



AN ERA OF COMMON GOOD

Prologue

A Farewell Address

His posture, kept straight.

Kallias joined the timid applause to dimly watch yet another speaker take their turn at the white wood podium. Servers made use of the flutter, tactful when topping off his wine and coffee amongst the others. None spoke, but all bowed as they covered their faces in the sweltering heat. A muggy winter had ended in sunny skies, cloudless overhead. The Horn's morning shadow, now tilting towards the capitol building. He wished he'd chosen a lighter suit for the occasion.

Anton wore a similar wool, but in blue, seated somewhere around the adorning crowd's midpoint. His poor friend has suffered an endless slew of passive denigrations by those few numina who still find themselves jealous of his success, relentless in their attempts to highlight his modest roots. Had Kallias known, he'd have required a place be set directly at his side, honoring their most loyal & stately citizen, above any noble line. For all its worth, Anton never mentioned it either, keen on sitting with the other senators and their spouses; undeniably better off in Dorra's company than suffering the old guard's perfumed decay.

A torrid Midday peak invited several musical performances to liven the stage, amplifying the casual tenor of patrons gathered by the rest stalls. While cameras captured each corner in a vivid technicolor, Kallias remained near his seat, shaking hands with all who wished it. Many tears blessed his legacy, some begging him to stay. He offered them hopeful words in his sanguine yet bullish manner just as bells began the second act, suffering a dozen more speeches thereafter. Each presenter, gilded in fine jewelry, labored considerably in their efforts to explain the meaning of sacrifice. He nearly choked on his glass listening to Égios Neram go on about the inherent equity that arises from a free government. The same Égios Neram who's voted against every civil appropriations bill ever brought before the Upper Chambers, saving his pen for the affluent & opulent ventures endorsed by his friends.

Three hours had passed by Kallias' estimate. His mind, wandering frequently, fighting an eager urge to undress the antique trench watch burning a hole in his front pocket. Finally, a wrinkled hand called him

forward, invigorating an uproar that spread far beyond the gardens, undulating across the city itself. Rising to the occasion, he buttoned his jacket, clasping the Vikis-Praecé with both hands. As the approbations renewed, he cleared his throat, unfurling six pages, prepared during the erratic vagaries of a weeks' long shifting mood.

“Thank you. Thank you. Please, have a seat. And a drink if you can. It's quite hot out. I see many more past the gate. To you, my kin of this great nation, I welcome your homage at such a momentous juncture. As you already know, my second term will end in three days' time, leading to the first extralinear transfer of power in our nation's history. The blood of Olympus runs through more than one family, and so should its guidance. Collectively, we are not the many races of Terra, but one united essence, sharing in principles and prosperity.

Serving as your inaugurative Civital, I've understood the weight of precedent. We are no longer a war driven economy, seeking pilfered fortunes to subsidize ineffectual ends. What is ours, we built on the merits of every citizen, embracing discomfort to elevate our lowermost standing. Within one decade, we've transformed four cities into living automatons, whose rhythm shares a harmony equal to our own. And though they've come at great cost, our grids represent the innate will to strive buried in all of us, forsaking opportunism in favor of a collective integrity.

You may have already guessed my next words. Say them with me; taxes pay for the Olympian experience. If fostering dignity is the core purpose of government, then roads, schools, hospitals, and homes are the veins by which it is nourished. Be wary of those promising functionality at a discount. Our shared investment far exceeds its principal, committing us to the promise of a better tomorrow. Your duty is no longer to a throne, but to each other. No downpour shall erode your union so long as it is well maintained.”

His warnings were stern. They needed to understand, dismantling the administrative state validates the ill mannered desire for dominion. And such appetites will always exceed posterity. The only incentive to order is consequence. Namely, for those who move the heavy handed pieces. Innovation is the right of any mind so capable, but access to their markets is a privilege, burdened by responsibility. Proper process assures the people, their favor is warranted.

Over the next two pages, he further aggrandized the Olympian spirit, focusing on the gorgeous motley of their identities & distinctions. It's easy to mistake cohesion of ideology for cohesion in culture. But it wouldn't be the city he saw through his childhood eyes without a patchwork to its people.

“To my successors, I must say, leadership is not a reward. Your actions are bound by law, and tethered to the legislature's will. There is no recourse for retribution, constrained to either compromise or defeat. Constructive opposition defines the arc between the Courts, the Chambers and the Horn by challenging the others' constitutional grounds for an act beyond their respective duties. Legitimate governance need not rely on the tactics of a despot. You must present your case to the public with an affirmative vigor, stomaching any objections to your ambition. Provoking authority is the right of every guest, citizen and elected official.”

He dabbed the sweat along his brow. They may not always agree, but Thrasea Maetram will lead on the virtues of her own vision. She's bridged the furthest factions where he'd toiled aimlessly. Her tender handed approach hears all sides, valid or not. Though his policies may soften under her leadership, progress will inch, if not at a trot. Olympus is in good hands.

“As my final farewell, let me ease your concerns. Zamara remains with me, and so it does with you. But you are strong, you are brilliant, and you are brave. Do not rely on its comfort. The world of my youth was a life by candlelight. Now, I have seen how brightly you shine. I thank you all for your commitment this past decade. And I look forward to seeing what you build without me at your helm. Be radiant. Be just. Your excellence is intertwined. Olympus, my heart. Together, we live forevermore.”

The crowd erupted as he bowed his head and kept it there a moment. In the decades to come, he'll be here to watch where they thrive and where they fall short. Still, a hole has been gnawed into his heart. If he'd had more time, they could've reached the deserts. Now he knows, a flame must burn first.

I

*Mundane rituals create a prison of convenience.
It's the yearning for stability that makes it so difficult to break away.*

The gears never stop.

He didn't mind fourteen hour shifts, six days a week. Didn't matter if they came off the line a little quick. What better use for dry calloused hands than a machine tight grip, holding jars instead of bottles, numbing himself either way. He can't be the same person who burned so bright, once upon a time. But meager pay makes for poor kindling. And it's easier to be content, just doing his part, dumping pennies down the darkened void at the center of the swirling shadows, to keep the ship afloat. He still hears a whisper from the instructional video reminding him, *every piece matters for the submarine to function.*

Small comforts, steeped in quiet majesty. The dank sullen hull soothes him on the everlasting midnight shift. He loves to measure his pace using the sonar's tick in the background, aligning perfectly with each jar spilt and not the pause in between. It's why he doesn't complain. Others might think him ungrateful, or feel the shame of realizing he's nothing more than a glorified cupholder. Instead, he hides in the dearth, drowning his humiliation in cheap liquor at the local cantina, spilling on himself when he can't stop the tremors.

Soon his wearing will render him obsolete, unable to hide it forever. A body is a machine but he's merely human. He can't be repaired. He'll be replaced. They're going to turn him into chum. He can't mess up. He will mess up. His knuckle tipped the next jar over the side while the rest kept coming; glass crashing, pennies spraying! Panic set in as vicious eruptions shattered the submarine's hull, sending floods & flames to consume all those he doomed trapped within.

But then, his eyes burst open.

He hit the pillow quick as he rose, happy to know a boiling death wouldn't take him in the deep blue corners of his bedroom. The comforter's fetal shaped sweat stain looked familiar; common on particularly cold nights. Airing out the middle sent rocket ships blasting off, tuned to his phone's horrid cascading chime. Except suffering serves a purpose in the

fight to rise. It's false hope, burrowing under the covers again, taking himself to the edge of slumber. Not that he can survive on hibernating breathes any longer. A deep stretch led to a hangry yawn sheds the lingering exhaustion. Ten seconds paused lightens his eyelids, finally attempting to attend to the pennies spilling on his nightstand.

Closer. *Closer*. *CLOSER*.

One more plunge...

And...

"Damn it." He sighed.

He didn't mean to tip the top over the lamp's organizer, forced to gently lure it in using the charging cable. As a reward for his exceptional efforts, he took a brief morning scroll, enjoying how the sudden silence withered his unease. But he harbored no anger towards his phone for keeping its blessed promise to spectacularly ruin every rise. A violent start propels the caffeine. Hence the toiling 'til 2AM for no reason in particular, to get the full effect.

His mom's gone to the world halfway through her favorite late night monologue, and up before the roosters. It's unnatural to him. Unless you're a farmer, or conduct business with farmers, the day can start at noon.

Throwing off the covers, he groaned loudly, heaving a dragon's smoke. It's the sound of sticks scraping concrete, itching both ends of himself. He straightened his manhood, somehow managing to secure his raggedy hoodie, sleeve by sleeve.

The hall's vibrant yellow added its own accelerant to the flame, claiming it assists the bright lights in tooting his scooting; not by request, nor would he ever admit its efficacy. Let her heels clack downstairs in despair, left to wonder if she's truly helping or simply wasting electricity.

The ole timey spigot takes a hard crank & a long minute for the hot stuff comes through, giving him a chance to brush his teeth the lazy way. Closing the medicine cabinet, the mirror showed him a frumpy young man, dark as an almond, or the hands that pick em. On his head sat a black mop of long, nappy curls living their own lives in the morning. Two weeks overdue for a cut, according to Ma-Linda.

"But you have such a handsome babyface!" or, *"Stop hiding those big brown eyes!"* She'd say as he skulked on his way to the kitchen.

He put the nozzle above his neck to soften the stiffness from sleeping badly for the hundredth night in a row. Eight months ago, he'd partied his

ass off on a high horse, senior year in sight. A relentless anxiety now tows him closer to the closeout. Twelve years, sixty-seven percent of his life, bound together. A group, scattering to explore their self-actualized destiny. Some knew it so well already. He wrote about a different career dreams in each college application, hoping to spark a flame, or at least achieve a warmth greater than this shower. There's still a chance, he supposed.

The clock tended to sprint ahead during these times of idle thought. This shirt; those pants. It didn't really matter which, so long as each piece passed the sniff test. He confirmed the contents of his backpack, counting six binders layered into an even brick and his graphing calculator sat sleeved in the front pocket, rushing to the kitchen next for extra salty cheap fuel & vitamins.

And there she was.

A cup of coffee in her hands, challenging the floor to a staring contest. He knew her dour quandaries involved work, carefully sneaking a hug as to not wrinkle her suit. The black pants topped by a white shirt & indigo blazer brought a vibrance to her dark complexion. He dropped his head low as to not tatter her bob, nor its perfectly crimped edges. Melinda checked the time before acknowledging his presence, wondering why he hadn't left yet.

"Damn, ma'am. I am, I am. Just a little behind."

"You do have little behind. And watch your language this early."

"It's five o'clock somewhere."

"If you started ten minutes sooner, you could fix proper eggs-"

"NoooOOOoo." Shaking what that woman over there gave him as her eyes rolled back to the Middle Ages.

"I grabbed the mail this morning." She yelled across the hall, having gone to pick his windbreaker for the day. "Do you plan on opening these? Another big one equals three. They don't send the full sized envelopes for rejections."

"I've got a few months." He shrugged, even though she couldn't see him.

She's good about letting him breathe.

"At least eat something real."

Melinda watched him take a bite out of a fiber bar, preparing for a beef stick swirl. He felt it best to ignore her negativity.

"Don't you usually leave ten minutes ago?"

“Doesn’t matter ‘til my meeting, if you want a ride today.”

He shook his head, gulping a small coffee on his way out. “You handle your business and I’ll handle mine, *thankyouverymuch*.” Letting the door slam shut behind him, to make his pointless point stronger.

It’s barely six streets, but the walk is always against the wind. He jogged beside the mismatched houses, paying the fine for lost time. Bites mid stride drove his speed boosts, dodging dog turds, skirting the patches of grass between the concrete. No slab’s sudden shift hindered his pace.

She had to start his day on a real note. Hearing the words out loud breaks the spell, pretending time’s frozen. He missed the scent of elementary school. Holiday arts & crafts, scooping broken crayons out of little tin buckets. The square wedges of pizza transporting mozzarella logs. But most of all, he missed blissful certainty. Free to believe he could grow up to drive a tractor. Nothing about owning a farm, just driving a tractor. Success seemed so guaranteed in the second grade.

He slowed, panting privately to steady his breath. Their campus ahead featured an especially grey concrete, fit for the finest of prisons. Its sole tincture lined the events marquee in a neon orange. No structure this ugly should elicit a sentimental pull. Familiarity can do strange things.

Squeezing through his peers is its own undertaking. He’s not fond of the tundra as a chatting spot, but offered several customary *what ups* in passing, feigning he’d heard their replies over the shoe squeaks. Since each room borrowed its teacher’s personality, Mr. Proctor’s remained their glossy white on orange peel texture, having none to spare. At the bell’s ring, Rorick withdrew his red binder, slapping pages to reach its fresh end.

“You get the last couple on the homework?” Whispered behind.

“Yeah, why didn’t you ask me sooner?” He said, delayering his coats.

“Check your phone.”

“I meant yesterday, not ten seconds ago. Here, ya beesh.” He slid it under his shoulder. “Spent so long on nineteen.”

Tom gave him a few taps to say thank you.

Always such the gentleman.

“Good morning, class.” Mr. Proctor called monotonously. “Before we begin, the office sent me these flyers, regarding senior week activities.” He partitioned exact stacks to the front row, thermally warmed in his scratchy wool sweater vest, covering a yellow dress shirt. “Settled down, settle down. You’ll have plenty of time to discuss who’s accompanying whom

later. It's still a few months away." He dryly proclaimed. "Save those sheets; pass me your homework."

Then nothing but the sound of angry backpacks being violated. He hunted for the holy grail, buried deep at the bottom, kicking the under basket to hurry.

Mr. Proctor started his rounds.

Three columns left.

Nitpicker asked a question.

Two columns left.

Heroic idiot dropped their papers.

Tom adorned the last hearts on his *is*, sending both forward. And down the line they went, out of sight, like everyone had done this before. It's the full team effort that really counts. Having spent his excitement tokens for the day, he basically dragged his head from room to room. Ms. Kaufman decorated hers in a decade's worth of student gifts, offering him plenty of distractions for the hour.

At lunch, he rode with Tom, Celine & Abby to the midtown business parks. Their chosen food court was a habitual hot mess. Fortunately, Abby had the foresight to bring wet wipes, clearing the table themselves. It quickly muddled again, but they were happy to not leave it so brutish in kind.

His post-meal pop quiz bordered on educational sabotage, dashing any aspirations he had to yawn for an hour straight. AP World History presented what he can only assume was an excellent lecture about the North Pacific. Then came the sweet sweet symphony of the final bell mooring its song of freedom. A proper swerve out of his seat will give him the right momentum to be first out the door... landing the dismount... good form all the way through... hand at the knob...

"Rorick, would you mind if I had a quick word?"

He could hear the collective boo in his head. But this was a legal interference, compelling him to accept disqualification honorably, salmoning his way up the stream of people to Mr. Harper's desk. Delayed by Denise, a fidgety girl carrying her daily list of questions.

Hurry up. Hurry up. I'm hungry and tired of smelling you all. Hurry up!

It'd be nice if their teacher sped her along at least. But no. He let her take her time, providing thorough assurances. It was very inconsiderate. At

long last, she finished, apologizing in passing. He smiled, assuring her it's okay, he's not in a rush.

"Hey."

"Rorick; my favorite name of any student I've had, by the way."

"Thanks." Forcing a chuckle.

"You said it's Germanic?"

"Yeah, intro day. Good memory."

"A couple usually stick."

"It's a long story how I got it."

Not really, but he didn't care to share.

"I'd love hear it someday."

"After the AP test."

"That's sensible." Mr. Harper laughed.

"Everything alright?" He blurted awkwardly. Hands, stiffly dug in his pockets.

"Of course, just checking if you're okay."

Here we go.

Let him give his speech.

"I am, thanks for asking."

"Good, good. You're not under too much pressure? Considering the situation at the courthouse. We're all proud of the impact your mom has on our community. But these men are dangerous, and I'm sure it can be traumatic for you too."

Mr. Harper was referring to a week prior. The Russian launderer guy's son spat at Melinda for shaming his father in her opening statements. Once again, living in the shadow of his super mom.

"It's under control, I think." Rorick waved as if he didn't want the server to top off his water. "I'm not stressing about exams or anything, but I'll take an automatic A, if you're offering."

"Nice try."

"Thanks anyway, to you and the rest of my teachers. My mom's been stressed." He shrugged. "She's a tough cookie; no need to worry."

"Well, we do. And not because it's our job."

Always the good guy, that Harper, with his endless plaid shirts & khaki pants. Unsure what to do next, a formal handshake hastened his exit. On the walk home, Rorick wished he shared his teachers' passion for more

than the slow drip of melted cheese. This one was okay, but his peers' persistence did get annoying.

“That’s classified.” He’d say.

Too many were dumb enough to believe it. The rest got mad.

He couldn’t wait for it to be over.

II

*Mundanity is not a poison, drunken slowly.
Thrill can never supersede stability in the long run.
It's for the naïve & reckless to think excitement worth losing it all.*

A blacked out sky.

Probably from spending the night in Tijuana again. The contact hangover added heft to Rorick's rise, forever waking wearier than the night before. This was it. This was growing up. Soon the hairs on top would move to his back & below, and he'll spend his days wondering if his low risk mutual fund has properly prioritized its capital preservation. Who's he kidding? Jameson is too soft. He won't be able to retire on these pitiful returns. It's always the markets fault.

– Can't even shave his three chest hairs in peace –

The kitchen's smoke detector sent him sprinting towards the burning smell. Melinda, balancing poorly on a stool, used a table mat to fan the irate sensor.

“Gotta kill the source, Ma!”

Rorick protected his face as a mushroom cloud of black ash bloomed in the sink, consuming their blue batik curtains, hanging above. One final glorious inferno in the name of her shame. He stirred the pan, smothering the boiling water's cackle, and the last vapors began to thin.

“Thank you.” She said once the beeps stopped.

“Were you planning to fan all day?”

“Hush! Thought I'd surprise you, and say thanks for cooking dinner.”

“Ha, you're sweet, truly. But I take my eggs runny. And how'd you burn eggs?”

“It was an important phone call!”

Melinda examined the crispy remnants.

“They're fine.” She said.

“I put soap in there.”

“Good, they're sanitary. Eat the middle.” She jabbed the pan, feeding him all at once. “Fine. You won't hurt my feelings; too classless for proper

gourmet.”

“I’ll stick to Pop Tarts, thank you.”

“Eat something real!”

“But like, you bought them?”

“Whatever, child. I gotta prep before I go.”

At least it’s Friday.

The Great Breakfast Fire set a pep in his step, giving Rorick time to sit & eat. She studied her documents at the table, so he sat quietly. Then he started chewing loudly. Then with his mouth open, adding smacking noises until she scoffed.

“Ts’all that about?” He sloppily mumbled through a mouthful.

“It’s work stuff. You wouldn’t be interested.”

“Probably, but I’m good at pretending.”

Melinda laughed; a finger leading the page.

“You see how dark it is outside?”

Her *reading while talking* skills were not genetic.

“You new here? Nah, I’d bet money you haven’t looked up in two decades.”

Now she gave him a straight face, too early for his type of sass.

“You want a ride in case it rains?”

He pondered briefly before surprising her by accepting the offer.

“Give me two minutes!” She squealed.

“I don’t believe you, so I’ll go warm the car.”

He dug for her keys in the side pocket of her purse, atop the tipping shoe cabinet. Gum & coins answered the call, dashing to freedom, but he was quick to shake them loose.

Inside the garage could easily be ten degrees colder than the dark side of the moon. Rorick hurried to the driver side, requiring the brake pedal to push its start. He stepped as he would over a puddle, careful not to leave prints on the still immaculate lining of her new midsize. Three minutes and forty-two seconds later, Melinda casually strolled in, finishing a call as she reached the door.

“Why don’t you drive?”

“I’m good, it’ll be easier for you when I get out.”

Didn’t take long for the awkward silence to build.

Any excuse to break it would be nice.

Something good... Hmm.

“Plans this weekend?”

Melinda nodded.

“Meeting my investigators tomorrow for lunch, but Sunday will be all mine, so I might do an Alexis brunch. How ‘bout you?”

“Two tests next week. Two papers due in the next two weeks. Gonna be alotta headphones-in time.”

“I can’t believe my baby’s graduating in a few months! There’s no harm in taking time to experience your truest self and reflect on your identity.” -He should’ve known this was a trap- “Don’t let anxiety rush you. And community college is a great place to start!” Using her high hopeful voice. “Or travel; take a backpacking trip. We can open you a credit card.”

She really is the best.

“Thanks for saying that. We’ll talk about it later.”

She gave a few quick nods, hugging his head as best she could at the wheel. “Makes no difference because you’re capable of so much.”

“MA.”

Luckily, campus materialized ahead.

“I’ll hop out here so you don’t suffer in traffic; thanks for the ride!”

“Love you!”

“You too, Ma-Linda.”

She pinched his cheek so hard he needed the car’s frame to push himself free. Melinda made a U-turn at the stop sign, giving her the perfect angle to wave & shout out the window, honking, in case he missed the show. A pack of girls laughed like the take no prisoner adolescents they are. And all Rorick said was,

“You’ll never achieve her cool.”

* * *

He had so much time to remember. But it’s still easier to blame his mom for throwing off his routine. She’ll be forgiven, this time. Thanks to Tom in all his fiery-haired chivalric grandeur, Rorick won’t be walking home umbrellaless & defeated. In rain this heavy, that rusty royal blue deathtrap formerly branded an 83’ Buick becomes a mighty stallion.

“Don’t spoil my new leathers.”

“Guess they came pre torn. Explains the cow’s ass smell.”

“It’s your mom’s ass.” Tom rifled the glove box, digging for his pipe under the crumpled receipts. “Here, pack this. You going to Katie’s

tonight?”

“Go out? Do you not have the same test next week I do? Or was that some other degenerate covering my neck in garlic breath every time he got a text.”

“It was my girl!”

“*Your girl.*” Rorick rustled Tom’s hair. “My freckly little man’s come so far since Tuesday.” He feigned tears in a nasally voice.

“It’s been six weeks.” Tom howled on crowd control. “*Official* since Tuesday.”

“I swear you smooched her three weeks ago? Yeah, after Valentine’s Day.”

“Right, but she was giving me eyes in Stats.”

“Ohho.” Rorick laughed. “*That’s* why you asked if we thought she’s cute on Warzone a month ago. Here I am, believing you had game, and Val did the work.”

“Ay, I still went for it at David’s.”

“Yeah yeah yeah, you’re a beast.”

“So, you comin out?”

“No.” Rorick cherried the pipe for Tom.

“C’mon, man. Who cares at this point. Colleges don’t care about second semester, unless you fail.”

“But my mom does. I’m not screwing up this close to spring break. She’s cool how we do... long as my life’s in orderd.”

“Alright, alright. She’s let me crash on your floor a lot so, outta respect for her, I won’t point out how much of a twat you are.”

“*Twat.*” Rorick laughed.

“What? It’s my culture. I’m allowed to used it.”

“That’s British shit. You’re a stretched out leprechaun, from Cleveland.”

“Who cares, it’s the same shit.”

“Your ancestors just rolled in their graves.”

Smoke garnished his exit, dissipating in the g-force winds. Rorick flexed his middle fingers back towards Tom in gratitude for his charity, itching to cozy up in his cozy home. He threw his bag in the den with a blatant disregard for safety, cranking the heater’s dial en route to scavenge a well deserved feast.

Munch munch munch.

Slurp slurp slurp.

Then face down, drooling into the olive green fuzz of their suede couch. A few twists & tosses tied him to a base cushion. Scenes, flickering on TV, dimly lit the otherwise darkened stead, fluctuating between mostly red to mostly green. Back & forth. The rain had paused briefly, now pouring its hardest, drowning out the chatter beyond periodic laugh tracks. For Rorick, everything became a single white noise, unable to stir him anymore. Not even the knocks at the front door.

Three humble requests, above the handle, reasonable under different circumstances. The bell may have yielded better results, if strangers knew how to find it behind the potted dracaena varieties. So Rorick dreamt away, huddled beneath his hoodie, in normal fashion for couch naps. The fridge's compressor, harmonizing with the raindrops. He loved stormy nights.

Irrked by rejection, five rapid bursts hammered close to the oaken door's hinges. Their waning pleasantries did little to trouble Rorick, whose smile arched in synchrony to the cheering audience. Seconds later came a more furious bashing, using the butt of both fists to stress the deadbolt. Triple peeps livened the alarm, momentarily quelling their offenses. Rorick scanned the room; his unconscious self, deeming it safe to lie again.

BRBRBRBRBR!

He flew off the couch to the hard floors, shy of the coffee table's rug. Chaos unending; Rorick staggered hazily in the dark towards the deafening barrage of rolling drums trying to break the door. Around the corner, he saw the wood vibrating in its frame. Though shouting failed, the porchlight succeeded immediately. Then, it was as if the whole world stopped moving.

The door's resilience did little coarsen Rorick's nerves. It troubled him, no shadows shifted through the frosted glass panes. He grabbed his hoodie, tiptoeing the angry cluster of squeaky boards, confirming the alarm was set on his way to the peephole, lingering alone at every angle.

Headlights brightened the viewer, slowing as the Meyers pulled into their driveway across the street. A courage he summoned was swiftly charred to wrath. Cursing the whole way, he opened the door, greeted only by a hefty frozen gust & a wet doormat. His slippers, donned. He walked the concrete path, squinting to scan the bushes. Mr. Meyer checked his mail comfortably under an umbrella, waving once he noticed Rorick.

“Hey, Mr. Meyer! Did you see anyone out here?”

But the rain was too loud.

It had to be Tom headed to the party.

Or not. He hadn't checked the time.

His shirt, well steeped. He blustered back inside, swearing on the door's swing, and again when it slammed shut. The clock echoed his estimate, reading half past eight. He wondered why his mom hadn't joined the fun, finding a solid clue in the empty garage. Still, he called her name for certainty's sake, expecting an abundance of exquisite texts to unravel the mystery.

In no rush nor mood, Rorick patted the pillows straight, doing his best to capture falling debris on his dirty plate. He desired no lights beyond the central hallway row, forestalling yet another adjustment. The faucets are a perilous game, balancing the thin line between scolding hot & hypothermia. But a splash is all it takes, and the machine does the rest.

Heavy storm clouds blended into a single grey skyline, visible by the lightning kernels popping deep in its belly, crackling pleasantly from afar. Even after a day spent soaking, he couldn't scrub off the hardened soot now engrained to the frying pan. It might require extreme measures, if he dared to use the steel wool.

“WOAH OH.”

A single strike crossed half the sky, plummeting Rorick to the kitchen tiles. The thunder that followed gave their meager town a good shake before the storm settled to its natural bedlam. Laughing eased his lingering angst, leaving a negging tingle in his tummy.

The party's at Katie's, so Chloe will be there. Her big brown bug eyes are a shot of lidocaine to his brain stem, moving weird, smiling weird, talking weird. They made out on Tom's dryer freshman year; his first kiss, and she kissed him first. But at the end of winter break, she reemerged dating a sophomore they'd later call *Aegon*, because he conquered half girls in his grade. The bad dye job probably had something to do with it too. Sad for Chloe, she was usually at soccer practice while he earned it. She's stayed single since dumping his ass on Halloween, so maybe Rorick goes for an hour to hang back by the laundry room...

Next time.

He rummaged the fridge to ramshackle a suitable dinner, but anything good required motivation. If he clung to the hope of leftovers, five pizza bagels might hold him. He considered texting his mom to play it safe, in case she's stuck at work.

“Oh my phone, *where’d you goooooo*.” Nothing could soften the restless desire to seize his night. “Wait.”

Rorick swerved towards the microwave, reaching for the frozen bagels. Trickling water pooled at his neckline, spending the next minute rehydrating, unaware prior how bad he needed it. Mid refill, an unfamiliar sedan caught his attention, driving slow in the dark. Nervous, he watched it park.

The driver’s awkward exit avoided taking in rain as a passenger, almost entering the flooded gutter hoodie first, but he managed to break his fall by sacrificing a leg to the murky stream. Undeterred, he began waving frantically, pointing at Rorick fueled by the same urgency.

“Who are you staring at?”

No one could be on their pointed terracotta roof. Rorick’s futile attempt to see out the window set the stranger off. He went for a crowbar in the trunk, rambling angrily as he pointed it towards the mailbox.

He wouldn’t dare.

The box exploded on its post, sending letters downwind & stream. Rorick tripped himself rearing for the door, turning to the stair closet to pick a metal bat. Its tape, well worn to match his grip. He marched confidently, bearing it visibly.

One foot touched the pavement, the other never made it. A crack to his jaw led the way down. It had to be sledge hammers, instantly traumatizing wherever they struck. He curled tight against the bat, scared of what another head blow might do, begging the rest of his body to endure. A spree hit the same spot between his ribs, forcing a squeal. Cruel laughter howled so close to him, declaring no motive.

“STOP!”

Rorick kicked blindly. A poor retaliation, but the minor offensive finally allowed him to see his assailants. His two tiny assailants. The taller, stumping less than four feet. Their faces; he didn’t understand. Cue ball sized eyes sitting narrowly adjacent, above slitted nubs in place of a nose. And mouths don’t usually go so ear to ear in the literal sense. All daubed on enormous heads attached to fit frames vested in tiled leather armor. The girl sporting braids had a fairness to her features, excepting her odious scowl. Her partner was uglier than his rotting teeth.

The gruff fellow used Rorick’s bewilderment to sneak a stern blow on the softest of his temple, poisoning him with vertigo. Their excitement

quickly turned to muddled shrieks, overlain by the alarm's whirling racket. He'd forgotten to turn it off before running out! Repelled a few steps, the woman cursed in a heavily sibilated language.

His eyes struggled to level. At a distance, they kept tight the bare fists used to tenderize his flesh, bickering about their next move. They might've reprised the attack if not for the man who lured Rorick shouting obscenities. The hissings they returned had nothing nice to say. Neither party concerned the other beyond an apprehension to hurry.

"Get. Him. And. Let's GO!"

Rorick swung hard, bludgeoning the nearest head. Her shriek was cut short by the pavement. Twitching, lying in her own head spill. He noticed a shine layering her spine, but it didn't register before the gruff thing charged as if the laws of physics didn't apply to him. Rorick closed his eyes, keen on a homerun. The bat pinged where the gruff thing's forearm bore the least meat. Screaming bloody murder, he lumbered to the grass... behind the man's gun. Breathing heavy, Rorick loosed his hands to raise them.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Get in the *fucking* car." He whipped Rorick's head, repeating himself.

His captor appeared human in every sense, a few shades lighter than himself. Distinctly Middle Eastern with a bilingual tinge to match. The impatient vein above his brow grew watching Rorick struggle to walk straight as blood rushed to fill the growing number of welts. He stretched Rorick's neckline, shouting at the gruff thing to collect its unconscious friend. Rorick's heart pounded worse than his head. Before he'd processed the weight of his actions, he punched high, firing the gun accidentally.

Rorick sorta remembered it flying into the mud. Then the brusque intensity of a wrecking ball in his gut. No punctures meant the gruff thing had tackled him. He must've hit the asphalt. The mushy grass helped, giving him a gentle massage, sliding past.

Each assailant dragged an ankle, heaving their hardest, panicked by the neighbors' porchlights turning on at the alarm's unremitting wail. His wits returning, Rorick kicked & kicked & kicked, wriggling free. He refused to let their car become his grave.

A growing chorus of sirens convinced the man to cut his losses. The gruff thing cursed & hissed, doing the same. They sped away, leaving Rorick in the mud. Officers advanced, guns drawn, lowering their weapons

at the sight of a boy shivering shoeless, soaking on the ground, too dark to spot the saturating red.

“Are you okay, son?”

He nodded through pain.

“What happened here?”

“Is that your firearm?”

Struggling to shake his head.

“Let’s help him inside. May we enter your home?”

“Yes.”

One under each arm, they partly carried him, safeguarding his fall. Rorick stopped at the alarm’s panel, unable to handle it himself.

“Four-one-four-six.”

Silence at last.

They set him gently on the couch, giving Rorick a moment to catch his breath. He found the remote under him, turning the TV off.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“Lawn gnomes tried to take me.”

The officers exchanged worried glances.

“I don’t under-”

“No wait. One was a fairy. She had dragonfly wings.”

“Son, I think you’re concussed. The ambulance is close. For now, why don’t you take it easy. Guess your parents aren’t home? We should give them a call.”

He dug for his phone under the cushions, entering its passcode. The officer handled the rest, leaving Rorick lost in a dead stare.

“Your mom called; the security company probably sent her a notification too. She left a text message earlier saying she had dinner plans. Guess you were sleeping on the couch; she sent you a picture of yourself.”

The officer dialed her number. He was a burly graying man, whose posture said he’d been doing this a long time. His partner, a younger guy, had a square jawed, and the hair to match.

“Hello, Ms.-”

“Addams.” Rorick said. “Melinda Addams.”

“Ms. Addams. This is Officer Murrin. My partner Officer Collins and I are at your residence...” He explained the situation at a safe distance from Melinda’s explosive grief. “He’s a little concussed; I think it’s best to wait

for the paramedics.” Tapping Rorick, he mouthed, “Do you want to talk to her?”

Agreeing, Rorick never reached for the phone.

“I see the ambulance.” Officer Collins announced.

“Ma’am, he’s okay; he’s just in shock. We’re here with him. We’ll see you soon.” Officer Murrin paused to listen. “Yes, ma’am. I was actually there, in a different chamber. Oh, I see the paramedics; Jim, can you grab them? Alright, sounds good, ma’am. We’ll be here when you arrive.”

While Rorick underwent a physical, more officers swarmed the street. Soon the place was taped off, news vans & neighbors standing outside under umbrellas. Melinda raced her way in, ready to drive through the crowd if needed, crying for her baby. Inside, she squeezed him so tight, the paramedics had to ask her to be gentle, leaving a face print on his damp shirt.

“Come on, Ma. Saw you this morning.” He fought his own tears.

“Who did this?!?”

The officers came closer, Collins taking notes. Rorick told them about the knocking, the guy outside the window, and the tiny ambush.

“You mean, uh, little people, as in Dwarfism?” Murrin asked.

“No, I mean; I don’t know what I mean. They were small. Less than four feet, but built same as him.” Rorick pointed to Officer Collins. “And moved fast.”

The officers eyed each other. Their concerns, escalating palpably. He decided it best not to mention the weird faces.

“And the third guy, outside the window, was he full sized?”

“Yeah, barely taller than me. Maybe five-ten. He had the gun.” Rorick calmed Melinda’s wailing. “He bashed me here. Hurt a lot. He tried to do it again but I pushed his elbow, setting the gun off. Then the small dude tackled me and I blacked out.”

“The girl was...?”

“Unconscious. Her blood’s mostly on the porch. Mine too. You should test it. The next part’s a blank for me. I hit my head, and they started dragging me to their car. Pretty sure my heel smashed the tall guy’s fingers. Your sirens scared them off.”

“Did you catch the make or model?” Collins asked.

“Dark color, two-thousands-ish sedan. I didn’t see the logo. It had tinted windows, I think. The little ones also spoke a weird language.”

“Sounded Russian?”

“Kinda? Had to be European. The fuck does Welsh sound like?”

“Rorick.”

“It’s okay, ma’am. How ‘bout the big guy?”

“For sure Middle Eastern. Raised here. He spoke English, but I think I heard him swear in Arabic. Light tanned skin; the little people were a tanned white.”

Officer Collins thoroughly scribbled his notes, priming for a second go. Officer Murrin asked Rorick to recap the story, aiming to sharpen its clarity. He upheld every detail, telling it the same. Unsatisfied, the officers let it go.

Paramedics glued the cuts on his head, clearing his need for an ER visit. They recommended visiting his primary care, and the fireworks exploding behind his retinas guaranteed he’d stay conscious.

“We’ll keep patrols close.” Officer Murrin said. “Don’t hesitate to call if he remembers anything. Goodnight and be safe, Ms. Addams.”

Within fifteen minutes, they’d cut the crime scene tape, and retrieved their markers. Lingering film crews began closing shop as well. Neighbors poked & prodded their curtains discretely, wondering if anyone else saw the little people.

“It’s late.” Melinda said. “We can talk tomorrow. No chance you’re going to school on Monday.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“How’s your head?”

“I’m okay. Stings, but the bandages help. These bruises on my sides; their little fists were like getting jumped by a gang of golfers.”

“I still don’t-” She started. “Never mind. You take a shower; I’ll set the kettle.”

He walked straight to the wine bottles hanging in the kitchen, pouring a glass to the rim, then sipped a big gulp off the top and handed it to Melinda.

“Rorick! Seriously? You have a head injury.”

“I’ll be fine, I promise.”

She could slap him sometimes.

“Love you, Ma.”

“Love you too.”

He wished he’d set towels down before sitting on the couch.

III

New beginnings.

An unintentional twenty-three days off did a lot to set Rorick straight. The first couple weeks had been a rough go. But minor brain swelling was certainly preferable to AP Calc, relishing the endless excuse to sleep. His healing then bled into a lackluster spring break spent wishing he could be in the videos his friends posted. The parentless weekend at Heddy's cabin especially hurt to watch. Val & Chloe mid giggles in the hot tub. Tom & Connor gulping their solo cups on a losing streak. It wasn't fair. He's a victim with police orders not to leave town.

