

## Part 1 // Fateful Nihilism

## 1.

Arcturus has learned, through the many shades of his life, that a hangover is a uniquely debilitating experience. It is not like a common cold, which is irritating but gives you an excuse to take it easy, nor is it anything more extreme, like a stabbing which always hurt like a bitch but at least the pain is real, and you could see it. The horrible beauty of an over indulged alcohol intake not only begins with the elation of being drunk, otherwise known as the fun part, but the inevitable aftermath of being hungover, which leans into a category known as *too* much fun. Unlike a stabbing or a stubbed toe, the pain is immediate and unpleasant. Likewise, you can feel the defense of your anti-bodies taking their mandated vacation days before the cold and prepare. Both are not usually one's fault, but a hangover...a hangover is a self-inflicted ailment with a pain level of six out of ten (all things considered in the scheme of what could really happen to a human body) but an inconvenience level of ten out of ten. During a hangover, you become a stupid golem, a simulacrum of yourself, cashing in on the credit of all that borrowed happiness from the night before. You can't help but feel a little stupid with a hangover, especially if you are past the age of knowing when you should stop. Of course, this did not stop Arcturus from partying in Manhattan so late it was early morning, and like all hangovers, Arcturus said to himself okay, no more, that's the last that's ever going to happen. Promise. Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye. Ouch.

There is a worse fate than a hangover, however, one that Arcturus does feel remorse for. It is more of a combination of experiences, and such being that a hangover and jet lag combatted in his skull with as much passion as a hate fuck. Combined with a rickety wagon ride up the Alps, the thinning air, and a desperate need for new gloves, if anyone asks how Arcturus is doing (no one does), he will answer "tired", but it would be obvious that there are so many layers folded into itself and once up again like a pyramid, a monument of all-encompassing pain.

The clients for today are Legion of the Mare, which, according to Arcturus's research, were founded in Scandinavia but found a hovel somehow in the forests of Slovenia around 1392. They've stayed ever since and through sheer willpower and devotion to their god, Mare, a supposed horse deity with a fitting name, they managed to live in typical cultish secret deep into the mountains. Arcturus is pretty sure that their torture rituals are from boredom, because as beautiful as the Alps are, what with their rising snow-blanketed fingers pointing to the sky, the clouds so close you could touch them, even paradise becomes dull if you are a prisoner, which the Legion of the Mare most certainly are. Slovenia has no time for Pagan secret societies, being too preoccupied with more nefarious economy-based societies that no longer require human sacrifices but pure, unadulterated *trust*, or so they say.

The Marians are in their typical cloaks: white and mossy black to blend in with the mountains. They have their hands tucked into their sleeves, keeping their heads dipped down to their knees in prayer. Large hoods obscure their faces, which is fine by Arcturus. He has gone through this gambit enough that seeing a true-blue cultist/legionary/society member, etc. lost its allure. Besides, the hangover quells any curiosity he might have had. He looks over the shoulders

of the Marians across from him, bobbing in rhythm to the uneven path up the mountain. Slovenia descended below, disappearing at first from a nice swathe of glades and plateaus to a patchwork quilt and now to just green and crystal blue, soon to be obscured by grey clouds pregnant with snow. Arcturus shuddered in the cold, wishing he bought his gloves. The chains clasped onto his wrist shake as he adjusts his feet, his buttocks getting sore and splintered from the open-faced caravan. There is a distinct lack of trees up the mountain, so Arc could not entirely blame the Marians for their faulty design. In fact, how they even achieved material to build a wagon was more of a question.

“Are you folks not even cold?” Then he realizes that he had spoken out of character, subtly nudged by his captive. He recovers, “I mean, where are you taking me? Please, I was only visiting the altar. I have money. Please. I won’t tell anyone. I swear.”

Arc receives no response from the Marians in front of him, who continued to whisper their sweet nothings to their frosty pagan god. He glances to his captor, who holds the chain in his coat, his face also obscured by an animal skinned cloak that looks vaguely like human flesh. It is a gentle tug, one of acknowledgement. Arc relaxes.

They make it to the top of the mountain where it opens into a wide crater. Black rock pokes from the snow and points like claws into the sky. They are surrounded by a sea of clouds, the stars now faintly twinkling above them. It is a geological experience that Arc believes to a perk of the job. At least a hundred Marians are already gathered at the crest, hands hidden in cloaks, looking like sentries. They surround a stone platform with carved, perfectly geometric ridges. In the center is a rectangular platform, flaked red with blood of centuries past. An obelisk stands in front of the platform, inscribed with deep, sharp etchings in the stone that move in unpredictable ways which Arc takes to be the visualizations of the odd syllables of their language. The summit shakes with their conjoined energies, intensified by the acoustics of the natural surrounding crests.

Arc makes a show of struggling to break free, jumping off the caravan at first opportunity, screaming, even frothing at the mouth, a skill that had come more into use even outside of these types of engagements that one would think. He kicks his captor, which was not arranged so the counter punch in the face was genuine. Arc always feels silly now, simply because everyone knew it was futile to try to escape, but it is convention to try.

Once, about two-hundred years ago, he was in Belarus on a Baba Yaga gig, after the entity had given up its charade and revealed itself as three separate Yaga a la three children in a trench coat, each with a separate faction of cults claiming their Sister was the true Yaga. Before he was stripped naked and forced to walk along the chicken bone laden forest path, Arc went so far to emit fear that he could only call it a *performance*. He kicked, bit, even pissed defensively like a squid shoots ink. It was very convincing. But this was then, and now was now. Arc was happy that the secret societies don’t communicate by virtue of their existence, because Arc has been channeling the same creative energy for quite some time.

Reprimanded with a well-placed smack of a cane busting up a lip (where are they getting wood?), Arc is promptly tied up, still struggling and refusing to give up hope of escape, and is

dragged over the snow and ice, past the humming Marians, and hoisted up on the pedestal in front of the obelisk like a slab of cow ready to be butchered, which honestly might be the case. They tie him to the cold pedestal with chains and he is happy that they had not requested he be nude before their god. The chains are rusty and brittle, weakened to an almost cracker like consistency after centuries of religious sacrifices. Arc thinks of breaking the chains for showmanship's sake, which would also serve as a double curtesy because then the Legion of the Mare would be forced to acquire better chains for the next sacrifice. He decides against it because even though his hangover is fading, he is still a little jet lagged, having woke up in his bed in the East Village this morning.

The leader is cloaked in a similar garb but lined with fur and a jewel along the neck. From within his sleeve, he fishes a knife with a curve like a thunderbolt and Arc pretends to squirm at this sight. The leader leans over Arc and in the starlight, he can see an outline of a face underneath the hood, glinted eyes that are so dedicated to ceremony that they squander any excitement of completing the ritual. But Arc knows better. These sacrifices to Mare only happen once every couple of hundred years. This is a big deal for them. The leader must have been waiting his whole life for this moment.

The leader demands the members to hush, and at once the top of the mountain is silent, the sound receding from the pedestal to the back of the crowd like an ocean wave. The leader looks towards the obelisk, shouts into the sky words Arc cannot understand, and proceeds to slice his palm over Arc's face, blood dripping onto his brows and his hair, thick coppery blobs of old man biomass. Some gets into Arc's mouth. The leader continued his prayer and proceeded to stab Arc in the chest, which always hurts. The knife moves up and down, obviously carving some sign specific to their culture along his solar plex and ribcage. One of Arc's intestines flop out like a limp garden hose, reminding Arc that he needs to scream from effectively being turned into a faucet. The combined blood falls from the pedestal, and begins to fill the ravines in the stone, moving along the path and eventually meeting the obelisk in front of them, where it engorges the outlines, moving upwards, and circulates a center orb as if this is what contained gravity and not the natural world.

A not unfamiliar sound of ripping space/time tears through the sky, which has become darker. The head priest of the Marions continued to chant and soon he is followed by the others so that a sea of hooded figures hum in unison, forming a great, deep reverberation that Arc feels in his exposed bones. A rift opens before them, purple and nebulous, and out crawls a great god, Mare, with its calcified horse peeking headfirst through the void, forcing the vaginal canal of a dimension parallel to Arc's own with demons and horrors unthinkable to widen.

Arc knows of this dimension but is nonplussed by the existential dread that infiltrates the psyche of all those who witness it, the voids existence spouting spittle of anti-matter or negative ions or whatever like daggers into the skulls of fragile men. Often, the cultists do not actually witness the rebirth or the summoning of their god, feeling too feeble or humbled in its presence, or else otherwise confined to some rule that Arc did not really care to question. Sometimes the Gods are arrogant and felt themselves too powerful and beautiful to be seen by their mortal servants, so they instilled, by excellent example of a random cult member sacrifice, a fear that

for a mortal man to gaze upon them they must lose their eyes. It is a form of collateral damage under the dictum of Eldritch affirmation. There are no rules to this sort of practice of course, nothing particularly written down past obvious arcana like the Necronomicon which can be found everywhere these days.

Mare widens the dimensional rift with long, spindly hands clad in iron, multiple digits on each finger so that with each stretch its bones snap, crackle, and pop. The horse head is gaunt, half decayed, little golden jewels in the hallows of its eyes. Viscous and brown liquid seep from the exposed pink of its gums, and it emits an odor so foul that it reminds Arc of hamburgers baking in the sun. The skull head emerges fully from the nebulous canal, rising to the height of the ruby glowing obelisk and stretching its bony arms, pulsing with pus pustules which cling to its black and sinewy body like barnacles. It looms over its humming subjects, awakened, and Arc begins to scream as he struggles to put his slimy entrails back into his body. The high priest begins to weep, the salt of his tears also getting into Arc's mouth. Mare roars in a guttural, psychic language that soon disintegrates the minds of the lesser cultists, forcing them to submission on their knees. Soon, Arc's own pain has begun to engulf him, and amidst the rising waters of the synchronized hum he looks into the golden, hallowed eyes of Mare, the regal god-king of the Legion, and feels at sudden peace. Mare screeches into the stars, shattering the heavens above. Arc falls asleep and dreams of nothing, as usual.

## 2.

Arcturus wakes but feels like he had not slept. He rubs crust from his eyes and props himself up on the starch, motel pillows. Like cleaning up empty beer bottles and plastic cups of liquor after a party, the phantom odor of Mare, now unleashed in some Slovenia mountain crest until the next ritual sacrifice, infiltrates his nostrils at random times. The taste of the high priest's blood and tears clings in the back of Arc's throat, lurking. Whenever Arc closes his eyes he could see Mare's hallowed skull, the glittering jewels in its eyes, tearing from the birth canal of a cosmic reality both above and below the one where Arc and the rest of the waking world currently reside. No one calls Earth Midgard anymore, and it was determined some several hundred years ago that since everyone has a different name for the plane, with no cross pollination (there is no secret society conferences, unsurprisingly) of operational definitions, that it is best to refer to Earth simply as Earth.

The soft and warm whirr of a vacuum cleaner runs by his room, followed by a squeaky wheel of the cleaning cart. He swings out of bed, still clad in the clothes he wore the night before, and uses the motel provided single use-economy size toothpaste and toothbrush, which Arc feels is a clever way to describe "small". He flaps complimentary slippers to the main desk, no longer hungover but very much discombobulated. He has lost his entrails many times, but the stink of Mare's raging drool and exposed tendons combined with the slippery sheen of his visible intestinal tract does him no favors this morning, even going so far as to threaten a fireball of vomit at the end of his throat when he passes the continental breakfast with its cafeteria tins of bacon and sausage.

Once Arc was in a Croatia being sacrificed to Parigia, also known as the Coral King, and the scaly clad and fish smelling Brotherhood of the Low Tide, and he watched in his reflection from a large sea glass mirror in their underwater cavern church his own liver being extracted and consumed raw before their seashell totem that looked adorable in like a macaroni sculpture sense. Had Arc not consumed his weight in oysters as a part of the Brotherhood's pre-prepping requisite for the sacrifice the experience might have pierced his apathetic approach to this stimulus, but oysters are a natural and effective aphrodisiac. Since then, Arc has been hard pressed to experience a bodily horror so grotesque as to shake him to his core, which had once been scooped out and served on a chalice for a blood sacrifice.

It is always the same person, Lyle, clicking away at the outdated compute. Arc does not understand how Lyle is always at the desk, as Arc's return home from gigs are as unpredictable as the lottery. This has been going on for years. Lyle is balding and spry in that weird way that older fit men are. He reminds Arc of a stretched rubber band with dust on it. He always smells like citrus, although the inspired fruit is questionable. Lyle stopped questioning why Arc would appear from his motel room with no record of ever having checked in. He even stopped insinuating that Arc was homeless, which he was most certainly not, after seeing the records of Arc paying for a room in full at the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey years at a time. A couple years ago, Lyle and Arc must have had a breakthrough in their relationship, because once Arc had forgotten to renew his yearly purchase of a motel room designed for one or two nights, at most, and Lyle reminded him that his "rent was up", which made Arc genuinely laugh. Arc was sure that Lyle saw him the same way that he saw Lyle: a fixture in the motel.

"Any mail for me today?" Arc says, leaning over the counter and glimpsing at the game of Solitaire on the screen.

Lyle also stopped asking the logistics or ethics of someone receiving mail at a motel long ago. He pulls out an envelope fastened with wax. It is not addressed to anyone, which Lyle has learned over time, and with many bickering, that it most likely belongs to Arc, except for the nameless magazine subscriptions that pile up like mold in the back of the storeroom. Arc is patient with Lyle, for he really does not comment on the peculiarity of the mail. Arc thumbs open the envelop and sees the cash inside. How The Legion of Mare, or more specifically, Joeth the main inquisitor who found Arc, managed to get an envelope, American currency, and a stamp, is only the tip of the iceberg for the logistics of how Arc gets paid at all. But it was here.

Lyle watches him. "I knew you were coming down today. Even though it's been months."

"How so, Lyle?"

"Linda says that strange noises were coming from 113. Your room."

"Noises?"

Lyle shrugs. "Assuming sex noises."

“No sex noises,” Arc confirms. Arc feels the same way about his regeneration as he does snoring; he’s not conscious to know if he’s making noise while doing it.

“We talked about this,” Lyle says, then repeats, “no sex noises. Makes things awkward for the guests.”

Arc looks around. An old man in a cane pours cranberry juice from the fountain with shaky hands. A pockmarked woman no larger than a skeleton attempts to be subtle about picking her nose while reading one of the magazines. The subscription of choice is *Baking with Carrots*.

“Got it Lyle,” Arc says, then he asks, “mind if you call a cab?”

“To New York?” Lyle says, the phone already in his hands. His bald, freckled head reflects a saber of light back at Arc, who resists touching it. Lyle talks to the dispatcher while Arc gets a cup of complimentary coffee, and Lyle tells him to wait outside. They had developed a ritual of goodbyes these last couple of years, with one of them saying “See you in a couple months?” and the other saying “Probably.” It switches every time, Arc has been keeping track, and this time he had says the final word.

### 3.

There are a couple constants that Arc has experienced in his time living around the world. The first being that there is a difference between a man offering you food opposed to a man offering you food with a vicious erection, for one is a nice gesture and the other can be seen, in most circumstances, as a borderline threat. Another constant is to tip generously, because Arc believes in karma in a most literal sense, having seen sacred tomes of more vindictive cults who believe in harmonic balance and Arc could never tell who belongs of what these days. Arc tips his driver handsomely, as the transit through the Lincoln Tunnel is already a daunting enough task for any driver, and Arc has asked the driver to drive around random spots in Brooklyn and Queens, feigning forgetfulness, and Arc wants to compensate the driver who, like all the others, is more than happy to get rid of Arc and speed off in a cloud of city smog. In truth, Arc is just careful. He wants to take away any trace of having been followed from the motel to the outskirts of Brooklyn, far away from even the most lonely and creepy subway. Arc has enough experience with the haunts of cultists who lurk in between soda racks in bodega aisles or ones who, albeit comedically, pretend to be reading an actual physical copy of the news while sitting on those stone benches in Penn Station.

There is a third axiom that Arcturus follows, although this is more of a general understanding of urban development beyond any talking head. The most space in any city for a reasonable, inconspicuous stay, is in the industrial zones of cities, right in that zoning sweet spot between “mixed-use” and “residential” but nestled almost like a matryoshka doll in the red ledgers of the government offices, buried so deep in cryptic writing as to be virtually invisible. Such a place is Arc’s abode, and one he has been staying in for more than the past sixty years.

Arc lives in a loft within what was once a shipping warehouse that transported arcade games and pinball machines. His bedroom is where the head offices used to be, and back when the shipping company ran out of business, Arc would scamper in between the left over terminals,

sheeted to look like retired statues or ghosts, and vault the steps two at a time to make it to his quarters. Overtime, when it was determined that the arcade game company would not come back to take the remainder of its prospects, Arc became comfortable enough to spread out like a slime mold, pouring in slow motion his belongings, sleeping not just in the space of a main office but now actively watching television in between Ms. Pacman and Galaga. Some of the terminals even worked, although how much life they had left is to be determined. Within about five years, Arc had converted the warehouse into his own domain. The kitchenette from the employee breakroom became extra storage. Large industrial beams the color of brick hold up tinted windows that echo the raindrops during a downpour, like little fingers playing a piano. The main floor, next to a permanently fastened closed door large enough to accommodate eighteen wheelers, became a nice alcove in which Arc read. Fast forward another twenty years, and Arc had developed even further, taking in a hodgepodge of furniture and adornments, usually found in thrift shops or on the street, most of it bordering on camp or kitsch, a strange combination of burnt orange and forest greens, even a collection of strange clown paintings in the corner. Even further, Arc had become so rooted in this New York domicile that he had begun to hang up little souvenirs from his travels, ones which he could fit into his pocket or had otherwise convinced a client to ship along with his fee to the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey. Whenever Arc returns home, he takes inventory just in case a dissatisfied cabal member or cultist had signified their intent to murder Arc (like, permanently) and reclaim an artefact that may or may not be considered “stolen”.

Among Arcturus’s favorite artefacts are:

- A splinter of Yggdoeken, one of the saplings of Yggdrasil, planted in Scandinavia by the druidic cult Ysere;
- Page 42 of the *Book of the Necrowraith*, stuffed into his pocket right before he was drained, drop by drop, to the Vampire beast conjured from a pentagram;
- A coin from the Accursed Tiller, risen from the ruins of an old bank deep underground, where both river water and the marrow of bones made a once formidable building. Coins dropped from the Accursed Tiller’s greasy locks like dandruff, and Arc had to stuff one of the coins into the lacerated slabs of his stomach before succumbing to his wounds, where the Bachryldns cut Arc open and stuffed him with coins from all over the world like a pinata;
- A white polaroid from the N’zorl’thy, snapped by accident in the woods somewhere in California. Emitting from open wounds on its many teeth barbed tentacles was a new color, which drove its followers to madness. The polaroid could not take the color and thus malfunctioned to white, but if you look hard enough it starts to give you a headache. It gives Arc strange dreams;
- A dried mushroom from the Fungarian’s who had resurrected the Fungelmancer, a hulking bipedal beast that is somehow dry and slimy at once and covered with blue lichen that swarms like a nest of baby spiders and trails a permanent cloud of noxious phosphorous spores. For reasons Arc still could not explain, he hid the mushroom under his tongue while the ceremonial mushroom sprouted from his navel and when he woke up the next morning in the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey, he had severe stomach

cramps but was tripping into another dimension. For a couple weeks Arc wondered if that lone mushroom was the Fungelmancer's unborn kid.

In the recent years, Arc has become invaded by a more sinister folk. Once living so close to a chemical plant that any downfall of wind threatened to singe his eyebrows off, now he lives near underground venues and art galleries which heralded a brewery a couple of blocks away and then the coffee shops arrived and it was all downhill from there. Luckily, no one comes down his street, which is luckily heavily industrialized with a tile warehouse and a run-down ironworker's shop. Every now and again, some drunk people will stumble a little too far down his street and Arc will strategically place the N'zorl'thy polaroid in their path, capitalizing on the same curiosity that brought them down. He would hear them from the rooftop, sipping a cup of tea while they pass around a "blank" polaroid. Sometimes they will vomit, most of the time they would weep or lose a temporary grip on their sanity. Regardless, Arc will engineer the ghost story for them, making them think twice not to come down the street again.

Not that Arc is cruel in anyway, which is even more surprising for himself because he has been tortured, maimed, incinerated, disemboweled, etc., so many times that he will be hard pressed (he has also been flattened a couple of times, too) to be amazed of another form of torture vicious enough to keep him up at night. It was just that he liked the anonymity that inevitably came with his line of work. Simple as that.

It should also be said that the sudden increase of breweries, bicycle chimes, and cafes with handwritten signs out front does bring a certain type of female to the neighborhood, which Arc finds occasionally useful, although he never brings anyone home. About forty years ago Arc had experienced a dry spell, mostly in part because his clients kept him away from a lot of free time. Arc's several year depressions were mostly accentuated by the lack of human contact and the act of dying to summon an eldritch force that he did not really care about, which overall contributed to the most nihilistic Arcturus had ever recalled himself to be. Further salting this wound was that most of his clients' s sacrificial rituals required various degrees and calculations of "sex stuff", which now, in hindsight, allows Arc to charge significantly more for those kinds of services...

This is not confused with prostitution, Arc thinks. He pours himself a glass of whisky and collapses onto the couch, looking at the pitter-pattering of the raindrops on the frosted skylight. He deposits the large sum of American currency underneath his mattress, enough to purchase a penthouse in Midtown along with the continual residence at the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey right on the spot. This is not possible of course, because Arcturus has no physical tracings of his existence. Any ID will be hard to conjure, being over two hundred years old, and any government precinct's acknowledgement of Arc's existence will put his clients in jeopardy, not only because of the open wound of a connection to the operative word "secret" in "secret society" but because the Illuminati are behind the banks and will digitally shit on everyone's unspoken parade with its bankers, suits, and cocktail hours that require years of vetting to even be in the SPAM inbox of their email chain.



He plays a record, stretches himself along a chaise to read a book, and eventually goes up to his actual bed, which was left unmade two weeks ago and just as he liked it.

## 4.

The Cloth of Sch'yth has been following Arcturus around for a couple of months, lurking steadily closer like a panther ready to strike. They did not look like anyone special, not wearing funny hats or robes when incognito, contrary to what their name suggests. Arc finds most cults in the U.S. metropolitan areas to be savvier in their agenda. Unlike vast forests or canyons where select cells of people could exist in the shadows, cities are hard hosts to secret societies, cabals, and cults. There is the exception of the Sewer People, who actually do live in the trash ridden and damp subway tunnels and worship King Crocodile of the New York City metropolitan sewer system, but they are more of a lifestyle at this point, no longer needing Arc's special services since the late 1800's when discovering their survivability depended on electricity and not a currency of blood.

Still, Arc could see the Cloth as if they were waving a banner. It starts with someone staring at him, unmoving, from across the street at a coffee shop. Then he would be at a bar and someone would be at the end of the bar, holding an untouched glass of beer. Then he would be in front of them in line getting a greasy breakfast sandwich to cure the inevitable hangover. Then, walking out of a subway turnstile, he strikes a conversation with the teller, whom had not been there yesterday or the day before and stares at Arc with a similar fashion.

"I would like twenty dollars on my MetroCard, please," he says this time, and passing the cash (always cash) underneath the bullet proof glass cage along with a folded piece of paper with exact coordinates, adds, "I will be at this location tomorrow at 8AM. Don't be late."

And the teller, a wide-eyed dark-skinned girl with an excellent smile who has replaced the tired old man the day before, folds the paper as delicately as petting a dove and put it in a pocket underneath the recently ironed on MTA patch on her vest.

Arcturus has been working his gig like this for over two hundred years. He has been wrong, once, or twice, but Arc is a fast learner.

So now, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a joint in the other, Arc sits on a fallen tree in Prospect Park, deep in the woods and far away from any walking paths or curious and spritely teenagers who like to get up early when they don't have too. He takes the final puff and throws the roach with a well-practiced flick, exhaling just as the trees rustle behind him. Arc unleashes his switch blade with a sharp *click*.

Regardless of what any media tells you, cultists follow the orgy route in terms of physical appearances. Think of it this way: all the porn in the world makes you think that only beautiful people engage orgies, their chiseled bodies intertwining into a carnal geometry of carnal perfection. In actuality, and this Arc had to learn the hard way, the attendants of orgies are so *normal* appearing that it dispels any lust for the event like water over a years-long smoldering flame. Orgy attenders, like cultists, look like the neighborhood bodega clerk, or the old lady who

runs the laundromat. It's a whole community. It is a decidedly normal look, and Arc does not think this is shallow but more of a surprising observation.

This cultist is an old man with a milky left eye and a nose crooked enough to open cans, which makes him look like a typical cultist or cabalist that one would see on television. He wears a North Face jacket and dirty boots and holds the slip of paper Arc had given to the subway attendant yesterday and a cup of strongly scented Earl Grey tea in the other.

The man jumps at the sight of the blade, raising his hands in defense, spilling some of the steaming liquid onto his jeans. He says, "Just here to talk."

He displays the paper with the coordinates in front of him and Arc gestures for him to sit next to him on the log. The man steps over fallen branches, crunches the brittle leaves carpeted the floor. He keeps his distance.

"Put the knife away," the man says, nonplussed, "I'm not coming closer."

Arc raises the switchblade and put the point to his throat. "It's for me, not for you. I don't take kindly to being forced into employment. And usually kidnappers don't pay. I'll be dead before you and your people can get me, and I'll make sure I won't be found again."

The man sniffs, his guard lessening. He sits next to Arc with some difficulty but manages to situate himself. "You're not right in the head. You know that right."

"I do," Arc says, "let's start with names."

"Mike," the man says, sipping his tea."

"I'm Arcturus."

"I know."

"Let me guess. You couldn't find a suitable candidate for your sacrifice and time is running out."

Mike nods, embarrassed.

"How long do you have?"

"We can only begin preparations at the beginning of the autumn equinox."

"And it's nearing the end of the equinox, according to my calendar. About a week."

Arc goes through the typical gambit of vetting questions. Mike is a devout member of the Cloth, as Arc already knows. He found Arc in the way that Arc found them, by staring back, much akin to lover across a dimly lit bar. The Cloth identifies potential victims for their sacrifices by borderline stalking people; sure enough that their absence from the world will not be noticed. Arc got their attention by staring back, he tells Mike, and Mike shakes his head in disbelief, a wormy smile rising underneath the white bristles on his chin.

"Tell me about your god," Arc says, "Sch'yth."

Mike jumps, spills more tea. “Don’t! Don’t say Her name in the daylight. The molecules are her servants.”

“I need to know what I’m getting into.”

Mike relents, considers his words. “The queen of bacteria and all the filth in the world, able to control the shadows of all the darkest caverns, consuming the despaired souls once they had gone necrotic with lost hope.”

“...Okay. Go on.”

“Our God-Queen is the vilest of creatures, speaking in phrases that only the few chosen can understand, having broken through the bacterial psychic barrier. The Queen is our love, and She is within all the crevices of hatred and malice, each of her seven lungs gestating the new plague, eyes full of flies...”

Mike’s milky eye starts to tremble. Arc keeps the blade to his throat. “Okay, I got it.”

“Oh, the Queen of all bile, cleanse the air with feces so that the bacteria can feast...”

An eldritch force like this, described by a man with a piss stain of tea and, yes, an erection, can only be more horrible than he could comprehend, an assault on all the senses. His last gig got the blood of an unwashed hand in his mouth, and it was all Arc could do not to gag.

“A pockmarked womb, cockroaches birthing from the giving canal underneath its sinewy nails...”

“Okay Mike calm down.”

“The god of filth, and thus the god of purity, for are we all not...”

“Mike I’m going to kill myself.”

Mike the cultist snaps to attention, shifts his weight on the log. He sniffs the air, looks around, embarrassed. He readjusts his jacket to cover what is confirmed to be a hard-on. He says in a whispered tone. “Can you do it?”

“Sacrifice myself to your shit god? Yes. The question is, do I want to?”

“The Cloth has money,” Mike says, and Arc believes him. They seem to need a sacrifice desperately, which is a good bargaining chip. Mike repeats again, “The Cloth has money.”

“How much?”

Mike tells him, and Arc keeps a straight face. He knows he can get more, even though he would be set to live comfortably for at least a couple of years.

“Where?”

“Upstate New York, near Albany.”

Arc pretends to consider these factors. Transportation is obviously provided, and if starvation is not a component of the ritual he will be fed, although the quality depends on his captors. The amount of times Arc has heard words relating to filth and bacteria reminded him that a gig is a gig, and he has done worse for less.

Finally, Arc says, “No one knows we are speaking today, correct?”

Mike shakes his head. “No.”

“If I so much as sense you are serious this knife is going into my throat and you’ll be really hard pressed to find a suitable candidate for your god’s resurrection.”

Mike says, “Listen, times are hard. You can’t just go around sacrificing people anymore. It’s too difficult for that.”

Arc appreciates Mike for saying this. He has vocalized Arc’s entire business philosophy. “Your high priest or headmaster or whatever suggested me.”

Mike relents. “Times are rough.”

Arc stood, retreats his switchblade into his pocket. He increases the commission by an additional twenty percent and stares down Mike and his milky eye until he agrees. Instinctively Arc takes out his free hand for an ol’ fashioned shake before realizing the god that Mike and his ilk worship.

His hand felt dirty for the rest of the day.

## 5.

Three weeks later Arc is at near Coney Island, eating a Nathan’s hot dog and wandering on the boardwalk. He purchases a coffee, eats some taffy, and enjoys the sand, cooled by the autumn weather. The Wonder Wheel looms in the distance, hibernating from a busy season, creaking at the wind. The cartoonish graffiti of creepy dolls and pneumatic women lurked on every surface, giving the now lonely neighborhood a feeling of abandonment, cum stained and torn, much like the used condom that littered the vomited trash of an overturned trashcan. An insurgent to innocence. Odors of funnel cake and fried oysters dominates any salt from drifting in from the sea. Somewhere, a street magician, complete with a top hat, is narrating his next trick pulling a rabbit out of a hat to no audience.

Arc walks behind the row of shops lining the boardwalk and thinks about the long shower he will take after whatever ritual the Cloth has in mind for their eldritch bacterial god. The shuffling of footsteps kicking tossed beer cans and crinkling flaccid bags of chips came soon after, following a sudden bag over his head, but by then Arc’s eyes were already closed.

The one benefit of this gig, at the very least, is that it is in the same time zone as when he wakes up. The Legion of the Mare was an excursion just to get to the country. It makes Arc grateful that these types of events are a one-way trip. His head hurts, which Arc finds a necessary inconvenience. It is important that the sacrifice appear to have struggled. His hands are bound, and he is being carried on a stretcher through thickets of oaks and ferns. Beams of light show

through interlaced branches, pregnant with golden notes of pollen. The Cloth, now outside of New York City and in celebration of what is the most important day of a lot of their lives, wear golden robes and slither across the nettled floor of the damp forest. It makes them look like slugs. The rotting, minerally smell of Arc typically associates with forests is dominated with a lilac, clean scent. Arc sniffs the molecules as if draught, knowing that Sch'yth would emerge from a crusted cocoon of crusted shit, exploding in a chocolate fountain with new life all while oily tears smack on the leathery faces of Mike and his unnerving colleagues. From Mike's description, Sch'yth emits both waste and living things from various orifices, and Arc is equal parts disgusted and curious.

The Descendants of Blemmyes looked morbid for their comical deformities, and when they arrived from the green sea foam froth out of the Brisone River, the biggest challenge Arc faced was not holding in his entrails or watching his newly chopped arm grind into a paste but not chuckling at the wide face on the torso, eyes where nipples should be, a wide, stupid grin with pink, wormy lips against a smooth chest. There was yet another time, when Arc had spent three months in the catacombs of Paris slowly losing fragments of his flesh like cut pieces of a burrito, that his own boredom threatened to make him take one of the rib cages nestled into the walls and stab his own throat to abruptly terminate the contract. When he learned the primordial being Gorgotha was a giant spider with the wrought faces of screaming men in place of eyes, Arc decided to stay the extra week. The men in each eye all screeched separately and at each other, like a loud family dinner. When they opened their mouth, their tongues were whips of purple, celestial fire.

So Sch'yth, while predicted to be gross, would at least be stimulating to look at.

The Cloth carries him on the stretcher for about two hours. He remembers to struggle and plead, turning his head to reveal the bruise on his scalp where someone clocked him earlier this morning. One of the captors takes the bait, and Arc feigns unconsciousness for the next two hours, listening to their sandals along the fallen nettles, the grunts as they navigate around fallen logs, the snap of branches. The temperature of the forest transitions to a chillier, damper environment, and the lack of air told Arc he was heading underground.

The stretcher seesaws as his captors maneuver down crude steps, twisting the cot awkwardly with Arc acting limp. Smells of lemon verbena and sea salt wafts up the path, so intense that upon his deposit into a dark room no bigger than a closet Arc has trouble breathing. It smells like a laundromat during peak hours, and just as musty. Still bound at the wrist, Arc shimmies against the wall after the door is fastened shut and takes the cover from his face, using a complex dance of chin movements and shoulder shrugs. He sighs, tells himself to be more selective with his clients, and to develop a clear list of standards for what he is willing to become sacrificed by. He falls asleep standing up and leaning against the wall, the twinkling of some underground water running through the stone.

A rectangle of light wakes Arcturus from his slumber. A woman stands in the threshold; her figure dark but outlined by the light. An explosion of citrusy peony bombards the room. She carries a bowl, holding it in both hands so that Arc, after a second's pause, dunks his face

embarrassingly into the cold water. He lifted himself up, pebbles of underground water trailing from his brow, turning his hair into spikes.

“I know you,” Arc says.

The afroed MTA attendant smiles a wide, toothy smile. Crystalline orange eyes pierce his soul. In place of her drab work attire is a white robe with large sleeves and white gloves.

“Arcturus,” she says, “our lifesaver.”

“Mike wasn’t supposed to know.”

“I told Mike,” she says, “and you told me.”

“Mike said I’m in Albany.”

“Somewhere there. Thanks for your service, by the way.”

“It’s my job.”

“What’s your name?”

“Niet.”

“I don’t remember seeing that name on your nametag.”

“Coworkers call me Rosanne,” she says, as if Arc should have known. Then she asks: “So how does it work? We sacrifice you and you what, come back as a fetus?”

“Sure.”

“The only resurrections I’m familiar with are ones that require sacrifices, like for our great queen. You are no primordial force. You are just a man.”

Arc could tell she wanted confirmation that Arc can rejuvenate, which will lead to a conversation Arc does not want to have with clients. Instead, he says, “You’re lucky you found me. Mike says you were running out of time.”

“For our ritual sacrifice? Always.”

“Can you tell me more about what’s going to happen to me? Starvation? Are you going to consume me? How long will I have to be around shit or other biological matter. Will something go *inside* me? Will I have to eat something inside of other people?”

Niet tilts her head and wrinkles her nose. “That’s gross, sir. Why would we make you do any of that that?”

Arc says, “Mike told me that’s your god’s domain. I figured the ritual would be related.”

“Why would you...do you want to eat shit? I do not understand...do you instead want someone to...”

“No!”

Neit stares at Arc, temporarily affronted by his existence. Then she shakes her head, golden inverted triangles swinging from her earlobes. “Oh, Basilia.”

“Pardon?”

“Basilia, his true name. You met him as Mike,” Niet says, her lips now pursed and looking like an MTA attendant, “Mike has not gotten the memo.”

“Again, pardon?”

“Basilia is a man of ritual, which is important for the sustainability of the Cloth. He was present during the original resurrection of our bacterial queen, and his understanding of Her evolution has much remained the same. He is, as you might say, a little old fashioned.”

“That’s a word for it.”

“Our Queen of many names gestated long enough in her primordial egg. Now we are preparing to wake her from her long slumber so she may cleanse the world of grime and filth. So no fecal matter on your part is necessary. Look, a glimpse. Are we the folk that does not value the true nature of the world in its natal beauty? We were once, when the queen was a princess, still fresh from the loins of Γυτεν-νερ, but our change in values is a psychic order from our Bacterial Queen Herself.”

Arc’s eyes adjust to the light behind her, revealing that the cell in which he resides is literally, a closet. From his rectangular vantage he sees great pillars the size of California red woods, holding up an underground antechamber of smooth, white stone. Candles float along shallow pools, bobbing into each other like lily pads. Members of the Cloth stand in the pools, each holding a candle. They pray in low, synchronized tongues, their bowed heads emitting in such unison that a low vibration bounces from the pillars and makes its way into Arc’s ears with a warm buzz. It is insurmountably relieving to know that he will not need to die choking on sewage or dunking into centuries old septic tanks full of otherworldly excrement.

Arc says, “You need a new P.R. person.”

Niet dismisses Arc with a chuckle. She holds the bowl up to Arc and he can see it is made of gold. He drinks casually, dipping his whole head and lapping like a pup. He shakes his hair loose of any clumps of water, only aware of how fitting the image was after the fact.

He continues, “Now that we’ve got that cleared up, how long do I have to be in this storage closet?”

“You’re not our guest. You’re working, sir.”

Then she leaves him, putting Arc in total darkness once again. He hears her saying to herself, “We’ve really got to get a new P.R. person.”

Arc does not feel antsy or claustrophobic before Niet’s visit, his thoughts too preoccupied with the potential of icky prospects. Now that the snafu is corrected, Arc’s mental energy focuses on the fact that he is indeed in a storage closet, tossed aside and kept out of sight like a broom or

a bucket. Arc knows his place in these events, much like a hired dancer or even more accurately, a caterer. Arcturus is not employed by the Cloth to join their ranks, but to be sacrificed for them, much like serving lunch before a board meeting. Still, there is a dehumanizing aspect to being shoved into a closet, simply because it is so droll of a way to keep him. He is used to prisons or coffins, sometimes even being starved in the top room of an old, crumbling castle to marinate “spiritually”. A closet is a little insulting, and Arc ponders this as his heartbeat increases and the walls started to close in on him, the dark encroaching on his arms, his legs, his lungs. His tongue feels like a sponge, lapping over the side of his numbing face. There was something in the water and Arc dove headfirst into it.

He in the main hall, bound by golden threads that cut into his flesh and adorned with roses over his nude body. The clean, bacterial smell of fresh laundry permeates the room with a heavy mist. A bobbing force sways Arc slightly to the left and right, and through his peripheries he sees candles eye level with him, floating on lily pads. Silken robes stand in a pool surrounding him, up to their waists. They are each holding a candle, humming and grinding their teeth. Rosanne/Niet cannot be found, nor Mike/Basilis. Rose petals blanket his raft, which is made of wicker. It is sort of peaceful, Arc thinks, and wonders if any of them have taken any of that special tonic and floated down this candle adorned river like a lazy river. Then he starts to struggle, pretending to first be possessed by over stimulation, then pure fright, then pain as the golden twine lacerates his exposed chest. All three motivations demanded a different nuance of performance, although to Arc’s credit the screams of pain were real, as the wire is not only thorned from the roses but also oiled in a poppy-tonic that enflames his skin and open wounds.

Before him, on the other side of the pool, is a large statue of bronze and white marble, alight with candleflame. A simulacrum of Sch’yth looms over them, scaling in height to the length of the pillars. The replication is horrifying, the sculpture showing the Bacterial Queen’s many teeth, the outpour of vermin and insect from underneath its many nail tipped tentacles, the fourteen intertwining tongues.

The sound of gentle wading behind him preceded a shadow of a large man, his face obscured by the ivory robe which hangs over his brows. He holds a candle in one hand and reached his arm out to the crowd behind him. He called for the instrument in a low, baritone voice that booms through the main hall. This set off a chain of voices starting in the back, a repeated phrase that draws near, blessing whatever instrument called by the head priest as it passes from the back of the hall to the front.

Arc hears the same phrase about ten times before realizing that the blessings are not getting any closer, and he wondered, with confirmation soon after, that literally each member is passing this artefact to their neighbor, blessing the tool with a two-minute, single breathed blessing, all while the head priest keeps a bloated arm above the water for someone to place the tool into an open palm. It takes Arc another five minutes to get bored, and another five to get frustrated at the lack of progress. It was like waiting in traffic. He has stopped counting the reflection of the candles in the mirrored ceiling after losing count around eighty, and by then the individual blessings started to sound like background music. Although Arc is unfamiliar with their language, he was certain that, by his sixtieth time hearing the same phrase, he could repeat



the damn blessing himself just to get on with it. And worse is the paralyzing agent in the barbed wire, so he could not even lacerate productively in search for stimuli. Occasionally he would glance at the frantic eyes of the head priest, searching for signs of regret to have followed this whole, righteous path only to be met with a final test of physical endurance, the poor man's arm already starting to shake as he holds a gloved palm open. All those years, Arc thinks, devoting to a single, eldritch cause, so close to fulfilling a spiritual desire but minutes turned hours away, the trial equal parts patience and physical. There are times when Arc thinks he could see the rattling eyes of the hooded high priest, almost pleading with Arc to die in a timely manner. There, floating and surrounded by the comfort of a candle flame, Arc is near to sleep from the hollow drone of the blessings, like the ebbing of a shore outside of a beach house.

The blessings continue for two hours, and the high priest is able to contain his relief of the instrument being placed into his palm like a caddy gives a club. Arc takes his cue and begins to struggle, trying to contort his bound and paralyzed body as the high priest of the Sch'yth reveals the instrument to be a cleaver.

"Did you get that from Ikea?" Arc whispers to the high priest in between his struggles, "I have a similar one."

The congregation silences, a collective bating of breath that gives Arc a sudden case of butterflies. The high priest began a final chant, directed toward the cleaver, and Arc is pleased to hear a different combination of syllables. Then, while Arc pretends to struggle as a last-ditch effort for freedom (the act modeled after many a horror film viewing), the high priest directs his attention the idol of Sch'yth and bows, drops of tears and snot contaminating the orange glowing pool.

"To our God Queen, whom we bring our sacrifice, our humble symbol of the manifestation of all the filth and putridity, the vilest of the bacterial axiom."

Arc has been doing this long enough to not get offended in the long term, but the initial cut of the words always hurts. He would understand if he was bathed in excrement, as he initially thought was going to happen.

"To you, our God Queen, the pedals which contaminate your unfettered paths, molest the nettles in the forest."

The cleaver slices into Arc's right ankle with a deft *thunk*. The high priest withdraws the steel, revealing white globs of fat and torn sinews of pink, meaty muscle. Little rocks of bone stick out from the shining gore, and Arc releases a genuine scream. A member of the congregation comes forth and takes Arc's detached foot, holding it over their clothed head like Simba over Pride Rock. They bless his foot with the same chant as the cleaver and then proceeds to hand the bleeding foot to someone else in the congregation to begin the blessing process in reverse. Arc's blood stains the white cloth of the cultist like a butcher's smock. The pool tinted slightly into the color of ruby.

"To you, our God Queen, the claws which transport the noxious germs from your natural surfaces, made to build sinister, sacrilege edifices of smoke and cancer in insulting mimicry."

Another *thunk* and the high priest shows Arc his hand before another member of the congregation takes this, shows his curled hand to the idol, and bless it before handing it off. Now the blessings for his foot and his hand are circulating in different wings of the room, each out of synch so that the buzzing sounds askew.

“And finally,” the high priest says, “the genitals of the sinners, who spray their noxious, maggoty seed over all your natural surfaces, exchanging necrotic slime.”

“Wait,” Arc says, still paralyzed but feeling the onset of extreme pain of losing both his foot and hand, “my genitals are fine.”

