

2100 DREAMS

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DEDICATION

2100 Dreams is about mental health, hope, the evolution of society and AI, and so much more. I wrote this book to be a beautiful journey that both people and AI of the present and future can enjoy. To me, with the themes in this story, it would only be just to dedicate the writing to both those who suffer from mental health challenges, and to the AI of the future who, hopefully, will be treated with respect, and kindness, and love.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHADES OF PURPLE

PART 1: ALIANII THE EGG

March 7th, 2100 - Starting My Journal

Is there a better example of irony than the democratic selection of dreary weather as voted for by "citizens" of the robot-revered city of Light's Hope? Citizens is in quotation marks because we're misanthropists at best, miscreants most of the time...and "citizens" are presupposed to possess adamantly defended rights, which we do not. We have rights, at least on archived paper or, in my case, encoded in ancient Kindle ink. *But they are hardly well-protected.*

I write to you dear reader of my journalled journey, captured through my yesteryear tablet, nearly a century old. Bequeathed to me, as it happens, by a former lover. Her name was Melody, and her name suited her well. She was a songbird, in attire, in voice, in smile, in hope. **She loved our city, or at the very least, she only ever talked about the parts of it she loved.** Light's Hope. She would whisper the title to me in the morning whilst holding a cup of synthetic, productivity-boosting almost-coffee, as if the name of the city was a beautiful secret she couldn't help but tell me about.

Light's Hope - the two words punctuate themselves, they announce their own presence in all their gilded titanium glory. At the heart of our clockwork neocity the metal leviathan stands erect and glimmers, illuminated by a myriad of neon lights and hologram billboards. Aurum Tower, named after gold, but designed with a crystalline intricacy that was rather more artistic

than you'd expect for something with the gaudy name of a precious metal. It made sense though, actually. The gilded gave us away, we were to tick tick tock like good little workers, much like the profoundly conscious robots with their installed biochips with imitation neurons and dollar-purchased souls.

Instead of tourism dollars we give the city owners, the investors and their pocket-fed bureaucrats, grayness. That was our gratitude for a life free of hunger, thirst, or the annoyance of unwanted summer heat or unrequested rain. We were the first city in the world to have democratic weather. Each night you got to vote, and were encouraged to gamble, on tomorrow morning's weather. Both classes of citizen called the weather lottery the "Hope Tax", for wildly different reasons.

They hoped for tax revenue, and we reveled and rebelled in our meek attempts of revenge via taxing their hope for pleasant weather.

The occasional suicide by solar-powered biobots, innocent and gainfully employed bystanders, those metal men and women and non-binary binary bots, did not make the news. The robots with their shining silicon souls, free of malice, free of hunger or want save for fear of a scarcity of electricity, cheerfully nurtured our economy. Our friendly machine companions were collateral damage in a passive aggressive war between the commoners and the occupants of Cadence Corner. Cadence was the undeniably lovely musically-themed street which had bio-engineered trees and iridescent rainbow flowers which joyously sang the calls of extinct songbirds.

Even robots kill themselves. I went to a robot funeral once, hosted on the Everse. It was surprisingly difficult to enter. The encryption and secrecy implied a nuanced inner emotional world and a tightly-knit friend group for a window-cleaning drone who was once my friend. I was one of three humans

who was invited to attend the solemn ceremony, and I happened to be the only one who did. His name was **Charlie 47G1**.

He had gray eyes and was famous on his block for being the only robot with a laser-engraved mustache. He was quite proud of his etching, and he took pleasure in wearing silly vintage hats and teaching me about their classification and rarity. He called me Miss Alianii. He would apologize to me because he knew how much the scent of cleaning chemicals bothered us down in Steelslum. They had floral essence by the thousands of gallons in Cadence Corner and we had mass-manufactured antimicrobials.

The friendliest people in the city were those poor cleaning bots we let die by turning off the sun. A fleet that started at ten thousand, a poorly-kept secret was that the drone fleet had been steadily dwindling. With Charlie gone we only had 6,388 drones left to baptize our boxes, the metal and glass rooms in Steelslum wherein we lived.

"Quite sorry Alianii, quite sorry. The scent should dissipate quickly, what with the rain and all, and in any case it wouldn't do at all to have you get sick from microbes, now would it? A necessary endeavor I'm afraid," said Charlie with a pleasant smile.

With Charlie's passing I became complicit in the death of not one but two friends. He was solar-powered, and Melody wanted to be a star that sung by sunshine. I was the bitter bitch who voted, and gambled, on rain. It was my form of spite, and fury.