"I swear I left my wallet in the drawer."

Kind notes from well wishers cluttered every surface in his already messy room, but he thought it rude to toss them so soon, before the bouquets at least had a chance to die. The incessant falling leaves of cut roses to potted begonias turned their home into a potpourri dish.

There'd be baked goods stacked too if he hadn't shared the wealth whenever possible. Key club alone brought three full lemon meringue pies, weighing four pounds apiece! Of which, Officer Daniels' pregnant wife appreciated two. He often tipped his publicly paid private security in excess sugar. They deserved every divine calorie, considering how many local strangers & weirdos the story attracted.

Rorick spotted a sliver of worn leather peeking out at the corner of his desk near the window, hiding under the elongated photo frame he'd been meaning to hang. It arrived in a big box, to everyone's surprise. Luckily, no bomb diffusing robots were harmed, once they called the phone number located on its return address, discovering it to be a gift.

The county's minor league baseball team sent him season tickets wrapped in a classic cream & navy pinstripe jersey, embroidering RORICK 01 in needlework on the back. He planned to wear it to their season opener next weekend. But his favorite part was the signed maple bat gripped in a spongy auburn tape. Engraved along its thick reddened barrel proclaimed, *keep on sluggin*.

Rorick jabbed the curtains aside to scan the perimeter, hoping no news vans lurked about today. Even if Melinda suddenly changed her mind,

he'd never do one. Nothing good could come from repeating his demented ramblings in front of a camera, knowing the truth of every word. A genuine plea will ruin his life.

Police had already given him several tastes of that ridicule, dragged into an interrogation room for hours on end, so a new set of condescending grins had their chance to explain what he may have actually seen. He was ready to sign the confession if it meant he didn't have to take another walk of shame across the exhausted tip lines as a new urban legend spread wilder than the summer fires.

Meanwhile, detectives struggled to find any real leads. Blood samples proved inconclusive, and Melinda's colleague who deposed the Russian said he genuinely seemed confused by the allegations. Nor did his extended family make any suspicious contacts or payments, according to the ongoing IRS audits.

Omitting a greater motive, the attackers likely skipped town the same night. So, after three weeks of protective detail, the department decided to shift their resources in favor of frequent patrols. Melinda reacted expectedly, whereas Rorick celebrated by sparking a big blunt. Though grateful for the officers' commitment to his safety, it hadn't been his favorite, seeing cops posted day & night in front of their freshly fortified mailbox.

Soon, he'd have his own car parked there. Melinda found some decent options that had a vintage shine, alluring in a late-nineties way. He'd often pestered her for video games, not vehicles. Now, she refused to drop the subject. Who is he to turn down such a fine gift? They planned on checking a few lots this weekend. In the meantime, Tom offered his chauffeur services, promising breakfast bowls.

Today's ketchup exam will christen Rorick's return. Ms. Jacobs offered him another extension, but it's barely an essay, thinking it best to get done before he forgot the book entirely. For once, he'll be starting school energized, ready to learn, and thirsting for the comfort of a herd.

Downstairs, Melinda fiddled on her laptop cozily beside the fireplace.

"You posing for a Norman Rockwell today?"

Off her guard, he gave her a spook.

"Clarify your nonsense, child."

"I'm saying, why're you so special and pampered?"

"Working in style today. Three miles to the office is excessive."

“Lockdown seven-point-oh. Need anything before I go? Wouldn’t want you ruining your battle station doing peasant work.”

“I’m okay.” She smiled bigly. “I’ll go shopping once the morning rush settles. Anything for the list?”

“Hmmm, I’ll text you.” He said. “Also, think I might go to the girls’ basketball game later.”

“You’re up for it?”

“I could definitely use a night out, yeah.”

“Oh, Abby’s daughter’s on the team! I’ll see if she’s going, and we can leave early if your head starts to hurt.”

“Works for me.” He said. “But *this time*, if you’re going to bring wine in a water bottle, at least make sure it’s white.”

“Depends on my mood. Now go before you’re late.”

He threw a granola bar at her and sped out the door.

“Bye-eee.”

“Good luck on the test! Take your umbrella!”

And he did a little dance back in to nab it off the wall. Down the street lurked the Channel Five news van. He delivered them a proper headshake to express his disappointment, staring cross armed at their shameful behavior. They took the hint, fearful of Melinda’s wrath. The van turned using a neighbor’s driveway, fading in the morning fog.

With the world nice & quiet, he started the meager journey to campus, absentmindedly watching his steps. The oak tree roots had lumped the sidewalk, creating dangers in parading over the wrong slant. Most were still surrounded by the mushy remnants of their autumn leaves.

A few houses further had the roughest terrain after years of neglect. Its tall evergreens bent the fence, letting bugs drip sticky piles of honeydew. One dip in those puddles will ruin his shoes forever. Then came the familiar emphysemic horn of Tom’s unintentional low rider.

“Damn, your wounds are healing fast! Pull your hair back.” -Rorick did as commanded- “Ayy, the forehead tusks are gone. You good?”

“Everything’s chill, I guess. Lots of cops still creeping, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, you ruined my midnight runs. I’ve been waiting for my parents to pass out so I can smoke in my bathroom.”

“Bet that name hit, prior to you uttering it out loud.”

“Point is, those assfucks can eat shit and blow a cactus. But I doubt they’ll try again, cause my boy had ‘em running! AYO, Bark’s got bite!”

“Don’t start that again.” Rorick fought the laughter.

“Bark’s got bite, and fuckin elves belong on a shelf. I’m calling it now; pussies won’t be back. How’re the memories shaking?”

“Still fuzzy. It’s hard. Remembering stuff, I mean. Pieces go missing, even if I knew them before, and the whole story moves.”

“But the weird faced little people were real, right?”

“Yeah, don’t tell anyone. I’m serious.”

“Promise, I haven’t.” Tom assured.

“The cops already don’t take me seriously; I can’t be adding new crap now.”

“Everyone’s gone nuts. They’ll probably make it a holiday next year.”

“They can leave me the fuck out of it.”

“So, was it about the case, or were they trying to take you to Narnia?”

Rorick shrugged.

Tom parked at the fenced end; duly concealed, thanks to a douchey lifted truck straddling the line. Not that the white shirts trekked this far earlier than second bell. Recessing their seats, Tom snagged his pipe & the dryer sheet wrapped toilet roll.

“Those edibles by the way, *gyaddam*.”

“Yeah, dude. The cops walked me to the door; my nerves fried.”

“Told you they wouldn’t search you again.”

“Still stressful as hell.” Tom laughed. “The treats were good?”

“Man, they put me on the moon, home alone.”

“Sorry. It’s bullshit, you couldn’t come.”

“Chloe really asked about me?”

“Dude, I’m telling you, she was bummed. Jason tried to hook up with her, and she started ducking him. I told Val to invite her this weekend; we can ride together.”

“Ride where?”

“Who cares, fuck. There’ll be shit going on.”

“I’m down. The FOMO’s been real, and I think neighbors are spying on us.”

“Exclusively the psycho trash. Jack and Nanny came yesterday, so Crazy Red shows up uninvited. Couple drinks in, she’s yelling it’s your

mom's fault and you guys should move. We told her to mind her own business. She's full of shit."

Rorick dropped into his own lap, lying low, letting mini coughs dissipate smoke through the tube. "Like Crazy Red needs another reason to hate us. You ever seen her mantle through the window? The folded flags behind her magat trash? It's a Confederate flag, and... a German kaiser? She's a loon. Can't blame her." He heaved. "I talked my mom out of a hotel. We had no cops parked yesterday so she's on edge. She stayed home today. She's never done that. Ever."

"Sorry, dude. Fingers crossed she's okay."

"Thanks. I think she will be, eventually."

"How long would you be stuck in a hotel? Separate rooms at least."

"Obviously."

"You need alone time."

"That's what I'm saying! She's avoided bumping into anyone. If she finds out Red's on the offensive, she might book the room."

"It's not Red's call." Tom took his turn ducking. "My parents, and mostly everyone else, stood by you guys. Plus, it's pretty much done, isn't it?"

"We'll see. She really doesn't mix work and home."

"She'll win." Tom cleared his pipe.

"I hope so. She deserves it, and so do those fucking twats."

* * *

The essay prompt proved mediocre. Something about themes as they apply to stages along the Hero's Journey. At least Ms. Kaufman let him skip class and take it in the library. The rest of day went on & on & on & on & on & on. Too many strangers welcomed him as if they held the keys to campus. He didn't even see Chloe, and ate lunch next to the study rooms, hurriedly cramming the necessary formulas for his Calc exam.

Once home, he shot gunned an energy drink or four to keep off his mattress, in an attempt to power through the growing backlog of homework. His lack of resolve led to a sluggish pace, taking the sky from a dim gloom to a pitch dusk. In the aftermath, he found himself melted by the tranquility of heavy rain as Lo-Fi beats murmured behind his half-finished presentation. How easy it'd be to lie for another night and watch the world on several screens.

“Are you ready?” Melinda called.

“No, I’ll be another hour.”

He went for his rubber booties in the closet, sitting neatly below all the hanging attire, and picked a snug navy jumper to layer with whichever windbreaker he’d eventually choose.

“I’m leaving. It’s not a far walk; you’ll be fine.”

“You think you’re funny, but when I freeze out there, they’ll wake me in twenty-thirty-three and you’ll be nothing but bones and dust.”

“In twenty-thirty-three, I’ll be a fifty-two year old queen. And we’re getting Abby on the way, so hurry up!”

“*WHAT?*” Rorick let out a long drawn & dramatic groan. “Doesn’t she live way the other way?”

“It’s a few miles. Her car’s in the shop and Samantha’s already at school.”

“Okayokay, gimme thirty seconds.”

“Better hurry it up.”

He called Tom and asked if he’d left yet.

“Lemme ride witchu?”

“Aww yeah.”

“Cool, I’m set. No rush.”

“Gimme a half hour, if that’s Gucci.”

“Gucci-nuff. I’d wait a lifetime for you.”

“You got problems, man.”

Rorick latched his phone to its charger and crawled on the bed.

“Ma! Tom’s got me; you do your business!”

“Okay, come say goodbye.”

“You come here and say goodbye.”

“You don’t love me.”

“I do, but I’m busy!”

“Fine, I’ll see you at the game. Love you!”

“You’re still here?”

She clapped her hands at him.

“Yeah yeah, love you, love you. I’ll see you there.”

The garage door opening... and... she’s gone.

At half past, he sprang to action, fifteen minutes closer to satisfied. Swapping his t-shirt for the gift jersey, he opted to bring brown gloves, so his nippy nose could intermittently taste of pleather.

Rorick snuck into Melinda's special cabinet, filling his water bottle with the cheap stuff. A bonus sip for him went down like a flaming haybale right as Tom honked his arrival, already reeking of the finest skunks.

"Nice. I brought a bottle too, but it's whiskey."

"We can use it to pregame." Rorick said.

"Do you have any chaser?"

"Shit!"

He sprinted as best his boots allowed, vaulting the walkway puddle. After nearly breaking his ankle, Rorick thought it best to suffer wet sneakers. Upon his return, Tom had a new bowl packed & ready. They billowed the smoke close to the window cracks, in case an officer happened to pass on patrol.

Spectators had packed the front of the lot comfortably. Rorick pointed to a decent spot, concealed well amid the crowd. Friends happening by joined their car party, helping them clear the brown bottle as Tom's poor sound system did its best not to rasp around the lyrics. Twenty minutes past, he started to panic. Val usually went in during the third quarter and he wanted to be there.

To their misery, the gym doors had to be left open, or they'd locked automatically. Rorick tightened his layers, indulging fitfully to kindle his warmth. The sparsely dense bulk of attendees supported their own Shamrocks, sprinkling in a few of their purple Panther rivals on either side.

None's cheering compared Tom, breaking the sound barrier every time Val made the net swish. In the fourth quarter, an opposing guard shoved their captain causing a brawl, encouraged by the stadium's kindred chants. His parallel glee lost its magic, watching an anxious Samantha come to him in the stands.

"Hey, guess your mom's not answering her phone. Maybe she fell asleep?"

"She left before I did." A churning toiled deep.

Rorick walked across the bleachers, calling her to no avail.

"Hello, you've reached Melinda Addams with the district attorney's office..."

He hung up and called fresh.

"Hello-"

He called again.

"Dude, I can't get a hold of my mom."

Tom stood so they didn't have to talk loudly.

"Call her one more time."

"What if it's them?"

"Call her again."

They did. Still no answer.

"Five minutes." Tom said. "Another water and I'm good."

Rorick sat, throwing on his hood.

"You alright?" A friend asked.

"Yeah."

But his foot was tapping.

Tom gulped a third bottle.

"I'm fine, it was three and a half swigs."

At the inlets, Rorick noticed administrators anxiously scanning the crowd. He waved at his counselor Ms. Murphy and her wide eyes drained him of any wit. Sprinting between spectators, he leapt off the edge.

"Rorick. Come, please."

"Where's my mom?!"

Tom trailed best he could following the footpath, now listening if he support his friend. Ms. Murphy only signaled for them to step out, toothless in a bantam mist. Two men, standing sturdy as their suits demanded, remained at the lot entrance. Her heels pummeled the concrete faster than Rorick did in sneakers.

"Ms. Murphy! What. Happened. Please, tell me!" His voice cracked.

"The FBI agents are here for you. There was an accident."

"She went three miles up the road!"

Her stride accelerated.

She's fine.

She's okay

She's been through worse.

Nearing the two men, they flashed their badges.

"These are Agents..."

"...Dover, and my partner Agent Medani." He clasped Rorick's hand with both of his for a warm welcome on a cold night. "We're sorry to meet you under these circumstances. My partner and I have been assigned to investigate the increasing violence affecting a public official and her family.

The local authorities alerted us. Your mother was run off the road, causing her vehicle to flip. She's in stable condition, but sedated. There's an

ongoing manhunt, and we're concerned you might be targeted as well. She's being treated at a small clinic; we'll here to escort you safely."

Dover, a burly pinkish man, stood about 5'10. His partner was a lean & clean shaven African, towering at 6'2. They waited for Rorick to reply, but he struggled take a proper breath, drowning in a parking lot.

"Why's it so hard to capture these people?"

"You lowered their security, now his mom almost died!" Tom shouted. "Brilliant strategy; smooth sailing."

"They're not the local police, Mr. Healy." Ms. Murphy objected. "Let them do their jobs."

"We understand your frustrations." Agent Medani spoke with the tight rolling inflections of an African dialect, occasionally swapping long & short vowels. "Predictable harm is a failure of law enforcement." Even soft spoken, the scars of a turbulent life coarsened his sentiments.

"The best thing for us to do now is get you to your mother." Agent Dover refocused the conversation.

"I'm coming too." Tom shouted.

"Sorry." Dover refused. "This is still considered an ongoing attack. If anything happens to you, the Bureau is liable."

"I'll call you later."

Tom hugged him tight and promised Rorick everything would be okay. He then turned to the agents and gave them a clear set of instructions:

"Take care of my friend."

* * *

Rorick's thighs tensed each time they slowed at an easy yellow. It's all he could do not to rasp against the tightly padded leather seats in what became a heedlessly silent ride. Neither agent cared to interact, limiting their involvement to assigned duties; Medani, tweaked the police scanner at every crackle. It looked tersely rigged to the dash in an otherwise pristine Lincoln Continental. Rorick tried to distract himself by staring out the oversized moonroof with hardly a moon to see. Texting Tom diffused his anxiety, but he agreed, Rorick needed to insist. Even now, her lessons on how you talk to people had him searching for the right tenor.

Rorick cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, is there a siren, or something? We're going to cut through downtown if we go this way."

“We’ll be on the highway soon.” Agent Medani assured him.

But Dover already missed two entrances. At the next, Rorick pointed until they were committed to the course. He texted his mom again, dripping tears on the screen as he typed.

“Which hospital is she at?”

Medani craned his view past the headrest.

“Are you sending messages? Put your phone away!”

“I’m not going to tell anyone anything. Just calling for an update.”

“They’ll contact us if her condition changes.” Dover assured.

“It’s a hospital. The staff is very busy.” Medani added.

Now, Rorick’s foot wouldn’t stop tapping. He checked ahead for clinics in their direction. The closest was thirty-six miles, and it closed hours ago.

“There aren’t any hospitals this way. Where the hell are you taking me?”

Medani turned, flaring a gun.

“Give me the phone.”

The words were muffled by blood rushing to Rorick’s ears.

“Kidnapping me won’t help your boss.” Anger exceeded fear as he slapped his phone on the center console.

Medani paid him no mind, inspecting it briefly, then cracked the window to pushed it out onto the speeding highway below.

“Fuck! Guys! Please... I don’t- this doesn’t involve me.”

Dover relished the tears brimming in his captive's eyes. The glints in his own darkened irides salivated as if Rorick were a pot of gold.

“You really don’t know, do you?” He asked.

Medani butt the gun into Dover’s arm.

“It is not your place!”

“Know what? What’re you talking about?”

His tenacity wore Medani’s patience into another fit. The rage oozed so personally. Rorick wanted to signal for help, but only a moving van remained behind. Passing the final lampposts, they entered the darkness of the intertwined oaks & firs. Each side dwindled to a narrow single lane, lifted above the rain gutters.

I need to jump.

You’ll die.

If I stay, I’ll die.

Sixty. Miles. An hour.

I'll roll.

You'll DIE.

Logic failed to penetrate his anxiety. Rorick floundered, powerless to take more than hiccup sized breathes down a bone dry gullet. Below, he saw a balmy shimmer in the aqueducts, meaning they were flooded. Periodic breakers separated the dirt incline, too uncertain if he'd slip through or get a face full of concrete. His last recourse widened ahead, abandoned following a construction job.

*Press the release,
pull the lever,
tuck & roll,
protect your head,
run for cover.*

Dover veered in a fit! The roar of an old muscle car came too close, treading the line round the bend, opposite their lane. Its headlights turned into taillights without incident, but Dover cursed them all the same. His squeaky yammering was easily silenced by Medani coolly raising one finger to answer a buzzing phone call in his native tongue. Screaming on the other end caused him to wince.

“What are you doing?” Dover said.

Medani turned to see.

“Nothing. I grabbed the handle for balance.”

“I can see your hand on the seatbelt.”

Rorick stared blankly, turning to the window. He still had time. As the breakers' translucent grey line vanished, he pushed & pulled, but a lone click returned. They'd put the child safety on.

PLEASE LET ME GO

He refused to beg out loud.

In the midst of his own dread, Rorick saw Medani's eyes widen through the side mirror. He fumbled the radio in favor of his gun, right as the same sun worn muscle car cut lanes to match their speed. Dover cracked his window in confusion, thinking the driver would do the same. Instead, they overtook him and slowed. The ashen black muscle car swerved, blocking Dover's attempt to deviate.

“Who the hell is this?”

“We've got trouble.”

Rorick shielded himself.

Medani fired three shots. Three more when the driver didn't flinch. Dover squealed, jerking the wheel, nearly tipping Medani, who leaned beyond duty. Undeterred, he emptied his gun. The muscle car jerked, speeding off.

“Are you insane!” Dover yelled. “Give me some notice next time!”

He couldn't possibly be worth a gun fight.

“Shut up, they're coming back.”

“*MOVE! AHHHH-*”

Glass frolicked to the tugging sway of the car losing balance. Dover had gone silent immediately. Medani's regret ended on the breakers. The car posed at an angle momentarily, pulling him left as it tipped right. The hill, charging towards his window, powdered him in flakes. He hugged the seatbelt tight, letting an invisible hand wind him by the neck, synchronized to the car's tumble.

A spin.

Thrashing against the muddy cliff.

Another spin.

The hood splashed into the waterlogged gutter at the edge of the concrete. Its headlights, wedged. Everything else tore above the engine, violently rumbling as staggered stones anchored the trunk, toppling over a bigger bulge. What remained of the car landed on its side to scribe half a circle in the mud.

Rorick groaned, agonized by every movement. Distressed beeps haunted the dashboard, stalling the perversions of a looming black out. He retched, and heard it passing his right ear. The stench of bodily fluids, coupled with the airbag's aerosol, became suffocating. In front of him, Medani appeared dead or unconscious. Dover was most certainly dead, showering Medani in blood.

He pressed the seatbelt latch relentlessly, unjamming it on the twelfth try, falling where blood & bile made a revolting blend. Venting through the unstained part of his shirt was all he could do to breath. Crying, unable to move, the warm puddle seeped through each of his layers. But momentary

defeat may have saved his life, hidden to the yellow eyes searching overhead.

Her colossal top half stalked him eight feet above, shining light through her loose goo drops in place of hair. She wore a vest, shaped by leather scales, keener than the scute texture of her greyish green skin. Her fingers scarcely fit under the grip to jimmy its handle, bearing razor sharp teeth in irritation at the bent lock. Panicked hiccups belched the fear buried in his lungs. He never planned to die a rabbit's death.

Every so often, clangs by the roadside amplified her urgency, wary of her own predator. She pulled too hard, causing the handle to snap, howling & hitting the window, frantic to peer through the tint. She yielded her attempts at the approach of an associate Rorick had no interest in meeting. He noticed the moonroof slanted off its hinges, poised for a good kick.

Too late to flee, the sudden landing of an ash grey creature on the door above rattled the car. Rorick tightened the seatbelt, pulling himself deeper in the shadows, still as the quiver of his nerves allowed. The creature laughed in an aerated voice.

Horrorified, Rorick watched its mace punch a hole in the window. Splintered shards joined the debris collecting in his hair. The glass frosted, otherwise intact, congesting around the spikes. Thrashing suctioned its hold, refusing to let go.

Rorick shouldered the skylight, inadvertently hooking his beltloop to its hinges, tripping him where the hard earth turned slushy. He fixated on the darkest place between the trees, prevailing four wobbly steps in the mud before it whipped him down. Slithering, eyeless, waiting for him to make the wrong move. Not a creature, but a tail attached to the colossal woman in place of legs.

The grey thing cannoned into Rorick, confining him. Its haggard laugh tickled his skin, shaking too much to play dead, unsure if he'd pissed himself. The creature's fiery amaranth eyes exceeded the bounds of their indented sockets, below two shaved horns. It ran a long, sharpened finger across his forehead. The rest somehow curled neatly in a loose fist.

What the fuck.

What the actual fuck.

He heard a whistling first, and so did the grey creature. Suddenly, a blue glow skewered the side of its olive shaped head. His assailant reached to him for help, struggling to bear the weight of a shimmering trident atop

its broken neck. The weapon hypnotized Rorick. Its dowel resembled a sharpened arctic andara, radiating under a pristine white metal forming the vaulted outer prongs, aimed towards the same point in the shape of an arrowhead. Quicker than it came, the trident vanished leaving a mist of its imprint. Three craters erupted, releasing a familiar shade of red.

Trapped in binary thought, he tendered a shivering hand to his fallen foe. Nightmares usually end by now, and the cold doesn't prickle like this. He didn't want to see her tail swaying in the dark, distracted, fearing the clangs on the roadside, marred by an occasional shriek.

Rorick quietly heaved through the muck on all four, breaking for the trees. How easily she slid to pin him down, so angry. Condemning him to blame.

"I'M SORRY!" He shouted. But she didn't care, whether or not she understood, dragged deeper in the woods, extinguishing what little light the night afforded.

"NO! NO!" He kicked & squirmed. *"NOOOO!"*

The duff offered a hundred nicks before he found a decent stick. Rorick gouged her forearm hard as it'd go. The pitch of her cry, declaring her wrath. He may have drawn blood. Her patience worn; she whipped his chest to send him the distance of six trees.

His lungs, burning. Rorick tried not to writhe. He landed on a plump of freshly dampened brush, stumbling to his feet through a coughing fit. Her silhouette sharpened in the dark, leaving him no choice but to flee the way he came. At the main road, a large man probed the wreck. It's snout leaping to his scent.

"That's, that's a minotaur. That's a fucking minotaur?!"

The manbeast wore its own fur for warmth, wielding a battle axe on the unplated shoulder; the other, fastened in a leather belt matching its breeches. A steel helm covered its oxen head, curving to hold each mighty horn. It came closer, emphasizing the true horror of its size. Rorick narrowly rivaled the beast's waistline.

He backed away at its pace, right into the serpent woman's rigid underbelly. Her cackle weakened him, twining his frame. He looked his most pauper, staring up at her, begging. Then flickers above collided. A shooting star, spearing one of the bug eyed little people out of the sky. The other dashed to evade the trident's next shot.

A woman stood on the breakers, unmistakable in her moonlit armor. It seemed more ice than metal, thickened where blows may prove lethal. She threw a man's body in front of the bull to its disbelief. It roared, inciting the serpent woman to snatch Rorick under an arm, clamoring for the shadows of the forest.

“HELP!” He shouted at the top of his lungs. “HELP ME, PLEASE!”

Distracted by his plea, an arrow spiked his savior's head, spared death by her smooth & rounded helm. Though it rocked her good, she strafed hard, jumping down to meet the bull.

Her eyes, now fixed on two enemies. She stayed low, inching forward. Arrows volleyed, to no avail. She'd learned their rhythm and danced her trident towards the beast, charging at a speed unthinkable for its size. A hard thrust soared her trident high, barely missing its agile target, reappearing in her hands as she stabbed down into the bull's unplated shoulder. She stepped on its head and thrust the trident again, this time piercing the center spike between its bowling ball eyes. She had a genuine angst in her stride, running towards Rorick. But the bull tackled her legs.

“LET ME GO!”

Punching her sides cost him dearly. Flailing slowed her better, landing a kick or two on her chin. Annoyed, she pinned him to a tree yelling to stop, he assumed. Her goo drops in range, Rorick wrenched to see how easily they'd rip. She grabbed his wrists, helping him pull harder in the effort to get him off.

They both let go at the sound of rapidly approaching splattered in the mud, rotating in time to stare at her own death; three prongs, gutting her belly. His savior drove the trident higher, savaging the serpent woman's lung. She squirmed inches from Rorick, gurgling, reaching out to strangle her killer. She wanted to avenge herself, if she could only reach.

He chose to not wait & see. A new rain had quickly flooded the path, seeping through the compacted leaves. His shoes became heavy, tramping the serpent woman's scurried tracks. It led him safely to the corpse littered wreck, and the hill behind. Digging deep, he sought the coarse earth underneath the sludge, no matter flesh its cost his fingers.

At the corner of his sight, the manbeast fought to rise, lacking its wits. Rorick leaned higher to compensate for the reticent change in his pace. At the top, he hugged the asphalt, briefly sprawling. The frigid air burned his

beaten chest, and dogged pants impeded his endeavor to rise faster than the bull.

“No no no. Please, no.”

A human body sat slumped against the moving van. He thought to blame himself for the senseless loss of an innocent victim who'd stopped to help. And yet, he noticed the dead man left three lines of blood as he slid down the cargo box, having soiled himself at the end, and the rain spread it well. Rorick pushed the body straight, in search of keys or a phone, trying not to inhale nor gawp at the lifeless scowl of a familiar young face. Dumbfounded, he realized it was his attempted abductor.

A large shadow dimmed the waning moon. Rorick dove under the van; its hooves, clacking nearby. In an instant, his cover was gone. The manbeast leaned as a shot putter would, and threw the van far into the woods, roaring at him. By then, Rorick was halfway to nowhere, miles from civilization. But the clacking followed, dominating his own steps.

Don't you dare check.

The wind tickled his cheek, bracing himself. Everything went black until the ground caught his shoulder. With each bounce, he left more of himself behind, tumbling to a stop. One arm trapped over his head. The other, wedging his hips. He gave up. He had nothing left. Rorick waited for the bull to kill him or take him.

“GNAAAAHHHHHH!”

Something happened outside his tilted view. He jerked his arms to their sides, and there she was. Standing on the back of the beast. She twisted the trident at the base of its neck, severing the spine. Rorick took his last breath, letting everything fade away, feeling an odd sense of comfort as it happened.

IV

*Sympathy means to have never experienced such a pain.
It is the luxury of a sheltered life.*

Pouring outside.

He came to, already staring aimlessly at the storm's heavy patter. Six dusty clerestories let in a washed light, filtered through the thick grey clouds. They were fenestrated unevenly below the high vaulted ceiling, having sagged over time, most like.

Slowly, Rorick eased himself to the swollen headboard of the spring loaded twin mattress he found himself upon. A manageable task, stiff as it was. Crisps in the morning air sharpened the exposed hairs at the bend of his neck, missed by the space heater's glow. Exhaustion softened his will, deciding to rest a moment longer and observe his sanctuary.

The deep brown furniture shared a seemingly laminated oak grain, purchased in the same mid-eighties catalogue. It hardly matched the especially yellow pine walls. On his second pass, he realized the desk was a repurposed dining table, reflecting a glass center under the document piles. Next to it sat a curio cabinet turned library.

Scents of old paper & hoary cotton resonated from four or five dozen haphazardly stacked book towers. A hand fought to reach the tickle in his nose; bandages wrapped the bends of his arms, well painted in dry blood. So much did his head jolt & bounce, he worried pressing on it might leave an impression.

His burdens, mollified. He knew she had to be close. Patting his surrounding in search of his phone, a shiver trailed his spine at the thought of Medani feeding it to the window. How surreal, the swirling memories wriggled. The languor, worsening his pain. Then it clicked.

“Somebody, *HELP!*”

Covers thrown; he stomped on a small bookstack, hurling paper daggers in every direction. Fresh blood soaked through his wrappings as he crashed to the floor, dripping on the remaining pile under his shins. Panicked, he did his best to gather those fallen on bent pages, doubly bruising his badly beaten chest, forgetting to set them down before adding another.

Where is she??

STOP!

The old house squeaked at someone's approach. Rorick followed each hurried step down the hall, right to the door swinging open. Saving him, he saw little more than a shielded glance. Yet he had no doubt, this was her. A seraph in her own right.

"Stop, stop. You're going to tear your stitches."

She was several years his senior. Tall & a total beefcake. Her sharp eyes had a quiet flame, reddish brown in hue, with the sandy skin of ancient queens who ruled long buried empires. In place of casual clothes, she wore a sleeveless grey doublet buttoned down the middle, and tight black leggings under leather shin guards, matching the pair on her forearms.

Swift as he'd pick up a cat, she gracefully set him on the bed. Though, the turbulence reeled his nerves, it wasn't the cause of his tears. She replaced the collapsed books, leaving a topside view of the darkly golden frizz, coming down to her shoulders in waves like a lion's mane.

"My mom... they, they said there was an accident. Is she okay?"

His savior stopped. Her devastation, speaking a worse truth.

Rorick fell to the floor without ever moving.

"I'm sorry."

"NO! YOU'RE WRONG! LET ME SEE! I NEED TO SEE!"

"I'm- there wasn't anything I could do."

"No no no," Rorick whispered endlessly, "no no no, no no no....."

"I had no way of tracking her."

"Where's my phone? WHERE'S MY PHONE?!" Absorbed in his panic.

"I- I didn't know to look for that."

"There's a computer downstairs." A frailer voice said, entering. It was an elder woman, using a cane to take the first of every step. "The story's on the news as well."

"What'd they do?! WHAT DID THEY DO??"

His savior helped the elderly woman sit in an antique chair by the door, shifting her caution to Rorick's bandages upon her return.

"These should be replaced."

He grabbed her hand as she started to walk away again.

"Please, tell me."

Hesitant, she caved.

"There's a lot to explain... and... they attacked her too."

His whole body convulsed. He wanted to run home. If he called her, she'd answer this time, worried about him. They'd pack for the hotel, or leave town forever. He hid the misery using his knees, rocking back & forth. Broken.

"My parents were killed by them too." She said. "An attack on our city. I was fourteen. I wish I could say to you not to worry. That things will get better, or that everything will work out in the end. Even if I could make that promise, the hurting wouldn't go away." Her accent had sharp rolls. Her tone, a soft rasp. "Just know, I'm here for you."

"I don't even know who you are." He was so tired. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Rorick. You're allowed your anger, and confusion. I'll be right back, let me find fresh bandages in the washroom."

"Can I have water too?"

He practically ingested the glass, sulking low to run through the motions at her command. Gently, she straightened his arm.

"It's my fault you're in this shape." She announced in shame. "Those weapons are new to me. The window exploded, and I tried to hit the passenger side, but the car swerved hitting the driver, and..."

"Don't worry." His nostrils heaved. "The accident wasn't too bad, for me anyway, so you did me a favor."

"I could've killed you."

"You were the only one out there *not* trying to kill me. I still don't-

He winced at the hot towel collecting dry sweat, carefully evading his abrasions. To dry him, she lightly dabbed the moisture using a starchier towel. The stitches settled evenly, professionally done. And the surrounding area wasn't so peeled as he'd expected. Once his arm sat snugly wrapped again, she moved to the next limb.

"Do you understand what you saw the other day?" She asked.

Rorick nodded.

"The other day?"

"You've been in and out of sleep. I brought you here at about twenty-one on Monday. It's now quarter to eight, Wednesday morning."

Already, this was a lot to take in.

"I don't... what am I supposed to ask you?"

He winced again as she swabbed his other arm.

"My name is *Thera** (Teh-rrah. Exuding a breathy T)." His savior said. "I come from somewhere very far from here; though, I'm not sure how

far exactly. *Totéhn** (Toh-teehn.) as well, and her husband *Aminus** (Ah-mee-nooss.). This is their home, about an hour north of yours.”

“How’d you find me? Why were you looking for me? Why were those *things* looking!” He caught himself before kicking dirt into his own eyes. “The case was about money laundering, and they bring out actual monsters?”

“They’re not monsters for existing in their form.” Totéhn tenderly cut in. Her accent had a unique cosmopolitan blend, suppressed by her decades living here. “Those were bad people, willing to harm an innocent woman and youth.”

Thera nodded in agreement.

“I’m sorry, okay.” Her sincerity guilted him. “None of this tells me...” The lump in his throat refused to let him finish.

“It’s not an easy story to start from the beginning, or even what to consider the beginning. Let me finish changing your bandages.”

The serpent woman flashed Rorick out of reality. Then the details faded, leaving her eyes. Two yolks in a worn frying pan.

“She was a Medusa.”

Totéhn tittered, nodding. Thera missed the reference.

“Their race is *Syreni*.” Totéhn explained, “But you’re correct. Gorgon is one of many names this world gave them, depending on cultural connections. You may’ve noticed, they can’t turn living organisms to stone. I often wonder how mytho-stories originate.”

One of many...

“Are you telling me...”

Totéhn regarded him, wide eyed. A loving look that said he could do no wrong. It was weird. And uncomfortable. But she’ll probably have to throw these sheets out, so he decided to call it even.

“They’re wonderful people, off a battlefield.”

“Fuck... what the fuck... What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.”

She taught him her breathing exercises. The air, filling his belly.

“Honestly, your reaction is sensible. How many can say they discovered other races exist in the middle of an ambush? And I watched you; you don’t linger. Quick thinking will save your life, time and again.

“Was he really a Minotaur?”

“*Tauram* for the large one with the horns; *Aos Sí* for the ones with wings, and *Wetiko* for the grey ones.” Thera explained.

“*See-renni, Tow-rram, Wet-teeko, and Ace-she?* Okay. Okay.” Fighting the urge to broaden his hyperventilating. “Why’d I meet them at all? Am I the punchline of a sick joke? They’ve been here this whole time?”

“Not until very very recently.” She assured. “We’ve had a longstanding separation of our, societies. And... time works differently there. It’s been hundreds of years for us; thousands of years for you. Your-well, Kallias came here decades ago, and was the first to do so in centuries, by time on our world. A very select few have been allowed to travel since. Totéhn and Aminus, included.”

Totéhn fluttered two fingers in the background. He’d forgotten about her a few times, how still she sat. Upright, staring intently, balanced on her cane.

“Have you spoken to your father?” She asked plainly.

“Hm? Oh, no. It’s just... it was just...” Pressure built in his throat.

“You’ve never had contact?”

An aversive sensation prickled his skin.

“You think... they attacked me, *twice*.” His conviction flared.

“Do you know anything about him?”

“Not much, I was the product of a hookup she decided to keep since she had no other family. Her parents died in an accident her junior year of undergrad. I was born about five months after she finished law school.”

“Did she ever describe him?”

“Um, yeah, a bit. He had a Mediterranean accent, and was tall. NBA tall.”

Thera’s eyes widened faster than she could play it off, the flush boiling his face.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“Breathe, Rorick, breathe.” She rubbed his back.

“Stop. No excuses; tell me the truth right now.”

After thinking a moment, she went to the lower cabinet of a smelly old armoire on the other side of the smelly old dining desk. Upon her return, she held a carved wooden globe in each hand; one, slightly more than half the size of the other. The engravings measured sea levels & mountain ranges, still holding enough paint to tell their stories.

“I was saving these for later, but they might be a better place to start.”

The globes weren't merely different in size; the bigger one had completely different landmasses, small & strewn across four continents; the two largest, connected through an arc shaped isthmus. Icy above & below, same as the smaller globe, which had *Gaea* written on the spoke piercing Santa's house. The larger one used an unfamiliar alphabet.

“It says *Terra*.” She put her finger by the letters, then twisted it towards the biggest continent, pointing at the largest word, “*Nameam Ter*”.

“It means Land of the Spirited.” Totéhn beamed. “Before coming here, our nations exclusively had titles. *Salus** (Sah-looss) designed the modern maps and thought it fit well.”