The high priest leans over Arc, smelling like blood and bone, his ivory robe pink and red, lumpy with coagulated bits of Arcturus. With a gloved hand he picks up Arc’s penis with clinical precision.

“No! Aim for the head first. You can have my genitals after you decapitate me. I promise.”

Arc equates penis loss to a sunrise, but not because he finds any joy in the former. Sunrises happened every day yet Arc still found a joy in watching the darkness of the night morph into a pleasant orange and purple. He has seen many sunrises in his life, enjoyed many cups of coffee on the windowsills in the apartments of sleeping lovers, listened to the waking of birds hidden in trees. Sunrises are a beautiful thing, one which, even after seeing the first time, still captures wonder. It is not a feature of the world which weakens over repeated engagement, much like when a cultist cuts off your penis or other extremely sensitive appendages. Arc is unfortunately no stranger to penis detachment, but each time does not soften the psychological impact of the next. It is an all-around unpleasant experience all the time, and one which Arc can say with confidence exists in the upper echelons of bodily harm.

The high priest plucks Arc’s penis like a mushroom, dangling it like a mentalist’s pendulum before the gargantuan stone idol. Arc cries from the pain, wishing that someone would just decapitate him and get it over with. Instead of handing off his limp and bleeding un-blown balloon to a colleague, the high priest places it at the base of the totem with utmost regard. Arc feels a little bit violated. The pain from his chopped foot and hand rises to a crescendo, localizing in the parts of his body not numbed by the paralytic agent in the barb wire. Blood spurts from three parts of his body that had not existed before, and Arc, gritting his teeth and fighting back tears, has enough mental fortitude to know that eventually...eventually he’ll lose enough blood and wake up with everything attached, like always.

The high priest bows to the base of the idol. The humdrum of the cultists elevates to a high-pitched aria, ricocheting from white concrete pillar to the candle strewn lake and back again. Arc closes his eyes and throws his head back, pleading to be decapitated. The water begins to shake below him, concentric circles pushing his float to the edge of the pool. All of the candles extinguished, now plumes of sad smoke gather to the top of the antechamber. Arc perceives the rumbling to be his final moments of life but as he opened his eyes, he sees a purple glow emanate from fresh scars on the statue of Sch’yth. The sounds of a cracking egg, the stench

of all the world's necrosis manifested into such a physically offending force as to be crunchy and sour. In the distance, beyond the continued asynchronous hum, a soft weeping, the water of the pools which has grown into a raging tide, the squeak of vermin, the groggy roar of primordial wrath.

Arc gazes at its many eyes, incomprehensible in its shape, cracking from its foul-smelling cement shell, pus sacs grow like lava bubbles and bursting under toenails, maggots falling like the nettles of a tree. Spittle so foul that it blinds Arc, burns his hair, cauterizes his wounds.

*How gross*, Arc thinks, telling himself to conduct a better vetting process, or at the least, demand more money. And with one final roar Arcturus's eyes pop and his brain melts and his penis, or lack thereof, still really fucking hurt.

He would rather have drowned in shit.

\*\*\*

"Hi Lyle," Arc says, rubbing his eye with one hand while holding his groin with the other.

He is afraid that if he let go his genitals would still be mutilated, treating his privates like a Schrodinger's Cat. Such is the psychological effect of losing that particular appendage. Cars wave past like swatches of paint, sounding, if one tries hard enough, like the comings and goings of a tide. Outside, Arc notices that management has finally repaired the leaning sign for the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey. Good for them.

"Do you have mail for me?" Arc says, wondering how long that cup of OJ a little out of Lyle's reach has been sitting there.

He twists himself from the solitaire game, no longer syrupy cordial to Arc that one would take with other guests. He says, "Some mail came with no address."

"Come on, Lyle," Arc says.

Lyle retrieves it from under the desk, already prepared for handoff. Arc wonders if it was just sitting on his lap, since the envelop is curiously warm. Lyle retracts his long, sinewy arm, which looks a little bit like a chicken wing. He moves like there is an additional joint in his arm, like its unrolling, and Arc's amusement turns off put rather quick. Arc opens the envelop, confirms the correct amount (somehow, Arc has never been *shorted*, which was amazing because Arc has no idea how to settle the debt. He always assumed that his clients saw his rejuvenate abilities as some conduit to a greater, more deadly force. Which is not entirely incorrect.), and finds, to an unexpected schoolboy giddiness, a phone number at the bottom. Signed from Niet.

"You're blushing," Lyle says.

"It's Valentine's Day, I guess."

"No it's not," Lyle says, then looks behind him to check the calendar.

"I know, Lyle," Arc says, "call a cab, yeah? See you in a couple months?"

Lyle begins to dial with spidery fingers, snorting a bubble of phlegm held captive in his rickety throat. He says, “Probably.”

\*\*\*

Arc makes sure to get well and truly drunk that night, to celebrate a professional triumph of committing yet another gig, and a spiritual one, for assisting in the rebirth of an actual eldritch force beyond human comprehension. He also made a group of people very happy, provided they were not dead. In fact, he can quantify the amount of people as an actual *society*, which was its own brand of soul food.

And, feeling a little gusto about the phone number, Arc feels a surge of confidence. Not that he would call the MTA attendant. It is not that she has drugged him or kept him in a storage closet, or even that she probably held Arc’s foot or hand and blessed it. Arc played his part and was paid handsomely for it. But Arc is professional; he has gone down that route before and it has never ended well.

Once, he had participated in a Gaelic sex ritual of a fertility cult in Tyresta, located in beatific Sweden. In the power of orgasm, they believed, they can evoke the Huldra from their slumber so the male members can be seduced to make human/Huldra hybrids. It was not an uncommon practice, although the bodily fluid which comes from lovemaking has a sweet, almost addictive odor when coming from the hybrids who go into a frenzy in their wooden, A-frame yellow churches, which then emits the smoky smell of burnt charcoal. Their sons, once believed to be the gendered counter parts to the Huldra themselves, the Huldrakall are the male hybrid off-spring, really mutants, who are destined to stomp stupidly around the forest gnawing on lost hiker’s bones, protecting the main village in a sort of caste system. It was not Arc’s place to opine, but he did express relief when he was told, by means of stripping his clothes in front of the whole village on a frost laden morning, to bed the head witch’s daughter, who Arc thought to actually be quite physically stunning. After the climax, he was to have his throat cut like a calf and bleed his sticky coagulate all over her supple body, but right before her body tensed with pleasure, she confessed her love for Arcturus, even though they had just met. He was not supposed to cum, but he was nearing it, and he feared sudden death before the climax. She offered, in between bodily shakes, to let him live and be among them in their idyllic land, to roam along the planes and climb the beautiful mountains, to picnic with fresh goat cheese on hand woven blankets, nestled in wild daisies. Arc thought about it for a second, even thinking so intensely as to drown out the sounds of the other males who had been captured (they had *actually* been captured), pumping away in fear and regret at some inner demons which brought them here. For second, he looked into her eyes and thought...perhaps. It was a judgement clouded in pleasure, heavily misdirected in priority for the need to emit. Then one of the elders, also naked, took a knife and slit Arc’s throat just as he was climaxing. Arc never knew her name, but he thought of her sometimes, fearing that he would encounter her somehow on the subway or something, and that it would be incredibly awkward.

So Arc learned a lesson. But he could not place exactly what it was. Regardless, Arc is so protective over his genitals that any sort of debauchery was out of the question, such is the

psychological effect of losing that appendage. It will take weeks to become psychologically sound, and in the meantime, he takes a long shower, dresses, and set out for the night, tossing Niet's number on an old Pac-Man terminal, next to the artifacts from his previous clients.

## 6.

*It started so simple. He had milked the sheep, tended to the field, had finally gotten the wrist technique right for his mother's tonic, just as his sister showed him. She was training to become the next village healer, and already she was showing promise. He even had time to drink some mead with his neighbors before mealtime, gazing at their little mountain flanked community while the women finished their own chores and began to set the large community table in the middle of the square, where they ate as one every night.*

*It was the visitor, Arcturus remembers faintly, who had come in from the thick of the forest, so hazy in Arcturus's memory that he recalls the stranger shrouded in mist. The stranger was in pain, a cracked femur burst from his flesh after a daring fall. A trail of blood escaped his right foot as he birthed from the interlaced bushes and trees. Arcturus watches as brothers Mathew and John heave the stranger up and brings him across the lawns of the houses to the chief elder, who chastises them for not immediately going to the medic. Arcturus was paralyzed like the others with less constitution; most villagers younger than he had no idea of others outside of their town, which was heavily hinted to contain cannibal native tribes rival settlements, even though these settlements come from the motherland. Arcturus was told as a boy, who then told this to the smaller children, that concept of man's natural law for these settlements had stayed across the water or otherwise beaten into dust on the rocking ship. Arcturus is not sure what to make of this other than running over to help brothers Mathew and John with the stranger, only to get a better look.*

*The stranger recovered swiftly, having been fastened a splint by Sofia, which impressed everyone. The stranger did not look strange to Arcturus and the rest of the town. A nose where it should have been, a language not uncivilized like the cannibals which lurked outside the perimeter of their settlement with bows and arrows, calloused hands from hard work. The stranger was not fit to return back, and in return for the hospitality assisted in the ways of the community as to not be a burden. This proved enjoyable for all. The stranger needed to sit, and sit frequently, but he took over the milking duties of their sheep, which was the least favorite chore among the men. He helped cook the meals by shucking the corn, which was the least favorite chore among the women. He made jokes and laughed with the others. Arcturus liked this man too.*

*During dinner the stranger spoke of his origins, which, had he already not arrested the attention and he talk of the community by his mere existence, was sure to bring everyone to silence, even the elders, who were familiar with the old world which they fled. The stranger talked of great spires rising from the Earth to intertwine with the stars above. Large pools of crystallized water that make you young. Fruit from a snake guarded tree that upon consumption give you infinite knowledge (at this he glanced at Sofia, who made no effort to hide her blushing, being just a girl of fourteen). He said of beautiful lands where time did not work backwards, but*

*stopped entirely. When pressed for more details, the stranger raised a hand and said with utmost respect, that he is paralyzed for more details. Arcturus was fine with the stranger ceasing his silly antics. He was helpful with the community, and Arcturus did like him, but he finds these talks poisonous. Their community is beautiful enough as it is, and he was too smart to believe in these silly dreams. While he did not understand why apples fall from trees, nor why night came after day and not the other way around, Arcturus knew enough to trust in these facts.*

*The shift was subtle for Arcturus, who had not noticed any change in the first couple of days. After that first dinner he overheard his neighbors talking about the wonders the stranger had seen, the strange lands he had walked. The following night people started to ask the stranger questions, and the stranger relented with selective answers, leaving the community wanting. Soon, Arcturus could not till the fields without brothers Mathew and John talking about wanting to visit these lands, which were rumored to contain beautiful women with mead that comes from their bosoms. Arcturus's neighbors at the community table, even far away from the visitor's storytelling of new facts, would strain to hear every word as if the words themselves contained honey. Even Sofia was dropping mention of these strange lands during breakfast. The Village Elders also took to the stranger, who was kind and charming, and imparted ancient wisdom from his wonderful community as a special gift to the Elders, which made them feel important.*

*On the fifth day the Stranger had taken over the meals entirely, all the town falling silent during mealtime, Arcturus himself too weak from the day's chores to keep up the momentum of conversation from those intent on listening. The stranger told of seas full of milk and honey, of radiant sunshine so thick you could wear it as a blanket. The community table was in the shape of a U, with the Elders at the head of the curve. Somehow the stranger had advanced from the additional seat closer to the center. He chewed slowly, intently; his face blurred in Arcturus's recollection. The community bent forward over their plates, hearing the stranger talk of great medicine that gives you eternal life. Arcturus felt occasional glances towards Sofia, who was sitting next to him, her gaze so focused and once reserved for aromatherapy now substituted for his stories.*

*Arcturus could not till the fields without hearing of a land without fields and produce that grew on its own. He could not milk the cows without hearing of the bubbling sea of warm milk. He could not talk to his sister without hearing a subtle yet strategic mention of the stranger, as if mentioning him will evoke special attention from some psychic connection, even though he was still in the main Elder's house at the opposite end of the plateau, a whole mile of daisies and tulips between them. When Arcturus tried to connect with her and asked his sister to teach him another medical skill, of which she was passionate and happy to impart her acquired knowledge, she instead relented and said that the stranger probably knew more. Arcturus felt her drifting away, farther to be encroached by the thick of the woods which surrounded their humble town. He felt the vibrations of imaginary cannibal drumbeats, the sticks femurs of their last supper, globules of meat still stuck on the bones.*

*The seventh night the Stranger was given a platform in front of them, surrounded at three sides. The dais was one of the Elder's kitchen tables, one which Arcturus's father had made before his death. This hurt Arcturus, but it hurt him more to see that Sofia seemed pleased by this*

*fact. Arcturus began to eat but was stopped by Mathew, who was intent on listening to the stranger's telling, his shucked corn and mushrooms coagulating in front of him. The stranger spoke as if out of the East church, waving hands in the air, unmarred by the splint on his fractured leg. He seemed to glow in the sun, orbited by the glittering daisies caught in a warm gust brought in from the valley. He started to weep and others did as well. Then he was finished and blessed their meal with a foreign chant, and everyone began to eat. The stranger disappeared into the Elder's house, and Sofia told Arcturus that she was personally asked to bring him his meal in secret.*

*As the days grew, the void around the stranger blossomed like a summer flower. He became harder to see from afar, appearing as a walking mist. The townsfolk started following him around, the women practically falling over the hems of their skirt. The boys were not threatened by this, which Arcturus found strange. They seemed to be honored to have their wives or sisters trailing the blur as he floated along the daisies and poesies, arms outstretched. Arcturus did not see Sofia in attendance, which concerned him more than seeing her trail along with the others like little ducks.*

*Later that night the Elder's had decided, upon the Stranger's recommendation, to fast until morning, and no dinner was prepared for the community in observance. Correlating with grumbling stomachs came frosty rain, and as the Stranger floated onto his pedestal, now adorned with ivy and specially carved wooden idols, thunder came spearing across the valley, igniting the sky with a divine wrath. The stranger spoke without invitation, illustrating attainable superhuman qualities, idyllic lands, powers stronger and more ascending than any god could muster. He screamed into the thunder ripping into the sky, a frothing mouth and eyes shining underneath, twisting his arms into odd angles. Even the most wizened of the Elders stared slack jawed, paralyzed at the glittering man, allowing themselves to be pelted by the cold rain. Eventually someone stood and voiced their opinion, declaring that dinner must be served, and listening to the stranger had gone too far. The stranger looked at the man, one of Arcturus's schoolmates, and pointed to him with a bony finger, and the sky listened. A strike of lightning ignited the sky and set the man ablaze, corrupting the air with the acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh. A charred skeleton crumbled where it stood, leaving only a black circle, a pedestal of his own, in between the chairs. Arcturus felt his spine tighten, for he was about to do the same thing. This stranger was no stranger.*

*No one moved to the remains of the man, instead they listened, pelted by the rage of nature, drowned atop the mountain, as the stranger swore and wept, evoked and promised. He preached for two hours, and slowly a golden glint in his eyes radiated like two invincible candle flames in an egg of mist. Arcturus wanted to say something about this but was too afraid. Sofia was too his right, and she was weeping, her tears joining the torrent crashing upon them. The stranger finished his sermon with the rain, gliding along the rainy grass into the Elder's house, of which the Elder had elected to sleep in the church out of respect for the Stranger's privacy.*

*Arcturus did not remember falling asleep that night. Arcturus did not remember waking up.*

*They were in the center of the glade, the Eastern church and Elder's houses to their right. They stood in front of the forest, the stalks of flowers brushing up against their thighs. Arcturus was next to brothers Mathew and John, each holding one of the many wooden totems set at the bottom of the stranger's pedestal. The Stranger floated in front of them, his leg no longer set in the splint, Sofia at his side. The Elders stood with their canes, each holding their own totem. The wives and sisters which had followed the Stranger previously now stood with their husbands, a warm smile on their face and tears of pride skittering down their cheek, leaving a salty slime trail baked in the midsummer sun. The stranger ran gnarled fingers through Sofia's hair and gazed upon his subjects with the glinting eyes. Onward, he beckoned, into the thick of the woods.*

*The spiders and beetles had tasted the premature death of Arcturus's village. As they made their exodus into the wildness, the bugs had begun to colonize right behind their backs.*

## Part 2 // Infernal Calculus

### 1.

"It hasn't grown much," Arc says before tilting his head back.

"But it hasn't lessened, either," Dudley drinks from his beer and rests an arm over the back of the sofa.

"Have you not heard of the water cycle?" Arc says, "How do you even know if this is the one?"

"Oh, we know."

"You mean you have a hunch."

Dudley flashes Arc a look that tells him he is nearing whatever boundary Dudley set for himself that day. He is a large man in a way that his skeleton is large, turning most love seats into a single occupancy. Carpeted legs stretched out cargo shorts. This is Dudley's pose today, not so much reclined but rather poured from a cement mixer. His beard rivals that of Gilgamesh (who does exist), and if he were older, he might make a good case for the existence of Santa Claus(who doesn't).

They look over the Great Flood, which in its current rendition is about two feet in every direction and a couple inches deep, Dudley's head hardly reflecting in what surface over the concrete floor it can achieve. They are surrounded by a tent of blue tarp in a rundown building in Elmhurst, Queens, someplace that is between contractors and, in the tussle with government building approval, remains deadlocked in its development (please note: not all of Arcturus's haunts are forgotten edifices, somehow sifted through physical space and imagination vis-à-vis government oversight or otherwise molasses like processes. It is just a coincidence). Arc considers the water, looks at the yellow orb as an overhead industrial light flashes on whatever



lichen or asbestos or whatever floats in there. There is a certain shine to it, Arc agrees, although he remains nonplussed.

Dudley, in his typical fashion, makes sure to convince Arc that this puddle is most definitely the Great Flood, pointing out odd shapes it takes when confronted with gusts of wind, how it has an oily shine to it like a rainbow. He says, “The flood that took Atlantis had a similar mark to it.”

“And the one Noah traversed?”

“Look,” Dudley takes out a crumbled gum wrapper and tosses it into the puddle, where it bobs and shifts a little to the right, “it’s *trying* to move it along. It’s obvious, Arc.”

“Well, if this is the Great Flood, you just littered in it.”

This was not the first nor the second puddle supposedly produced from the Great Flood’s metaphorical loins that Dudley has shown Arc. The first instance was, funnily enough, came from a true-blue kidnapping. Arc was deep in the mountains of Denver on a much-needed personal vacation after an unsuspectingly sexually charged struggle with the Samrians of the Ninth Order. He was finishing his joint atop a red tinted rock looking over to the sunset when a man, Dudley, Arc would later learn, started yapping away from behind him. Arc wanted to be alone, but Dudley did not get the hint, and eventually relenting, Arc and Dudley looked over the arid expanse of the mountains and Denver proper and started talking. When they were out, Dudley remarked that Arc seems to be the strongest hiker around to get to these parts, and flattered, Arc accepted the fresh joint from Dudley’s pocket. He woke up in an empty parking garage, tied up and next to cages of mewling cats, howling dogs, and frantic birds. All domestic animals. A group of twenty stood in a circle, heads bent inward. Through the massive gap in Dudley’s legs Arc could see these people praying to a coffee cup. The contents of said coffee cup were the aquatic rebirth of same Great Flood which had squashed the great city of Atlantis and allowed Noah to traverse across the world. The coffee, sort of on a tilt because of the ramp of the parking garage, would carry the Cult of the Genesis and a copy of each animal, which, from Arc’s assessment, seemed to be their pets. They needed a perfect male and female to populate the new world, according to the prophet, and Arc was the best of the bunch on that particular day (he was first strangely flattered by this fact but was later told by Dudley that Arc was the first idiot to accept drugs from a stranger), while the female was still pending. Arc hoped she would be pretty, or at least amusing, because it was going to be quite a ride. To Arc’s severe secondhand embarrassment, the prophet was incorrect in assuming this discarded Styrofoam Starbucks cup contained the seed of the Great Flood. In shame, the prophet sent Dudley to kill Arc for having seen too much, but at this point they were already friends and, to Dudley, Arc was sort of onboard with the whole idea as like a retainer or something. This, coupled with Arcturus’s reincarnating dilemma, made Arc a suitable candidate for whatever ark they were going to build, and Arc was planning on collecting on time waited with interest.

The second time Dudley had brought Arcturus to the site of the Great Flood was at a crumbling indoor tennis court in Minnesota. Arc was not kidnapped, but rather called, and throughout the flight there Arc was not sure who was employing who. The process was the same

as the parking garage; the Genesis clan set up tents, food stalls, even managed a cute little parade around an old Gatorade bottle that most certainly did not contain Gatorade. It was like heading to a convention. Unfortunately, the prophet was incorrect in his assessment here and everyone was sent home. Arc was more disappointed that he did not meet his “perfect other”, whom Dudley said came from Italy and spoke in a flighty, sing-songy accent.

Now they stand in an abandoned construction site, waiting for the end of the world. Shadows of the other members moved along the perimeter of the tarp, setting up places for the animals they wanted to take on their aquatic exodus, putting up makeshift grills.

“Just you wait,” Dudley looks down at the puddle. Then he adds: “Couldn’t get that Italian girl. Sorry man.”

This made Arc feel weird, but he chooses not to say anything. Instead, he says, “I’ll live.”

The tarp crinkles as a middle-aged woman walks into the area. She bows to the puddle and tells Dudley that the Great Flood will take some time to manifest, at least a week longer than the prophet anticipated. On the way out, she says, “Hi, Arc.”

“Hi Lana. How’s the kids.”

“James is getting quite good at math and Samantha learned a new song on her flute.”

“Next time I’ll bring my lute and we’ll have a little jam session, her and I. I have an old abacus for James too. It’s more of a novelty, really.”

Lana’s brows curve. “Next time?”

Dudley shoots Arc a look across the miniature Great Flood and Arc understands. “I mean, after all this is over, of course. In the new world.”

Lana relaxes. Like the others of the Cult of the Genesis, Lana gives Arc a wide berth in his lapses. Ever since the first kidnapping, it’s been understood that Arc would accompany them on the ark when, not if, it comes. Arc does not necessarily believe in their aquatic prophecies with as much verve as Dudley and the others, but he appreciates their collective energy. Somewhere on a lower floor a child lights a fire popper. The faint smell of artificial butter drifts through the concrete pillars and exposed beams of the halted construction building.

With Lana out of earshot Arc replaces the tarp and turns to Dudley. “So this is it, huh?”

Dudley looks at the puddle, chews on the inside of his jowls. He opens up another beer. “Actually, Arc, I think the Great Flood needs a little more time. Come back in a couple of days.”

## 2.

A couple of days turned into a couple of weeks, and Arc soon got tired of waiting on call for the great aquatic exodus. Every couple of days Dudley assured Arc that the Great Flood was coming, and Arc made sure to be ready to drop everything when it came. The dividends for the investment were much more than any of Arc’s gigs, and involved significantly less bodily harm. He was also promised to be partnered with the “perfect” female specimen, which was also a

motivation to continue taking the long, sometimes arduous trips to random locations only to stare at a Tupperware full of dirty hospital water or what have you. Not a lot of cults and cabals have sacrifices on call, and Arc considers his working relationship with The Cult of the Genesis to be an exception to his usual mode of business.

In the meantime, Arc has recovered from his psychological affliction from the bodily harm he had experienced with that bacterial god. Renewed, Arc makes his way through the boroughs on a sexual release with as much randomness to his conquests that pinning where he spends one night and then another would look like the corkboard of a conspiracy theorist, which, in Arc's opinion, were righter than they were wrong. Arc has a carnal quality to him when he gets into this mania. His desire to mate is akin to a biological drive described on an animal documentary; necessary and thoughtless. It is always after a bout of rejuvenation, and it was a feeling which infiltrates Arc's psyche like a scratch unreachable on your back without breaking your arms. In these times Arc could not walk down the street without the winds influencing his half-masted crotch. He sits awkwardly and eats ravenously, sometimes at once. When pornography was just still photos Arc had amassed a large collection of sepia tinted Victorian era debutantes in brassieres and pantyhose, erotic fashion that would blush to today's standards, and was able to sell it for a significant profit in a weird and sticky pornography flea market in Dayton, Ohio sometime in the 1950's. It was a hard relic to part with for Arc, for he had taken the pictures of the women personally and coveted them in his heart.

To be completely honest, the only addition to pornography that Arc could say was fruitful was having full color shots and videos, which, after having experienced the circuit during a stint in Los Angeles in the 70's, sort of put him off on the whole experience with this artificial quality. If someone asked Arcturus's opinion on the true paradigm shift relating to the consumption/dissemination of pornographic content, he would say the advent of the Internet and free porn. Although no one, in his several hundred years of life, has asked the question, much to his dismay. Fortunately, Arc had several hundred years of practice wooing partners, and he knows how to convert his ponderings of such questions into achieving bliss filled nights of one-night stands and sometimes more. Usually, they get fed up with Arc, who would never invite them over to his relic-filled warehouse for obvious reasons. Arc never takes offense. He also never gets attached, for it would only be around ten years of emotional connectivity before the other party realizes that Arc does not age, to mention his line of work. Arc accepted his ultimately lonely fate and figures that only until the sun explodes will he *really* feel the effects of such an existential crisis.

Thus, brings Arc in a nice apartment in East Village, a topless executive assistant curled in the crook of his arm. The apartment is nice, although somehow, she still needs a roommate in her early thirties. The proximity to the park is a plus, of course, and well worth it for someone who has about fifty or sixty years left, on average. Maybe even less if one of the many eldritch gods or nameless ones he has helped unleash onto the naïve world decides it is too good to be worshipped by its little cult and decides to tear the globe asunder with its might. This is unlikely, Arc realized. Eldritch forces seem to value percentiles as opposed to raw quantity, which, when one is dimly illuminated with rudimentary algebra and not the secrets of infernal geometry

hitherto unknown to man, seems adorably pathetic. This explains why certain demonic forces are localized to the perimeter of its worshipper's camp or town, often never in cities. It's those damn all-father eldritch types, those Cthullu assholes who get so powerful as to haunt a collective zeitgeist, and if *everyone* knows you, no one *believes* you. It is a strangely comforting paradox.

Arc dresses, careful not to wake his nightly companion, who hardly stirs as he buttons his pants and shuffles into his shoes. The morning sun spears into Arc's noggin like a fallen, vindictive icicle, and he recounts in a flash the multitude of tequila shots he put into his body when the sun was still sleeping. Getting home will be an adventure, Arc thinks, one which he does not have the mental fortitude to make.

Now armed with a greasy sandwich and seltzer, Arc traverses the centipede burrows of subway platforms, holding his temples with the rumbling of the tracks below him. He wonders if he would see Niet here, providing directions in her little fishbowl. It is unlikely, but Arc has experienced more intense coincidences before. The crowd of post-party New York City drums along the subway with crusted eyes or cups of coffee. Servers are putting on makeup or ties as they get ready for a brunch shift. A couple businessmen who had somehow managed the electric vibe of Greenwich Village on a Friday night look creepy and conniving at the edge of the platform, and Arc considers kicking them onto the electrified tracks. Maybe they would be turned into bacon to be consumed by the subway mice who occupy the subterranean transit with all sorts of mole men. This is a New York characteristic, by the way, as the subways in Paris host a different kind of cabal than that of London or Dubai.

Arc glances to his left and right, watches this pocket of the world in flux. He feels himself being watched, which is not an uncommon feeling in this part of city, especially one collectively recovering from a bar hopping carnival. Occasionally he could see one of the businessmen looking over their shoulder, all sharp chinned and high cheek boned, gargoyle like. Arc pretends not to notice, but when one of them broke rank Arc knows they were coming to him. He walked with perfect posture and even from the length of the cement platform and the beaming of the lights Arc can see a steely look permeating from his eyes. His suit is crisply pressed, and Arc imagines the sound effect of a crinkling paper bag. He stops abruptly in front of Arc.

“Do you believe in god?”

Arc flinches. He puts up his sandwich and seltzer equipped hands. “Not looking for anything.”

The man considers him, tilts his head. Arc feels himself being dissected. The businessman has a cleft chin. “Do you believe in information?”

“Listen, man,” Arc says, but he sees the other two businessmen at the far end of the platform, shoulder to shoulder and facing them like sentinels.

A train goes by, popping newspaper and discarded plastic cups along the ground, the boom from its velocity sending a gust of hot hair through the terminal.

The man continues, “Information is the way of the world, these days. And money. But do you know what they bring? Are they not artefacts of something bigger?”

Arc says nothing.

“Influence,” the man says, “influence is the force which drives our being. Although I’m sure you already know that.”

A wave of cold sweeps over Arcturus, locking in a sudden inflammation of vulnerability. He feels every fiber of him itching to move, a pulse of adrenaline so powerful as to make him forget his night of drinking. His colleagues stare from across the businessman’s shoulder, one hand in their pocket and another clutching a briefcase.

“What is your name?” The man says.

Arc blinks, collects himself, suddenly lost of breath. The train arrives, zooming past like a silver chariot, a colossal blur before coming into a halt. He diverts: “Your train is here.”

The man reabsorbs into his triad. Crossing the threshold into the train, he calls out, “They say a man’s best promotion is one he finds in another company. You’ve made it real hard for HR to find you, a thorn in their executive searches. But I see now that you exist, by mere coincidence. If you are who we think you are.”

“Who are you?” Arc yells, but the doors close. The businessmen all turn, broad shoulders forming a barrier of black along the window.

They keep their gaze at Arc as the train begins to move, and Arc feels their piercing gaze long after they depart, feels it even as he gets on the next train, like a branding which enflames when exposed to the sun.

It takes Arc an additional three hours to make it home, and most of the time was spent walking around side streets on foot two neighborhoods over. He was effectively reeking by the time he returned, caked with dried sweat and the psychic fumes of anxiety. He checks his artefact inventory and finds nothing amiss but still retrieves a knife for comfort. He paces his room, feeling inspected, prodded. Arc is very secure in his domain. He has mastered the art of existing in technical non-places, never once faltered in his routine to return home. Whomever these creepy men are, they must surely have been mistaken in their recognition.

Arc spins around and sees the calendar nailed the wall. He has a meeting with another client today anyway, one which, if they are serious about their funds and just as desperate for a sacrifice as Arc’s other clients, will be more than enthusiastic to spirit Arc away. Then he will return to Lyle to collect his check and go from there. Yes, a plan was enough to dispel the spookiness of the whole situation. Arc bathes with the kitchen knife within arm’s reach and he did not allow himself to ponder too long on the similarities of *Psycho* (which he saw in theatres, twice), as he packs and set out to the meeting place a couple of hours early.

There is a great string of bars in the Meatpacking district anyway.

Arc wakes to the burnt and oaky smell of caramel. Aggressive twinkling of bike bells echoed above him, muffled by the wall which props him up. Tufts of dust plop from the floorboards above, floating like little crystals in a ray of sunlight which beam all the way from the sun and bends into what Arcturus assumes is a basement. In typical kidnapping fashion, Arc is bound by the legs and wrists, although the gagging with a questionable, crusty dishrag leaves much to be desired. Arc wiggles, adjusts himself to better see the outside world from the basement window, which is half obscured by a curtain of tulips. The damp and sappy smell of must wafts into his nose. Arc wonders if they stuffed his mouth with the same rag which was used to knock him out in the first place. Arc draws his tongue back, careful not to taste the bristles of the dirty rag, his tongue glazing over scabby spots as he does so. Outside bikes zoomed past, their spoked wheels a blur of silver, bopping along cobblestoned streets. Tilted houses with macabre hooks poke into the sky. Arcturus has not been in Amsterdam in a long time.

The client today is the Children of Mani: creepy tiny people who wear pointed caps and lurk in between barrels of mead in dark basements much like this one. Arc has done his research. They are hunch backed, typically albino, with eyes incredibly sensitive to light. Arc figures they work graveyard shifts, claiming to be protected by Mani, but Arc believes that they preferred the night because they are an unsightly and unnerving bunch. He pictures two of them clad in sun blocking caps and cloaks, perhaps one standing on the shoulders of another, to swiftly bring the chloroform to Arc's lungs back in NYC. They are not supernatural creatures by any means, and one hundred percent human, but it makes Arc wonder if the Children of Mani have specific requirements for entry. Or what they do to the children who are not albino, physically stunted, and nearly blind.

There is a stirring in front of him. A multilimbed creature bulged in every direction from a wool sack, cinched with twine. It falls onto its side and swears in English.

"Hello?" Arc says to the sack, although it comes out as a muffle. His tongue taps the scabby sediment on the rag.

It lurches in response.

Arc wiggles onto his chest, sliding along the dusty cellar, the square of light occasionally interrupted by a passing bicycle. The bag thumps against the brick, slams into a barrel and knocks over a toolbox. The fall evokes plumes of dust from above and Arc halts. He maneuvers himself like an inchworm, at first struggling to the knot of the bag amidst the inhabitant's resistance, and then working the twine behind his back. Upon release he twists away, bathing himself in dust and squashing his nose against the floor.

The bag opens and a woman tumbles out, a shining welt on her upper brow. Long blonde hair nests with twigs and dirt reveal a sharp face fixed with displeasure. Emerald eyes gaze at Arc from across the cellar. Arc is relieved at first that he had not released a wolverine to maul him to death in beautiful Amsterdam, but upon closer examination he was not in any mood to console another sacrifice, for Arc has enough on his plate already. Due to the ambiguous nature of cult sacrifices, it is not entirely uncommon for Arc to be one of many victims for the event.

Some ceremonies call for entire caravans of victims to be culled, others call for each cult member to bring their own ward. Sometimes, although disappointingly rarely, it is a sexual ritual, and everyone just sort of has sex until the ones being sacrificed get ceremonially executed. It was often that Arc forgets the confidence which comes from complete rejuvenation, for the repeated maiming, torturing, and otherwise creative use of his body and soul heals over like emotional scar tissue. For those who are sacrificed along with him, they are being *really* sacrificed. Like dead. Nadda. Arc has seen it all; the gradual processing of events, the denial, the tears, and eventually the shattering of their fragile, singular life psyches as they come to face with new colors and sounds, new geometries beyond their feeble four-dimensional existence. In a way, Arc envies them. Death was like the joy of watching a good movie; you can do it again and again but the first time...the first time...

“Put me back,” she says, her voice gravely from the struggle, no doubt from the whole experience. A tendril of blood seeps from her lip.

Arc tries to speak but only gagged groans come out.

She plops herself back in the sack, pulls it over herself like a curtain. She murmurs, “It’s like you’re fucking deaf or something. God.”

“Hm?” Arc grunts just as one of the Children of Mani hobbles down the stairs, childishly one step at a time, almost like hopscotch. It’s kind of adorable.

In a squeaky voice he tells them to be patient for Old Man Moon, and to be grateful, and notices that the girl’s bag undone and reties it. He winks at Arc before leaving, which could mean that he was the one who kidnapped him, and they were in cahoots or something else. Arc hopes it is the former. Aside from an initial meeting with this group outside a fish and chips stand 15 years ago, they have corresponded with newspaper sectionals, cross word puzzle clues, and most recently Craigslist. He could very well Arc the one he was talking to all this time.

Arc returns his attention to the resacked girl, who has now ceased being a shapeless mass against the wall. Arc manages to ungag himself by pushing against the dirty rag with his tongue. It falls to his chest like a dirty tumble weed.

“Can you promise to stay calm like this until the night?”

“Can you promise to stop talking to me?”

Arc flinches. “Pardon?”

A finger pokes out from the top of the sack, needles its way to enlarge the opening. Her nose pops out as if under a cloak. “*Pardon*? Who says that? What century are you from?”

“That’s irrelevant,” Arc says, careful not to be offended. People acted strange when confronted with death. He pivots, “I understand you’re scared.”

She rolls her eyes. It is not visible, but Arc could *feel* it. “Some people over talk when their nervous, you know. Pot calling the kettle black.”

Arc uprights himself. “Are you finally coming to terms with your impending doom? These Children of Mani are no joke. I can understand why you’re being so abrasive.”

“Abrasive?” The girl scoffs, “Not abrasive. Just pragmatic. This might be the end of your life but I’ve promised a couple friends I’d get brunch with them in a couple of days and I intend to be back after all this. I was told this wouldn’t take any longer than a day.”

Ah, thinks Arc, *denial*. The first stage of grief. “Do you understand what’s going on here? We’re being sacrificed.”

She shrugs.

“Is that your response? A shrug?”

She shrugs again with more emphasis, two lumps on the burlap rising and falling.

“I’m coming back tomorrow,” she says, then she relents, “but I understand why you’ve taken a caretaker’s stance on this. When people are afraid, they sometimes want to overhelp. It’s an anxiety thing.”

Arc holds back a chuckle, watching this poor, beaten girl transition from *denial* to *bargaining* within the passing of the one bicycle chime. “Reincarnation from your God. Right.”

The girl looks at him. “Sure. Is this conversation over?”

Arc wants to end this too, but now his curiosity is peaked. He gestures in the best way he can to the cuts on her brows and cheeks. “They really did a number on you.”

“You got the chloroform treatment, I see.”

“Somehow less unpleasant than getting beaten up.”

“You’ve got to put up a struggle.”

“They just came up from behind me.”

“The way you’re talking sounds like you wanted to be kidnapped.”

“What? No.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t ‘whatever’ me.”

“Fine.”



Arc grits his teeth. He has encountered many people at death's doorstep over the years, but something about how this girl processes grief is particularly grating. He wants to retort but one of the tiny Children skips down the steps. Arc bends his neck and braves through the initial disgust of diving tongue first into that crusty tumbleweed of a dishrag. The chemical fumes make him feel a little high. The girl retreats into her bag and cinches the top from inside, and Arc thinks that the Children of Mani have little fingers so their tying must not be too good to start with. The cultist looks at them with leering, reptilian eyes, then he looks out to the window, prays in a special language, and returns to the first floor.

Arc wants to continue the conversation out of masochistic curiosity and for some petty reason decides he wants to annoy this girl's last few hours of life before all laws of her world are shattered and her psyche falls in pieces like a dropped porcelain cup. Instead, he stares at the bag, consigns to silence, satisfies himself with the last word, like symbolically. He rides this high long enough for the moon to ascend from the cosmic horizon, the lights beaming through the window transforming from a brilliant yellow to a calming purple and eventually a starry black.

The ceremony commences in Nord, somewhere in an abandoned office building. It takes a ferry to get there followed by a short car ride to the flatlands far away from the concentric ring that is the Amsterdam City Center. The sky is cloudy and looks like paint swaths, dotted with glistening yellow stars. The moon is full and bright, which of course is no coincidence for the resurrection of Old Man Moon. These types of events take place in abandoned houses or office buildings when the ceremony is in an urban locale. If the city has no significant underground system, like New York City's subway veins or the Parisian catacombs, cabals like the Children of Mani are forced to make do with the bureaucratic invisibility much in the same vein that Arc commissioned his warehouse loft in Brooklyn. The cinches on Arc's wrist cut deep and he is very thirsty, but the distance from his home and the potential prying fingers of those creepy suited men are a price he'd gladly pay twice over.

The bag is upended and the girl tumbles out, swearing upon impact. The person keeps moving as he does so, like throwing away trash. The Children are in the middle of a conference room, adorning the broke windows with special jewels, tracing glittering runes on the graffiti scarred walls with a kind of soapy lichen. Wilted cubicle dividers create a mold smelling maze, crumbled papers of discarded chip bags and sticky notes barnacle on corners and pillars.

Arc turns to the girl. "Pleasure to see you here."

The girl scoffs. "You've got a strange way of processing grief."

"I could say the same," Arc says. Then: "What's your name?"

The girl considers this. "Why."

"I don't know. Human decency."

"Lucia."

“Arcturus. Nice to meet you.”

“Arcturus, what century *are* you from?”

“Not relevant. Are you deaf or something? God.”

Lucia looks away and attempts to shuffle some distance between them but fails at making any real progress. Then she looks through the broken window, the moon shining through the jagged teeth. “Death comes quicker than you think, you know. The fear and pain are temporary.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about death,” Arc says, “something tells me your karma isn’t too good, but I hope it is.”

Lucia shoots him a look. “Death is an old friend, thanks for asking.”

“I’ve never met Death.”

“Now I’m thinking *you* believe in reincarnation. Whatever works for you.”

Arc shakes his head. “Something like that, maybe.”

Several pairs of arms cluster around Arc and Lucia, lifting them up. Their small stature is gnomish, their bent backs putting even the tallest of them at Arc’s elbow. They walk past the cubicles, mottled calendars, past a somehow localized noxious fume of a rotten ham sandwich. The conference room has adopted a verdant, ghastly glow, like the shimmering of sunlight through water. The runes along the wall are not of a familiar language to Arc, but he thinks they are pretty. Lucia starts to whimper and resist, prompting one of the Children to give her a hearty shrug forward so that she is adjacent to Arcturus.

“Are you faking it?” Arc whispers.

Lucia elbows him. “Faking it? We’re about to die.”

Arc feels the urge to vomit. Never had he seen someone so lackadaisical when faced with death. “For some of us.”

Lucia weeps, “I think I’m going to miss brunch if we keep walking this slow.”

The Children of Mani bring Arc and Lucia into the conference room and lay them on the octagonal table. They tie them both down with twine and Arc starts to struggle, as per what everyone is expecting. His grunts and swears are louder and more pronounced than Lucia’s, although why Arc decides to enter a competition of grief with this difficult woman is hard to place. He feels her watching him and he feels supremely performative, the magic of genuine acting unveiled and laid to bare. Lucia’s crying turns girlish and hysterical, dominating Arc’s grunts. Arc counters by twisting into his binds and cursing as the razors sliced into his skin.

Lucia watched him, adjacent on the table like two lovers in bed, bound as one. She bangs her head on the table as if undergone convulsions. She bites her tongue and drools out frothy blood.

Arc screams, “Are you trying to die better than me?”

“Silence!” One of the Children shouts into the room. Had Arc not been infuriated by Lucia’s display he might have found the authoritarian tone in the squeaky voice a little comical.

The Children hold hands and face the open window. The moon glares at them from the cosmos, unblinking, a giant eye. The green runes glow as they chant and stomp in rhythm on the ground.

In unison, they shout: “Oh Mani, Old Man Moon, God of Mondays. Wake from your slumber. Live amongst your Children and defile your solar sister. We rejoice! We rejoice!”

“Ah, Mondays,” Lucia whispers.

“What are you, Garfield?”

Lucia scans Arc with her good eye. “Looks like one of us likes lasagna.”

The conference room begins to shake. The sound of ripping paper encircles the room. A symphony of whistling rockets from the wriggling lichen, joining in the ceremonial prayer. Beyond broken glass and millions of miles from the conference room, the moon turns a furious yellow.

Lucia leans back, watches as the fabric of her reality distorts at first in the corner of the room and then manifests in ephemeral haze. She looks bored. Doesn’t she see how lucky she is to be dead and done with it? And that’s not even considering the optimistic viewpoint of being sacrificed for the awakening of an eldritch god.