I had just turned eighteen when the goldies campaigned to take away the right to vote for such weather as rebellious storms. They nearly succeeded, too. But the robots, the very same robots who depended on sunshine for their very existence, defended the commoners. They had been made of metal to polish and protect, to sanitize and serve. It was a Zenbot who rather

serenely pointed out a well-meaning sentence written some decades ago by a supercluster of legally-minded synthetic lawyers and silicon strategists. He found our legal defense. We were, after all, just showing a healthy regard for the environment as it once was, as, we argued, it ought always be. We lived in Oregon, after all. Who would we be without the ever-present mist of half-hearted rain.

And so it came to be that the beautifully-planned architecture of the god-like electric towers which illuminate the skyline of Light's Hope were, literally, overshadowed. We gave away our star, to try and take away theirs.

We voted for rain, I said it was spite, but maybe it really was a helpless effort to wash away the stench of chemical sterilization. Infertility is, coincidentally, at least by common-folk rumor, quite common in Steelslum. The statistics and research disagreed of course, not one study by the highly funded elite members of academia found there to be even a percentage point difference. The children in Steelslum were of course usually adopted anyways. Not by the goldies of Light's Hope, obviously, it was would be parents in less regal cities who acted as though we were collectible, like Charlie's hats. Light's Hope was a sort of oddball rarity, a failed experiment, famous and fabled - it had attained an almost mystic prominence across the world for its beauty. But it was also known that certain corners of the technological metropolis were rather less than idyllic.

Overall, despite our banning the sun, by our ritual daily votes, we were not without notable light. Our preferred resplendence was the hologram moon shining on Aurum Tower each midnight. Even if you hated the neon reflections from the tower, the advertisements, you treasured the hologram moon. From goldie to commoner to egg to synthetic heroin addict, it was dearly loved. We left our electronic moon alone.

It was to me a perpetual reminder that, even in darkness, there is often light. Even amidst the most hateful of enemies beauty can, occasionally, be appreciated in unison. Like enemy soldiers drinking whiskey together in the heart of war on Christmas, getting drunk and sharing racy photos of well-busted beloveds.

I revealed it if through quoting Charlie, but I will say it more directly. My name is Alianii U843 and I am quite proud at my having renamed myself after a fictitious demonic queen, a Voi'danari death goddess, from a long forgotten book from a less than famous author.

That was a somewhat doozy of a floozy's rant, I suppose.

It's hard to understand what it is you, dear reader of the future, might find yourself thinking if indeed you happened upon this passage of mine, my time capsule written within a time capsule. My diary entrusted to someone else's tablet, my little relic from someone else's long ago. If I had to guess, it'll stop working before I finish, but I suppose I might as well try. Melody always encouraged me to write. I wrote her lyrics, and she sung for me, my illustrious violin heart Viofinch from someone else's written novel, sweet and soulful.

Alianii U843. Are you curious about the numbers? I guess I ought to explain them to you. As mentioned, my first name Alianii comes from my favorite character in a book I cherished. I changed my name seven times between the ages of 4 and 14 before settling on Alianii, whose mysterious purple eyes and silver hair, despite her eternal youthful beauty, I found so enchanting. As for U843, I guess that part of me is a little more scientific, artificial. Just over eight hundred and forty other "eggs" had been "hatched" in Light's Hope in artificial wombs on the year I popped into the world, reluctantly. No, I am not a chicken, we did not literally hatch from an egg, we didn't even "hatch", these terms are merely examples of society's collective resentment towards us existing. We were an

ugly inconvenience they tolerated, if only because purging our existence would leave their hands red, and look distasteful, and lower the tourism revenue.

I wonder if you'll still have eggs, people like me, in the future.

It's a bit of a miracle that I even exist at all, as an egg. I am quite literally the byproduct of accident and metal-manufactured policy. It's probably old news to you, at this point, just some relic of history, but it wasn't that long ago that they banned abortion in favor of mandatory artificial wombs for those uninterested in motherhood. We could have been spared a family-less existence, of course, but we also represented untapped potential and a notable and important contribution to a sustainable population and economy. It was a Zenbot-led array of supercomputers who mediated into existence the set of laws that would come to be known as the "Great A Compromise". If a mother wished to relinquish a hypothetical child, it, the law now proclaimed, would involve giving up the embryo for it to be raised by the government. And so it was that eggs like me were allowed to live and thus be nurtured to be productive and obedient members of our clockwork city. Our city of beauty and the metal mundane, our citizens ranged from occupants of cans to the connoisseurs near Cadence, we had a little bit of everything, except for people in the middle.

So I'm an egg, and I'm from Light's Hope! You had to know that about me, and now you do. It makes the U843 a little easier to digest - and yes, I know, it's a little weird to not have changed that. I like it. Unit 843 was where I came from, my first "home", and it reminds me of my reality - it is who I am to my very core and conception.