Solid lines divided the mainland into three pieces. The top left ended in a spray of at least a dozen jagged peninsulas, reading “*Chicomoztoc*”. To its right, “*Rīkr*; the Realms” trailed northeast into the arc. And beneath their bulk, a toppled pillar lengthened coast to coast bore the title, “*Olympos*.”

Shivers mounted Rorick's spine. He caressed the grooves of the mountain ranges. If these globes were accurate to scale, then Olympus alone had to be the size of North America.

She pointed at the left portion, “Countless tribes live here. *Hemera*.”

“It's the largest nation on the continent, by population as well.” Totéhn explained. “*Hemera* is the western half, and the native home for a collection of races known as the *Anunnaki** (Ah-noo-nah-kee.), who aren't fond of being called Olympian. Recently, they've adopted the moniker *Ennean* in honor of the *Great Ennead*, who ruled the Lands of *Punt* and *Manu* during what's considered the *Anunnaki* golden age.”

“They're part of...” A word so familiar yet so unnatural. “*Olympus*? Why?”

“Centuries old conquests.” Totéhn, in nothing more than a factual tone. “Colloquially renamed *Hemera*, after one of our ancient deities, when we still had such things. Home to the rising sun, it's largely a desert. *Nyx* is the eastern portion. Even at the peak of winter, selective regions stay fertile. The purple star is our capitol, *Olympia*. Considered the birthplace of civilization on our world. A shining example of victors writing the history books.”

Rorick gawked at the *Terra* globe as it glibly twirled.

“The land bridge is huge.”

“*Bilröst*. It's mostly frozen.”

“And here is...?”

“*Gigu Ter.*”

“Lets... it’s unnecessary additional anxiety.” Totéhn said.

Thera named a few others instead, “*Ergeneqon, Sigi Tolo, Hanan Pacha, Hawaiki, Penglai* and *Hōrai*. We’ll do a proper geography lesson later. Your story and troubles started here.” She refocused the globe on Olympus. “The two halves have a violent history, even before the first *Zeus* started conquering Anunnaki lands.”

“The first who? *T’ssay-ooss?*” Rorick jumped in.

“They use a different phonetic here, *Zoos.*” Totéhn tittered. “Thera is using the native form. Our languages rarely use a ‘zee’ sound.”

“Oh, of course.” Unable to contain his fit. “So, am I Zeus’ baby or grandbaby?”

“The one you’re referring to has been dead for centuries.” Totéhn reproved. “A powerful king, yes, but still a mortal man.”

“His last descendant on our world was *Kallias Iovis Zeus.*” Thera said through her own pain. “He raised me since before I turned thirteen. I had two fathers taken by the same man. Seeing you... despite all the good he’s done on our world, I realize, you have every right to hate him.”

“Why would I hate him?”

“Because, Kallias was your father.”

An arid warmth staled Rorick’s chest, mixing guilt, sadness, and anger; heightening his nausea somewhat. Probably from finding out they’re both gone on the same day. It meant more to Thera, that much he saw plainly.

“I don’t hate him.” The words stumbled out. “Harder to blame the dead, I guess. I’m confused though.” He straightened his sagging. “I thought his name was Rorick?”

“He penned a name?”

“Well, she didn’t pick it out of a newspaper! Long story short, they met at a bar. She said hi. He bought her a drink. Next day, he was gone.”

They pondered on the same thought.

It was Thera who whispered, “A Zeus shall never share their name.”

Totéhn bobbed her agreement.

“Say again?” He asked, impatient.

“It’s tradition for the lineage, and law for everyone else.” Totéhn said. “No one but a Zeus can bear the name, and each Zeus shall bear their own

name. If he used an alias for an explicit encounter, it suggests he may have expected your arrival.”

“No.” Rorick, vehement in his verdict. “Don’t even try to suggest she knew. She didn’t believe me! I watched her fear and confusion these last few weeks.”

“We’re not implying she did.” Thera slammed on the brakes to clarify. “I think what Totéhn meant is, he knew about you.” Pulling an envelope from her pocket.

Inside, the letter held a picture of Rorick between its folds. He had to be about middle school age at the neighborhood basketball courts, wearing his favorite shorts at the time. Black, lined by white streaks. And behind Rorick’s jump shot, he saw Tom’s hair fluttering. He wondered how often they’d watched him. The letter itself was six pages, written in a garishly fluid cursive. Thera pointed to the last paragraph on the third page:

“And now you’ve lost again. I can’t console you this time, but you must be strong. Though I may be gone, Zamara will not share my end. Take a vial of my blood, and find him on Gaea. Bring him here, he will survive the trip. Share your strength. Exchange your best practices. You’ll be the finest of our lines.”

Skimming the rest, it neglected to go into great detail about his odd choice of secrets. The letter mainly discussed personal memories, or used terms Rorick lacked the context to appreciate. Again, he spoke of *Zamara*, and how its loss exposed him in the trenches. Above his signature, he left a parting wisdom:

A day cries for no one. Please don’t waste too many on me.

-Kallias

Rorick set the pages aside, a droplet smudging the print. He apologized to Thera. She hugged him tight and told him it’s okay. He wished he’d been able to read it in the right voice. But the current crisis also made him want to punch the man.

“He mentions, a vial of his blood?”

From her other pocket, Thera retrieved a round glass flask, sealed by a small cork. The water inside had a murky gloom, submerging a robust

needle. She held it flat, swaying the flask between them. The needle, always pointing right to him.

“Wow.” He said in horrified amazement. “How’s it doing that?”

“It’s called a *spal’d*. Those who has a *simul* in their direct lineage can be tracked using blood of the current bearer.”

“*SpAhld. See-mool.*” He repeated.

She nodded her approval at his attempts, unlacing her right gauntlet to show the markings of a trident etched into her meaty forearm. Its staff of blue & white led to three prongs, pointed as an arrowhead would. Moving subtly, it resembled breathes, noticeable to a long gaze.

“You have a mini version?”

“No.” She laughed.

Her hand flickered, and the trident appeared amid an empty silence, glowing in a moonless light. Up close, its chill resonated, frosting the air in the blue of its aura; rippling as the center of an ocean does on a calm day. She stood tall, showing how high it towered, then rolled it on the back of her hand into a spin at full speed between the book towers. He cheered, lightly patting the bandages to feign an applause. Totéhn joined the celebrations as Thera took a bow.

“Its formal name is *Neptuciu* (Nehp-too-sheh.), but I call mine *Cypraelia** (Cehp-reh-lee-ah.)”

“Has to be a Poseidon thing, right?”

“He means *Poh-seh-dow-ohn?*” She turned to Totéhn for clarification, who nodded. “Then yes, it is a *Poh-sy-dun* thing. Once a part of my father, his father, and so on, including *Poseidaon*. But he inherited it, same as me.” She explained. “Its older history is lost to time, and changes shape depending on the bearer. My father’s was bright gold and much thinner.”

She crushed it in her hand, disappearing so fast it left a lingering outline.

“That thing can do a lot of damage. Watching you work, I just knew...” Rorick found himself lost in admiration. “You had the armor too.”

Her trident’s inscription leaked a silver liquid, seeping beneath her clothes, unsoaked. Spilling up her face to cover her completely.

“It was the water immersing my ancestor’s body when they created *Neptuciu*. I practiced a lot to flow its form continuously in a fight.”

“No other *Neptun* has ever used it in such a way.”

“Crazy.”

“What do you mean?” Thera laughed.

“It’s a compliment.” Totéhn illuminated.

“Yeah, I’m... I’ve never seen anything like it before. But like, even we’ve heard of Poseidon’s- sorry, Poh-say-dow-awn’s trident, even if it’s just a myth here. Those are simul, right? How do you make them?”

“A complicated and deadly process.” Totéhn explained. “The host can pass it to solely to their direct descendants. Even then, there’s no guarantee it’ll take. But it’s certain death for persons outside the direct bloodline to try.”

Rorick inched towards the marking, anticipating permission to touch. Her skin had a soft grainy texture, more stone than callous underneath.

“You’re saying I have one of these?”

“You do, in your lineage, fairly different than the standard. There’s a famous book discussing your line in detail, written by *Onesimus** (Oh-neh-see-moos.). I’m sure *Anton** (Ahn-Tuhn.) and *Dorra* have a dozen copies.”

“Different how?”

“The bags under your eyes have drooped to your cheeks since we started talking.” Totéhn shifted in her seat. “We can continue this later. There’s much to cover, we would need the whole day to scratch the surface. You should rest.”

He might’ve argued, had his body not taken her side. Thera adjusted his pillows, loosely cloaking the comforter. Totéhn plugged in her old sound system, preserving a Josh Groban disc for at least a decade. Lulled, the door closed.

* * *

He woke to pastries & tea sitting by his bedside, past dusk, dark in the room as it was outside. After devouring the jelly filled doughnut, he carried himself to the door. Its loud pop briefly faltered his balance, opening towards him.

“Rorick?” Thera called below.

“Yeah.”

“Wait, I’ll help you.”

Seeing the stairs brought back his exhaustion, not yet mentally prepared for the journey. Thera moving him proved too strenuous, helping him reach the bathroom instead. She returned carrying fresh tea, meeting him bedside to ease his settling. Totéhn joined in her own time; the stove,

not quite ready to be left alone. Together, they enjoyed sips of warmth in mostly silence. Thera especially seemed to be waiting for him to start.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“I don’t follow?” She asked.

“How do I explain what actually happened?”

Their expressions, strained.

“Rorick, you can’t stay here.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. I’ll sell the house, collect the life insurance, and disappear into witness protection.”

“You can’t-”

“No, you can’t. Sorry, don’t drag me into your mess. I don’t want to be a part of it. Thank you for saving me. I don’t want to be a part of it.”

“Simul prolong the decay of their dead host. They’ll never stop hunting you.”

“They’re using his blood too?! Are they here now?” He whispered.

“Heavy rain obstructs their ability to track you at a distance.”

“Rain...” This had to be a practical joke. “What are these rules.” He found himself cracking. “Who wrote this garbage?”

“*Ahahem.*” Totéhn cleared her throat for the room’s attention and, by the sound of it, she’d been raring to. “Simul aren’t well understood, but they’re not magic. No matter their form, they all behave in the same general way, made from an exotic matter used to generate an extreme force, or negate them. Or permeate through them without damaging... well, itself anyway. For reasons yet unknown, simul can only be generated by *Álfar* or *Homin* on Terra. Thera and I are *Homin*; you’d call *Álfar* Elves.

Most are created in desperation after losing a limb, so the person can work. Dying in process meant one less mouth to feed, and surviving its intrusion offers significant benefits, including hyper resistance to ailments, increased strength and stamina, and a faster physical recovery period, including mortal wounds.

Simul aren’t common in Olympus anymore. It’s an archaic form of social security, better addressed using modern safety nets. They’re prevalent in times of war, if fighters lose a limb, or seek an old glory. Those are rarely passed down, not being worth the risk of death in peaceful times. The average success rate on record is about sixty-two percent. For your line, it’s ninety-one.

The dynastic forms tend to be *powerful* weapons, belonging to conquerors and their councils; though, time has claimed many of them as well. Most of the famous bloodlines ended in battle or an exchange gone wrong. In some cases, the heirs simply didn't want it.

A longstanding superstition complicates things even worse; that the number of descendants affects the transfer success rate. Meaning, excessive options may reduce the likelihood a simul bonds to the first few attempted hosts. Discounting the affairs, your bloodlines typically tapered the nuclear family, seldom bearing more than an or two offspring. As did others, which is why they're at risk of dying off over the centuries. Time always wins in the end."

"Go back to the exotic part." His ire, tempered. "You lost me pretty hard."

"It can be confusing even for an expert, if any can claim to be." Totéhn briefly searched her mind. "Have you studied viruses in school? Simul are a similar principle; they're neither alive nor dead, nor conscious, yet are activated by residing in a host. But a simul isn't carbon based, or helium based, or arsenic based. They are wholly their own unique composition."

Thera's trident reappeared in her grasp. Eyes locked, she stabbed into the meat of her forearm, laughing at his squirms. It projected through her; hollow, yet intact. She brought the tips close to a book on the floor, repelling it as magnets do, pressed against a matching force. Then tapped the tips on the same book.

"So that's how you avoided the stacks, spinning all fancy."

"Yeah." She grinned a toothy grin. "It's a party trick. Simul don't willingly interact with normal matter. But because we're united, I can control the effect. Don't ask me why; I try not to think about it, testing my boundaries."

Totéhn leaned on her cane in an effort to rise.

"Let me check the oven. You two continue; I'll be in the kitchen."

"Do you rest?" Thera asked.

"No..." it was hard for him to admit, "...I'd rather not to be alone right now."

Thera found that reasonable.

"Let's talk then." She dipped a biscuit in her tea. "Even if the circumstances aren't great, I'm really glad to meet you."

“You too. Thank you for saving me. My toddler apology earlier flopped, so here’s me saying it proper.”

“Family’s for the hailstorms.”

“We are family, huh? Never had any siblings, or relatives, or pets. Just a happy home.” Tears blurred her. “How ‘bout you?”

“My mother’s side is large. On my father’s, I’m the last.”

“You’ll be queen if you go back?”

“I want to free my people and return to my homeland.”

“Where’re you from?”

“*Atalancai** (Ah-tah-lahn-shay.). Atlantis, you call it; I remember that one.”

“Of course you are.” He sniffled.

She pointed at a cone, cutting out the southwest corner of Olympus.

“Are those rings islands?”

“Mhmm.”

“And they’re natural formations?”

She nodded.

“Four million people live there, including many farms. Another sixty thousand live on the mainland, fourteen kilometers outside the city walls.”

Sparks tingled Rorick.

“I’m slowly realizing; we’re talking royal lines. You’re an actual princess?”

“In my old life.” She shrugged, sounding as she would about a childhood hobby.

He waited a bit longer, hoping her answer might expand.

“Does Olympus have a monarchy?”

“It’s a republic now, but you were close to being a prince, if I catch your meaning.” She jeered. “Your grandfather ruled as the last king of Olympus. Kallias abdicated the throne after spending a decade here. He urged my father to do the same, designing an elected government. I met him, I think was five or six. My parents forced me to present flowers; I was so mad I had to wear a dress. Then they disappeared into my father’s study the rest of the day. Kallias found out about my tantrum, and personally apologized for showing the Crown Princess of Atalancai such contempt.

He spent the month trying to bring rail lines to the city. My bed maids laughed at the idea of putting a hole in the city walls. They didn’t

understand how bad the famine was any more than I did. If my father had listened, we could've brought in supplies to alleviate the suffering."

"You said *they* killed our parents. Who's 'they'?"

"I don't blame the poor, seeking a better life. *Mathas Akena** (Maht-hahs Ah-keh-nah.) ordered the execution of my parents, and yours."

"Who? No, no. I don't care. How'd you deal with losing your parents? Because I- I can't. I want to keep talking so I don't have to think about it and, and..."

He crumbled again.

"It's okay, Rorick."

"I need to see her."

She didn't want to say he can't.

"When Atalancai fell, your father helped me escape safely and brought me to Olympus. Everyone cared for me; loved me like their own. Still, I barely said a word for weeks. Never thanked them, or shared a meal. Never cleaned a mess, or touched my dishes. A piece of me was ripped out. The hole lasts. The edges heal. I found my way on my own terms. You will too."

Her words were a lighthouse.

"Sorry for being so rude. I... whoever those guys are, I hate them."

"Your languages..." She impishly puffed. "It's not as bad as French. Furniture being a boy or girl is nonsensical."

"Yeah, gendered objects are annoying. And conjugations. How do you guys- sorry; how do y'all say it in your dialects?"

"In *Laschma** (Lah'sh-mah.), the Olympian language, we say *geds*, referring to a group that's not only *fum*, guys. *Gi atta ged s uram*. 'Geds of all kind' or 'People of all kind'. But it's how your language uses the word 'guys' to call a group. In *Atla*, my native language, it's *ges** (Geh'sh.), which is also the word for family in *Fraza*, the primary Anunnaki dialect."

A satisfying explanation.

"Fair enough." He nodded. "Fuck those *gaeds*."

Thera looked happy to get a smile out of him.

"I'd sooner stake them." She said.

"So does this Matt guy live in Ata...lan... Atalan... Atlantis now?"

Begrudgingly, she nodded.

"And I intend to take his head where he took theirs."

“Watching you work, I believe you.” He corrected his slouch, unbothered by the aches. “So everyone does his bidding, no questions asked?”

“He claims it’s a wartime occupation, and holds the city as *Am’Ad’ifa*; sort of the general of generals. His *Ad’ifa* swear loyalty to him, and the *corfum* swear loyalty to their specific *Ad’ifa*. It’s why I don’t hesitate, championing a battle. They’re warriors; they’ve made their choice.”

“Speaking of which…” He switched to a murmur. “The bodies are…?”

“Gone, after a very long night.” She snorted, eating a grape. “I threw the dead off the road and straightened the barriers as best I could, then put you in the car and moved it about a kilometer up the road. I had to take all the bodies deep into the woods, which wasn’t hard since this world’s gravity is at best seventy percent of ours. And Cypraelia dug the shallow holes easily since I compressed the corpses.”

“Compress?”

She squished her hands together, splatting her tongue.

“It wasn’t messy; I used my ice to box them individually. But you can hear an awful crunching, then *pop*.”

He really wished he hadn’t asked.

“The part I’m lingering on is… you said kilometer. Are you telling me there’s a whole ass other planet is using the metric system before these United States?”

“Yeah, nobody warned me what a mile is.” She hiccupped mid laugh. “I thought your people adopted new measurements.”

“Definitely not new. We’re stubborn if nothing else. But I’m glad there’s no secret government taskforce handling disposals.”

“Nope. Your world’s forgotten us.”

“And you’re here.”

“This is actually my first trip.”

“Really?”

“It’s also my first time meeting Totéhn and Aminus. Well, I arrived twelve days ago. They left long before I came to Olympus.”

“I would’ve guessed you two were family.”

“In a way we are.” Thera granted.

“I’m almost afraid to ask your opinion of our world.”

“It’s beautiful! I saw a lot, traveling the thousand kilometers here. So peaceful, but the air smells really bad in congested places. *Gasoline* is the vilest thing I’ve ever come across, besides sewage or a battlefield.”

“I kinda enjoy it. Smog does suck though. Fresh air is why lived out here.”

“Prudent and sensible.”

“You have cars on your world?”

“Yes, they’re a fairly new development. Olympus has had them for about thirty years, and everything is powered using grids designed by *Bramia* and *Colperna*. They’re the sweetest. Part of Totéhn’s original band.”

“How long have they been coming here?”

“Over a hundred years I think, based on your world. I’m not so good at math.”

“A hundred years?!”

“Kallias and Anton arrived here in eighteen-ninety-seven.”

“No fucking way.”

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“Nineteen-twenty-seven.”

“How long were you here?” Rorick asked, comfortably seated in the couch corner closest to the fireplace. It’d taken a united effort, migrating downstairs. Thera hovered as though her toddler were practicing his balance.

“Between then and thirty-eight, most of us studied here full time. Sammu and Ammy did a venture loop; traveling, Europe to Olympos in less than a Gaean year. Salus went twice. Kallias and Anton had presented us with a comprehensive model of their infrastructure plans; our assignments were to figure out how to make certain phases possible across varying fields, which became increasingly tricky to scale since coal and oil were not allowed. We left in thirty-eight, seeing another war on the horizon, giving us time to build universities and take on ministerial positions.

We returned in the sixties, coming and going a lot for the next three decades. Aminus and I asked for permission to permanently settle here in nineteen-ninety-eight, ready to step aside. Several generations of our students have become brilliant professionals and academics in their own right. We went from crude generators to full scale modern cities within two decades or so. That took a lot of people doing the right thing for the right reasons. They’re our proudest legacy, and they’ve outgrown our guidance.”

“You don’t miss it?”

“Of course, but this is our home.” Totéhn said, chopping carrots to toss in the bubbling stew. She preferred them a little less cooked to the rest. “The problem for us now is, everything’s too heavy on Terra. It’s difficult, having lived here so long, to not think about the extra weight.”

“I bet.”

“And at our age, it might kill us if we tried.” She chuckled.

“The time difference is even weirder than the gravity.” Thera, clearing counterspace. “You were originally fifteen years older than Kallias and Anton, weren’t you? Then you were all the same, but you’ve spent so long here, you’re their elders again.”

“Yes.” Totéhn merrily explained. “I started working for Senator *Cridiaul** (Kree-dy-ool.) at age twenty, and often saw the little prince, sans

any underpants, outrunning his poor caretakers. They'd circle the palace for a dozen laps every day, chasing him. As a teenager, he... well, you know how young princes are.

Anyway, at twenty-four they came here, aging to three years younger than me and Ammy. I think we're at least twenty years older than Anton now. Arven used to keep track." Her reminiscing turned solemn. "He emigrated back to the Realms a decade ago, after several disputes about Kallias' innovations diplomacy. You see, engineers and scientists are bound to Olympus by oath, preventing travel to non-democracies in a world where Olympus is the first and only one. It didn't help, we never lent him our support."

Rorick's stupid puckered lips gazed in awe.

"How was living in ole timey America?"

"Things were certainly different. We'll always cherish having experienced its charm. Same goes for the sixties, which I preferred."

"Was the racism a culture shock?"

Totéhn treasured his innocence.

"One group hating the others is nothing new on any world." Totéhn treasured his innocence. "Simple minds hold simple views... no, I shouldn't say it like that. There are too many brilliant fools running around. As you age, you'll meet lots of professionals who believe their education in unrelated fields enhances their expertise on civics and the economy."

"I've met plenty already." He concurred. "I had this libertarian teacher sophomore year. He had the most one dimensional personality of anyone I've ever met. Brilliant at physics; cannot believe how dumb he was in every other way."

"All too common." Totéhn squeaked. "Even on Terra, you'll hear people talk as if every other group can be boiled down to a few simple traits while their own takes time to unravel the rich assortment. I've met many bright kind people, who simply lack a diverse experience beyond superficialities. And when you're raised hearing generalizations as fact, you tend to not think twice about it."

"So, how do the haters hate on *Terra*, not *Thera*?"

"You're getting quite good." She applauded, standing by the warmth of the stove. "For us, it's less focused on skin color. Given an average bigoted Olympian Homin, they'll disparage Anunnaki Homin, but might treat *Orisha* Homin as equals, even though they have a darker complexion

than Anunnaki Homin. This is because the Orisha started in *Orun* and expanded their domain across the *Uhlanga* marshes. In this way, they'll venerate each other's historical dominions. Now, factor in other races of Terra, and the prejudice becomes far more direct.

Syreni tend to suffer the same cruelty in Olympia as they do in Atalancai. Doesn't matter, they have a single nation expanded across thousands of islands, built by war and unification. Prejudice makes its own logic." She shook her head. "I'll admit though, it was a bit jarring to see things so strictly divided based on skin color here. *Ortic'l* faced the worst of it, being the darkest among our lot. It gave him obstacles the rest of us evaded.

Discriminations aside, the twenties were indeed roaring. The thirties were difficult; I was in Paris for the decade. We left, not long after Hitler crossed the border into Austria, on your father's orders. He didn't want us involved, having suffered through the first himself, with Anton and *Camus** (Kahmss.)."

"The first, as in World War One?!" Rorick asked. "They fought in World War One? That's what 'the trenches' meant?"

"Mhmm." Totéhn hummed. "No one predicted how ugly it would be. It certainly stole the endless smile off Kallias' face. He was still charming, but in a reserved way; not so flirtatious."

Totéhn gave her stew a stir, letting Thera baste the chicken on break from the oven. Rorick asked to help, refused at every attempt. Totéhn insisted he remain under three throw blankets. She'd be proud he offered.

"You're telling me he's a veteran for a hundred year old war, and I was born in two-thousand-six. How. And who made the portal?"

"Portals." Thera's corrected. "There've been thousands of them, fizzling away on their own after a few hundred years, or else they were forcibly closed." She sought Totéhn for assurance she had the right of it.

The thought unsettled Rorick.

"Closed by who? And why couldn't anyone use them for so long?"

"Where to begin..." Totéhn sighed. "I say that as if I don't know it's the sisters. They claimed to be the original manufacturers. How or why is, not really clear. Supposedly, it's the same set of sisters, but the stories span empires existing thousands of years apart, including individuals who've visited kingdoms, announcing themselves as a sister traveling alone. You might recognize their common titles: *Parcae*, *Norn*, *Moirai*, *Rozhanitsy*.

Rorick ported an open palmed deferral.

“Were they *Oh-mins* like you *gæds*?”

“If they chose to be.” Totéhn said. “Otherwise, they were something else.”

“People can shapeshift on your world?”

“Just them.” She clarified. “If they even could. It’s a consistent theme, but old stories tend exaggerate things. Doesn’t help, knowing the weirder ones always involve a sister or three. Usually, they’d leave the portals open once their business concluded. It’s debated which region held their last appearance, but it’s famously not Olympus.” She chuckled. “We lost the privilege about two hundred years before they disappeared entirely. *Eacus*, a bastard son who became Iuppiter Solutorius. He was fifteenth or so down the line, had a bad temper, and only received the honor due to the death of his older half-brother.

He tried sneaking an army into Asgard using Gaea. Since the sisters could supposedly see beyond their eyes, Eacus invited them as guests the week of the attacks. On the eve of the invasion, he opened his finest wine, hoping to blind them. It didn’t inhibit the sisters, of course, who watched the king humiliate himself.

They scoured the worlds to sort out his game, splitting off at dawn in different directions. The sisters closed every portal across Olympus. Lacking the means to retreat or rearm, his hosts were slaughtered, bringing an end to the twin lines of Apollo and Artemis.”

“Not condoning his behavior, but taking them prisoner might’ve worked better.” Rorick judged. “Sucks his people died. Then again, they also tried to commit mass murder.”

“Would’ve if he could, no doubt.” Totéhn shouldered her response, chipping at a dozen hardboiled eggs. “Among the many oddities about the sisters is how a handful of women were able to distress monarchs sitting upon their own thrones. No negotiations; they *always* set the terms.”

“What happened to them?”

“It’s a mystery. Could be, the line holding their abilities died off. Or maybe they actually were thousands of years old, and lived out their lives someplace quiet.”

“Can I please help set the table? I’m not too bad right now.”

“Relax; healing is important.” Thera dressed the mixed greens. “Be happy your storyteller is so wonderful.”

“Sweet of you to say, dear.”

“Fine.” He groaned. “Then how ‘bout we talk recent stuff.” The space between his shoulders tightened. “You said my grandfather was king?”

“And a fierce one at that.” Totéhn exclaimed. “Not the worst by any measure; I’d even go so far as to call him a good king in Nyx. But he took and took and took, withering Anunnaki lands.”

“What was his name?”

“King *Ardam Iuppiter Zeus*; or *Ardam Rax*. And Queen *Aemil Aloadae Cithaere*; or *Aemil Ressi*.”

“Your culture doesn’t take last names?”

“Iuppiter is a bestowed title. In a normal family, your father’s name would be *Kallias Aloadae Cithaere*. Aloadae is your grandfather’s surname, Cithaere is your grandmother’s. The wife and children take her husband’s family name, the *naeta*, sitting in the middle. And the children take their *cognaeta* from the mother’s side, which won’t be passed to her grandchildren. For her, it would’ve originally sat in the middle, demoted to the end once she married. Then there’s the *praeta*, your personal name.”

“So it goes: *pray-tah, nay-tah, cog-nay-tah*?” He clarified.

“Excellent!” Totéhn cheered.

“And a *Tssayooss* always takes both names because they’re in line for *Tssah’mar’rah*?” Precise with his language. “That’s why they’re hunting me, right? The simul?”

“You haven’t told him yet?”

“I had a lot to work in earlier.” She said forking loose cherry tomatoes.

“True.” Totéhn gave a sort of snort. “We’ve covered a substantial amount.” She wiped her hands on the stained white apron, protecting her bibbed turquoise lounge from a similar fate. “Well, you see, simul are ordinarily crafted using a piece of refined material, because having a definitive end to end will vastly increase the attempter’s chance of survival. It also helps to use a familiar tool, usually metal. The point is for it to function as an extension of their body. Neptuciu is unique, being a refined weapon connected to natural water, which is a great deal more difficult to create. But the trident has balance. Zamara on the other hand is.... It’s pure...”

“Lightning.”

He took note of thunder cracking in the background as it had all day. But now, he wondered if it called his name. A crude notion beyond his usual lack of spiritualism, and all things deific. Personifications aside, he resolved to do better. It helped, knowing the storm was his shield, and his sword too.

“Very astute.” Totéhn nodded. “In harsh weather, Zamara can wipe out an army. Imagine its dangers in the wrong hands.”

“Not breaking any precedents, I’m inclined to speculate.”

“Spot on. *Summanus* comes to mind.” Thera attested. “But he also forced the city’s largest *Huperbóreo*i offensive into retreat, averting Olympia’s destruction.”

“There have also been inherently good bearers.” Totéhn added. “*Tinia* was first of the *Novensiles* and established many positive precedents. By *Summanus*, things had decayed quite a bit. Still, we saw an end to ritual filicide for daughters born into the line.”

“They killed their own daughters?”

“Oh yes, throwing a whole ceremony. They’d call a single massive bolt, leaving nothing but ash. Athena famously escaped her grim fate. Most didn’t.”

“How do people go about their day after being so awful.”

“I think it was harder for the queens, who had little choice in the matter. They usually refused to let anyone else set their baby on the alter. Three took their own lives after.”

“I’m so glad we have civil rights now.”

“On that, we can agree.” She chuckled. “I lived before civil rights and wouldn’t recommend it. Yet, we deemed ourselves so civilized.” Totéhn shut off the stove, fishing out the potatoes, left to cool on a cutting board. She settled in a seat, sighing her relief. “Dear, can you pass me the open wine bottle? Last night’s glasses might still be in the dishwasher, but they’re clean.”

“I toast too, right?” Rorick hollered.

“You’re too mangled.” Thera refuted. “If anything, you should be resting.”

“Ammy sent a message, he’ll be running late.” Totéhn said. “Dinner needs another twenty minutes; you’re welcome to sleep right there on the couch.”

“Not yet.” He swallowed the burning lump. “Can you tell me more.”

“Of course, of course. How about... hmm...”

Thera must've taken note, joining him on the couch, relishing her own blanket. The endless nagging ultimately won him a sip from her glass during Totéhn's brief restroom respite. Sundown brought a heavier rain, reminding him he's safe for the moment. Thera's arm hooked his neck partway, leaning in to enjoy another tale.

"Weren't you at the palace the day he returned?" Her voice had a muffled boom so close to her ear. "Kallias mentioned it once in passing."

"Oh yes! About a month before we properly met." Totéhn raised her glass, thankful for the nostalgia. "He'd been missing about three years by then, since the end of *Harodus' Rebellion*; a sort of precursor to the current debacle."

"He fought in a war on your world too?"

"Oh yes. Sword fights and machine guns; it's a wonder they didn't go mad. But the experiences changed them, picking up a bad habit or two as well."

"Cigarettes." Thera denounced.

"On the sisters, I wish they'd never brought those things to Terra." Totéhn huffed. "No weapons allowed, nor dirty energy, yet they approved of portable poison. It's another reason we chose Gaea to settle, the indoor smoking bans."

Anyway, I was still a scribe for Senator Cridiaul, so I often bounced between the palace and the senate chambers. One day, there's this clamor of people running. I thought the city might be under attack as I ate my lunch. Guards rushed me towards the throne room, shouting, *the prince has returned!* I can still smell the firepits roasting whole animals for a last minute feast. They even served good wine to us minions! Antsy children lined the entrance hall, carrying baskets of flower petals, waiting for him to appear at any moment. Poor things must've stood there an hour before the golden doors pulled open.

You should've heard the uproar. You'd think he stopped an army himself. The way I cheered, it might as well have been my own brother. He looked handsome, wearing the same armor he'd left Olympia in. A bit snug after five years, not realizing he'd aged ten. Your grandfather refused to join the ovation. The way he stared; I know now as I did then, Ardam Rax could see the real difference was behind Kallias' his eyes."

"Five years? I thought you said he'd been missing for three?"

“Since the end of the rebellion.” Totéhn nodded. “But he’d been at war for two years prior, and the city certainly missed him. They’d’ve cheered all day, had the king not put an end to it. We all bowed or kneeled as he stood. I had this irrational fear he’d notice me.” Her anxiety, still fresh. “People claim they saw Ardam Rax inducing sparks, even though Kallias hadn’t returned Zamara yet. I do agree with the sentiment; their hostility radiated.

Kallias opened his arms, raised this high. The king couldn’t fight his smile any longer, seeing his son again after so many years. They hugged, and sparks actually did fly, causing this sad fellow *Dorio* wet himself! He always said it was wine but he had no glass, *ah ha ha!*

Touching moments aside, the pleasantries faded. Kallias had grown very attached to philosophy on Gaea, and monarchs aren’t the biggest fans of individualized expression. Imagine the king’s son telling peasants, no group is entitled to greater dignity than another. Not by race, wealth, nor empire. He’d sit in a town square, reading translations of his favorite excerpts, leaving the crowd existential riddles to digest. Ardam Rax promptly confined him to the palace grounds.

We’d briefly spoken on a few occasions. I think he used wandering the gardens as an excuse to scout the best routes for his monthly getaways. But he always had guards trailing close behind, checking he didn’t pass notes or linger in conversation.

I actually met him properly, working late. We had to hand copy every document, usually by candlelight long after the powerful people went to bed. There’s this beautiful ledge behind the fountains I’d go to for fresh air, sitting below the turrets. Right above me, who do I see but the prince climbing down carrying a sack full of toys like Father Christmas.

He used to build little wonders with parts he brought. An incredible sight, seeing a light bulb in our medieval period! He had this dingy bi polar generator, letting people crank the lever to prove it wasn’t Zamara’s doing. He’d show off the big contraptions, and gift small sets to assemble their own mechanical trinkets. A clever way of introducing people, rich and poor alike, to the brilliance of innovation.”

“Actually, I think he melted the gears himself.” Thera said; the blanket, now tightly tucked under her chin. “I mean, he might’ve brought them too, but there are castings for watch parts on the shelves in his documents room, he said he bought them, I think working as ship builders.

To practice at home, along with those music box wheel things. It's a junk packed room."

"Yes, you're right. That's why they sounded so awful." Saluting the pause to finish her glass and fill another. "So, we locked eyes and he stopped to ask if I'd move. Oh, you just reminded me! He had the bulb in his mouth, sort of muttering the words. I think I squealed, hopping out of the way.

For my token of appreciation, he gifted me a parts pouch." Merriment seized her. "His clumsy shuffling lacked any discretion. It sounded like he'd dropped a jar of pennies, choosing to rest flat on his belly behind the bushes, in case a favored guard of the king heard the raucous. Nobody came, so I told him how much I enjoyed the speech he'd given about; he sort of called a drawbridge a machine of safety and questioned why we never contemplated what else machines can do for us. I thought he might be mad at me for attracting attention to his presence, the way he stared. I'd been careful to whisper.

He asked me bluntly what being alive meant to me. *Our duty is to kingdom*, I said, as if I'd give another answer to the crown prince in his own gardens. I think he stood before asking me if the Anunnaki were entitled to the same standards as Olympians. Let me tell you, I had a brief heart attack. The desperation on my face would've been plentinuff to throw me in the dungeons, had it been any other Zeus.

Sweat beads formed on my brow line, and he's standing there, struggling to keep a straight face! He nodded, eventually, to save me the damnation, and spent the next ten minutes explaining why we must actively engage in our own ways to better the world, rather than accepting a reality where beings are expected to suffer by nature of their birth.

I told him, I'm married, wanted a long happy life together, and wished the same for all who could obtain it. Safe to say, my answer didn't impress him. He said, wishing accomplishes nothing. I asked what else I should be doing then, and he gave me my first piece of Gaeian literature, transcribed of course, handwritten himself." The nostalgia warmed her. "A smart use of his time in confinement, I suppose. smelting watch parts and translating books. After reading it a few times, I gave it to Ammy. Well, we sort of took turns reading. Nine of us read it; we gave it to Ortic'l, who gave it to Salus, and so on.

A few months later, Kallias fled. The king branded his behavior treasonous, demanding Zamara back. Whispers about Ardam Rax conceiving a new heir struck a chord, and he chose not to find out. The three traveled to Europe in nineteen-eleven, leaving in nineteen-nineteen.

Kallias returned, keen on a happy day. He didn't know his parents had died.

Ardam Rax, two months after they'd left, which is about how long it takes to reach the portal. Zamara ripped his body to pieces.

Aemil Ressi suffered an illness, four months before his return. I remember her in those days. She held Olympus together when the king hadn't shown his face in years. And the uncertainty, if her son was even alive, weakened her.

I don't know how long he sat alone in the throne room, but he wasn't the same person I'd met by the fountain. The joyful young man, gone. And a statue replaced him. He rejected the crown, causing a fervor among the *nymphs*, Olympian nobility. One wrong move is all it would've taken for the nation to implode. He dismantled his own thousand year dynasty, meticulously building its replacement. Always guided by empathy. I forced my way into his presence at an event. Two years later, Camus ferried the lot of us; *Sammu*, *Ortic'l*, *Salus*, *Arven*, *Fet*, *Bramia*, *Colperna*, *Ammy*, myself, and we began our studies."

