drenched as well, matting them to her chest and waist.

"You'll kill us all, Lon. No one is safe as long as you breathe." He's dumbfounded. It reaches out, and grabs his neck.

"No.. no.." He can't cry out anymore; his words just eek out. Her grip stays tight.

"You have to die, **Honey**, you're a danger to your world. You must die, die die!" Her soft menacing tone rises into a screech. He's just about to lose consciousness when she lets go, recoiling back onto the floor.

A blinding silver light floods the darkened room, the unholy thing melts into the floor boards leaving an acidic scent in the air. Light glints off something, but there's nothing in the center of this room.

"You've got to get out of here!" *Great another new voice*. Frantically, the feminine voice hurries on. "I can't jam **their** hallucination for long, go! Take the chance while you can!" A wet clapping sound snaps him back into his father's bathroom.

Mereina collapses at the base of the tree, more exhausted than she's ever been.

"I did it..." She sits, crumpled against Mondetou, crying steadily.

Lon vomits again, mostly dry heaving, but at least he's back to reality. He wipes his sweaty brow, feeling the moisture all over him. *I'll never be free*.

He stands and begins walking to his father's office, slowly at first, then with a quickening pace.

There's only one way.

He opens the glass paned cabinet. *The only way out of this hell*.

No thoughts cloud his mind, he's had more than enough reflecting. He sets the revolver on the desk and writes a short note:

"Dad, Family and friends,
I'm sorry I can't explain anything, I guess it's not important anymore. I don't want you to be upset or depressed about this, this is a personal choice I must make.

I'm sorry I couldn't have been a better son.

I will always love you."

Ca-click. *And I'm sorry Mereina*. Tick.

She snaps her head up. *Oh no...* She full on wails, burying her head into her knees and hands.

"Wait, what's this?" It sounds sardonic and playful. A pair of feet move in front of her. "I'm sorry I had to leave you again," She's raising her head. "'How rude', I know."

Lon smiled down at her. Mereina's hair curled so furiously, it knots in place as she throws herself to him.

"But, how! You were- I tried to- Lon!" She lifted him up, rising through the branches and leaves with sheer joy and relief.

"I don't know, I never have any answers." He laughs, hugging her closer. "I just 'fell asleep', and now I'm here." She caresses his head, noticing the small round scar above his right ear.

"I don't care how you did it, I'm just so happy you're here!" She's sobbing into his shoulder again as they clear the topmost canopy. Butterflies flutter around their heads. Warm, clean sunlight bathes aching skin.

Epilogue

He was just waking up. The morning sun was just peering over the window sill onto his eyes. Even though Lon transitioned fully into Aurdia, he still needs to sleep unlike Mereina's family. She says she doesn't mind, mostly because there's nothing to do about his only remaining human necessity, but he knows it's very boring for her. Yesterday, Mereina laid down with him, and she's still curled up half across his chest.

She blows on his face, whistling gently.

"Finally! You've been asleep for six hours and seven minutes!" She lifts upside down, tickling Lon's face with her hair.

"I was in the middle of a dream.." He says irritably. "I had to find this small..." She grinned warmly. "Small.. ugh, it's already gone."

"You get a dream come true, and you're upset you can't find something?" Mereina giggles her lighthearted laugh and rises to stand beside her bed. "I don't even **need** sleep, it's more of a hobby."

"Exactly." Lon grunts, sitting up for a stretch. "What do you do while I'm asleep?"

"Well, I usually lay with you for a while, meditate, or practice my light with Vivian." Mereina brushes her signature red petals flat. "I'm getting better, but it's not our speciality."

Lon fades clear to get dressed. He loves Mereina, and knows she could catch a peek at him whenever she wants, but he likes some privacy. Aurdians are less ashamed of their bodies than humans, so they never mind being naked around each other. He's getting used to it now, but a culture shock like this takes time to normalize.

It's true, this is something of a dream still, a wonderful dream that never ends. Bisnth even did a trick to replicate his dog, who loves playing with the other animals in the sanctuary. She is a little different since Bisnth recreated her from Lon's memory. He called it "aural spectration".

Despite not getting any travellers besides himself, Ferran and Mereina knew a lot more about humans than Lon expected. Thanks to them, the transition has been rather pleasant.

Mereina continued teaching him all that she could, overwhelming him here and there as she did her demonstrations. He's glad she teaches him. She knows him almost as well as he knows himself, like they're two parts of one person. He smiles at this as he fades back into sight.