A cluster of mottled lichen dotted with tulips and roses form in the front of the room, dominating the abandoned whiteboard like slimy medical gauze. The lichen wiggles with a thousand fingers, each tendril exuding a moldy, citrusy mist. A swarm of botflies hatched from the wall, twirling into their own hive-minded nebula. The lichen squishes and throttles along the wall, wriggling in an organized mass, forming an arc of florescent fauna. Arc witnesses a gnarled finger, scabbed and cragged, worm its way through the viscous barrier. This elicits an eruption of ecstasy from the cloaked children, who set about revealing stakes from their cloaks and come upon Arc and Lucia. They carve runes into their exposed flesh, digging deep with splintery, damp wood. The lacerations turn green, glowing in tandem with the ephemeral moss to a collective area of light blue and emerald luminescence. This hurts Arc now and he is positive that Lucia’s pain is genuine, too.

Arc’s arms pulse and explode. Grey pustules expand from his open wounds, bursting into a cluster of spores and then into mushrooms spotted with his own coagulate. The stalks finger

into his flesh, gnaw at his bones, sapping the marrow. The botflies dance above the conference table, and in between the cluster of Children carving into his flesh, the steady parabolic rise and fall of their wooden stakes, Arc sees the needling finger burst through the lichen film like a popped balloon, which makes Arc feel a little queasy moreover. A palm, a mottled wrist, then the crook of an elbow with three joints bends at odd, visibly discomfoting angles. Its grey flesh is liver spotted with mushrooms, much like ones which itch in between Arc's knuckles and along his ribs.

Lucia says, "Screw the mimosa. Shots of vodka. This sucks."

Arcturus has a revelation, unrelated to the bearded man who has forced himself from the lichen canal in the wall, gnawing on his beard occupied with twigs, nuts, and leaves. Lucia's denial is comforting, in a sense. It makes this whole experience a little more pleasant, especially since the ruby spotted mushrooms with its ebon gills are getting larger and starting to populate his thighs, neck, and shoulders.

Mani now gazes upon his acolytes, the god of the Moon, and apparent namesake of Monday. He is fully freed and sticky from the mossy placenta, flexing his webbed fingers. Mushrooms and tulips pulse on his naked, half goat body as if they breathed with him. Mad eyes illuminate the room as if the moon itself is there. He roars in a foreign tongue, shouting backwards curses and blessings. The Children fall to their knees.

Arc watches a giant mushroom burst from his chest, the flaps of his skin arcing outward like a blooming flower. He sees Lucia is nonplussed, and only reacts as a giant tulip rises from her abdomen. She even gets to die first, Arc thinks, and his last thought is to not take it personality that she gets a flower and he a mushroom.

#### 4.

To Arcturus's relief, there are no suited men waiting outside of his home when he returned. This did not sway his steadfast approach to entering the warehouse vis-à-vis a precarious and jaunty shuffle up rusted drainpipes. He shimmies through the storm walls and dropped into the lofted kitchenette area (which, after all these years, still has the plastic feel of an employee break room) and grabs a screwdriver he was lucky to have kept on the counter after he repaired a rickety cabinet. Arc checks his artefacts and opens all the closets. Arc expects against his better nature that he would be jumped by the suit men, held down and prodded with staplers and those pretentious pens with refillable ink cartridges. It takes Arc a whole hour before he decides to settle down with a glass of much needed scotch.

Arc knows he has begun to take reincarnation for granted several decades ago. Just there, lurking at the crest of his psychological abyss, is the existential encroachment of perpetual reincarnation, of which Arc is not even sure the parameters. Once, he was of the belief that he had a limited number of reincarnating opportunities, as if the Red King has a finite number of quarters for the arcade game that is Arc's life. Arc has developed a hedonist practice of life

which not only nulls the cosmic system shocks but unfortunately, in the right circumstances, allows a window of opportunity for them to reenter. This glass of scotch, the ice now melting in Arc's warm hands, picks at such a symbolic scab. Which is why he gets a second glass, and this quite does the job.

Dudley invited him to brunch, and Arc realizes that it was just mid-morning. As a precaution, he brings new pairs of clothes and some snacks in a bag just in case the Great Flood is going to spirit them away into a wetter, nautical faring future. Arc makes this a best practice sort of deal, even though he did not believe that the Great Flood's water is going to drop today. It also shows that he still took Dudley and his clan seriously, which helps with relations along the way. And besides, if Arc encounters any strange men on the subway again, he can make his way left instead of right and get their pointed noses away from his scent.

Arc is not sure what the manifestation of *brunch* is supposed to look like, or what any personification of a mealtime was sans Jesus and his Last Supper. However, he is certain that Dudley stands in stark contrast to the posh brunch of New York City, antagonizing any passer byes of what they might have seen in shows or television and otherwise their perception of high society snooty Manhattan types. Dudley wears cargo shorts and a bubbly fisherman's vest, which is more fitting than one would assume from the outside looking in. In the waking, public world, Dudley is a coffee roaster, and when not wafted with the smell of chemicals, exhaust, or the stingy odor of damp cement, he exudes a perpetual whisper of burnt coffee cherries. Before him is a half-finished beer and an americano. Arc sits down and orders the same, setting down the bag adjacent to him.

"You were wise to bring that," Dudley says, pointing with a sausage-like finger, "any day now. The puddle grew."

"Hey," Arc says, aware that he needed to ask for his own conscious, "no one followed you here, right?"

"You alright?"

"Seriously Dudley, no one in suits?"

"No. I'm not that popular."

"Okay."

"Stop looking around, you're weirding me out."

Arc stares at Dudley across the table. Then he deflates. "You're right. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night."

“Me neither,” Dudley says, wiping a pebble of froth from his mustache, “I worked all day and then went to the Great Flood. Took a ruler to it. Three inches in nine hours. It’s really coming, Arc.”

Arc sighs, takes a swig of his beer to rival the level of Dudley’s. “God, do I hope so.”

Arc looks out to the street, where the cobblestoned road weaves in dangerous angles even for the horse carriages that once progressed along the path. Clusters of tourists coalesce with buskers and street artists. Pizza joints nestles next to pubs that never seem to close. One of NYU’s dorms is either up or down the street, bringing in their own trove of youthful, bright-eyed revolutionaries into the art and film world. It is all really inspiring to Arc, who knows he lacks that inner fire that propels all these folks to even get out of bed.

Arc now traces Dudley’s line of sight and watches a gaggle of long legged, graceful swans of women moving like a hivemind along the street. Beautiful girls, bright eyes, perfect teeth, impervious to the assessing glares of passersby. They go to a restaurant and are moved outside in such swiftness that Arc is hard pressed to be convinced that they were not given priority seating on emittance of beauty alone.

“It’s hard, you know, that we can’t take *everyone* on the ship. Arranged marriages in the community and all,” Dudley says more to himself.

“Wait,” Arc says, “you all inter-breed?”

“I wouldn’t call it that, gosh. And besides it won’t happen to you. We are pairing you up.”

“Wait,” Arc says, leaning over in his seat.

“Trust me, the last girl was really beautiful. We’ll do you right, Arc.”

“No wait,” Arc stands up, “I know that girl. Stay here.”

It was the girl. The one in Amsterdam with the split lip and the attitude problem. Although she has no split lip now. Here, bathed in midmorning sun and injected with the optimism of a limitless future, she pulls back her hair with a violet clip, reveals a toothy smile, laughs a joke in a way that reminds Arcturus of anti-depressant commercials, although he is not sure if it’s the before or after.

He marches toward her, feet scraping against the cobblestones, an interrupted record skipping over Dudley’s calls. Arc’s shadow cast over the table of the girls before he approaches, and he realizes upon their reactions he has come with too much intent. Suddenly all eyes are on him, the full force of sudden attention. Arcturus has been maimed in a matter of ways, even eaten his own eyeball, and literally six months ago had his genitals tossed as ritual for a bacterial god. Yet there is something in being judged by a cluster of beautiful girls who know they are better

than you that strikes a particular pressure point in one's soul. Arc persists, using his existential crisis of potential immortality as a buoy to armor himself that at least his youth will not falter.

Arc points to Lucia. "You're really getting brunch."

She looks at herself and then her friends, who are beginning to take out their phones. Then she stammers, uncomfortable, "Yes."

"Can we help you?" One of her friends asks.

Arc ignores her. He gestures to Lucia, "You. I saw you."

"Do you know this man, Lucia?" Another of the girls says. Arc feels the spearing eyes of other diners who have caught attention.

"Lucia," Arc repeats, "in Amsterdam. Small world."

Lucia takes the rim of the mimosa to her lips. A warm breeze ruffles the hem of her dress. Underneath her sunglasses she stares Arcturus up and down with such intensity that he can feel it, like tiny spiders.

"If," she says, "we had met, wouldn't you think I would recognize you?"

It is a sentence, not a question. It does not take Arc long to remember why he does not like this girl and had the circumstance of this coincidence not been so extravagant he would pass by Lucia and her willowy friends without a second thought.

Arc pulls back, "You're like me."

"Like you how?"

One of the waiters comes by with a cloth draped over a tucked arm. He asks the girls if Arc is bothering them, but Arc waves him away. The periphery of his vision fades into black, dispelling the worried stares of the other tables, the geospatial sensitivity to passersby who had stopped to watch the predicament from afar. Somewhere Dudley watches, chomping on his cleft nails.

"We met last week," Arc asserts.

Lucia scoffs, "Not in Amsterdam we didn't. Sir, you are bothering us."

The waiter steps in front of Arc, and his world reopens now to the clusters of bystanders to his left and right, the shop keep in the adjacent record store peeking out from the stoop. Dudley appears before him, tugging at his elbow.

Arc feels alone and embarrassed. He shakes himself to put himself back to reality, feel the stones under his feet. He apologizes and follows Dudley down the street and turns a corner.

“What happened back there?” He asks.

Arc resists holding himself. “Thought I recognized someone.”

“I think you were wrong, man.”

“You think, Dudley?” Arc says, then apologizes for being brash.

They head into a pub and Arc orders a couple of drinks for them. He feels her presence a street over. Lucia. No way he was incorrect. He can see the flash of recognition in her eye, even though she masked it so perfectly. Could Arcturus have been wrong? He has seen more faces in a month than most people have in a lifetime. There is the genetic probability that people would look somewhat similar, even going so far with this phenomenon that Arc is certain he had bedded an Italian musician’s grandmother in Venice eighty years ago, although it turns out he had, by coincidence. Maybe this Lucia he had met truly was dead and had a strange way to go about being sacrificed to the Dutch manifestation of the Moon? Maybe her body is now mulch for the giant flower which resides in her, covered in writhing lichen? Maybe that creepy Old Man Moon, with his moss scabbed floppy penis, has different intentions with both of their spored bodies, which would be unfortunate. Still, the way she looked at him with such confusion and disgust was not unlike how she looked at him in the cellar underneath the pub. The way she talked, so sharp as if defaulted on “offend-mode”, was not unlike how they conversed in that abandoned office block.

But then again, maybe not.

All is well until Arc leaves Dudley in the station (the Great Flood was uptown, in Queens) and he is left to his own thoughts. Hands tucked into a light jacket, he fumbled a coin in one hand to calm his nerves and a switchblade in the other. Surrounded by the moving currents of sweaty people, antsy from waiting underground for silver slugs to take them miles away, Arc feels alone. His experience with the suited men made the claustrophobic subways places to be ambushed, concrete crab traps that will leave him cornered. And it is New York City. People help pretty girls at brunch, not disheveled men cornered by peacoat and top hat donning businessmen. Arc keeps looking over his shoulder, sidestepping in a sort of one-person ballet routine until he gets on the subway. He avoids the first couple of cars because he sees people getting home from work and cannot trust anyone with a briefcase. Then hunches in the corner and leers at everyone like an angry owl as the subway accelerated southbound to Brooklyn.

Arc feels embarrassed that he has accosted those girls. Not that it would matter in the long run of things, but if he had not shame then what bastions of self-respect would falter next in his quasi-immortal life? The human psyche is designed for ruin, a planned obsolescence from god, if you believe in that nonsense. Human morality, on the other hand, is a slippery slope. But still, but yet, Arc cannot shake the electricity which coursed through him upon seeing this girl. The



possibility of it being the girl from Amsterdam is incredible enough by a statistical standpoint. What bothers Arc more is that if she is here, having brunch with her friends, then maybe Arcturus is not the only one to hold the burden of reincarnation.

The realization is so jarring that Arc pees himself a little bit.

## 5.

Lucia, for all the pictures the girl seems to take of herself, is strangely void of social media. She is nothing short of a phantasm, not that Arcturus was any adept at navigating digital waters himself. Arc makes sure not to follow the trends of social media as it rose its terrific and terrible ubiquity. There is something decidedly pessimistic about technology that Arc has adopted over the years. It started with the transition of gas lanterns to bulbs carried forth from the horse-carriage to automobile. The change frightened him then and it does now with social media and the ambiguous sounding “Internet of Things”. Like others, he was initially enthralled with instant messaging in the molasses crawl of dial-up. Phones have come a long way, too, transfiguring into all shapes and sizes. But Arc is suspicious of them, and he knows it has to do with his line of work in this ever-shifting gig economy. He doesn’t prefer photographs, either, or now with social media it is almost impossible not to be in the background somewhere, a past version of yourself immortalized in millions of other people’s family vacations, selfies, etc.

There are groups in the world that believe that people like Arc exist. They fall in line with ghost tour guides, and people who go into the woods to take pictures of sasquatches (which exist). It started with a sepia photograph with Arc and some drinking buddies in a saloon about 100 years ago. Arc had forgotten he had taken those pictures until it was shown to him, along with the other photographs accumulated through scavengers rummaging through antique shops and somehow, through an impressive degree of cross referencing, decided that Arc is the man in all the photographs, sometimes half obscured, others in full view. An immortal, they called him, ganging up on him in a strange city. It was the first time he had been confronted with pitchforks and torches since Salem. Arc did not have the time to explain that he was not immortal, but a reincarnate. There were nuances, rules. The Red King made this so, cursed him with a faux mortality. Had these men not regained their senses, Arc would not have rejuvenated in a Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey, which then was untilled lands. Sometimes, the scariest people are not the secret cultists, cabals, and societies, contrary to what the horror movies might say. At least you know what they want.

Arc pauses on his venture to find Lucia. If she is a reincarnate, she would not be on social media either. If she existed at all. Her presence taps on Arc’s consciousness like a leaky faucet. Arc has gone hundreds of years under the assumption that he is one of a kind, the unfortunate acolyte of a hungry, eldritch force. Searching for Lucia only served to remind Arc how lonely he is in this world.

He thinks of getting high and listening to a record, but the silence in the warehouse seemed a more apt environment for his sulking. He fumbles for his wallet, looking for something

else to do with his hands. He readjusts his cash and guts the portfolio of any membership buy-10-get-1 coffee cards from places he had not lived in for decades. A light blue note slips out. It is Niet's phone number, and Arc decides to ring her before thinking too much of it.

\*\*\*

They meet at Domino Park. The Manhattan Bridge floats along the water, an illuminated caterpillar skating across. The sounds of the water underneath the docks push against the pillars, the calm thrush of the waves trailing the midevening ferries. The water brings in a salty, briny air to the warm night. Behind him the ruins of the Domino Sugar factory loom, sulking and defeated. It is being turned into a shopping mall, this pillar of economic activity in the creation of Williamsburg, and the building knew it.

Niet glitters underneath the purple sky. Orange eyes exude a confidence that makes Arc wonder if fire can be captured. Her lithe body looks like a willow tree; arms held delicately in front of her. Inverted pyramids dangle from her ear. Arc's heart flutters, which is a feeling that he has not experienced in some time. Then he realizes that the last time Niet has seen Arc he was writhing in pain, tears and snot and blood exiting from all orifices, even some that are not meant to be orifices. In a strange way, she has also seen him naked. She also drugged him, which Arc remembers now with blunt clarity, but in this celestial light he forgives her for that.

"Nice seeing you in the open," she says, "not in a closet."

"Nice seeing you in the open too," he says, "not in a subway clerk box."

They start walking down the promenade, towards the direction of the Manhattan Bridge. "Why did you pick this place to meet?"

Arc shrugs. "I like it."

She gestured to the deflated Domino Sugar Factory, "That building is being suffocated by this new development."

"You think? I always thought this park was an improvement."

"For some, I suppose," Niet says, still looking up, "pretty soon, it'll stop looking like its old self, so far gone into another form."

Arc chuckles, "Didn't know you were such a preservationist."

Niet says, "I believe in the old world. There is power in old things. Have you ever heard of the Ship of Theseus?"

"I have not," Arc says.

They turn a corner into the dark awning of the bridge. Cars zoom overhead. A briny gust blows into the avenue.

“One day, Theseus the great warrior needed to repair his ship. He loved his ship. He had taken it to war and back, conquered lands with it. Made love inside it. Built brotherhood underneath its sails with blisters on his hands. It was just a small repair, one plank needed to be replaced.”

“Okay.”

“And things went well. A couple months later, another plank needed to be replaced. Then another. Then another. Soon, every part of his ship, his pride and joy, had been replaced, down to the last piece of cloth, the last splinter. So now his vessel is built from completely new parts, and Theseus asks himself, is this a new ship, or his old one?”

“It can’t be both?”

“Perhaps.”

“I would ask Theseus at what point did he stop thinking that it was one ship and not the other. At what point did the identity of the ship change? After the first replacement, the second?”

“So you’re quantifying it?”

“Only if Theseus is materialistic.”

“Good answer, Arcturus.”

“Arc. Call me Arc, Rosanne.”

“Call me Niet.”

“Alright, then,” Arc says.

They walk to a bar that Arc sort of had in mind but pretended was on the way, and Arc suspects Niet knew this was a plan. He orders an old fashioned and she follows suit, which impresses Arc. He has been drinking old fashioned since they were not old fashioned, and always thought one could tell a lot by someone from how they drink.

Arc realizes halfway through their second round that he likes Niet much more than he thought he would, and then, staring into her orange eyes against a backdrop of famous people in black and white pictures, realizes that he would not have called her if he wanted a simple sexual release. Not once did their conversation orbit around their secret endeavors and organizations. She does not ask Arc how he comes back to life, and Arc skirts on the topic of occupation by asking how what it was like working for the MTA.

“As fun as you would expect,” she says, “you get sort of tired people watching after a while.”

“But the benefits must be good,”

Niet shrugs, “Helped me get away for reasons I think we both know. But now that a new day is here, I’m proud to say I’ve put in my two weeks.”

“Surprising,” Arc says, crossing his arms, conscious of keeping their insinuations as nothing more.

“Thanks to you, of course.”

“No, surprising that you are still putting in two weeks.”

“I’m a professional gal,” she says, downing the rest of her drink in a single gulp.

Niet returns with their third round and they sip their drinks underneath the moody red light over the booth. Arc, ever conscious not to talk about the commonality between them, was unable to resist if he would be needed for another ritual if there ever was one. Niet flinches.

“No no,” Arc says, “I didn’t mean to ruin this date with work talk.”

Niet smiles, “Ah, so it’s a date.”

“You’re the one who gave me your number, you know.”

They locked eyes and Arc felt his groins stirring. The tension is palpable, and people walk around them as if they generate a forcefield.

Then she says, “Alright, I’ve had a fun night, Arc. I think it’s time for this soon-to-no-longer be MTA gal to get some sleep. I’ll have to be in a fishbowl in Times Square when the sun is still down.”

Arc feels her tone, knows it was genuine, “I feel like that’s the worst stop to manage.”

Niet grimaces. “It’s definitely the most work.”

He walks her out and she slips her arm around his arm, allowing Arc to pull her close. Her triangle earrings jingle in the night, glinting in the neon signs of the bars as they returned their way underneath the Manhattan Bridge and pivot a corner, Pac-Man style, onto 8<sup>th</sup> Ave for the subway. For someone else Arc might have tried to rush this, but Niet is special. She intimidates him in a healthy way that Arc realizes is what he needs. He also knows that he would not ruin whatever friction is rubbed between them with a bold pass at her. In a breeze of thoughts that has developed into a tempest in his head, he decides that he does not want Niet as a friend. It will be too difficult for him.

“Can I see you again?” Arc says, afraid to lean in for a kiss.

Niet kisses him on the cheek and Arcturus feels electricity. She pulls back and he can feel the presence of her lips, a cakey impression of her lipstick. She says to call her in two weeks and disappears into the subterranean rush of the subway, the Saturday night crowd enveloping her like a tongue. Arc stands there staring at the corner posts of the subway for several minutes, breathing to calm himself from the excitement of meeting someone as strikingly intelligence, snarky, and beautiful as Niet. The last time Arc felt this vibrant pulse of emotion was many years ago, in a Parisian flat.

In that moment Arc feels a pang of guilt for a woman long dead. He thinks of Niet, whose association with a primordial deity probably brings some boons in the mortality department, and still wonders many years would it take for her to grow tired of his unlimited youthfulness, his long stretches of absence? Not to mention his line of work directly contradicted her own belief values. Still, what is the point of anything if it will all end the heat death of the universe? Arc needs to hold onto something and learned from reading Antionette’s obituary decades after his sudden departure that the most coveted rocket fuel to the human experience is love, in all its shapes and forms.

And Arcturus hates that he believes this.

6.

*The Red King sits bored in the throne room, a skeletal fist propping up a jaw permanently fixed into a grimace of disappointment. The crown, which has long calcified on his scalp and fused into his head like an extended bone, pokes from the hood with little joints, like fabric draped over a dead tarantula. Arcturus, bound in time and beaten to near blindness, is forced into a kneel before him. The throne room is incredibly tall, higher than the Eastern Church in his village, and Arcturus does not know if the ruptured blood cells in his shattered cheek bone are blurring his vision to the point where he cannot see the ceiling, which rises along mile length curtains the color of the sun into an infinite expanse.*

*It was there, beaten and tossed in front of the Red King’s plated knees, that Arcturus had broken. It was not the twisted joints, nor the nightly flailing. He had gotten used to his own screams of pain and terror as he had his own breathing, and a calm heartbeat was a foreign, exalting experience for him. He had been burned for the first time a couple weeks ago, chains against an anvil with strange runes above a molten pot of writhing magma snakes. He felt needles slowly delivered into his eyes, pushed by a humanoid creature, ungodly in smell, who had no features save for a smooth head and a gaping mouth with shark teeth. The creature spoke in clatters and clicks, like an insect, and pushed tiny obelisk splinters into his corneas. The next day he was eaten alive by ants. Arcturus had only ever cried from pain, the tears stinging the exposed muscle on his cheeks.*

*Still, Arcturus remained steadfast, shouting prayers of protection and when his teeth were shoved down his throat and his mouth filled with angry cicadas. This was enough to armor him*

*against this hellscape, with its ornate walls that pulse with blood occasionally beating with an organic membrane, as if the Red King's keep were a living being, all shimmering with saliva with balustrades and chandeliers rusted to look like necrotic teeth.*

*The chittering creature was a nightmare, one which manifested from the poppy fields that his community had been led from. Yet Arcturus had never felt so alone, never felt so possibly singular in this universe, for not even death could save him from this physical agony, and this hurt Arcturus the most. He had witnessed the clacking humanoid poke and prod his friends and family, had personally witnessed the multi-limbed and bladed creature, all smooth flesh, lean back and reveal a lower half of a scorpion with an outer shell as black as ebon, watched it exchange the organs of brothers Mathew and John. Beautiful Beth, the town's best seamstress who was pregnant with Richard's seed, had been forced to excavate the child from herself as the fleshy creature looked on, salivating from its many toothed mouth into her insides, on the stillborn baby. It took the limp child, red and squishy, examined it, and tossed it into the pit of fire. Arcturus watches the fetid, impy babe be consumed by the magma snakes that heated the anvil in which he rest. The baby did not even scream, and Arcturus felt jealous of it for its quick release from this pain. This is what he had been brought to, Arcturus realized, and yet he still thought his prayers and endured the pain, waiting for the calm before death and whatever form of life was injected into his veins soon after.*

*Arcturus lost time in this pit, his skin healed anew each time it melted and shredded. But the mind is stronger than the body. Soon the chains which linked him to the anvil were broken and the skittering monster dragged Arc through the ornate halls of the keep. In the distance he caught glimpses of volcanos and birds larger than any clouds he had ever seen. The creature tossed Arcturus into the throne room, and he knew that his psyche could not handle what was next. He saw Sofia, his sweet sister, wrapped in one of the many blood-colored drapes lining the infinitely high throne room. She rose above the chair, and from this distance Arc saw her once crisp and light brown hair cut short. She wore a pointed cap.*

*The Red King stood fourteen feet, and even sitting down dominated the room with his thick armor carved from ruby and jade. He stared at Arcturus with hollow eyes, one arm rested on a gauntleted fist, another grasping a spear. Arcturus was allowed the stand, and he shambled over, hearing the great door closed by the scorpion creature. He shambled on, his legs no longer smashed from yesterday's tools but simply unfamiliar with walking. He kept his eyes on Sofia, who hung limp, cocooned by the drape, one breast exposed. She looked carved from stone. The triangle that he had assumed was a cap was the tip of the spear. She was a banister, impaled on the giant weapon like an ornament. Up close he saw dried scabs of blood and coagulate down her brows. Her eyes lolled listlessly, void of all the summer sun which he had so associated with her.*

*"In pain, we grow," the Red King says, his mouth unmoving but his voice booming from above.*

*Arcurus felt every fiber of his being turn to glass and shatter. Something twisted inside him, unnamable, ethereal. He had seen her grow and turn into the beautiful woman she was destined to be. Her compassion and serenity floated through the village with as much grace as winds rippling against poppy seed fields. She did not deserve this.*

*Arc fell to his knees and started to weep. The knees of the Red King loomed over him like two tombstones. Sofia's feet dangled from the spear at the edge of his vision.*

*"There are worlds beyond that of which you know," The Red King says, again in his booming voice. It sounds like a storm front coming from the coast, the ripple of tectonic plates, hurricanes on the updraft, plagues of cicadas down the hill. All the horror that has befallen the world and all the horror that will continue.*

*Arc wept, buried his head in his palms. He looked up to the Red King, glimpsed at his sister. In this moment, a line of fire shot through his wounded soul, and he felt jealousy, just as he had with Beth's fire consumed babe. He wanted to die so bad. Death was what he dreamed of every night, disappointed it had not come every waking moment. He wanted to join the others in the eternal sleep. This is what broke Arc, and he knew it.*

*"Please," Arcurus says, "please let me die."*

*"Your time is not to come. I have chosen you."*

*"No, I want to die."*

*"You have not earned this choice. You have been chosen to be a vessel."*

*Arc stared into the Red King's hollowed eyes, saw the heat death of the universe and did not comprehend what any of this meant. For some reason, the Red King looked sad and tired, and strangely Arcurus felt a growing sense of pity for him, even though he had orchestrated the torment of every fabric of Arcurus's being.*

*The Red King says, "My form in this world needs rest. I hunger for mana."*

*"Mana?"*

*The Red King shuffles the spear. Sofia's limp body dangles like a slain rabbit. "There is no fealty nor genealogy in my dimension. Only currency. I am a merchant king, ascended at first by favor and charm, then by blood, and now I require my return on investments to sustain my form."*

*"I do not understand," Arcurus says.*

*"Give your body and soul to the resurrection of primordial beasts, intelligent ethereal designers, destroyers of worlds and creators of abominations. You have been given the gift of immortality in this realm, for you now exist as a nexus in between realities, a mathematical insult*

*to the infernal calculus of your universe. With every death I will collect interest by your soul and in conjunction their gods. When I am satiated, I shall claim a new post by blood. I shall monopolize every soul in this world, and they will pray to their gods, old and new, and I will feast on their prayers and whisper to them 'no gods, no man, only the Red King'."*

*Arcturus stared, "I want to die."*

*"You exist because I allow it, and you will end when I demand it."*

*Arcturus wiped away his tears, thought of the chattering fleshy creature prodding the torn remains of his old village, forced himself to glance at Sofia, dangling like a lantern, visibly asleep. "And if I say no?"*

*The Red King stirred. "You dare defy the Red King? I will flay you for infinity. You will wake every morning with cinders into your nails, daggers through your ears. You will sleep with cockroaches and rats burrowing into your insides. You will wish for nightmares for they will be softer than your reality."*

*Arcturus looked at his hands. They were unperturbed from the numerous stabbings. It was as if he were tilling the fields yesterday, eating dinner at their communal table underneath the evening sun, crested by snowcapped mountains.*

*"Please," Arcturus says, his voice cracking, "once I complete this task, please let me die."*

*The Red King relaxes, leans back in his throne made of pearl marble, draped with ox blood-colored shawls. He tilts his crowned head and stares almost apathetically towards Arcturus. Although he has no lips in his skeletal features, Arcturus felt an amused smile. "As a merchant, I dare to punish your arrogance. As a King, I believe in investments. Your wish is granted."*

*"Now go," the Red King says, "bask in your illusion of freedom and know that I lurk behind the walls of your reality."*

*Arcturus leaned back, holding his knees to his chest like a wounded child. A heaviness came over him, a sudden, deep urge to sleep. Drifting in between the Red King's throne room and the twilight of slumber, Arc remembered he had forgotten to ask how much mana the Red King demanded of Arcturus, and how long the processes were intended to take. He was now an empty vessel with hardly a sail against a raging storm with unpredictable, salty winds.*

Part 3 // And Fibonacci Wept

1.



Arcturus likes dressing up and considers himself quite good at it. Pinstripes elongate his legs, and blazers make him feel like he has some place to be. Luckily, men's fashion has not changed much in the past two hundred years, and thus Arc has not made much mental investment on the changing social trends that to him shift as fast as the weather. He is happy that the monocle is out of fashion and has learned some time ago that he is not whimsical enough to warrant a bow tie and suspenders. He likes shined shoes and a straight, long tie, the latter of which is a newer invention, and never tires of catching glimpses of people wondering where a man as smartly dressed as he is going, or perhaps, where he is coming from. It would be lying to say that the boosts of confidence from people lustfully gazing at him as they pass with their prolonged connected stares and slightly bit lip does not make Arcturus feel good. Yet, everywhere he walks he keeps thinking of Niet, counting down when he could see her again.

Arc is in Alphabet City, a small neighborhood anchored around Tompkins Square Park on the Eastern side of Manhattan. The streets are old but recently have obtained a metaphorical new layer of paint. Contrary to popular media, alleys were not in overabundance in New York City, which relied heavily on a grid system until it decided to become an exception of its own rule. However, if one knows the way around, they can find the alleys nestled in between buildings, hidden behind public view, and validated out of existence by faulty city ordinance, much like Arc's own abode. Arcturus does not find pleasure in city guidelines relating to development, zoning law, and public hearings for new buildings. In fact, it is a very droll conversation. However, much like a stockbroker reads graphs over their cup of coffee, so too does Arc keep up with the ever-changing physical flux of New York City. The city holds a lot of secrets, and within them lurks potential clients. In fact, a large part of Arcturus's job is preparedness, and while he is most adept at tracing the physical trends of New York City's form, he is quite familiar with most boring ordinances of other cities, collected through his various years traveling for work.

Such was an alley in Alphabet City, located in between a dive bar and a newly rented out boutique. Arc makes sure he is not followed when he makes his turn, clicking on shined dress shoes on the trash laden sidewalk, hands nestled in his pockets. He wishes he has a cigar between his lips. You know, for the look.

The alley twists deep into the back of the neighboring buildings, curving right behind the renovated boutique. He encounters a couple of steps every now and again, and Arc feels as if he were slowly but surely orbiting a spiraling, disjointed staircase. The steps become more cragged and less cared for as he descends, and in the waning light he has a hard time seeing them, occasionally missing a step. The world becomes damper and muggier, adopting an earthy, mushroomy smell. Arc stops at the foot of a landing, where he was told to wait for someone to meet him.

He waits ten minutes and entertains himself by replaying his nice night with Niet. His heart stirs just thinking about it. He keeps thinking of how straight and regal she walks, the golden and interestingly shaped jewelry which dangle from her ears and wrists, the curve of her waist. There is a not-so-subtle drip in the distance that reminds him of a leaky faucet, and on

another day, he might have been bothered by this. But not today. Then he hears a stirring at his right, looks down, and sees a pyre floating up from the darkness, bobbing like a buoy gaining purchase on still waters, moving closer. Occasionally drifts to the right and then return to its post in the darkness. The smell of clove proceeds a plume of smoke, and Arcturus reels back as to not get the smell on his suit.

“Arcturus,” he says, “you look just like my great grandfather said. Tall and lean. Although I didn’t expect you to be as brooding.”

The man is pudgy and emits a strange, sickly, almost greenish glow. A constellation of warts track across his face, half covered with a greasy peach fuzz.

Arc says, “Klaus IV, I suppose. You sound just like Klaus I, although at the time, he was just Klaus. His voice sounds like it was dragged through gravel, and yours does too. A nice man.”

Klaus examines him, cradles a cigar the size of a sausage in between two equally girthy fingers. He scratches a bald scalp dotted with pearls of sweat, no doubt from the ascent to meet Arc. Then he puts the cigar in his mouth, inhales, exhales, and says, “Grand Papa was a smart man. Said you didn’t exist.”

Arc shrugs. “Here I am.”

Klaus IV continues, “Said he and you got a long real great.”

“I didn’t expect him to pass my name along generations.”

Klaus IV smiles and it reminds Arc of how worms look when they are slithering through dirt. He points at Arc and slants his eyes, “Dad and gramps always said he was insane for keeping your card. I always knew. I always did.”

Arc shrugs again, “Well, I’m here and ready for coronation.”

“No one followed you,” Klaus IV says, looking at Arc from the side of his rounded face.

“No one followed me. I assume the same for you. I’d prefer if my existence is kept to your bloodline. You know, as a professional courtesy.”

When Klaus IV giggles it sounds like a child gargling salt water. Arc wishes to remain on Klaus IV’s bad side. It will be easier in the long run. In truth, he hardly remembers Klaus I, and when Klaus IV approached him in Union Square with wild, desperate eyes Arc thought he was being accosted. It took him a couple of minutes for Klaus IV to explain his heritage, and that his great grandfather was fond of him, telling each descendant of a magic man who may or may not be a perfect sacrifice for their nubile god, Loire. Then, like a picture coming into view, Arcturus does indeed remember Klaus I, all the way when the Irish emigrated to America and New York

City was still called New Amsterdam. It took Arc a while, and even made him feel a little bad on his way home, to accept that he had become such unlikely friends as to make a multi-generational business venture. There are times Arc's behavior even surprised himself, but still nothing takes the sting of interrupting a Sunday brunch in front of judgmental, pretty girls.

“So has Loire grown from a little lamb to a healthy, adult lamb?”

“I don't think I like your jokes.”

“Not a joke. Honest question.”

Klaus IV stops and Arc bumps into him. For a moment Arc thinks that Klaus IV is going to hit him, which would have been no good for anyone. Arc has already seen too much, and Klaus IV has already revealed the continued existence of the Witnesses of Innocence.

Instead, Klaus IV says, “Something like that. A union.”

Occasionally a force vibrates the walls, and Arc knows it is the intersecting paths of the subways. Somewhere, Niet might be handing in her badge for the last shift. They are, according to all maps of the interweaving subterranean networks, in a void. As they descend, they became engulfed in gradual, then complete, blackness, illuminated only by the swaying pyre of Klaus IV's cigar, which he has lit in the darkness with incredible dexterity. An orange glow synchronizes with a low murmur of conversation, amplified in the funnel they are descending. Klaus IV stops again, and Arc bumps into him, again.

“Here,” Klaus IV says, mumbling through closed lips. He twists and puts a sack over Arc's head. Arc cannot see but feels that it clashes with his outfit. Klaus IV continues, “You were at a happy hour at an investment banking firm.”

“In a full outfit like this?”

“Okay. You sell yourself to rich men who like boys that dress like the cover of *GQ*. I put you in a sack after you just got finished with a trick.”

“That is an incredibly bold jump.”

“Is it? Is it really?”

“Whatever. Let's just go.”

The cavern is only a cavern by the fact that it is underground. At least, Arcturus is positive it was underground, judging from the multitude of steps he needs to take. Arc can see outlines through the mesh of the sack. People move back and forth, all dressed in glimmering dresses and tuxedos. He looks more in place than Klaus IV. The damp cobblestones recede to what feels like natural grass underneath his dress shoes, with the familiar dirt giving underneath his heels. Sunlight somehow makes its way through the halls. People are making chit-chat at

tables adorned with silver and gold thread. Bouquets of flowers scale brick walls. There are even little hotdogs, which were Arc's weakness even though he knows they do nothing good for his figure. It dawns on Arc then, as Klaus IV leads him through a room with glistening chandeliers and past a laughing couple holding champagne glasses, that this is not a resurrection. It is a wedding.

The atmosphere changes almost as suddenly as it does before. The mesh hood over Arc's head only does so much to filter light, and he feels these new walls close in on him. At first, Arc thinks it's a closet, but hears the clattering of dishes and pans, the stressed tones of what sounds like catering staff. The logistics of a catering staff for an event like this perplexes Arc. Was this a third-party catering staff full of kids trying to make their way through grad school? Did the Witnesses of Innocents designate a portion of their collective designed for eldritch weddings?

"Can I get a drink?" Arcturus asks. Klaus IV responds by hitting him in the stomach. Strangely enough, this means it is showtime.

He leads Arc to a bench and forces him in between a group of people sitting gagged and tied. They are sitting by the side, ready to be used like a sac of potatoes for puff pastries or whatever pretentious bite size edibles come to weddings. Arc puts his hands behind his back and Klaus IV cinches his wrists together. Arc sits and pretends to weep.

"Please," he says, "I was just using what I had. No harm in sleeping with those *GQ* men. I wasn't hurting anybody."

Klaus IV grumbles and swears under his breath and Arc feels a sort of satisfaction. It sounds even more stupid coming out of his mouth, half-actualizing it. Klaus IV recovers and says to everyone to remain seated. He sneaks a cigar puff, gets yelled at by one of the waiters, and then leaves in a huff. Once the smoke clears, Arc smells the hors d'oeuvres. He smells lavender and peony, something tangy, something else fruity and citrusy. Hors d'oeuvres are an echelon of cuisine that Arc never felt comfortable with. For all his accumulated wealth, Arc cannot name a single hors d'oeuvres and defaulted to calling them all pigs in a blanket. If he wanted to get fancy, he would call them *swine in a twine*, which was funny like, once. Arc always thought they could really tell someone's social class by the number of pretentious appetizers you could name off the top of their head.

Arc shifts in his seat, settles himself. There are others with him, four to his right and three to his left. They are all wearing nice clothes, not unlike his own getup. Some are shaking in their seat, wiggling from the awkward way in which their hands are bound behind their back. A puddle of piss dribbles down the pant leg of one of the men two seats down. The man next to him is praying to himself, the sack over his head bobbing in and out as the sobs of fear threaten to ruin him. Arc has no time for these people and instead turns to his right, to the first of the girls. It is interesting to be enamored with someone, Arc thinks, it's like wearing a pair of glasses that mutes everyone around you. Every girl he passed was not Niet, and that was enough for him to not see any woman as a sexual prospect. It is such a sudden change that Arc felt a coldness run

up his spine, unfamiliar with the fact that every girl reminded him that he is not currently talking to Niet and will have to wait patiently until he could see her again. Still, something drew him to direct his attention to his female neighbor. It is the peculiar way she was sitting, perhaps, straight backed, hands tied but not uncomfortably just above her tailbone. She wears a violet brooch over a tight-fitting silver dress.

“I’m not actually a hooker for *GQ* executives, you know,” Arc says. He feels this is necessary.

“Good to know,” the girl answers, flatly.

He knew the voice. He straightens himself, looks at his feet. A silence falls between them and it feels particularly heavy. Putting an utmost conversational tone to his words, he says, “Hey, Lucia.”

The back over the girl’s head turns to him, “What do you want?”

Arc recoils, almost falls from his seat and into the puddle of piss two guys over. Instead of twisting his body he leans to her. “It’s me. Arcturus.”

“I’m afraid you’re unfamiliar to me. Please stop talking. I’m very frightened.”

“Don’t play games,” Arc whispers, “I know you know me. I talked to you during brunch in the Village. We met in Amsterdam. I saw a flower burst from your chest.”

Lucia relaxes and sighs like a deflated balloon. “I think what you did during brunch better fits the term ‘accosted’.”

“So it was you!” Arc shouts. The kitchen goes silent and Arc knows his outburst is a little more emphatic than he wanted it to be. He collects himself, leans in again, “You are just like me.”

Her hood bobs in and out. “White and living in New York City?”

“That’s not what I mean,” Arc says.

Lucia’s bare shoulders straighten. She ignores the outburst of sobs from the girl to her right. Arc ignores another stream from the piss-leaking man to bodies down, wondering only briefly how it is biologically possible to have two fueled pee incidents so close together.

“Okay,” Lucia says.

“Okay, what?”

“You got me. Happy now?”

Arc digs his fingers into his palm, feels himself being toyed with. “Cut the crap, Lucia.”

“Stop saying my name.”

Arc begins tapping his foot in frustration. Her retort is valid; in his effort to connect with her he had forgotten where he was: at work. He returns to his position and ignores her, but not before whispering: “We’re not done.”

He seethes in silence, thinking of how Lucia ended up here and rationalizing that either she too has an intergenerational client or through other means. It also angered Arc on a more emotional level that she is not as enthralled with Arc’s existence as Arc is with hers. He has never met someone who can reincarnate as he can, much less someone who, by some infernal arithmetic, frequents the same occupational haunts as he. An existential crisis makes Arc squirm in his seat. Has she been chosen as another of the Red King’s acolytes? Is Arc’s term in this world done, his contract inexplicably and suddenly ended? Or worse, Lucia is apathetic to Arc’s existence because she knew of others like them, and Arcturus has somehow missed the online meetup or bulletin board advertising the local community groups for faux immortals.

It occurred late to Arc that perhaps Lucia’s attitude is from the subtle psychopathic, self-centered tendencies lurking in the psyches of all young women. Even though by Arc’s own personal logic Lucia might be over one hundred years old, her personality and affinities have been ambered on the fateful day that she realized she can no longer die permanently. Much like Arcturus’s own experience. He feels his anger subsiding at this revelation and thinks he could perhaps be a little more empathic towards this younger girl whose life affliction mirrors his own. Perhaps what Lucia needed is a friend.

“It’s going to be okay,” Arc whispers.

The man next to him stirs, “Thanks. I think I needed to hear that.”

“Not you,” Arc says, then he shifts himself more intentionally to Lucia. “It’s going to be okay. I’m sure this reincarnation business has been scary for you, I know I-”

Lucia answers, “Please stop talking.”

All empathy within him burns out, and Arc begins to retort when he doors to the kitchen swing open and someone yells that the ceremony is going to commence. Hands rush towards the sacrifices on the bench, pulling Arc up with the collar of his suit. In a different situation, Arc would have brushed them off, complaining of a torn hem, but work clothes are designed to get dirty. Especially in this field. He keeps an eye on Lucia, keeping track on her presence as they lift her up and push her in front of him, the hems of her silver dress shimmering in the subterranean gleam.

They are led back out into the main vestibule. Scents of lavender and orchids accompany the clicking of wine glasses and polite, socialite laughter. Underneath it all prances the coppers

smell of fresh blood and the acrid zest of burnt flesh. His feet give way to artificial turf, and he feels the eyes of the wedding guests lasering on them. He can hardly see in front of him but there are shepherds to the left and right of the group, ensuring the sacrifices are moving in single file like a captive caterpillar that emits scared moans, pleads to god, offers of money, and promises to keep a secret. Arc keeps forward after someone prods him with stick when he accidentally drifts a couple centimeters to the right.