A snore from the couch warmed her.

She sipped her glass, savoring the scene.

There lies hope.

VI

His cheeks were flushed.

Warm from an embarrassed glow. They must've heard the loudest parts, if nothing else, thankful neither came to check on him. He'd stumbled off the couch, retreating to his borrowed room. More tears would trickle, eventually. For now, the sharp itching pains had subsided mid slumber.

Dinner should be starting soon, if they're not already waiting on him. He could hear lively chatter around the fireplace, including a man's voice. Totéhn's husband, who's also an alien representing half of Rorick's blood. Because they can breed genetic hybrids...

"Let's not think about the breeding part. I should go- *ahh*."

A twist too fast caused his stitches to contort. He froze awkwardly in place, letting the aftershocks settle, refusing to lay any longer. He wanted Thera's strength, facing enemies at every angle. It's no wonder they were seen as gods. The way she moved, undaunted.

He imagined the weight of steel plated armor, standing on an open battlefield. How firm his grip needed to be to fend off a wide eyed enemy putting their life's rage into splitting him at his neck's curve. It made him nauseous. He'd seen their hate, clueless how to emulate it. Kill counts were strictly reserved for online. It wasn't fair to put this on him. Yet, his forearm tickled bare as it does in a breeze.

Rorick hobbled to the handle, drinking a cold breath. Silence overtook conversation at the door's pop, bursting free of its warped frame. He grimaced, a bit relieved to skip the unnecessary tiptoeing. Aided by the railing, he quickly waved off Thera's assistance before she ruined her own comfort. But Aminus seemed determined to share a greeting, stammering to the landing with his knobby knees bouncing waist high and a pinkish hand ready to shake.

"Rorick." Rorick said.

That was a stupid entrance.

"Aminus! It's so nice to meet yyou!"

He had pigmentations spread across his arms & head from sunnier days. But the best part was his hair. What he lacked on top grew twice as

long on the sides, blending naturally into his beard line to form the base of a mountain, if someone rounded the top.

“Nice to meet you too. Thank you for letting me use your guestroom. Oh, and saving my life.”

“Nonsense, you’re family!” His happy awkwardness lacked any flow, unconcerned by the grandiose of his motions. “I met y-your father days after he was b-born! Working as an aide to the king’s chief advisor, who was vvery close to y-your grandfather, and I chanced to be on duty the day your grandmother introduced Kallias to the world! A dewdrop, turning into a magnificent person.” Aminus’ minor stutter never diminished his confidence. His eyes glowed at the memories. “And now, y-you. Just llook at y-you.”

“I apologize, dear. He has a tendency to ramble.” Totéhn said.

“No, it’s great, I love hearing these stories.”

“You’ve been listening to them for decades, R-Rorick has not even had five mminutes; he’s not sick of me yet!” Aminus razzed back, wagging his finger so she knew better next time.

He packed in three stories before food had reached their plates. It was easy for Rorick to detach himself and enjoy the tales resentment free. Hearing about the nineteen year old prodigy prince hunting boars the size of a double decker bus using spears, then using its meat to feed an entire village through a harsh winter was too grand an accomplishment for him to relate.

Pacified, they savored a true homecooked meal worthy of the Brady Bunch. One big mismatched family; loving, all the same. Except Aminus’ off putting gawk. Very inquisitive, in a not so prideful manner as Totéhn.

“R-Rorick, h-how old are you?” He finally asked.

“Seventeen. I’ll be eighteen in July.”

“And, you’ve lived here your whole life?”

“I was two when my mom got her job.”

Animus glanced at Totéhn, displeased by his leadings.

“Tell me R-Rorick, y-you’ve heard extensively about your father’s side, and... w-would you mind sharing a bit on y-your mother’s?” Rorick appreciated the importance, but Aminus had already lunged into explaining himself. “Y-you see, Totéhn and I moved here roughly fifteen y-years ago, at your father’s request. *Closer to the portal*, he’d said. We loved it

instantly, and took him at his w-word. So now the question is, w-what's in your mother's blood that began all this?"

"Ammy..." Totéhn, sternly.

But Aminus pressed a little more, "Y-you have an ambiguity to y-your complexion; I a-s-sume that means a m-mixed background? Do any significant figures come to mind? Or did y-your mother work on any?"

"Enough, Ammy." Totéhn scorned. "The wounds are still fresh."

"Are y-your mother's parents originally-"

"Ammy!"

He stood right up and started collecting dishes. Totéhn was visibly fraught. Rorick, not so much. Curious, why his mom chose their rainy city.

"My grandparents died in a car accident a few years prior to me existing. Her dad was native Algerian, but lived in France. Her mom was Puerto Rican, which obviously includes European and African blood on top of the indigenous. Born and raised in the Bronx, same as my mom. I used to hear stories, but can't remember the last time she mentioned them."

The room took a reflective pause.

"Rorick, we can't stay." Thera thrust in, swift as her trident. "Yes, it rains a lot. But the slightest break can track you here. Aminus and Totéhn will be in danger."

"You're right."

"Let's leave tonight."

"I'm game."

"You're able to tolerate the long drive?"

"I can handle a few sore days to see what she died for." He affirmed.

Totéhn & Thera's reaction aired their suspense. Aminus effectively swallowed a firecracker. He clunked a jig to the fridge, pulling out his favorite carrot cake from the singular bakery in town. Rorick savored each bite, helping himself to seconds, then a third, wishing he could have it on his birthday.

Seemed unlikely, all things considered. He tried to sustain the pleasantries, watching Aminus stand on his chair, telling a story about tween Kallias championing their international games. He's supposed to be working on a group project Saturday, not travel dimensions, or whatever. His lab partners are probably still aching at the loss of their friend, powerless to tell them he's okay. That he'll miss everyone, but he has to live

another life. Thera reached for his hand, noticing the anxious sweat beads forming.

“We should go.” She said.

The story, unfinished. Everyone darted to a task. Totéhn began shredding their dinner into tightly packed leftover containers she’d meant to toss, insisting they take a cooler as well. Aminus retrieved it, sashing the duffle bags he’d prepped for them, filled with new clothes & toiletries.

“I m-matched your sizing, and put your jersey on a gentle cycle; it’s in there too.” He said, also carrying two boxes of running shoes. “I found your social media pages. Y-you really should heighten your privacy settings, but I’m glad y-you didn’t, and it’s no matter now. I added sunset pictures too, so you don’t forget the sky here.”

Flipping through, Rorick saw screenshots of the last testaments written by loved ones on his profiles. Tears streamed down his face, holding Aminus tight in gratitude. Then he moved on to Totéhn, who bobbed side to side. She handed Rorick a thousand dollars cash for the thousand mile trip south.

“Your ability to stand after the torment your mind and body have gone through is a proof of how strong you truly are.” She said. “Please, take care of yourself.”

“I won’t. I mean I will! I- I won’t forget.” He said.

“It’ll be an adjustment, Rorick. Not only the gravity; it’s a place that’s gone from its Middle Ages to Industrialization in less than fifty years. Words of honor matter. And be lenient on your notions about Terran morality. The culture is changing to modern standards, but it’s still a great deal behind in a lot of ways.”

“Can’t insult anybody if I don’t speak their language.” He joked, blurry eyed.

“You absolutely can. Don’t discount the dangers of glancing at the wrong person sideways.”

“I won’t, I was kidding, I promise.”

“Be careful. You deserve a long happy life. And Thera, you are everything I’ve ever heard, and it doesn’t do you justice.”

“Thank you for your hospitality. You are marvels yourselves.”

“Depends on who’s telling the stories.” Totéhn winked. “I’m so happy to have finally met you. Please remember, the people must always come first.”

“I will.”

A gust whipped them at the front door. They said a final goodbye; Aminus, luring Rorick into a fourth bear hug. A trap he'd happily fall for every time. Their hosts watched Rorick & Thera run towards the old muscle car. Thera, carrying the lot of bags & containers.

“This Olympian too?”

She shook her head, amused.

“It belongs to Camus, the friend they mentioned.” Thera said. “Once we're out of the storm, they'll be right behind us. We have to assume there are scouts at the edges, which means no delays. Rest, so your body can heal.”

But he thought it best to scrutinize the dark, unwilling to gamble.

“We need a game plan; do you have a passport?”

“A real one.” She showed him. “Kallias arranged for the possibility of me traveling. I'm registered as his daughter; he's registered as his own father and grandfather.”

“Good. My ID will set off an Amber alert. I'll be careful taking driving shifts.”

Hours moved faster than the road. Thera mulled her sentiments close to home, avoiding grand displays. It's enough, she reminded him he wasn't alone. Her softspoken tenor put him to sleep at some point, soothed to a comfort. He nearly ruptured wounds, encountering a sunny day. Thera calmed him as best she could through bloodshot eyes on her sixteenth hour driving. Instead of challenging her stamina, he pointed out the gas gauge.

“I'll pay; bathroom's inside.” Rorick said.

“I'll go after you. What's that smell?”

“Tacos.”

And they were great.

She slept a good six hours, refusing Rorick's pleas to sleep more. Nor did she care for his tight speed limits, insisting on taking the wheel again. By the third day of essentially nonstop motion, he couldn't quell the restlessness.

“We don't have to sleep the whole night. Let's take showers, crash on a real bed for a few hours, and get back to it after the continental breakfast.”

They hit road before coffee.

Four hours was better than nothing, and a boiling antimicrobial scrub settled his wounds' thumping. The last day to reach the border ended in

heavy traffic. A stop & go pace led under the rusty metal arches, serving as a new starting line, determined to win the race.

“Once we cross, we’ll stop at Camus’ friends’ shop. He’ll put the offroad tires on for us. They have this hotel next door; you can book by the hour, so we’ll take proper showers, and I can remove your stitches. Then, we follow a spal’d of Camus’ blood.”

The butterflies in his stomach had claws. He’d be back, right? To visit? Retire? Why did it hurt the way goodbyes do?

I don’t want to go.

Damn he’d miss tv.

“There’s a lot of moving vans.”

“Let them try.”

Her unbothered energy mended him.

“You really are my hero.”

VII

During the fallout of a tragedy is when we are most vulnerable. Consumed by a need to rationalize & process the disturbance. In doing so, we let our guard down, believing another misfortune improbable so soon.

A dry hell of endless nothing.

Then nightfall hits, and hell freezes over. Five days driving through the dusty barren void put them on their last jug of water, thankful, a speckle in the distance finally resembled a house. He didn't think he could dry heave through another soggy sandwich, clogging the flooded cooler; his sanity, intertwined with the shrinking block of ice.

At one point, he'd begged Thera to cover the vents in a light hoarfrost, unaware Cypraelia freezes at absolute zero. Still, he'd insisted against her protests, so she showed him, binding a single strip. It was as though the air might cut him at the wrong angle, gradually getting harder to breathe until he gasped for the torrid breeze outside while she laughed herself into a bathroom break.

The nightshifts suited him better, driving amicably bundled. Thera slept in the backseat, affording him the privacy to cycle his anguish & excitement. Few know he's about to make history. Up 'til now, he probably thought he had a better chance of winning the lottery than visiting another planet. Maybe one day, they'll ask him if the sacrifices were worth it, and that person can say they were.

Soon as Thera nudged him awake, Rorick saw a stumpy old man standing on the porch of a desolate two story home holding a well worn short barrel shotgun. He tightened his grip below its perforated top, waiting for Thera to signal him out the window. She stretched, waiting for him to limp the steps.

"Rorick." She said. "Kallias *oji** (Oh-jee. Son.)"

The smoke rolled from his crusty lips.

*Camus At'ka** (Cahmss Aht-kah.) could pass for a native of this region. Here, he's guarded the portal for three decades, ferrying trips and passing messages. They don't come often; perhaps thrice per Terran half decade.

Late in the rebellion, Harodus' Ad'ifa became desperate for resources, committing the very acts they once condemned. His village was slaughtered by Ad'ifa *Rukeiqnak* for no longer contributing to the cause. He laid buried in the ruins of his burned home consoling his daughter's remains.

Kallias had lingered at the base of the rubble, not anticipating a simul to burst through. Short of killing each other by way of misunderstanding, he joined the hunt to avenge their cruelties. Hot on their trail, Camus delivered the final blow to the cowering Ad'ifa. The war ended eight months later.

In Harodus' tent, he stole a leatherbound journal containing oddly directed maps. Kallias identified three fallen kingdoms. Their epicenters, inscribed using common crests of the sisters. Vowing silence on the matter, Camus joined the yearslong march to Olympia. Every night, he setup fake pavilions, hiding the prince's vagrancy. A high official discovered the ruse, resulting in Camus' arrested, suffering a year of punishment & persecution, confined to the palace dungeons. Kallias freed him upon his return, bestowing a parcel of land to match the sack of gold as recompense for his torment.

He lived comfortably on that sack in Europe. Then fell the Great War, and he became sick of here too. Guarding the portal gives him a middle ground between peace & purpose, Thera told Rorick on the way. Seeing the dedication himself heightened his insecurities.

Conversation remised to a hot meal. Rorick noticed Camus' shoulders never quite relaxed. His skin had leathered, as it often does for those who've overcome the harshest versions of life.

Words weren't his forte, just listening to Thera's recounting of the last few weeks. Rorick followed along based on the hand gestures, then heard the names Totéhn & Aminus, afore a stretch to symbolize the dull drive.

"You sure you don't want to rest?"

Thera refused.

She had no doubt scouts tailed them. A quick stop at the outhouse was all she permitted. Rorick leapt the windowless doors into Camus' monster of a truck, renewing confidence in his returning strength.

A few minutes later, Thera joined them, now wearing her sleeveless doublet, pairing unrestrictive leggings. She chose the front passenger seat, tying the gauntlets onto her wrists as she queried Camus in their language. He agreed, retrieving a big dagger from under the driver's seat, sheathed in

fine leather, gripped & guarded by expertly shaped gold. A very large emerald stole the show, embedded at the tip of its pommel.

Camus dripped the contents of a small vial on the blade, holding it outside the truck. The droplets slid to its honed point, doing the same to its other side. Camus inspected the edges carefully. Sheathing it again, he handed the dagger to Rorick.

“Soldiers poor. Show gold.” He rubbed his stubby nose. “Best thing, they take. Venom *ehh* quick.”

Rorick held it tight. No reason to let go. A heavy turnover roared the engine. Its deafening rumble settled as it reached its idle, then kicked off, riding the well ridden path. Their destination, clear. Heading to the tallest of the flattop mesas, hiding the portal in its cliffs for hundreds or thousands of years.

The truck climbed at a ninety degree angle, of so it felt, forcing Camus to rely on bursts of momentum, timing the hard revs perfectly. Rorick closed his eyes, refusing to watch Thera sternly grip the dash. If only he’d tipped his head back, he might’ve seen a spec in the distance coming closer, where the sun began to set.

* * *

Nothing was visible beyond burnt orange waves sanded into the limestone pillars. Camus crossed into a darkened cave. Once passed the arch, an open air canyon revealed the stellar & starry night. He stopped the truck at a fork in the road. Here, they faced three options; an easy central path, or up the narrow cliffs on either side. To his dismay, Camus pointed left.

All too often, the ridge tapered off, leaving half a foot to shuffle with their backs firmly pressed against the poorly leveled cliffside. At its worst contours, the bulging forced them to lean forward, staring down a nasty fate. First, measuring at twenty feet, then again at the thirty-five mark, and once more to reach the wider platform above. Rorick wheezed on all four, beholden to the solid ground. Ten seconds later, Thera pulled his arm, still carrying the duffle bags, reminding him they’re not done.

Tumbling gravel bits clambered from the ledge across, landing below. Her anxiety then worsened, unable to determine a source in the shadows. She signaled to continue, silent as their steps allowed. The next incline offered a roomier ledge, at the expense of a greater drop. He ignored the

searing in his ten day old wounds, refusing to further slow their mission. Finally, Camus adjourned.

“He says it’s not far after the bend.” Thera explained, no panting in her voice, though a gleam had formed on her brow.

The ledge rounded a corner, turning to flattened stone. Its decline stretched long as it did wide, leading to a clean gap between itself and an almost mirrored incline. The jump wasn’t big, but Rorick’s heart raced all the same. Two minutes later, they reached the dirt landing of the peak above.

He paced in circles to calm his thighs. Thera helped Camus clear the ghillie tarps covering an area between several large boulders. Underneath, Rorick couldn’t believe it.

“Are you kidding?” He shouted. “We’re supposed to crawl through that?! Holy shit, I already conquered my fear of heights today, I can’t do claustrophobia; how deep are we talking?”

“It’s wider a few meters in.” Thera assured. “If it can fit Anton, it can fit you.”

“Go.” Camus said, sounding like he didn’t have a neck.

“The path is narrow but you’ll see lanterns at the other end.” She promised. “Crawling takes twenty minutes. There are two divergent passageways: Left at the first, and continue through the middle at the second. Repeat my instructions.”

“Left at the first; middle at the second.” Rorick said.

“Good. Taking the wrong path will lead to certain death.” She warned. “Other than that, everything should be fine. Enjoy your skyline one last-”

THE GROUND EXPLODED UNDER THEM.

A sand wave crackled in his ears. His bruises, smashed by pelting rocks & clods of dirt flying faster than he plummeted. Thera lunged into him, rolling on the ground to throw him again before another blast struck. Camus leapt high for a bearhug, and set Rorick down gently, noticing his struggle to breath. Pressing firmly on his chest, he calmed the spasms vacuuming Rorick’s lungs.

“Iz okay. *Yuur* okay. Nahting missing.” Camus’ muffled voice announced.

Rorick sat fowlered, shaking it off. He thought danger lurked behind them, realizing the six spider limbs were made of Camus’ own ivory.

Another blast came. This time, disintegrating Thera's trident midair.

"*Af'Daq!*"

"What's *Aff-dack?!?*"

Camus marked their peril; a speckle under the moonlight on the ledge across. His horseshoe hairline draped dirty blonde locks over both ears, falling restfully to his gargantuan shoulders. Even at their distance, every dense muscle could be seen rippling on the monstrously large man standing at the top of a peak.

Behind them, half a dozen warriors hollered their battle cries, charging the decline. A Wetiko led the pack, galloping towards Thera. Moments later, it was flopping off the end of her trident; her armor, now as a beacon for her prey to follow. She flung the corpse at living dirt, stomping its way towards her, gaining evermore speed. The *Sham'pe* tilted with vigor to avoid her desecration.

In the background, Af'Daq twirled his rock in a sling, brightening its glow. Upon release, the stone wobbled the air, trailing as a bullet does in water. She sent Cypraelia to take her place in its path; the connection, causing an iridescent quaver building a lot of force behind the eventual *pop*. Back in Thera's hands, she hurled Cypraelia at Af'Daq, who recognized the dangers, jumping to disappear in the darkened lower peaks.

Thera pointed her forks out. The *Sham'pe* crashed using the full ton of its weight. She held her ground, planting her heels, flipping it overhead. The rest, blocked by an elevated Camus carrying his worn out blaster & a short sword.

"Run!" He yelled.

Rorick shook off the headlights, focusing on the rubble covered tunnel. Its previously undisturbed scenery, now freshly wounded & lightly cratered. Dented, not blasted, pressing in the boulders' pulverized remains. He wanted to do his part. He had the easy part, begging the pieces not to be so heavy. The sensation of blood dripping tickled him to his belt.

Thera stabbed forward, splitting the log it'd carved into a club. A few thrusts faltered its balance. She gave it no chance to buff or rebuff, until it caught the trident and slapped her in the dirt, excitedly stomping her head.

Underfoot, Thera did her best to regain consciousness between resets. Her breathes were heavy, but not from exhaustion. She was pissed. As it came again, she rolled belly up between its uneven legs, sending her trident

into the small of its back. The Sham'pe roared, smoothly spinning for a well cocked blow. Thera guarded herself, letting its next punch snap her trident. She smirked, watching the Sham'pe pull its hand away confused. Cool & composed, she smashed both ends together, striking the thick clodded skin over its chest.

Another Wetiko took its chance, tying a curved blade around her neck. She ducked & sidestepped, gouging the spear end of Cypraelia into its heart, and kicked it off to stab forward again. The Sham'pe squealed at the fork in its hand, but moved quick, slashing her unguarded left arm.

Its dagger, unable to cut her armor, devastated the bones below. Its second swing was not so lucky. She lunged closer, shouldering the Sham'pe a few steps to give her trident room. Unrelenting as she focused her strikes on its chest wound, hitting the same three marks, perfectly accurate & precise. On the eighth blow, she punctured its sternum, hearing whispered gasps during its agonized fall. There, she drove Cypraelia into its meat.

Her armor drained off her body, flooding the Sham'pe. No longer able to bend its limbs, fountains spouted at every orifice, making cannonballs of its eyes. Red water tore passages, hastening its release.

Covered in grainy entrails, she washed herself in Neptun's water, wrapping her broken arm in a layer of ice. The battlefield, cleared of violent trepidations. Camus guarded several dead or dying, marking a line the survivors dared not cross. Above, on the platform, Rorick's head remained visible, bobbing as he cleared the entrance, safe from peril. She thought her problems dwindling, unfazed by the new wave of targets descending. But then, to her horror, a large figure turned the corner. It wasn't Af'Daq.

Digging through the top layer, he removed the hefty slabs to find their tunnel sealed. A few pats rang flat, meaning it had caved in fairly deep. Exhausted, Rorick began carving out the jagged whole pieces buried between the compacted sand, using a stone well shaped for the task. Sweat & blood formed encircled his frame. His squatted scrapings remained eerily silent to the battle below, serenaded by the rhythmic hum of his own heavy breathes.

Just then, cackles.

His head went to meerkat heights in search of the source. Below, Camus & Thera faced a swarm of new enemies rushing the bend. He feared the fallout of distracting them, or motivating whatever crept close.

Rorick drew the dagger, pointing it anywhere his paranoia aspired. Double fisting its grip wasn't enough to steady the blade through his wavering panic. He danced in circles, hoping to surprise his pursuer mid act. Instead, a stone whipped his side; the part that clipped his bicep, sparing him a broken rib. As blood rushed to welt, he found the dagger's weight difficult for one shaky hand.

Unimpressed, his enemy rolled into view, hoofing closer on all four as it lashed an orange tongue side to side, searching for more good rocks. Its long black fingers curled easily into tiny grey palms, easily holding its growing collection.

He studied the Wetiko, smaller in stature than the last, rising chest height on naked feet, well webbed between three talons. Its pencil thin arms swung below stumpy inverted knees, favoring a black stone in particular. How human its face looked, missing the nose. And clearly male, from Rorick's view behind the worn loincloth.

It barked something casually, letting howls & hiccups gurgle in the laughter that followed. The Wetiko whipped its favorite stone at him. This time, Rorick ate the blow intentionally to focus on his charging adversary. As he slashed, it smacked the dagger loose, clenching his throat. In a swift motion, it swept his legs to pin Rorick on his back, then shook him the way a bad mother does an infant, burrowing its nails deeper in his jawline.

Backhands smacked Rorick's cheeks left & right. He pushed its face to no avail, squirming, searching for the dagger, weary of brushing the venom. Instead, he mustered a fistful of sand, hurling the lot into its bulbous eyes. Blinded, the Wetiko struck Rorick's lip in retreat. He slid atop the loose dirt trying to rise, scouring the platform for his only means of survival.

Still searching, he heard its excited snickers, muffled from facing away, lost in the new treasure. His enemy had stumbled upon the shining gold. A sweeter prize than its commission.

Rorick grabbed the sturdiest slab he'd set aside and raised it high. The crunch of his tiptoeing might as well have been glass, yet the Wetiko paid him no mind. A single blow to its bare head left a worthy gash. He dove towards the dagger. Its senses returned in the form of a blinding rage, dooming itself to a fatal intrusion. Hard flesh ribboned. Invaded by the dagger's edge, warming Rorick's hands in blood. A block of cheese would've taken more to pierce. He pushed forward, committed to the hilt.

Its final charge toppled them together, snorting out tortured coughs through a swollen throat. The poison seized its limbs, trapped beneath its shivers. He clung to the handle, lying there, willfully ignorant of the burning in his nostrils.

Move.

Please move.

Rorick steered the Wetiko's body using the dagger, wiping the blade clean on its leg to sheath. No dangers lurked beyond the line of soldiers mired by Camus, who gave his victory a thumbs up in solidarity. Thera held her own too, fighting a... a... he went back to opening the tunnel.

Those wearing chest plates beat them as war drums. All let out huffing cheers. Thera's breaths were short & worrisome, visible in the chilly desert night. None concerned her, except the one. She knew this enemy well.

"He dies today." She whispered to herself.

Thera had never seen him in person, but their paths have crossed before. Because it was *Ammon Ha'qi** (Ah-muhn Ha-kee.) who first made it to the palace during the siege of Atalancai. An *Am'Oth* at the time, now the *Am'hak** of *Wsjr'temet** (We'll discuss ranks later.), Ammon is known to seek glory.

He's *Uridimmu*, distinctly hailing from *Wepwaweté*; renowned for their wolflike heads, and vicious claws. The strongest of their race can crack a tree off its stump. Ammon is certainly among the capable. Though he's on the taller side at eleven feet, it's not much greater than the average. More impressive is the size of his arms. He'd hardly need a fist to crush her, given the chance.

Ammon stood clad in black & brass armor, exposed at the hocks of his ankles, smoking a wooden pipe the size of a cooking spoon. The fur on his face was a blue darker than midnight, faded by the occasional greys coming from a violent. Black odorless grease lined the bridge of his nose, leading between his ears. Thera knew he did this to cover the white strip when hunting.

"*You killed Femi.*" Ammon's voice carried like the crunch of bones, mixed with the stark tones of his Anunnaki dialect. "*Did you not?*"

"*At Sudi'nan.*" She confirmed.

He took a long puff from his pipe, observing the platform. It worried Thera, she couldn't alleviate Rorick's fight. Camus was trapped as well, guarding the path. If he moved, the rest would follow.

"So, they weren't just rumors. You two were together?" Ammon's attention returned towards herself. *"Did you love her?"*

A scowl in his eyes; he stared a bit longer, removing the pipe to give her a nod.

"I am willing to bet you believe it justified. An eye for an eye, of sorts." He said.

"You killed MY FAMILY!" She slammed the bottom of her trident, sending the other soldiers a step back in tandem. Except Ammon, who simply nodded again.

"Not directly." He agreed. *"But I did enjoy it. You're an oppressor, and your line has used that abomination to destroy our lives over and over."*

"I fight for the people."

"You fight to maintain control! How can it be a true liberation if you protect the mechanisms of subjugation, princess? That's why your own people kicked you out." He laughed. *"They begged for Mathas, and he heard their pleas. He's given them the dignity your line withheld for a millennia. You think they'll welcome you to send them back to their meagerness? None will be prisoner to Olympus or Atlantis. Today, I'll end two bloodlines!"*

"By your own logic," she leaned in her stance, *"you still owe me an eye."*

Ammon smirked.

"Take it if you dare."

"But that's not why I killed Femi. No innocent would die by my hands."

His snarling grew louder, throwing aside the broadsword fixed to his waist. Camus loaded buck shots into his old shooter, shaking his head as Thera rolled her shoulders, ready. *"Cowards tend to run, so I hunted her down."*

Rorick tried not to focus on the platform below. Enemy soldiers had formed half a ring to witness Thera fighting what was most definitely a ninja werewolf. He'd seen the wolfman lunge at her. Its claws, hovering above her trident's repel.

Returning to his task, he wrapped the hand clawing deep in his shirt, to ease the blisters. Further in, the not so densely packed earth became easier to move. His heart leapt, finally punching the empty air, kicking at the edges to broaden the hole for Thera & Camus. Rorick measured the mess, confident they'd fit. He had to go unannounced. She's better focused.
Left, then middle. Twenty minutes to go.

Thera slashed at his throat using the prongs, always missing by a hair. Every swipe took more than she had to give. Her broken arm throbbed, limiting her ability to strike or guard. Still, Thera's not one to be trifled with either. Wide swings & fluid spins kept her agile, and softened the rigid pain.

Ammon tore at her in all directions, trying to catch her throat between his teeth. A mad dog charging, unable to leave his mark. It was a soldier behind who noticed Rorick's withdrawal. He smacked his cohorts, pointing at the inert scene above. Soon, all had stopped watching the fight to search.

Camus glanced back.

It was time and they had to be quick.

He reached into his coat pocket, retrieving a very old mills bomb, pulling the pin to throw it at the dozen. None moved, unsure of its purpose, sending carnage & limbs flying about. Ammon raged in disarray. Cowards cheating him out of glory. But Camus had the barrels ready at a pointblank range.

Writhing on the floor, Ammon's screech melded into a howl. The fleeting turmoil afforded them a vital retreat, hampered by Thera's faltering limp. She clasped her neck, bleeding badly from a bite, pack strapped to Camus. He vaulted high using his ivory limbs, swiping at the survivors' arrows. The last, piercing his meaty calf, crashing so close to the burrow, until Af'Daq struck again.

He shimmied through its exit, near the bottom of the original grand entrance, covered by the ages. Volcanic rock formed the temple floors, red as it was coarse, bracing himself for the footlong fall. His steps, reverberating. He walked in awe of the skillfully shaped carvings cut directly into every inch of stone. Encrusted jewels formed vibrant mosaics, honoring their ancient gods. Most impressive was the large green serpent dressed in feathers. A room of profiled portraits, except this one, damning the foolish and daring the brave to enter beneath its fangs.

No amount of opulent decoration could distract from the menacing fiery glow, bleeding as though reality had melted into a boiling puddle. Rorick realized its murky reflection displayed an entirely different room. Lavish too, but more golden than colorful, centered by a statue standing guard or greeter. He understood how it might be mistaken for a portal to... well, paradise is also an option.

The thrill soon wore off, pacing back & forth against mounting nerves. Twice, he'd fallen to the floor hyperventilating. Minutes later, he started pacing again to settle the throbbing after pissing out his adrenaline in the corner. With each passing minute, the assurances Rorick made himself lost their credibility. He rested his head on cradled knees, warming his convictions at the serpent's base. Eyes closed, because they were so heavy. A deep silence burned the torches softly, leaving him under the heels of his foulest presumptions.

He thought the grunts were his own. Dehydration inflamed his jaw, too tired to shake the stiffness. It's the scuffing noises that finally caught his attention. The path's end takes a sharp downturn, giving him the advantage. He crept above the tunnel entrance, waiting, dagger ready. Thera's mane hailed her welcome. He eased her fall, hearing Camus close behind.

"Come here." She spat passed a bloody windpipe, sick of everything.

"Fuck! Are you okay?!"

Barely acknowledging him, Thera limped towards the portal bolstered by her trident. Af'Daq's approach unsteadied the mountain. Their duffle bags dropped, cushioning Camus, needing no help flying to his feet. He snatched Rorick, closing the gap quickly.

"There's a natural barrier." She ignored her own difficulties. "If you press, it'll let you through. It's instant. Once you push, you'll be on Terra."

Another blast scattered several artworks; the serpent's snout, spilling green jewels. Thera went first, consumed in its warm glow, vanishing to see her shape on the other side. Rorick placed his hand on the portal. Shards of light wove their embrace, unable to envelope him the same way. It became a brick wall.

Camus assisted his push, turning the barrier's texture into a burning gum, traveling half past an instant before Thera softened his landing. Camus bellowed at his steaming hand that met Rorick's. The ripple began losing its shape, now volatile & sloshing, pulling them closer.

"RUN!" Thera shouted.

The temple dropped large a chunk of ceiling, caught in heavy vines. The weight became too much, sprinting towards the sunlight, and further still. The cave spit out a few gold plates.

“Tssssss.” Camus emptied a cantina, unrelieved by the puddle he cupped.

“What a mess.” Thera coughed.

She left Cypraelia’s water hovering in a liquid orb, checking Rorick next, who’d found a grassy spot to fall flat. When they ran, the pressure broke his ankles.

LESSONS

NO. 1

A.

A Partial Chronology surrounding the portal, from Kallias to Rorick:

(Interesting/Important)

- [Late 1897 CE] (Early 1144 AX): *Kallias Zeus & Anton Taescelli* take the first trip to Gaea in over five hundred years at (25) years old.

Living off the land, they fared the basics of a local dialect, hearing stories about *industrialization*; machines doing the work of a hundred men further north. Months later, they sought out these curiosities, finding work at a copper refinery in New Mexico.

There, they met *Belka & Borja*, an old Spanish-Russo couple who'd emigrated decades earlier. In his twilight, Borja became too feeble to employ. They split their wages with the couple, to avoid losing their factory home. Grateful, Belka helped them better their English, cooking the spoils of their weekly hunt. Kallias later professed his regrets, wishing he'd learned her recipes.

Feeling the itch to move on, they gifted Belka & Borja three melted Olympian coins before heading east. Several months of exploring ended in Brooklyn to become shipbuilders. The chief engineer was a good man, who put merit above all else. By year's end, they'd earned his alumni recommendation for a highly competitive university program. This is where Kallias developed his affinity for Humanism & Utilitarian writings.

- [Mid 1901 CE] (Mid 1145 AX): They return. (29)

Kallias spent his days imparting enlightenment philosophies to anyone who'd listen. The nymphs were furious at him for refusing to share the portal's location, and most found his teachings to be treasonous. Ardam Rax, among them. In his third year returned, the king grew hostile towards his son, demanding Zamara back. A gift he'd originally been so proud to

give. Fearing imprisonment, Kallias fled in the night, aided by Anton & Camus. They returned to Gaea, bringing Camus for his first trip.

- [Early 1911 CE] (Late 1148 AX): Kallias, Anton & Camus go to Gaea. (A-32, K-31)

This time, traveling to France. Kallias enrolled in the growing fields of electrical engineering & fluid mechanics at *La Sorbonne*, while simultaneously studying political theory at *Le Collège de France*. Anton doubled up as well, but turned his attention towards city development & earning a law degree.

Camus elected to explore Europe, until 1914, when calls for every able man to do their duty grew louder. Kallias suggested Anton enlist under a pseudonym, so none questioned his loyalties. He chose *Falx*.

Everything they built; they destroyed it all. An emerging culture of logic & reason, unable to escape its primal nature. Kallias came to understand, sapient growth occurs as a duality between those at the forefront, and those who cannot fathom such civility. Convinced he could bridge the gap, he set out to create a system of controlled growth, driven by education.

- [Mid 1919 CE] (Mid 1151 AX): They return to Olympus. (40)

Ardam Rax & Aemil Ressi had passed away in the years prior. Kallias doubted the decision to reunite with Zamara, but knew its authority would constrain the nymphs while he reformed the government. Immediately following his coronation, *Kallias Rax* abdicated the throne, announcing the creation of a republic.

He & Anton wrote *Tal Constōtio en Olympos* to guarantee the social & economic welfare of all citizens. It mandates securities, education, and infrastructure as *Tal Prae Pecuro*, The First Funds. Because Olympian pride will always ensure its Legon is well financed, The First Funds guarantee nothing else is left behind.

Facing serious pushback from the high families, they found an ally in *Galla Milna Thrasea Raecour*, a prominent figure among the nymphs. She negotiated deals, wherein, certain families gained the exclusive rights to a handful of highly lucrative patents. In exchange, they'd support his

republic. The agreement stipulated livable wages, worker benefits, and safe operations.

Kallias preferred the smelting districts. He taught smith workers how to produce machinery, starting with simple gears, up to functioning motors. He strengthened the various guilds in every trade, and formed local representative governments on the authority of his royal line.

Anton stayed in the capitol to work on the future administrative structure. He primarily wrote the Olympian Constitution, after much debate and compromise between the two. While Kallias was selling it, the document was neither complete nor ratified.

Upon returning with Galla Milna, Kallias had enough support from the nymphs and the people to enact the new constitution. He announced his candidacy for Civital, head of the executive branch, and promises to shape the office during his tenure.

- [Mid 1923 CE] (Late 1152 AX): The Constitution passes. (A: 42 K: 41)
 - Kallias was promptly elected, and began his first term in 1153 AX.

- [Mid 1927 CE] (Early 1154 AX): He & Anton established the core infrastructure, sending his chosen to learn. (43)
 - *Tal Doca* [The Scholars]:
 - *Totéhn Plava*: Neurosciences.
 - *Aminus Plava*: Law.
 - *Sammu Faustus*: Medicine.
 - *Ortic'l N'Deeva*: Philosophy & Law.
 - *Salus Valera*: Anthropology & Farming.
 - *Camus At'ka*: Support.
 - *Arven Torde*: Chemistry & Biology
 - *Arkissafet Maran*: Business & Economics.
 - *Bramia Sosius*: Engineering.
 - *Colperna Cincus*: Engineering.

 - Kallias had two rules:

- No weapons.
 - No dirty energy.

- [Late 1927 CE] (Mid 1154 AX): Roadblocks delaying his agenda intensify. (43)
 - The nymphs called foul, chastising him for hiring so many lowborn citizens to manage the levers of government. Their pushback became so severe, Kallias expanded the federal workforce to include more nobility. At which point, the nymphs found a new reason to be upset. Training included classes full of commoners, with no distinction between pupils.
 - Creating department inspectors proved a difficult task. The nymphs have deep pockets and commoners had no prior experience with ordering changes to their fiefdoms. They accepted bribes almost innocently, unsure how else to respond to noble blood. As the sitting Civital, Kallias attended factory inspections, ensuring the duty was done correctly.