“What are we doing today?” Mereina had already started her half prance, half glide down her stairs, and Lon leaps through their doorway after her.

“Some sages from the council are coming for you!” Her voice echoes loftily, though she isn’t in sight.

“Sages? **The** council?” He falls down the center of her spiral stairs. Mereina, cheery as ever, catches him from falling more than a few meters.

“**The** council, yup!” She kisses his cheek in affirmation. “They need to go over some Aurdian Laws, and the oracle has been veerry anxious to meet you!”

“*Lon, honey, are you awake yet?*” It was Ferran’s metallic voice.

“*You don’t have to call me honey anymore..*” He never really liked the nickname, and it was Vivian’s idea of a joke after all.

“*Right.. sorry, but the Sages-Cxhi, mnæ khønm!- are here now.*”

What was that? It sounded like he was saying two or three things at once! Mereina leads him into the fine sitting room that he was once new to. Nowadays, he’s familiar with the whole house and grounds. It feels like a thousand years since then, and it may have been that long in Earth years. His concepts of time have been completely rearranged since he died. *Another thing that sounds weirder said.*

Ferran and two men are talking jovially in the same double or triple speech he heard in Ferran’s message. One man is much larger than his counterpart, and talks avidly with his hands. The smaller man stands mostly quiet with his hands folded over his navel.

“*Mereina?*”

“*It’s the highspeech, language of the Goddess. If you think that’s hard-*” An image of swirling text appears in Lon’s mind. He can recognize some characters, a’s, 8’s, little o’s, and partial c’s, but the text itself is undecipherable for him.

“Ah! Lon, this is Komndtrunm and Xavi.” Ferran pronounces the m and n as one letter, and the d and t. He makes a harsh sound like clearing one’s throat when he says Xavi instead of an x sound. The two men offer a shallow bow at their names that Lon returns. “Xavi is the sage of our spirit tree in Aurdia, and Komndtrunm protects the gateway to the West in Colentia.” Some of this Lon already knew about the spirit tree, Mondletou on the other side of Basilk, and that there are sages to protect them. He is confused by the Colentian sage, who speaks up in a heavy accent of highspeech.

“It is my honor to meet a traveller who has broken through the world barrier!” Komndtrunm, the bulkier, steps forward, taking Lon’s shoulders in his hands. Up close, he can see the scars lightly etched into the sage’s face. “How did you do it undetected?”

“Well, I uh-”

Ferran, seeing the discomfort in Lon’s mind, cuts him off.

“Really, Komndtrunm, I’m sure he doesn’t want to relive that awful experience. It’s only been a short time now, you know.”

“Ah, oh, right. My dearest apologies, Master Lon.” *Master?* He backs, looking to his companion. “It’s just this is a very rare occurrence, in fact, such things do not happen in my country.”

“If you don’t count the apprentice that went through your gateway some years ago.” Xavi says with some humor. “What was his name again? Rymetrix?”

“Arymix.” He corrects crossly. He huffs. “I see what you mean, Ferran.”

“Precisely, now can we get down to business?” He gestured for the group to sit around the fireplace as four glasses of a murky brown liquid floated in from the door. Ferran nods in appreciation and sips.

“Right, the reason we’re here is to show you forbidden manipulation techniques and to introduce you to the oracle in Colentia.” Xavi smiles, eager to move on. Komndtrunm seems eager to gossip all the more at the mention of his homeland.

“Colentia is a purely gorgeous land! Warm running rivers, excellent seashores, and the mer-”
“We’ll get to that!” Xavi snaps, irritated at being interrupted for tangents. “First things first: I understand young Mereina has been teaching you her brand of gravitational manipulation?”

“Yes, there are other ways..?”

“Oh my, yes! Even Lavion and Vivian have different techniques for... virtually the same outcome.” He’s pretty sure his mouth is open again, and makes a point to make sure it’s closed by wiping his lips. Now he notices Mereina hadn’t followed him in the lounge, but he thinks he feels her listening at the door. “Has she mentioned the taboo?” Xavi’s voice hardens inquisitively.

“Taboo...?” A lightness rises in his gut along with his anxiety.

“I didn’t think so.” Komndtrunm snorts distastefully.

“The taboo among gravitational manipulators is using it **on other Mauxians.**” His eyes narrow accusingly.

“On other...? Wha...?” Lon remembers Mereina lifting the whole lake with only a few breaths.