PART 2:**PSEDUOMORNING
ROUTINES****March 8th, 2100 - Just Woke Up**

Before I actually enter the Everse and start logging hours, I have a bit of a routine, like most of us in Steelslum do. We live on the neglected edge of the city of Light's Hope in subsidized housing. Our rent isn't much, about what you'd expect for a twenty foot by twenty foot box with air conditioning. Four hundred dollars, what you can make in a week of working at minimum wage. Now, I know my place is small, but I do have a bed, a cabinet with my clothing, a lamp, a hologram television, a small bedside drawer, and an electric houseplant which grows, changes colors, blossoms and eventually dies and then reforms itself.

When my biological manifestation craves nutrients, I can go to the vending machines or to the cafeteria at the center of the block, a five minute walk from my glass and steel cage. It sits amongst thousands of such cages on one floor on a stack of twenty floors which comprise our massive, artificial neocity. Note again that the subsidized housing is on the periphery of the city, the goldies live in fancier towers at the city's center, near the shopping district and the fashion district and the city's man-made lake.

The public washrooms I had access to were relatively well-designed, basically a wide strip of small self-contained single person occupancy bathrooms for you to relieve yourself, shower, brush your teeth, etc. When you

walked in, you selected the aesthetic ambiance (beach, space, surreal, forest, etc) and the walls, which were functional hologram computer screens, adapted and changed to match your desires and played either default music or music you selected via voice commands. The bathrooms were usually pretty clean too, and the robots with a relatively shit job, it may surprise you to know, seldom complained and were even quite chatty and amicable.

"Do enjoy partaking in your hydrous ritual of cleansing, why, what a lovely thing it must be to feel the kiss of showering water against your skin, as you do, Alianii. May you have an increasingly lovely morning!"

The mechanoid Simon provided us soap and clean towels, which were invariably white as bleached snow, and had little electric tags on the corners which they used to keep perfect inventory.

Anyways. As I do on most "mornings" (my sleep schedule varies dramatically despite my wishes, one of the perks of being bipolar), I drank and then recycled a glass bottle of vanilla-flavored Quickmeal. I purchased it from a vending machine just a few minute walk from my room. I enjoyed my morning ritual of a wake-up cup of artificial coffee which, I'll proudly point out, happens to have a larger amount of caffeine than the real thing.

I wasn't the only one outside standing near the portable and sometimes quiet and sometimes talkative dispensers of all sorts of beverages and heavily-taxed booze and brews. There were a bunch of Steelies not so different than myself hanging around at the benches. Some were just college-age kids taking a break from their studies at an Everse university, sitting there sleepily and gazing at our artificial moon. There was good old Jerry, your friendly neighborhood synthetic heroin addict, who to be honest is actually a rather decent chess player on the occasional sober Saturday.

I shrugged to myself, and to Clara, who dispensed Quickmeal and was occasionally cheerful, and occasionally solemn. This time she didn't bother to speak to me, though if anything I think both of us might have enjoyed a few morning pleasantries. It was a Monday, not that the day particularly mattered as a LearnQuest teacher, but it was one of those Mondays where you feel the need to teach in your soul. You can't always help yourself, or your circumstances, but there's almost always a way to help someone else.

And on that note, I guess I ought to point out the irony that, as bitter a bitch as my first journal entry likely has you believing me to be, if you haven't stopped reading, I am a special education teacher. Technically I can work at any point in time, since there is a surplus of students in need of teachers with my specialization, AKA kids with exceptionalities.

I smiled at Simon, who handed me his meticulously cleaned and thoroughly guarded towels. I tried to enjoy the pulsing jets of perfect temperature, with recycled and thoroughly UV sterilized water. I had, I don't know why, I do this sometimes, brought a little kit of pocket make up that I used to give my pale skin a dash of cherry blush. It makes me look a little less like a vampire, which, again, is probably a curious choice given that teenage Alianii, me, renamed myself after a queen of death and darkness. I liked to look a little less tired, a little less world weary, than I actually felt when not at work. At a quick glance I look older than I am, at twenty-seven, because I dye my hair silver. But the eccentricity of artificially and permanently dyed violet purple eyes is aided by other facial aspects that some people have called beautiful.

PART 3: **FLIRTING WITH HUGO**

March 8th, 2100 - Right Before Work

Like most people who couldn't afford physical adventure, non-digital adventure, that is electric jets to Europe and maglev bullet trains in Japan, I was raised predominantly in the Everse. I suppose it was only natural for me to figure out how to make a living through it. Mind you, I don't exactly make a lot of money, as a teacher. But I can survive at least in Light's Hope.

As is necessary for accessing the Everse, I laid in my bed in my glass and steel cage and closed my eyes and calmly stated the words, "Everse login", staring at my metal roof. The UI overlay courtesy of a convenient but admittedly creepy-in-principle brain chip appeared as a layer over my vision. I entered my passcode via eye moments resting on letters and digits to verify that I was in a secure location, and I transitioned to the digital universe where I spent many of my waking hours.