- [Late 1936 CE] (Early 1157 AX): The Doca return, sensing another war. (46)
 - Each became the department heads of a new Olympian university. Several adopted ministerial positions in conjunction with their academic positions, utilizing their brightest students to expand public programs.
 - Its creation caused yet another uproar among the nymphs, believing they'd have their own universities and grade schools. Some built private institutions, initially struggling to fill

them with competent experts since many of the fields were so new and the Doca remained exclusively reserved for public service.

- A budget bill included provisions to expand the hospital system through rural areas. Égios Neram then shoveled in a whole host of earmarks, building special projects on private land. It was held up for nearly two months, causing railroad closures and delivery delays, resulting in a food shortages.
 - The administration agreed to certain protections for the nymphs. Kallias conceded to a few of their demands, subsidizing funds for private institutions, reducing inspection procedures, and guaranteeing at least four years to meet any new federal standards. Naturally, worker complaints of harassment and retaliation rose.
 - Overall, the five years of his first term were highly successful. They established three major universities. Sixty-five public schools. Forty hospitals. Six hundred factories. Over one thousand refineries. Forty thousand kilometers of railroad track. And began construction on the first three grids.
- [Late 1951 CE] (Late 1158 AX): Kallias is overwhelmingly reelected.
 - He'd been challenged by *Hédro Lukanama*, the patriarch of the third wealthiest family in Olympus. The senator's campaign spent so much in the major cities, it led Kallias to consider a constitutional amendment, banning self-funded campaigns. Finance reform became his top priority.

- The three main focal points of his administration included education, engineering, and medicine. His Doca established four more major universities, and two dozen specialized institutions.
 - The advent of penicillin came at a fortuitous time. Kallias used its mass production to repair Olympian relations with the Anunnaki, but found the ba'al far more troublesome than the nymphs. They had for so long dictated their own governance, that each of the six thousand families served as petty kingdoms.
 - If a ba'al didn't like a project, they'd simply burn it to the ground, stealing the remaining building materials. The projects proved too costly, leaving hundreds incomplete. Kallias knew rail lines were the key to breaching their strongholds, so he used Legon engineers, guaranteeing military protection as they progressed.
 - He ended his second term having created seven major universities. Eight hundred and ninety-two public schools. Three hundred and fifty-six hospitals. Over eight thousand factories. Twenty thousand refineries. Half a million kilometers of railroad tracks. And completed construction on the first two grids with twelve more following.
- [Late 1951 CE] (Early 1162 AX): Galla Milna is elected Civital after Kallias' second term. (51)
 - Her first term began in 1163 AX, kicking off a wave of privatization. Medical facility growth slowed, leading to tiffs in Hemera.

- [Late 1961 CE] (Mid 1165 AX): The Doca insist on a new tour. (54)

Seven went, including *Menedorra Epimelam* for her first trip. Joining Anton, Aminus, Totéhn, Sammu, and Salus. Camus reluctantly agreed to ferry the journey, for those returning early. Undoubtedly, they found a whole new world yet again. Empathy & science flourished through robust regulatory & legal systems. Originally going for exploratory purposes, they decided to settle in as students once again.

- [Late 1965 CE] (Late 1166 AX): Totéhn, Anton & Arven return. Thera is born. (A-58, K-56)

Anton & Arven cut their trip short to brief Kallias on nuclear energy. Dorra stayed behind for medical school. Upon graduation, she enlisted in the Vietnam War for her surgical residency.

- [Mid 1969 CE] (Early 1168 AX): Kallias takes his first trip to Gaea since they fought in France. (A-59, K-57)

He was furious to learn of Dorra's involvement, though it quickly turned to pride. Months later, she returned to Terra with Kallias, earning her professorship at a new university, ultimately landing on the shortlist to replace Sammu as Minister of Medicine. Anton proposed somewhere between it all.

- [Mid 1983 CE] (Late 1172 AX): Anton is elected Civital. (A-64, K-72)

- His first term began in 1173 AX.

Arven's frustration hit a breaking point after Kallias doubled down on his policies limiting modern advancements to Olympus in his memoirs. Arven renounced his oath and fled to Rikr, escorted personally by Kallias, who wanted to assure his old friend arrived safely. Later that year, Colperna & Bramia left to Gaea, ferried by Camus who then escorted Salus' return.

- [Mid 1991 CE] (Mid 1175 AX): Totéhn, Aminus, Camus, Salus, Colperna, & Ortic'l go to Gaea. Kallias returns from his northeastern travels. (A-66, K-74)

The *Ar'lut'a* Massacre. Local leaders involved were neither charged with a crime nor unseated at their ranks. *Mathas Akena* brought justice himself, becoming a local hero. Rebellions sparked across the deserts, led by those who would soon become his Ad'ifa.

During his a televised interview, Kallias insisted, aggression should be expected. Nyx grows despite western food insecurities. Crowds cheered him, but nothing came of it.

- [Late 2005 CE] (Early 1180 AX): Unbeknownst to anyone, Kallias goes to Gaea. There, he meets Melinda Addams. (A-69, K-77)
- [Early 2006 CE] (Mid 1180 AX): Rorick is born.

Though Mathas' support grew, his territory remained fragmentary outskirts. Olympus did nothing, still petrified at the thought of another war. Kallias agreed to serve as a diplomat during the accord summit, meeting Mathas for one week.

- [Late 2006 CE] (Late 1180 AX): The Atlantean throne falls. (A-71, K-79)

Olympus mobilized a single Legon to aid the kingdom. On the day of the royal executions, Kallias requested three small teams for a search & rescue operation. Scouts had reported the princess as missing, and she could only hide for so long before Cyprian's blood led to her capture. He swam under the ocean ports, finding the fourteen year old Thera shivering in a concealed waterway.

- Galla Milna died of a stroke at the age of 126.
 - Her last message for Olympus was to not hoard happiness.

- [Early 2007 CE] (Late 1180 AX): Kallias sent a letter asking Aminus & Totéhn to relocated to the northwest coastline.
- [Early 2013 CE] (Late 1182 AX): Haitius Lavinius Corvinus is elected Civital.
 - His first term began in 1183 AX.
- [Early 2023 CE] (Late 1185 AX): Kallias reenlists to mount an offensive. (A-77, K-83)

Mathas countered the entire Legion in a clever ambush. Few survive. Among the bodies lies the last Zeus of Olympus. New rebellions are spurred across Hemera, increasing Ennean territory. Olympus has been licking its wounds ever since.

- [Mid 2024 CE] (Mid 1186 AX): Rorick begins his first trip to Terra. (A-78)
 - With the portal collapsed Aminus, Totéhn, Colperna and Salus remain on Gaea.

B.

Common Languages of Olympus:

(Interesting/skippable)

The Olympian dialect came into form by way of returned influence through conquests & expansion. *Rasna*, the old language of the first dozen or so *Zeus*, belonged to *Othrys*. *Laschma* was built upon its bones, adopting several norms from *Atla*, and an early form of modern *Fraza*. Because Atlantis engaged with the *Aegean* a thousand Gaeon years earlier than Olympus, their influence on the natives became the earliest *Coptic* languages. In this way, *Laschma* again experienced *Atlan* influence, since *Zeus Bouleus* & *Zeus Naios* spent much of their time on Gaea in *Dodona*.

But it was *Tins Cilens* who commissioned an Olympian settlement. He sent *Tages* & *Vegoia* west to form the colony of *Rasenna* across the *Ionian Sea*. Bowing to the *Moirai*, he offered indefinite adherence to their requests if they gave him a direct portal to his second throne. They more than delivered, opening new locations throughout the *Latium Valley*. Over the next few centuries, *Rasna* absorbed dialectic elements from the natives, slowly evolving into a new dialect.

The tipping point came in the time of *Iuppiter Tonans*, whose favor shifted towards the *Roma* people. His son *Iovis Tonans* is the only *Zeus* to spend the majority of his life on Gaea. Within a century after his death, the term *Laschma* became common practice. It is, by all accounts, the sixth major romance language.

Fraza is the principle *Anunnaki* dialect. It's a merchant's route in language, combining the ambiguities of regional formations. There have been roughly six variations over several millennia. Each, organically produced by absorbing elements from the eras' vernaculars, blending the common attributes found amongst their countless tribes. The *Ennead* & *Ogdoad* were the first nations thought to be graced by the fates. It's this sense of unity, created by their earliest kin, that has preserved the *Anunnaki* identity for so long. *Fraza* is the most common language spoken in modern *Hemera* & southern *Chicomoztoc*.

Atla is spoken in *Atalancai*. They are a sea people, and their language has the salty tones to match. It's an ancient forum, collecting morphemes

from the words of their victims. The ocean portals were meant to be isolated; instead, they became gateways to infinite wealth for Atlantean pirates, who spent the better part of a millenia raiding the *Red Sea*. Similarities can also be found in *Mediterranean* dialects, where *Póntos* is believed to have settled around 1800 BCE.

C.

Olympian Ranks and Units:

(Interesting/skippable)

- *Tal Legon*. The Legion. Pride of Olympus.
 - In the time of the *Zeus Olumpios*, his *Lares* fought his father's *Keres*. In Rasenna, *Menfra Cilens* opted to join a growing local union known as the *Legio*. The hundred unit structure was adopted, doubling a few centuries later.
 - *Capta Barrax*: (Cahp-tah Bah-rrahx) Head of all Legon.
 - Current: *Thais Timon*.
 - The Capta Barrax is not in charge of any individual Legon; rather, they are in charge of the overall decision making for the Legon as a whole.
 - *Laossai*: (L'ow-ssye) Head of a Legon.
 - There are currently 24 Legon with 10,000 Legian each:
 - Active Ground: 14.
 - Active Air & Naval: 5.
 - Reserve: 5.
 - Noncombative one year Constitutional Conscription: 6.
 - Can join by 19.
 - Cannot be combative until age 20.
 - The Legon are ranked.
 - Each Laossai outranks the numbers higher than their own.
 - Current *Prae Laossai*: *Venisia Marr*.
- *Oxym*: (Ohks-eem) 1,000 Legian per. 10 Oxym make 1 Legon.
 - *Gradivam*: (Grrah-dee-vahm) Commanders of a Oxym.
 - They are also ranked.
 - *EX. Prae Gradiv* of the *Secu* (Second) *Oxym* of the *Prae Legon* is higher in rank than the *Prae Gradiv* of the *Prae Oxym* of the *Secu Legon*.
 - *Prae Oxym*. *Secu Oxym*. *Tert Oxym*. etc.
- *Deinos*: (Dye-nohss) There are 5 *Deinos* per *Oxym*, made up of 200 Legian each.
 - *Aphne*: Same ranking structure as the higher officers.
- *Polemeros*: (Poh-leh-meh-rrohs) The smallest unit. Either 10 to 20 Legian per.
 - *Legian*: (Leh-gee-ahn)
 - The modern Legian operates with a blend of the races, meant to utilize the advantages of each in tandem.
 - *Ex.* A larger race will carry or drag a three person shield, depending on the terrain. The midsize and smaller races stand protected on both

sides, launching arrows until they can push the line close enough to engage.

- *Prae Legian*: Unit commander.
 - Often called *Praegian* for short.
- *Quirinae*: (Kee-rroo-nay) The smallest unit in a training setting.
 - Either conscription or service.
- *Polemétes*: (Poh-leh-mee-tehs) A citizen serving in conscription.
 - Noncombative.
 - Consists of however many Deinos are needed.
 - Grouped into 40 recruits each.

Anunnaki Corfum ranks and units:

(Interesting/skippable)

- *Corfum*: (Cohrr-foom) The largest unit, consisting of 3,000 Corfea. There are currently 10 Corfum.
 - *Am'Ad'ifa*: Chosen leader among the *Ad'ifa*.
 - Current: *Mathas Akena*.
- *Haku*: (Hah-koo) 1,000 Corfea each.
 - There are 3 Haku per Corfum, each with a personalized name.
 - Ex. Mathas has two Corfum under his command. The names of the six Haku are:
 - *Atum'temet*: Ra's honor.
 - *Tef'temet*: Tefnut's honor.
 - *Ssf'temet*: Shu's honor.
 - *Nwt'temet*: Nut's honor.
 - *Keb'temet*: Geb's honor.
 - *Wsjr'temet*: Osiris' honor.
- It used to be, one Haku was made up of heavy races, the other light, and one mixed. This is the first war to have them all mixed, excluding tribe formed Corfum.
 - *Am'hak*: First Commander.
 - *Dru'v'hak*: Second Commander.
- *Au Otho*: (Oh Oh-toh) 100 Corfea per. The 'Au' gets replaced by whichever number Otho it is. Ex. *Am Otho*.
 - *Am'Oth*: Leader of an Otho.
 - *Dru'v'Oth*: Second in command of an Otho.
- *Prus*: (Proosh) 10 to 20 Corfea.
 - *Corfea*: Warrior.

D.

Races Native to or Commonly Encountered in Olympus:

(Interesting/skippable)

Details are from different works by the Nine Scholars and their protégés in various scientific fields.

1. *Uridimmu* [oo-ree-dee-moo]: *Anubian*

At first glance, their facial structures have a remarkable resemblance to wolves. It's not entirely inaccurate, though their snouts are a little shorter and their mouths a little wider, with slightly inclined teeth. This adaptation, among others, allows Uridimmu the versatility required for language. Inspecting closely, they rely on their well muscled cheeks to speak at the flap lipped sides of their mouth.

It's speculated they share a recent ancestor with their *Urmah* neighbors due to similarities between their unique hybrid system to regulate body temperature. Hair covers their frame, but tends to be lighter or completely void between from pectorals to waist. This adaptation allows sweat glands to form major ports. A combination of panting & body sweat offers a balanced stamina, at roughly 70% Homin capability. Average heights for the masculine are 9'0, and 8'7 for the feminine, with a median lifespan of 137 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:*

- Northcentral Olympus.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Mythologies from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Germanic tribes show the clearest evidence of contact with Gaea. However, New World stories contain elements that may show contact also occurred.

- No names are known to be associated with the entire race. Only individual figures alongside stories of wolfmen.

- Anubian became a common name for Uridimmu following the Anubis line in the Land of Punt. It's not a hereditary line, but due to time differences & infrequent visits, competitions were held for the honor of replacing their namesake to preserve godly narratives.

2. *Syreni* [see-rehn-ee]:

They go by many names, Syreni being the Olympian variation. Some might find this title insulting; however, it's not a derogatory term and simply a translation. Other terms also

imply regional focus. Thus, Syreni equally practical as a catchall term.

Their skin is rough in texture; not quite scales, nor spongy as other mammalian ocean species, and better adapt to manage dry terrains. They have no hair; on top sits a network of oxygen processing blood vessels that share a similar texture to earthworms. Losing this won't kill them, but will significantly reduce the amount of time they can stay underwater.

Their noses are partly nubbed, primarily relying on flaps alongside their necks, which slam shut when diving. Syreni have four sets of lungs, each capable of absorbing 99% of oxygen inhaled. This allows them to remain submerged for forty minutes per breath. They have no legs, averaging 11'0 for the masculine, and 10'6 for the feminine, from head to tail fully extended. Their median lifespan is 190 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:* Hundreds of islands and coastlines globally. The *Telkhines* live south of Tartaros. The *Ne Hwas* thrive along the Hemeran coastline. There's also the *Selchie*, native to the northern coasts of Tír na nÓg. And *Limnads*, who prefer lakes to the oceans. They're all descendants of the *Nommos*, originating on the other side of the world. The island clusters closest to Atlantis are known as *Nereid*.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Gorgon.
- Mermaid.
- Lumpeguin.
- Merrow.
- Ne Hwas.
- Syreni.
- Siren.
- Ningyo.
- And many more.

3. *Homin* [oh-mins]:

The familiar humanoids on Terra, spread well across the planet, due to their relatively quick births compared to other species, and the ability to make simul. Homin organ structures match those of Gaeans, but are slightly enlarged, with a greater bone density to match. Heights average 6'6 for the masculine, and 6'0 for the feminine. Their median lifespan by the Jovian calendar is 140 years. With a simul, the median becomes 170 years, unless it's exchanged to a descendant before then.

a. *Native to:*

- Global.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Various gods.
- Various mythological figures.

4. *Sham'pe* [sh'ahm-pee]:

Their name translates to living land. Generally humanoid in shape, their features can vary wildly, often sporting limbs of differing length. Their frame can be square or rounded. An adult can range from 3'0 to 16'0. Their median lifespan is 290 years, requiring four years per pregnancy, and a decade in between. Outer differences notwithstanding, they all share a similar organ system. Everything is mounted in the same place, protected by an almost metallic ovoid enclosure at the center.

With a limited aptitude, assessments have shown they're incapable of education beyond primary school levels, rarely pushing boundaries through questions. But Sham'pe are avid artists, often using nature as the medium. An example of this is tree shaping, which is used to make spiritual grounds.

a. *Native to:*

- Upper Hemera
- Southern Chicomoztoc.
- Northern Chicomoztoc.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Golem.
- Gargoyle.
- Trolls (not to be confused with Troll in Ásgarðr).

5. *Aos Sí* [ayss-shee]:

They live up to the mischievous legends. Though native to the Tenth Realm, *Tír na nÓg*, war has brought them to Hemera in robust numbers; originally as mercenaries for Olympus, now fighting with the Anunnaki they consider kin. Either gender is capable of being born as a winged variation. It allows for flight at the expense of hollow bones. Aos Sí average 3'8 for the masculine, and 3'6 for the feminine. Their median lifespan by the Jovian calendar is 133 years.

a. *Native to:*

- Tír na nÓg.
- Western Rīkr.
- Southern Chicomoztoc.
- Northern Hemera.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Harpies.

- Fairies.

- Dwarfs.

- Elves.

- Leprechauns.

- (Dwarves & Elves are races native to Rīkr, but Aos Sí are not the same as either.)

6. *Wetiko* [weh-tee-koh]:

Southern Anunnaki tribes are desert dwellers, smaller than their northern counterparts. Northern Chico tribes live primarily in forests.

The northern variation are known as *Wechuge* (Weh-shoo-geh). Their arms tend to be longer than their bodies, adapted for climbing. Wechuge are also hairy, offering protection against insects & harsh winters. Their faces protrude, balancing large branched barbs, shedding yearly as antlers do, but female Wechuge also grow them, which is typical of horns.

Wetiko are often hairless, with faces resembling a bare skull. Most have dark grey skin, though black & white tones make up 20% of the overall population. They may have nubbed horns, also shedding yearly. *Wetiko* are shorter than Wechuge, offering a better balance with the rest of their bodies. Their hands, however, are typically larger, allowing for easier movement in loose sand.

Wechuge range from 6'5 for the masculine, and 5'6 for the feminine. *Wetiko* are 5'5 for the masculine, and 4'9 for the feminine. They're able to interbreed, typically taking the title 'Wetiko' or 'Wechuge' based on the majority of the tribe. Their median lifespan is 119 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:*

- Central Hemera.
- Southern Chicomoztoc.
- Northern Chicomoztoc
- *Ergenekon* (a large island north of Chicomoztoc).

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Wendigo.

- There are references to individual figures with long arms or antlers, but it is not discernable if they are random myth or based on contact.

7. *Urmah* [urr-mah]: *Leonis*

Features include round heads with pointed ears & pendant noses. Their lips are tucked in, otherwise similar to Homin, featuring canines longer & thinner than the Anubian varieties, moving with greater grace as well due to the slimmer dimensions of their pectorals. Males can grow manes, though cultural traditions may result in cutting or braiding them. Urmah & Uridimmu fur comes in many shades. For better or worse, this can often be a defining difference between tribes. Their average height is 9'0 for the masculine, 8'6 for the feminine. Their median lifespan is 141 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:*

- Eastern Hemera.
- Western Nyx.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Only known contacts are legendary figures.

8. *Tauram* [toh-rrahm]:

Strong, hairy legs mounted on hooved feet. Their features are blockish, except the large round nose. Their bodies are not so hairy above the waist, allowing for almost Homin levels of sweat glands. Both males & females grow horns, with the male variation being twice as thick. Tauram average 12'4 for the masculine, and 10'7 for the feminine. Their median lifespan is 143 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:*

- Central/Southern Nyx (Tartaros).

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Minotaur.
- Centaur.

9. *Satyr* [sah-teerr]:

They are similar to Tauram except much smaller, averaging 5'5 for the masculine, and 5'1 for the feminine. *Faun* have a unique ability to climb inclined cliffsides. Coupled with their speed & prowess for archery, it has made them formidable in the mountainous terrains of their homelands. Lifespans average 139 years by the Jovian calendar.

a. *Native to:*

- Central/Southern Nyx (Tartaros).

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Fauna.
- Centaur.

10. *Dökkálfar* [dohh-kahl-frr] & *Ljósálfar* [lee-oh-sahl-frr]:

An old adage says you should never play cards with an Elf. It's the bulging compound eyes, typically only seen on insects. They're unblinking, and have a standard viewing range of 270°. A unique sight even for Terra; they're the only other species capable of creating simul. For this reason, Álfar will often serve as mercenaries for anyone but the giants, who tend to make slaves even of their guests.

Many Zeus have given large incentives to *Dökkálfar* in particular, due to the way their glinting coal colored skin absorbs sunlight for energy, making them valuable fighters in desert regions. Centuries of this has resulted in entire *Dökkálfar* tribes forming from the descendants of those fighters, abandoned at war's end. Most stayed, preferring hot temperatures to the frigid climate of their native *Alfheim*, along the Ríkr coast.

Ljósálfar are pale as a glass of milk, making them more common in Nyx, due to a biological preference for cold cloudy climates. Their Photosynthetic cells are highly reactive compared to *Dökkálfar*. This typically means *Ljósálfar* must remain fully covered in direct sunlight, to avoid damaging the sensitive pigments.

Apart from the differing intensities of their absorption systems, there are few physical disparities between the two groups. Both rely on food & sleep less than is required by other

races. And it's possible for them to interbreed, resulting in *Svartálfar*, Black Elves.

Humanoid in form, Álfar have rounder heads than Homin. They grow hair, but lack fingernails, instead shedding a layer every few months. Álfar also sweat a sweet aroma. Their average height is 6'1 for the masculine, and 5'7 for the feminine. Their median lifespan is 160 years by the Jovian calendar, going up to 200 years with a simul.

a. *Native to:*

- Ljósálfar: Svartalfheim
- Dökkálfar: Alfheim.

b. *(Likely) Common names on Gaea:*

- Elves.
- Nymphs.
- Faeries.

End of lessons.

VIII

Paradise is a place like any other.

Shattered bones.

Skin torn to shreds. Painted like a canvas in various shades of browning red, amongst other colors that looked more like bile than blood. Pick any of their lot and the description fit. Yet tickles from moisture in the air made all their troubles seem so far away.

Minutes ago, they'd been fighting for their lives in a freezing desert, kept warm by the heat of the moment. Now, they basked comfortably in an uncovered spot at the heart of a forest, with the sun tempering its fifteen o'clock peak.

A quiet shelter, sitting in Chicomoztoc, beyond the Olympian northwest border. Legally speaking, their presence here could be called an occupation, or even an invasion. Since Kallias & Anton found a functioning portal, countless private & government actors have sought its location, insensibly combing the wrong nation.

None tailed them here.

Ignoring his bumps & bruises, old or new, it was the perfect spring day. If not for the intense weight of their gravity and the extra moon slivers still visible by daylight, he'd have no cause to suspect they were sitting on an entirely different world. The trees bore a classic silhouette, Rorick would say. Weird bugs tried to crawl on his hand for the hundredth time in his life. The soil was soil. The rocks were rocks.

His curiosity reignited a few hours in, witnessing his first truly spectacular sight. A moon orbiting unnervingly close to the point where its cracks & caverns could be seen by the naked eye, visible as its movement. *Selém** (Seh-leem.), they call it. Greeting every nation of the world every single day, and again at night. Places near large bodies of water often have special architecture to account for the resulting waves. Neither agreed, but Rorick swore its presence pushed him further in the grass.

Several fractured ribs had him sipping slow breaths to simmer the pain, instead of the intense throbbing endured by his ankles. A bite stick saved his tongue when they reset the arm he'd regrettably used to brace his

fall. Thera then carried him to the shade, honeymoon style, promptly cleaned his wounds.

“I’m going to put your leg down, okay?” She said in her hoarse but friendly way.

“It hurts.” Rorick cursed, swathed well as a mummy heading for its tomb.

“These wounds are rough. The splints are good; I’m more concerned about your blood loss.” She coughed. “You need to eat. Don’t worry, Cypraelia will mash it for you.”

He groaned at all of it.

“Leave me here to die.”

“Don’t tempt me.” She japed.

“Thera.”

“Yeah?”

“Think I’ll be able to hold my own the way you do? Well, not you. But passable.”

“Let’s get you healed before we worry about training. It’s normal to feel anxious, starting something new.” She caught her breath, raising a finger to say she’d be fine. “Kallias once told me your world’s expression, *needle in a haystack*. He said, ‘Learning a skill is like searching for a hay in a needle stack. If you dive in, you’ll hurt your pride much as anything else, and develop of fear of trying.’” She took a breathing break. “You have to gather the needles one by one. It takes a long time, but eventually you’ll find your mastery in the middle’.”

The words rang true, but he still found it difficult to praise the man.

“If you keep talking so much, you’re gonna have like four new mouths on the side of your face.”

Unable to dodge, the roll of bandages hit him between the eyes. He didn’t grumble. Instead, he watched Selém disappear up the northern sky.

“*Do’gre**(Doh-greh. I’m off/leaving. Frazz.)” Camus shouted.

“*Shol** (Shohl. Now. Frazz.)?” Thera hollered.

Their discussion intensified, while the pain meds helped Rorick pretend he was just another stone who claimed its home here long ago. In the end, Thera conceded, letting Camus do things his way, on a path he’s more familiar with than anyone.

“He’ll notify *Ima* to do her rounds tonight. If not, he’ll wait.” She lamented, finally laying a blanket out for herself under the sun.

“Long as he’s good.” Rorick shrugged. “Your friend’s taking us to Olympus?”

“She’s not my friend. She’s a colleague of your father’s.”

Thera threatened to open her wound, spitting out that lie.

“Okay, well, is this colleague going to take us to Olympus?”

“You’re in no condition to travel, and it’s better I don’t return in my state.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

She seemed annoyed, which she had every right to be, considering the totality of her sacrifice. Rorick wanted her to be specific later. For now, Thera deserved her rest, so he let it go, falling asleep soon after. What he awakened to was an awe inspiring set of cosmic ornaments decorating the sky. Glowing nebulas, patterned constellations, and the wildly varying shapes & sizes & colors of over a dozen moons. He wished Selém were here to see this.

“You’re sitting!” Thera wheezed.

She had a fire going in a dugout next to him. Rorick lifted his left arm, bringing it close to his face. He wiggled the fingers sandwiched between the splint.

“It’s easier to breath now too.” He said.

“How’re your wounds?”

“I don’t feel them, to be honest. Everything still hurts, but it’s the way flu aches do.” He burned hot, covered in cold sweats, causing him a nauseating quake.

“Are you alright?” Thera ran, dropping her supplies.

“I- *huhrr*.”

He coiled into himself, heaving.

“Here, drink.”

He took several gulps, unclogging his windpipe. With it, the stream flushed his stomach’s stew, spraying the side of the flames. His chills worsened, slowly blinding him. Thera called, but only the muffled outline of her words filtered through. She dragged him closer to the warmth, resting his head on her lap as she checked his vitals, placing a wet rag on his forehead. Wrapping him in a blanket was enough to give him a semblance of control.

“Everything’s fine. You’ll be okay.” Her words, clearing.

“I can’t see.” He shouted.

“It’s okay; he said you’d survive the trip, remember?”

“Well, ‘scuse me for not exactly trusting his planning skills.”

“You’ll be okay.” She reiterated. “Lie here, and let it pass.”

Thera’s grip on his shoulders expressed her doubts the way she wouldn’t.

“How long am I going to be like this?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.”

His vision stabilized, seeing opaque dark spots atop blurred surroundings.

“Actually, it’s a little better already. You’re right, we’ll wait it out.”

“See, I told you.” She placed a folded sweater under his head.

“Wish we had music, or a movie.”

“I don’t think you want me to sing.” Her laughter struggled.

“I dunno; all scratched up, you probably have a great voice for the Blues.”

“The what?”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. No culture stuff. Weird.”

“It’s what they thought was best.”

“But why?”

“I think they feared what might happen if notables on another world became famous here. Encouraging people to idolize your icons wasn’t their goal. So, they brought guitars, not the music of anyone famous for playing them.”

“Yeah. Guess it’ll be fun to explore what your people created using the same tools in an isolated setting.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Really hot. At least my vision’s better than five minutes ago.”

“Good. We have time if nothing else.”

“Okay. Tell me about your nonfriend Ima.” He blurted.

Her silence, filled by the full orchestra of insects chirping.

“Well, Ima is...”

*Pan Ima Lavinius** (Pahn-ee-mah Lah-vee-nee-uhs.) earned her acclaim in the deserts of Hemera when she captured or killed six of the of the ten most ruthless warlords plaguing the merchant roads between *Amenti* & *Asphodel*. And that was before Thera was assigned to her *polemeros*. An *aphne** (Ahff-neh.) then, she now serves as *Laossai endo Legon Vaga Qatta** (Head of the Twenty-fourth Legon.). Her command would likely be

in the single digits, had she not committed the very grave offense of publicly opposing a new campaign to liberate Atalancai. A day that cost her both the respect of her father & Thera's love. She attended the debates as her father's guest. Even Kallias made a rare public appearance, attesting to how rabid the situation had become. Thanks to Ima, his presence sufficed.

Bandit tribes allied with Mathas derailed an Olympian supply train, killing twenty-nine civilians, enslaving the rest. It should be noted; reports confirmed Mathas neither encouraged nor gave any orders to attack. He surrendered the leaders & captives to Olympian emissaries, alongside a chest of gold to be split amongst the victim's families. Still, the outcry for retaliation was great, emanating from the halls of government equally as did anywhere else.

A few war minded senators invited *Haitius Lavinius** (Hay-tee-uhs Lah-vee-nee-uhs.) to speak at their debates, before the Upper Chamber voted on mobilization. He's the hero who brought an end to Harodus through a massive slaughter known as *T'irimortam** (Tee-ree-morr-tahm. The Colorful Death.). As the longest serving *Capta Barrax* in Legon history, he oversaw the monarchy's transition to a republic, safeguarding the king's peace in the absence of a king.

To his supporters, Haitius is the iron hand of order. To his critics, far too often, his tactics boil down to nothing more than net gains. The campaigns he's led have come at a great cost to all sides, and none cared to see the revulsions he'd incur during the first siege of Atalancai in eleven hundred years.

Retired by then, Haitius still vigorously argued in support of *Atlan* liberation. A bloodthirsty senator besought Ima to speak, followed by growing cheers from those in the room who anticipated, she'd join her father at his side. Instead, Ima agreed with the opposition. She said what Olympians refused to acknowledge; Atlantis is thriving, and its prosperity bleeds into the poorest parts of Hemera. Disrupting the flow will lead to famine & rebellion.

Every paper ran her speech on the frontpage, pinning the hero daughter against the hero father. It dwarfed Thera's anger to a page six gossip column. Her bitterness runs deep. It's been years since they've spoken, doing so now because their official & unofficial duties require it. Which is to say, at the behest of Kallias.

Thera never blamed him the same way, even though the wider victory belonged to him. No matter her position, he would have quashed their plans. But he gained an important ally that day. A newly discovered reason for Thera to hate her. Everyone assumed Pan Ima Lavinius had been sent to command this barren outpost by the scorn of her father. Yet here she was, the only other person Kallias Zeus included in his big secret since his scholars brought the modern world.

Her stifled seething lamented Ammon getting so close. Now she had to accept the circumstances. A compromise of sorts; Ima helps them, giving her a conclusive opportunity to validate her loyalties, and then her part is done. Because Thera will won't call on her the same way.

"Ima, years ago, very publicly chose your father's side over her own." Thera realized she hadn't conceded enough ground. "I served under her years ago."

"You two had a falling out?"

Her hold on his shoulders tightened.

"We..."

"You know what, I'm sorry. It's between you two."

"She's a good person, loyal to her convictions."

Rorick couldn't tell where the ground stopped and he started.

"Nicely put. My body's fighting itself, and we're not winning."

Thera cover him in another blanket, using Cypraelia to spear a log and drop it in the pit. Then she sat still as stone so he could relish the comfort. If he were fully conscious, he'd thank her, and politely ask for a snack, even though the store of dried foods had become torture.

She's gone.

She's gone.

STOP.

She's gone.

Bitter truths burn slowly, with always a fresh layer for kindling.

"It was me. She didn't deserve-"

"*Shhh...* it's okay. Everything will be okay."

"She's dead. She's *dead*. It's my fault she's dead."

For her to be looking down at his tears was the last thing he wanted. Then a droplet grazed his temple, easing the burden so simply.

"Can you tell me about the different things in the sky?"

"What do you mean? Like names of the moons?"

“Yeah sure, let’s start there.”

“Uh, well, I don’t remember them all.” Thera wheezily giggled. “There’s... *one*... *six*... *nine*... fourteen in the sky, including Selém, which is her Olympian name. She goes by *Cessaem** (Seh-shem.) in Atla, *Sulxi** (Sool-shee.) in Fraza, *Wogat* (Woh-gaht.) in *Aslýðr*; the rest are names but theirs means Wōden’s Eye.”

“Ahss-loo-thrr?”

“Mhm, it’s the language of... how do your people pronounce it, Azgart?”

“Asgard!”

“I was close, see.”

“How’s it really pronounced?”

“*Ásgarðr** (Awss-garr-thrr.).”

“Wait, so Woah-den is supposed to be Odin?”

“Hmmm, maybe.” She shrugged. “Or *Óðinn* or *Wotan*. They’re all descendants of *Wōðan*. A few hundred years apart, but I think each visited your world.”

“I’ll see home again.”

“Ditto.”

“Two orphans in a strange land.”

“Aha, at least we’re not alone in this world.”

“Or the other. Not that it matters now.”

“We’ll find your way. I promise.”

“Thanks, Tee. Wouldn’t mind seeing my one moon again.”

“Oh yeah, the moons! The next closest after Selém is... mmmm... *Áton** (Ah-tun.) in Laschma, I believe. It has a peach color to it, but it’s very faint. Then there’s *Lethos* and *Hylon** (Leh-tos and Hee-lun.), the brothers; and *Galla* and *Milna*, the sisters. Traveling together, as in each with their pair, not all four.” She became anxious as if it were an exam. “I don’t remember their other names. I see *Chacus** (Khay-koos.), I think *D’rato* in Atla, or Fraza. Umm... *Akíos** (Ah-kee-ohs.), *Oméleus** (Oh-mee-leh-uhs.), *Harmonia*, *Napollo*... I’m just naming names for moons; I don’t know if those are the ones in the sky.”

“How many are there?”

“Twenty-one, in total.” Thera said. “A few travel at the same speed as the planet, so they’re only visible if you go to that part of the world. We

have one of those here as well. Over there, *Lo'Gaea*. It's the furthest back, so you can't see it in the city."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"Hmm, I'm fluent in Laschma and Atla. Almost fluent in English and Aslýðr, and passable in Fraza and *Naxuul** (Nah-shool.), the language of Chicomoztoc, which we're in now, right above Hemera."

"How do you separate so much in your head? And what are your thoughts in?"

"Words are easy. If you have two meaning the same thing in the same language, then a new language kinda adds another to the collection. I accidentally switch in the middle sentences a lot. In my head, it depends on the subject. Atalancai is a global trading port, so I grew up around mixed languages. They're all part of me, even if I consider Atla my central. Then Kallias taught me English to speak privately. I practiced French a little too because he has so many writings. He usually did early drafts in French."

"I took Spanish for three years and know basically nothing."

"Not true. You were speaking to Camus' friend, remember?"

"Yeah, but not your level of conversational English."

"Don't worry, I'll help you practice Laschma."

"After your neck heals. How's it feeling?" He asked, eyes still closed.

"Itchy."

"Sorry that happened to you."

"It's not your fault. I'm the one who's sorry." She wheezed a moment, and he realized how unfair he was being asking her to talk. "I took too long opening the letter. If I'd done it sooner, my neck might've been fine."

"So goes the bullshit of life."

"*Sa ast nom aneam vo sa ast chaus** (Sah ahst nohm ah-nee-am voh sah ahst cowss.)?"

"What's that mean?"

"It's an Olympian saying. It means, *is it our minds or is it the chaos?*"

"Our minds?"

"*Uckhh.*" Thera spat. "Basically, consciousness is a biproduct of universal chaos, or, such. And, for coincidences that seem too coincidental, it's theorized or believed... living beings have sensors, constantly searching for ways to align themselves with their goals. It's a weak effect but can have big impactful moments."

The Enneans sought you same as we did, putting in the work to open routes. Was our timing random chance, or was it because we were linked to the same goal?" She rasped. "You'd have to ask Anton or Dorra for a proper answer. It's not a specialty of mine."