“Judging by your face,” Ferran interjects. “you’ve realized how easily a manipulator could harm another.”

“Me? God no, that- that’s awful! That’s the kind of oppression I-” He stops. *That I killed myself over.* Komndtrunm’s expression softens, apparently understanding what Lon was about to bring up.

“Right. So then you can relish the, forgive me, **gravity** of the act?” Xavi and Ferran chuckle at the pun, and Lon nods slowly, wishing he didn’t have to have this discussion at all.

Then, Ferran holds out his hand, extends one finger, and forces Lon to the floor, pinning him there. His eyes look apologetic, but the shade behind them tells his obligation.

“Now fight it and stand up.” It’s getting harder for him to breathe, the tremendous weight is squeezing the air from his chest. Panic runs through his mind. *How can I counter this if I can’t breathe? What can I do?* It winds around him, freezing up his mind as well as his body. Just when he accepts he’s going to pass out, Ferran lets up.

“I’m sorry we had to do that, but it’s important for you to understand that getting out from under a manipulator’s grasp is near impossible.” All three of them stood analyzing him, making sure Lon wasn’t injured at all. After a moment of controlled inhalation, Komndtrunm smiles.

“Come along now, Sara has been questioning me all day about you, and we shouldn’t keep her waiting!” He almost trilled his last words, much like Mereina does when she’s excited. They exit the back door, toward the lake. Once along the banks under the willows, Xavi produces a long pipe.

“Where were you keeping that?” Lon says after realizing he couldn’t have stashed it under his cloak.

“Komndtrunm and I are conjurers as well as manipulators. It’s the predominant ability in Colentia.”

“I believe Sarah can inoculate you with the basics, if you wish, then you can make objects from your aura as well as alter them.”

Something familiar wafts Lon’s way, and instinctively he gives his finger a beckoning motion for another smell. Yes, it’s a smell he knows well.

“What is that?” He asks, trying not to show his knowledge.

“This is a pipe, son.” Komndtrunm answers, too much like Lon’s father. He senses his misstep and sends a feeling of remorse. “Although you’ve enjoyed your time here so far, I should tell you now that you can never return to your prime.”

He forgets about the dank scent. Never turning back was always implied, but he hadn’t understood all of it until he heard his own father in the sage’s words. Again he assures himself that this is what he bargained for.

“Right..” He responds absently after a moment. Xavi nudges him with the long stem of his pipe.

“This is the leaves of the ambrosia fruit. Ferran doesn’t think it wise to enhance ourselves, he’s always been the ‘hard work and perseverance’ type.” Lon took a usual sized hit, completely filling his lungs and exhaling a thick cloud while his company looked on in fascination and mild fear. He doesn’t cough.

“Um. Very good. Now, you may feel a lit-”

“-tle light headed, experience a dreamlike euphoria, and your abilities will be supercharged.”

Lon finishes for Xavi. Both men let their expression of shock show.

"In prime, this is marijuana. Pot, weed, whatever you want to call it." All three remain confused, until Komndtrunm bursts with exalted laughter. He proceeds to take a measly draw, and Xavi follows.

"What a relief," Xavi announces after tapping his chest. "We thought you were going to have quite the episode, taking such a long draw! You do well to keep us on our toes!" The sages laugh again, Lon enjoying one himself.

"Wait," Lon starts once his laughter dies away. "Colentia is half the world over, how are we go-" Then he realizes what purpose his earthly recreation serves here.

"Teleport!" Komndtrunm grins. They link his arms and utters a single phrase in highspeed: *Uraskchaand Taourrp*.

With a crack, he's compressed, shot through ether, and nearly topples the trio over at the abrupt landing.

What he sees now, he has only seen by means of greenscreen.

Tall towers of dark grey stone stand strong above the rocking waves far below their plateaus. Off to the right, what he knows is west, a great expanding ocean swallows the horizon. Not a single landmark dots the smooth surface of Colentia's deep blue waters, nor a single ship, neither sail, nor schooner pollutes the endless sea stretching before him.

The eastern bay, past the tangled braille of pillars, flows with mighty waterfalls and their pools under. As they glide along the water's surface, he can see how the liquid flows up the stone in yard wide grooves. It wasn't anything unusual for him in this dreamlike world, but lack of awe doesn't quench the wonder. Beyond the shore a thick stretch of jungle bleeds into a higher elevated plain, and further up to a snow peaked mountain.