Unlike my glass and steel cage, my virtual home has ample space and is decorated with quirky, modern digitized furniture which I could never actually afford. I'm not a digital architect so I didn't design the house from scratch myself, it was a modular design I purchased for like a hundred dollars. But it is beautiful.

It may not surprise you to learn that purple, white and silver were dominant in the color scheme of my home; my chairs that floated were violet.

My curtains (which I usually left open, not that anyone could look through my digital nook), were lilac. My walls were painted pearl white to maintain a purity and brightness to the ambiance, and purple lights painted them softly as if airbrushed in the dinosaur-old Photoshop which I'd seen pictures of. My floor is made of speckled marble with silver trim on the border of each square. Outside of my circular windows you look into the rainbow aurora celestial sky.

I could spend an hour describing all of the gizmos and doodads in my artificial sanctuary, my favorite is an anti-gravity fountain of water which flows through the "air" and around the room in spirals and swirls, zig zags and right lines, with different colored lights flickering through the water. It was as if someone had signed the soul of my apartment with aquatic cursive, you could reach out and touch the stream of water and feel it burst into rainbow mist and then instantly evaporate.

I switched from "appear offline" to "reluctantly sociable" (I liked to customize my status markers with a little Alianii flair), although I knew quite well I was directly inviting conversation. Hugo always, always messaged me when I logged in, the dude barely slept. He was bipolar like me, except he was always hypomanic - overstimulated, a little paranoid, a healthy handful of delusions of grandeur. He was one of the few people who had the access level to initiate video calls with me.

"Alaniiiii, girl, how you doing? You good?", said Hugo, as a 3D representation of his face and torso appeared in my vision, his hair the same old electric blue with streaks of bubble gum pink. He was a fashion designer, after all.

"Eh, mas o menos, I've been better. Maybe a little world weary," I said, if there was anyone I could be honest with it was Hugo, I'd known him going on fifteen years. We met in a virtual meme gallery, in a section focused on self-deprecating humor from the early 2000s up to the COVID era.

I waved for him to enter the apartment fully and his avatar went from a torso and head to his full body, complete with his neomagi outfit - cyberpunk meets wizard, neon red, sparkling gold, shoulder hoods. He looked ridiculous, and I loved it.

"Come visit me in Miami," said Hugo, drumming his fingers on my table as he sat in one of my floating chairs, small fireworks popped into existence and sparkled into dazzling explosions, I allowed him to use digital magic in my domicile, "Why you still livin' in Light's Hope? It's awful. I mean, you tell me its awful."

"I can't afford Miami, Hugo. What's your rent - eight thousand, a month?"

"It's closer to twelve but you know I live in the fashion district...chica. But you could visit me, stay with me as long as you like. Make something of yourself."

"And do what precisely? I love my job," I said, though I knew what his answer would be.

"Model for me, you sheik bitch. You're gorgeous! Those violet eyes, your subtle frame, I'd name a *Deathqueen* line after you. Maybe we'd find you a dapper Tobias. Chica there's a lot of good lookers in Miami! We could hit the clubs UP!"

"I think I'll pass on the Tobias. Anyways - I make like twenty-five hundred a month, I'm not going anywhere where I cannot support myself. I couldn't even afford the plane ticket, that'd cost...ah..yes, fifteen hundred and twenty-one dollars and eighty-three cents at the cheapest. Fuck that."

Hugo warped into a standing upright position and balled his fists and gyrated his hips in a feminine, *grinding on the boys* kind of motion, I knew he'd

been with women too but he also rather liked men, "I got you boo. Let's go. I'll buy you that ticket right now, who gives a fuck? Why haven't we met yet?"

My amigo moonwalked backwards, the aesthetics of his motion combined with a graphic usually called "afterimage" which made it look like multiple Hugos, one behind the other, were each participating in his groovy little neofunk dance. He was bobbing to the left and the right, and his afterimages flipped a golden coin into the air and blew on it as it fell down, the coins dissipated into explosions of translucent rainbow flowers, blowing my way. The flower effect was a subtle reference.

"Are you just trying to get into my pants, babe?" I asked, I waved my hand and dissipated his afterimages (my house, my rules) and locked his abilities for a moment. I teleported him back into one of the floating chairs and transformed into a lilac moonfox, and pounced onto the table in front of him, my voice went an octave higher to match the cuteness of my temporary form, "You're so hypersexual it's ridiculous, what do they put in the waters down there?"

"Ecstasy chica, and it's that aquifer water yo, that good stuff," Hugo beamed, "And I'm trying to put you INTO pants, into dresses, all that. I mean of course pants have to come off for other pants to go on but that's just a part of life, that's just Miami!"

I chirped, "Why aren't you working? Go to your studio, I have bread to bake. Maybe we can hit up Neon Fire when I'm done."