"Ahn-tun. Doh-rra."

These strangers are all he has left. He wished his stories impressed the way theirs do. Why should they care about some weakling longing for a safe place in the chaos?

"You'll love them; they're the best."

"Thera."

"Yeah?"

"I gotta go to the bathroom both ways but I can't move."

* * *

A whistle began in his dreams, skirling far too close to his ears. Then Thera responded with her own, surging his rise, unsure what'd happened.

"Sorry." She said. "At least our ride's here."

"Sweet Baby Ray's, hallelujah!"

His pride couldn't handle Cypraelia's shower-bidet combos anymore. And the decline in their dried stores meant they might've had to eat one of those disgusting cork headed, wide eyed, death staring, mutant turkey things rustling up temporary nests in the surrounding trees, bringing a rancid odor after their flock arrived the day before. *Cuo Kus** (Coh-coos.) they're called, dangling their hideous extra swollen waddles just begging to be popped by a wispy branch. It'd get bigger, puffing their chests in tandem to gyrate a prolonged series of phlegmy clucks, sounding as though they were drowning mid stroke, half a dozen times per hour.

The whistle came again.

Thera returned another, pressing on the painful flair it caused her chest. From the forest appeared Ima's brisk & friendly wave. She capered the lining of her deep purple double breasted military overcoat, arrayed in golden stripes. It complimented the amber bitten dark grey fur around her left eye.

Her nose resembled the pendant shape of a cat's, poised between sharp cheekbones. Closer in, he saw whiskers, though evolution had waned them in size, generations past. But her ears stood pointy & high, wearing a

titled golden beret medially. Unlike her well postured broad shoulders of perfect stature, up there at about nine feet, easily carrying fresh supplies.

“Is she the same as Ammon?”

“Her race? Not quite. She’s *Urmah*; Ammon is *Uridimmu*.”

Ima made quick work of the distance between them, even at her casual pace. He didn’t mean to stare; it was hard not to. How refreshing to see a different race posing no threat so close.

“To answer your question, we came out of the primordial dawn beside our Anubian *gedribam** (It’s a broader term than brethren. Think of it as *gedren*, which is not a real word in any language, but may occasionally be used as a summation.)” Ima said.

“You heard us, way over there?”

“Are you kidding? Have you seen these things?” She pointed at her ears. “I thought you’d be surprised I can speak your language.”

“Pretty used to it, actually. What Thera neglected to mention is you’re an, Urrmmm...” His somber frown begged Thera, but she threw him no lifelines.

“mah.” Ima finally said. “Or Leonis, if you find it easier. *Urmah* is our native term. Leonis is the Laschma equivalent.”

Rorick thanked her for offering him options. He meant to ask her meaning behind primordial dawn, if Thera hadn’t highjacked the conversation already, jumping into one he couldn’t understand.

“*Are you okay?*” Ima asked. “*Camus told me most of it. I can’t believe they’re on the other world.*” She surveyed the wreckage without acknowledging the collapsed cave. “*I should’ve gone. Kallias broke his own rules. He’d consider the necessity, especially if they’d already done so.*”

“*Ammon got the better of me; we’re fine.*” Thera avowed bluntly.

“*And the Doca?*”

Thera shrugged.

“*They’re safer than we are.*”

“*You’re probably right. I’m glad you’re okay, Moonshine.*”

“*Don’t! Don’t call me that.*”

Thera’s lashing stunned Rorick same as Ima, leading to an awkward silence.

He raised his hand for their attention.

“I’m Rorick, by the way.”

Ima turned, studying him.

“Well, you certainly won’t be the largest Zeus among its line.”

Her jestful tenor sizzled in the aftertaste. Rorick wanted to cleverly regain her confidence, but her words had shattered him.

“His soft chin is similar to a portrait of Kallias as a boy, actually.” Thera probably cared more about condescending Ima than she did curing his doubts. Still, if true, there may be hope for him yet.

“Rorick... sounds familiar.” Ima said. “Who were you named after?”

“This is all new to me.”

She seemed as though she’d been expecting his answer.

“It’s no matter now.” Ima said.

“Camus?” Thera asked.

“He’s lying low, securing the *gep** (Gehp. GP. During the Great War, it stood for ‘General Purpose vehicle’. The term has since become commonplace on Terra, including ‘gip’ using the phonetic *jip*.)”

“Good. You’ll have to carry him.” Thera pointed at Rorick, gathering their supplies. “We need a place to hide for a month”

“There are plenty of abandoned farmhouses from before the *Xu’wele* conflict* (Shoo weh-leh. Happened a hundred and fifty years ago.). But any I know, my *Legian* know as well. It’s hard to predict when a few might sneak off to drink with whores.”

“We’ll alternate watch shifts.”

“Your truancy has already been noted.” Ima contended. “Everyone’s writing their own fables about your secret mission. I suppose, they’re not far off. And it’ll lessen my father’s scorn if people believe you’re away on his orders.”

Had things gone smoothly, she could’ve blamed her absence on a flat tire. Thanks to Ammon, she’s officially AWOL. And her stature doesn’t afford her the privacy of documents shuffled silently to a case manager through the bureaucratic behemoth. All of Olympus knew once reporters got wind.

“He’s kept it quiet?”

“You know full well, he’s probably fuming at the thought of you damaging his reputation in the papers.”

“Rorick can’t travel far.”

“I agree. Doesn’t mean you have to stay. Camus can supervise, and I’ll-”

“I’m *not* leaving him.”

“He won’t be-”

“Until he’s at Anton and Dorra’s, I’m not leaving him.” Thera shouted. “*There have been too many surprises. We take no chances.*”

Ima sighed.

“What will you say in a month?”

The endless line of questions.

“I’ll tell them the truth; not the whole truth. I went to the temple to see for myself. It collapsed and we no longer have contact.”

Ima huffed a clicking sound, unsatisfied. At least she’d have plenty of time to work on a proper answer. She straddled Rorick in a carrier designed to transport wounded soldiers off a battlefield via larger races, trekking behind Thera. Rorick sensed her irritation, but had a million questions for his new friend, taking turns to alleviate her own curiosities about Gaea.

The spooky damp forest produced an unclear path. If necessary, Camus carved subtle markings long ago. Thera wore their remaining supplies in a duffle bag strapped opposite her wound, snubbing Ima’s concerned offerings to share the load. For ten hours, they marched over vines & under branches, eating on the move, eventually stopping to camp before a deeper darkness chilled life unbearably. They settled in where the trees were sparse, building a fire easily thanks to Thera’s forethought to grab dry kindling.

So many creeping howls beyond the flame’s light. Rorick watched a long green centipede wriggle its way in search of a snack, checking behind every pebble, shaking loose some sort of crickety, which hopped to a distance it considered safe. Then the centipede opened its ring of pincers, exposing innards through its mouth and flicked forward to wrap its poor fare.

“AHH!” Rorick shouted. “I’m supposed to sleep next to those crawly things?”

“You did fine the last couple nights.” Thera noted.

“Yeah, *before* I witnessed the horror of their existence.”

“You’re too big to taste.” Ima joked. “Sleep closer to the fire if it worries you.”

And that’s exactly what he did, spit roasting himself to relieve the burdened side’s toasting. He’d grown tired of trying to bridge conversations, as if they didn’t have more in common with each other. Or

maybe they're just better equipped to handle long silences. Either way, it was freeing not to put any effort in.

"How're your wounds?" Thera asked.

"Not bad, how's yours?"

"I'll survive the night, if a hungry worm doesn't feed on my bones."

"Worms don't have legs." He snarked.

One less thing to worry about. Fingers locked on her stomach; she rested using her duffle bag as a pillow. A delicate smile, helping her float away. The next day, they reached the forest line in six hours, accompanied by curious apish things with batlike hooks & gliders, traveling above them most of the day. Rorick matched the babies holding their mothers, and they seemed to recognize it too. The *ergennigaors* stopped following once the forest thinned, revealing an excess of sun beyond their eyes' capacities. He waved goodbye to the babes, touching their own palms to mimic.

Camus roused himself awake, napping on a bed he'd fashioned out of fallen leaves. Thera insisted on rebandaging his leg to confirm he wasn't underselling its condition. His palm had deteriorated noticeably, scarring in its melted shape.

Refusing, he lit a handroll, shedding the camouflage covering their vehicles. Rorick should've expected their size, but still, they exceeded his expectations, particularly Thera's. The thick armor plated front tires stood two meters tall.

Nope.

Of all his adjustments, metric quantities rang most jarring.

"It's called a *Stymphalian*."

The wheels protruded beyond their sides, resembling wings on a chariot, balanced by heavy plated shocks to support various terrain. Though protected, it was also versatile. A single oversized castor wheel gave it its unique mobility, and the cowcatcher tip assured nothing slowed its ambition. Its color matched desert sand, about five shades lighter than Thera. Plastered on either door was an eagle holding two worlds in its talons.

The second car emerged in a familiar long & slender body, curvy at various creases, head to tail. The silver lamps sat as a decal would, sparkling above its dark blue frame that resembled purple at certain angles. The carriage, meant for those of Ima's size, reduced him to a toddler at its helm.

“Alright, we’re going to the marshes.” Ima announced.

Thera pulled Rorick towards the Stymphalian. Camus rode in Ima’s big blue classic, tilting his cigarette in the breeze. The drive lasted thirty minutes, taking them to... is this what she calls safe? The stench of it. Exploding mountains, he can manage. This was painfully cruel.

“The algae bloom is a little off putting, so chances are slim anyone else will shelter here.” Ima explained. “The stream is drinkable, and a good place to bathe, but do your best to avoid the lake. There’s not much for fishing or hunting either. I’ll restock your supplies soon. If you need anything before then, my spare radio will be at full volume waiting for the clicks.”

They hid the Stymphalian in a partially collapsed barn, choosing for themselves the titular home flaunting its functional roof, surprised to find the infestation underwhelming. From Ima’s trunk, she brought two coolers. One carrying salted meats and fresh vegetables. The other, full of grains, utensils, pans, plates, and cups.

Rushing to return, Ima bid her farewells. Thera benignly waved, tailoring her claimed corner. Camus sagged a mordant half salute. Unshaken, Ima swung Rorick side to side, leaning him on the doorless frame to behold the open land, plagued by an occasional rotting ranch, blushing a rosy red as the sun hallowed yet another temporary home.

IX

Good & bad are simple constructs, meant to determine morality's shift. As experience shapes understanding, ethical questions will naturally deviate from the linear. At this stage, a more accurate guide can be found in circumstance & perspective.

"I failed you. I failed us all!"

"Stop moving." *Amsu* beckoned with a firm grip as he cleaned the empty socket of *Ammon's* left eye for the second time today. The other darted away in shame.

"*His son-*" He caught himself shouting. "...the bloodlines continue because of my arrogance. *Huni** (Hoo-nee.) showed me the dangers of their weapons, and I refused to consider his warnings. Next to her, they seemed trinkets." *Ammon* spat at the bitter taste of his own words.

Mathas reached for the hearth of his friend's leathery blue palm.

"I'm sorry I missed you yesterday." He'd scarcely returned from *Léyatora*, stopping here before his own home.

"No reason to be sorry, *qega** (Kay-gah. A familial term for a sibling of life rather than blood.)" *Ammon* said. "Your talks went well?"

Amsu finished cleaning his wound. The new bandages, immediately put to work by a clear gloss forming under the brow's leaky puff.

"Let me see."

Mathas callously pushed his personal doctor aside in a way cousins do at times. He held *Ammon's* chin, rolling his head under the lamp to see scars spreading out of a central fractured cavity, tearing off pieces of his ear as well.

"This maimed you?" He retrieved a blanketed object on the floor.

Ammon's growl possessed the pressure of a deep sea cavern.

"*Huni* says it's not the same type. These are meant for long distances. The one that hit me; I should be dead. The traitor pointed it in my face, and I took no chances after a bursting rock ripped so many of our own to pieces. Still, it caught the side of my face. *Af'Daq* pulled me away, seeing the traitor throw another bursting rock. I don't recall their name. *Huni* told me."

Mathas asked *Ammon's* permission to unwrap it. He ran his hand along the hollow drum. It's refinement fascinated him, reluctant to consider

it metal. He shouldered the stock, fitting not so different than a crossbow.

“And the pieces go here? Are they rectangular?”

“No, Am’Ad’ifa, their container is. The fillings are boxed in my desk drawer. Huni said not to leave it armed. And never point it at a life you don’t intend to take.”

Four decades, Kallias stood firm on the policies separating the worlds, unshy about his motivations. Gaeon warfare is different. But Olympus has built countless weapons using other world technology. It struck him as an excuse to maintain control following the monarchy’s end. Yet, part of Mathas always trusted Kallias’ intentions. He should’ve committed to his own ideals fully. Still, he was a great man.

“Their danger lies in impact?”

“The finest armor in the world won’t stop them. They come bigger than a gep, or small enough to fit in your pocket. I’m sorry, Am’Ad’ifa, we had to leave the larger types to travel in our condition.”

This is because the Ennean temple takes ten weeks to reach Atalancai. Here, the dethroned *Cyprian Wanax** (See-pree-ahn Wah-nah-kah. King Cyprian.) refuted Kallias’ attempts to connect their domains through railways. An understandable first & second reaction, fearful of exposing Atlan defenses.

The city’s five meter thick wall used every red stone for a hundred leagues, rising forty stories at its lowest points, stretching twelve kilometers to either side of the coastline. In the flatlands beyond lie farms & traps alike. The mountains end their domain, serving as a final safeguard from the lifeless rocky desert. Since the city primarily relies on its ocean ports for trade, building a route that circumvented these defenses created vulnerabilities the *Myrmidons* struggled to comprehend. The remains of their liquidated army still protests anything of the sort.

Regardless, machines cannot traverse where the portal has remained hidden for hundreds in *Irkalla*, a desert of boiling geysers. On a good day, the temperature averages 55°C* (Roughly 131°F). Mathas thought only one person qualified to survive the search. *Ar’noq’a* is Wetiko, and a smuggler by trade. Even though he doesn’t care to play politics, he finds himself sympathetic to their cause. It took him several trips with a sack of rations & a knack for finding groundwater. The countless days he spent stewing in search of a vague prospect. Eight years seems a pittance for what they’ve unearthed.

Mathas' most fruitful venture yet started as an odd gift. The descendant of an old cartographer under Harodus, grateful for the liberation of her town, delivered him a crumbling leatherbound journal. You've heard mention of her before, on the mountain. A decade later, Mathas holds the culmination of those results his hands.

"May I try it outside? I'll avoid the neighbors."

"You can't, Am'Ad'ifa. They'll hear it farther than you can see." How he wished he'd gotten her throat a little deeper in his fangs. "Their doctors said the hearing loss on this side may be permanent."

"Is that your opinion as well, Amsu?"

"He suffered a lot of damage to the inner ear fibers."

"No treatments?"

Amsu shook his head.

"War has costs, and I swore my willingness to pay." Ammon said. "I'm luckier than the others."

"I can't believe she was there." Mathas, sounding fraught. "Did she know him?"

"Doubtful, Am'Ad'ifa. The boy stood his ground, but he wasn't a warrior."

"No?"

"She did the work for him."

"How many did we lose?"

"Of the twenty-eight, six of us remain. The scholars are okay. Among the simul, Af'Daq is uninjured, but *Hafit* was slain."

"You're a worthy subject for song, Ammon. Few survive her fork. Even fewer leave their mark. Reports still have her missing."

"She'll heal quicker than I do."

Mathas poured himself a water.

"Tell me everything. Start at the beginning; the portal, please."

"Its temple is underground. The spiral steps are worn, but well sized for myself. We suspect it was meant for *Apedemak* based on the wall carvings. He's the only Urmah to claim its region in his territory. On the far side, a freshwater pool is filled by some deeper scalding source. A cup has to sit for an hour before it's bearable to drink." Ammon struggled to cough, feeling the tremors in his wound.

"Here, I ask you for a report in your condition. Rest. I'll return this evening to check on you and bring dinner. We'll save the full briefing for

the Ad'ifa."

"No, wait. Am'Ad'ifa, I must tell you. Their portal's gone."

The words eluded him.

"You found their portal?"

"Their temple entrance sat in the peak of a mountain. Af'Daq saw them go through before it caved in. He might've died if it weren't so easy to move on their world. Small wonder why we were gods to them." Fervent dithers filled his voice.

Mathas exhaled hard at the desk chair. He scratched the scruff rising to his gaunt & bony cheeks, then the black of his silky dark locks behind their lobes.

"I still don't.... What destroyed their portal?"

"Af'Daq loosed blasts as he chased them."

Mathas wasn't satisfied by that answer. Simul can't damage a portal. They're very stable. Even a collapsing mountain wouldn't affect its function. There are records of it happening.

"Magnificent news!" He cheered. "Ammon, you disappoint me. I'd have started there if I were you."

"The shame of my failure is too great for an accident to mend."

Mathas went to a knee, enjoining his friend.

"Your loyalty to our people has already softened your falters. I'm honored to call you my friend and ally. Sorry they gored you. I promise, you'll have justice."

"Thank you, Am'Ad'ifa. I tasted it already, and felt the crunch of her bones."

"Huni is okay?"

Ammon nodded.

"His brilliance amazes me. In four months, he's become fluent in two of their languages, and formed many friendships in their desert markets. Now, he studies anything he can. Kallias' temple sat on a separate continent than ours. Huni's allies smuggled us in cargo containers, suffering a week. Then we *flew* to the shoreline in a metal sky ship! No balloons carrying it, Am'Ad'ifa. It was metal, flying on its own!"

"We'll discuss it later."

"On their world, they have one moon, and they've touched it."

"We'll discuss it later." Mathas reiterated.

"Wait, Am'Ad'ifa."

Ammon pointed to a large manila envelope on the corner desk. Mathas bobbed his way, entertained by the mystery. Inside he found pictures of a higher quality than anything he'd seen before. He flipped through them, noticing one person they all had in common. A messy haired boy of similar complexion.

"I'd think him your child sooner." Ammon said.

Mathas chuckled, not entirely disagreeing.

Except the boy had a pallor to his complexion.

"How old is he?"

"Eighteen, Am'Ad'ifa."

"His face is young."

A hard life ages Anunnaki children age quick. By fifteen, wearing lines have already started to show. Mathas wondered if he'd inherit his father's square jaw.

"You wanted diplomacy." Ammon, unburdening. "Blunders mark our missteps, but we had him, peacefully surrendered. *THEN SHE CAME.*"

"Calm yourself, Ammon." Mathas said. "I'm sorry about our poor timing. The mission was crucial. The outcome... is what it is."

The boy's button nose resembled a Leonis. Mathas ran a finger down his own slender bridge, pinching shut the wide chutes below its pointed tip. He didn't expect them to appear so Homin.

"His name?"

"Rorick."

"*Rorr-ehk?*" Mathas sounded out the oddities. "It has an *Aségar** (Ah-say-gahrr. Asgardian.) flare to it. These photos are outstanding by the way. Almost a window."

"Their cameras far exceed anything Kallias brought here."

The boy's arms were under worked, but their length gives him a nice advantage. His father had a stockier build, to be sure. Long limber legs allow Mathas to stay low, leveraging his reach. It's often said, he's the greatest Homin warrior absent a simul... by his own people. Not that he prides himself in such things. Fighting is meant for protection & justice. He values the mind far more. *Fists are a stupid man's brain*, recalling a quote from his favorite book. Words he takes to heart. A signed copy sits in his safe next door.

"I'll send word for the Ad'ifa to hurry their return." Mathas pocketed the pictures. "Cousin, handle the letter to your wife. It'll draw less

attention.”

“They’re in talks currently. I don’t think she’s conducting them at home.”

“Find out before sending the request.”

Amsu bowed on his exit.

“As for you, we’ll say you lost your eye to an infection. It won’t stop the whispers, but at least we’ll make it clear, the subject is off limits.”

“As you see fit, Am’Ad’ifa.”

“Whatever you need, my friend, I’m here.”

Ammon took Mathas’ hand.

“May the sun shine on you today.”

“As on you.”

* * *

Mathas redressed its linen, taking the ammo box as well. His personal guard waited out front, chatting alongside the workers trimming Ammon’s hedges. He honored their bowing heads with the same, sending his guardsman in to fetch cold drinks. A day this lovely deserved to be appreciated, but Mathas had spent the past nine in a boisterous heat, and missed the feeling of refreshment.

It takes a minor trek to reach next door, affording him the opportunity to greet his neighbors briefly. There weren’t many other races living here before the Atlan uprising. The few who could afford it usually sauntered in on a red carpet stained by the blood of their own kin. They’re all gone now, by whichever means during the *execution or exile* phase of the occupation.

His gratitude to Ammon is eternal, for putting an end to the fighting so quickly in the face of a tremendous force. He led his *Au Otho** (Oh oh-toh. Reminder: Corfum military unit consisting of 100 Corfea.), measured & tactful, losing none of his own. For helping the people take Atalancai, Mathas offered him to choose in his reward.

“A place at your side.” Ammon had said.

They became quick friends fittingly. Ammon aided in the tedious aspects of transitioning the palace to a public works facility. For nine years, they’ve lived down the street by five blocks & a turn. The other surrounding homes were partially given to praised citizens, for their exemplary efforts during the famine. Their devotion created channels to feed the poorest citizens wherever scraps could be found, or the taste of rot hidden. It was in

the hearth of these connections that the rebellion brewed. Eventually, they'd open the gates for Mathas' Corfum, so simply as he opened the one to his home now.

His home in an overcrowded mining camp has no frame of reference to imagine living in splendor. There's an optimism here. Olympus held it out of reach for his people, maintaining their ignorance to keep them servile. The way they educate their own children is incomprehensible to the uneducated. True, Kallias' reforms improved upon the nonexistent school system. At least, that's how Olympians want Enneans to see it. But their intentions are clear. They'd prefer to ship engineers, rather than train Anunnaki in skilled practices.

Almost home.

This walk usually pacified him, like a panacea for all his worries. Today, it sat as a hard swallowed nostrum, gurgling in his belly. What protects Zamara & Neptuciu?

If foxes breed too much, they eat too many rabbits. Starvation thins their numbers, so the rabbits come back. Then the foxes come back. No greater purpose in its meaning. Simply, chaotic equilibrium. Yet nature offers no balance for the lightning, and the trident, and the hammer, and the serpent.

Turns out, the answer's quite simple in hindsight. And Olympus has been showing them the truth of it all along. Only [sapience] can conquer a weapon made by [sapience]. Simul are created, and their lines preserved, by the efforts of people. Nature cannot offer balance for tools of infighting. The great Anunnaki philosopher *Ortic'l N'Deeva* put it best:

“The moment existence began, chaos reigned supreme, as it has to this day. But chaos never existed exclusively, for the physical laws came into being at the same moment. These laws bring about celestial equilibrium, when dust in empty space tightly bonds to form planets and stars. Physical laws set the parameters, and chaos molds existence into something like our own.

...

Logic follows, matter created within the universe cannot be independent of everything else. All that we are, and all that we see around us, exists as a response to contingent stimuli. The development of [sapient] beings is not an exception to this rule any more than it is a coincidence.

Consciousness is a byproduct of chaotic nature, equal and opposite. [Sapient] beings are of a continuous line which has sought to conquer chaos by manufacturing stability.”

Kallias must've recognized, his reforms had driven an axe through Terra's continuous line. And the advantage these weapons could give his people... Olympus already turns a blind eye to Anunnaki suffering. They'd have lost sight of what it truly means to live in horror, fighting so easily in disproportionate casualties.

The terror sent acid to his chest. His guilty conscience reminding him he killed the man who inspired him to start a movement. Then tried to kill his son, losing so many of their own in the process. All of it done by Mathas' hand, because it was done at his command. He wished Ammon had blamed him the way he deserved.

“Everything seeks a median state. The most important difference between equilibrium created by natural chaos, as opposed to an artificial construction, is that nature is often cruel, whereas [sapience] can achieve equilibrium through equitable and civilized standards.”

Yet cruelty is an inherent part of every civilization, preserved by proactive & sedentary will. Let them live a day in their manufactured chaos. Mathas turned his attention towards the alternative, imagining how the Ad'ifa might respond if he swore the survivors to secrecy, and continued their present course.

Vöx would lead the contentions, pointing out their accessibility compared to simul. Zaba would counter, stating the obvious concern he's ignoring. *But don't these weapons also escalate the conflict?* Solon will join Vöx, since his people have suffered the greatest casualties, believing tensions are bound to escalate anyway. A balanced fight is its own achievement. Then Forfa... actually, no. Teefu would emphasize the probability Olympus already has designs better adapted to this world. Portal or no, they're waiting for us to make this mistake.

Mathas also worried about arming certain chiefs. Fod & B'wun are begrudgingly incorporated among their allies. The ugly things they'd do. His intentions won't matter if the Serpent Queen feels provoked. No doubt, Tlalzilpo* (A clicky 'T' and add a lisp to the 'S'. T'Lahl-sil-poh.) will find these weapons daunting. Her silence since the death of Kallias unnerves

everyone. If they're lucky, it's meant as an insult, predicting another success for Olympus. Will her neutrality end if their fighting takes a Gaeon turn?

Film footage of Kallias is riddled with stutters. His shaking hands often debilitated him. Before his reclusion, crowds had distressed him visibly. And every photo of his later years has a cigarette in his mouth, or hiding behind his palm.

Reaching the front steps, Mathas awakened from his lull. Two of six guards opened the grand wooden doors, releasing wafts of citrus scented cleaner. This house once belonged to the kingdom's treasurer, *Amasu Grespo*. A man who codified misery to conflate duty. He's one of the few executed after the fighting, given no option to exile, in service of justice. In service of equity, Mathas allowed the Grespo family to take a fourth of their fortune, the same offer as any who fled. A generous allocation under the circumstances. As for the house, he bought it at a fair price, putting its fee into the newly created Office of Subventions. Not a single life has been lost to starvation in six years.

Those who wished to stay had their fortunes put to trial in the occupation courts, to prove they accumulated their wealth *without slavery nor great suffering*. The ego driven assumed it to be a farce, for show, losing their hubris to a tightening noose. Most were allowed live peacefully in their ancestral homes, confiscating half their fortunes. They abide by every new tax & regulation, despite their hatred of Mathas lasting the decade since his arrival.

*Bomice** (Bohm-eess) squeaked at his return, doddering to sweeten his welcome. Mathas hunched well & down, meeting her halfway, always grateful to see the manor's old housekeeper. He scarcely met his own mother. His father sold her not long after Mathas stopped suckling. The worst part is how the money gave him a better childhood than anyone in *Shamhk** (S'homk.).

Those who fought for Harodus were ostracized during the Legon's occupation. Thanks to his mother, they always had food on the table. His father paid a neighbor to teach Mathas how to read & write, then traded his armor for an apprenticeship as a carpenter, saving his son the same fate of a life in the mines.

Eventually, he remarried to a nasty piece of work, always saving the worst cruelties for her stepson. It's the generous dowry that persuaded an

aging *Nimta*, soon fathering two more children. Mathas hated those brats. He almost strangled them the day their negligence killed *Nimta*.

Sixteen at the time, she kicked him out, weeping by his father's grave. Rather than seek *Amsu's* family several towns away, he decided to travel on his own. Those years were exhilarating yet rough. He preferred it now, in a loving home.

"They told me you'd be back soon. I've already run a bath and put out clean clothes." *Bomice* patted his robe, disparaging sand tracks.

"Thank you, my sweet. A soak sounds wonderful after so many days in the desert. How're you?"

"I'm okay, Master *Am'Ad'ifa*." She refuses to call him by his given name, citing it as improper. "Been busy tending the garden."

"Did *Vi'rk* not come and take care of it?"

"Oh, he did. I asked him not to water the flowers. He overdrinks some, and the others die of thirst." She huffed, quickly shaking it off. "Did you by chance..."

"I did." *Mathas* smiled. "Your sister has a wonderful family."

She glimmered in tears.

"They're safe and healthy?"

"If they aren't, they hid it well behind their smiles. I wish you'd come."

"Let the weather cool. Even with central air, it's not meant for people my age."

"You could use a few nights camped under the moons. They told me how they miss you, same as your family."

"Oh, stop." She giggled. "I'll start dinner soon, and a cake."

So nice to be home.

"Sounds wonderful, but first, they've sent you presents. In my sack, below the worn clothes. Don't worry, the gifts are wrapped. Wait 'til you see what your grand niece and nephew chiseled for you."

She veered off her path, darting to the door.

"Don't forget your bath before it cools!"

Bomice deserved her moment alone. There were also pictures he needed to develop. An unwarranted guilt came for his heart, thinking about the photos *Ammon* brought, as if his quality fails her.

In truth, it's the shame he can't escape. He should've gone himself. Now seems too late for amnesty, if ever he'll have the chance at an apology.

Maybe his mother's waiting. Mathas would happily give him safe passage home.

Rorick. A subtle reference few will notice, going back to Kallias' childhood, attending the coronation of King *Egil Wōðanaz*. In the chaos of Aségar celebration, marauders abducted the young prince, causing tensions to rise between the nations. Ransom notes were exchanged, stagnant towards a solution. They're fortunate, a noble nomad happened upon him, caged in a set of ice caves. The ploy proved to be a failed coup by extended members of the royal family, attempting to destabilize the throne and raise Egil's half-brother.

The nomad returned Kallias personally. Seven months traveling. They must've bonded, even if there's no mention of their meeting again. Mathas storied these old remarks as he sat in the tub, flipping through the pages of Kallias' memoir. He found it early. Written by Kallias' own hand. The name of the nomad who saved him, *Rorick*. His former rival's savior, honored in namesake.

It may not be the signed copy, but Mathas tossed the book a safe & dry all the same. No words entered his mind. His body, stealing the water's heat to mend itself. It'd be sunset soon, sowing the urge to take a walk.

He dried himself in full view of the city, veiled by a light tint on each sash window. Stare a while, and his temperament always turned aglow to match the beauty below. In no rush, little dots moved about under the rosy sky. At this hour, markets became rife with passersby on their way home. It seemed quiet off the embankment, suggesting a perfect route for his venture.

Atalancai is still tendered by its scars, and he's not yet welcome everywhere. He respects the boundaries, in his off time. It's undeniable, he'd never have taken this city if the native citizens hadn't turned his name into a chant of defiance. A lavish monarchy & ruling class once floated at the center of this great city, unphased by anguished pleas. Things were undeniably worst in the middle rings, trapped by an embargo, locking all foreign ships to the outer ring.

Since his arrival, they've rebuilt three quarters of homes to modern standards. Plumbing was easy, but electricity required hundreds of confiscated Olympian generators. Soon as renovations are complete, they'll start on a second functioning plant. None go hungry, and the many races of Terra build together. No indulgent pride to a monarch, undaunted by their

anguish. Before leaving, Mathas browsed the photos again. Whomever the group, he smiled so genuinely.

I'm sorry.

"I should've gone myself."

It'll take weeks for all the Ad'ifa to arrive. Forfa & Teefu are leading negotiations inland, but *Sy'ki* went halfway across the ocean to meet the new island tribe elders. He may be absent for the initial talks. If his people don't decide quick, that demented warmonger named Civital will do it for them. Tired as he was, too much new information had festered for him to stomach seclusion.

"You're going?!" Bomice, sounding near a heart attack. "Dinner's ready, Master Am'Ad'ifa, you can't leave now."

"Save me a plate, please. I'll eat soon as I return. Feed our protectors, and rest."

"If you say so, Master Am'Ad'ifa."

"Did you see the carving? Their talent! I gave them pointers for the hooves and, I'll admit, I helped shaped the face quite a bit..."

Weak with affection, she bowed.

"Thank you, Master Am'Ad'ifa. Imagine me asking Master- oh, well, you know."

"When they're older, we can find them an apprenticeship here in the city."

"Mean a lot, you think they're good. Now go before you miss the light now."

Two guards accompanied him, *Au'goiui* & *Thlalbo** (Oh-goo-weh & T'lahl-boh.); a Syreni & Homin, respectively. They started on *Vøk'ta Mam'uri** (Voh-ksah Mah-moo-ree. *Vøk'ta* means street.) towards the water. It's a welcoming area the entire way. He's optimistic, the bitterness will fade once construction is complete.

Children ran past, drowning the streets in their shrieks & heavy footsteps, chasing each other, ecstatic. The older kids horde the park benches; they used to end their days lighting streetlamps to earn an extra coin for their families.

Mathas attended this park's grand opening. People gathered close, but none dared approach the grass, not wanting to be the fool hanged as an example. It took playing catch with a little girl to get the rest on the field.

He threw the ball halfway over the playground. She ran, and the other children followed.

It's nice, no longer disrupting the scene. People don't stop to point & whisper anymore, hesitant to welcome an external governing body. Now, these walks are no different than passing any other neighbor. Most waved & smiled, going right back to their chats or chores.

By this point down the incline, a circular wall had encased the nymphs in their own thriving ecosystem. It was an ugly thing, covered in jagged stones, said to be a last protection should the red wall fall. Yet it only ever served to stall angry peasants. Until Ammon drove a series of trucks into its base, forming stepladders. Olympian gifts, ironically meant to peacefully sway Cyprian Wanax on the marvels of modernization.

In those days, a foul stench hovered from the salty air corroding their wooden homes. Walking the streets meant more steps in muck than on stone. Now, these people here are clean & educated. There are doctors, builders, shop owners, Leonis, Syreni, Homin. Some are even multigenerational *K'sk*, the poorest of the port districts, used exclusively for transporting pickled sea life intestines. Those lucky enough to learn a skill often found themselves indentured to a loan shark or the shop owner who trained them. They deserved better than the filth of their hobiles.

Exhaustion stalled Mathas' enthusiasm. It's the thought trekking home, even if he took the trolley or hitched a ride on a wagon. Instead, they turned to a house perched above the ground level rooftops.

An elderly couple, Mr. & Ms. *Mër'sd'su** [Mrr-S'd'nt-soo. ^ closely resembles the second type of apostrophe found in Syreni dialects. It's traditionally requires an inward curl of the tongue, creating a double hiccup reverberation. The mark is known as a *dussek* (Doo-shek), and is used to unite the first letters of the four parents given names during marriage. The *Mër* beforehand is the tribe of the husband, or both in this case.] often sat together on their porch around this time. He stops for tea, occasionally playing a game similar to chess, where the long version leaves poor *N'mu* so frustrated or bored, he'd often quit in anguish.

Ah'mi noticed as Mathas seated himself in the rocking chair next to the swinging bench. She uncoiled their tails, excited to play host for her favorite guests. Au'goiui & Thlabo helped themselves to a cup of perfectly steeped amber leaves, pouring a third for Mathas.

Years ago, Mr. & Mrs. Mër'sd^su were of the people not allowed to buy these homes. Called *Urfm** (Oor-ffm. The 'm' is almost silent.), a racial slur meaning sea monster. Mathas visited the Syreni isles once. They left paradise for a spiteful place, during the famine that ignited Harodus to lead his rebellion. Fish had disappeared for a decade, leaving Atalancai the only stable option regardless of hate.

After saving his whole life, N'mu tried to buy a small house and found himself beaten half to death in the streets. An old man. It wasn't illegal for him to purchase, even in those days. But protections were for the protected, and none would defend his right to do so.

Once the fighting stopped and Mathas established district magistrates, they brought in war crime adjudicators to assess violations affecting native citizens. N'mu sued the landlord, whose sons beat him. The judge made an example of their sickening behavior by awarding N'mu & Ah'mi the landlord's personal house. This house. Mathas loved that story.

As the sun dipped into the ocean, he sagged in his seat, gently rocked by the wind. Ah'mi covered him in a blanket. N'mu too, flopping his usual snore. The world stopped moving briefly, and Au'goiui decided to wait a bit longer before calling a car.

X

Boogie time.

He'd miss this rotting wooden hole, home as it was for the past month & a half. Thera's neck spent most of their stay spitting out bone shards, often dressing her left side in a light dust. His protestations favored another week, falling on deaf ears as her anxiety grew unmanageable. Her wounds weren't fresh, but a multiday journey doing the entirety of the driving might brand the tender wrinkly indents of her scar tissue into a permanent fixture.

Meanwhile, Camus recovered by week's end. His ivory legs made quick work of perimeter checks, gathering wood & water. To fill his days, he taught his young ward the basics of survival. How simple sticks can start a flame, the finer intricacies of braiding vines into a sturdy rope, then stitching several together to sew river nets or set traps. The speed of Rorick's own recuperation was an oddity, sounding alarms for Thera.

"You're healing too fast for my comfort." Is how she put it.

To which he shrugged, promising it'd never happen again. His irritating condescension aside, she dropped the subject when none gave a plausible answer; in the end, praising his stockier build, and commending his determination. Between lessons, he'd stroll in circles, practicing his new world gait. Within the month, he'd almost done three pushups on what should've been a broken wrist. This impressive display of biological remedy convinced Thera to co-opt Ima's plan, arranging separate travel routes.

Being a military vehicle, the Stymphalian uses a proprietary battery design not found at simple roadside stations. It'll require maintenance services, ensuring outpost alert the Civital, she's travelling alongside companions. Instead, Ima will take him & Camus to the train station, forty kilometers south. They'll book a private sleeper cabin, and make their own way across the twenty-eight hundred kilometer distance to Anton & Dorra's.