The soft give of the turf recedes sharply to the feel of a hard surface. Arc glances at his feet and sees his dress shoes are on damp rock. The smell of copper and burnt hair has increased significantly, dominating the heavily perfumed vestibule. Arc is told to stop and the single file spins horizontally so that Lucia (to his relief) returns to his left and the weeping man to his right. There is a figure in front of them, and even though they are obscured by the stitching of the burlap sack Arc sees it to be very large, sitting on what looks like a throne.

Footsteps round along the stone. Arc feels the breath of someone coming up behind him. The ghost of ingested pigs in a blanket vacuum into his burlap sac.

The M.C. begins: “Great Loire, we are humbled in your eternal servitude. It is our mission, nay, our infernal purpose, to nurture your infinite primordial hunger. We bring you our gifts so you may judge us.”

The burlap sac is removed with as much velocity as an executioner with a noose. Arc witnesses Loire and searches his brain for any memory regarding the once resurrected infant form of this Satanic being. This monstrosity must have skyrocketed through whatever primordially celestial puberty befalls the life cycle of whatever lurks in its nether dimension, for the Loire in front of him now is hard pressed to reignite any memory synapses for ever having been around for its resurrection over one hundred years ago. Yet in a way Arc feels a certain validation for being a part of the process and celebrates by pretending to suffer from a complete psychological breakdown of the great bestial essence before him. He glances to his left and sees Lucia pretending to stammer backward, even throwing up a little bit, but not too intently to over do it. The weeping man weeps again, and the pissing man pisses *again*, which cannot be healthy.

Loire sits before them, arms resting on a throne made of whicker and adorned with petals. He is wearing a suit, and is for the most part a humanoid figure, save for the lamb head and the crown of thorns. Its eyes are as pitch as night, with celestial bodies moving in the void as if the eyeballs are made of marble. Tufts of white fleece poke from the suit, which is accented with a bowtie. Loire’s ears shift subconsciously to the sounds of the wedding, and his nostrils flare. Blood seeps from his mouth, dribbling like soup onto his pantsuit, which does not seem to bother him. Upon second consideration, Arc sort of remembers Loire’s resurrection. He was much tinier then, and quadrupedal. Now he is attending the being’s wedding! It makes Arcturus wonder: where is the bride?

The M.C. spins a finger in a circle and hands push Arc onto the dancefloor, which was really a septum in front of Loire’s throne. Some of the handlers push with such force that the

other tripped on the stone. Those that remain, curled up in a fetal position, are propped up, taken in front of Loire, and then-as Loire waves them away-has their throats slit with a blade hidden in the handler's sleeves. Those remaining stare at one another, at the onlookers surrounding the court.

“Dance!” The M.C. shouts. In the darkness there is a quartet of strings playing out of tune.

Arc stands. He looks to Lucia, who seems especially bored beneath her efforts to look afraid. She swings her hips in a sad rhythm, and Arc knows she is a better dancer than she is letting on. Arc, however, cannot dance to save his life, a thought that mixes quite funnily with the circumstance. He sidesteps out of sync with the music. The other kidnappees orbit around him, lips trembling, minds shattered by the eldritch lamb-god and his dedicated followers looking on. Arc twists, raises his hands, and decides that he needs to get more emphatic for the event. He pretends to cry, twisting, and connecting glances with Lucia, who is swaying like a parasol in the wind.

Some of the remaining victims began to pair up. One of them approaches Lucia but Arc intercepts the exchange. He holds out his hand and challenges her resistance. He knows her dedication to playing this role is as ingrained as it is for Arc, and she takes it, belligerently. Her hands are soft. He drew her close, put a hand around her waist, traipsed down the stones. The galactic gaze of Loire radiates from Arc's left, like a bottled hurricane.

He whispers, “Where do you wake up?”

“In bed,” Lucia whispers back.

“No, like after.”

“In bed,” Lucia says. They twirl, her blonde hair swinging.

“How long have you been doing this? I thought I was the only one.”

“As long as you, maybe,” Lucia says.

They twist, pop. Arc lifts his arm and Lucia twirls underneath. His concentration breaks once he feels the vacuum of space to his right and left. Somewhere along the song Loire raises a glove hand and the handlers take a knife to the necks of the others. Arc leads Lucia to another pirouette, dips her down, and notices the heels of his shoes submerges in blood just as her hair dips into the pool, pulled back sticky and red. It slaps onto her exposed back, paints the silver sequins on her waist with a scarlet comma. She slants her eyes, and Arc feels a visceral reaction before feeling the cold bite of steel blade invade his throat. Lucia's displeased glaze turns into one of shock, pain, and then subtle bliss as one of the handlers pull back their blade. Her neck spurts blood like a faulty hose.



Arc tumbles to his knees, holding his neck, drowning in the eruption of warm biomass in his throat. His hands grasp at the stones, which are covered with gore about an inch thick. Loire looks on, the thorned crown now holding a levitating fireball like a candle flame. Arc notices that Loire is looking at the dais but not at them, for a white light has entered the cavern, illuminating the bubbles of the champagne glasses on the neighboring tables, casting a golden glow over the peonies and daises crawling up the pillars. A shadowed figure appears in the light, arms outstretched like an autopsy. The bride materializes in the ether, dressed in immaculate silver and gold threads. Large dove wings unfold from its back and lower hip, stretched to four feet in length on each side. Miniature wings bloom from its face like an opened palm. Its skin is the color of polished ivory. Arc cannot see the front of the Bride, but it emits a heavenly feminine presence, and it makes Arc want to weep from its primordial beauty. Even Loire, the lamb headed, blood dribbling demon, is weeping a waxy, glittering mucous from its endless, abysmal gaze.

The aura of light disappears into the air like dissolving wisps. The Bride floats inches above the pool of blood. No ripples emit from its naturally pointed feet, which remind Arcturus of the porcelain claws of bathtubs. Arc can no longer breathe. Lucia is struggling, holding her throat, her fingers glued together by the sticky coagulate spurting from her punctured artery. They lock eyes and Arc tries his best to communicate to Lucia that their conversation is not over, and if the world continues to orbit as it does, he will see her again.

Even if he dies.

## 2.

Lyle is eating a fried chicken sandwich when Arc goes down the steps of the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey at 10AM. Arc has only seen Lyle consume two food products in their entire working relationship; fried chicken sandwiches and orange juice. Mostly separate, sometimes simultaneously. It is like an axiom for his existence behind the desk. Why Lyle only consumes this was unknown to Arc, but it never bothers him, so he never asks. What is more perplexing for Arcturus is how a man as wiry and wound as Lyle can maintain his spry figure in the face of such magnificent consumption of fried chicken sandwiches. This too was beyond Arc's rationalization, and he never asks this question because he feared the answer might make him uncomfortable.

They have their usual discourse, with Arc leafing through his expected check and finding the money from Klaus IV, along with a note saying how pleased he was that Klaus I had not gone mad. Klaus IV was sure to keep Arc's existence close to the chest and for his next descendants. It is a handwritten note, which Arc found to be an unexpected softness from the bald, greasy man who had waited patiently underground, grasping the hope that Arc existed at all. Arc pockets the money and starts to ask Lyle for a cab into the city. Instead, Lyle jumps, surprised at himself, and while holding the remains of a fried chicken sandwich in one hand he bends down and retrieves another parcel of mail from under his desk. He slides it over to Arc.

“It’s usually only one,” Arc says.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Lyle responds, taking his final bite.

The envelop is unmarked, which does not surprise Arc. All of his mail is unmarked. What concerns him is that there is a second envelop, which makes Arc rake his brain for any late payments that might have slipped his mind. His clients are usually never tardy in their transferring of money, and most of the time (sans Niet leaving her number), they follow the specific instructions outlined by Arc prior to the sacrifice. And Arc is certain to never leave the motel without his payment.

He opens the envelop and out drops a postcard onto the sherbet-colored counter. It is a typical “I love NY” postcard; the kind you can find with a silly heart to abstractly represent LOVE, available at literally any store within a seven-block radius of Times Square. On the other side is an aerial view of the island, which Arc still thinks is a beautiful example of human achievement. Central Park cut through the middle with its perfect verdant geometry. On the other side is a message in typewriter font, as if someone had actually gone through the effort of stamping the letters and resetting the cache:

Arcturus:

You are a difficult man to find, but we are persistent, which we hope you will admire. Q: Do you believe in god? A: Does it matter?

Please visit us upon a week’s receiving of this letter. We’ll know it’s you. Our fateful encounter in the subway has become quite popular among the office. You will be pleased to know that your very existence has been a harbinger of good spirits and moral amongst the staff. Q: What is god? A: Influence.

We are offering you the opportunity to sign with us. You will make a significant amount more than if you were freelancing. Our financials department has a hole in their pocket, fully prepared to hemorrhage money for your recruitment. You could stop living in secret. Q: What happens when the primordial deities you help rebirth into this world dissipate into mist? A: A vacuum.

You have done a tremendous job already, and we would love to have you on board. We cannot find you, but we hope you will find us. Q: What fills the vacuum? A: Whomever has the most influence.

Please do not perceive our lack of formal signature as an insult to your personage. We believe you know who we are, with as much accuracy as who we think you are. Thought inversely, if we were not confident, we would not be sending this letter to a Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey.

Sincerely: L & C

Arc holds the postcard at arm’s length like it was a feral animal. Lyle keeps his gaze on the computer but manages to ask Arc if he is okay. Arc ignores him, staring into the postcard like it is some great void, and Lyle asks again.

“Did you see who dropped this off?” Arc answers instead.

“I never see when anyone drops anything off for you. It’s always unmarked.”

“But this one specifically.”

“Zilch.”

“A cab, please, then,” Arc says.

“See you in a couple months?” Lyle says when the cab pulls up.

“Probably,” Arc says, hoping it to be true.

\*\*\*

Rain patters on the taxi, sending metallic echoes throughout the interior. A river of umbrellas maneuver through the city, clumsily bumping into one another, temporarily folding under the scaffolding of a continuously rebuilding city façade. The traffic is at a standstill all along the turnpike and through the Lincoln Tunnel. Headlights, streetlights, cab lights, all adopt a neon hue that cuts through the unrelenting gray overcast sky. Honks of impatient drivers comfort Arc, relieving him from the maze of his thoughts. The occasional “stick your head outside of the window and swear” provides him with even more comfort. He thinks of Niet and how excited he is to see her again.

This was before he had discovered that Lucia does indeed exist, and she is running the same game around the secret societies of the world as he is. This is also before the Illuminati reared their ugly his in his direction again, peaking over their business suited shoulders heavy with the weight of briefcases. He thought he has evaded them since the initial creepy encounter in the subway. Even then it is unconfirmed that the three of them represented a larger authority, even though Arcturus has his suspicions. At the time this confrontation frightens him, but this since waded as the weeks went by with the same nonplussed velocity as a pimple that sort of goes away on its own. The postcard, which rests in the breast pocket in the inside of his jacket, feels both heavy and hot. He is very aware of its presence. How had they found his location of reincarnation? How did they know how to address him? It is more alarming than being at his warehouse domicile. He favors his home and the objects he has stuffed it with but lacerating his connection there would be no more cumbersome than cutting off a limb, which Arc of course is more than familiar with. What if he reincarnates and they are hovering over his bed with clipboards and those stupid ropes that connect pens to said clipboards, so they do not get lost, leering over their spectacles at him as his body stitches itself back together? The possibility is more invading than he thought possible.

He let his mind wander to Lucia, thinking that it is better to exchange one anxiety inducing thought with a somehow less anxiety inducing thought. He makes the transition once the taxicab goes over the Brooklyn Bridge. He pays the driver, walks out, and unfolds his

umbrella. The mist feels good on his face. He walks through the warehouses and small buildings, much smaller than Manhattan's quadrillion floor zoning cap. He passes people rummaging through the rain and wonders if they too are like Arc; reincarnates, old, familiar with the workings of the secret cabals which run the undercurrent of society. Arc has never had this thought before, this feeling of vulnerability.

Once, he had wished for someone to share his fate so that he may squander the loneliness that comes from it. Eventually this yearning passed as the years strolled by with no evidence that anyone, not even his multitude of clients even then, were familiar with the Red King. After a while he stopped asking his clients, some of which answered his suggestion that there was an eldritch being higher than their own with torture that felt a little too personal. But Lucia is real. A rude, inconsolable female she may be, she is still a reincarnate like he is, and this thought alone draws Arc to find her again. He cannot be sure that he would cross paths with her again in another gig, not that was social media any help. But he will find her. By sheer mathematical probabilities revolving the law of urban universes, he will find her.

Arc returns home and immediately collapses on the couch, face down on the throw pillow. He was still wet, but the tinny, metallic rainwater does not bother him. He checks his mail, ensured that Dudley offered no developments for the Great Flood, and then his phone. It is a message from Niet, asking if they were still on for drinks in a couple of days. This was sent two days ago, and Arc knows that any unanswered messages from a potential suitor will look negatively on an otherwise burgeoning relationship. However, the one benefit from seeing someone who not only was a proud member of a secret cabal but also knows of Arcturus's reincarnating powers has a certain patience that comes with unanswered texts. It is a dangerous flirtation, Arc understands, since a direction the relationship could take if the ship goes south will involve the outing of both Niet's Cloth of Sch'yth and Arcturus's shtick, which will really incinerate his credibility. It will be more of a setback for the Cloth than Arc, but still. He likens the relationship as similar to why celebrities only really date each other, like spiritually speaking. Arc turns, takes his phone out of the charger, and asks to meet the next day. She answers back immediately, nonplussed by his days of silence, and Arc finds comfort in her presence, if only digital.

He goes into his fridge and sees that the only thing he has kept in there is orange juice. He pours himself a glass and thinks of Lyle, and how Arc is consuming half of Lyle's daily diet.

### 3.

They meet by the stairs of the Highline Park, a refurbished abandoned elevated railroad once used to transport meat and other animal products into the concrete threshes of Manhattan. It has been derelict for some time, and almost faced utter decimation, but has since become an elevated park, complete with a miniature playground, a foodtruck-esque bar, and the location of many "up and coming" companies. Niet comes out of the shadows, which he assumes is a talent of hers. She stands tall and wears a dress the color of ruby. Little planets dangles from her ears, and her afroed scalp speckle with glitter. But it is her eyes Arc notices missed the most, so

intelligent, striking. They are “no bullshit” eyes, and they probably worked well when she was working for the MTA. Niet gives him a peck on the cheek, which makes him feel warm. Arm in arm, they walk up the steps to the Highline, the busy street descending behind them as if on a lever.

“How is the lack of work?”

Niet smiles, “It was fine, actually. The employees threw me a little party with a cake. Then the next day I used the subway and someone else was in my box.”

“That’s nice, at least.”

“Yes, but in actuality, I’m quite fine with leaving. The monotony was fine, but that’s all it was. Just fine. I’m much happier devoting my time to the Cloth.”

*The Cloth*, Arc thinks, *she brought it up*. “Well, how’s that going? Is your god enjoying its renewed life?”

“The eldritch personification of cleanliness is also the eldritch personification of godliness. You ever hear that adage?”

“In some variation or another.”

“Our Queen has been feasting on the sewage underneath our city. She’s really shaping the underground in her image by means of purification. But Basilica...”

“You mean Mike.”

“Apologies. I forgot we are above ground.”

“Mike’s giving you trouble?”

Niet stops, looks out to the canyon of the city. It is dusk now, and the sky is a canvas of purple and orange. The streetlights look like organized fireflies waiting sentry. She turns to Arc, “Mike’s not reading the memos! It was only a minor nuance when I was splitting my time between the subways and the antechamber, but now that I’m devoting all my time-

“-Well, not *all* your time,” Arc interjects, pointing to himself with a smirk.

“Hold your horses, mister. Listen, I’m saying that for an eldritch god to *eat* filth, wouldn’t She be the harbinger of the great toxification?”

“I suppose that could be misconstrued, to be honest,” Arc says.

“Well, he’s getting under my skin regardless,” Niet says, “but enough about me. How are you?”

Arc looks into Niet's eyes and feels the genuineness behind them. He wants to tell her that he met someone like him, and more importantly, that it reminded him how truly alone he is the cosmic spectrum of things. She would understand. He also wants to tell her how the Illuminati contacted him, but he knows that even the most small and remote secret societies harbor resentment that shows by even mention of the name. Besides, bringing them up would only put his mind adrift anyway. He has the rest of the week to ponder what they wanted from him.

"I went to a wedding last week," Arc says, and he sees that Niet notices his shift and allows him the privacy of his most anxious, encroaching thoughts.

"For work I presume."

"Yep. Died from a slit to the throat. One of the easier ones."

They walked along the side. Cars drive underneath them, like the ebbs and flows of waves against a shore. A flurry of honks erupts in the distance.

"That implies our gig wasn't as easy for you."

Arc gives her a look and now Niet must be thinking of his chopped genitals. Which, upon more consideration, is a little unfair that Niet has seen him naked and probably even held his member in her hand like a sad water balloon. He shakes his head and clears his thoughts. His hand finds his way into hers, and they interlock fingers. The space next to him fills with an intimate permanence.

"The Highline is an interesting place," Niet says, stepping over the visible remains of the old railroad embedded in the boardwalk, "it's gone through so much change."

"Tell me."

"Well, for starters it's not much of a park," she begins, "and before you say that it says 'park' in its name, I would argue you could run in a park, or throw a football, or have a picnic. You can leave and enter the park at any time. With the High Line, you must get out as designated areas. Like a subway stop."

"But you must argue that it illustrates urban renewal in a nice way by converting the derelict space to a park, no?"

Niet shrugs, "Perhaps at one point, in the beginning. It started as a reclaimed railroad that turned into a park. Now it feels like an attraction that is railroad themed. See the difference?"

"I do," Arc says, "makes me wonder what Theseus would say about it."

Niet answers by kissing him, full on the mouth. Wind blows around them, flapping the hems of their jackets. A fire blossoms inside of him, tickles his spine. He reaches for her waist,

and he pulls her close. Her lips are full and soft and sweet, and Arc has not felt this in a very long time. It is the first time he has kissed someone with this much passion sober in more than a hundred years.

After the park, they got drinks with dinner and their knees touched throughout the entire meal. Her intelligence is intimidating, with the ability to find holes in arguments with the sharp eye of an archer. She is gifted with words too, and Arc finds himself staring in awe as she eloquently explains why she feels like the way she does, weaving a beautiful quote of her argument one impactful, symbolic sentence at a time. She connected abstract ideas for Arc, reignited synapses. They talk about politics, design, art, the impact of economics and social theory. At first, Arc thinks he would describe Niet as someone who has time to think, but this would be a disservice to the magnitude in which she does so. Everyone has time to think and be introspective, but not everyone can do so as well as Niet.

She lives Fort Greene in a well-kept and cozy studio apartment. Exposed brick hides behind a multitude of books, all read and well worn. She has a cat named Lothario, and to Arc's luck the cat adores him. Animals usually Arcturus. They are drawn to him in a way that the moon follows the sun. Arc hypothesizes it had to do with his existence between the realms of life and death. He evokes a mysterious cerebral calmness in them. It is not long into their cups of tea when she jumps on Arc and straddled him amongst the canvas of hand knitted blankets, pulling her sweater over her neck and revealing a scarlet brassiere.

Later, stewing in their own sex, Arc and Niet engages in the psychological autopsy known colloquially as pillow talk. She is in the crook of his arm, twirling a finger in his hair. Lothario is a black void of fur in the corner of the bed.

“Can I ask you a question?” Arc says.

“Sure.”

“How did you find me?”

“If I remember correctly, you found us,” she says.

“That was only after being stalked by your guys for a couple weeks.”

“Our strategy was to bait you.”

“Bait me?”

Niet shifts positions so that she is leaning up. “We had a feeling it was you, but it was confirmed when you started to look back at us. Ever hear of the saying ‘I looked into the void and the void looked back’?”

Arc shakes his head. “You’re saying that I found you because you found me? Makes no sense.”

“If we were wrong about you, you wouldn’t have noticed as watching.”

“That’s a Schrodinger’s Cat kinda deal.”

Niet laughs and Lothario stirs, gazed grumpily at the both them, and then returns to its ball form. “It appears to be! Why do you ask, though? Afraid someone is following you? Rest assured that the Cloth is very good. We can find a needle in a haystack blinded folded.”

*Actually, yes, Arc thinks, I am concerned that someone is following me. I received mail about it.* Instead, Arc says: “I’m hoping you can find someone for me.”

Niet frowns. “We aren’t that kind of service.”

“It’ll give Basilica something do to.”

Niet considers this. Then she curls up next to him, nestles in his crook of his neck. “You owe me one.”

“I’m not chopping off my penis,” Arc says.

“Don’t worry,” Niet replies, her hand sliding under the covers and across his naked thigh, landing on his genitals, “but rest assured that what is going to happen next does not count as my ‘one’.”

#### 4.

If there is one thing that Arcturus hates about New York City, it is Times Square. It is not a sentiment unshared by native New Yorkers. In fact, one could argue that it is one of the only commonalities that bind together the tense sinews between race and class, the others being a loyalty to the functionality of dollar pizza and the disgruntlement which comes from a late subway train. However, the one saving grace for Arcturus in this wretched manifestation of Capitalism is the picture hungry simulacrum of costumed workers, clad in fever-dream versions of Muppets, Disney, and superhero characters (all TM). He makes up stories as he wades through the dredges of tourists who stop in the middle of the street to snap a photo of the digital monoliths that make up half of the “I LOVE NY” post cards. Somewhere in the midst a selfie-taking Miss Piggy leaves her group of tourists and saunters next to Spider-Man, and Arc wonders if Kermit feels angry about this, but he is too busy sneaking grabs at Buzz Lightyear’s ass near TKTS. It’s a thing they do. Grab each other. They spend all day rubbing themselves above their costumes, only to slither out of their garbs like shed skin at the end of the day. It’s really all there in the great symphony within the digital arena of late-stage. Capitalism manifest.



Such a post card is held in Arcturus's hands at this moment, the flimsy weight somewhere heavier in his hands. If he is reading it right, which he is certain of, one of the doors to the Illuminati lurks somewhere in this sea of tourists and hecklers. It makes sense for them to be here, or at least one of their doors. To be in a place no one wants to be. It was like a fortress guarded by a moat of magma. He trusted each entrance to their underground network of bankers and socialites is heavily guarded and controlled, and in this case, Arc holds the key in his hands. Even got a paper cut.

He walks to the elevator by the red stairs. People are taking pictures of themselves for some reason, even though Times Square looms before them in all its advertising glory. The Olive Garden sings its pasta-hymns, hoping to beckon those who had come to the city in search of cultural enlightenment to deflate and divert from the more authentic Little Italy to the safe restaurant chain that is adequate just about everywhere. He passes several buskers along the way, as well as people offering tours, discounts to shows, and a Batman and Betty Boop paring that seemed fit on like a spiritual level.

He gets into the elevator, which is a chute demanded by paraplegic revolutionaries to include more accessible subway systems and hears the doors close and reduce the buzz of Times Square to a whisper outside of his glass case.

This whole experience makes him feel unhealthy, unnatural. He needs to find out how they know he exists in the way he does, and especially how they found out about his location of reincarnation. If he was a more paranoid man, he would assume Lyle was a part of the Illuminati, but Arc trusts the strength of his professional and cordial bond with the willowy desk attendant. The buttons show only the ground floor and the subway, but Arcturus sees a vertical seam in the console and the glass wall. It is like a mail slot, only slimmer, or a larger version of a credit card reader. For reasons Arcturus cannot conjecture with proper logic, he puts the post card into the slot and feel the weight of the lift give out from underneath him. He is just as surprised at this working as anyone would be, but instead of self-congratulation he braces himself as the elevator plummets what feels like three floors, sending a shiver of impact up to his knees, buckling them. He picks himself up just as the doors open.

“Mr. Arcturus,” a man says.

He is dressed in a suit and holds a fedora to his chest, as if preparing a bow. Thick sideburns engage the side of his face as if battling for it. Next to him is a woman in a pants suit holding a clipboard. Blonde, short cut hair. She is a whole foot taller than the man, whose broad shoulders occupy the width of the open doors.

She says, “My name is Catherine. My associate here is Ludwig.”

“Like the musician?”

“No,” he answers. Then steps aside for Arc to enter the hall. “Welcome to the Illuminati. We are so glad you made it.”

“Would you like some tea or coffee?” Catherine asks.

“No thank you,” Arc says, offended by their audacity to display kindness. It is a power move. He is not stupid. “I came here to talk to your boss. I’m not working for you. Stop stalking me.”

“Of course,” Catherine says, her voice filled with honey, “in due time. Please, at least tour the facility. You will meet our CEO later. He never makes time for anyone these days. He’s very excited to meet you.”

Ludwig begins to walk down the hall, which is very white and very sterile. Catherine follows and Arc feels the doors close behind him. He looks back and notices that there is no way to call it back. He thumbs the switchblade hidden in his wrist just in case he needs to off himself. They would find him in the motel but getting him out of there will be a lot easier than being trapped here. He follows them, hears his sneakers pad after the dominating and rhythmic stepping of their dress shoes.

Arcturus notices that either the hallway or Ludwig has citrus scent to him, zesty in a way that reminds him of a clean kitchen. He also reminds Arc of Jabba the Hut, complete with a triple chin and as many jug handles. He dwarfs Catherine, whose petite frame is clasped together by the buttons of her blazer and walks like she is on a conveyer belt. They were an unlikely pair, even given the circumstances. As they walk and turn the corner to yet another elevator, Arc realizes that Ludwig is the one carrying the sterile scent. Catherine, on the hand, smells like a fresh manilla folder.

The doors open like rocket ship. A catwalk stretches before them, cutting through a warehouse with incredible industrial lights above. Stretches of desks set out in a seemingly infinite grid below, heads bent down, toiling with something. All the bodies are identical, all the desks the same mahogany and oak design. Arc feels like he is staring at the edge of the sea.

Catherine notices Arc and says, “You might be thinking, ‘boy, this is not what I pictured the Illuminati to look like’, and you would be right. Whatever you picture us to look like, is what we look like.”

“So a warehouse full of desks.”

“This is our R&D department,” Catherine says.

“Research and Development,” Ludwig explains, as if Arc didn’t know (he didn’t).

“Look here,” Catherine says, gesturing to the desks, “do you see what they are doing?”

Arc leans over the railing. Hundreds of heads bent over the desks, moving their hands rhythmically, methodically. They are pulling cards from a deck, writing the result on a notepad, and pulling another card, ad infinitum, like some droll dance.

“A deck of cards,” Arcturus says, perplexed.

“A deck of cards indeed. Question: in a completely random deck of cards, what are the odds that you would pull a red or a black card from the top? Or a specific suit?”

Arcturus glances at Ludwig when he answers, “One in two for the first one, one in four for the second.”

“Do you think its possible for it to be black one-hundred percent of the time? Or spades every third card?”

Arc watches a worker flip a card, record his findings, and then pick up another card. He wonders how long these people have been in this warehouse, flipping, recording, shuffling. He wonders if the little hamsters running in their head have gotten complacent.

Arc says, “Possible? Hardly.”

Ludwig interjects, “Do not confuse impossibility with mathematical improbability.”

The flurry of an electrical card shuffler sounds like a pinwheel occupying the left side of the room. Arc turns to them, followed by Catherine and Ludwig, who simply torque their body as if stuck in the center.

Catherine says, “We are testing to see the impact of electronic interference on this mathematical probability.”

“What have you found so far?” Arc asks before kicking himself for being invested. He reminds himself that he is being stalked by these people and should, by all logic, hate them.

“Data,” Catherine says.

“Let’s go, Mr. Arcturus,” Ludwig says, and Arc glances once more at the machinations of the desk below him before he follows them out of the room.

The catwalk moves through several other rooms of experiments that are as perplexing as they are droll. They pass a room of equal size full of people stuck in the motion of flipping a coin, recording the result, and bending down to retrieve it. Flip, record, retrieve. They pass another room where a bunch of wild haired mathematicians were venturing into the infernal calculus of  $\pi$ . They pass yet another room that smells distinctly like roses, complete with a refreshing mist in the air. People are walking around rows of roses with petals the color of ruby and the sun.

“The golden ratio,” explains Catherine, “unlocking the geometrical axioms of Fibonacci.”

“Obviously,” Arc says, snickering.

Arc follows them around the corner and encounters another elevator. Catherine and Ludwig step aside.

“Our CEO is very excited to see you,” she says, “please, into the elevator.”

Arc looks at the open doors, the clinical feel of the elevator. It reminds him of a little pill. He feels a certain invisible cloud of dread emanating from its geometrically perfect interior, the weight of the artificial lights now heavy on his shoulders. In the distance he feels the wind of the electronic card shufflers, the *scritch scratching* of pencils on notepads, all powerful engines engaging in theoretical mathematics so abstract and mighty that all matter and cosmic anomalies are folded inwards into an echelon of thought so dominating as to be reductive into a puzzle to be unlocked, a *scritch scratching* of pencils on a notepad. In the elevator lurks a black hole of dread and dreams, chronic and nefarious, the embodiment of doom brought from knowledge, far more daunting than any eldritch force that Arc has ever experienced.

“Please,” Ludwig says, “into the elevator.”

Arc steps forward, feels as if the ground is dissolving into sand underneath him. His hairs stand on end. Each step feels like he’s moving underwater, pulled by each strand of his DNA into the gaping maw of the elevator. He thinks of turning around and running through each strange room and up the elevator and into Times Square to disappear in the thrashes, but he knows this is futile. Besides, the elevator has no buttons getting *here*. He traps himself the second he walked into the lift. Arc also considers stabbing himself and bleeding out into the floor, but he knows that he would be found in the motel when he awakens.

Arc gulps, steadies himself, and moves past the facsimile of a genuine connection between Catherine and Ludwig. He enters the elevator, alone, and the doors close behind him.

\*\*\*

Even though he is underground, Arc has seen enough movies to convince him that the leading member of a powerful organization should have an office on the top of some metal obelisk, looking nefariously out to the city from every angle of its wall-to-ceiling encasement. He pictures clouds leveled with the eye level of a large desk, a place for expensive whisky and expensive pieces of art that convey nothing other than the fact that it is difficult to attain. But Arcturus is surprised when the doors open and is greeted immediately to a dimly lit, grey office. Overhead fluorescent bulbs shone over an area with kitsch furniture. Wood paneling dominates the walls. They are underground, so any inclination of where a window *should* be is substituted with impressionist style paintings of ponds and bridges, ladies in parasols. An old coffee machine from what seems to be the fifties gargles its bitter liquid in the corner.

The CEO stands from behind his desk and rushes to meet Arc, his hand outstretched for Arc’s reception a little too long before they engaged each other, as if the hand were pulling him instead of the other way around. He is tall and lanky, and his presence to emits a noxious aura, one that distorts all around him. When he smiles it does not reach his eyes, which rattle in their

sockets with a different kind of energy, a hunger. Instead of white, healthy teeth the CEO smiles and reveals pebbles hardly hanging from bruised gums, necrotic. His chin disappears seamlessly into his neck, like someone with too much skin that got all the air sucked out of them. It is hard for Arcturus to look at him, gliding along the green and orange zigzag pattern of a carpet. He wears a suit a little too big for his lanky frame and horribly hemmed. He dresses like he has an agenda to affront the human act of wearing clothes at all. It is hard to even validate the man's existence, for he seems even more otherworldly than the eldritch forces that Arc has helped summon or rebirth into the world.

“Arcturus,” he says softly, confidently showing a collection of smashed tombstone teeth, “a pleasure, a real pleasure. Please, sit.”

The CEO glides over to the sitting area and crosses one leg over the other, temporarily revealing a hairless ankle line disappearing into the dark void of a pantleg. For a second Arcturus wonders if the only parts of this man are the parts that are visible, and everything in between is interconnecting wires in place of flesh and sinew, molds of plastic from the neck down, not quite a robot or a human. A mannequin in a cheap, three-piece suit; the head of the Illuminati.

Arcturus sits across from him, one hand near his switchblade. It makes him feel better to feel its bulge against his palm, even though Arc knows that it would be futile, in the long run. They stare at one another in silence across from a coffee table. The CEO wraps two spindly fingers over one knee, leans forward, ignores the plasticky crinkling of his suit.

“Nice to meet you.”

Arc plays along. “Nice to meet you to, Mr...”

“-You can call me The CEO,” he says, dipping his head as if tempering tea, winking as if he and Arc were on the inside of a joke.

“Okay,” Arc says, “listen, ever since your associates found me in the subway I’ve slept with one eye open. That postcard did not do me any good either.”

“It brought you here,” the CEO says, “in this very seat. As for the subway incident, our HR department has issued new protocols on harassment. But regardless I’m very happy to see you here, in front of me. We’ve been looking for you for a very long time. A very long time indeed.”

“You must explain,” Arc says.

“Question: What fills a vacuum?”

“Whomever has the most influence,” Arc says, remembering the post card.

The CEO wiggles his lips, strains to put them into a smile. “Well put, Arcturus. Could not have said it better myself.”

“Why have you been looking for me? I want a straight answer.”

“Because you are a golden cow.”

“Excuse me.”

“Pardon the expression, Arcturus. Think of us-”

“The Illuminati,” Arc interjects.

“Sure,” The CEO says, “think of us as a business. Throughout our growth from the before times we’ve always been on the lookout for expansion. Expansion means influence. Slowly but surely the people of the world sought higher forms of power from their own will. As we’ve pushed the best and brightest of those days to discover electricity and chemistry and medicine, so too has their faith in themselves increased. With this, their energies dwindle from their all-mighty primordial forces. Influence is a religion now, the religion of the masses. The less people who follow gods inadvertently follow us, even if they don’t know it. And then we found you, or traces of you. You were a myth in the office for hundreds of years. Through England we followed you. Through Paris we followed you. Through Amsterdam we followed you. Then we lost you, and you, Arcturus the immortal, became a myth at our holiday parties. It was not until the serendipity of the New York City subterranean transit line that you put a stop to all calls, all emails, all faxes. It was like the heat death of the universe, a big project of ours, has come early. Now to see you, Arcturus, I feel honored.”

“That doesn’t explain the whole ‘cow’ comparison.”

The CEO maintains his smile. “Question: why do toothpaste companies offer coupons for two for the price of one?”

Arc shrugs, feeling his patience thinning.

“Answer: because if you own two of my brands, you are off the market to buy my competitor’s brand. In this sense, my two-for-one deal has not only ensured your purchase of my product at a slightly cheaper profit, but you have also eliminated yourself from the pool of potential buyers. The  $n$  is now  $n-1$  and wielding such power of business theory allows my toothpaste to be better than any others.”

Arcturus feels as if he was being dragged along a carousel of idioms designed to make him feel stupid. He is not a mathematical genius, but he understands basic principles. He is by no means a toothpaste aficionado. The CEO talks as if Arc’s mind is an instrument and he is strumming it along, manipulating his perceptions of the world with as much mastery as a writer

with the clickity keys or a musician casually strumming. He seems unperturbed by the raw essences of power that Arc has helped bring into the world.

“Are you even human?” Arc asks.

“Human? Of course I am. But I am also a *we*, and *we* are an idea.”

Arc leans back, inches his hands closer to the bulge of the knife in his pocket. The CEO sits across from him, hands latticed over his knees, drawn close in his mismatched and unflattering thrift-store suit. Hungry eyes look at Arc like a hot wind rolling over a tundra.

He continues, “Arcturus, your business is an admirable one. We like seeing initiative and scrappiness. This might come as a surprise to you, but according to our numbers you are the sole reason why a lot of these cabals and societies exist. You are the engine that fuels your own business. We invite you to join us instead. Use your powers for a cause.”

Arc realizes that there is no use trying to deny his involvement with the dedicated cults of the world. “I don’t see how my reincarnation abilities will help your coin flipping, rose bud dissecting projects.”

The CEO flinches, looks at Arc as if ready to vomit good news. “Oh no, Arcturus. Compared to you, those projects are nothing. You would be the sole proprietor of influence. Everything would come from you.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Think, Arcturus. Think of revolutions. Of dictatorships. Of wars and freedom. Economic theory is social theory is business theory. How many wars started with a single assassination? How many social movements started with the unfortunate death of a single person?”

“A martyr,” Arc says.

“Yes! Your abilities are unique. Imagine being able to birth a social movement or abort one. Imagine taking a scalpel to the onset of a revolution, or being the first death of many, and then the millionth death that reignites an evolving cause. There is an operative difference that I may have not acknowledged. You are not an immortal. You are a reincarnate. But with us, you would live and die as an idea. As the first Promethean fire to the infinitely interconnected latticework that is global influence,” then he adds, as if pulling from an ancillary cloud bobbing around his head, “and you’d be paid handsomely of course.”

Arc considers this, watches as the electrified eyes of the CEO slowly morph, as if superimposed, into the ravenous blackhole. This whole conversation is The CEO donning wolf’s clothing and chasing Arc through corridors of wordplay, tricking him into thinking that every right is a left and every down is an up. Progressing through dark corridors, the clattering of his boots, the salivating gargles emitting between rows of teeth tortured into necrosis.

Arc hates evoking his name. Images of needles in his eyes, ripped fetuses tossed like trash into endless fire. Listless, Arc brings up his name with the same psychological leaping that it takes to gargle salt water instead of spitting it out.

“I work for the Red King,” he says, his eyes breaking from The CEO.

Without severing connection, the CEO says, “You do not work for the Red King. You are enslaved by the Red King. You would work for us.”

“I’m sorry,” Arc says, “you can’t offer what he has for me.”

“Death?” The CEO says, twisting his head, “no. We offer you life. We offer you immortality. We offer you power.”

Arc stands, feels a wave of nausea envelop him. He feels the Red King listening in between the planes of existence, the sounds collating into some infernal geometry that transcends space/time in the blood stained, ivory halls of his nefarious, hellish keep. He would rather the Red King materialize from the reeking NetherRealm and smite them all, but instead Arc feels him just *listening*, waiting, lurking in the geometrical non-place in between. The anxiety of the punishment of even validating the Red King via sound tightens a knot in Arc’s stomach, makes him disregard any logic. He pulls out of the blade, activates the switch, and points it to his throat. He figures he’ll be far away before they even find their way into the motel. They also don’t even know which room he wakes up in.

The CEO appears nonplussed. He says, “No need for that, Arcturus. Just a consideration is all. It would be unfair to not let you consider where your ultimate loyalties lie. Take your time, just know that we will be waiting for your inevitable answer. You’ll realize you’d want to work for yourself soon enough.”

The elevator dings and Arc turns like a cornered animal. He pictures a platoon of business attired people flooding the CEO’s office to contain him, but instead finds the elevator empty.

The CEO says, “The elevator will take you back. You’ll have no difficulty finding your way from there. Take your time. You know where to find us, but please do keep in mind that is because we want you to find us.”

Arc grits his teeth, feels a seething hatred that this man, this mortal man, made him evoke the Red King, perhaps as a test. “No following me. Ever.”

The CEO smiles, nods slowly. “Never, Arcturus.”

Arc enters the elevator holding himself hostage. He presses the only button available while keeping his gaze at The CEO, who watches Arc with a curious positivity that sends spiders up his pantlegs. The doors close and open within seconds, and Arc is in a service tunnel deep within the heart of the subway system. A train rumbles by, shaking the walls. In the distance the headlights zoom pass. He takes a breath and doubles over. Vomit erupts from the depths of his stomach, the blade still aimed at his throat.

## 5.

When Arcturus tries to remember The CEO’s face, or even Ludwig’s and Catherine’s, for that matter, he encounters a surprising level of difficulty. Arc prides himself on his recollective



abilities, it is a good way to get people to like you, but he is hard pressed to even recall the colors of their hair. He cannot mentally reconfigure the layout of the Illuminati R & D department, with its card room, flower room, etc., but he knows for sure it happened. Even navigating the subterranean defunct service tunnels under the Big Apple seem like a fever dream, and he was too nauseas to be alert for the entire trek among the hives of rats living in their nests of debris from the city proper. Standing there at the end, blinking like a baby faun as he wraps around the lip of the 14<sup>th</sup> street PATH platform, he felt as if he were being released from a nap. Arc found that he had no recollection of the event, but he was sure that it happened. The pinprick in his throat, and accidental wound from his threat to commit suicide in front of The CEO proves the event and even that fades with each passing day.

He spent the next two weeks in hiding, leaving only to one of the many bodegas for provisions and sandwiches that were of high taste but low quality. Niet was on a retreat with the Cloth to meet their West Coast branch somewhere in the middle of America. She described the experience as a passionate, yet modest sexual union between Mecca and the Burning Man, which even Arc had a hard time conceptualizing. Regardless, she was indisposed, which was both a boon and a bane. She was the one person he wanted to see, to hold her in his arms, to embrace her scent, and talk about literally anything else. Niet possessed a wisdom and insight that Arc never knew he needed until now. However, his emboldened paranoia would have prevented him from seeing her anyway and explaining the situation would only threaten the already peculiar foundation from which their relationship blossomed. She also promised to find information on Lucia, which made Arc even more anxious about hiding out. Even with the threat of the Illuminati lurking from every corner and Niet's bittersweet absence, Arc still caught himself thinking of Lucia, wishing that he could hold her still for just a couple of hours and learn more about himself through her. Still, this too would have to wait for him, even though the molasses crawl of time became especially known through the various losses of Pac-Man and Tetris on the terminals around his hidden domicile. Against his heart and siding with logic, Arcturus knows that disappearing from the world for a bit was for the best.

Dudley tried to get lunch with Arc a few times, which was honestly obnoxious considering that Arc's self-imposed incubation period was two weeks. Ever since the brunch incident in the Village Arc was surprised at all that Dudley would want to hang out with him again. In between failed attempts at meeting, he slipped in statuses of the ever-burgeoning Great Flood, which seems to have grown from a puddle to about the size of a queen size bed. Arc did not have the heart to remind Dudley that it had rained on and off for the past couple of days. Arc wondered if Dudley feared that the end of their personal friendship would be the end of their professional one, and in most cases. There was most likely an element of fear that Dudley possessed in relation to Arc, whose agreement to be a retainer for the Great Flood was Dudley's sole burden in his community. Arc never once thought of this potential dynamic this way, but now that he was spending some time away from the world, he could allow for these kinds of intrusive thoughts to work themselves out.

It is now midmorning, halfway through his now daily routine of walking aimlessly around the house, that Niet calls him. Seeing her name on his phone elates him; he had not expected to see her for at least another couple of weeks.

“Hey, you,” she says. He hears laughter in the distance. She sounds a little tipsy.

“Hey, you,” he repeats, “how’s the event?”

“It’s fine,” she says, “the Western sect is nice, but not kind. It’s nice seeing old friends, though. Haven’t seen them since the rebirth of our Queen.”

“The inverse can be said for the East Coast,” Arc says, grabbing his coffee and sitting down at his coffee table. He likes hearing her voice. Then he adds, “Wait, was the entire Western sect present for the sacrifice?”

“You bet,” she says, “it was quite the event. Obviously.”

“So they’ve all held parts of my body.”

“Yes,” Niet says, and Arc can tell that she is smirking. “Anyway, I can’t talk much, but I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” he says, reveling in the first real human contact he has had in about ten days to consider the pure statistical implications of how many people tossed around his limbs like a hot potato. “How long do you have to chat?”

“Not long, our Queen has just finished purifying an underground river bed and has slept its microsleep. About two minutes. To be honest, if you didn’t answer we probably wouldn’t have chatted until I got back.”

“Thanks for thinking of me,” Arc says, “wait you brought you Queen with you? How did you manage that?”

“*She* brought *us*,” Niet corrects.

“Right.”

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you personally that we found her. The girl. Lucia.”