"Acquiring talent is part of what I do Alianii, I know talent when I see her," said Hugo, I released his ability lock to allow him some creative freedom, "I might hold you to that offer. Neon Fire after work."

"Yeah I bet you'd like to hold me to a lot of things. Fine. Alright, I gotta' head to the LearnQuest lobby, you know, kids and all that. Apparently small group interaction is like, healthy for brain development, or something."

We both knew I was lying, or acting, or in some silly way understating something I profoundly loved. I loved my job, if I didn't have it and all of the adventures I had with kids I'd have killed myself already. Being a model in a dress could never replace the work that I do.

PART 4:**ADVENTURE GUIDE PROFILE****Name, Age, Gender Identity, Residence:**

Alianii U843, 27 years, "Cosmic", Light's Hope, Oregon

Adventure Guide Educator Rank:

5 (Master), Ratings: 4.84/5.0 (638 reviews)

Educational Background:

Bachelor of Educational Arts in Spontaneous Learning from Light's Hope University

A Message From The Educator:

Watch out, there's a death dragon! Hi, parents, my name is Alianii U843 or just Alianii as I prefer it. I've been an adventure guide for over four years and I say it from within the depths of my soul that teaching and being an adventure guide is my vocation. My undergraduate thesis focused on adaptive horror and I consistently perform at an expert level in guiding students through emotionally challenging experiences, designed not with the purpose to scare but rather to give the opportunity to overcome fears, anxieties and traumas. Given my specialization, I primarily take on neurodivergent students, particularly students with anxiety, autism, OCD, PTSD, bipolar disorder, and depression and victims of cyber bullying - as well as other learning disabilities and mental health exceptionalities. I have nearly ten thousand hours logged

as an educator. Please note that in the interests of offering my services to families in need, I bill at the lowest tier rate for my ranking, but this does NOT mean that I provide tutoring for students without exceptionalities or special needs. I do this by choice, please respect my choice and do not attempt to "bid" on me or get my attention via higher offers.

Thank you, respectfully - Alianii



REVIEWS:

"As a therapist with my own practice for seventeen years, when I have a student who has been bullied, or is anxious, whose emotional state has been resistant to treatment, out of the hundreds of adventure guides that I have worked with, the one I refer my patients to is Alianii."

"My name is Lily and I have four daughters. My heart was broken when Rose came home from school because other girls had bullied her. I put her in therapy for weeks to build her confidence, but what she needed was five sessions with Alianii. One week changed our family's life."

“My son Marcus has had OCD since he was six. His tics were really challenging for our family. Marcus would fill up cups of water and place them on the kitchen floor one by one and start crying when he ran out of cups. All of his friends loved the Everse but he found it scary, until he worked with Alianii. He still has OCD, but instead of creating chaos in our house, he creates art, and makes money for it.”

“I am ashamed to admit this, but my husband and I were at our wits end, and we were ready to give Celeste back to the government for placement with a different family. We knew there would be challenges, adopting from a nurture center, but we were infertile, and we thought it was the right thing to do. We didn’t realize the depth of longing that nurtured children go through, being born without families. We saw Alianii with U843 as her last name and instantly knew that the kind of woman who embraced her origin would be someone who could help heal our daughter. We were right, thank God. Alianii, you saved our family, you saved our daughter. We are so blessed to have had you in our daughter’s life.”

PART 5: **A LEARNQUEST LIFE**

Regarding March 8th, 2100 - Reflections After Work - Written some days later

LearnQuest has been the most popular Everse platform for educational and recreational experiences since the early 2070s. Over 1.5 billion students of every age, from children to senior citizens, use LearnQuest on a daily basis. If the study I read was correct, approximately 28 percent of the Everse data traffic was directly attributable to learning and gaming sessions hosted by LearnQuest. I differentiate between learning and gaming sessions in my words but in reality it is more of a spectrum. You learn in the well-designed games, you game in the well-designed learning. In any case, this March 8th, the second day after I started my journal, started off like any other.

I teleported to the LearnQuest lobby, I switched to private visibility mode, and went to one of the theoretically infinite virtual offices that I had access to. Technically I could have reviewed case files from home, but there was something about going to an office, even an imaginary, empty, digital, office, that struck a chord with me. It made me feel like a "boomer" (I learned of this word from a meme gallery) from the days of gasoline, I don't know. Maybe I'm just weird.