Rorick- sorry, *Hesperos* is the name he'll assume under the guise of being Dorra's nephew. There are a few Hesperos among her countless relatives, possibly including those in Rīkr. It's an easy way to explain his accent since the Realms are full of surprises.

“Say it again.”

“*Thallm. Sa ast neche ot orium ta. Hesperos, me naeta.** (T’hahlm. Sah Ahst Neh-cheh awt oh-room tah. Hehs-peh-rrohss Meh nay-tah: “Hello. It’s nice to meet you. My name is Hesperos.”).”

“Good!” Ima cheered. “Keep practicing and your Rs will soon teach your tongue how to roll.”

Thera chucked her belongings through the Stymphalian’s window, ready to reiterate their gameplan. It’s pretty clear she hadn’t grown fond of leaving him, lost on better options. Vigilance, that much he promised.

Rorick enjoyed his last whiff for the road as he climbed into the trunk. Camus did the same in Ima’s gep and, as expected, neither vehicle was subject to search by those they outranked. Still, it took a long few minutes, with so many coming to see the trident’s return. He heard the words *morta & valtam* a few times, probably saying they bet money she wasn’t dead.

Ima shooed the crowd, announcing she’d escort *Aphne Neptun** (Aff-nay. Lowest of the officer ranks.) to the next outpost, doing so t0 the roads’ split. They said their goodbyes; Thera, continuing on her path, waving through the window as the rest went left towards a shabby cattle town. The unpaved dirt could be called a street by virtue of the log cabin buildings lining each side. Locals stopped to watch them exit, half expecting a personally familiar Legian. It’s not uncommon for outpost soldiers to offer travelers a ride, sparing them a week on the walk.

They parted simply, easing attention. Ima then visited the general store for the sake of adding a purpose to her visit. She’d already packed fresh provisions, dressing Rorick in typical Olympian day to day garb, jeans & a t-shirt. The side pockets housed small stacks of *aumra* as well. Paper bills, loftier than he’s accustomed to; white in color, marked by gold lettering. A higher worth meant more gold embedded, rivaling the currency’s value.

Six weeks of isolation gave his heart a good race amid the sparse crowd. He sensed Camus’ frustration, unhappily exposed. Stepping aboard, the train proved bigger than expected, designed to accommodate any being. And he knew in his heart it was racist to think it like a zoo inside. All the loose fur, smells & hollers.

Holy shit.

It repeated in his head several times, accidentally staring too long at one person or another. Most ignored him, but twice Camus had to calm the offended. Things normalized for him by the second train, no longer on the outskirts of civilization after passing through *Othrys*. This one had sleeper cabins for the five day journey, featuring private toilets, but showers were in a dedicated cart. He barely spent his sleeping hours in the room, burdened by sporadic breakdowns. During an explicit onset, he accidentally woke Camus, who groggily comforted the boy on his way out to give him space.

By day three, Rorick blossomed a glowing pride, watching the small clusters of conversation. How familiar everything seemed. He'd even formed an occasional connection with those happy to help him practice his Laschma. Pretty much everyone taught him a new swear word, often in the midst of abhorrent explanations targeting other groups. When asked to speak his own language, he unnecessarily adapted French gibberish as if spoken by Winston Churchill. An affable guilt consumed him regarding one woman in particular, helping her practice the same nonsense three times to nail it.

The open air carts offered a comfortable breeze, displaying Olympus in its full glory. Stunning sceneries showed off farms or grazing country, bedecked by the infrequent rundown locals hub. Herds of *bonnaco* roamed anywhere the grass grew lush & green, souring the hill's bottom as they released their acidic excrements. They're a stocky cattle, usually reddish brown or black, swinging their fifth leg around, if ya get what he means. He couldn't help thinking of their reckoning, ignorant until it's too late. Worse yet, no cow's meat ever tasted so tender.

Fenced away on their own fields, monstrous stallions galloped at speeds greater than the train. These weren't the breeds he's ridden. Their hooves could kick through a person's soul. Apparently, they originated on Gaea, and it took a lot of gravity based broken necks & ankles to establish Terran herds. He asked other versions fly, to which Camus buzzed his tongue.

“No wings.” He rasped.

The spit droplets stank of cheap liquor, bought at the train's market cart. Rorick nabbed the bottle for another swig. Noon was always so far away here. The taste hit worse than black liquorish marinating in vinegar. Ethanol goes down easier. Then they'd chase it with a rotation of hand

rolled blunts & cigarettes. Camus fought his tears, having to smoke the musty Olympian tobacco leaves again. Rorick found every puff perfect.

On the fifth morning, he woke extra early to catch the sunrise over Olympia. Children were already jumping on the handrails, channeling the excitement he wanted show. He pulled his scarf higher to stop the cold air whipping his cheeks as he gazed upon the foggy outline of his new home. Squinting helped him see the city's details, aided by an aphotic sun hiding above the overcast.

"OHH!" The kids collectively shouted at the mounded hills blocking their view.

"I barely saw anything anyway." Rorick hollered.

"I saw the gates!"

"Yah, I saw, I saw the castle."

"That's the Horn not the castle." They went off on their own tangent.

Camus joined for a pit stop to neg Rorick about breakfast. Set on his plans, he asked for the basics, presuming Camus didn't mind hauling the goods. When the ridge finally cleared, they were so close, he could see, everything.

Olympia. The Capitol of Olympos.

Massive gears known as the *Aetra Cal** (Eh-ttrah Cahl. It's a portmanteau, combining Athena's Aegis to a reference on modernity.) guard the main entrances, ready to slam shut the city's walled portions. A smaller version secured the tracks they ride, high above. The earth left underneath, carrying the train on marble blanketed steel girders, soaring two hundred meters overhead. They had an excellent view of the largest mechanism. Fifteen lanes bridged its sunken cradle, meant to be sacrificed if ever the gate is needed. Across the city, another gear protected its much taller back end.

"I thought Olympia's the furthest city east?" He asked his train friends.

"It's to the *Navé** (Nah-vee. Navy.) base." *Ioviam* told him.

Beneath the clouds, airships soared in three variations. The two biggest were pitch black, floating by the heft of their flattened disk balloons. Their gondolas, balancing perfectly in the middle, bulged atop & below. The second style had slender hulls, mustard in color, bearing a darker tint at the tipped ends, perched like the curve of a scorpion's tail. These six ships

moved the fastest, sailing closer to the city than the highflying black ones, but not so close as the last type.

Their colorful balloons had an established look, carrying open baskets sized to fit a handful of passengers; piloted by professionals, who soared seamlessly in the lanes established by hovering green blips, spaced a hundred meters apart to form an arched path over the old city. It's a pricier way to travel, but convenient, since cars aren't allowed in central Olympia.

A large river zigzagged through the southern half, falling to the lake below. Its spill was blocked by an old fashion portcullis, serving no greater purpose than shielding boats from a grim fate. The lake's body, tracing the lower cliffs, extended fourteen kilometers, apparently making for a nice swim.

The buildings deserved their own praise. Most had a Victorian chatter, brandishing large turrets & dormer windows. High slanted dark brick roofing arrayed their white walls, accented by blossoming purple vines. Rorick noticed a faint palate stained on every windows' glass, glistening an array of colors on adjacent buildings. Solar cells, *Médall* explained, easing the central grid's burden.

Behind the lake, Olympia & its surrounding flatland seemed of a level, plus three home covered hills, and the big one. A mountain in the distance, piercing the sky with all its might. The purple in its climb disappeared under white frosting. Who can say a mountain faces one way or another? But this one. It stares at them, claiming its dominion. *Mans Olympos*, where the first Zeus created Zamara. Rorick enjoyed the morning air's sense of new, patting the pictures in his pocket. Tears had hollowed his chest enough.

"Let's do this."

Soon as their train pulled into the station, Camus darted towards the stairs, forcing Rorick to pass hurried goodbyes too his travel buddies. He closed the gap using long strides, catching a fleeting glimpse of the shabby shops lining the open street before following Camus to the subway escalators.

His jaw nearly dropped the width of the platform, taking in its magnificence. Great big circular windows were anchored to the ground above, letting in natural light from the upper placards, forming the Olympian eagle on polished linoleum floors. Marble sculptures lined the

spaces between frosted screen doors, each holding a color changing orb to match the arriving train.

The crazies tried to hand him pamphlets, including a membership to their transcendent energy circles, a discount cosmetic x-ray service, and flight lessons for the budding industry of cross country zeppelin travel.

Further along, protestors almost forced him to stare at several posters of his father. Thankfully, they'd had taken the time to paint an X through his face, sparing Rorick the details of Kallias' features. He saw little more than sharp points on a square head, dressed in aging black hair. That part of the station no longer existed to him.

Waiting in line to buy tickets, two cops fitted in crimson double breasted shell jackets accidentally checked Rorick's shoulder, hurrying past. The Leonis & Homin pair were bound for the crowd, hearing their jeers bulken. People threw things at a group wearing feathered cloaks, stained in previous incidents. *Hellai*, they call themselves, carrying wooden scythes, hiding their faces under hoods. Fanatics, convinced she'll restore the world to natural equilibrium.

"She's certainly a choice." He supposed. "But why *Hel*?"

Because legends paint her as birthed by chaos, and the only true immortal. No other being has ever taken another bloodline's simul successfully, let alone dozens of times. Her favorite was the Scythe of Kronos, gifted to her by sycophants, who stole bloody wraps hidden in the old king's tomb. It took the adjoined might of *Tomodius Zeus & Thor Wōðanaz* to finally subdue her. She's said to be trapped under a mountain, bound in chains fixed by the Moirai. A lava drip dulls her senses, but she'll return, and her great simul wings will blacken the sky, according to the loon whose friends managed the onslaught.

Camus preserved his distance. Hate for *Hellai & Lokiens** (Hel-lay. Low-kynes.) is nothing new. Major cities are suffering through a bit of a renaissance, owed to the increased violence they're causing in Ásgarðr, fearing its spread to Olympus again. Rorick agreed. No sense wanting chaos in a contented place. If every city has a dark side, Olympia's is better hidden than most.

Once they reached the east gate, Camus tried hailing a cab for the last leg of their journey. Three spurned him, unwilling to drive so far, finding luck on his fourth try thanks to an old welcoming portly fellow whose love of incense & cigars necessitated an intervention by those he held dear.

Outside the city, they may as well have been riding a pad of butter on a hot skillet. The cabbie explained how permeable roads have a spongy texture to filter passing rainwater, improving Rorick's vocabulary along the way. Fleeting chimes from the radio lulled him close to sleep, feeling a familiar regret about not bringing his old generic mp3 player with the busted skip button, if nothing else.

Anton & Dorra lived about thirty kilometers deep in farm country, the main crop being a round fruit podded in a pink peel. The homes hid behind their harvests, barring one sitting on a mounded hill further east, and to the right. Opposite their own path, turning hard on the left, more abruptly than needed.

A dozen heads paused their labors to see who'd arrived. Five minutes past, their trip ended in front of the main... it'd be an insult to call it a house. This was a manor. Exposed clinker bricks formed the walls between thick oaklike beams. Evenly spaced lanterns led to the steps, watching the heavy wooden doors pull inward to free a red haired pale woman, eagerly waved, going faster & wider at their approach. Then she jumped to bring it all home.

Aunt Dorra.

XI

Owl eyed.

His hand lingered on the door's lever, unable to commit. Sharing no such qualms, Camus never bothered looking back as he exited on his side. Dorra's excitement withered into a fretful panic at the sight of him, causing Camus to vigorously assure her everything was fine, without so many words for good measure. The cabbie undoubtedly recognized her, enhancing his confusion. To which Rorick said, "*Q'ast me amél. Isi non'fis velio me patem.** (K'ahst meh ah-meel. Ee-see nohn-fee veh-lee-oh pah-tehm: "That's my aunt. She didn't know my father was coming.")" He thinks that's right.

Close enough.

Finally cracking the lock, he turned towards their expiring conversation. All else faded, leaving only her fixed stare. She took the steps slow, trying not to spook the bambi in her driveway. But when Rorick hurried home, she ran to meet him. His cries began curdling, locked in her warm embrace, telling him it's okay. She's here now, and it's all okay. Dorra tunneled under the sponge of his hair to kneed the roots.

Her auburn hair had streaks of grey, loosely wrapped in a bun, perched at the curve of her crown. Gorgeous as she was, she had a touch of tar layering her teeth, below her round tipped nose. She stood tall & lean, to the point that the muscles in her shoulders rippled every time she moved. Her strong fingers formed rather large hands, cut by the same sharp veins all the way up her forearms. The stories failed to capture her presence.

Leaning on his steering wheel, the cabbie watched their lovely moment. Camus whistled for Dorra's attention. Rorick didn't need Laschma to figure out they were short on funds. She had her wallet ready, tipping him in excess for his willingness to shoulder the burden. A two point turn later, he left, thankfully shaking his hat.

"Exhausting trip, huh?"

"You won't believe half of it, auntie."

She squeaked.

"Your Laschma! I mean, you're speaking Laschma!"

Her mishmashed accent reminded him of Totéhn.

She turned to Camus, “Did you know about him?”

Camus’ shrug implied he was also ignorant to these happenings. Smiling, he offered her a cigarette. It’d been years since their paths crossed. Still, she shirked the temptation in favor of refreshments.

“Let’s go inside. Can you climb the porch?”

Rorick nodded, ready to show her his mad skills. He jumped the ground level, then sidestepped the rest, showing off a *cha cha*. Dorra’s laughter became his cheering section. Camus flopped hard on the patio couch, happy to join later.

Inside, the eggshell colored walls had a rivet pattern, managing to flatter their umbered floorboards well. They passed a den containing a sunken circular couch, centering a similarly receded coffee table. The formal room across housed a long dining table between fourteen tall & slender chairs. Crystal chandeliers hung at three points above, defining its opulence. Further in, the stairs were guarded by twisted wrought iron bars sandwiched between the same fine wood forming the rest of their home.

“Your room’s been ready for weeks! Thera went to meet you as a starting point, but we got worried with her gone so long. And hoping for the best meant planning for a guest or two. Have you eaten?”

“Not since this morning.”

“Good!”

The hallway ended in a wide open room, taking its share of the bottom floor to accommodate the full size kitchen & carpeted living room, connected by what seemed to be a single window spanning the farthest wall. Peaceful as the backyard called, he chose to melt into the pudge of their sectional. Maybe find a daytime talk show on the tube TV, attached to its chrome stand, which bore a striking resemblance to the Stanley Cup. She lowered the volume, leaving on the grainy local news whose anchors were wearing an interesting yet pragmatic interpretation of formal wear. Their thin suits had keen edges, sturdier than normal blazers, and its shortened collars allowed for the dexterous mobility required to perform quick cuts between cameras.

Rorick, lost in the knickknacks, gave Dorra auto responses. She asked him if he wanted anything to drink, and he couldn’t help but stare at the copper toned fridge, wondering who designed a nuclear silo to store perishables. She poured him a glass of lemonade, laying out fresh vegetables & homemade hummus on the heels of lunch’s sedating aroma.

To pass the time, Rorick shared his story. All he'd lost & left behind. How he managed himself through the worst of it. Meeting Totéhn & Aminus. Thera & Camus saving him repeatedly, ending on the part about the portal collapsing.

Dorra ached to understand his meaning. Rorick explained the inkling it was his fault, further puzzling her wits. She stopped short of calling Anton. He'd only known one other person so capable of letting things go for a more appropriate venue. Instead, eating a few fine cuts of bonnaco together.

“How is it?” Dorra asked.

“Sure beats train food.” Catching the spill at the corners of his mouth. “Man, I thought the camping stuff was good. Feels like I've been lied to my whole life. Which I have, except I'm not mad about it this time.”

The duality of her disgust & joy, watching him suck the marrow out of a bone, reminded him of home. He minded his next bite, savoring the endearment. Afterwards, she poured a couple glasses of chilled red wine to enjoy the afternoon in the garden. He noticed an empty doghouse next to a stone marked grave. Dead from cancer at age four. The girls pushed through their tears to dig the hole, undeterred by a harsh winter's bite.

“When do they get home?”

“Anton, much later. The girls will be here by seventeen-thirty. Speaking of which, it's already quarter 'til. I'm going to prep plates. Rest, relax, or you'll wish you had. Trust me.”

*Hadrén & Caelia Sor'che** (Hah-dreen and Keh-lee-ah Sohrr-kheh.) are both sun kissed girls of an adolescent age. Their crumply dark hair & reddish eyes are common in Anunnaki Homin. Born to a mining town, they were orphaned by a plague. At eight years old, Hadrén refused to marry. Defenseless against slavers, she packed their clothes, begging a merchant family friend to take three year old Caelia & her to the newly built trains in *Duat*. For thirty-six kilometers, they hid under a blanket in the sweltering heat, avoiding bandits who might risk it all for a worthless cart if there are little girls to snatch.

Two years past, Hadrén & Caelia became quite the adept street performers. Their audience, rarely knowing they paid handsomely for the show, often leaving town before anyone caught onto their troubles. After inadvertently cornering themselves, they discovered a new love for moonlighting as wagon thieves, passing through *Arcadia*.

In densely populated areas, the best criminal dealings tended to be done at the docks or under a bridge. Caelia usually distracted the parties by throwing rocks or banging on trashcans, giving Hadrén time to navigate the shadows. If she found a large treat, she'd take the sprinkles.

It was meant to be a simple theft. Two high end carriages meeting in the dead of night. There'd be money involved, no question. She listened briefly, distinguishing the buyers & sellers.

"We'll want test it." The left side said.

Hadrén thought she'd found her target, but she must've misconstrued his meaning. The reason for her error no longer mattered once she saw the sleeping baby. Her obsidian skin had three dots tattooed horizontally on her shoulders. Wise to its meaning, she snatched her new sister and named her *Sonu** (Soh-noo.) after the moon shining brightest that night.

They left town immediately headed for Olympia, up to their usual tricks, foraging a decent living for two years. Hubris led to their inevitable arrest, trying to steal the wallet of none other than *Menedorra Falx** (Meh-neh-doh-rrah Fahl-ks. Reminder: Aunt Dorra.).

Hadrén knew who she was. What she didn't know is three tours in the jungle had made Dorra a little jumpy. Caelia & Sonu fashioned a lazy story about lost parents. Hadrén slipped behind, intending to pinch the wallet's corner, steering it out the same way. Perfect grace, as always. And yet, a lilac scented hand clapped around her wrist. The smaller girls screamed, fighting Dorra off. Her personal guards & a professional bystander had to restrained them to sort out the baffling situation.

Dorra waited for social services to arrive, checking in on the girls regularly. The situation became clear; Sonu would be separated. Unable to bear it, Dorra called Anton, and they agreed to start the adoption process. How lucky they were to have found each other. The girls are a big part of why Dorra can carry herself at all. She's listened to the cries of dying boys, begging to go home. It was different with him. He seemed untouchable.

* * *

Sudden shouting stirred Rorick conscious. A high pitched voice screamed at the laughter, telling them to stop. Not that he speaks much Fraza, but their tones said it all. He pushed himself from the lounge, struggling to find any drive for a potentially awkward meet n' greet involving children. At least they know his true identity, even the tiny one,

so he won't have to put on a show. In his mind, it's still dark, except a narrow shining spotlight priming his encounters. How boorish he felt, unable to get passed the fact, it's all so forced upon him.

It's not their fault.

And he knows he's been forced on them too, wondering if his presence serves as a reminder of their own loss. He really can't do a minute alone without overthinking his entire existence. Time to meet the cousins! Standing always proved difficult so soon after waking. His softened muscles are not quite as adept at handling the extra weight. Rorick pushed himself slowly to roll off the edge and land on bent knees, steadily raising himself.

The middle one, *California* or something like that, noticed him through the long window. Dorra gestured to join, which of course made it impossible to walk normal, facing an audience. They might've lost their faith in him already, since only little *Sonya* smiled at his arrival, giggling behind her oldest sister, whose stare had a sharp edge to it.

"He-hello. Nice to meet you. I am Hadrén." She said, stunning him.

"They've been practicing their English greetings so you'd feel at home!"

"Hello, my name is Caelia." The middle one said. *"I am eleven years old. I am a sixth year student. It is nice to meet you."*

"Hello!" Squeaked the little one. *"I am Sonu! I am six years old! I am a first year student! It is nice to meet you!"*

"Hello Sonu, it's nice to meet you too." He replied in the little Frazza he's learned.

She gasped, and the other girls finally cracked a smile. Seconds later, little Sonu ran into his arms for a propeller hug, leaving them dizzy on the couch. It surprised Dorra to tears, escorted away by Hadrén. He loved their love. Like, not even Dorra's allowed to make Dorra cry while she's around. Sonu grabbed his cheeks, ranting beyond his Frazza skills.

"Hmmm, say again?" Switching to their common ground language. "I speak Laschma better, but not great either."

"It's okay! We... will... talk... slow-ly... so... you... can... practice." Sonu assured, using a deep voice. "Have... you... seen... your... room... yet?"

He shook his head.

"Come! We'll show you!"

The two girls fumbled over each other, giddy to tow him upstairs. He admired each picture, presumably framing different parts of Olympus. Beautiful scenes. Some natural, some structural, and a black & white one of a dried old sod house in an empty field.

Reaching the second floor, he saw ten doors of varying color. The two closest were painted a sparkly magenta, reading 'Sonu' & 'Thera'. The three doors across bore two names. Caelia's was a soft green, next to Hadrén's murky gold. The unoccupied room sojourned its natural carved maroon. On the far end were the large double doors leading to the master bedroom. Slightly hidden to its right, an adjacent room went above the stairs.

"That's mom and dad's study." Sonu said. "I do homework in there."

Straight ahead, on the last wall, another plain door read 'Hesperos'. Caelia decorated the sign, but wanted him choose his own color, walking into basically his whole bottom floor back home. Its tile flooring retained the sturdiness of marble avoiding the extra weight. Its floral fractal patterns connected the decorative lines, cut to squeeze through the shared bathroom. Doing the same for his wall fountain, encased by a cushion topped stone ledge wide enough to lie with a book. The bed must've been designed to accommodate Anubian kings. He sunk into its lower quadrant, reluctant to defile the hearth in his train filth.

This can't be for him.

"It's too much."

Sitting together, Sonu explained their rationale.

"His dad raised our dad here, but not in this house. It was an old cabin full of holes, and a muddy roof, and no plumbing, and a broken door letting mice in."

"No mom?"

"She died giving birth." Caelia said. "He doesn't talk about it much." She added, in case he's a blabbermouth. "They built this place twenty years ago, and bought the surrounding farms. They also built really nice apartments for the crew, half a kilometer *uhh* there." Pointing out the window to a rustic three story building facing the large red barn further east.

"Come see mine!" Sonu pulled his elbow.

Caelia yelled at her to let him walk on his own, causing an argument he preferred to watch, rather than be trapped between. Her floor's plush carpeting had a memory foam layer beneath, doing a decent job of hiding

the lighter stains in its vibrant colors. Built smaller than his own, it contained no fountain. Instead, a large fort occupied the distant wall, devastating an army of stuffed creatures. Her orchid themed bedspread hid under a soft netting to protect the sleeping princess.

Next, they were off to Caelia's light blue showroom for her many creations. Her mixed emotions varied from an especially dark gouache, to a blissful & light tenebrism of smiling expressionist faces. All Rorick could do was ogle their quality, but it livened her mood. If she didn't design it fresh, she cut the pieces out of magazines, forming brilliant hanging collages.

At Dorra's calling, they raced downstairs to plate the serving trays. Soon as he heard spoons clanging, Camus mysteriously roused from his coma, saying little beyond his usual grunts to spark Sonu & Caelia's giggle fits using a myriad of silly faces. He helped himself to an unopened bottle, retiring to a vacant room to sleep off the wine. Dorra prepared him an extra serving, layering three bottles of water.

Rorick lost track of time in the ridiculousness of a card game, determined to complete a flush in his assigned suit and win the double dessert. At the front door's creak, he considered the hour. Sonu disappeared faster than his palms turned sweaty. He got to his feet, feeling the clumsiness in his gait with barely a step.

The way he towered; only Rorick's insecurities reached such heights. His fitted shirt somehow remained whole at the bulging of his arms, unbothered by Sonu's belly squirming on his shoulder. He'd seen the strange boy in his living room and yet, beyond a subtle smirk, his form eased as though it were any other day. Rorick wished it had stayed that way once the enduring pierce of Anton's darkish brown eyes finally turned to him.

"I- I'm Rorick. Rorick Addams."

A smile crossed Anton's face.

"I can't believe you're real." The monotony in his voice had a welcoming tenor. Anton freed Sonu to share a proper greeting. "It's really nice to meet you, Rorick. I didn't think anyone would be coming, since word's been, Thera's traveling alone."

"It was a wild trip. We thought it best to separate for the last leg."

"Camus brought him." Dorra interjected.

"Camus is here?"

“Sleeping in the guest room. We have plenty to talk about later.”

“Oh, okay. How ‘bout a drink?”

Dorra reached for fresh glasses in the high cabinet, asking Rorick to open a sparkling bottle. Hadréns’ glass was barely filled to its bend, and the other two joined the toast using cider. Immediately, Sonu drove the conversation towards a tale of two toys at school. Another kid fell and blamed her for tripping him, and she wanted Anton to take away his right to university, which led to a debate on the merits.

First, they determined her guilt for the accused crime. Sonu promised, she set the truck there accidentally to align the remainder of her fleet. How can he claim she placed it in his path intentionally when he can freely walk in any direction? And why wasn’t he watching for possible obstructions? Dorra had to translate the denser bits; in the end, they agreed on her innocence.

Next, they debated if the punishment fit his crime. Though an egregious lie, a sentence to be served twenty years in the future seemed unreasonable. And thus, her side lost by a single vote. She accepted the verdict elegantly, settling for double dessert as compensation. The adults then weighed out the merits of having a last drink. It seemed wise, in celebration of their family being whole again, once Thera arrives.

“She’s not far, *tupa** (Doll/Dolly.)” Anton said. “One day; two tops.”

Their collective exhaustion hit at 25. Anton carried Sonu upstairs, having fallen asleep in his arms at the table. Once he settled her in, he knocked on Rorick’s door.

“Rest tonight. I’ll send a notice out cancelling my morning class. Our home office is the room above the bottom steps. I’ll be in by eight, if you want to talk.”

“Yeah sounds good, sirr- uncle, yeah.”

He managed a shower, unsure in his delirium if sleeping next to the drain seemed a sensible option. Once clean, the fountain’s soft patter anesthetized his resolve, waking to a haze in his limbs. The clock read 8.30, meaning he’d slept thirteen hours. Months had passed since he rested on a real bed. The spell finally broke, springing into action as if late for work. He caught himself, deciding to rest another minute for the anxiety to pass.

Tiptoeing, he paused at the office door, reminding him of a chariot holding the reins to all the others. A firm but quiet knock set his course,

hearing a chair slide & heavy steps. Despite having only met last night, it was weird seeing Anton in sweats.

“Good morning, Hesperos. I’ve had time to get used to that. Please, come in.”

XII

It is often easy to ignore the sins of prodigious members in society. Shortcomings, or even morbid behaviors, are but a spec on the underbelly of their great deeds.

This room was taller.

Lengthened out & away, to accommodate the endless columns of books. How colorfully, their spines painted a mind's web on the walls. Rorick questioned the wheelie ladder's ability to hold Anton for long, and yet, he'd been sitting alone these last five uncomfortable minutes while his uncle browsed the shelves.

Anton moved the ladder using a joystick, silent but for the hum of its motor over that of the electric fireplace. Then came the sound of shuffling books, followed by another whirring silence. No words could be the right ones to soften this moment. Trapped in his own body, trying not to move, in case he'd offend the former Civital. At least, the fake flames consuming real logs gave him a place to fixate. Anton reappeared, circling the desk to really sell the professorialism. He had seven books in total.

"Are you familiar with the *Theia* Theory?" He asked.

Rorick searched his brain, knowing any privity was an illusion.

"Which world does it come from?"

"Both, in a sense. But it originates on Gaea."

He opened his desk drawer to retrieve a manuscript written in pencil, titled *A Collection of Theories by Kallias Iovis Zeus*. Rorick recognized the penmanship.

The first copy, written by mine own hand.

- Your brother always, Kallias.

"It attempts to explain how life may have started on your world. The original idea behind it supposed, your moon was formed by a Mars sized object crashing into the Earth, sending lighter minerals into orbit. Your father believed *Theia* might've split off or come into contact with our world as well, to explain the parallels between certain species. In fact, scientists on Earth suspected a similar chronology, believing *Theia* dispensed

microscopic lifeforms. But still, your father abandoned his version before publishing.

Rorick flipped through the pages, reading its various markings & highlights. He'd heard most of Anton's digest, skimming the notations. Each section had a blank sheet separating its subject matter, labeled in broad terms, followed by subsets outlining the specific topic. *Economic or Social Theories* was of the few written in English, diving into how *Taxes are to pay for the Olympian experience*.

"Why'd him change his mind?"

Anton stared at the deckled edges of its front cover.

"Because it contradicted the full body of evidence. There were too many inconsistencies. If your assumption doesn't hold up against rigorously tested, academically accepted, scientific and historical data, then why hold onto it? There's no shame in proving your own ideas wrong. All that matters is the objective truth."

"I've seen what you built. I wish more people were willing to push."

"It's rational to fear drastic change. Predators tend to thrive in moments of chaos. We're lucky, things have gone so well. But one good swing can destroy years of work." Anton paused briefly, unblinking. "Having to meet you this way; I've never been so ashamed of him." He finally said. "I understand if you blame him for your mom's death. I do too."

A dizzying cold sweat weakened Rorick. He needed to hear those words.

"How'd she die?" The swelling choked him. "Was it quick? Was she scared? Did she suffer? How do I stop feeling responsible for her murder? How could I have known? I couldn't. I couldn't've known."

"You don't have any fault in this, Rorick. Honestly, you, your existence, isn't something we even remotely considered. I wish I had answers for you. But I don't have to have met her to know she'd be proud of your strength."

"No offense, your friend's an asshole. Sorry you lost him though."

"Have you thought about your own wants?"

"Not really." He'd been numbed by too many unknowns. "My whole life is gone. I almost died, twice. But then I healed weirdly quick. We thought it'd take six months to move me at all. I mean, Zamara can't do help me unbonded, right?"

Anton seemed visibly confused.

“You healed fast? I don’t follow.”

Rorick explained going blind their arrival night.

“Do you think the portal collapsing was my fault?”

“We can only guess how old it was. Could’ve evaporated on its own but, I’ll admit, the timing is suspect. As for your wounds, we live with a doctor, so I’d suggest scheduling an appointment. I don’t think Zamara can heal you unbound. Don’t be shy about abnormalities you’re experiencing.”

“Should I do a DNA test?”

“Genome sequencing isn’t a thing here yet. We slowed certain advancements intentionally, for a society that needs to be spoon fed.”

“My mom did an ancestry kit years ago. I don’t remember anything weird.” Pressure built under his face. “I think I’m still in shock. The stories about him sounded amazing. Now they piss me off. How dare anyone praise him. I can’t. I just can’t. If he was alive, I’d hate him. I’d never forgive him. We had a giant target on our backs my entire life, and he decided to play games.”

“I haven’t wrapped my head around it either.”

“Why’d he lie to everyone?”

“Because we would’ve ended his negligent game.”

Thera expressed similar assumptions.

Rorick surrendered the manuscript, realizing his grip had left imprints. Though his attempts to massage away the damage failed, Anton assured him, he’d increased its sentimental value.

“How’ll this work?” Rorick asked plainly. “I got a good head start on Laschma, since there wasn’t much else to do at the farm. I promise to practice everything else fast as I can. Won’t someone notice I don’t speak Aslýðr?”

“I don’t see it being an issue. Aslýðr is the dominant language in Ríkr, but not there are hundreds. Do your best Northern European impression, even if it’s gibberish. Most won’t bat an eye. The Realms are separated by unlivable ice, and their historic isolation has led to a diverse cultural mosaic. Dorra will do an in depth review. Take your time. It’s new to you. You’re on no one’s schedule but your own.

Don’t worry about anyone’s expectations. You always have a choice, even if others won’t approve. There’s no such thing as destiny; you’re a capable kid figuring out your life. I’d rather you focus on continuing your

education. There's an underground gym in the backyard, if you want to work out together on week nights. All you have to worry about is adapting. This is your home. You're safe here."

My uncle. What a guy.

"Thank you."

Anton smiled.

"Any questions for me?"

"I have a million questions. Have you spoken to Thera?"

"Papers say she arrived at *Auroram* last night. It's an outpost, four hours west. We might see her tonight, once Civital Lavinius is done grilling her."

"Is she in trouble?"

"Yes but no, likely not. He's stayed quiet about her disappearance. It's helped fuel the rumors she's gone on his orders, which isn't to say he's happy. But I doubt she'll be facing a court martial." A bit of thoughtful reflection later, Anton grabbed the top book on the stack. "This explains our early histories. The rule of the Great Ennead in the Land of Punt, up to the rise of Othrys. This is full of simple descriptions on how our electrical systems work. You might've noticed, there's no combustion fuel in Olympus.

This is a very famous book about your ancestor, Zeus Olumpios. This is a photobook of Olympus. Here's an anatomy book on the many races; lots of detailed pictures. This one discusses classical Olympian culture, up to the monarchy's end. It's full of paintings and sculptures. And, finally, these two are folktale collections. Probably the best place to start. Not only for the famous urban legends; they're also a great way to practice reading in Laschma."

"Tell me other shitty things he's done. Just curious. To balance out the good."

Anton looked okay with the question, if not a little caught off guard.

"We fought in two horrific wars. There's a lot we're not proud of."

He didn't mean it like that.

"What I will say is, age caused him to detach. It's hard, finding people who can, endure. And it was second nature for him, fully committing to his own ideals. Too often, he'd decide for others the extent of their personal sacrifice. He always sacrificed willingly, so he expected the same of

everyone else. But you... he asked the most of you, without so much as a word.”

“Then it’s not asking.”

“True.” Anton chuckled. “Sorry; goes to show how engrained bias is in our nature. I justified and sugarcoated his, his fucked up behavior.”

“Not your fault.” He appreciated Anton’s candor.

“You deserve to feel every bit of your anger. A punching bag helps.”

“Right. So, I’ve gotten into a few fights in my life, but I’m not a fighter. On the mountain...” He paused, ashamed he may sound cowardly.

“Am I supposed to join the Legon soon?”

“You don’t have to enlist ever. You’d be at mandatory conscription age now, but it’s noncombative, and you’re not a citizen so we don’t have to worry.”

“Really?” Rorick stammered.

Anton leaned forward.

“I’ll make this perfectly clear to anyone who expects you to fight, including Thera. You are in charge of your own life. You don’t have to be part of any international conflicts. There’s going to be a war eventually, and its roots are a lot more complicated than ending a few bloodlines. Personal vendettas aside, he’s not your concern, now or possibly ever. You’re not here to be a soldier, or an ace in the hole. You’re family. That’s enough reason to want you in our lives. Weren’t you finishing secondary school? You can continue your studies at university. Give it a year; you’ll live an ordinary life.”

His sense of control, returning. Rorick almost felt human again.

“I’m starving.” He sniffled.

* * *

They found two plates shimmering under the kitchen’s heat lamp, spotting Dorra’s bun above a lounge in the yard. She often spent her mornings perusing documents, in preparation for her eventual return as Minister of Medicine. Rorick stared at his breakfast, unsure if he’d be able to finish half.

“What lays eggs this big?”

“*Basan*. The barn’s full of them.”

Rorick enjoyed sharing in the lighter stuff. He mentioned basketball, discovering, Anton cosponsors a five city league. He played in the days of

closed bottom baskets. Its otherworld popularity inspired him to dedicate public funds towards athletic outreach during his tenure as Civital, including a few Olympian creations he thought Rorick might enjoy in the offseason.

Good chats.

Having time to spare, Anton suggested a tour of the farmhouse. They minimized their disturbances, passing Dorra on the way to the back gate, crossing a narrow path lining the *qiftu* crops. At forty centimeters each, trellises preserve space between the vines. Anton went for a mustard colored one, preferring their ripeness to the lighter green variation. A sharp crunch heightened its glowing tangy savor, throwing chunks far for the birds.

Reaching the apartments, twelve workhands sat by a campfire, boiling their lunch the traditional way. The pot itself had seen better days, a hundred years prior. It's the nomads in their lot who find modern comforts difficult, refusing to heat their homes, or sleep on a bed. Their foremen, a Satyr named *Covi*, waved. Followed by a Tauram named *Philo** (Fee-loh.).

"You're Hesperos? Glad to finally meet ya, Dorra's been on about you for months." Covi slugged akimbo. "Didn't know Aségar came this dark."

"Or this small." Philo added. "I can count the meals this boy's eaten in his life."

"Why don't you come down here and say that to my face."

Philo laughed himself good.

A hug & a handshake made them quick friends. During his wider introductions, the rest watched Hesperos run through a few jokes in good spirits. A worthy audience laughing, at the right cues. The majority were men of one race or another, plus a woman in their lot. Philo's wife *Mydil* (Mee-deel.). Both had horns, but they were daggers to swords by comparison. Still, she seemed quite capable of handling herself.