Arc freezes mid-sip, the steam puffing into his face. “Oh, Niet. Thank you.”

“I’ll text you the info.”

“Thanks for prefacing that you’ll text me with a call. I wanted to hear your voice.”

“Well, I wanted to hear your excitement with this news, but something tells me you’ve got something on your mind. You alright, Arc?”

Now Arc slumps in his chair, paralyzed.

“Arc?” Niet says.

“I’m fine. Didn’t sleep well last night. Thank you, Niet, for this information. You made my day.”

“You can talk to me,” Niet says, “I hope you know that.”

“I know.”

A pause. “It’s not about us, right?”

“No. I promise. I’ll tell you when you get back,” Arc says, and he meant it. Perhaps it is time. He is going mad bouncing his thoughts against the lofty walls of his warehouse apartment, and he trusts Niet enough to reveal not only his quirky mortality but his discovery of Lucia.

“Okay. I have to get back.”

They said their goodbyes, and Niet hangs up soon after. Arc slumps back in his chair, the cellphone dangling from a loose grip. Just talking with her made him feel less alone. He knows, deep down, that this attachment to her was a precarious one, himself being essentially immortal and she is being chased by the hopefully slow crawl of time. Surely this must have crossed her mind, too. He still thinks of his abandoning of Antoinette...Arc blanks, massages his scalp to rid the reoccurring pressure points of guilt pangs from over two centuries ago. His phone vibrates in his hand and at once his angst is dispelled.

Niet sent him Lucia’s address, phone number, and, as if to brag, her Netflix password. Arc wonders if her tapping into the Cloth’s powers of stalking is a testament to how much she liked him, and in a strange way Arc is humbled by this. This makes the rest of the day lurking around the house a lot better. He marks an “X” on the calendar to signify that he has hidden from public view for long enough.

According to his sources, Lucia lived in a shared apartment in Tribeca, New York City with two other girls. If she makes as much as he does from these cult gigs, she will not need to share an apartment like this. This fact gives him doubt that perhaps she is just an average girl, and he wonders along the way if he can really tell the difference between one young twenties girl to the next. He takes the subway back and forth a few times, even though the distance between his local subway stops and the one he needs to get to is really only fifteen minutes. In this extra time, Arc knows to shake off any predators who might have spotted Arc from another gig, surprised that he is walking with his head still attached, or the vague features of the Illuminati with their own subterranean network. He realizes that Lucia was probably keeping appearances, just like he does.

He navigates through the high rises and weaves in between traffic. Anonymous buildings look like copies of the Woolworth Building, which is really the main draw here, aside from the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge which stretches over the water. It is a clear day, and the parks are full of food carts and street performers. Arc buys himself a coffee and walks in the shade of City Hall, turning only when he is sure that he is not being followed. He cannot remember all the details of his visit to the Illuminati, but he does recall The CEO giving his word that they won’t follow him. Whatever that means. For all he knows, even the crying baby being

hushed by a tired mom at a park bench could be an agent for them. Maybe it is a robot. *Okay, Arc thinks, now you're being paranoid.*

*That's what they want you to think,* another side of him says, but he dismisses that intrusive comment like swatting away gnats.

He finds her place, located more near Zuccotti Park than the center of Tribeca. He stops in front of the plaza, observes the bankers and investors on lunch walking up to the array of colorful food trucks, parked there indefinitely like trap door spiders. Not too long ago there was a contained revolution here. Something about the vampiric nature of capitalism knocking the equilibrium of a once healthy country off balance. Arc did not follow this revolution, but he got whispers of it on the news on the days he cared to read about something other than city ordnance. Had the Occupy Movement taken place in Dayton, Ohio Arc would truly not have batted an eye. He figures that Niet would have plenty to say on the space, which contained so much revolutionary energy in the form of a substituted barter economy, tents, and smelly people that it was like a kernel waiting to pop. Looking back now, Arc determines that he is still waiting for it to pop, not that he really cared about this stuff anyway. He has lived longer than most countries, experiences the rise and fall of kings and nations. He remembers when being gay was acceptable and then not and then it was again. Dissent like this does not matter much in the scheme of things, at least for Arcturus. Then again, he thinks, watching a man drop a platter of hot falafel on his suit and stifling a sadistic laugh, perhaps that's the only thing that matters. Social movements change the world, for better or worse. In the far epochs of time a single bullet killed Franz Ferdinand, Martin Luther King Junior, Kennedy. But it is social movements that influenced the path of the justice and morality, martyrs of a cause. Arc shudders, feels a sense of nausea rise from the pit of his stomach. Still images of The CEO's rotted and crooked teeth superimpose over the park.

Arc leaves the plaza and navigates to the address Niet provided. Sipping his coffee, he waits outside the building, one hand in his pocket because he believes that makes anyone look casual. The street is busy, with no sense of community. It makes sense why people go to brunch in friendlier places. Her apartment building is modern and shiny, like a new car. Arc himself prefers the more homey and artistic brownstones. He waits for thirty minutes and considers cold-calling her.

She appears in the front of the building another ten minutes later, her head buried in a phone. She is wearing a white tank top and shorts. A reusable water bottle is in her hands.

"Care about the Earth, huh?" Arc says, "Ironic considering that we'll be the only ones to see it turn into a cigarette."

Lucia looks up from her flurry of texts. She straightens herself, looks at Arc over the rim of her sunglasses. "Logically we are the only ones *to* care about it. But whatever, it doesn't matter."

"Why care about something if it doesn't matter?"

Lucia turns to him, "Why eat if you are only going to get hungry again."

Arc scoffs, surprised at himself for even attempting to contact this girl.

Lucia continues, “Well, you’ve officially stalked me into a conversation. You found me.”

Arc sips his coffee and slurps the melted water at the bottom of the plastic cup. He eyes a trashcan across the sidewalk and considers throwing it away but keeps it in his hands.

“Just do it, it doesn’t matter,” Lucia says.

Arc throws the cup away, puts his hands back in his pockets.

“You think that stance makes you look casual?” Lucia says.

Arc stops in front of her. “Why are you like this?”

Lucia shrugged. “You’re the one who stalked me. I could ask the same. I was fine seeing you at the wedding and the weird plant man.”

“Old man moon,” Arc corrects.

“Whatever,” Lucia says, “I was going to go along the South Street Seaport and listen to podcasts. I guess if you are here you can come with me. Unless you are going to kidnap me or something.”

“Why would I kidnap you?”

Lucia shrugs. “That’s usually the next logical step when you stalk someone.”

“Can you stop saying the word ‘stalk’?” Arc does not wait for a snarky retort, instead he says, “You seem awfully alright with my being here.”

Lucia pats her purse. “I have contingencies. I can leave this conversation whenever I want. I’ve paid off the rest of my rent for the year and I don’t like my roommates. I could be gone in thirty seconds.”

Arc pats his pocket. “I too have a contingency plan. Where do you wake up?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“I wake up in New Jersey.”

Lucia considers this. “I wake up in Vermont.”

“A Holiday Inn?”

“A Ritz Carlton.”

He originally thought this commonality would bind them together. Instead, Lucia stares him up and down and walks down the street, forcing Arc to follow like a stray dog. They walk into the Sea Port, which is a cobblestoned network of streets that were once heavily crusted with salt and now replaced with the padding of tourists. The river glistens, occupied by ferries to Ellis Island and people on jet-skis.

After a silence, Arc says, “You are just like me.”

“How so?”

“Reincarnate.”

“I suppose so.”

“How old are you?” Arc asks, then he offers: “I’m over a couple centuries old.”

“Excuse you,” Lucia says.

They walk along the water, partially shaded by the raised highway skating across the perimeter. They walk along the docks and Lucia leads them to the port. They sit on a pair of chairs looking out to Brooklyn. To their right, the large, dormant cranes of Red Hook, to their left the modern and art-deco obelisks from the Manhattan side and the industrial buildings on the Brooklyn side. A salty breeze pushed across the water. In the distance, the rumble of a rigger precedes its crossing.

The two of them were silent for a while, looking at the city in their own ways. For as difficult as Arc found Lucia, he finds silence easy with her, which is unexpected. He then sees her, a young twenty-something (affixed, obviously) just as alone in this giant city as he is, navigating in her own way through the cultic underworld. Much like his own trials during the ceremonial sacrifices, he is sure that the slit throat at the wedding and the burst chest-flower are of the easier methods of torture she has endured.

“I’m sorry I chased you down, Lucia,” Arc says, finally.

She shrugs. “I was waiting on it, actually. I figured you wouldn’t stop.”

“I needed to confirm you are real.”

“And in a way, validate that you are real?”

“I suppose so.”

Lucia says, “I’ve been doing this since before electricity, that’s for certain. I’ve forgotten how old I am, how many times I’ve woken up after dying.”

“It all blends together after two hundred. Anything after that and it gets depressing,” Arc says, “do you know the Red King?”

It feels easier talking about the Red King with Lucia.

Lucia gives him a sideways glance. “I’ve already told you I didn’t.”

“I thought you were being difficult,” Arc admits.

Lucia settles into her seat, drinks from her eco-friendly water bottle. She watches a couple jet skis go by. She hands Arc the bottle and urges him to drink, which he does. He tastes a burn down his throat, spicy and botanical. Hints of pine.

“Is that gin?”

Lucia nods, takes another sip, watches the world from behind her sunglasses. She says, “It was the Blue Queen. We were a small village in the mountains, and someone came by and slowly but surely the village fell apart. Piece by piece, my community accepted this strange man, but I remained suspicious. It was like watching a flower grow. You watch it every minute and it doesn’t change all that much but come back every couple of days and it’s a whole new plant. I was awake the whole time, watching parts of my community be replaced, and then I blinked I didn’t know how I got into the Blue Queen’s clutches-”

“But then you were kept there and tortured and made to be-”

“-her bitch, for lack of a better word.”

Lucia takes another swig of gin and hands it to Arc. He says, “Sounds like we had a pretty similar experience.”

“Indeed so,” she says.

“A Red King and a Blue Queen,” Arc says, scratching his cheek, “I wonder if there is a relationship.”

“I don’t care if they are siblings or lovers or both,” Lucia says, “I’m doing my time in servitude. All I care about is the end.”

Arc is beginning to become overwhelmed. He has wished for this moment all his life, spent many long nights crying over the wispy smoke of a cigarette, and now here it is, and he is not as ravenous for information as he thought he would be. Everything he wants to share with Lucia, thoughts, pains of loneliness, all this of this bottled of in Arc like a contained tornado. Instead, he shifts topics.

“How do you find your gigs?” Arc says, “I have a system but it’s primarily word of mouth.”

“Social media, actually.”

“I don’t trust social media.”

“You’d be surprised what people post on Craigslist and Backpages,” Lucia says, “sometimes there are weird orgies with *themes* of cult activity, sometimes there are actual cult sacrifices with *themes* of orgies. I’ve learned to parse them out accordingly.”

“Fascinating,” Arc says, “and they can’t track you, like after you are done?”

“Fake IP’s, but now that’s getting harder,” Lucia says. She turns to him, “You’re methods are old. The world’s going to leave you in the dust if you keep using archaic communications like that.”

Arc ponders this. He always strayed from technology for justifiable reasons. It is an ephemeral beast more frightening and mysterious to him than any inter-dimensional god. He

feels a fresh breeze run through his hair like fingers, and he looks out to the city. In a strange way, the Illuminati should have more affinity with Lucia, if this was her mode of finding business. Arcturus feels like a rusted model. He glances at Lucia's touch screen phone, with its whirlwind of apps and assault of text messages, and realizes he is like one of those brick phones. Or better yet, he felt like an old English knocker-upper to her atomic clocks. He is still getting paid in none-traceable envelops, and this is a practice that works for him now, had worked for him in the past, and intends to keep working for him in the future, pending his return to the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey.

Arc takes a breath and reaches for the gin. Distracting himself, he says, "What do you usually charge? Like, on average, without the special mutilation fees and such."

Lucia tells him, and Arc almost spit out the gin. "That is almost twice as much as my rate, even *with* the additional fees. How do you manage that?"

Lucia stares at Arcturus and says, "I'm a virgin. People pay more to sacrifice virgins. Haven't you read any horror novel?"

"Okay, one, this is not a horror novel so those rules should not apply. And two, you are most definitely not a virgin."

Lucia looks offended. She wrinkles her brows, purse her lips. "How rude of you to assume."

"You're telling me that you are older than the discovery of electricity and you are still a virgin? I've seen you with your self-obsessed brunch friends. You're more social than I am."

Lucia shrugs. "I was captured by the Blue Queen as a virgin. Every time I die, I wake up a virgin. People pay more to sacrifice virgins."

Arc scoffed. "Unbelievable. You were probably paid more for the wedding than I was."

"Probably," Lucia says.

"Okay, then I'll start saying I'm a virgin then," Arc folds his arms.

"Not the same. People don't want to pay for male virgins."

"That seems a little far-fetched, don't you think?"

"I don't decide how the market has worked through the epochs of time," Lucia says, as if that is the end of the conversation.

Lucia stands and starts to walk more down the harbor. To signify the depletion of the water bottle, she tilts it upside down. "Let's go to a bar, I know a place."

The South Street Seaport proper was a strange place, a simulacrum of the once prominent fishing and port village of centuries past. From a certain angle one could say that the outside remain frozen in time, the building maintain their hovel appearance (at least aesthetically), while



the shops now contained boutique stores and overpriced bars. Whatever tales of mermaids and pirates and long-lost loves over the sea died with the introduction of the highway.

They sit in the corner of a tiny bar. Lucia orders a gin and tonic and Arc a negroni. Their drinks arrive and Lucia, to his surprise, offers a cheer. They clink glasses, sip, and Lucia disappears temporarily into her playground of texts.

“You’re friends can’t be more riveting than me,” Arc says. When he gets no response he says, “Right? I mean I’m the first person like you you’ve probably ever met...right? Right?”

“Three right’s don’t make a left,” Lucia says, “and just so you know, one of my friends is having a housewarming party in a Williamsburg loft this Friday and I forgot her name so I’m trying to parse out info so I don’t look like a bitch who forgot her name.”

“Ah,” Arc says, “I’ve been there. What specific mutual friends do you have?”

“A few.”

“Any social events you’ve seen them at? Think. What drink did she have? What kind of laugh? Those are the tricks I use.”

Lucia considers this. “Huh. I feel like it’s Miranda. Thanks, Arc.”

Arc smiles. Then he says again, “Really, am I the first reincarnate you’ve ever met? Have you met others?”

Lucia puts down her phone facedown, even goes far enough to ignore the rumble of an incoming text. “You are the first.”

Arc sighs, “Then why are you not as emphatic about meeting me as I am you? Why, after I saw you at brunch, did you not want to see me?”

Lucia looks older in the dark lighting of the bar. Arcturus has seen glimpses of this version of her. She says flatly, “I felt as if confronting you would mean confronting a part of myself that I assumed was deeply personal and singular. It was alarming to meet someone like me. At first, I thought you were a test from the Blue Queen. Now I see that you were sent by a different deity, which is something I also considered. It appears we are but pawns in a greater chess game. Confronting you at such a vulnerable time would have shattered me, much like how mere mortals interact with our inter-dimensional beings, of which I am sure we have a shared vocabulary.”

Arc puts down his drink. “Wow. That was surprisingly prescient.”

“Surprisingly?”

Arc shrugs. The bartender comes by and he orders another round, keeping with the gin theme. “A very good display of emotional intelligence, is all.”

Lucia looks at him, offers a wry smile. “It’s a marvel at all that we both aren’t world weary by now.”

They finish their second round and head outside. The sky has turned into a purple swathe, a mixture of oranges and yellows. The sunset bounces off the high-rise obelisks.

“I’m going to go home now, Arc,” she says, then she offers to exchange phone numbers and he agrees, which elates him. He thought he was going to be chasing this girl all over town, covered in sweat, yelling profanities into the air. She continues, “Let’s get a drink again sometime. Coordinate gigs. Are you being killed by anyone in particular this month? You can tell me. I’m probably the only one you can tell.”

Arc shakes his head. “I’m taking some time off.”

Lucia nods, understanding.

Arc says, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Final one before I start getting anxious about missing the *Bachelor*.”

He says, “The people you keep around you are all going to get old and die. You will outlive them. There are two consequences. Either you, as the two-hundred plus age woman will grow tired constantly saying good bye, or they will grow tired of you not aging, pending if they don’t even question it. Why do you go through so much effort to connect yourself with others, when you know it will go nowhere?”

Lucia smiles, “Some things aren’t beautiful because they last, Arcturus. It’s because they don’t.”

And then she was off, leaving Arc in the middle the Seaport shops, the clouds drifting by and fading into stars.

## 6.

*Beads of sweat fall from Arcturus’s brows. Splinters dig into his hands and his feet are red and blistered. Monsieur Morneau looks over from the kiln, several jiggly chins clumping in disapproval. Arc feels this as if poked by smoldering iron, and promptly wipes his hands on his semolina-dusted apron and continues sweeping the bakery. He sweeps for another five minutes under the now prominent gaze of Monsieur Morneau, who has stopped kneading the fresh bread and watches Arc begrudgingly over folded arms.*

*“Vous voulez travaillez, ou non?”*

*Monsieur Morneau never uses the familiar cadence with Arc.*

*“Oui,” Arc says, “je suis desole, Monsieur Morneau. Je vais travailler plus.”*

*“Oui, oui,” Monsieur Morneau growls, “mon boulangerie, mon argent.”*

*Monsieur Morneau disappears down the hall, leaving Arc to finish cleaning up the shop alone. Arcturus is not used to the nature of people in the city. Their aggressive, direct attitude both confuses and surprises him. It seems that everyone in the city understands a set of rules to a game that allows them to thrive, and no one wants to tell Arcturus. It is very unlike his village,*

*which now had seemingly vanished from amidst the daisies and posies, burnt to cinders. After making his way up the mountain and falling to his knees, crestfallen, that all he had experienced in the Red King's keep was not a fever dream but as real as the mountains around him and the sky above him.*

*Arcturus is now lost in this world, and spent many months among the wicked, bent streets of Paris. No one is kind to him, and the talks of a revolution make the streets dangerous and frightening. There are times that he wonders if he was in another form of hell. He had come to Paris on a distraught whim, stowing away from the nearest port to the first available ship. He had not known that he would be coming here, into a place he had no idea even existed. He longed for his old life; his neighbors, his farm work, most especially his sister, Sophia. The memory kept him warm as he got sick over himself on the ship and tumbled onto the street. It took approximately two more weeks for Arc to shamble along the crooked avenues and find his way to the bakery, where Monsieur Morneau presided with crossed arms, standing like a judgmental God. No, not god, Arcturus first thought, he has seen one already.*

*One of his daughter's, Antoinette, took pity on Arcturus rummaging through the trash for a loaf of stale bread like a girl falling for a lost puppy. She gave him a fresh loaf and looked him up and down. Arc is tall and sturdy, his muscles well developed from tilling fields and carrying buckets of water, and she said to him:*

*“Au lieu du pain de la poubelle, aimeriez-vous y travailler?”*

*Arc does not know how to answer. He tries to apologize in his language but found his words unable to manifest. This kind woman possesses the power of the sun on his skin, a welcomed breeze on a summer day, cooling his body after tilling, his blisters torn from hoeing. Her voice, in her strange language, is soft, like cat's purr. He feels paralyzed by her beauty and kindness, but at once this shifted into shame and embarrassment. He had spent the last three weeks living among the city sewage, eating trash. He had wept so much in the dark hovels that his clothes were stained with grime. Once, he had gotten into a fight with another struggling man, and had been victorious over he skirmish, but not without some of the man's blood scabbing his lower waist. Plus, Arcturus could not speak this beautiful women's tongue. But he knew what love was. It was a fire that, for the first time since the Visitor, had defended against the creatures of the night which haunted him whenever he closes his eyes.*

*And Antoinette read Arcturus's soul, for she picks up a neighboring broom and thrusts it in Arcturus's hands, so that he holds the shaft and the bread, like two halves of a whole. This much Arc understands, and he swept and mopped and took out the trash in exchange for loafs of bread and occasionally some fruit. Within the month he was proving himself more capable, able to fix windowsills or chop firewood, all while picking up tidbits of language. Occasionally he will see Antoinette in the store, selling to customers, kneading dough, and they would smile at one another across the semolina splattered floor. Arcturus wanted to thank her, to say anything to her, really, but he is not confident in his language skills. The scarce feeble attempts to do so only lead to embarrassment. Soon, under Monsieur Monroe's hard-fisted guidance and Antoinette's gentle energy, Arcturus could sleep in the extra storeroom on top of the building*

*and was given fresh bread that reminded Arc of a long, strenuous day in the fields. It was weeks of this schedule before Arc realized that he did not picture the Red King's keep when he closed his eyes, or any of the horrors he experienced within.*

*Eventually he was able to have rudimentary conversations with Antoinette as they both did their respective duties in the shop. One day, he asked why she was so kind to him, and she responded that she recognized when people needed help and had lost their way.*

*"That's all?" Arc says, in broken French.*

*"That's all," Antoinette replies, in broken English.*

*It is now Sunday. They close the shop early once the townsfolk had gotten their share of bread for dinner. Arcturus lives upstairs, and Monsieur Morneau and his family lives in the house adjacent. Antoinette invites him to walk along the River Seine, and when Arcturus protests that her father would not approve, she flutters her eyes in such a way that makes Arcturus want to follow her into the ends of the Earth, armored against any force which might come to him. Besides, had been able to afford a modest shave, and most importantly did not smell of sewage.*

*They navigate through the intricacies of inadequate language, Arc teaching her English and Antoinette teaching him French. It is a shaky ride, but never an unstable one. They walk along the glistening river Sein, underneath the eaves of pubs and cafes. A man named Napoleon is beginning to enter the city, and according to most the people, they did not welcome him. He was already tearing up entire streets and rebuilding them to his design, headed by an architect named Hausmann. The way Antoinette talks sounds as if she is personally insulted by these changes, especially Hausmann, for he is Paris born like she is.*

*The days went like this. On Sundays Monsieur Morneau retires early, as did all the shop keepers. After cleaning up shop, Antoinette and Arcturus would walk along the Seine, looking at the people bathing in the green river in the shade of the Notre Dame. His French improved, as did her English. They got to know each other quite well. Antoinette was one of three siblings, although her brothers went off to war and her little sister was still a young child, hardly old enough to handle a bread pan. Their mother was a calm woman who anchored their father's fiery temperament, although after four child bearings and succumbing to whatever filth flowed openly in the streets, her abilities to do so have waned. It was understood, Antoinette said, that their mother is probably not long for this world, and she suspects that Monsieur Morneau spent his Sunday evenings in their room with her, knowing his days are limited. Now they walk arm in arm, and she asks Arcturus what he thinks of death, and if he has ever lost anyone.*

*"Everyone," Arcturus says, but he finds himself unable to elaborate.*

*Later that evening, on their walk back, they stand very close in front of the bakery. Arc sees this in slow motion, her delicate approach, her bated breath as Arc takes her waist and lays his lips upon hers. It was just one kiss, but enough that once Antoinette internalized the taboo of intimacy with one of her father's workers, she places a hand on her lips, giggles, and disappears into the house. Arcturus stands there, right underneath the wooden sign hanging from the eave, and touches his lips with his fingers, grazes his cheek where the heat of her soft hands embrace*

him. He thinks again of his old life, and thought perhaps, with whatever fire generates between the space of their bodies, he would be alright. His past can exist as a fever dream.

Not two months after these Sunday rendezvous with Antoinette did strange women appear in the shop. It is early morning and nearing winter. Dawn is just beginning to break from the black, star-studded cape over the sky. Their bodies are shaded under heavy, dark cloaks. There are four of them, and they paired off into two's as they entered the store, the bell signifying their entrance.

"Nous ne sommes pas encore ouverts," he says, picking a splinter from his hands. He has had early morning bread buyers in the past, and sometimes they only understand his accented directive after a repeat, so after the women stare at him from underneath their visors, he says it again: We are not open yet. Then, for whatever reason, he adds, "Je suis desolee".

The women stare at him. Their eyes glitter gold underneath the shade of their cloaks. They bring with them a cold wind carrying the scents of mildew and damp stone. Arcturus says they were not open a third time, and still they make no effort to leave. One of the pairs circle the bakery, moving as one, looking at the beams and rafts holding up the weak roof, examining the corners. Their heads move like birds: jagged and sudden. The other two stepped closer to Arcturus, where sees hands poking from their sleeves that remind him of the way the legs of spiders curl up when they die. Their skins are wrinkled as if dehydrated or old, and the color of parchment.

"Nous tu es observe," the one of the right says, "Arcturus."

"Vous me connaissez?" Arc says, observant that they were using the formal language.

"Oui," the left one says, in a voice that sounds as if dragged through gravel, "Arcturus, venu en bateau, travailler dans un boulangerie...vivre dans un boulangerie?"

The right one, her voice softer, like wind chimes in an abandoned church, says in English: "You are alone."

These women frighten him. The two in the back continue to circle the room, not looking at the day-old bread still on the shelf, instead looking at the floorboards as if a secret lay within. The two in front of him, the soft spoken one and the gravelly one, remains locked in his glance, hands limp at their sides. They possess a dream like quality to them. No, not that. More like a vortex, like looking into a deep, endless well. The orbiting pair approaches the other two and gestures to the breaking dawn. Wordlessly, the four of them group together again, arms so close to one another as to appear to be linked, and make their way out of the bakery, just as the black sky is turning a deep azure and the morning mist is beginning to clear.

Arcturus rubs his head, grabs a glass of water, and sits for a moment, watching the flames in the oven crackle and pop. How had they known him? They are surely not frequent customers here; Arcturus would have remembered them. Even if they were, how would they know him? Antoinette is the pretty face of the operation, the one who people chatted and the one who chatted to people. Arcturus is just the stupid muscle that could hardly speak the language, and

*when he does it is botched and awkward. Are they neighbors? No, Arcturus thinks in the flame, certainly not. This is a nice neighborhood, full of children. Monsieur and Madame Morneau reared all four of their children in this neighborhood, and their youngest daughter, who still went to school, walked to and from. These creepy women would be squeezed out like a weed.*

*Antoinette appears from the back hallway which connects the bakery to the Monsieur's house. Her presence alerts Arcturus to the passage of time which he became trapped, entranced by the lapping orange flames. She is due to begin her morning duties an hour after Arcturus wakes, and this lapse frightens him. She asks if he was alright, and Arc shakes himself to attention, mumbles something in English, and proceeds to continue with his tasks. He feels the concerned look from Antoinette but ignores it, the gnarled, wormy hands of those cloaked women imprinted behind every subconscious thought like a wart.*

*The shop closed early because it is Sunday, and even though Arcturus looked very much forward to his weekly strolls with the baker's daughter across the glistening River Seine, he could not help but wish the day remained as bright as ever, almost infinite. He pretends to complain about the slowness of the day when Antoinette expressed her own impatience, but Arcturus finds himself unexpectedly but most definitely afraid of the dark. These women came at dawn, when the mist of the morning still crawled along the cobblestones and underneath the gas lamps, but Arcturus could not find a logical way to differentiate their cold, dead presence with anything other than utter blackness. Eventually he asks Antoinette if she ever heard anything about the pale women in dark cloaks. Antoinette answers that she had not heard anything about these women, although in passing Monsieur Morneau, in a strange lightness only present on Sundays, enters their conversation. Ever since the magnetism between his daughter and the poor worker has been well known, as well as their weekly outings becoming accepted knowledge amongst his family, Monsieur Morneau has lightened up to Arcturus's existence. Arc suspects that Madame Morneau's ever encroaching crawl to the abyss might have played a role. This is all unspoken, of course, but one day Monsieur Morneau started referring to Arcturus in the informal terms and it has stuck ever since.*

*"Les femmes craniennes de la Batiment Noire," Monsieur Morneau said.*

*"C'est une fable, papa," Antoinette says to the Monsieur's shrug. He leaves to retire upstairs, and she redirects her attention to Arcturus, recognizing that he is struggling to keep up with these new words. She switches to her botched English, which was far better than Arcturus's botched French. "Do not let father frighten you. The Cranial Women of the Black Building are nothing but a fable, something to scare small children."*

*"The cranial women?"*

*"Oui. He told the stories to me and my siblings when we were misbehaving. They are long and willowy, and move as move throughout the streets, smelling of death and bringing with them a cold winter bite in their wake. They are bald underneath their cloaks. And blind."*

*Arcturus digests this information as he finishes his final sweep and Antoinette counted the tills. They split some old bread and fresh butter as they close the shop and proceed on their*

*date. Instinctually, their arm in arm promenading evolves to handholding, and people in their neighborhood started to refer to the two of them as a couple, waving to both the baker's daughter and their house servant as a package. It is a romantic narrative for them, Arcturus knows, and it no doubt helps with the business. Antoinette is lively, as usual, speaking of her recent thoughts on the revolution, on the muting of art, and the new avenues paved through the old streets as if a butcher took a meat cleaver to the cobblestones and beams. A fire erupted across the city sometime last week, and people were saying that it was an accident at a café. Antoinette hypothesized that it was a squashed peasant rebellion, and she was usually accurate about these things, as if she could feel the strings of society pulling and pushing on one another, like interlocked fingers fighting for right of way. Arcturus tries to keep up and listen, but he could not get his attention away from those ghastly women this morning in the bakery. Even now, the sky turns from blue to purple and now dark, with stars lining the skies. Amongst the thrush of evening café patrons, street musicians, and suitors looking for beautiful woman, Arcturus could not help but feel as if he has stepped into some mysterious, gaping maw.*

*"Someone will lose," Antoinette said, "and I feel as if it will be the people. Arcturus, are you listening? Bonjour... ca va?"*

*Arcturus snaps himself to attention. "Oui, Antoinette. Je suis contente."*

*"I'm speaking English to you," Antoinette said, "you look like you looked this morning, looking into the flame."*

*"Oh?" Arcturus says, realizing this was true. Then he unsheathes his most used phrase in French, with him since the beginning. "Je suis desolee."*

*"Non," Antoinette said, kissing him on the cheek.*

*Her kiss is hot, and her lips have enough force to gently push his face to the right. He smiles, feeling comforted, and in this motion his eyes drift to a passing alley. There, in the darkness, bony lines of white peak out from the black void in between the bricks. It looks like an illusion, disjointed geometry. When Arcturus blinks and assesses the whole picture, he sees the pale lines to be gnarled, spidery hands, leading into a cloak as black as the night, and popping underneath an ebon hood the exposed, tight-lipped jaw of what could only be a Cranial Woman. She stands erect and connects eyes with Arcturus, slowly raising a finger to her lips as if to keep a secret between the two of them.*

*In his mind, a soft voice of a polluted river: You are alone.*

*"Arcturus," Antoinette says, "est-ce que ca va?"*

*Arc tears his gaze from her glittering eyes. Images of that dazing flame in the oven collide with the haunting, dead gaze of the four Cranial Women in the bakery, standing over wicker baskets waiting to be filled with fresh bread. He starts to sweat and feel nauseous.*

*"Let's go home," Arcturus says, unable to translate, "I don't feel well."*

*Arcturus does not sleep that night in fear seeing the Cranium women in his dreams. He only gets scraps of slumber, grabbed like shredded cloth thrown into the air. It is restless and he would flash awake disoriented and covered in sweat. He feels their glinted eyes occupying the shadows, lurking behind every corner. Even the next morning he feels the impression of their cold, gnarled hands skittering up his spine like a frantic rat. It is still dark outside, and the fresh fire has heated up the storefront, but Arcturus does not leave the door ajar, even though sweat drips from his armpits and down his neck. Every now and then he would glance at the morning dark outside, fearing that he will see those creepy women in the shadows, fearing more that he would not be able to see them even if they were right in front of the bakery.*

*An hour later they arrived. Arcturus knows this because his breath became visible, as if he were standing outside in the mist of the Parisian streets. Space warps behind him in the same way that he would recognize someone else in the room, or when a customer came in without his knowledge. Arcturus braces himself, ready for their glinting eyes, their gnarled hands, the hint of whatever evil form lurks underneath their cloaks, as if the hands and the wrinkled, bald faces were nothing more than ornaments of something viler.*

*He turns, sees the quartet again. He cannot determine if it was the same group as yesterday, but he had the inclination that this is true. There is a familiarity about them, as if they had been observing him and now, they were greeting him like fallen angels. Instead of pairing off into two's like before, they now stood in a row, arms limp at their sides.*

*"Arcturus," the one in the middle right says, "embrace this honor."*

*"Honor?" Arcturus says, his own voice sounding distant. Clouds of his breath escaped his lips. His skin feels clammy, even though a fire is burning in an oven behind him.*

*"Honneur," the middle left one says, her voice sharp and high pitched, like shattered glass, "les batiment noires."*

*"You are alone," the two flanking women says in unison.*

*"Alone?" Arcturus says, bracing himself on the countertop.*

*His knees turn into jelly, his shoulders feel as if they are supporting the frames of the building, The sides of his vision encroached upon him in deep black, like spilled ink upon a canvas.*

*A long face and a bald, wrinkled head appear above him, followed by a cavalcade of duplicates peaking up like curious animals. They lean close, and Arcturus can smell the stench of rot and decay rolling from their black tongues, and Arcturus knew he is, as they previously said, completely alone.*

*The Cranial Women appears to have words wriggling in their scalps. Once unhooded, they all looked the same; gaunt faces, almost skeletal, a jewel like glint in their eyes. They are all bald, and have slightly oversized heads that remind Arcturus of a mushroom cap. In their wrinkled scalps the lines of cartography, move underneath their skin. The Cranial Woman surround Arcturus and whisper in a foreign tongue. It is not French and it was not English. It*



*sounds as if snakes were talking to each other, the sound of slithering tongues tasting the air over damp rocks. It is obvious; they were praying.*

*He tries to lift himself but is restrained by thick leather straps. Feeling the cold stone under his body informed him both that he has been stripped and he cannot move his neck. Piercing through the collective praying of his captors is the crystalline drips of water upon stone. Torches illuminate the room, which is full of pillars extending into an infinite length and bricks as black as the night sky.*

*Les batiment noire, the black building. Then, a random thought enters his mind like an illusion of comfort, an original thought that allowed him some distance from his current predicament: if they are underground, can they still be considered the Cranial Woman of the Black Building? A “black cellar” is more apt.*

*Arcturus thought of vocalizing this, even though he was not confident enough in his French to make a grammatical suggestion. He goes far enough to open his mouth against the restraints on his neck when one of the women appears from the shadows and hovers over him. She births a blade the shape of a thunderbolt from the depths of her inner sleeve, slices her own hand, prays to the fresh wound in the foreign, slithering tongue, and proceeds to wipe her open wound on Arcturus’s chest, painting him in thick, sticky coagulate. The praying rises to a crescendo, now in perfect unison. She plunges the jagged blade into Arcturus’s solar plex, as if trying to euthanize a rabbit. Arcturus’s eyes rattle and his tongue laps out of his mouth. The pain is unbearable, like someone turning him inside out. The Cranial Woman’s blood seeps into his open cavity, burning his exposed sinews and muscles. The worms writhing under her scalp starts to pulse like a beating heart, the clammy skin shining underneath the torchlight of the Black Building.*

*Arcturus claws at the air, his fingers scraping against the stone bed. The restraints cut into his wrists and legs. In the center of his chest is a gaping hole, burning with some strange blood, being filled by the collective chants of the High Priestesses’ daughters, sisters, mothers. His screams are drowned by these chants, which are beginning to sound like grateful weeping, and still the leaking ceiling drip-drip-dripped water onto the black stone.*

*He thinks of Antoinette. Her striking intellect, beautiful face, her wonderful heart. He pictured her face surprised at his absence, unable to answer the question as to where he, their once charity case, had vanished. Then her face morphs into the fire of the oven, and behind the trance of flame a face long forgotten. A red skeleton with glowing engravings, a bone scalp morphed into a crown, a flowing cape the color of blood, a flagstaff with his sister hanging limp, reduced to flapping in the wind.*

*“Mana,” the Red King says, his voice deep and heavy, a tidal wave drowning the pain that has befallen Arcturus. It is just one word, and Arcturus clings onto this horrible image and the memories he has thought to be long buried like a lost sea and lighthouse.*

*Arcturus awakes in a forest, dried tears flaking down the corners of his eyes. He brings his hands to his chest, checking for the cavity, and finds only intact skin. Then he rests his head back into the long grass, stares at the sun in the interlaced branches of the trees, and weeps.*

#### Part 4 // Reflecting Fractals

##### 1.

It has been three months since Arcturus has put his ceremonial outings with the various underworld cults on hiatus. He has read once that incredibly rich CEO's will sometimes take an entire year's worth of vacation to go eat dolphins or battle their giant robots or whatever rich people do. He pictures his own hiatus to be like that, especially since, all things considered, he has enough raw cash in a duffel bag underneath his bed to last him several lifetimes, no pun intended. It does bother Arc that Lucia makes more than he does on some gigs. Not that he can really complain. He is never short of clients, but he does get little whispers of fear on his psyche that if a client has the choice between him and Lucia, then they would most definitely go the virgin route. It is an indisputable boon. It takes Arc the next two days after their meeting for him to reclaim his empathy—it was not like Lucia chose this life, either.

Arc realizes that his relationship issues are more frightening than the Illuminati or the Red King, simply because he could avoid confronting them. He could continue to neglect The CEO's job offer, and if he does not die on a regular basis and evoke some eldritch deity than the Red King surely will visit his dreams, screaming about the due mana. Arc hopes the Red King, this being who exists in between dimensions, understands that Arcturus has been compromised by the card flipping, coin tossing Illuminati, and is actively trying to find a way to protect Arcturus. It is like an employer protecting an employee from harm, like health insurance. At least that was how Arcturus rationalizes it.

And then there is the Blue Queen, who heralds Lucia. He wondered what horrors she has encountered in the Blue Queen's keep and if her grotesque torture servants went to tremendous lengths to break her. He figures this was the case, and he is so proud of himself for feeling absolute empathy for the only person who understands his mortal dilemmas that he needs to shower the humanity off him, such is the utter unfamiliarity of these feelings.

He finishes breakfast and starts to do the dishes, keeping his phone pinned between his ear and his shoulder as he takes a soaped sponge to a frying pan. Niet is confirming their date for the Metropolitan Opera and the reservations for a nearby restaurant over the phone. Arcturus likes this expedient quality about her. Niet is a woman who gets things done. After hanging up, he leans over the sink and sighs, channeling an unwelcome blossom of sadness. Their argument a couple weeks ago was about the inevitability of their breakup, which had then spiraled into a metaphysical argument about time as a pluralized construct. As their connection to one another grows, so does their collective resistance to asking the pragmatic question: if things go well, Arcturus will most certainly watch her die from old age, or she will grow bitter that he has maintained his youth. Her god queen of filth Sch'yth (of which was only referred to as "The

Queen” in the conversation, but was heavily implied) has many restorative powers to bestow upon her proud and devoted followers but provide immortality she does not. At first Arcturus was upset that, if given the option, she would not choose reincarnation or immortality to be with him, and then after closer consideration, he would not choose it for himself either.

But the thought still saddens him and he considers again the actual light at the end of this horrible tunnel. If he submits completely to the Red King’s will, then he would be allowed to die. Even if Niet isn’t the one, Arc could know that he could grow old with *someone*. Or kill himself for real. The choice was his, and this fact was empowering enough for him to renew his hiatus, even though the thought of the Illuminati in his motel room makes him feel like spiders are crawling up his arm.

Finishing up the dishes and ow feeling appropriately glum for such a beautiful summer Sunday, he goes to make a brunch martini (which is a regular martini, only in the morning), and eyes a large “X” on his calendar for this coming Friday. He has forgotten that he booked this gig several years ago. This had slipped his mind for a variety of reasons, but on Arc’s own defense it is because the ritual was, for all purposes, *boring*, and this was considering the premise that boring typically meant a quick and painless death. The only fascinating aspect about the Twinsday was the inter-dynamics between the dual clans who have to gather every couple of years in the ruins of an old church in the middle of nowhere. Both halves worship Gemini, but that is the only stretch of a commonality between them. They are, in their own identifiers, light/dark, order/chaos, non-Persephone/Persephone seasons. Arcturus finds this last one a bit strange, considering the intellectual legwork needed to even provide such a comparison. When he was first introduced to them, he had thought that a great many sacrifices would take place, that he would watch two warring clans battling for the resurrection of what they consider their own, true face of Gemini. Perhaps, at one time, they were. Instead, the entire event was as awkward and listless as a family gathering full of people who never see or want to see each other. Even while tied up with half of his body covered in tar to represent the night, he managed to hear snippets of judgmental gossip coming from both sides. He was able to parse out who Miranda on the light side was, because the dark faction kept whispering comments to one another about how her purple dress and added weight makes her look like Grimace from the McDonald’s cast (and she did). Arcturus felt no more important than the obligatory pig roast at a cookout, and after hours of hearing both sides make passive aggressive remarks at one another, he realized that he was only being sacrificed because it was one of the only longstanding traditions that seems to offend no one in attendance. He was, however, excited to see which face of Gemini would roam the Earth until the next festival (it does not predictably alternate, he had learned through snide remarks from each side) but the reveal could only be akin to as exciting as the American holiday Groundhogs’ Day: no one was really there for the results, but it was prominent office talk whenever the weather got cold.

The faces of Gemini are also very cheap, and Arcturus was pretty sure he only rebooked them because he was feeling at a low point and took whatever job security he could get at the time.

The “X” winked cheekily at Arcturus, creeping out of its little box and into his mind, helping him find his resolve. He does not care that the Illuminati might be in the bedroom with him like some sexual predator, he would fulfill the Red King’s mana and bring about the apocalypse. Then he and Niet could be together and die like two normal people.

\*\*\*

Much like a couple years ago, Twinsday smells like damp rocks and funnel cakes. The Lumens and the Nocturnes could not make their tribal commitments more obvious, wearing golden yellow robes on Arc’s right and pitch cloaks on his left. They are in the ruins of a large church, buried deep in the Red Wood forests. Nature had started to reclaim the stone pillars, strangling the foundation like a vice grip, poking through jagged teeth of stained glass. The ceiling has caved in, and the midevening sky, blue and orange, looms over the procession. Twinsday always takes place between 4PM-6PM, the sweet-spot between day and night. Arcturus has forgotten how swift this event is. The two sides sit opposite one another, eating roasted pig and grilled corn, their faces forever leering at their opposites across the no man’s land which was once the center aisle of the church. They sit on moss encroached church pews, but somehow, they had managed to take in foldable tables that one would typically find at a picnic.

Arcturus watches over them like a sentinel, gagged and bound in the typical fashions of a sacrifice. His hair was longer a couple years ago, and he has slightly more muscle because that was the summer he found gym going women particularly attractive. There was no way that the Lumens, who had won the coin toss of Gemini’s actualization four BBQ’s running, would recognize him as the same sacrifice. The one who he had booked with was old, and probably died anyway. Last gig he danced in front of galactic lamb god, now he was nothing more than furniture, a ritual symbolic of the only “safe” zone between these two passive aggressive collectives. Arcturus hears snippets on the inevitable moments of cross-pollination between them, such as at the Kool-Aid station and the buffet. Such snippets include:

“Oh, Bethany, you’ve done really well considering all your challenges this past year.”

“Oh, James, I’m sorry, I completely forgot you were coming.”

“The potato salad you brought has a lot of...character.”