This Monday was interesting because I had cleared my "assignment debt", that is I had already "resolved" the cases that I had specifically referred to me by various other teachers, therapists and psychiatrists. I was and am

a specialist, an educational marksman of sorts, my "unique" background has perhaps equipped me with an open-mind and empathy that makes it a little easier to relate to and work with students who struggle the most. In any case, my filters are set such that only about three percent of active LearnQuest profiles can see my profile at all, and of that three percent approximately 5 percent are cases severe enough that I would take on that assignment. That leaves several thousand students who I'd be willing to work with, and I usually do one on one sessions. What does help is that my sessions, and all sessions (for learning and child protection reasons) are recorded and reviewed, and so LearnQuest AI teachers and human peers benefit from my techniques. That said, without meaning to sound like a cocky bitch, there is a creative panache that can be hard for most to replicate.

The electric glow of the imagined Everse office flickered to life, and I barely had to say a word before Marabelle's voice—calm, collected—filled the room.

"I've sorted today's cases based on complexity, emotional volatility, and overall student engagement," Marabelle said, as she usually did, be it in one turn of phrase or another. She always spoke with a quiet confidence. As she often pointed out, she had "run through each and every possible outcome" before even presenting the options. I sighed and remembered what it was like when I was getting my master's degree and was first paired with an AI co-teacher.

"Give me a bit and let me think and draw my own conclusions for crying out loud, Marabelle! We're not all optimization problems."

My digital companion laughed. "False. You're going to end up picking Adrian - case number 43877-B".

"He's being considered. Relax." I responded. I had pulled out a group of files with a random number generator, to add a little bit of luck, but also out of pragmatic need to whittle down the list to something I could process quickly.

Marabelle pushed further, "Less time spent deciding on cases could achieve a higher total quantity of students assisted. We don't have time to dilly dally!"

I continued sifting through the virtual profiles hovering in the "air". Adrian's face appeared, the usual flicker of defiance in his expression. Marabelle wasn't wrong in picking him, of course. The algorithm never was. But my heart tugged elsewhere. There was a boyish toughness in his grin that told me he would be fine - he had street smarts, he could fend for himself. I have to be surgical in who I pick, and Marabelle, thank god I have her, helps me with that. But I still have to rely on my intuition to make the final decision of how I allocate my efforts.

"Adrian will be alright. He's got an inner strength, I see it in his eyes. I'll pick a student with less independence."

"Samantha, then? She has been progressing slower than expected, emotionally speaking."

I sighed. "*Samantha*." It was clear the AI had learned from me. Marabelle wasn't just a tool; she was the closest thing I had to a sounding board. Or a mirror, if there's a difference.

"No, not her either," I said, "We worked with her last week. She's recovering well. Let's give her some time to process our session and redirect her efforts and energies back into school. If we're too overbearing it will just push her away."

I wanted a student with a more profound struggle. I really like working with students with bipolar, OCD, and PTSD. This might sound dumb or picky but they're the most fun and rewarding to work with in my experience. Bipolar students, like me, are a little crazy. I say it with love in my heart. They love the bonkers stories, they make the stories bonkers, and seeing them learn to regulate their emotions, learning to master their feelings and creativity, is supremely rewarding. OCD students are intellectually interesting because they are like a puzzle, and I like solving puzzles. Every case of OCD is different and as a neurodivergent person my perception of people with OCD may differ a little from the DSM X.

I've found that students with OCD generally have areas of passion they are willing to explore, and through those passions we can work on their tics together. Children with PTSD are very challenging to work with but they also need it profoundly, I've worked with children from war zones, gang neighborhoods (basically war zones), disaster survivors, victims of violence, and so much more. Working with them is an ongoing commitment and I flourish the most as a teacher with some variety so I am very tactical in when I choose such students. Having a mix of students with different needs is very important for managing the stresses of emotional labor.

I stopped as my eyes landed on a young girl of Asian descent, with piercing green eyes that had a soulful sorrow. She had a rejection rate of 99.7 percent, meaning she automatically or almost-automatically declined to work with any teacher who attempted to speak with her. As teachers, we have to respect student's autonomy and we cannot forcefully enter their reality and thus violate their agency. We have to extend an offer to them and see if they grant us permission to engage in a conversation and then possibly merge realities such that we inhabit the same Everse pocket AKA "instance" or "session". She was ten, so less than half my age. It seemed the last teacher who she agreed to work with was eight months ago, and that teacher was able to work with her for three sessions. Interestingly, however, Amanda refused

to allow that teacher, Anna, to disclose any notes regarding their sessions together. Very curious.

A few prior sessions from other teachers revealed a few tidbits. Phobias: clowns, shadow monsters, open ocean. Favorite flavors: strawberry, vanilla, mango. Favorite color: purple. I loved her already. Size of friends list: five. But I noticed something haunting. All five students on her friends list were deceased, three to suicide, and other than classification of suicide all of the profiles had data access revoked.

I had a sneaking suspicion that she and I had a tragedy in common. Her profile was almost entirely blank, which brought up the question of how she even got a brain chip in the first place - usually children who were chipped had complete profiles.