Being the basan caretaker, she introduced him to the forty-six macro bred chickens dressed in similar shades of black & amber feathers. He found himself getting too eager about their affectionate cawing. The basan crowded him, awaiting their turn to be ruffled. These hens were strictly for eggs, each laying about eight per day. It's their offspring who'll be sold to market, often cooked in tender youth.

Twenty minutes later, Covi called him to the fire, pouring a greasy bowl of stew based on his family recipe, but missing a few of the right

herbs. Still, its kick was perfect. They told stories about their journeys to breathtaking places, and the cruel things they'd seen people do. It's why most left home, only to experience worse on the road. Rorick shared little beyond his parents' recent deaths. Not why, though.

Dorra fetched him near noon; the morning crew, spilling out, happy to greet the famous nephew next to his famous aunt. Covi handed her an updated order sheet, paying cheeky complements to their newest adoptee before leading his shift south.

"Are you practicing plenty out here? We can study if you want."

"Go fill your empty head." A Leonis named *Motu* said.

Rorick hopped off the downed log, joining Dorra on the walk back to the main house. He chattered about his day, admiring her exhausted jubilation. A third coffee softened the bags under her eyes, prompting himself to do the same after eating lunch so soon following his enormous breakfast. They started on the simplified alphabet, practicing proper phonetics. By noon, Dorra had to brew another pot, letting Rorick briefly faceplant into the couch.

Upon their return, he recognized the book bumping her elbow. Not the children's fables. Instead, she'd chosen the one about Zeus Olumpios, written five hundred years ago by Onesimus, Olympus' most famous philosopher. She thought it might help foster a connection to his ancestors.

"This copy is for you, in case you want to write in it."

A ridiculous notion consumed him; furious, he'd dare consider replacing what he's lost. He disregarded the gnawing, deeming it unwarranted, ready to accept that loss isn't an ending. Rorick cracked the spine, releasing its earthly bouquet. A scent he'll always remember as the day he became whole.

LESSONS

NO. 2

Excerpts from Onesimus' book:
God of Olympus.

(Interesting/Important)

AX: Anam Rax
In the Year of our King.

Familiarity with the Jovian calendar helps to follow these events. Due to its accuracy, the Olympian system was adopted by most nations globally, translated using local terminology & varying start dates. In Olympus, the first year coincides to the birth of Zeus Olumpios. The current year is 1186 AX. Onesimus finished his masterwork in 474 AX.

There are ten months in a year: [Reminder: Z = T'ss]

1. *Premzil*
2. *Secdamzil*
3. *Tertmazil*
4. *Quartamazil*
5. *Quintamazil*
6. *Sextmazil*
7. *Septamazil*
8. *Octamazil*
9. *Nonmazil*

10. *Desmazil*

Days of the week and their meanings:

(Di = day. Pronounced *Dee*.)

1. *Venadi*: Hunting day.
2. *Pelldi*: Skinning day.
3. *Manddi*: Feasting day.
4. *Agnodi*: Day of appreciation.
5. *Relqdi*: Day of rest.
6. *Pardi*: Day of preparation.

Dawn to Dusk:

- *Sol ortam* (Sunrise): 8
- *Mernt* (Noon): 15
- *Sol occa* (Sunset): 24
- *Noct* (Midnight): 30/0

With the passing of their constitution in 1152 AX, Olympus adopted the standardize SI units, including the exact length of a second. Using a sixty minute model,
the Terran time comes out to thirty hours per day.

There are four weeks in a month, based on the movements of *Zilus*, a moon taking twenty-four days to cycle Terra, equating to precisely two hundred and forty days in a year. A leap day is necessary once every five hundred years.

Now, the selections.

~Translated close to as written~

Prologue

(Introduction)

“Five centuries have passed since our great king laid the foundations of his empire. Though he failed in his quest to share its immortality, he still

exists in every stone of our countless cities, and those lost on Gaea. Zeus Olumpios built something that will never die.”

...

Chapter 1- His First Love.

(Top of the second page)

“On the night of his birth, none could shake their worry. The prince had arrived early by a month, exiting the wrong way with the tether that bonds a mother to her child latched around his neck. At first, he did not breathe. And once he did, he appeared frail.

His father the Titan King Kronos denounced the babe as unfit for his bloodline. His mother the Queen Rhea was not so cold. She wrapped him over her heart, carrying her brittle princeling everywhere, even when Kronos wanted him thrown from the mountains of Othrys.

Night and day, she used one finger to rub oil on his back, breathing life into his lungs each time they started to fail. She held him tight, giving him all her love & strength until he grew enough of his own. A mother’s compassion taught our Zeus his mercy.”

...

Chapter 2- A Prodigy.

(Near the end)

“Even at his young age, the prince proved to be a skilled hunter. It became commonplace in his routine to spend his mornings studying, and his afternoons in the forest. At half the size he would grow to be, he could already carry a *lycaon* on his back, gutting the beasts himself. The meat served its purpose in the kitchens, and the pelts warmed his servants in winter.”

...

Chapter 4- The Young Conqueror.

(Midway through)

“By his twentieth year, the prince won two more battles, chipping away at the edges of the once great Ennead. Othrys’ dominion spread further west, as the city state slowly grew into the dominant kingdom.

...

It is commonly, and incorrectly, referred to as the empire. What our Zeus built here on Terra is one united essence. The nation of Olympus. But that would not be its name for many years. He was still the Prince of Othrys.”

...

Chapter 7- Cutting Kings.

(Two pages in)

“The officer who held the line was invited to meet the prince. He introduced himself as *Dionysus Bacchus*, son of a prominent winemaker in Othrys. Though not of noble birth, his family was quite wealthy.”

...

(Middle of the way through)

“Victory against the [*Hekatonkheires*] mercenaries gave Othrys domain over Tartaros. Kronos was furious. He considered the offensive a wasteful effort, done in his name. The southernmost city is a veritable den of misery to all but the native Satyr. Its endless cliffs cover land prone to wind cyclones. Most others would find this reality a grueling punishment. Successful or not, the prince had disobeyed a direct order.

But our Zeus saw more than rocks. Under its soil, Tartaros carries the finest ore used to produce weapons and armor. This was of no concern to Kronos, who praised Othryan steel, having always gotten the job done.

He sent his Titan *Iapetós* to condemn those who participated in the conquest. None would forget this blunder as Tartaros proved itself

indispensable in the battles to come. Because it's not iron alone that makes their weapons superior. It's the blacksmiths who craft them."

...

"Dionysus interrupted the harsh criticisms, calling for honor from the banners above where Iapetós gave his lurid speech. The Titan demanded Dionysus' head, falling on deaf ears as roaring cheers declared him victor of the exchange. The prince watched in silence before leaving. He knew then, his father was the greatest impedance to the golden age he intended."

...

(Near the end)

"He lingered, revering the ironclad city. A proud strategic moment for him, ruined by the shame of his own father. A fitting place to one day hold Kronos' tomb."

...

Chapter 14- A Failed Conquest. An Irreplaceable Ally.

(Near the beginning)

"Our Zeus had never seen a wonder so balanced in its element. The rings of the ocean city. A prize shining brighter in the sun than his finest chalice. None had ever pierced its walls. And none would today.

Maligning the campaign's folly, he pleaded with his father through endless emissaries to consider other conquests. But Kronos no longer trusted his son. He sent *Koios*, the greatest mind among his Titan Council, to command the siege of Atalancai.

...

The Ocean King Poseidaon Wanax stood at the wall watching wave after wave crash before reaching his city. Their blood, feeding the abandoned crops."

...

(Near the end)

“Dionysus’ expended his influence, committed to its folly, so the prince arranged to meet him privately. *Dolos* was a bastard son of the False Titan Prometheus. He greeted the heir to Othrys, presenting a cask of Atlantean wine, speaking on its quality and the superiority of the Atlantean palate.

Our Zeus confronted *Dolos*’ detailed accounts, and *Dolos* shared how he embraced the city as his own from wall to sea. The brilliance is in the duality of its design, hindering foes’ ability to starve the city out. Their unwavering faith is due to the landscape more than the wall itself. The flatland between its mountains and the city is teeming in traps. The prince had lost countless lives to Atlantean tricks, always reset underground. And stakes proved ineffective at stopping the weight panels.

Dolos pointed them to the sea, which even the most wasted fool knows is their domain. However, this is also why smugglers earn their fortunes in Atalancai. During times of peace, officials will accept a bribe for allowing unregistered ships to dock, because all goods were welcome in Atalancai. It was a city to explore the purest forms of every pleasure. And war didn’t mean the nymphs would accept significant changes to their lifestyles.

Their chosen runners earned formal permission to continue trading. But a trustworthy smuggler is an illogical paradox. They only side with their purse. No ship clever enough to earn royal trust is stupid enough to share the whole lot of its hiding places. *Dolos* suggested, a few soldiers sail to the second ring, catching a ferry to the mainland. The prince valued the plan’s simplicity. If they disabled the controls, he’d have time to navigate the traps in double columns.

...

Without *Koios*’ knowledge, the prince sent spies to monitor the frequency of guard changes at the gate, reporting as many as twelve stationed midway up the wall. Paths from each post led to the inner battlements, offering a way in. When *Koios* launched an attack, the spies noticed, all but three guards left for other posts.”

...

(Last page)

“The prince demanded he lead the attack. Indifferent, Koios agreed.”

...

They marched slowly, using an inventive rectangular shield design. The prince bore two at the head, stopping incoming arrows, above and below. Before the city recoiled, he breached the wide open red wall. Once more, our Zeus claimed an impossible city.

Though his reign did not see the sun cross the sky, Poseidaon Wanax greeted his strategic brilliance with genuine praise, claiming Zeus was the embodiment of *olumpik** (Oh-lehm-peek. Being worthy of remembrance for all eternity. Atla.) in living form.

Guards on top cut the counterweights to slam shut the entrance mechanism. It remains the sole instance in Atalancai history to require such extreme measures. deprived of a front entrance during the weeks' repair.

Poseidaon Wanax took the prince as a royal prisoner, housing him in the palace. The rest of the captured invaders were released back to Koios' forces delivering the Ocean King's terms.

...

They bonded during the monthslong negotiations. It is here our Zeus came to realize who truly valued him as an equal. A sharp contrast from Kronos and his Titans.”

...

Chapter 19- A New King.

(Three pages in)

“The prince no longer doubted himself. He did not want the scythe of Kronos. A great weapon, feared by no one as it sits useless in a throne room. Our Zeus believed himself stronger than it.”

...

“For the unfamiliar, a simul’s creation is deadly in process, requiring a strong and patient mind able to return from oblivion. This is true even for mundane compositions. Stories have long attempted to explain the origins of Homin and Álfar craft, but they are full of contradictions, weakening our ability to discern the truth. Unknown are our earliest ancestors of the many races. Lost to us are the tethers, tracing our way back to meet them properly. But their traditions remain in every mind’s flower bloomed.

We are together a [rose bush], each destined to blossom and die. But in our time, we sustain the greater entity, repeating the cycle to perpetuate its survival. Masked by the night’s sky are the stems and thorns leading to the soil and roots where existence began.

To that, a simul is an outside entity. Not a part of the [rose bush]; it is a droplet absorbed by the petals, unifying within. But did the flower drink water or poison? The success rate is not high. They go in the hole seeking glory* (I know, but it’s disrespectful to laugh.), only for it to become their tomb. But those whose journey proves fruitful will have their being elevated. Gifted with extended life, healing quickly from mortal danger, and power capable of kneeling all those without.

...

Simul are forged in the mind. A dark room is necessary to deprive the senses of their reasoning. This is why simul are often created underground, in a sealed environment.

The attempter will feast for a night, cleansing their bowels the next morning. They must enter the space bare, bringing the object to be bonded, meditating until their mind forgets itself. No food nor water for the days or weeks to come, calming the body to an enduring stasis.

As the unconscious works its way to the great beginning, their physical being is changed. It becomes unstable and ill defined. The raw power of existence may consume them. Or, the successful say, they’ll reach just before the center of creation, losing consciousness, but waking more whole than ever.

The dangers increase, using natural material. An object firmly compressed in its refinement will work best. It’s held in flat palms at chest height or above the head. Knees or feet may be used if no arms available, diminishing the success rate significantly. In triumph, the object will be

gone, replaced by an etching on the skin, and may generationally alter shape.”

...

(Midway through)

Our Zeus contemplated his choice, none equaling the strength he meant to summon. Or, perhaps, harsh truths would leave him as dust during the attempt. To him, few beings understood their presence as he, later saying, if death had won, it would signify he'd seen the infinite truth beyond even his limits. Our Zeus walked alone, pondering his intentions. A full day past and into the next, he reached the base of what would become his Olympic Mountain. There, he chose a *ruceipetor** (Roo-say-peh-tohrr. A cliff sticking out the side of a mountain. Raśna/Laschma.) leaning so far as to see the Elysian fields engrossed in a storm. He closed his eyes, unable to remember his own name.

Untroubled, his guardsman considered it a typical disappearing act by their prince in his exile. But their worry set in at the storm's approach on his third day gone. The marshlands began flooding. Rescue parties went in vain, drowning, if they refused to abandon the search. Stories say the storm raged for six days, growing in strength every night, taking refuge in a set of caves on higher ground.

On the fourth night, intense quakes brought a radiating heat. Lightning rang their ears deaf, coming not from the sky, but Terra herself. They believed it to be the end of days, worsened by the thought of their prince alone in its heart.”

...

(Near the end)

“Metis knelt first. Their fealty, rippling his hallowed grounds. The place he intended to build his eternal city. Olympia. Now blessed with the might of *Ouranos*'* (Yoo-rrah-nohs. Creator deity in Othryan religion.), he meant to challenge the Titan Council for control of their dominion.

End of lesson.

XIII

Don't do it.

She had to remind herself. But there was a malice behind her collarbone's itch. Caressing the bandages settled it somewhat, with diminishing returns after so many days stuck in one of three positions on the everlasting drive home. She'd checked in at various outposts along the way, occasionally lodging a night. Questions came from grunts more than ranked officers, who anticipated it to be above their pay grade. A good thing too. The formalities might placate Haitius' wrath.

He loathes his legacy as Anton's successor. They ran against each other three terms ago, having the grace -or tact- not to challenge Anton in his second. Months earlier, Atalancai had fallen. Like most, he believed Anton had an obligation to deploy a larger force. And the singular Legon he sent ultimately stood by, doing nothing. Haitius chose a united front rather than playing politics. He's not a bad leader by any means, she's just not fond of having her loyalties questioned. The constant need to prove she's neither an agent of Kallias nor Anton is exhausting.

Finally, the Aetra Cal rose to meet her.

She missed the mist. Olympia had a way of cleansing her temperament. New buildings lined its southern edge, including an inventive bridged apartment design brought to life. She'd seen their concept art in the papers a year prior, now half finished. Developers must plead a sensible purpose for expansions due to the city's overflow. Ongoing deliberations will determine whether it's best to break & build the wall over a larger area, or maintain the current and build another entirely. In any case, Legon engineers have started a new wave of farm relocations, to accommodate the growing population.

Thera's path led right of the gates, spiraling underground into a well lit & roomy concrete tunnel, able to line six Stymphalian. She signed her return papers at Station Eighteen, located directly beneath the government building.

A Satyr captain on duty gave her quite the rousing welcome, walking her to the elevators, happily pressing the button for an excuse to continue his one sided conversation. Other guards followed behind, impressing their

desire to join her for a drink. She politely declined their offers, favoring a quiet ride holding her own bag.

As luck would have it, her climb didn't pause at the subway level, reaching the central gardens in peace. But there was no sailing across the courtyard undetected. Heads turned in the café line, manifesting a diminished applause. She held her fist strong in solidarity, unperturbed by the whispered gasps noticing her neck. Officials aren't so prone to fanfare, and they recognize her destination. None dared obstruct her path.

Burning stares celebrated her on the marble steps, headed towards the north wing of the second floor. *Caerno Crysna** (Kehrr-noh Krreess-snah.), the Crystal Horn, is attached to the government building by way of the sky pass. The Horn is Olympia's original solar powered building, and its shine used blind half the city. The modern silver & blue crystalline panels reflect a warm vibrance, absorbing the same watts per square centimeter as they used to per meter.

The Civital resides at its point in an official capacity. His personal residence is closer to the middle, below the path she walks. *Anandéna Lavinius** (Ahn-ahn-dee-nah.) is presumably there now, having retired from the Upper Chamber last year to raise their newest adoptees.

She barreled through the visitors' registry, avoiding an eager reporter among the congressional aids. His questions bounced off her, much like the unfortunate intern taking a corner too fast. Feeling less indulgent but still polite, she apologized, helping him to his feet. It's rare security frisks a modified guest due to its futility. Guards may be assigned if appropriate. In Thera's case, she has more to fear.

Another elevator rose to another lobby, guarded by a simul bearing Homin named *Etas** (Eh-Tahss.) bearing his double headed axe, and an unfamiliar Tauram carrying a repeating crossbow. Grateful for their lack of enthusiasm, she reciprocated the salutes. Each pulled a door, pointing her to the waiting room.

Eight desks, spaced equally, lined the path to the Civital's office. The doors on either side were for his chief advisors, *Bollium Anemoi** (Boh-lee-oom Ah-neh-moy.) and *Qa'fun Nankur** (Kah-fehn Nahn-Koorr.). Everyone pretended to stay busy in her wake; their pens, sitting still on paper, fighting the intense urge to pry. She went for the Civital's personal assistant *Amrik* who buzzed the intercom.

“Yes?”

“Aphne Neptun is here.”

“You may send her in.”

The door to his office is made of *faramin*, a dense naturally white wood, holding a sweet calming scent for years. By then, and with expensive care, another tree will have grown to replace it. Scented *faramin* is considered the pinnacle of prestige, though post scent *faramin* embodies its own esteem. This one’s scent will hold for the term or longer.

Civital Lavinius sat behind his desk. The silence irked her worse than how he dimmed the lights. Thera placed her duffle bag on the floor, taking a seat.

“I’m glad to see you’re alright, Aphne.” He said.

She used the lamp to show him her neck wrappings.

“I’ve heard. But I haven’t heard why.”

His tone remained steady & calm never showing his age. She’d rehearsed this a million times on the road. The problem is, she rehearsed it a million different ways.

“I went to visit Gaea. We were attacked. It was Ammon Ha’qi. Mathas found a portal, and, and ours imploded. Mathas has sole access to Gaea.”

Worse than the worst practice version.

Yet somehow, it wasn’t far off from the best.

She hadn’t cared to think of a good way because he wants to be mad. Her synopsis, though crude, served its purpose well. Childishly jumping headlong into the details is an unnecessary supposition of guilt or fear.

Civital Lavinius watched her, assuming she hadn’t finished, or better not be. Thera locked herself in his glare, saying nothing. Her bitterness hid better than his advisors, who waited for their boss to take the lead.

“Why were you on Gaea?” He asked.

“Curiosity. I went to visit.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Kallias left me a guide in his will. I met Totéhn and Aminus. On my way home, Ammon ambushed us. I didn’t expect to see Anunnaki there, but they obviously have my father’s blood.”

The vein on his greying forehead darkened, sharpening the receded newbornlike wisps of hair. Sweat sheened his pale beak nose, leaning on calloused knuckles. His forearms held their width.

“Who’s ‘us’? Who else was attacked?”

“Camus At’ka.”

“And where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“But he’s alive?”

“Yes.”

“On which world?”

“Here. On Terra.” She repined.

“And so, why isn’t he here now? Has he visited Civital Falx?”

“I was injured. He left before me.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t know where he is now. I’d assume he’s spoken to Civital Falx since returning, but I can’t say for certain. If you’re asking if they’re together now, I’d assume not, since Anton teaches a fifteen class.” Pointing at the clock, half past.

“Do you find this amusing? You’ve committed treason, abandoning your post. You should be stripped of your rank and jailed for your crimes.”

“The decision is yours, Civital.” She bowed.

“Tell me now, what Kallias was so morally obligated to protect us from.”

“It’s bad, Civital. I’ve seen their weapons. He was right to fear them.”

“Explain.”

Thera did her best to describe firearms between a very shortened account of the actual events. She told them how Ammon struck, saved by Camus who may have taken Ammon’s eye, ending on the implosion.

“You mean to tell me, the death march Kallias condemned an entire Legion to was because of this second portal. And he hid it, not only from the public, but *any* suitable government official?”

“He told, not even Civital Falx. I thought he went to save my home.”

Civital Lavinius turned his attention to Qa’fun.

“Ortic’l and Sammu; bring them in immediately. Quietly.” He said.

“We will not see our way of life fall because of one man’s arrogance and idealism.”

“How shall I proceed, sir?” Thera asked.

“Your part is finished. Return to your ranks in two weeks, or however long it takes for your shame to heal. You’re forbidden to speak publicly while we sort your mess. I’m truly sick of these spectacles. Amrik will have a car waiting below.”

“Sir, I know our enemy-”

“You know nothing! You are a child! And a traitor. You’re dismissed.”

She gave a precise & formal salute, taking her belongings. He wasn’t going to keep her in the loop anymore. Thera had no energy left for pleasantries, leaving as though it were an empty room. Reporters swarmed every exit, flashing cameras in her face. It took a certain amount of aggressive pushing to reach the black town car, muffling their voices to an incoherent point once the driver closed her door.

Skirting the city center, she cracked a window to check which zeppelins flew today. The new designs had taken flight. She preferred the older models, but can’t deny, the efficiency is an upgrade, turning at sharper angles, and require skeleton crews by the old standard to fully operate.

A taxi’s window stooped, revealing a camera whose flash went off right as she stared into its lens. She gave him a wagging smirk, returning to her privacy. There’ll be hordes of them at the farm for days.

Her heart thumped. She missed home so much, smiling at the thought of Sonu’s happy squeaks, excited to see Caelia’s newest artworks. She wanted to unburden her frustrations over a cup of tea with Dorra & Hadrén, and regain her bearings in an Anton curated workout. She also wondered how Rorick was doing. Probably fine. He’s very talkative once he starts. Plus, Sonu’s kind of an expert at breaking the ice.

Used to be, she’d head further east to Kallias’ lonely hill. Her driver pulled between the vines, watching the taxis come to a dead stop. Dorra ran so far to meet them, she rode in the cab as well. The girls weren’t home yet, or they’d have been there too. Thera’s stiff neck cared less for the door’s heft, happy Dorra aided her entry. Once in, she noticed a head peeping at the far end of the hall.

“You survived! I’ve been checking every paper hoping I’d see nothing about a train attack. You’re alright?”

“Am I alright, she asks. I’ve been here for days! Are *you* alright?”

She gave an unconvincing nod.

“Why don’t you freshen up, love. Rorick and I were about to start dinner.”

“Ooo, what are we having?”

“*Chochocha!*”

“Really?! Yours is my favorite! It’s the closest you’ll taste to traditional Aztlán.

“Well, I’m helping now so... prepare... to be... dis-a-ppointed.”

“Oh, boy. I better supervise.”

“Absolutely not!” Dorra cut in. “Go take a shower and rest. You can handle dinner, or you can handle the girls.”

She didn’t argue. Her struggle to climb the stairs proved Dorra true. The hanging names put a smile on her face. She & Sonu share a bathroom, expecting it to be a mess. But it was spotless, decorated in little hearts on the mirror.

Her hot tub, warmed. She still needed to clean herself. The coat came off easiest. It’s the purple & blue uniform she borrowed that gave her trouble. Too tight for her meaty frame, she peeled it slowly, hearing threads stretch & tear the whole way, unraveling the bandages, neck to pit.

She’d be dead if it wasn’t for Cypraelia. Her clavicle had replaced itself considerably where Ammon crunched the bones above her sternum, though it remained recessed compared to her other side. As she glowered in the mirror, a hot rage sprang the trident through her clenched fist. Its tips, falling short of cracking the glass, vaporizing quick as it came. Defeated, she opened the shower door.

He’s okay.

Everything’s okay.

Everything is NOT okay.

Anxiety has brought her to shakes often as of late. Constantly replaying the moment her shadow prongs pressed his throat, refusing to pierce. She came so close, and then he won again. Thera slammed the wall, sinking to the shower’s floor. A dry cough weakened her resolve. How strong the sense of failure became, shadowing every thought. Slow breaths lifted her belly, trying to ease the burdened six seconds at a time. In for control. Out for liberation. Freeing herself of the guilt & pain. Her hair turned to moss growing on stone, sealed against the cross section of her knees. She rinsed the anger & dirt, kicking sand down the drain.

Steam rolled into itself as the shower opened, trapped between the outer doors. She wrapped her hair, putting cream on her scars. They’d healed noticeably since yesterday, planning to bandage them again later.

At the far end of her room are steps to the high rise spa, facing a tinted window. She turned on the bubbles to lie back, letting her hair dry. Anton helped build it for her weeks after Kallias died. She fell to the floor at the sight of it, and they all mourned together for the first time. Except

Anton. She covets his restraint. He kept everything moving when the world stopped.

Twenty minutes revitalized her. She ashed the pipe in a planter before shaking her hair to its normal frizz. Her bed whispered sweet comforts about missing her too, but she missed her family more. The two had lingered in the kitchen, goofing beside simmering pots. Veggie topped deviled eggs, waiting on the counter.

“Even though you’re recuperating, I’ll sneak you wine.” Rorick clicked & winked, pouring a red three quarters high.

Hardly a minute past, Thera tossed her plate into the sink, appreciatively gulping the glass. Then reached for a blanket by the couch, slightly crashing her landing in the hearth of its squish.

* * *

Tickles on her nose. Giggles in her ear.

Thera swiped at it and the laughter grew louder.

“Stop, let her sleep.”

Haddy.

Thera sprang up! Sonu froze & she pounced, descending into whirlwinds fit for an astronaut. Between the twirls, each smiling face shone. Dorra wide mouthed, clapping. Hadrén smirking behind Caelia’s squirms. And Rorick, dipping biscuits in tea.

“Do you ever stop eating?” Hadrén rified.

“I am a growing young man!”

Thera held her girls for longer than long. The younger sisters, crying themselves into coughing fits. Their savory meal, plated & ready. Roasted *ø’vauk* (Eu-vowk. Aségar cattle.), softly peeled off the bone. The creamy sauce is ladled last, turning the delicate hunks into a thick stew. It’s golden yellow splash smacked of herbs, richly lingering in its trail.

Four plates later, they brought out the chocolate *svu’chir* for dessert, saving a sliver for Anton’s return an hour or so later. His unmoving eyes never quite matched the smile below. Sonu dove for her daddy’s hug, leaving Thera to greet his aft. Rorick blew him a kiss, cutting up a ginger scented apple-type fruit.

Thera fist bumped her uncle’s arm on the way to the cupboard for a couple extra wine glasses, to Dorra’s dismay, lightly scolding her to put

Haddy's away, not happy about the young one drinking again. Sonu sat in Anton's lap, finishing her crumbs so he didn't eat alone.

The two older girls left to prepare for bed on Rorick's insistence he'd handle the dishes, rinsing as Dorra loaded them for a proper wash. At the table, Thera was officially on her fourth glass, the bottle parked in reach. She slouched on two chairs, facing a sleepy Sonu held by Anton.

"Since Hesperos... Rorick? What do we call him here?" Sonu asked.

"Maybe it's best we stick with Hesperos to avoid any slip ups."

"Okay, since buttface is here now, can we put pictures on the walls again?"

Exhaustion gripped Dorra.

"Pictures?" He asked.

"Family photos." She let out a hard sigh. "We had pictures, including Kallias. Worrying you might feel overwhelmed, we set simple landscapes instead."

"Clever." He approved.

Having lived at the farm so long, Thera pensively applauded their insight. He hadn't processed much of anything in the wake of his mother's death, reenforced by the silence now. Anton finished his last bite on schedule to board the rinse cycle.

"Time for bed, noodle."

Thera scooped Sonu like a sack of grain.

"Go brush your teeth, baby." She kissed her cheeks. "Rorick. How're you?"

"Bittersweet." He nodded. "All things considered, I'm good."

"Good." She smiled. "Glad you're settled. Took me a lot longer."

"It's easy with people this loving." He choked. "Corny as it sounds."

"Trust me, I get it. I have a few weeks off. Let's train." She flexed.

"A workout sounds nice. We'll talk in the morning, yeah?"

Parting ways, she joined Sonu for the brushing portion, successfully guilting her to read a story plopped in Sonu's bed. A minute later, Thera kissed the sleeping baby's forehead, covering her nose & tight. She snuck out quietly, tapping on the office door once. Dorra mouthed a welcome, shutting it softly. Herbal jar in hand, she packed her vegetable stock pipe. Anton had taken to the patio in a quiet ache. Thera went by the railing, craving the wind on her skin.

"Should we ask Rorick to join?"

“Another time.” Anton said. “It’s not his worry right now.” He paused to clean the slate of conversation, shifting focus to his news. “I had a meeting today. There’s been strange sounds out in *Tef’ad*. The air cracking, is how they described it.”

“Who?”

“Different merchants traveling similar routes. Could be poachers who reported it, for all it matters. The descriptions: bursting sounds, scratching sounds; my guess is Mathas didn’t realize how loud the weapons would be. But they’re here now. And Haitius will find out soon, even if it takes him a bit to process its meaning.”

“He’ll figure it out quick.” Thera passed the stock pipe. “In my meeting today, we talked about the portals and weapons. He’ll assume the sounds are a threat.”

Icing on the cake.

“I’m going to go by the house to check the crops tomorrow.” Dorra said. “He has to have left, something.”

“He didn’t leave anything, *melé** (Meh-lee. Casual way of saying aunt.), because he thought he’d be coming back.”

Dorra flicked the lighter in front of her cigarette, shaking at the anxious cold. Her irritation blamed the breeze for blowing, as it tends to do. Thera rubbed the loose skin of her forehead, feeling guilty for being terse.

“You’re right, we should check again. I’ve missed our days together.”

“Are you sure?”

Thera nodded.

“Might as well. Haitius basically banned me for the next two weeks. Because... right. The reporters.”

Dorra shared her realization.

“We probably won’t be able to go this week.”

“Speaking of Haitius, how’d your meeting go?” Anton cut in. “If it’s not treasonous for me to ask.”

“He didn’t forbid me from talking to you. I assume it’s his nice way of not trying to put me in another mess. But we didn’t discuss much. I can’t quite remember at the moment, I’m so tired. I told him about the portal closing and Mathas having his own. The possibility of Gaean weapons. I think, yeah. Oh! He summoned Ortic’l and Sammu, and asked about Camus. Where is he, by the way?”

“He left promising to find their portal.” Anton said. “I’ve been saving him a sack of gold for... this, I suppose. We should contact the others.”

“I’ll call Sammu now.” Dorra finished her cigarette in a last great puff. “He’s still awake; it’s barely twenty-five.”

“Maybe its best I swing by in person tomorrow.” Anton said. “I’m worried our calls have other ears.”

“Sorry things have come to this, *anu** (Casual form of uncle.). It’s so senseless.”

“It was our fault.” Dorra disagreed. “Every proposal flopped, or was rejected because it contradicted a longstanding cultural belief. But, please, don’t blame the Anunnaki, moonshine. You have to understand, there’s a reason it’s called a civil war in Nyx, and a rebellion in Hemera.”

“Melé, I don’t blame Anunnaki, I blame *him*. I understand why they follow him; his promises are big. But he had no businesses bringing my home, *MY* people, into it. This is his fault!”

“Thera, you can’t want an answer more than you want the truth. Uprisings happen because suffering is out of control.”

“You’re talking like we’ve lost!” Thera, on the brink of fury.

“And you’re talking about winning or losing. This is about a people’s dignity. No, honey, we’re not done. I promise, I’ll be back in the saddle myself soon. Because we can’t let it come to that.”

“You deserved your break. You’ve done so much for so many decades-”

“Well don’t call me old!”

Anton poured himself a stiff drink. He’s not a fan of the cold. The burden growing on Thera’s eyelids.

“It’s late.” Dorra said. “I doubt we’ll be at war in the morning.”

“If it’s even Olympus’ call to make.” Her bark, defeated.

“We’ll see.” Anton said.

“What are you going discuss with the Doca?” Thera asked on the way in.

Anton weighed out the consequences of his next words.

“We have to decide if we’re going to turn weapon designs over to the Civital.”

LESSONS

NO. 3

A.

Excerpts from Kallias' book:
A Collection of Theories

(Interesting/Skippable)

Kallias had a unique ability to make commonfolk interested in the particulars of life. When he set out to write a book, it wasn't other scholars he kept in mind.

Most subtopics are the length of a pamphlet, with its key principles laid out plainly, avoiding lengthy explanations where the reader may lose focus.

That being said, translations can be difficult, and this passage is quite dense. You can skip forward. It's okay to save it for another day.

A true apology.

None among us is free of guilt or shame. We've wronged the deserving and undeserving alike, intentionally, or as a result of our actionable choices. As we've defined morality several times throughout, this seems a good place to piece them together into a coherent principle. I say this because, you can't apologize if you don't understand the immoralities you are correcting.

Our early ancestors settled the lands in scattered societies. It didn't matter how isolated the tribe, they arrived at the same fundamental principles. No theft, No rape, no murder. We need little explanation to understand their reasoning; unprovoked harm to members of the group was unacceptable.

Implementation, of course, suffered then as it does now from the moderations of iniquity. Those beings, entuned to their primitive nature, will always excuse their own conduct, and that of their compatriots. But the lesson here is the birth of objective morality, in a hyperbolic sense.

Its independent existence implies, application is irrespective of a society's formation. Sapience allows us to define what already exists or can exist. Just as the laws of physics prevailed before our ability to calculate, moral function has always existed an option. A wild dog will tear through any being smaller than itself, while one raised in domestication understands the complexities, where love and prey divert.

But the products of morality are not so tangible as a railway, resulting in a patchwork of ill considered creeds systematized by collectives, believing they can create their own. This is an err, ensuring repugnant desires remain tolerable.

As modern beings, we must look at every action and consider, does this act cause harm? Is the harm retaliatory, in measured defense, or a legitimate form of justice? What are the alternatives? Applied equally to the broad strokes of a vendetta as to erroneously taking another's pencil. The act concerns us, no matter how miniscule or common practice it may be. Morality's direction is determined at these points, not its magnitude.

An act that causes harm is habitually ugly. Still, we do not flinch at the sight of dinner, nor do we mourn the story of a rapist hanged. Objective morality begs us to stand against all slaughter. We cannot pick and choose which to define as reasonable. And yet, virtually all would agree, piercing someone's heart as they're aiming for yours is not only acceptable, it's the right thing to do. At best, this act can be called neutral. A need necessitated by the moment. Though we approve, we should not applaud. It's better to ascertain the causes of harm, in an effort to avert repetition.

Difficulties arise, examining smaller inflections. We trivialize the indolence in our daily behaviors as negligible. But it is in these moments, we ourselves are defined. A sculptor must be exact at every point to achieve proportionality in their refinement. Behavior gratifies this same individualized precision, while failures cause perceptual erosion.

A person's resolve is worn away each time their litter misses the bin and they neglect to retrieve it, eventually reaching an irreparable state. Concessions of the heedless results in a sentient default, when the ability for external considerations is more akin to the sentience of an animal, rather than the refined moral character capable by sapience. In the end, the consequences are clear. As litter piles up, it becomes easier to label those beings adept at function as too stiff, rather than stare at the slobbish actuality of their own degraded principles.

I say the plural intentionally, knowing erosion will always weaken its surrounding and worsen the burden of the morals held above. One layer's collapse will continue in the degradation of another, until dignity itself is considered too great an effort. For this reason, frequency of the offense raises its magnitude. One might see a child's theft of candy as innocuous. And yet, in that instance, the child's mind has begun a shift to codify this entitlement through each repeated offense. Remedy requires remorse.

Shame breaks through safeguards, flooding the being's inner refuge with anxiety, demoralized into understanding, they're now beneath their kin in civilization. Without penitence, attrition will soften a mind's contours, severely restricting its ability for thoughtful reflection. Sapient minds have a choice not to be linear. It is on the being themselves to nourish this strength. Perhaps, by engaging with a dialogue. Thus, training the unconscious to perceive what already exist in a more critical manner.

It frightens me to sanction such brash resolutions, knowing bias will ultimately exploit these measures to vindicate the subjective moralities of a society's culture. Where the objective may often be defined as positive or negative regardless of mitigating circumstances, the subjective are purely qualitative, likely in the interest of protecting social order. Few instances here justify aggressive intervention. Beyond the objective harms, how a being presents themselves publicly, or behaves in their privacy should be left to simple recourse in the form of acceptance, avoidance, or kindly disillusionment. The last of which is reserved for inflammatory awkward behavior rather than the willful inclinations every being is entitled to express.

Those who seek to control these aspects of another often fail to accurately assess their own shortcomings. Narrowly tailored principles must include an adept introspection, removing overt assumptions of personal capability. In regards to morality, it is a bias claiming neutral behaviors as worthy of good. External causations are never sparse; thus, assessment of personal conduct must be done in a vacuum, reflecting upon the singular act.

Adequately replicating the instance will cause a nervous ache. Fundamental growth occurs with the same discomfort as a teething infant. It is on the being to decide if they'll adjust to the burden, or flee at the start of a cold sweat. Depth demands exertion. And declarations are performative, if they lack genuine consideration.