This really helps Arcturus get through this event, because he is beginning to feel the awkward (and maybe sexual?) tension between these two-sides of the same coin by osmosis. It is like watching a comedian sink on stage. Then, after dinner, he waits patiently for the head Lumen and Nocturne to rise from their respective camps and make their way to the procession. Fittingly, they are twins, each scabbier and flabbier than the other. They waddled up to the stage and, as the light visage of Gemini is the one to walk the Earth while the other face naps deep within, such was the expectation of the successful clan leader to begin to the procession. When the wrinkly Lumen speaks, Arcturus is able to spot several less than tactful looks of disgust from the other side.

“Family and...colleagues,” he croaks, embracing them all but clearly standing on the side which accepts him, “we meet on this wonderful Twinsday to embrace our two-faced deity. May Gemini be awake and roam the Earth as a breathing force in all of us, but may Gemini also sleep, and remind us of the restorative power of hibernation. We must not take for granted that the light side has chosen to embrace us with its presence, just like we cannot *assume* that the dark face of our beloved Gemini is a false one.”

This is received with a series of hollers from the Lumens, who jangle their jewelry like a group of people waving away a ship. The Nocturne’s made no effort to hide their grimaces and groans, but to the Grand Lumen’s credit, he ignores them.

He continues: “We approach the precipice of this night, where the great Gemini can materialize again. With this, we, the Lumens, accept the task of finding the sacrifice, as we had the last *four* times.”

He gestures to Arcturus, who plays into his queue of squirming and crying. He hears one of the Nocturne’s drop the remark that the Lumen’s had gotten their sacrifice at the discount aisle. At once Arcturus develops a favorite half of this awkward ceremony. The Grand Lumen retrieves a crooked blade from underneath his cloak and starts to approach Arc, and Arc is rooting for him.

“Wait,” the Grand Nocturne growls, the flaps of his lower chin trembling, “we have brought our own sacrifice.”

The Grand Lumen pauses mid stride. “Hm?”

The Grand Nocturne directs his attention to his side, “Bring our sacrifice for Gemini!”

“What are you doing?” The Lumen says, “We only need one sacrifice. These are the rules.”

“Well maybe we can try something different.”

“No. No! These are the rules, Donald. We bring a sacrifice and Gemini reawakens on its own accord.”

“Well maybe it’s *because* your side brings the sacrifice, Jerry. Ever thought of that?”

There is another thing which unifies both sides, it seems: a penchant for drama. Watching both sides ricochet from the sparring Grand Priests is like watching a tennis match.

“Don’t be a sore loser, Donald.”

“A sore loser? So, it is about winning, isn’t it? Mom was right, that’s all you ever cared about.”

“She loved me more anyway, you old fool.”

“Old? We’re twins, idiot,” the Grand Nocturne pinches the bridge of his nose and collects himself. He returns his attention to the crowd and instructed them to bring forth their own sacrifice.

Arcturus tries his best to swear amidst the gag. He already knows who it is.

Two figures in black and dark blue cloaks dragged Lucia down the aisle. They bring her up to the stage and it was then that both she and him lock eyes.

“What are you doing here?” He says, voice muffled.

“What are *you* doing here?” She says, equally blocked.

The Grand Nocturne nods appreciatively at Lucia, who is positioned to stand bound and gagged next to Arcturus. “Behold, Gemini! The tribute from the Nocturne’s, and the Nocturne’s only. Embrace our beautiful and young maiden and see how our gift trumps the sallow and rubbery tribute that your lesser worshipers the Lumens have brought.”

“Excuse me?” Arcturus says, but his words are jumbled.

The Grand Lumen stomps his foot, points a pale sausage finger at his twin brother and then at Arcturus. “This is not right. You can’t just bring your own sacrifice!”

The Grand Nocturne wrinkles his nose, gives a sideways glance to Lucia. “Let’s let the people decide, brother. Everyone, do you want to sacrifice this willowy man, or this beautiful virgin?”

Arcturus blinks. *Rubbery, sallow...please just kill me.*

Flutters of conversation pop around both clans, whispering of the advantages of killing a beautiful virgin as opposed to the lower quality man wrapped in wire and gagged with a rag on the stage. For the first time all evening, both sides appear to agree, and now Arcturus is legitimately anxious, fueled entirely by the absurdity of the situation. He wriggles in his binds, swears at the audience, the old twins, and even Lucia. He even tries to plead with the Grand Lumen, who is more starch about tradition than the rest of these sellouts, but his puffy eyes already tell Arcturus his mind has been made up.

The Grand Nocturne shouts, “The girl it is then? All in agreement? Grand Lumen, do you confer?”

The Grand Lumen deflates and returns the blade in his gold trimmed sleeve. He relents, “Whatever Donald. Do what you want, like you always do.”

The Grand Nocturne smiles, his teeth having that ghastly, spooky quality of fallen trees poking from a swamp. He takes out his own blade and walks up to Lucia, who now fake cries and gets her face the color of an apple. She is pleading, resisting his grasp, starting to use that burst of strength when people realize their lives depend on it. The Grand Nocturne slices her jugular, steadily sawing as blood spurts over the altar and stains his black robes. Lucia stops breathing. Her head goes limp, and with a squishy sound of torn flesh, the Grand Nocturne lifts

her head from her neck, showing the decapitated skull first to the audience and then to his brother. Lucia's eyes roll absently in her skull, her hair clumped together with blood. Her tongue sticks out of her lower lip, and if Arcturus was not so surprised she was here in the first place he would have snickered at how cartoonish a decapitated person looks, especially her. Not a conversation for brunch, that's for sure.

The altar begins to glow underneath the open roof of the church. Colors of emerald, ruby, and sapphire shine like little candle ribbons.

The Grand Nocturne returns to the front of the stage. Then he says to his brother, "If this works, next time have the wisdom to bring your own. Gemini will pick which one it hungers for more."

The Grand Lumen eyes Arcturus with disappointment. "Now what do we do with him, then?"

"We kill him, Jerry. He's seen too much."

"Too much indeed," the Grand Lumen says.

The colors on the altar flash a shining gold and a deep purple. The foundation of the church begins to shake, and there is the sound of breaking branches and trees, the evidence of something growing behind him, and growing large. Arcturus wants to see what side of Gemini manifests tonight, but he cannot turn his neck. Both the Lumens and the Nocturnes offer no indication, equally in awe at the experience.

Someone gasp and pointed, but the Grand Lumen had taken a blade into Arc's temple before he could see what they are pointing too.

## 2.

Arcturus opens his eyes to the popcorned ceiling in his room at the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey. His first thought, after stretching and vomiting into a nearby wastebasket (which sometimes happens after a gig), was that he still has no idea which face of Gemini materialized into this dimension. The light side of the eldritch god looks like a large infant with a porcelain face, crying tears of gold as it leaves tyrannosaurus sized imprints around the forest and neighboring towns. If Lucia's sacrifice did influence the other side of Gemini to materialize, Arc is a little disappointed that he did see it, hoping that it was the same bumbling idiot just wearing an "Eyes Wide Shut" mask or something. If the Nocturne's ploy of shattering tradition and bringing their own sacrifice works, then their entire cult community really has some hard conversations coming their way. Still, he cannot believe he found her at yet *another* gig, and something about how it plays out leaves a bad taste in his mouth, much like the globules of vomit lurking in the back of his throat. He has a mind to call but decides to go into the bathroom to wash up and take an aspirin first.

It is not ten minutes later that Arcturus realizes he is alone in the room when he reincarnated. Instinctively, he grabs a complimentary toothbrush for defense and started to scour his tiny room for strange people in business suits. He pulls back the shower curtains, looks in the closets, checks underneath the bed, looks in both directions down the hall. Nothing. Arc lays back down, calming himself. Then, accepting that he is truly alone, picks up his phone and dials Lucia. He is not sure how long it takes for her to reincarnate, but she wakes up in a far nicer place in upstate New York, so at least they were in the same time zone.

“Hello?” Lucia says over the receiver, her voice groggy.

“What the hell was that?” Arc says, ignoring both the coincidence that they reincarnate at approximately the same time, and that he has probably woken her up.

“Arc?” Lucia sighs, “Let’s regroup in a couple hours.”

“That was my gig, Lucia. I scheduled those years in advance.”

“It’s not like you aren’t getting paid.”

“That’s not the point,” he says, “you weren’t supposed to be there. That was *my* gig.”

“Okay, first, watch the attitude. Second, you don’t claim anything. I didn’t know that I was the second sacrifice, or that I was breaking the rules.”

Arc leans against the pillow, rubs his temples. “I suppose I wouldn’t.”

“Alright, are we good now?” Lucia groans, “I need my sleep. I’m meeting people in Tribeca today.”

Arc rolls his eyes, feels an onset of nausea. It comes in waves. “I apologize.”

“It’s alright, I would be upset if the roles were reversed too.”

Arcturus lingers on Lucia’s reaction for quite some time after they hang up. She may look the age of a young twenty-something, but she has the emotional intelligence of a woman who had seen so much and managed to grow from it. The layers of emotional scar tissue actively lurking underneath those perpetually judgmental brows must be a heavy burden. Past seventy or so, everyone is more or less the same age, but for Arcturus, at least he can pass as a thirty-year-old. Lucia was right, of course. It is not like she could have planned to infiltrate Arc’s gig with the Gemini clan.

Arcturus washes up, checks under the bed for the Illuminati again for good measure and makes his way to the lobby. He helps himself to a complimentary apple, which is mealy, and cup of black coffee, which has a slightly paper-cup aftertaste. He pictures Lucia rising from a feather downed bed, stretching into the sunlight from a room forty stories up. She pads on slippers, complains about her head while eating the complimentary chocolate covered strawberries, and gets full room service. Arcturus grunts and waves these envious thoughts away. Like Lucia, Arc has also been around for a long time. He knew himself enough to know that he never disliked his arrangements before. This Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey, and the accompanying



colonial inn before it, and the thick brush of forest before that, was never anything to complain about. Then again, Arc thinks...then again.

Lyle surprises Arcturus by consuming both a glass of morning orange juice and a greasy fried chicken sandwich akimbo style. How he manages to work with both hands occupied is beyond Arc, and he wishes he did not get distracted by his own thoughts so he could see how and when Lyle managed to present to Arc his address-less mail while holding both food and drink. Arc opens the envelop and finds the payment to roughly fifty percent of what was agreed upon. Attached is a tarot card featuring the dual faced god Janus, forever looking into the day/night, the future/past. Written in sharpie:

*We regret to inform you that we are deducting a considerable amount because of the unforeseen circumstances. You did not fulfill your part of the contract, and we had to make room to accommodate the appropriate sacrifice. Best of luck in your future endeavors.*

Arcturus realizes he has crumpled the tarot card in his palm when his knuckles have gone white. He pockets the cash, his teeth grinding. He keeps reminding himself that this is not Lucia's fault, and that he should be frustrated with the circumstance and the cult which hired him. But it is still not fair! Arc needs to move so he fixes himself another cup of coffee from the dispenser, fighting against the encroaching thought that Lucia might be served an espresso right out of the hands of some beautiful maid who sole job is to serve espresso out of her cupped hands. He presses the button, still holding the tarot card in his palm, and waits for the black bean liquid to spurt like a burst oil pipe into his Styrofoam cup. Instead of a torrent, only a drip comes out, no more than a sad stream from a hardly connected faucet.

"Sorry," a man at the station says, stirring copious amounts of sugar into his own coffee, "guess I got the last one. They'll replace it soon enough."

He waddles off to his table. Arc stands there, looking at the sediments at the bottom. He places the tarot card in the cup and throws it in the trash. Arc realizes that it is just coffee, and even more so is fortunate enough to have enough money to be able to tank this sudden decline of profits. Even if there is no payment, the mana for the Red King is the true win, and at the very least...

Arcturus stares at the coffee resting atop a Twix Bar wrapper and what he hopes isn't a used condom. Begrudgingly, he dips his hands into the cup, skims his fingers on something sticky, and picks up the crumpled and coffee-stained tarot card.

*You did not fulfill your part of the contract, and we had to make room to accommodate the appropriate sacrifice.*

Sure, Arcturus has gone to be sacrificed, but he technically was not sacrificed. Just worthlessly murdered. Zilch. Nada. Lucia swooped in like a pelican on the hunt, stealing not most of the profits made, but the nectar of Mana that will send Arcturus to a lovely death. Arcturus had this gig lined up for years, and Lucia was probably approached by the Nocturne's only a week ago. He keeps reminding himself that it is not Lucia's fault, and that he was furious

at the situation, but the lines between the two becoming as blurred as to whether there is a used condom at the shoddily kept coffee bar.

Arcturus returns and asks Lyle for a cab.

“You ain’t going to open up the other mail?”

“Pardon?” Arc says.

Lyle scratches his beard with the wrist holding the chicken sandwich. He guides Arc’s attention to the post card on the counter. He must have missed it when opening his payment. It is another “I love NY” post cards, but instead of showing the red stairs of TKTS and the neon spires before it, the card shows the Brooklyn Bridge framed by two buildings in DUMBO. Arc knows exactly who it was from.

Arcturus:

Please do not receive our method to contact you with offense. We want to respect your space with the same confidence that you will respect ours.

We are sure that you are disappointed with the outcome of your last endeavor. Q: Are you at fault? A: No. We recognize that it is not your fault, however, we counter, does your employer?

The world orbits on a pin, Mr. Arcturus, moving with or without you. Q: Can you see yourself as sustainable in this business of yours? Q: Can you see yourself maintaining your lifestyle when natural competition threatens your once stable methods? Q: Do you believe the world is changing? Q: Can you change with it?

Our offer remains open. Join us and you will get your mana. Ideas are stronger than gods.

Sincerely,

C & L

Arc stares at the postcard, feeling just as invaded as the last time they contacted him. This melds into his frustration and forms a black pit in his stomach, infecting his mind. It takes a significant amount of self will not to crumble this post card like he does the Tarot Card, and he hates himself for viewing their message to him as an artefact worth keeping. He asks Lyle for a cab and it arrives fifteen minutes later.

He says, “See you in a couple months?”

But Arc does not answer.

\*\*\*

Arcturus leaves the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey in strange spirits, which is becoming a norm as of late. The Brooklyn post card feels heavy in his front pocket, but what he really feels is the ghostly imprint of the tarot card on his palm, the words shoddily explaining the lack of a full payment and the loss of mana for the Red King. Like he has just worked for free.

He sleeps with Niet that night, staying at her apartment. They watch a movie and Lothario cuddles between them, looking like a miniature black hole. He knows that she could sense he is not in the right mindset, and when she presses him, he answers a little too snappy, which makes their night together a little awkward. He apologizes, and meant it, and the next morning knew better than to let one slip up get the better of him. It was all ups and downs, Niet told him, and Arcturus had always come out on top so far.

The next gig is a couple of months later. Squid-dancers of the Baltic Sea had their ceremony on the beach, surrounded by tiki flames and the ancient architectural remains of their old city which sleeps at the bottom of the waves. The blocks have strange markings and are all smooth, reflecting the water and the setting sun with a distorted, fun house quality. The Squid-dancers wear their funny hats, which is really just a live squid taped to their head and wrapped the dangling tentacles on their own arms with splints of wood made from palm trees and cedar. They eat mollusks and speak to one another in a language which reminds Arc of a yodel. Arc feels good; he was initially anxious about this gig going wrong. Even now, ready to be burned at the stake and then consumed in the name of Gob'th, the great squid god who will bring them to the drowned city of their birthright. The incident with the Gemini cult was a snafu, nothing more. Just as Arcturus is about to be set aflame, some of the tribal members came with a secondary sacrifice, reasoning that their population has grown since the last ceremony, and that they now required *two* sacrifices.

“The virgin for the elders! Let her youthful beauty be the first bite, let us offer her!” One of them shouts, wiggling his arms and body, rattling the large eyes of the dead squid atop his head.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Arc says.

Lucia is pushed onto the stage and almost immediately set aflame so that Lucia cannot even get her bearings. The sacrifice was stolen so swiftly from Arcturus that he starts to scream in anger. He stamps his feet on the unlit coals underneath him, watching Lucia’s skin melt and slide off her bones. *That is supposed to be me*, Arc thinks, watching as two large men in equally silly squid hats take Lucia’s still smoldering body to a picnic table nestled right on the shoreline, *I was supposed to be set on fire and consumed*.

\*\*\*

The next morning, he wakes and calls her, not waiting to check if the Illuminati was underneath his bed or lurking down the hall. “What was that?”

“What was...” Lucia sounds like she is still waking, “oh, was that you with those squid people? I’ll be honest, Arc, I thought I saw someone else on the platform with me and right before I was set aflame, I remember hoping that it wasn’t you.”

“I waited on that platform for six hours, unable to even scratch my bug bites. I watched a tarantula crawl over my feet, and I could do nothing about it. Here I was, thinking I was the main event, only to be the cold cut platter at a wedding while you are the prime rib-”

“Get ahold of your metaphors,” Lucia says to Arc’s deaf ears.

“-then you come and...”

“Are you getting paid at least?”

“I hope so, but it’s not about the money.”

“It’s about the mana,” Lucia says.

\*\*\*

Rinse. Repeat. Four weeks later Arcturus is scheduled to be buried alive by the Alchemist Committee, an almost exclusively subterranean group of people who live in the unused service tunnels underneath Portland, Oregon. His body is going to decompose on a special mulch which will function as the placenta to Chemical King Korvath, who the committee will raise as an infant. Upon getting his baggage from the airport, Arc checks his phone.

“No need to come,” a phlegmy voice says, “sorry for the late notice.”

“Excuse me? I just landed.”

“You will be reimbursed.”

“What happened? Is the ritual off?”

Heavy breathing on the other side denotes an attempt at silence.

Arcturus continued: “You found someone else, didn’t you?”

Silence tells him the answer. Instead, he hangs up and dials Lucia.

“Hi Arcturus.”

“Are you in Portland right now?”

“Why does it matter?”

“So is it a yes?”

Lucia pauses, which tells Arc what he needs to hear. He says goodbye to her, careful not to use her as an emotional punching bag. He goes up to the counter to purchase a return flight and considers killing himself via bleach, thinking that it would just be faster to wake up and see

Lyle's bright and wrinkly face. He would have done it too, had he not considered what pandemonium he would cause if he poisoned himself in the middle of a duty-free convenience store.

Two weeks later Arcturus finds himself preparing to leave Brooklyn for another gig. Before departing, he calls Lucia.

"Okay," he begins, "I'm going to Albuquerque for a gig. With all professional respect, can I not expect to see you there?"

"Are you referring to the Malactimites of the Red Dust Order?" Lucia says, then adds, "I'm sorry Arcturus but I'm afraid I'm already there. I thought they would have told you."

"This is the third time in four months that you've sideswiped these clients from me," Arc says, kicking at the wall.

"Sideswiped?" Lucia said, "This is business, Arc. I need the money and I need the mana for *my* eldritch employer. If the roles were reversed, would you feel as indignant?"

Arc grits his teeth. He looks at his calendar, sees the X's in these past weeks, slashed out with an aggressive blue sharpie to signify failed gigs. It dawns on him that it has been literal months that Arc has worked for free, all because a part of the market he thought was his own was being eaten up.

"You're a parasite, Lucia."

"That's not fair."

"Neither is what you are doing. I can't expect you to understand."

"I'm trying to empathetic, Arc. However, you are really testing my patience."

"Enjoy ABQ," Arc says, hanging up.

He pours himself a drink and leans back on his couch, staring at the overnight bag full of cheap clothes he intended to die in. It is competition, Arc thinks, simple market share. Sure, Lucia was a beautiful girl, and the purity aspect helps get her a lot of gigs, but Arcturus is good at this kind of job, and has been for over two centuries. He is poignant, a terrific actor, and well organized. He is the best ceremonial sacrifice he knows. In fact, over one hundred eldritch forces and interdimensional beings would not even be wreaking havoc in this plane of existence or elsewhere if not for Arcturus. The Illuminati is right, Arc was the foundation for their existence.

Still feeling down on himself, Arc calls Dudley. He usually never calls him for updates on the Great Flood, but he needs to know his role of retainer is at the very least secured.

“It’s actually a lot bigger than when you last visited. You should stop by sometime,” Dudley says.

“Well, it hasn’t rained so that’s probably a good sign. No leaking from above?”

“It’s the Great Flood, man. We all know it. The great elders are practically living here now, whispering incantations to it day and night.”

“Sorry for being so cynical.”

“It’s important that at least one of us is,” Dudley says, which is a surprisingly prescient statement from him. “Oh, that reminds me, I think we found your female half. You know, for the ark.”

Arc chuckles. “Okay, shoot.”

“We think you’ll really like her.”

Arc thinks of Niet, and wonders if she’ll have a good attitude regarding Dudley’s arrangement. The implications of two humans on an ark were not hard to follow, but Arc could leverage the probability of their failing in predicting the Great Flood with enough confidence to assume that it will not be a problem.

“She kind of looks like that girl you harassed when we went to brunch that one time.”

Arcturus freezes, the glass of his whisky resting on his lower lip, the vapors twirling into his nostrils. “What’s her name?”

“Lucinda, I think?”

“You think.”

“Look, man, my job is to find a compatible person based on a multitude of metrics, like high calculable metrics. Her name is like, ancillary.”

Arc nods, grits his teeth. “Thanks for letting me know, Dudley. I look forward to begin on the Ark.”

“Ha!” Dudley says, his voice booming from the receiver, “Arc on an ark. Never made that connection. If you were to fly on a rainbow, you’d be Arc on an ark riding an arc.”

“Riveting, my friend. A true poem.”

The sarcasm is lost on Dudley, which tells Arc that he was in good spirits. He does not tell him that he was dating Niet, and that he was pretty certain she is a perfect partner for him. He decides to let Dudley have his moment, even though he is certain that the girl is Lucia. If patterns

prevail, the Cult of the Genesis would find that Lucia does not age in only a few years' time, and then offer her a retainership much like the agreement they have with him. Then they would be stuck together, forever in competition, Arc permanently the underdog in this unwanted struggle to be ceremonially sacrificed for mana.

Dudley breaks Arc concentration by asking if he wants to get a beer. Arc declines, saying that he has plans that night, and he does. He is staying with Niet tonight after an extravagant three course meal in Little Italy, and they are planning on walking home wine drunk with some gelato. Just anticipating his time with her is enough to calm his nerves and incite him to action. His job might be faltering with a parasitic Lucia always biting at his heels or snatching the meal from right underneath him, but Lucia does not have Niet. This much is true.

\*\*\*

Niet wears a ruby colored dress stops right at her thighs. It is classy and sexy, and when she walks the charms on her fingers and the inverted pyramids of her earrings refracted light, making her look like a prism. Niet is naturally beautiful, and if Arc does not want to be biased, all he needed to do was walk down the energetic street and focus a little harder on all the single men and women subtly checking her out, drive by style. Arc has a high opinion of his own looks, but he knows that a lot of this confidence comes from his own basin of overindulged self-worth. It is no doubt, however, that Niet is classically beautiful, chiseled from pure onyx.

They embrace one another and Niet sniffs his neck. "New cologne?"

"Can you guess the scents?"

"Cedar on the upper nose, orange blossom on the bottom nose."

"What a nose!" He says, interlacing his hands with hers, "You should be one of those drug sniffing dogs."

"Oh please," Niet chuckles, her pearly teeth a half moon in the street, "I've done enough of that already that I'd be smelling myself."

"A past life?" Arcturus says.

"We've all had them," Niet says, "some more than others, no doubt. Wouldn't you agree, old man?"

They walk into the restaurant and are led to a table. It is a busy Friday night, and the city was bustling. Lanterns scale like vines across a kinetic New York City Street, full of buskers, dancers, and rival restaurants hosts trying to poach tourists off the street with an "authentic" Italian meal. The orchestra of the city plays out before them, a mix of car horns, guitar strings, and heckling.

“Authentic,” Niet says, sipping her freshly poured glass of cabernet. She speaks with her sultry, dreamy voice, which tells Arc that she is simply speaking out loud. “Yeah, right.”

“At one point,” he says, “back in the day when it was really referred to as Little Italy. Now it’s just a street. The culture is...commodified.”

Niet raises an eyebrow, “Someone has been paying attention in class.”

“Lothario lets me cheat off his homework. But all kidding aside, it wasn’t always like this. I remember when the Italian immigrants first started coming into the city.”

“You were there for it?”

“Yes.”

Niet pauses, sips her wine and stared Arcturus up and down. Then she says: “I think the more apt term is bricolage.”

“Bricolage.”

“The cultural vibrancy of a city always threatens to enter into a sociological bricolage state. As in, it’s easy to sample simulacrum of cultures in New York City, which most of the time, came from authentic traditions. Take here for example. We’re having Italian pasta now and then we can go down the block for Pe King Duck.”

“Or general Tso’s.”

“Which is American, by the way.”

“Made my Colonel Sanders?”

Niet throws her head back and laughs, right from her gut. Niet is the type of person who only offers a snicker or a light chuckle when she’s trying to be polite in the face of a bad joke, but when she laughs, it is real and authentic. “Ah, a secret society of food production. A foodimatti.”

Arcturus pretends to laugh, and he knows that Niet knows it is not genuine. They have been getting along quite well since they argued a couple weeks ago, but there is now a leak underneath the surface, a small, yet malignant tumor on an otherwise full and beating heart. The feelings are quite resolved, both Arc and Niet both seeming to come to terms with the complications of their relationship. It also does not help that Arc has spent the better part of several weeks in different locations for thwarted gigs, which by proxy contributes to aggressive, impatient texts and calls. Niet is getting busy too. Ever since becoming one of the main handlers of Sch’yth, she has been spending a significant amount of time in the wherever underground cavern the Eastern branch of the Cloth resides. Apparently, they had the same religious grounds for over two hundred years, but ever since the Queen’s reawakening and subsequent endeavor to



purify America from coast to the coast, the main base of operations for the Cloth of Sch'yth is wherever its multiple teeth and tentacles are. They follow the deity like Mecca. So perhaps the wound has not been healed over for both, but Arc is determined not to let it sour the evening. A beautiful woman sits before him, eating a fresh breadstick. She is the fire which makes him want to play the Red King's game. But the silly "foodimatti" joke strikes a chord in Arc's psyche, one which is out of tune to the rest of the melodies in his head. He still has that stupid DUMBO postcard somewhere with the rest of his relics, for whatever reason.

The waiter comes by with their meals, a truffle cacio pepe for Niet and a Bolognese for Arc. He pours them another glass of wine.

Niet notices that Arc has not immediately dug in, like he usually does. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, just thinking is all."

"Thinking," Niet says, twirling her pasta, the specks of cracked black pepper twirling into a gooey vortex, "about my joke, no doubt."

"Second time today that you've read my mind, can you do that?"

"I'm just empathetic, I guess."

"It seems like everyone can read my mind these days."

Niet returns her twirled pasta to the plate. She leans over the dishes. "Talk to me, Arc."

"It's fine. Let's just eat."

"I'm not eating another bite unless you talk to me."

"Your food will get cold."

"Then it gets cold."

Arc looks into Niet's eyes and sees a warmth that he has not seen in a couple of weeks. "I was offered a job. I think I might take it."

"Oh," Niet says. She has become more resistant to Arc's gigs as of late, and both he and she knows that any gig means strangling the Venn-diagram of their obligations for one another.

"No, it's local. I might take it. It's more...permanent."

"What. Are you taking up baking?"

Deep in the recesses of his brain an orchestra struggles to keep tempo. Just now, a chord snaps on a bass violin.

“It’s for the Illuminati.”

“Shh,” Niet says, leaning further. She looks around. “Shut up, Arc. They are everywhere.”

“You know about them?”

“Obviously, Arc. Everyone does. Even people not in my community. In Marvel Comics Professor X is a member.”

“How do you know this? Why do you know this?”

“Never mind that. Point is, everyone knows about them. They inundate themselves into the public psyche like a parasite. That is how they become invisible. You’re really thinking of joining them? They can’t kill you. You won’t be summoning anything. I thought your gigs were working for you.”

He tells her about Lucia and the complicated circumstances which orbit between them. Niet listens intently, never breaking eye contact even as she gives up on her food embargo and absently spears her truffle cacio peppe.

Then, after a very pregnant pause of consideration, she says, “So Lucia is not only a reincarnate like yourself, but she is beating you out of the competition so now you are going to go...corporate?”

“Well, when you phrase it like that it’s really not as high-stakes.”

“And these people will help you obtain mana how? By ceremonial killing you to resurrect the iceberg that sunk the *Titanic*?”

“I don’t know,” Arc says, holding out his glass for his third refill. “Maybe.”

“You know it’s hard for us, and I mean *us* as a community, to find new members because they are bought out by these people.”

“I think your eldritch forces are fine. They’ve been fine for hundreds of years.”

“Yes, they are fine now, but for how long, Arc? These people have the money, the manpower, and most importantly, the influence. You would be contributing to such a negatively cyclical process.”

“Oh, come on, Niet. Don’t lecture me on ‘processes’. You can’t understand what I’m going through?”

Niet leans back, pushes the plate away from her. “Perhaps I can’t, but I do know that if not for Basilica finding you, we would not have our Queen walking among us. Because of

Basilica finding you, we are realized. You were incremental to our prosperity, and now you plan on selling out to the same people who are trying to starve us of ritual rites. You are commodifying yourself.”

Arc formulates a sentence that will not solve anything. He recognizes that it sounds mean as it comes out of his mouth, but only realizes that it was a stupid remark after he says it: “Well, thank goodness for Mike or Basilica or whatever. Why don’t you go talk to him about commodification and cultural memory or whatever?”

“Okay, I’ll give you a pass on being a dick because a lot has been going on with you.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, and he means it.

“You can’t do this, Arc.”

“I don’t think I have a choice,” he says, “Lucia is just a better at this. To keep going is unsustainable.”

“Unsustainable? People like me have been living with unsustainable conditions ever since these business suit wearing weirdos picked up a charred stick and discovered wall art. Don’t talk to me about unsustainable.”

“That’s not fair, Niet,” Arc says, his voice raising higher than anticipated. Several heads turn in the restaurant. “If I cannot get gigs, then I cannot get mana, and then…”

Niet stares at him across the table, and space warps around her sharp leer. “What? And then what, Arc?”

He says flatly, “Then I can’t die.”

Niet stands abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. “I do what I do because I believe in something bigger than myself. What do you believe in?”

“Niet, come on now.”

“And meta-philosophical arguments aside…were you just planning on being with me until what, you dropped dead? Screw me getting old, you were planning on taking the permanent route as soon as possible.”

“That’s not true. You’re putting words into my mouth.”

“Am I? You’re acting like a puppet anyway.”

“Niet.”

Niet grabs her purse and slings it over her shoulder. “The way I see it, I can’t be in the same room as someone who actively tries to strangle people like me. And worse, I can’t be with someone who has no reservations about the wreckage they will leave behind. Goodbye, Arcturus.”

She turns a corner and is gone, leaving only the awkward stares of the other restaurant patrons in her wake. Arc finishes his wine and beckons the waiter to come over. He ignores his obvious unwilling body language. He asks for the check, puts on his coat, and leaves the cash right on the table, moving through the thick miasma of judgmental stares and speculative whispers. Even the host shies away from him as he leaves.

There is a beauty to New York City that Arc has not really appreciated as of late, and it was that there was not just one New York City, but trillions of versions of it. In the restaurant he has been subjected to an awful and public breakup—this much was true, but now as he steps onto the crowded street and becomes absorbed by the buskers and tourists underneath the headlights and the purple sky, he can only carry that maelstrom of an event within him. The city does not care, and anonymity calms him somewhat.

Still. Still...and yet.

Arc wanders into a bar off Greenwich Village, kicking a discarded soda can in his wake. Hands stuffed in pockets, shoulders hunched, he sidles up to the bar and orders an old fashioned. It is not wise to mix liquors—Arc has had many years understanding the fallouts of such a plan—but this is how he is built, he supposes. A stubborn alcoholic. He decides to call Niet and she does not answer, simply texting back that they are done. Arc growls to himself and takes a big gulp of his drink. It would be foolish to pretend this does not wound him. He is quite fond of Niet—and doesn’t she understand the lengths he was trying to go for her? He wants to die so he can live with her. His specialized field is now an uphill battle against Lucia, and if Niet truly understands the nuances to what is happening she would understand how cornered Arc is in terms of job prospects. This system of his is unsustainable, and if he accepts the job with the Illuminati, he might be able to get out of this mess unscathed. Is it selfish to consider one’s mortality? And besides, if what she says is true about the Illuminati strangling out the lesser-known eldritch societies, is not this just a part of the larger capitalist scheme of bodies anyway? In a sad and sick sense, if a cult has been reduced to less than a hundred members and cannot muster the influence to resurrect their swine god or whatever, then should they disappear into the mists of history, gobbled up by some meta-physically stronger, interdimensional fish?

Regardless of whatever political implications lurk behind this dialectic, Arc figures he does not care and decides to head home. Business is business. He has an obligation to the Red King, and if he cannot get his mana the old-fashioned way, then he will do it a new way. Adapt to a new system, as Lucia adapted hers. The gigs might not be as frequent, but they would be consistent. Four hundred years of living according to someone else’s schedule—maybe there would be a silver lining to this change. Even better, Arc thinks, the Illuminati wants Arcturus,

not Lucia. Their knowledge is wide and deep, it is not a matter of not knowing Lucia exists. They want Arc. No more sacrifices done wrong, no more round-trip plan rides to nowhere.

Arc takes out his wallet to pay and pulls out the bills. Wedged in between two five's is a thick nugget of paper, like a pea in a mattress. At first Arc thinks it could be a rolled-up paper straw wrapper that somehow infiltrated his pocket, but it is too thick and heavy. It drops on the slightly damp bar, and he unfolds it carefully, afraid of destroying it with his handling.

It is the DUMBO postcard, the same one from a couple months ago, with the carousel in the foreground. Arc rubs his chin, looks at the postcard on both sides, looking for legs or something. He has thought he left it at home, and even if he had not, he certainly did not make the effort to fold it and put it in his wallet, where it lurks like a dormant cyst, waiting to be discovered.

On the back, addressed to him, are new words.

Q: Are you wondering if our offer is still open, Mr. Arcturus?

A: It is.

### 3.

Arc walks along the Brooklyn Promenade. Manhattan glistens across the water, looking brilliant and regal, a testament to human achievement. He tries to manipulate these thoughts and thinks to himself that Niet might find a way to ruin this for him, citing some high theory and throwing some SAT words to mask her displeasure for the world around her, but this is an impossible task. Niet has opinions, sure, but they are truly celebratory for how she sees the potential of the city. He wishes he has her sharp perspectives when he saw the first skyscrapers, the electrification of cities, the transition from horse and buggy to gas guzzling minivans. It would have been waiting for this moment less painful.

The day is hot, but the Hudson River brings a salty, breeze over tennis courts and outdoor bars. The smell of barbeque wafts through the curving paths, sliced through by tourists walking on the biking paths and bicyclers participating in their age-old campaign to get people to respect bike lanes. Kayakers row alongside sleepy sailboats along the coast. In the distance, the Statue of Liberty waves to her sister in France.

Arc sits across from the carousel and examines exactly how he is supposed to enter it without anyone knowing. It was not like the elevator in Times Square, which is a rather solitary experience. He stares long and hard at the machine, watching it whirl and spin little brats in a flurry of colors and creepy carney sounds. Tired, hungover teenagers admit children. It is not as magical as the carousel in Central Park, but it is still nice.

After about fifteen minutes of watching the motions, he realizes that a grown man staring at the children and adults underneath a shaded bench is not a good look. Instead, he takes a walk around the perimeter, examines the nook and crannies of the glass encasement over the whirly-bird, sees the distorted horses and birds in the reflection. He double checks the postcard to ensure he is in the right spot and holds it up to the sky, replicating the snapshot. The sky in the postcard is purple and orange, nearing into twilight. Arc curses himself...he is in the right spot, but the wrong time. He checks his phone on the off chance that Niet contacted him, but she did not. Feeling forlorn and restless, he walks down the cobblestoned paths, checks out a bookstore underneath the bridge, and heads into the closest thing he can find to a dive bar.

He reads the newspaper about local politics as he waits for sky to turn to the color of the postcard, giving particular attention to the public hearings this week at city hall. A streetcar is being proposed to connect Queens and Brooklyn, which Arc sees as a good idea. A construction company has won a bid to construct a homeless shelter in the Bronx, but this company has won the past three bids for similar projects, so Arc suspects foul play, and it appears that other people do to. A necessary but unpopular subway line is threatened to close permanently, severing a central artery between Manhattan and Brooklyn. All this is not pertinent to his own warehouse hovel, but will cause tremors of activity in unpredictable ways, that is...if Arc left the patterns of urban dwellers to chance. He has been around long enough to understand how the rivers of human commerce shift like rivers and changing just the same. Like the wolves in Yellow Stone Park (also home to the Lupinous Cult, no relation). Maybe this is what the Illuminati was talking about all along.

The sky drifts into twilight outside the windows. Arcturus pays up and heads to the carousel. The Brooklyn Promenade is a family-oriented strip, and as such it has retired its main attractions upon the curtain of nightfall. The kayakers and sailboats on the river are replaced by barges and party yachts, each vessel an amalgamation of different colored yellow squares. The barbecues are smoking with dying charcoal. No more bike chimes, of which Arc is thankful, because bike chimes in the night unsettle him.

The carousel, like most carnival-esque attractions, is creepy in any scenario that is not daytime. The merry-go-round looms like a sleeping beast in its glass encasement. The ponies and bears and falcons looked petrified, speared by some faux-gold pole. Now Arcturus can see what a carousel is: a machine, creaking from a day's work. Arc looks around for any security guards, couples on dates, or teenagers getting high in the bushes. Once he feels comfortable, he walks to the gate, crosses it, and realizes that he has no idea what to do from here. The animals are tinier versions of themselves, but in the darkness, they are like poised monsters, waiting to strike. His footsteps bounce from the center terminal, which is plated with fun-house style distortion glass and makes Arc look like an ogre when he stares too long at himself. He presses on the nose of a little lamb with dead eyes, thinking that its cute button nose will activate some magical teleporter. He even straddles a little pony, dwarfed particularly because Arc is an adult male, and the seats are designed for children. After about thirty minutes of both feeling and looking like an idiot, he rationalizes that any obscenely large child could hypothetically activate the secret

entrance to the underground Illuminati network, which would bring forth a cavalcade of questionable elements for their Human Resources Department.

He decides to take another look at the central terminal of the machine. His fingers graze over the many other sticky children's fingerprints. He is scanning for another slot like the one he saw in the elevator near TKTS, and after several of his own roundabouts, he finds a slot near the electrical box, which is painted in fun colors to be on brand for this whimsical ride. He takes the postcard from his pocket and slides it into a underneath seam the electrical box. The inner gears of the carousel purr as the postcard slides into its gullet, and after some tinkering of gears and a series of clicks, ejects the postcard back at Arc. It looks like its sticking out its tongue at him.

"You've got to be kidding me," he says, taking the postcard and examining it.

He sighs, notices the creases imprinted on it from being folded in his wallet. He smooths it out on the ninety-degree angle of the electric box and reinserts it. Again, the carousel rejects the postcard. Instinctively, he holds the postcard up, looks around for anyone else that might have an unfolded postcard that he could trade with, and realizes how illogical this whole experience is. He grits his teeth, puts in the postcard again, and then, in brief episode of rage, kicks the bottom part of the wall. The electrical box *clicks* and accepts the ticket, uncorking whatever pent-up rage Arcturus was going to inflict on the poor plastic pony next to him. A little bulb in front of the electrical box illuminates lime green and Arcturus takes the handle in his palm and pulls, feeling more resistance behind the little door than he initially expected. Instead of revealing the inner workings of an electrical box, the tiny handle instead pulls the entire slot of the terminal, revealing a ladder into what appears to be an endless depth. Arc looks around for anyone who might have wandered by and, seeing the coast to be clear, steps backwards onto the first rung of the ladder and closes the mirrored wall behind him.

He descends into the depths of this strange carousel to meet the Illuminati. Their R&D department floats around his consciousness like a dream, the features not quite placeable in his mind. He can not picture Catherine of Ludwig's face in his mind's eye but trusts himself to recognize them in person. As for The CEO, Arcturus feels the same about waking up from a nightmare and being grateful to have forgotten it. Still, the Illuminati are not to be poked, which is why Arc must be prepared to poke himself as an efficient way to teleport from the situation. He descends one ring at a time, defending the ghosts of his last dinner with Niet and her thoughts about his endeavors.

The ladder is, to Arc surprise, only about two stories in length. A dull light appears at the bottom of the shaft, reminding Arc vaguely of a gullet of some strange beast. Grey carpeting reveals itself as he nears the bottom, and with a little hop Arc is in a hallway that could rival any anonymous corporate office. Filing cabinets screech and slamm out of view, the clacking of nails on keyboards sounds like tapdancing spiders. Around the corner the deft *thunk* of a vending machine. Sad and flaccid community plants add a little zest to the area. A woman in a pinstripe pantsuit stands six feet from the bottom of the chute. Arc recognizes her, makes a note to see her

sticky-tack-colored eyes, her pursed lips. She looks at Arc like she thinks most lifeforms are beneath her, and if he were of a weaker constitution, he would believe it.

“Catherine.”

“Mr. Arcturus, how was the descent?”

“I was expecting the ladder to be longer.”

“Why?”

Arc looks behind him, examines the black void hanging over the silver ladder, consuming it into infinity. Above, the DUMBO carousel creaks.

“I just thought a ladder should be larger. The impression was that it would be larger.”

“I’m not sure how safe that would be for the office, but I suppose I see your point, Mr. Arcturus.”

“Thanks?”

She turns and Arc follows her. He wants to ask where her partner is, Luddite or what his name is, and finds that he cannot even remember any physical features of him. In fact, now that he is looking over the endless cubicles of workers, their heads rocking back and forth, engaged in some endless data traveling across their screen, he finds he cannot remember any physical details of his last visit at all. A second first impression.

“I’m glad you decided to meet with us again,” she says.

They pass people in shabby suits navigating through the office. People at water coolers, looking at notepads. Conference rooms with presentations and pointers. More nodding heads. Arcturus feels any creative energy within him dry up like an oasis dominated by the sun. He feels tired just being here.

Catherine does not look at Arc. She is more dutiful than the last time he met with her; this much he remembers only psychically, a hunch. They move around cubicles, office pantries, and coffee machines. Potted plants that may or may not be fake. All Arc sees are the backs of heads. Even in the hallways and aisles, the only face that Arc sees is Catherine’s. Everyone always seems to be going the same direction. In the glass paneled conference rooms, the blinds are drawn to waist level to conceal the presenter, even those sitting down and taking notes are concealed by the blinds, a black and white collage of socks.

“Will I be meeting with The CEO?” Arc says.

“Perhaps,” she answers, turning a corner.



She leads him to a cubicle the size of a bathroom stall. Cork and laminate walls fortify the perimeter of the desk. A grey computer, boxy and from a different era, sits patiently on a grey desk with an equally grey keyboard. A yellow notepad and an array of perfectly aligned pens look like silverware at a restaurant. At the end of the desk a corded phone patiently winks at Arc with a ruby bulb. Catherine stands next to the empty desk, her attention turning onto Arc with such sudden intensity that he felt a cold wind grasp his spine. He approaches the chair as if trying to not wake a sleeping animal, waiting for any change of expression. Slowly, excruciatingly methodically, Arc sits at the desk. He feels Catherine's energy change behind him, as if someone has put a battery in her.