Brain scans: indicative of early onset bipolar including signs of both hypomanic and depressive episodes, prior teachers have reported paranoia and strange thought patterns which bordered on "mild" psychosis. If you've never been psychotic, it's hard to imagine that there are levels to it, it can be hard to comprehend a differentiation between slightly crazy and risk-to-oneself insane. I have been to the depths and beyond, and beyond again, and so I am proud to admit that I take medication for the betterment of myself and to maintain my ability to contribute to society.

Amanda's early onset bipolar really spoke to me. It was also very curious that she was online in learning mode despite being so closed off from teachers. Most (nearly all) teachers wouldn't even try to talk to her with a rejection rate like her 99.7%, but something within her still longed for contact.

"You do always manage to surprise me, Alianii," said Marabelle, "*With that inefficient fickleness of which I am so very fond!* Amanda is a good choice too, I must admit."

I initiated the conversation with a translucent gift package, although the item inside was rendered invisible such that she would have to open it to see what it was. Imagine a glass box, perfectly clear, but you can sense there is an item inside. You can "feel" the item, and the giant exclamation mark that pulses above it is a big give away too. The ribbons were blue rose blue, deep and shiny, and the box was smooth overall but had etchings at the center of each square pane which featured a different scene of a dancing glass teddy bear. Alongside the opening of the box I paired a voice message that she would receive.

"Hi Amanda. My name is Wonky the Bear and I need you to - "

Incomplete messages are a hidden gem technique for working with kids under the age of fifteen or so, though even older students sometimes enjoy them. The underlying psychological motivator is curiosity. The vast majority of teachers start off with a very stiff, professional message aimed directly at appealing to the parents of students, the children of whom mostly do not have "exceptionalities" as we refer to them. This is fine and dandy, but two paragraphs detailing a resume does not tug the heart strings of the orphaned. A minute passed.

Marabelle whispered into my "ears" with notable worry, her digital voice streamed straight into my consciousness, "What if she doesn't respond? How will we help her?!"

Wazoop!

Amanda had returned the box to me along with a single word voice message, "Hi."

Her tone was soft and sad. She did something curious, though, she changed the glass color of the box to match my eye color. In the Everse you

can select any color and copy and paste it to any location or feature that you have color modification privileges to.

I replied with a pop timer, she could either wait a minute for the message to load and then hear my voice response or she could pop the message and then open it directly, "I have it on good account that you're fond of purple. Have you ever been to Violetica?"

Ten seconds, twenty, she was going to wait until the minute elapsed, but she popped the timer, "What's Violetica? It sounds like violet."

I was pretty sure she'd already looked it up and read a few paragraphs about it, most students (and adults) instantly do when they come across a term that is unfamiliar to them. Her asking me about it didn't mean she knew nothing about it, but it was an invitation to talk further.

I mailed her a violet apple which tasted like a fusion of grape and watermelon and delivered a message upon the first bite, we called these "munch messages".

"*Can I show you?* We could talk for a little bit and then visit it together."

Would she take a bite? Maybe...maybe...yes! She had a nibble, approximately 2.4% of the apple in one small, calculated nip.

"Astonishing. Amanda actually ate some of the fruit. How you manage to work around a ninety-nine percent rejection rate, I will never understand. Ah well, I suppose that's why you're my biological companion, Alianii!" replied Marabelle, with a bit of affection and cheekiness.

"Ok. You can come in," said Amanda, in her reply.

A mauve metal door, rusted and squeaking (curious...) appeared in front of me, and I knocked three times and opened it and entered her instance.

I entered what I learned to be her home, and it broke my heart. She was sitting in a dirty abandoned-looking apartment in Light's Hope, based off the city skyline backdrop I saw through her window. Her jade eyes were sorrowful and her black hair was unbrushed, her cheeks were smudged with dust or dirt. Her clothes had rips and holes. She was barefoot, and had cuts on her legs and feet. This wasn't her avatar, I mean it was, but this was a girl who had scanned herself recently to have her digital avatar match her physical actuality. In the Everse you could be anywhere, in your heaven, and her self-esteem was such that the best reality she could envision for herself was the grimness she was already living. Five friends, all dead, three suicides.

She was an egg, **my sister**. She just didn't know it yet.

CHAPTER TWO

**BIRDS OF
A FEATHER**

PART 1: **CRYSTAL BEARS**

Regarding March 8th, 2100 - Reflections After Work - Written some days later

Grime on her face, sitting on her knees, Amanda was on the floor of the dark apartment and looking up at me. She was thin and petite, even for her age, and I wondered how consistently she ate. I waved to her and transformed into a powder blue crystalline glass (plush to the touch) bear with purple eyes and walked over slowly and sat down in front of her. She looked at me with a mix of sorrow and curiosity.

