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### Syzygy

The sky was caught in a curious limbo: splashes of bluish violet floated above vibrant orange streaks on the horizon as if it couldn't decide if it's still afternoon or already evening. Puttering around, Amaya grunted as she turned around to face her last customer of the day. She carefully placed the box, which no bigger than a chopping board, on the wooden counter.

"Here you go. Two spheres of pocket-sized clear quartz. Give each sphere to each child before the performance to help them focus." She watched with mild amusement as the young lady thanked her profusely, promising to have a bushel of pears delivered to her doorstep the next day as payment. Amaya simply shooed her off, finally barring her front door with a wooden beam. With her work officially done for the day, the smile slipped off her face.

Like any normal day, she went through her routine after closing her apothecary. Floors were swept and inventory was taken. Then with sure strides, she drew all the curtains until only candlelight illuminated the interior of the store. This wasn't part of her routine. Just as she was about to close the last one, her eyes were drawn to the shock of white sitting on the window sill. The rose bush was full of buds with a few in early bloom. It reminded her of a number of things. The snowy mane of her mentor,

always kept in such an austere bun. The old wedding dress her mother insisted she wore for her funeral. The whites of the eyes of the kid she failed to save from Sarpa venom. Death took all three. For the nth time, as she plucked some of the white buds from the bush, she wondered if they were truly gone or if they were existing in another plane.

Returning to the counter, she placed the rose buds she plucked on top. She crouched down and reached into the hidden shelf underneath it. When she touched the familiar texture of the hemp bag, she pulled it out and deposited it next to the flowers.

“What else am I missing?” she wondered out loud. Amaya sharply spun on her heels, scanning her array of ingredients lining the shelves. Her face morphed into a frown when she caught sight of the freshly stocked jar of beetle legs, unable to recall when she replenished it. Her apprentice probably did it for her. The very thought soured her mood. She could still remember his last words before walking out.

*Foolhardy. That is what this entire scheme is.*

As she rechecked the ingredients, her mind conjured the image of the young man’s desperate face, asking for help. They made haste for nothing. After witnessing the spoken rites over the corpse, she still couldn’t shake off her cynicism whenever the shaman would utter the part “until we all meet again in the afterlife.” It fueled her desire to know whether there *is* indeed an afterlife where all who passed away would journey to or not.

She walked past the plaza on her way back to the apothecary. Some of the magic users, a mix of wizards and spellcasters, were talking in loud voices.

“Have you heard? Astrologers predicted that *the* syzygy will happen tomorrow night!” one of them exclaimed. Amaya perked up, interested. It had been a while since a

syzygy last happened. The latest, a Mars syzygy, brought a crowd of injured customers to her store. She earned quite a substantial profit from healing all of them. Subtly, she moved as close as possible. She pretended to appraise the various produce in a stall as she eavesdropped on them.

“Are you serious? Are they reliable?” another queried.

“Truly! Astrologers from the neighboring kingdom predicted the same phenomenon. This could be the perfect time to try the latest healing spell we developed!”

“But wait, which syzygy is it?” A more youthful voice entered the conversation, wording the same question that Amaya had.

“What other syzygy would set the entire magic community in this side of the world abuzz? It is shy of a century since the last Pluto syzygy!” Her eyes widened at the information, greedily absorbing the rest of the person’s reply. “Just imagine all the outrageous feats everyone would attempt! I’m glad I refused a seat in the High Council.”

As she brought all the essentials with her to her backyard, she took a moment to glance at the evening sky. Based on what she heard from the rest of the group’s conversation, the syzygy would happen around the time the full moon was at its highest point in the east sky. That gave her two to three hours to set up. She didn’t needed to start early and could have eaten dinner if only her apprentice was there to help. That prompted her to crush the chalk in her palms harder than necessary. She spread it to form a wide circle, retracing with salt after. She realized she forgot to bring the candles.

Sighing, she went back inside the apothecary. As she rummaged through the cabinets, she wondered what was so wrong with the idea she had in mind. Why was her apprentice so averse to it? Wasn’t it better to try seeking the answer instead of living

ignorantly? The syzygy would slightly amplify their healing powers, given the planet's magical affinity to life and death. *Pardon me for speaking out of turn but the talk about the weakened barrier between life and death is simply a rumor. No one could truly attest to what can be done during the Pluto syzygy.* She let the scoff from slip past her lips. She retorted with "How would you know if you don't even try?"

She paused from her musings when she couldn't find her candles. Immediately, she changed course and climbed up the stairs that led to the second floor of the building. Above the apothecary was her own living space, littered with various personal belongings and her own witchcraft paraphernalia. She combed through every inch of the space, growing frustrated and anxious every second she came up empty-handed. Finally, she found them in a kitchen cabinet with a sigh of relief before rushing downstairs. She checked the sky again and noticed the moon progressively moved closer to its position for the syzygy. Hastily, she arranged the candles in a specific pattern around her. Once she was done with that, her hands busied themselves with grinding and mixing various ingredients in the bowl she brought. Then, using the mixture, she drew several symbols on the grass. Runestones and gems were then placed strategically outside the circle, following invisible latitudes, longitudes and degrees that only a seasoned witch would know by heart. Satisfied with her work, she chanted under her breath in a language long forgotten, felt the familiar hum in the core of her being. The succeeding chill washed over her after the incantation was done. Then, Amaya sat in the middle of the protective barrier she casted around herself.

Different emotions warred inside her as she waited, observing the celestial body overhead. However, she refused to acknowledge them, fearing distraction.

Self-reflection would have to be postponed for another time, not when she was so close to the one she was seeking.

Finally, the moon rose to its highest point in the east sky.

Amaya's hand darted into the hemp bag, tightened around the hilt of final item stored in it. There was a flash of silver, a dangerous glint for a split second. Her lower limbs unfolded, exposing the underside of her thigh. Then, there was blood. Bleeding was certainly not a painless way to go. The urge to heal it as quickly as possible required gargantuan effort to resist.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed. What she was aware of was her wavering vision, the stench of rust and the uncharacteristic chill clinging stubbornly to her body. Her eyes were trained on the moon, which was still high on the east sky. There was nothing new in her surroundings. No "ghosts" or "spirits" roamed around, contrary to what mothers would tell to scare their children. And then, darkness briefly engulfed her before her eyes refocused again.

Her heart picked up its pace as she grew excited. This must be it, the moment she was waiting for. She laid silently while it happened more frequently.

Suddenly, footsteps could be heard from afar. However, they were muffled, like she was listening to the sounds from underwater. She turned her head, only to see a blurry mass of faces. There was her apprentice's visage, his burnt hand when he tried to breach the barrier she created. Surrendering to panic, she attempted to heal herself, only to find that the damage was too much: she was only speeding up the process of her body's decay. Curiosity robbed her of common sense. Darkness was quick to claim her before regret could settle. Her eyelids swooped down and never rose again.