"Excellent fit, Mr. Arcturus. Please find yourself comfortable. To your right is the nearest watercooler. To your left is the nearest pantry with a more than satisfactory selection of snacks. No need for any quarters or dollars for the vending machines."

"That's a nice company perk," Arc says, "free snacks."

"They are not free snacks. There are other ways of exchange beyond physical money," Catherine's lips form a smile. It is not so much forced as it is artificial. A sudden change of expression, like someone had pushed a button in her brain connecting whatever wires are needed for her to express herself. "We appreciate you, Mr. Arcturus. Please take time to get yourself adjusted."

"Sure," he says, looking at the black screen of the computer, familiarizing himself with the dimensions of the desk. He turns to say *thank you* but she is already gone. He lifts himself from the chair to look over the cubicle to see which direction she has headed in but finds only a sea of scalps bent down, hundreds of little shoeboxes of droll reality.

Arc returns to his seat. He shakes the mouse to wake up the computer. The terminal hums and reveals a single line of text along the screen. **PICK UP THE PHONE, MR. ARCTURUS.**

"What?" Arc says to himself.

The text disappears. New text pops on the screen. **THE PHONE TO YOUR RIGHT, MR. ARCTURUS. DO NOT FORGET TO PRESS THE BLINKING BUTTON.**

Arc picks up the phone and shies away from the computer screen, feeling as if it is undressing him with its lens. He presses the blinking button.

"Mr. Arcturus," The CEO says.

*Optimism on the updraft, glossing over the sounds of out of tune string instruments, nails against a chalk board, and below this, the gurgling black ichor of the necrosis of the collective spirit. All spoken behind an array of yellow, rotting teeth with as much charm as a brick thrown through a glass window.*

“Hello,” Arc says.

“Do you find your accommodations satisfactory?”

“I’m still getting used to it,” Arc says, and this is a genuine assessment of a lot of things, he realizes. Then he says, “You said something about me being a martyr. I am not sure how I can do this from here.”

“You are in a different world now,” The CEO says in Arc’s ear, “being a martyr takes time. It is a careful and deliberate practice, much unlike the swift deaths you have experienced in the past.”

“Okay.”

“Trust the computer. You’ll understand in due time.”

“What department am I in?”

“People in your department call it the Department of the Zeitgeist.”

“What do you call it?”

“I must be going now. It is an absolute pleasure to have you on our team.”

The phone clicks and Arc releases a breath he did not know he was holding in. The CEO’s voice in his ear feels like maggots taking little bites out of his ear canal. He needs a shower.

The monitor turns on, revealing a background of generic rolling hills and puffy clouds. It is not a bad view to have, Arc thinks, but it does highlight the stark difference between beautiful nature and the crushingly bland six by four universe he currently resides in. A text box appears on the screen with a link. The text says: **CLICK HERE**.

Arc follows the link. The screen flashes white and reveals coordinates. Arc inputs these coordinates in a GPS and finds that they are in some suburban town in the middle of nowhere, Tennessee. He rubs his eyes, inputs them again to find a similar result. Then Arc’s phone rings, spooking him. It is a gruff voice, one that reminds Arc of a cement mixer. It is vaguely familiar and now that Arc recalls the voice he can connect the dots.

“Meet me in these coordinates by tomorrow, precisely at 4:27PM,” Ludwig says.

“What’s in Tennessee?”

“Just be there,” Ludwig says before hanging up.

Arc looks at the satellite image of the coordinates. An intersection, in the middle of a row of family homes. A convenience store to the right. Arc decides it is one of the most boring places on Earth, with the only interesting part being how specific the time demanded. He tries to picture Ludwig now using his full attention. Just like Catherine's figure who materialized in his memory as if waking from an ephemeral mist, the vague shape of Ludwig appears in Arc's mind. No facial features, not even what he is wearing. All he recalled is that he is very large.

Feeling as if he got his directive, he decides he could make no waste to make it to Tennessee in less than twenty-four hours. He stands up to disengage himself from the endless sea of anonymous faces hidden behind cubicles. Walking through the aisles, he tries to catch glimpses of faces via the reflection of their computers, but he can only see determined faces looking at endless waves of Excel sheets. To his left and right everyone seems to be traveling away from him, prim and proper haircuts navigating through the halls in a way that reminds Arc of Pac-man. He passes another row of cubicles, but these were too high for him to even circle the perimeter of an island of desks to catch a glimpse of even an eyebrow. Their screens did not show excel sheets, but rather blogs, message boards, and social media accounts. At first Arcturus thinks he finds a slacker in the midst and is about to approach his new coworker, but then he finds all the others navigating the internet, whispering seemingly ancillary comments like a weevil into the Internet's unassuming ear. What is an ocean but a multitude of drops?

He calls out to someone walking away from him at the end of a hallway, accepting that the only face-to-face interaction will be when someone else wants it. He yells into the open floor plan how to leave the office, and the figure points to a door at the end of the hall before disappearing behind the corner. Arc looks around to see if his outburst has stirred some curious heads but finds that no one has paid him any mind. The aggravation makes him feel stuffy, and he heads to the stairs, where it opens into what appears to be a basement of an apartment building. He takes a deep breath, inhales the musk and mold, and is so glad for the fresh air.

\*\*\*

Turns out, *large* is the only feature that makes Ludwig stand out, looking like an ogre at the corner of South & Main in a sleepy neighborhood. His features are nondescript. The suit he wears is apparently the dress code of the Illuminati; an ill fitted suit from at least four decades past. He stands at the corner with a newspaper, appearing as if he has been waiting for Arcturus to board the plane from New York City to Tennessee and then a taxi to this deadbeat town.

"Okay," Arc says, sidling underneath the shade of a bus stop, "want to explain why I'm here?"

Ludwig ignores Arcturus, keeps his nose buried in the news. He checks his watch every thirty seconds or so. It is an old model. Arc examines his surroundings. It looked just like the satellite image from the day before. A cracked street baked underneath the summer heat. A closed hardware store, still boasting the original signage, snoozes across the street. Wind carries

particles of dust and leaves down the lane. The bus stop has a poster for a local Vanilla Ice cover band and Arc wonders who the true villains of the world are.

Then Ludwig says, “I need you to stand in the middle of the street in two minutes.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“It’s your job,” Ludwig licks his finger and turns a large page.

“Not until I find out what I’m dying for. That’s how I did it back then. I’ve earned that much. Did The CEO personally hire you?”

Ludwig offers a pregnant pause, which informs Arc that the man can be affected. He relents: “There is no cross-walk sign. In five minutes, a man named Daryl Peterson will be driving drunk and make a right turn, killing you.”

“I’m not sure how that makes me a martyr.”

“We have been socially engineering this town for over thirty years. We are the reason why the lock to the liquor cabinet in Mr. Peterson’s childhood home was faulty. We are the reason why his rage cemented the restraining order against his wife and children. We are the reason why he is getting obliterated down the street, angered because an advertisement in the middle of the football game reminds him of all that he has lost, and how unfair it all is. He will be so angry that he will have tears in his eyes. Self-inspired by a rage of righteousness, he will be making this turn and then he will kill you.”

“So, I’m ruining a man’s life,” Arc says, “more so than apparently you have?”

“Mr. Peterson is a domino. This town has been struggling with their government to promote safer driving habits, more appropriate signage, and better streets. This death will push them to make these changes. Entire neighborhoods policed with traffic laws. Then, the more righteous and elder fashioned of these townsfolk, specifically a Mr. Harold Blomme, will move to a neighboring town, where he will run over a ten-year-old named Linda Harriet-Jones, who does not know that she has been waiting her entire life for this moment. This will manifest four years later to Congress as the Harriet-Jones Initiative, and in seven years, if all the dominos are in place, automobiles will be so policed that it will become an instrument of class control.”

Arc ingests Ludwig’s words. He tries to make sense of it all, but all that comes out is, “Holy shit.”

“One minute, Mr. Arcturus.”

“What are those are other dominos you are referring to?”

Ludwig flashes Arc a sideways glance and says nothing. Then he folds the newspaper in half and tucks it under one goliath arm. He walks down the street, heading into an alleyway strewn with dumpsters vomiting trash bags.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“My job is done here. Report back to work when you...come back.”

“If I’m to do this alone, why the hell did you even come? You can’t just expect me to just fly all the way out here just to die in the name of a grand tokenism of automobiles for class warfare.”

“It is not much different from your old job, isn’t it?”

“Okay, fine. But why come at all?”

Ludwig takes a stick of gum from his inside breast pocket. “I was told to explain to you as much of the process as you need to know.”

“Then why the hell did you give me such a hard time,” Arc says, more of as a statement.

Ludwig grimaces. “Because I don’t like you. You have forty-five seconds to die. And word of advice, stop asking so many questions. Dominos do not ask questions. See you in a couple of days.”

He leaves Arcturus alone. In the distance the zipping sound of an unwieldy truck. Arc stares at the empty street where Ludwig once was. Then, as the truck nears its ugly, diesel head, Arc steps onto the street and watches in slow motion as a hulking machine chews him up and spits him out. Daryl Peterson did indeed have tears in his eyes.

#### 4.

The days go like this, more or less. He wakes up in the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey, greets Lyle with his orange juice (no pulp) or chicken sandwich (fried), and receives his mail. Instead of an anonymous envelop with cash, he receives a post card featuring some place in New York City. The post cards are always ingenuine: he’s seen duplicates littered in any souvenir shop around the city. It is an unspoken assumption that the pictures on the postcards would be the next location for his entry into the Illuminati Zeitgeist department. He actually went back to the Dumbo Carousel to test the theory that the entrance changes seemingly upon the hour, and even went so far to return to TKTS one day and use the elevator to descend into the R & D department but ended up looking like a fool in front of everyone else waiting to use the lift. When he leaves the building, he is always returning above ground in a new spot. Sometimes he leaves via an old church, others through the back hallway of a closed bodega. In the drawer of his desk is an envelope with a large sum of cash, more than he had ever made with a single gig in

his old role. Arc never questions who drops the money, or why no one has tried to pilfer it yet. This place is too strange already.

It's been about three weeks and still he has not seen a single face except Catherine and Ludwig's. Setting into his desk with his thermos of coffee and a corn muffin, he follows the **CLICK HERE** prompt on the screen and obtains geographic coordinates to somewhere in the world. Since the pockets of the Illuminati are as much of an infinite void as The CEO's wolfish eyes (the only feature Arc could truly recall from him, and this was in those brief moments where the consciousness floats between awake and asleep), getting first class, priority flights or cabs is not difficult. Not once is there ever a full capacity plane, and one or twice there is just one vacancy left, the attendants said, as if Arc were lucky.

Sometimes Ludwig comes, sometimes not, but when he does, he is always frustrated as if Arc has arrived late to their very specific time. Catherine never appears for these events, much to Arc's chagrin. She is strange and cold in her own way, and creepier for reasons Arc did not want to untangle himself, but she was far prettier than Ludwig, and Arc was in the stage of being dumped where he accepted his fate and starts to harbor schoolboy rushes from being around any female energy.

Today he and Ludwig are in the Beijing Zoo. It has been some time since Arc has been in Beijing, and back then he really needed to learn the language. Now it is easier to navigate since the country has really leaned into its tourist capital. He finds Ludwig underneath an awning, sitting by himself at a picnic bench. He is cracking nuts into his palm. At first Arcturus thinks he had gotten lost and entered a gorilla exhibit. The zoo smells like all animals combined, as well the thick and manicured vegetation looming over the paths. Families navigate the avenues, stopping at bridges to see spider-monkeys and gazelles. Arc was never a big fan of zoos unless they are conservations. Otherwise, zoos were essentially an anthropometric display of power: look, we found animals—now they're in prison!

“You are five minutes early,” he says.

“Have to be early to be exactly on time.”

Ludwig does not respond.

“What's going on and where?”

“A panda is going to come rushing through this path and maul you to death.”

“What?”

Ludwig looks at Arc as if trying to communicate telepathically that he will *not* repeat what he just said.

Arc tries again: “In front of all these children and families?”

Ludwig cracks a couple nuts with his baseball mitt paws and shoves some in his mouth.

“Aren’t pandas endangered?”

Ludwig cracks more nuts.

“Can you at least tell me why?”

“When the architect of this zoo employed the subcontractors, we made sure to manipulate some of the structures by mere millimeters, so when it rains, water gets stuck at certain, miniscule key points in the exhibit. The panda in question is named Cheerio, and he is an angry brute, hungry and intelligent. He is going to rampage through the weakened structures, and you will be in his path. After he mauls you, this will become another brick in the grand scheme of animal rights activists’ verse those who support the death of Cheerio, who will most likely be put down on the spot for his rabid behavior. Also, stop asking so many questions.”

“This isn’t about the strange and sadistic death of Cheerio the panda, isn’t it?”

Ludwig stands, puts some more nuts in his mouth. He says, “This one is going to hurt.”

“It’s fine. I’ve experienced much worse.”

“So, you have been mauled by a bear?” Ludwig says. He does not wait for an answer and instead stands abruptly, telling Arcturus that he has less than one minute.

“Can I have the rest of your snacks at least,” Arc says, “you know, for protein or something.”

“No.”

Ludwig dons his hat and disappears around the corner of the pavilion.

Arc watches him, looks down the stone path. The trumpet of an elephant booms in the distance. Zookeepers in beige drives on little carts from one captive zone to the next. The rustling of heavy leaves from the wind, the canopy of shade wiggling like an organism on the cement paths. He stands in the middle of the avenue, right near a sigh leading to an aviary and another leading to concessions. As if stepping on a stage, once he makes his way to the center, he hears a large crash and pandemonium around the corner. In a black and white flash, a large monster rounds the bend, stampeding through cotton candy carts and drink stands abandoned in haste. Cheerio is frothing at the mouth, locks eyes with Arc as if he has an agenda for murder. The panda charges at him and Arc reminds himself that he has gone through all sorts of torture, and that something like this won’t actually hurt as much as Ludwig suggests. He remembers that Ludwig does not like him, and was being sadistic, trying to get under Arc’s skin. But the fangs and claws are sharp, and the beast is mad.

For a reason that Arc even recognizes is stupid, he braces himself with two fists in front of himself, as if preparing to box the hulking brute. He tells himself, as Cheerio stampedes towards him, that the poor beast is probably more afraid than angry. Probably. Arc punches the bear in the nose, and it recoils, wrinkling its nostrils, more annoyed than disturbed. This fumble makes him feel a little confident, and he starts to shuffle in place because he saw boxers do it a couple of times on television. Cheerio growls and erects to full height, a full seven feet and about six hundred pounds as heavy.

“I recognize my mistake,” Arc says, aware that he is well and truly screwed.

Cheerio was on him with an actual vendetta now. Its claws dig into his stomach, gutting him. His ribs crumbles into sand. Cheerio’s fangs gripped into his collar bone, dislodging it as it tosses Arc like a doll down the path. He sees the back of his elbow and knees, his limbs contorted backwards. Raw sinews of lacerated fingers, the whites of his bones cresting through tendons. Something hard is lodged into his throat and he hopes its some of his teeth. Cheerio rushes at him, moving past a zookeeper who raises a carbon rifle to his shoulder. His shoulder recoils but no bullets come out, and he fumbles to unload and unjam the weapon. Cheerio is on Arc again, taking full bites out of him. He is so thankful that he is beginning to lose consciousness. In his fleeting vision he sees another keeper run to the scene with a dart gun, firing of three air compressing shots into Cheerio’s neck. The beast slumps over on top of Arc, squashing him like a grape. His last image is that scene in the *Wizard of Oz*, the one with the witch and her creepy curling toes, going right underneath the house like a curled tongue...

Lyle is at the reception counter. He is playing a riveting game of solitaire, his attention focused with more intensity that one would assume the game deserves.

“You look like shit,” Lyle says, dragging one card to another.

“Thanks, Lyle,” Arc says, leaning on the counter.

He looks at Arc but keeps his eyes to the screen, as if the game will change without his permission. “Like someone chew you up and ate you out.”

“You know how to make a man feel good,” Arc says. “Any mail?”

“No envelops. Just postcards now,” Lyle says, handing him a post card depicting Washington Square Park, the arch gleaming in the sun. “Different anonymous donor, my friend? Are you sure it’s not sex stuff? You can tell me. I’ve dabbled.”

“No, it’s not sex stuff, Lyle. And what do you mean ‘dabbled’?”

Lyle shrugs, his boney shoulders like defeathered wings. “Just dabbled.”

“Looks like I should be asking the questions. For instance, can you call a cab?”



Now outside, Arc takes another look at the postcard. Usually there is nothing on the back, but this time is a note:

The manufacturer of the zookeeper's rifle is faulty, yet in fifty years this same manufacturer will supply weapons to an American civil conflict that is engineered to succeed, only to crumble under the weight of its success. The panda was never meant to die. It was not in the narrative.

-L

“How cute,” Arc says to himself, flexing his fingers to make sure they were still attached to his hand.

\*\*\*

Arc comes home, makes some brunch (only because it was too late to have breakfast) and reads the local newspaper for any developments in city planning. Halfway through learning about the passed contract to build a parking garage in what was once a mixed housing development, Arc realizes that this probably no longer matters anymore. The Illuminati provide the coordinates for him now. Arc no longer needs to find potential locations of secret cults or understand their movement patterns as if tracking a pack of mammals across a safari. Arc leans back, tosses the newspaper across the counter, and sips his coffee. A large part of his previous gig was learning the flows and currents of these societies. Like most freelance gigs, it was half research-half action. A two-hour torture for a giant, transient squid dog might take upwards of twenty hours of research, and this does not include meeting / being “captured”, travel, and waking up in the Holiday Inn in Parsippany, New Jersey. He can leave that to Lucia.

He looks at the calendar one sees the appointments he has made months in advance, an array of X's once or twice a month, sometimes more. He envisions Lucia looking at her own calendar, thumb swiping across the months of her phone, digital squares blocked off for her own gigs. How many of her gigs matches the ones of Arc's calendar? Had this been half a year ago, he would have been optimistic, but now he can only be certain of it. Arc revisits the post card for the next wandering location of the Zeitgeist department. It is time for work.

\*\*\*

There is an art to becoming a martyr, Arcturus realizes. The amount of work from the accounting department and the information department to even get a simple stop sign to become faulty in a rural town in Minnesota takes literal decades of work. The workers of the illuminati are not like Arc in that they are mortal. An entire lifetime of service, carefully plucking at strings of fate through a canvas of excel sheets and grids, nudging social movements and paradigm shifts by centimeters, long hours of overtime dedicated to determining the trajectory of a stray bullet by millimeters. The Illuminati dedicates workers who commit hours of subtly prodding alt-right blogs or lurking in the undertow of the Internet, painting an abstract Rorschach test so underneath the psychological brim of the public, writing the right number of words at just the right time for a certain, predetermined *someone* to internalize and radicalize to an event of such

scale only determined by the Illuminati workers higher than the drones, a return-on-investment decades in the future. It is time the Illuminati has. Time and unlimited resources. Arcturus never understands the agenda, the grand scheme of it all, but he does not care. At the rate of this mana collection, he'll pay his dues to the Red King and not have to worry about the future molded by the invisible scalpel by The CEO, who Arc sees more as a concept than an actual person.

It is not just sinister events that the Illuminati orchestrates. Their persuasion extends far beyond the unfortunate building collapse, hate crime, or presidential murder. For a martyr can either be another rain drop on a long, historical chain, weakening one paradigm enough until the chain snaps with a powerful shockwave that turns over a cauldron of sociology, or a little piece in the ancient and impenetrable Rube-Goldberg machine of the Illuminati's overwhelming grand design. Or, a martyr can be exactly what an ideology needs to bond together, links fastened together into an even stronger chain, so powerful in the moment that they do not realize, or cannot realize, that the Illuminati is building a chain link fence, has built a chain link fence, will always build a chain link fence. A small domino pushing against a slightly larger domino, forever in the abyss, until entire skyscrapers fall, just from the slightest tremor onto a coin sized block.

The experience is how Arcturus pictures movies to be made. Sure, the actors get all the attention, but the real magic is in the lights, the quality of the set, the script. It is easy to see the actors as the only visage into the infinite world of moving parts, but Arc knows the effort made to ensure he will be in the right place at the right time. It makes him wonder what sacrifices the organization must have been before him; do employees volunteer for these events? Is it an honor? In a sense, this is no different than summoning an eldritch god.

Some jobs were easier than others, both physically and emotionally. This is a drawback that Arc can foil against his experiences working with the cults, cabals, and secret societies. He is used to being tortured, maimed, consumed, etc. There is something different about becoming a martyr, dying with such a socio-political impact to push the first domino into a slightly larger domino. It is for a bigger cause, sure, but Arc is used to seeing the eldritch, primordial force manifest from its interdimensional rifts, or dying just as it claws its way into this world. The cause and effect are tangible. Arcturus is dying for a larger idea that is just a building block of an anonymous, megalomaniacal agenda. He does not know if his dying in a convenience store during a stick up in Pasadena, California will lead to a new president forty years from now or a found cat in Switzerland in seven months. It is also public, too, which Arc finds some discomfort with. At least the strange handling of his penis a lifetime ago is with people who *wanted* to be there. Arc has been decapitated in front of a group of elderly mall walkers just last week. Two months ago, he fell from a bridge and landed six feet from a little boy and his mother eating ice cream on the promenade. He killed himself in the middle of a farmer's market by blowing his brains out next to a stall of fresh apples, all because someone will read the news and become radicalized by the chaos of the world, instilling in their child thirty years from now with enough paranoia and hate to attempt to bomb a capital building. He is pretty sure that a child holding a teddy bear was watching in paralytic shock as he was eaten alive by Cheerio, the most pissed off panda in the world. All for the agenda, the Grand Scheme. He finds himself looking at the world

now with tunnel vision, going from one gig to the next, hardly resting in between his reincarnations.

Arcturus decides to return his old calendar to its original spot in the kitchen, so he can see all the gigs that Lucia has stolen from him. It is a good reminder to keep going. She tries calling him to meet up for dinner a couple nights ago, sounding as if she wants to smooth things over between them. It was big of her, and in that moment, he feels guilty for calling her a parasite. Then he looks at the calendar, flips through the pages to see all the X's scheduled months in advance and does not return her calls. Dudley tried meeting for a couple of beers, but Arc was too busy. The day after Dudley called Arc he found a note on his desk by Catherine, informing him that fraternizing with other businesses is a potential breach of contract, but the first offense is a warning. Arcturus did not want to know what a second offense looks like.

Niet has not reached out to him since they separated. This is probably for the best, Arc realizes after moment of sober clarity, for one morning he woke up and discovered that he did not like himself as much as he thought he did. This realization came at Arcturus like cold water on his face, haunting him through the day. The truth emboldens him, making him want to collect mana quicker. Before he takes this job to rid himself of the Red King's grip and live a normal life with Niet, but now, he just wants to die, his life long overdue to rest.

This is an impact which echoes across all the fabrics of his own life, another domino effect in this long, esoteric game. He cannot sleep as well as he used to, even though that is all he wants to do. Food and drink have adopted a bland quality, and even the fleeting elations of post-break up one-night stands leaves him feeling hollow. When not at the office or committing some act of self-annihilation, Arc finds himself sulking around his loft, bumping into the old arcade games like lily pads, bouncing from the relics of his past gigs with a strange and sudden unfamiliarity, like another Arcturus in another dimension had coveted them, a dragon's hoard belonging to someone else.

He returns to his hovel a couple days later after a stint in the Netherlands which will lead to a floating prison for the world's impoverished two hundred years from now. Arc wonders if the anyone in the office knows that Arc is the only one there that will see the impact of their torrents of data crunched today over morning coffee. He pours himself a drink and feels sorry for himself, which has as much satisfaction as itching a bug bite. This space is too cramped for him, the abandoned street linking his democratically invisible abode and the neighboring warehouses a sense of the artificial. A kitchen full of dishes, empty bottles of tasteless whisky, unmade bed. He goes into his room and falls headfirst onto the pillow, sleeping almost at once.

*Arcturus wakes in the Red King's keep. It has been years since he has stepped into this place, transported through sleep into this ethereal dimension. Beyond the pillars of ivory large dragonflies fly above the magma-leaking volcanos which dot the land like an array of zits. The smell of sulfur carries pyres down the hall in a humid mist. The coppery taste of blood enters his mouth with every breath. In the distance the sounds of iron on iron, a whirring of machinery, all over a steady hum of screaming. The Red King sits on his throne of bone, a new corpse speared*

*on his halberd. Flags of conquest hang from an infinite ceiling. Silver eyes glint underneath the ingrown crown.*

*The Red King says, "The walls of your reality are as malleable as your flesh torn by my gauntlet, Arcturus."*

*His mouth is unmoving. A booming voice shouts from the void above. Or in his head.*

*The Red King continues: "Where is my mana?"*

*Arcturus's mouth is dry, which is a strange experience since he thought he was dreaming. He has not been in the Keep for over a hundred years. Phantom pains from the smooth-face abomination evoke on his skin; needles into his eyes, long twisting fingers playing with his entrails like yarn. The screams of his village family once thought to be deeply locked away beyond his nightmares. His body locks as if the strings of his marionette arms are plucked. Arcturus wants to cry, slap himself awake.*

*"Where is my mana?" The Red King says again, and Arc shudders, embarrassed by his reduction.*

*"I've been obtaining the mana for you for years, Red King," Arc says, wincing. He feels the multi-legged creatures skittering down the hall, lurking like trap door spiders to grab Arcturus at the Red King's lackadaisical whim.*

*"So why have you stopped?"*

*"Stopped?"*

*"You have consigned your mana to another force. Explain yourself."*

*Arcturus says, "It was difficult raising the mana in a traditional way. I had to be resourceful."*

*"Do you wish to die?"*

*"Yes. Very much so," Arc's eyes began to sting with tears.*

*"You are committing yourself to an opponent cause."*

*"I have been obtaining mana more swiftly. Dying for a different cause, but my compass remains true, Red King."*

*"I receive the mana, but you are dying for a different crest."*

*“Oh no, Red King. Please understand if this was an oversight. I was taking my gigs and sacrificing myself to raise not smaller gods compared to yourself, but for an idea. It is about influence. My intentions were to you.”*

*“Do you wish to die?” The Red King says again.*

*Arcturus begins to weep fully and openly. “Yes, my King. I do.”*

*“Then you shall only die for me, and for me only. Your world is nothing but ants, unworthy of utter decimation. Your geomancy and geometry do not apply to my being. Every living creature in your dimension folds up into a greater, infernal calculus, and that folds into me, the Red King. Do not test your mettle worshipping other forces. I am primordial, I am the nexus. It is my rite. Do not misunderstand how insignificant you are.”*

*Arc remains silent. He thinks of Lucia and the Blue Queen, pictures what she looks like, if the architecture of her keep mirrors the Red King’s. Arc says, “What do I do about the Blue Queen?”*

*The Red King’s silver eyes lose their glint. His straightens himself, a large, armored hulk. He slams his halberd on the foot of the throne and the body’s limbs shake and stir, lifeless. Its tongue lolls out. “You dare speak her name?”*

*This outburst provokes the multilegged insects to skitter into the throne room, crawling on the walls and clicking biomechanical tongues. The smooth faced, smiling torturer appears in the threshold. A volcano ejaculates magma, sending a shockwave across the fiery plains.*

*Arc braces himself, afraid of returning to the torture chamber. He cannot withstand an eternity being prodded and poked, the sinews of his muscles plucked inch by inch over a heated anvil. “There is another in this world, reincarnates for the Blue Queen. Please, please don’t take torture me.”*

*The Red King assesses Arcturus. He says, “Starve the Blue Queen.”*

*“Starve her? How?”*

*“By feeding me.”*

5.

Arc awakens in cold sweat, feels the chittering of the Red King’s torturers fading into the distance, obscured by dream. Someone tossed a sneaker into a dryer somewhere in his mind and his cranium *thump-thump-thumps*. He fixes himself coffee, pours in a little whisky, and looks at the post card that the Illumanti has left him, delivered by Lyle’s raisin looking hands. He feels betrayed, unguided. Most powerfully, he feels stupid. The Illuminati are a nefarious organization, no doubt, but something within Arc broke when he decided that he did not care

about the long-term effects of his martyrdom. It is one thing to ceremoniously cut out his tongue and watch a great, many eyed beasts consume it. It is another to go wield an explosive in a place of worship in the name of another, human-centric belief.

When Arcturus stares at himself in the mirror, he finds he can no longer recognize himself, and cannot remember the last time he was able to. He once thought it was the natural discomfort that comes with change, but this is not so. Arcturus feels like a cancerous cell in the otherwise serendipitous harmony of life. He does not enjoy his penance as a indentured servant to the Red King, but at least his sacrifices make an impact and bettered the lives of those around him. Niet was right; if not for Arcturus the Cloth would not have resurrected their bacterial god. This was true mana, not artificial mana designed to propel a singular, anonymous purpose. Arc cannot recall The CEO or his office, but as he remembers something about the “Heat Death of the Universe”. Or something like that. Looking up the beating sun, Arcturus wonders if that fiery, cosmic ball is a god after all, or an egg, biding its time to reign nebulous hell over the broken Earth, the remains of the Illuminati basking as they become silhouettes in the blast of incendiary, heavenly radiation. Was this the goal? Arcturus cares not to find out. They could go back to their excel sheets and work the old-fashioned way.

A phone rings, even though Arcturus has it turned off. He picks it up.

“Hello, Mr. Arcturus.”

*Drowning horses in mud. Gas spray of a chemical shower. Exposed ribs of hungry children.* The CEO.

Arcturus does not respond. Feel the silence grow heavy between them.

The CEO continues, “I am calling personally to tell you that I am so very glad that you decided to work with us. You have done a terrific job. High marks all around.”

Arcturus offers silence, struggles to hold on to it. Begins to sweat.

“But,” he says, “I have an inclination, if you will, that you are planning on leaving the organization.”

The hairs on Arc’s arm prickle. A draft somewhere in the loft. “Did you find that on a spread sheet, sir?”

“Everything starts as a spread sheet. Everything.”

Arcturus wonders if they really are supernatural in ability, that they possess some eldritch force, a primordial, inter-dimensional panopticon. It strikes him now that the Illuminati are just people with an incredibly powerful purpose, and this is what drives them to view the world in variables, spreadsheets, and graphs. They exist in the undertow of subconscious thought, forever lurking a couple rows behind whatever the last seat in the house is supposed to be. They are not

the dominos, Arc thinks, nor are they the ones which set them up. They are the manufacturers of the dominos. This is their superpower, and it scares the shit out of him.

The CEO breaks Arc's thoughts. "Is this true, Mr. Arcturus?"

"I suppose talks of a severance package are out of the question?"

Arc can hear the muscles of The CEO's wormy lips writhe into the simulacrum of a smile. "Do you understand the position that you are putting me into now, Mr. Arcturus?"

"Explain it to me."

"You are forcing my hand. You are too indebted into the latticework of our mission."

"And what mission is that?"

Then, a sudden sadness in The CEO's voice. "You could have had it all, Arcturus. A quicker freedom from the Red King."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I think I'm done. This conversation is at an end."

"Do not hang up on me, Mr. Arcturus, or—"

The phone returns to its "off state". He sets it on the table, examines how they could have contacted him in the first place. A weight lifts from him, feels the most intimate parts of himself returned, a seed replanted. Proudly enough, he does realize that this decision is not fueled by Niet or Lucia or even Dudley. It is himself. Somewhere, in a volcanic dimension more sinister and aggressive than his own, the Red King shifts in his throne. He looks at the calendar and sees the X's on the following months. Hopefully his cancelling of appointments this past year did not tarnish his reputation too much.

A couple of hours pass and Arcturus decides to revisit his phone. He sees an array of missed calls, primarily from Lucia with some of Niet. In another life Arcturus would have been glad to see their names on his phone but for some reason he pictures grinning, nettle toothed smiled of The CEO, the rows of spreadsheets orchestrating an apocalypse in real time, and feels the heavy knot of dread.

He calls Lucia, who answers immediately.

"Arcturus, where have you been?" She opens with this, and Arc fights the snarky part of himself to answer back with equal aggression. Then she says: "I've been trying to reach you for four days."

"My phone has been off for the past two hours, Lucia. I haven't had a single missed text before then."

“What are you talking about? I know you’ve been ignoring me ever since our schedules collided, but now you’re talking nonsense.”

“Get to the point.”

“They’re gone, you idiot. All of them. All my gigs. What did you do?”

“What are you talking about?”

“All of the secret cabals I was in contact with decided to cut off contact with me. At first I thought it was a fluke, and maybe they preferred you, hence why I suggested a truce with dinner and drinks.”

“And?”

“And it’s not. They just got cold. All of them. How am I supposed to get mana now? How are you supposed to get mana now?”

Arcturus looks at his calendar, drifts his eye to the postcard with the new location of the Illuminati entrance. He tells Lucia that he’ll call her back and dials Niet. He flips through the calendar pages as the phone rings. In the empty spaces between rings Arcturus feels a nameless dread. He has not talked to Niet since their dinner in Little Italy months ago.

“Arcturus,” she says, exasperated, “where have you been?”

“I had my phone off for two hours. Are you okay?”

“Two hours? I’ve been trying to reach you for four days.”

Arc wonders why both she and Lucia said this. He checks the calendar on his phone and finds that the date is indeed half a week farther along than when he collapsed onto his bed with the fever dream of the Red King. Is this the same coffee cooling on his counter? He holds the phone to his chest and inspected his trash can, sniffing and finding sure signs of decay. Had Arcturus lost four days’ worth of his life in as fast as he could blink? Was it the cerebral invasion of the Red King, or the slithering, frothing mouth of The CEO in his ear? Arcturus fears the answer, but a part of him wants it to be the Red King. He still has use to the Red King. He returns his attention to Niet.

“Okay. Four days indeed. What’s the emergency? Are you okay?”

“The Cloth, Arc. The Cloth. Our West Coast branch is not answering any calls. A forest fire burned their headquarters up.”

“Oh,” Arc says, “I’m sorry to hear that. Is everyone okay? Where is your god queen?”



“Our god-queen is fireproof, but I’m glad we didn’t have to test it. As for our branch...only those that happened to be away at the time. Our population is cut in half.”

Arc is silent.

“What did you do, Arcturus?”

“Excuse me? What did I do? I’ve been gone for four days, apparently.”

“Did you quit the Illuminati?”

Arcturus feels vulnerable as if evoking the name along the radio waves would summon Ludwig or Catherine from the thrones. “Don’t say their name.”

“Why? Because they could be listening? Good. I know the Illuminati orchestrated this fire.”

“That’s a little farfetched, Niet. No offense.”

Niet gasps. Her shock rattles through the receiver and crawls along his back. He realizes how silly his retort is. And how insulting. He has seen Niet’s wrath on a whole matter of things, but not once, except for the Little Italy incident, has he experienced such wordlessness from her.

She says calmly, “What have you been doing these past few months? What have they been making you do?”

Arc stammers, “Well, a couple weeks ago I was beheaded by a race car.”

“Beheaded. Sure. Fine. Why?”

“The analytics department told me that it would activate some sort of switch in one of the bystanders, so in a couple decades...”

“-And you don’t think they organized a fire almost localized in our Western branch? Don’t insult my intelligence, Arc.”

Arc away the creeping miasma of the lost four days, like an old television set creeping at the edges of his vision. “I’m sorry.”

“What did you do to piss them off? Destroy their printers or something?”

“I pissed off The CEO?”

“They have a CEO? Really?” Niet’s voice sounds incredulous, sharp. The kind of voice designed to make the recipient walk themselves into a philosophical corner. Arcturus knew he was taking the bait.

“Well, it’s The CEO.”

“And I’m The Pissed Off Cult Member,” she says, “I’m also the very afraid cult member.”

“Don’t worry, Niet, I will make sure no one touches you.”

“You can’t promise that, Arcturus.”

“Don’t go to your church,” he says.

“That’s how they do it,” Niet says, “throughout history, that’s how everyone does it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Parasites.”

She hangs up and the silence is heavier than her words. Arcturus feels as if someone else was speaking for him, saying all the wrong words. He feels feeble, powerless. And still Arc wants to ask her if she was seeing anyone, just to be sure, because his feelings mattered more than the situation at hand, because Arc is a parasite just like the Illuminati. He slumps in his chair, centers himself. Tries to recall how he has lost four days of consciousness. He wonders if he was brainwashed, wired as one of the multitudes of sleeper agents scattered throughout time and space, unaware of their activation. The rationalization of being able to not only travel to California, start a fire, and return in the exact same spot somehow seemed more improbable than a forest fire as a tactical assault starting from a PowerPoint presentation or an email chain. Still, this gap in time made him feel uncomfortable. He hopes that it is the Red King’s doing, then remembers the new body hanging limp on his halberd like a tattered flag, wonders what The Red King has done with his sister’s body.

He calls Dudley, finds out that a sink whole has taken out the forgotten construction site and half of the Witnesses with it.

“And the Great Flood,” Dudley says, his voice breaking with sobs, “gone. All gone. Soaked up by the burst sand bags.”

“Oh, Dudley,” Arc says, “it’ll come again, it always has.”

A pregnant pause and the smacking of lips. “But not the others. Not my family. I’m sorry Arc. We found the perfect girl for you too.”

“I’m sure you did, my friend. Do me a favor and stay where you are. Don’t try finding another Great Flood just yet.”

“I have to Arc. It’s my purpose. It’s all I have left.”

Arc leaves Dudley. He walks back to the calendar, scans through the X's. Calls the numbers he can, even though it is strictly against his policy to communicate with anyone after the gig.

Klaus IV of the wedding: "Can't talk. A burst sewer pipe onto the venue. Also stop talking to me."

The Children of Mani: "A pothole into the streets. Bicycles lining the pit like broken teeth. Too much sun. No moon anymore. Only light."

The Children of Gemini: "The Nocturnes are reduced. Only the Luminns remain. Two faced god, burned at one side. Equilibrium destabilized."

Without context, these unfortunate events are just unfortunate. However, Arcturus is beginning to suspect his fears are true. The Illuminati, however untraceable, lurks at the threshold of each of these societies, systematically starving them. A forest fire, faulty city infrastructure. Arcturus feels woozy, realizing their Grand Plan is set in motion long before Arcturus even considered the Illuminati. Perhaps this was the point. Perhaps they are waiting for him to join. Or quit. He resists vomiting. Calls more clients set in the future, one which he has established a rapport with that do not involve some sort of aggressive kidnapping. The Frothing Gorge, based in Yosemite, features a rockfall on their headquarters and will be cancelling their appointment to murder Arcturus underneath the starlight. The Brotherhood of Clouds lost their greenhouse underneath the Zhangjiajie Forest Park and must be canceled. The Storm Feathers regretted to say that their resurrection of Quetzalcoatl has to be rescheduled due to a sudden increase in tourism in Machu Pichu.

Arcturus sighs. He calls Lucia again.

"I messed up."

"Mr. Arcturus," a voice that reminds Arc of frostbite, vaguely familiar, as the precipice of his memory. A glacier of cordiality. "I am glad you are self-reflective and take ownership for your performance pitfalls."

"Is this Catherine?"

"Mr. Arcturus, I wish you would be more strategic in your contacts. You should not have called Lucia first."

Arcturus cannot recall her but knows that he does not like her. "What did you do with Lucia?"

"The pieces are in place, Mr. Arcturus," Catherine says, her voice as steady as the emotional range of a mannequin, "question: what happens when an employee leaves a company? Answer: someone needs to fill the spot. It's business. You must understand."

“Listen to me, if you so much as-”

“Goodbye, Mr. Arcturus.”

Arcturus’s patience for getting hung up on is beginning to grow thin. He grits his teeth, feels Catherine’s presence lingering in his ear. Then he gets a cab a couple of blocks away to the South Street Seaport, where Lucia lives. He walks down the cobblestoned path, twists underneath the government buildings and Highrise offices that have begun to take over the area like a shining scab. He catches glances with people in suits or on their run. Arcturus is aware of himself that it must do with how he looks; frantic, panting through the streets like a scared dog. Still, he cannot help but wonder if any of the thrashes of workers on their breaks or having outdoor meetings are agents for the Illuminati, watching Arc like curious scientists overlooking the behavioral patterns of a mouse. He catches some people in the offices above, framed by floor-to-ceiling glass panels, heads bent to pin a phone against their shoulders. Paranoia is a funny thing, because even though Arc knew that most of them did not care about the frantic man navigating the streets in a hurried half trot, he could not be one hundred percent sure.

He runs to Lucia’s apartment. A concierge greets him at the door, which frustrating Arc because he thinks concierges are silly. The concierge looks him up and down, stopping at his thrown together outfit, his panting in the salty breeze carried from the seaport. Arc wonders if this man is an agent of the Illuminati but does not want to accuse him of being one, or even convincing himself of such a fact. The lines between reality and the undercurrent, manufactured reality built by The CEO are beginning to blur, ambiguous. Arc now lives in a Venn-diagram, trapped in the center.

“I am here to see a friend. Her name is Lucia.”

“What is her last name?”

“I don’t know. She’s a colleague. Young. Midtwenties. Long, blonde hair. About a foot shorter than me. Has she left the building at all?”

The Concierge eyes Arcturus. “I do not recall anyone of this description. Maybe you have a wrong apartment building.”

“No, this is correct,” Arcturus says, believing the concierge for a second. He catches eyes with the man at the front desk, a bulky man who looks like the human personification of a marshmallow (opposite in physical appearance to Lyle, oddly enough). Arc redirects his attention. “Hi, hello. Have you seen a woman named Lucia exit the building in the last couple of hours? About a foot smaller than me? Blonde hair?”

The concierge and the front desk attendant exchange glances, and Arcturus knows he is on the precipice of their collective patience.

“Just check, for my sake,” Arc says.

He looks into the computer, shakes his head. “No sign of any Lucia here.”

“Sorry, pal,” the concierge says, which Arc interprets as *move along, pal*.

Arc does not know where to walk so instead he walks towards the South Street Seaport. He ignores the amplified glances of those he passes. Runners, day drinkers, middle aged woman with iced coffees on a morning walk. The sky is occupied with puffy clouds slowly skating across the blue, underneath sailboats traverse just as nonchalant. The smell of the Hudson River is salty and metallic. He wonders if this entire pursuit of his was engineered decades ago, maybe centuries before Pangea, birthed from a carefully aligned algorithm, presented visually at board meetings over office donuts and bad coffee.

Arc doubles over, steadies himself, and holds back anger fueled tears. With a shaking hand, he picks up the phone, considers dialing Niet or Dudley for advice, and remembers that they have their own conflicts to worry about, more directly related to Arcturus’s influence than they both think. He feels cornered, chased out of options, terminated rather than quitting on his own accord. And now they have Lucia, and Arcturus fears how The CEO will dissect and hijack her agency just as he did with Arc’s own. Now he is on the outside, and if the Illuminati has systematically destroyed the ritual locations of the cults and sects, then he cannot obtain any mana for the Red King regardless. Arcturus will starve, forever, and then after forever, he will be tortured for eternity, a discarded puppet unable to be broken but not abused.

This feeling is vaguely familiar to Arcturus. He read once that animals will switch into a primal state when backed into a corner. Foxes will gnaw off their own foot. Humans are no different. If a bear is chasing a hunter and a dog, the trusty dog becomes an obstacle so the hunter can escape with what little sanity is intact. This behavior influences Arc’s performances when chained to an altar, or while blindfolded and carried through forests or sewers. There is always a moment right before the first laceration or mutilation where Arc pretends to be backed into a corner, and he thrashes about in his wire or gags with more fervency, feigning a fight-or-die response. Arcturus has spent so many years pretending to be in these moments that he recognizes when one has befallen him.