"Komndtrunm, you mentioned this is your home?" Lon asks.

"This is actually the island of Vigrist, the northwest isle. This is where Sarah lives. I take my refuge in the mainland, by my spirit tree." He replies happily. Lon stops, looking back at the pillars now mostly behind them.

"Why does the water flow upwards?" He starts flicking water into small spouts, poorly imitating the pillars behind him. Komndtrunm laughs a multilayered sound like a choir with him at the lead.

"Merpeople." He replies, chuckling a normal tone once more. "Only country to have them, too." Xavi merely smiles a polite 'he's-gloating-again' smile, and starts moving, pulling a draft of air behind him to scoop Lon and Komndtrunm along.

"As for the towers, they're excellent lookout points, and merpeople enjoy sliding down inside for some reason." He produces a pipe from his aura and draws smoke from it. As it went round, Lon realized the setting. They'd stopped just before the waterfall in the middle of the pool. The creeping vines from the jungle above covers the mouth of the falls, striping the walls grey,

green, and blue. The path they came shimmers in the sunlight, and the pillars appear as trees to the water's surface. Then he sees it.

There, at the top of a tower two rows back, something blowing in the wind, like a leaf from the topmost branches.

No. A webbed hand is waving long sweeping waves as if to say goodbye.

"I'll come back" He sends to the aquatic man or woman behind him. It sends nothing back, but jumps down the chute, back to its watery home.

He's handed the pipe, and marvels this world once more.

"They're friendly, when they want to be." Komndtrunm moves forward, toward the waterfall.

"Mauxians typically aren't welcome, but it seems you're an exception."

I'm always the exception these days. Things will even out eventually... He feels guilty being the center of attention so often, however *anything is better than being part of the scenery*. That, he knows.

The sages nearly pass through the sheet of gleaming water without him while he's gazing off to the sea again, but he throws his hand over his head, splitting the water.

The cave looks average, at first glance. Wet walls and small sweet smelling puddles extend into the shadows beyond, giving each footfall a slight **sploch** in choppy time. *It must be several miles to the town, and more to the mountain.*

As they progress into each stage of seeing through darkness, the sweet smell strengthens.

They are climbing, rising with the lay of this island, although there's no flowing water to indicate a source under the water table.

Tick, tack, pslat, top, plusp, the steps ring on.

"Do you hear it?" Xavi asks, breaking the rhythmic silence and startling Lon.

"Hear what?" Even through his mind's ear, all that registers is the steps, and the deafened waves, presumably risen by tides.

"Surely you've noticed?" *Komndtrunm expects constant clairvoyance*. Softly, despite his last thought, notes plucked by careful fingertips ring, echoing off the walls. Just as he recognizes the melody of... Bach?

No, I can't explain why, but Bach.. no. Tchaikovsky? Now he regrets having no interest in classical in his previous life. Three chords echo down, then the light heartstrings twittering like a couple skipping down the street in a drizzling night.

Rachmaninoff, Liebesfreud. He sighs in relief and sorrow. *I knew I've heard this before in Your Lie in April*.

The notes are gaining fervor, losing no time or delicacy because they're growing nearer. He loves the feeling of never ending warmth hitchhiking on the sound. They whisper words of love and compassion in his ear, and shouts of admiration and pride for the chords and bass.

Something brushes his ear as it flies past him, but it's out of sight into the lightning black before he can look. Then feather light claws land on his shoulder and he recognizes it as a glowing blue hummingbird.

"Ah! How beautiful! What do you call that?" Xavi nearly exclaims, holding a finger for the small bird to perch.

"It's a hummingbird." Lon replies incredulously. "But what's it doing here?" The petite aviator tsks its beak with indignation.

"The hummingbird, Animalia Chordata Aves Apodiformes Vigors: the only avian of earth who can fly backwards, a symbol of joy and love, and sometimes become defensive of their flower."

The bird flutters on, toward the new voice.

"We're here." Xavi says. "Go on, Sara's been patient." They look at him, seeding calming thoughts through their smiles.

Lon walks on, feeling his solitary steps. Just past the veil of darkness, his glowing avian zips back and forth eagerly guiding him along.

The music grows louder as he approaches a cavern.

Crystals and trickling water cast a glittering view of the oracle's altar, above which a radiant antler shaped crystal hangs. On her raised altar, Sara the Oracle plays her harp unwaveringly, a set of white wings on her back flowing along. She is small, barely five feet tall and thin.