With hands shaking, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the postcard for the new location to the Illuminati Zeitgeist department, feeling like a fox ready to gnaw its leg off.

\*\*\*

Arcturus navigates underneath the Pulaski bridge, feels pulses of hot air carrying brine. Cars zoom above, rattling the drawbridge. Occasionally the rectangular shadows flash by the cracks, and Arc thinks that if they saw how feeble this bridge looks from the underside, they would never drive along it again. Long Island City sits at his right, a new cavalcade of shining buildings emulating Manhattan. Barges cling to the lips of the river, holding an array of crates carrying something from someplace to another place. Greenpoint side warehouses reflects fractured light onto the water, glossing the river with a sheen only damped by the shadow of the

Pulaski bridge. The smell of trash and oil folds and wraps itself into the old-burger smell of hot city summer heat. Arcturus must make his way to this underpass by a series of vaults over fences, sliding between two shipping containers, and stepping into puddles crusted with whatever ambiguous biomass plop from the bridge runoff. Pigeons scatter as he stomps underneath the bridge, clutching the postcard so hard his knuckles turn white.

Now underneath the bridge, Arcturus is tasked with finding the door. The postcard only shows the Pulaski Bridge with the Manhattan skyline behind it like a crown. He clings to one of the piers, scaling the pile cap while trying to flatten himself as much as possible. The wall is dotted with enough pigeon shit that Arc wonders if it is not a Pollock painting. He grips to whatever hand holds allow him to balance, crushing the postcard against the wall, afraid of dropping it into the oily water below. Fortunately, no one is around, because Arc is pretty sure he was breaking a couple laws simply by being here. He tapped aimlessly on the pillar as if knocking a door, hoping that a slot will open and allow him in a dry, not unpleasant smelling elevator. He bloodies his knuckles and swears, both at himself and the situation.

A ship rounds the corner from the Hudson Bay, entering his peripheries. The ship is the size of a small building. Each barge held an array of colorful shipping containers stacked like matchsticks. As the ship approaches Arc feels a rumbling underneath his fingertips, the coarse exterior of the piers vibrating. No more cars are zooming above. The shade of the underpass begins to recede, opens like a gaping maw. Rays of sunlight burst through the crack and for a second Arcturus wonders if the Illuminati has found a way to cleave the heavens. A series of mechanical clanks and whirrs chime in the air, and Arcturus suddenly feels very vulnerable, feeling as if he was clinging to the capsizing mast of a ship in a storm. The drawbridge look like two obelisks standing upright, large stone monoliths of concrete and steel, each gate keeping against the threshold of walkers and cars trying to get to the other side. The ship honks its massive, nautical horn, deep and heavy. It approaches like a slow-moving beast, micro-adjusting to clear the opening like a thread into a needle. Arc is not afraid of the ship crashing into the bridge, for he is certain that this is at least a daily occurrence for everyone involved but seeing the ship so close with him clinging onto the pier with nothing but his fingertips does cause him some alarm. Like watching a subway pull into the station, screeching from the highspeed subterranean route to a sudden stop.

Arc must squint to look through the sudden burst of light from the exposed sky, but as his eyes adjust, he notices a door on the middle pier, or what appears to be one. He grits his teeth and curses the Illuminati. It is clever to have the entrance only activated when the bridge is drawn, but the amusement ends there. Logistically, this is a nightmare. It is black and cloaked by the Long Island City side of the bridge, but it was there, Arc is certain of it. Like some strange puzzle, to have a door that only appears during the passing of a ship.

It dawns on him that the bridge will inevitably return to its flat state and resume being a bridge. His opportunity to reach the door is limited, synced entirely with the slow-moving hulk nearing the straight. He tracks the plan of navigation, mustering any geometrical intuition to understand parabolas, understands that while he may *feel* he can cross the watery gap from one

pier to another, realistically this is impossible. Unsurprisingly, dying over three hundred times does bring a certain understanding of bodily limits. The barge is ever approaching, moving slowly but confidently in between the two pillars holding up the bridge. The nose slices in between the piers, and Arc sees that the ship's captain has navigated the barge to fit within inches to spare on either side. Just picturing what stress the captain must be experiencing makes Arc woozy, even considering that he is clutching against a turd crusted pillar like Prometheus on the mountain. The colorful shipping containers draw near, so close that Arc is confident that he could simply step upon it...

The black door taunts him. Arcturus sees the top of the container drift underneath him, a moss green platform six feet down. He waits for the second horn from the ship conveying to the bridge controllers that they had cleared the threshold and drops, falling directly onto his knees with a metallic thump. His body crumples into a roll, and Arc pretends that the endeavor looks cool from someone who may have been looking over the railing of the bridge. Adrenaline courses through his body as he jumps from one platform to another, vaulting at a slant because the ship is crawling forward along the green-blue water. The metal shell of the container is heated and burns his fingers, but this only makes Arcturus want to traverse the body of the ship faster. Using the platforms, he makes it to the door on the other pier, otherwise unattainable. The door rolls by like at the speed of a Sunday stroll. Arc curses at the Illuminati under his breath and vaults up to the pier, kicking at the wall to gain enough leverage to grip along the coarse pillar with his fingertips. The ship has almost cleared the narrow path, and this blossoms in Arcturus a strength to bring himself up by his cut and crushed fingers, motivated as if his life depends on it. Which, in a way, it does. The parts of his life that matter.

Arc sets himself on his knees, brushes himself off, and opens the door. The silver golden knob is hot from the intense exposure to the sun, but he grips, twists, and feels the door pull away from him, revealing a black void in the middle of the pier, an ominous emptiness. He stumbles into the darkness, catches himself at the threshold, and looks up to find thick, hairy knuckles slamming into the bridge of his nose as if in slow motion, as if to emulate the micro-adjustments of the succeeded barge.

## 6.

Arcturus wakes with his hands tied behind his back, sitting on a chair with uneven legs and enough splinters to rival a porcupine. His peripheries are blurry, a miasma of manilla, teal, and silver. In the distance are the *tap-tap-tapping* of diligent fingers on plastic keys, the soft pattering of dress shoes along the carpet. Globules of warm and sticky liquid can only be blood dripping down his nose, onto his shirt, and then onto the floor. On a high level, this is not an unfamiliar feeling. He has been captured and gagged many times before, knocked out and thrown into stranger, bound positions more times than there are days in a year. Yet something was *off*. This feels sinister.

“Mr. Arcturus.”

It is Ludwig's voice that Arcturus recognizes, like molten magma gurgling from a volcano; slow, craggy, geological order masquerading as chaos. The voice centers Arcturus, who feebly picks up his head and sees two large men super-imposed upon one another, spinning until they joined as one. *Yes, Arcturus thinks, this is what the brute looks like. I forgot. How could I forget?*

Arc grunts in reply.

"It was quite stupid of you to come all this way. Have you considered that if we did not want you to come all this way we would have made the door disappear? All the data and presentations said you would not charge into such an obvious trap, but I knew...I knew how narrow your vision is. Like a horse with blinders. That's all you are. A workhorse to till the fields."

"Where is Lucia?" Arc says, hearing peeps of whistling escape through a gap in his teeth. It is reassuring that he will get his chompers back when he wakes up after they kill him.

"How uncharacteristic of you, to think of someone else," Ludwig says.

"What have you done with her?"

People walk past the conference room, their legs visible underneath the shades along the floor to ceiling dividing wall. A fax machine beeps and whirrs. Chairs are stacked against the back wall. It discerns Arcturus that this room was not meant to be an interrogation room but can easily become one with the apathetic consent of all the office drones aimlessly orbiting the rows of cubicles the color of sticky tack. He wonders where his desk is in this Pac-man style floor plan, wonders if anyone cares that the man in the cubicle next to them is leaking coagulate on the floor, toes of a scuffed shoe kicking dislodged pearly whites. He recalls being in the subway about a year ago, being found by those creepy suited men, The CEO telling him that the office found their white whale, ecstatic that Arc exists at all.

Ludwig takes out a phone and holds it to Arcturus's ear. Faint breathing on the other side, but it is steady, more gripped by fear than anything else.

"Lucia?" Arcturus says.

Silence, then: "Arcturus. Arc."

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. I was getting onto the subway and apparently there is an extra stop on the line that I didn't know about and..."

"It's okay, Lucia, don't talk. I'll get you out of here."

"I want to die, Arc."



“No you don’t,” Arc says, “trust me.”

She starts to whimper, and Arc tries to console her. Ludwig pulls away the phone, hangs up, stuffs the device in his pocket.

“Damn you. She didn’t do anything to you. It’s me who quit.”

“Q: What happens after a workhorse gets put down? A: A new one comes to replace it.”

“How did you find her, anyway?”

Ludwig looks at his knuckles, scrapes off some dried flecks of Arcturus’s blood, “Because of you, Mr. Arcturus. We are everywhere.”

The phone rings. Ludwig answers it, nods, returns the phone. Arcturus watches him pick up a dictionary sized tome from one of the cabinets, feel its weight, and then, in slow motion, brings it across his brows, knocking him out cold.

He wakes up on an old Victorian couch, the welt from the dictionary the size of a tennis ball on his brows. The gurgling of an old model coffee pot sounds in the corner, a steady, grotesque undertone to the mechanical tapping of a clock. He uprights himself, notices now the sitting area in the corner of a wood paneled office, a grand mahogany desk in the center of the room, facing the only door. A necrotic smile of wormy lips caressing uneven, broken glass teeth chews on cinnamon gum. The spice masks acrid hints of vomit. Varicose veins spot pale hands slithering out of a misshapen suit like snakes.

“Mr. Arcturus,” The CEO says, “welcome back for your exit interview.”

*Oil spills on the Gulf. An automobile hydroplanes, turning the future scientists who will cure cancer into a crumbled candy wrapper. Men standing above the ruins of cities, armed folded like gods.*

Arcturus steadies himself. Tries to move his body but finds his arms strapped to the adjacent coffee tables. His ankles are bound to the legs on the chair. He feels underwater.

The CEO puts on leg over the other, leans back in his seat, and steeple two spidery hands over his stomach. “You really caused a lot of stress, Mr. Arcturus. I will admit.”

“Lucia,” Arc says.

“Soon, soon,” The CEO replies, “It was easier when you had job satisfaction, when that was all you cared about. You can’t blame us for ruining the competition. We need you, Mr. Arcturus, and it brings me no pleasure to say how reliant we have become. We cannot have you quit just to service those more insignificant. We know you need your mana.”

“So you made sure the only way for me to get mana was from you,” Arc says.

The CEO gives a tired nod. “And then we found Ms. Lucia. Or rather, you found Ms. Lucia.”

“No,” Arc shakes his head, feels the salty sting of arriving tears, “no I’ll come back. Not her. It’s not fair. She’s ancillary.”

“Ancillary? Is this not what you considered before of yourself? Is this not why you decided to seek employment with us, because you felt ancillary?”

Arc remains silent.

Catherine and Ludwig flank him, the soft pattering of their ill-fitting dress shoes like cat paws on a carpet. They set two briefcases on a side table underneath a picture of a generic forest. Catherine hands Ludwig rubber gloves as he unlatches the case and begins to toil with the contents within. They take off their blazers, roll up their sleeves. If this were under different circumstances, Arcturus would be unashamedly smitten by Catherine’s display of dominance.

The CEO smiles and Arcturus feels somewhere a kennel is putting several old dogs to rest because no one adopts them. The CEO’s eyes curve in a way that suggests genuineness, or the simulacrum of such an emote. He says, “Now what is stopping us from simply replacing you with Ms. Lucia, and having you become the puppet we envisioned you to be, the martyr you kept telling yourself you would be?”

Arc considers this. “Somehow you know that Lucia is better at I do than I am. She needs less Mana. You don’t know how long you’ll have her.”

He remembers the Red King’s wrath, angry from being starved. Arcturus does not believe The CEO understands that the mana gained from their endeavors does not contribute to the Red King’s satchel of souls. Arc figures they do not need to know.

The CEO swallows his gum; a heavy knob on his throat levies up and down. He maintains the chewing motion, absent, like a cow with cuddle. He looks at Arcturus but seems to look through him, robotically inserting another slot of cinnamon gum into his writhing lips. Odors of vomit nudge between the spicy aura of cinnamon freshly emitted from his noxious, odonatological nightmare.

He puts one ill fitted leg over the other, cradles his knees with an interlace of bony fingers. “I believe my associate Mr.Ludwig’s assessment is incorrect. You are not a workhorse, Mr. Arcturus. Not a work horse at all. You and Ms. Lucia are *oranges*, Mr. Arcturus. Oranges. Have you heard of oranges?”

Arc thinks that the abstract jump from describing him as a horse and then an orange is becoming a little obnoxious. He says, “Citrus fruits. I’ve heard of them.”

The CEO waits a beat, as if needed to untangle Arcturus's words. He replies, "Oranges make orange juice. It is important to squeeze as much out of one orange as one can when making orange juice. We will use Lucia until she fulfills the terms of her indentured servitude with whatever eldritch force is commanding her. Then, we will use you. Keep in mind, Mr. Arcturus, that our actions as of late are directly relational to how we treat Ms. Lucia. I can assure you that the only time she will see the sunlight is in the mad rush of well-orchestrated peasant rebellion, or to become patient zero of a global pandemic. She will associate sunlight and fresh air with death."

"No, don't you touch her!" Arcturus says, jumping from his seat to strangle The CEO. Ludwig and Catherine hold him back, sitting him back onto the seat by his shoulders and the nape of his neck. They pin his arms against the sides of the chair. Arc struggles but keeps his eyes on The CEO. "This is inhumane."

"Inhumane? The CEO says. "No. This is judgement. We are judgement personified. We are the rules which make the rules which make the rules which make the rules. With judgement comes penance."

Catherine reveals a box cutter. Ludwig pulls a pair of scissors from the briefcase.

Catherine says, "You may have brought us Ms. Lucia, yes, but your actions have yet to be reprimanded. Q: If Lucia is being used in place of you, what will happen to you? A: You'll be put in storage, a model at the back of the shelf."

In one motion, Ludwig cuts off Arc's pinky finger. Blood spurts from the exposed muscle, sinews of pink and layers of white insulate shine underneath the artificial lighting of the office. His finger falls to the floor like a limp worm.

Arc writhes, stamps his feet on the carpeted floor. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

The CEO says, "No one quits the Illuminati, Mr. Arcturus. You've made us do some horrible things to horrible people. Now we are doing horrible things to you. We own you. If we cannot have you by your will, we will have you by breaking you."

Catherine takes the box cutter and inserts it in between Arcturus's index and middle finger. She withdraws the blade to a little spurt of blood that lands on The CEO's shabby suit. Catherine examines Arc with as much intensity as a sculpture artist assessing their work from afar. Unimpressed with the viper bite, she proceeds to slice Arcturus down the arm with the box cutter, carving lines of calligraphy into his flesh.

Arcturus squirms but Ludwig holds him back. He swears at them, begins to sweat. He approaches this feeling like an old friend.

Wincing, Arc says, "Do you plan on killing me? We all know that is impossible."

“Who says anything about killing you?” Ludwig says, pulling up Arcturus’s pant leg and snipping his Achilles heel, severing it completely.

Arcturus screams, writhes. His socks fill with warm blood and his foot bends too much, a broken wire.

“Is this it? I’ll die from blood loss.”

“No you won’t,” Catherine says, pulling out bandages and gauze from the brief case. She begins to encase Arc’s arm in wrap, where the holes in his hand and forearm splotch red. She pulls out a heated iron and a Bunsen burner. “For cauterizing, obviously.”

His peripheries are beginning to blur. “So what...a million little...little paper cuts?”

“Yes,” The CEO says, “a million little paper cuts indeed. Life is full of them, Mr. Arcturus.”

## 6.

*Airplane sized monstrosities float among pillars of magma. Scorched sand for miles, endless, enough to drive any sane mind to madness. Creatures with many limbs and many eyes scale along the walls like barnacles, basking along the battlements and the rivets outside of the Red King’s Keep. A moat circles the fort, fixed with excrement of the damned, lava, and blood. Bodies writhe and grab hold of one another as they drown in their own filth, clawing with broken nails, biting with shattered teeth. An orgy in disguise.*

*He has never come here on his own volition, and he repels the persistent approach of abstract, infernal dread knowing that he can. The monsters screech behind him, communicating in a language that sounds like orchestral music in reverse but distorted, gargled, and angry. The drawbridge falls over the moat with a deft thump. Arc walks over the platform, gazing at the spire as it extends into the orange sky, watches it pierce the storm clouds pregnant with dry lightning.*

*Arc recognizes some of the structures, long catwalks where he was dragged in a thorned collar by the Red King’s fleshy torture servants, abominations of half otherworldly machine and half complicatedly grotesque bio-matter. A spigot vomits excrement and bones to his right, leaking into a black pool. A large, eight-legged creature with a body of scab pocked flesh and the lower abdomen of a spider skitters down a wall and stands at the door to greet Arcturus with a blood shot and glossy cyclopean eye. It greets him in chitters that register at a higher octave to the entangled moans of pleasure and pain from the moat and the torture chambers surrounding the inner courtyard. The massive doors open like a golem waking.*

*Arc enters the Red King’s Keep, his head forever forward. The fleshy-spider creature directs him to the Throne Room, scaling the walls in sudden, aggressive bursts before checking over its wrinkly shoulder to make sure Arc is following.*

*The Red King sits bored on his throne, hunched over on his blood red gauntlets. The bony crown growing from his skull pointed towards the infinite sky in the throne room. A new body has been impaled on the halberd, flailing like a dead fish. Another beautiful woman with long, flowing hair caked with blood and eyes rattling absently in her skull. The spidery creature gestures Arc into the room. Arc walks along the tiled floor, his feet echoing in the chamber.*

*Arcturus kneels. He says, "Red King."*

*"Your presence is an insult. Stand," The Red King commands, although his skeletal jaw does not move. The voice comes from the far away rafters above like an all-powerful force.*

*"I do not mean to call upon you, Red King," Arcturus says, then he straightens himself, "Something outside of this realm is breaking me. Parts of me are...falling off. I lost consciousness and ended up here. I do not know how I did it."*

*"Bah! I have no care for your mortal qualms. You are my servant. My tool. I own you."*

*"That you do," he says, "but I need your help."*

*"Help?" The Red King shuffles in his throne, straightens his back. The sunken eyes of his giant, skeletal face glitter in the red hue of the throne room. "Must I show you our relationship?"*

*Arc grits his teeth, resists all urges to submit. He stands.*

*"Kneel, maggot. Kneel for your king."*

*"Not until you hear my plight," Arc says before he can catch himself.*

*"YOU DARE DEFY THE RED KING?"*

*"Not until you hear my plight, for it affects you. It affects the Blue Queen."*

*The Red King considers Arc. "Speak. If this is a ploy I will flay you, inch by inch, until you wish for death, and I will not grant it."*

*Somewhere in a distant land, one where he cannot imagine quite fully, something like this is happening to someone he knows. It is a hunch, but one which provides Arc with enough armor to remain stalwart in the face of this cruel force.*

*"The Illuminati has set forth protocols to systematically destroy all eldritch and primordial clans, cults, and sects. The Illuminati is stopping me and the Blue Queen's servant from obtaining mana."*

*"I care not."*

*“And the Illuminati has captured both me and the Blue Queen’s servant.”*

*“I care not.”*

*“And are going to lock me away until Lucia completes her debt to the Blue Queen.”*

*The Red King considers Arc.*

*“I will only be able to get mana for you, my Red King, until only after the Blue Queen rises, and when she rises there will be no way for me to get your mana. For at this point, there will be no more fields to till.”*

*“She will encrust the world with ice,” the Red King says, “a tasteless way to rule.”*

*“If you want to destroy my world, then help me help you. We are both locked, used by the Illuminati as their tools. You may own me in death, but they have enslaved me in life. If the Illuminati keeps going, neither you nor the Blue Queen will rule. Help me stop them, somehow, and I will promise that I will get you your mana.”*

*The Red King slams the butt of his halberd onto the step of the throne, emitting a pulse of such angry magnitude that the foundation of the Red Keep shudders. The lifeless woman dangles, the bones of her limbs broken in so many places that they flop in grotesque directions. Beyond, the flying creatures roar, screeching as if in response to the Red King’s fury. Arc has seen this response before, and it frightens him now as much as it has before. A reaction of this kind means the Red King is reactive to Arc’s proposal, and while the Red King dominates and abuses, negotiation is a skill that akins to breathing.*

*The Red King clenches a bony fist and says, “You are an insensible, arrogant worm who needs to be reminded of their place. You serve me. No one else.”*

*“Yes,” Arc says, “but I cannot serve you if the Blue Queen takes over the Earth first, with all her frost and glacial fury. Then you will have lost, and it will have been on you.”*

*“You dare blame the Red King?”*

*“Only if you do not make the right choice. Help me. Help yourself.”*

*The Red King seethes, the eyes in the hollow cavity of his skull a deep blood red. “I will free you from this false prison.”*

*“Thank you, my king.”*

*“Now begone,” the Red King says, directing his attention to the lifeless, impaled woman. He gazes upon her like a piece of art. He continues: “I own you. Remember this.”*

\*\*\*

Arc returns from the hellscape dimension of the Red King and becomes assaulted by all the pain which has befallen him. In this unconscious state he has lost more of his fingers, some of his toes, and strips of his skin along his chest and stomach. A viscous fluid leaks from his eye, feeling like a trail of tears but is not tears. A matt of blood chills the side of his head, which feels lighter and unbalanced. Strewn across the carpet are little worms that Arc identifies as his detached fingers, whole chunks of his calf, scooped as if someone is serving ice cream, and his left ear, which looks like a fleshy snail.

“We thought we lost you,” Ludwig says.

He sees Catherine at the far end of the office, now wearing a bloodied smock and welding goggles. Ludwig is sharpening a pair of knives. The CEO sits across from Arc, still sitting proper, back straight as if absently watching television, chewing, chewing, chewing on the cinnamon gum. Arc does not have trouble reconfiguring his memory to identify them. Pain leaves an imprint on the body like a psychic connection fostered between an infant and a mother in the womb.

“Thought we went too far,” Catherine says, testing the blow torch.

“Frankly,” The CEO says, “I was looking forward to meeting you at your new locale and dragging you back, Mr. Arcturus.”

“You can call me Arc,” he says, “you know, like informally.”

“Informality is reserved for friends,” Ludwig says.

“But we are friends, aren’t we, Arc?” The CEO says, wormy lips squirming, a tongue fighting for air, “Always have been, are currently, and always will.”

Arc does not respond. He only speaks because it keeps him conscious. He cannot submit to the dark void of death; it is too irresponsible; they will only drag him back and perhaps bring Lyle to his doom. He would also never find this office again. Catherine approaches Arc with the blowtorch, eyeing underneath her goggles how to incinerate a particular limb most artfully, and Arc wonders exactly how the Red King will assist in this predicament. The Red King is literally in another dimension, an astral plane of horrors and grotesque, slimy abominations. He fears this is a cruel joke from the primordial force, and the possibility of the Red King able to joke both confuses and amuses Arc enough to straddle the tightrope of life and death just a bit more.

Ludwig grips Arc’s arm and Catherine ignites the blowtorch. A white-blue flame dances along the snout.

“This actually might kill him, sir,” Catherine says.

The CEO shrugs. “We’ll get another. We have much work to do anyway.”

Catherine brings the blow torch closer. Arcturus shuts his eyes and sees the Red King in the darkness.

*Now is your time, you horrible bastard,* Arc thinks.

The flame kisses Arc's arm. She holds it there, intensifying the heat, but Arc notices that the flame does not hurt him. Catherine looks at Ludwig for confirmation, he nods, and she raises the heat until the blow torch is miniature saber of flame.

"Ah, I see," Arc says, grinning through puffed lips and a broken cheekbone.

"What's going on?" Catherine says, "Why is he not melting?"

"Fuck you, that's why," Arc says, "and by the way, I was kidding about the 'Arc' thing, it's Mr. Arcturus to you all, and learn my last fu—"

The fire incinerates Arc before he can feel his pain receptors turning into dust. His eyeballs melt into goo, but he makes sure to get a lasting glimpse of The CEO finally showing some emotion. If Arc could, he would get the look of unexpected fear, unhinged rage, and undertowed disgust translated into some abstract form of art that only he knew, like a Rothko or something. He could see them scream as the boiled blood comes to a crux, exploding his body with as much might as several tons of C4, Arcturus a martyr to himself, to Arc.

\*\*\*

Arc wakes up several days later, naked and on the water-soaked floor of The CEO's office. The carpet squishes with absorbed blood and guts, fragments of Catherine, Ludwig, and The CEO himself popped like confetti or a split pinata. The sprinklers, if not all melted or obliterated, have long since exhausted now, dribbling only meek little droplets of water onto the smoldered floor. Slivers of the mahogany desk lay shattered where it was once situated, now a black, crusty phantasm. In the distance, ringing of fire alarms. A blown wall reveals The CEO's office not to be underground, but a hidden room within an office floor. Uprturned plants and chairs spike the pathways full of trampled on manilla folders and snapped pencils. Pandemonium chokes the hallways of the Illuminati Zeitgeist department like an angry lover.

Arc lifts himself up, rubs his head, feels the blood absorbed strands of carpet uncomfortably submit to his weight. He flicked someone's eyeball away from him. It's probably Catherine's judging from the unimpressed vibe he is getting from it. He stands holding himself, covering the shame of his nudity. He sees parts of his body mixed along his torturers like some abominable stew; a meshwork of sinews, bones, hair, fingernails. The extremities and chunks of muscle will regenerate once the old morsels necrotize and degrade. As for the burn marks and the lacerated Achille's heel, Arc finds they are healed completely. He looks around, sees the splinters of the chairs, the artwork, the desk, poking up through the carpet. The gap between rooms like wooden teeth. Arc recognizes he needs shoes. And pants, after feeling a stray dribble of a half-melted spout invasively flick his testicles. Ludwig is too large, and his body is too



mangled to make any clothing more effective than venturing through the offices nude. But The CEO...Arc finds The CEO's rotten, twisted face burned to a crisp, half his skull capsized with brain matter oozing out like the tongue of a clam. His clothes, however, are in perfect condition, as if answering to Arc's need for clothing. Arc grumbles, beings to undress The CEO's ill fitting, fashionably offensive clothes, pulls the long slimy socks from gnarled toes that remind Arc of the roots of a tree. He looks like an offense to anyone with sight and the basic ability to dress themselves.

*Perhaps, Arc thinks, looking at himself at the crackled reflection of an exploded mirror, the Red King has a sense of humor after all.*

The shoes are a little too large for him, and he feels like a clown flapping his colorful flippers. He moves through the broken wall and into a complex of droll offices, not unlike the one which his own desk was located in. Maybe this was even the same floor, and the interior design of the Illuminati morphs and changes at a whim. The offices are empty. A hodgepodge of upturned filing cabinets and smashed potted plants. Spilled cups of coffee soaked into the carpet, leading up to tilted paper cups. The emergency lights flash ruby down the halls, illuminating ways to safety. Arc read a play once describing Hell not as a place, but "other people". If so, then this must surely be one of the circles of Hell. He flexes his chopped fingers, wincing as the cracking scabs from the cauterized nubs. Lucia is somewhere in this maze of cubicles, printers, and swiveling chairs. Arc feels a little bit like the Minotaur, who is a pretty nice guy, by the way, albeit with debilitating daddy issues.

The Red King lurks behind Arc's consciousness, waiting to see if this further investment into him will lead to dividends. Arc can feel him, arms crossed in judgement:

*Why did I not wake up in New Jersey? I always wake up in New Jersey.*

***I allowed it.***

Arc spots the top of a scalp in a cubicle at the end of the hall. Head bent down, dutifully working. Arc wants to give him a badge to pin on his lapels. He enters the cubicle and finds the worker still hunched over. The computer screen has a spider-web crack on the corner, half obscuring an excel sheet.

*Why that Holiday Inn in general?*

***It is where the meteor hit. Mass extinction of cosmic forces. Where we first met.***

*The meteor killed the dinosaurs is in Yucatan Peninsula.*

***Insolent child.***

Arc taps on the man's shoulder. He does not move. After a second of examination, Arc notices a stream of blood matting his black hair. The worker transforms into a lifeless body, and

a kind of gross one. Arc spin the deadweight by his shoulder, twisting on the axis of the swiveling chair. This is the first of the office drones Arc has seen, and when they come face to face Arc sees a pair of miniature office scissors sticking out of his temple, his left eye obliterated to look like a fish scaly sphincter. Arc recoils, backs into another cubicle, holds himself on the teal dividers. Down the hall he sees a pair of feet sticking out to the hall and Arc runs to them. The woman is much of the same, her head lolling feebly with several pens jammed into her throat. Down the hall, the side of a man's face is barnacles by the impact of a coffee pot, his hair smelling sour by the old bean juice.

Arc stands on an overturned filing cabinet and surveys the area. He spots hands lulled into the desks with office supplies sticking out of them, bodies slumped over, asphyxiated by office phone chords. A glorious purpose, annihilated. The Illuminati must have dried up with the destruction of The CEO's office. Arc is confident that The CEO is more of an ephemeral concept if anything else, and, like a hydra, there will be another CEO to take its place in due time. But now...Arc looks over the ruins of the office, sees splatters of blood like flicked paint brushes, apostrophes of coagulate on the supply closets, keyboards sticky with sinews, all this underneath hanging lights, and feels that the destruction of the offices and subsequent data in the computers drove the workers to madness. Suicide? Murder? A caught fox will gnaw its legs. Hamsters without food will eat their children.

*What do you mean "we"? You slaughtered my village far away from America.*

Arc waits for an answer but realizes that the Red King will not supply him with more clarification. He steps off the fallen filing cabinet, arms himself with the sharpest pencil he can find, and then sharpens it on a neighboring desk after moving limp, rubbery hands away. Dead eyes watch him, reminding Arc of caught fish. He moves past the cubicles, even call out to Lucia with a cupped hand. He passes more dead bodies slumped over chairs and desks. Some workers intertwine within each other, synchronized in their fatal stabbing of the other one.

"Lucia!" He calls out.

The Red King returns, his voice ringing through his psyche like an echo at the bottom of a well:

*Leave her. She is an agent of the Blue Queen.*

*I cannot, my King.*

*You dare defy me?*

*I cannot trust that she will die here. I need to save her.*

*She is a parasite for mana. My mana. Saving her will hinder you.*

*I came here for a reason.*

***You exist because I allow it. You shall end if I demand it. My goblet will fill with your blood. Leave this place.***

Arc turns a corner. His knuckles whiten with his grip on the pencil. He shakes his head.

*Then do it.*

***Do not tempt me, insect.***

Arc passes a conference room fishbowed by floor-to-ceiling glass panes. The blinds are drawn, concealing most of the room. Arc sees his own reflection, looks at the ill fitted suit, the mismatched tie. His face looks like a pound of pastrami, and his hands can get the most use out of a pair of fingerless gloves. This is the Arcturus that he wants to be. This is the Arcturus that Antoinette saw in him, all dirtied and stinking outside of the bakery. He was an insect then.

*You cannot find another servant like me, my King. I have hundreds of years of experience. Good luck finding another one of me.*

***Arcturus!***

*I am saving the girl, my king.*

Tangles of feet are motionless on the other side of the glass. Mixed in are limp Doc Martens, splintered with bone matter and coffee. Not proper work attire. Sticky notes, post-its, and sheets of printer paper occupy the carpeted floor like fallen leaves. The rickety jamming sounds of a printer jolt and shake in the corner. Lucia stands ready as Arc opens the door to the conference room, holding the jagged edges of a smashed coffee pot in one hand and a box cutter in the other. The sour smell of acrid coffee seeps into the hall. Her hair is wild, shining bits of staples and paperclips interweave in between the dark curtains of her bangs. Light scratches on her cheek look like warpaint underneath the hollows of sleep-deprived eyes. Slumped bodies, splotted with blood, twist on the swiveling chairs or lean awkwardly against a plastered wall.

“Lucia,” Arc says, putting his own office weapons down. He feels like he is approaching a wild animal. Ghosts of his encounter with Cheerio.

Arc remains steadfast, but her eyes begin to swell red with recognition. She deflates in her chair, surrounded by people in torn button up shirts and bloodied khakis. Arc rushes to her, wraps his arms around her shaking body.

“They kept me in a dark room, like a closet,” she says, speaking more to herself. Her voice is craggy with dehydration. “Then the whole place shook. People kept screaming as if they had just found out they had a voice. They screamed about datafiles rendered useless, about a lack of purpose. And then...madness. Everyone started killing one another with whatever was closest to them. Strangled with chords, computer monitors caving in skulls. Half the people were already dead when I got in here. The other half...”

“It’s okay,” Arc says. They hold one another for several more minutes, ignoring the lifeless bodies and the smell of acrid coffee. Then he says: “Do you know how to get out of here?”

Lucia nods, “Follow the bodies. Most people got trampled on the way to the exit.”

## Epilogue // Cycles of Memory

### 1.

Lucia is the first person to enter Arc’s abode. He is too afraid of returning to her apartment building, and since everyone there failed to remember her existence, she probably does not live there anymore.

Of this, she says, “I was getting bored of that life anyway.”

He has always anticipated a guest, if there ever was one (and intentionally there never was), to be highly impressed by Arc’s living situation. The relics of past gigs, the old arcade games in the center of the warehouse floor. Instead. Lucia, finally allowing the adrenaline to leave her body, slumps upstairs like a defeated athlete. Arc makes sure she is settled before collapsing on the couch himself. He no longer feels the presence of the Illuminati lurking within the folds of his life, potential ghosts just beyond the corner of consciousness. He does not think that the Illuminati is defeated, but he has no plans to make this a mission to find out. It is only one head of a hydra, Arc knew, but the one with his scent on it has been decapitated.

Arc and Lucia spent the next week in his home, occasionally leaving to restock on food. They are well equipped on alcohol. Lucia read Arc’s collection of books in the corner that he never touches, and Arc beat his old high score on Pac-Man, only to be beaten by Lucia in a drunken mania the following night.

One morning his phone rang. It has not rung all week and both Arc and Lucia stare at one another, she from the office loft, he from the industrial kitchen. They meet the phone in the living room.

“Dudley?” Lucia says, “Who’s that?”

“A friend,” Arc says, smiling. He answers.

“Arc, how are you? Been trying to get in touch with you for a couple days, man.”

“Sorry Dudley, it’s been hectic. How are you and your clan?”

“Recovering. But our hope is not faltered.”

“Fancy a beer?” Arc says.

“Cutting out all that stuff. Gotta get in shape.”

“You’re already a shape.”

“A shape I like, I mean. With the incident I was promoted to handle the engineering of the Arc.”

“You’re an engineer?”

“I am now,” he says, “also I do have my Ph.D. in Engineering.”

“You never mentioned that before. I thought you were a coffee guy.”

“Time to apply myself. Anyway, we found the real location for the Great Flood. The real one this time. Want to stop by this weekend?”

Arc puts the phone to his shoulder, exchanges glances with Lucia, confirms that she feels safe. He returns the phone back. “Sounds good, Dudley.”

Lucia asks, “Who was that?”

“Friends of both of ours,” he says, “Cult of the Genesis. You know them.”

“Ah yes, the Great Flood people.”

“I call them the Ark people.”

“Of course you do,” Lucia says, walking back up the stairs to continue whatever someone young twenties in New York does.

Arc watches her, happy to see she is back to her old, isolationist ways. He looks around, sees the couch, and falls into a deep slumber as if someone has pushed him into the pool.

\*\*\*

*“You are free,” The Red King says, one crowned head on a ruby gauntlet, dripping with blood. His glittered eyes look past Arc, almost intentionally.*

*“Free, my king?” Arc says, surprised that the Red King even knew these words. It dawns on him that he is in the Red King’s keep. Back in Arc’s own dimension he feels emboldened to speak his mind. Here is the Red King’s world. Every atom and molecule is subject to his sadistic whim.*

*“I shall not repeat,” the Red King says.*

*Arc says, “I have not gotten you mana in many months. I have become proxy to the decimation of any mana sources in the future.”*

*The Red King leans back. If his skeletal jaw moved when he talks, he might have been yawning. Arc notices just now that the Red King's halberd is bare of any lifeless bodies. Without the corpus adornment it looks regal, deadly, beautiful.*

*"This is a move against the Blue Queen's progress," the Red King says, his glittered eyes turning the color of ruby, then sapphire. "You have given me sufficient mana."*

*"The bombing," Arc says, "of the Zeitgeist Department."*

*"In the name of me, the Red King. All of them sacrifices. All of them mana pustules, exploding in a fiery blaze. They were killing themselves because of a lack of order. I am the opposite of order. You were the largest income of mana I have received thus far. Clever insect. Very clever."*

*Arc allows the compliment to sift through the insult. He manages a smile. "I am free? I can die?"*

*The Red King raises his halberd. The infinite ceiling above the throne room begins to flash scarlet, the deep color of oxblood. Rays of purple illuminate spots on the tiled floor like the sun pushing through clouds. Sounds of slow moving and gigantic machines rumble underneath a discordant chorus of demonic trumpets.*

*"You have long earned the embrace of death."*

*"Wait, King!" Arc shouts, "let me die in my dimension."*

*"You do not wish for the embrace of death?"*

*"There is more in my world that I wish to do."*

*"Granted," the Red King says, "enjoy your pathetic world, knowing everyday it is because of my charity."*

*"I shall," Arc says. Then he asks, "How much longer until you take over the Earth and enslave us in eternal damnation?"*

*"Entire civilizations will rise and fall before I leave my molten imprint on your world. Behind me shall be riders of Armageddon, out from your exploded sun."*

*"I see," Arc says, "I wish you best of luck with conquering our world, my King."*

*"Begone, insect." The Red King moves his giant skeletal hand...*

And Arc wakes up and begins to weep.

Dudley tells Arc and Lucia to meet him in New Orleans, Louisiana. Both of them have been there many times before, on various gigs. They even had the same client at once point or another, and Arc jokes that perhaps, in a past life, they might have crossed paths.

Lucia has no clothes or belongings, so Arc takes her to her favorite stores and outfits her with a new wardrobe. Her cellphone plan is also cancelled, as the Illuminati has erased her existence, and Arc puts her on his own plan. In a way it is like having a roommate. At the door he hands her a wad of cash. She notices that he brings no bags with him.

“You aren’t coming?” Lucia says.

Arc shakes his head, “No need. Don’t tell your eldritch god, but I have fulfilled my debt. Apparently, my stunt at the Illuminati is enough to pay my servitude.”

Lucia looks at him with a growing smile. He sees the cogs turn in her head, underneath her black bangs and behind her emerald eyes. Arc has felt the same as she. Apprehension, not of losing whatever mana-arms race that some eldritch forces are waging against one another, but of being alone. Lucia hugs him, plants a kiss on his cheek.

“So that’s it, huh? One fatalistic stabbing and you are dead?”

“One can only hope.”

“Stay away from all that makes life dangerous.”

“That’s what makes life ‘life’.”

Lucia scoffed. “When is the end of the world?”

“Not in many, many years. You have time. Maybe your Blue Queen is a little faster.”

“Maybe,” Lucia says, looking away. “I was getting used to having someone like me around.”

“Well,” Arc says, “some things aren’t beautiful because they last. It’s because they don’t.” The taxi pulls up at the end of the street. Arc makes a habit not to promote traffic here, but it does not really matter anymore. He says, “Come visit me in a couple decades. You’ll see me with wrinkly skin and arthritis.”

“You already look like a nut sack, Arc.”

“Okay, Lucia. See you soon.”

“No,” Lucia says, “see you along the way. And thank you.”

Lucia gets into the taxi, and it drives off to Port Authority, clutching a one-way ticket to New Orleans in her palm. He watches the taxi turn its corner, belching a grey exhume of pollution in between two derelict warehouses. He checks his phone to make sure Lucia did not forget anything and sees that Niet finally texted back. She mentions that the remaining members of their East and West coast branches have consolidated somewhere in middle America. Several of her texts mention a man who was one of the survivors of the “accident”, and Arc interprets this as her new partner. A pang of guilt surfaces in Arc’s heart, not because he desires Niet or is jealous of this new man, but because things could have ended differently. Still, he is happy to know that she and her community are back together, and her new relationship will probably be stronger, reinforced by their shared trauma.

Everything is falling into place, in its own way. Arc wonders if this is because of some divine or infernal mathematical principle. Wonders if there is a plan at all. He leans his forehead behind the shut door of his apartment and looks at his hands. It relaxes him knowing there is an expiration date, and it brings forth in him a surge of energy, a need to make this last life worthwhile.

\*\*\*

A warm air sweeps through Arc’s hair like fingers running through silk. Before, the streets were unorganized, cobblestoned paths of severe geometries, ad hoc, an uncontrolled weed. Now they are illuminated and paved. The Eiffel Tower looms above the buildings, a graceful iron skeleton. The taxi passes signs for the Champs Elysée, the Notre Dame, Louvre Arc holds his duffel bag in his lap, practices phrases in a tongue that has not gotten much use.

The taxi stops in the 9<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, which is far enough from the center of Paris and surrounding Seine that Arc can rediscover the city like an old friend. He tips the driver and shuffles the bag on his shoulder, watches the car swerve down the *rue*. Arc takes a breath, breathes in the sounds of fresh croissants and coffee. He picks up *French for Beginners* in Shakespeare and Company and turns the corner into the crooked back alleys, the Notre Dame regal and white behind him. Pigeons roost on the corners of taverns and flutter away as he approaches. He steps into a bar, sits down at the table.

“Un amber, si vous plait,” Arc says, practicing the inflections and finding the tongue easier to adapt, like wearing a favorite shirt.

He drinks his beer, looks out the window to the passing people, and wonders if the Cranial Women of the Batiment Noire will come for him. This is unlikely, considering they probably thought to have killed him centuries ago, when this city still operated by gaslight, before the strategist reconstruction of the boulevards. And if so, then so be it. Perhaps it is some ironic fate. His mission is enough to armor him of any encroaching doubts.

He settles his tab. Heads down more crooked paths. To his surprise, the smell of freshly baked bread wafts through the streets, bounces off the striped café awnings, u-turns at the River



Seine, and wafts into his nostrils. Like the frail fingers of an old piano player, Arc picks up the salt and yeast on the bread, the mugginess of the sourdough. The love powering each rhythmic knead. He shuffles the bag from one shoulder to the next and follows the scent, remembering the streets as they once were, trusting his memory of every synchronized step with Antoinette.

A bakery is before him, approximately where Monsieur Morneau's house used to be. Time has shifted the buildings and the streets into amalgamations of the past and present. Knows it like his own heartbeat. Morneau's bakery might have faded into the past here, traded hands in front of the kiln, replaced the storefront some hundred years ago. Arc is not sure, but he knows with every fiber of his being this is the street where Antoinette saw Arc begging for bread. Where her beautiful, strikingly intelligent eyes steadied his sails. He walks into the store before he can get nostalgic. Finding Antoinette's grave is the agenda for tomorrow, or tomorrow after that. The time for mourning is not now.

"Je peux vous aider?" The baker says, her apron caked with flour.

"Je voudrais un arbeit," Arc says.

"Avez-vous deja cuisine?" The baker says, her eyes furrowed.

"Oui, c'est mon passion," Arc says, setting his bag on the semolina dusted floor.

*But it has been a very long time.*

FIN.