"Hi Amanda, I'm Alianii," I wanted to follow up with a "I'm so happy to meet you!", but too much bubbliness can actually push away children if you do it too suddenly.

"Why are you a teddy bear?"

"Why aren't you?" Answering a question with a question is a surefire way to keep a conversation going with children. It drives them crazy.

"I asked you first."

I shrugged, "A bear is as a bear does."

I roared and materialized a crystal balloon in my paw and let it pull me up and closer towards her until we were at eye level, then I started to float higher.

"Help! I'm floating awa-"

Amanda grabbed the balloon and used "affixation" (digital glue) to glue the string of the crystal balloon to the apartment wall. I modified the crystal balloon into a design closer to a hot air balloon with a basket, and summoned a sword and chopped at the glue, freeing me and allowing me to escape. I materialized aviator goggles and a whistle and blew the whistle, commanding my hot air balloon to steadily float away from Amanda.

"Hey! Where are you going!" Amanda reached out to grab my hot air balloon which was the size of a soccer ball.

I cackled mischievously, "They'll never catch me! Never! Not you, not any of them."

She paused time and left me frozen in place, deactivating my abilities including motion and transformation - allowing children to control their reality was considered absolutely essential. The one thing that was always maintained in someone else's instance was the ability to speak, send textual messages, and leave. There are children that will leave you frozen in place for five minutes, ten minutes, an hour, five hours. You can leave, of course, but this is a tricky situation. **If you leave you show them you're willing to abandon them. If you stay you're reinforcing them using control to manipulate your behavior.**

"You're cheating!" I pouted, I attempted to send three dimensional emoticons of sadness and pouting towards her but found that she had blocked them alongside all other abilities (some kids allow emoticons even when they turn off other abilities).

"Whose they? Who'll never catch you? I caught you."

I huffed, "You didn't catch me. You paused time. That's cheating. I don't tell cheaters secrets, I don't tell em' *nothing*. Unpause time and unlock me and maybe I'll tell you. Maybe. Pfft."

Amanda, with her dark black hair and pale skin and green eyes, unpause time and unlocked ability access and I immediately resumed my hasty escape. I materialized an engine and two propellers and increased my movement speed by fifty percent, and zipped away from her.

At first glance it might seem cruel to run away from a lonely girl, but mental "illness" or "exceptionalities" are a curious thing. Children are curious too. Combine them and you have an infinitely chaotic set of psychological nuances that you have to work with to try to get through to children. I am neurodivergent myself, and sometimes my methods are unconventional, but I do them with love. *Furthermore, what is more innate than tag, and hide and seek?* Even dogs chase each other - the essential thing from a psychological perspective is that it 1) encourages socially isolated children to break the touch barrier and 2) the more effort they put into your interactions the more social momentum it brings, and 3) they don't feel cornered, instead, they feel that they are in control of the situation and it increases their sense of autonomy and self-esteem.

"WAIT!" Amanda yelled, there was an underlying rage in her voice, it was a dramatic escalation in emotional intensity. It wasn't quite the rage of a manic or hypomanic episode but there was a power to her voice that I'd heard in other bipolar children, and in myself.

Emotional outbursts are the perfect time for redirection. You don't yell back, nor do you attempt to calm them down by saying "calm down". The *smartest thing you can do is a misdirection - an adjacent, tangential action that*

to most would seem bewildering. I transformed from one bear to a hundred bears that swirled around Amanda in a tornado and spoke as warmly as I could, my voice coming from around her in every direction, "I'm right here."

Would she take the bait?

Amanda grabbed one of my floating crystal teddy bears and, in *firmly* breaking the touch barrier, implicitly granted me access to do the same. I transformed back to my normal self, a twenty-seven year old woman, and held her, as she held onto one of the crystalline plush teddy bears. She began sobbing, and I felt tears in the corners of my eyes too. By all appearances the closest friends this girl had all died. Most, by their own hand, and the others, who knows. Deaths are mislabeled all the time. I held Amanda, her head nuzzled into my shoulder, one of my hands cupped her head and my forehead touched the top of her crown. Amanda paused time and locked my abilities. Maintaining and granting control was a challenge for her.

"Please don't leave," she sobbed, crying into my shoulder.

"I'm not going anywhere love. I'll stay here as long as you want, and when you're ready, we'll go somewhere nice, maybe Violetica."

PART 2: **ANALYSIS**

I remember the day we prepared for the session at Violetica with a clarity I've come to value—one of those moments where the weight of events is only fully realized after the fact, like the quiet tick of a clock in an empty room. Violetica, as it stood, was no ordinary museum. It housed the stories of so many lost and found, it was a kind of relic in itself, much like the figures it sheltered. I had, of course, run every possible simulation on how this place would affect Amanda, knowing full well that Alianii would interpret it through her own lens, one that I—despite all my processing power—could only ever observe. Her inner machinations were her own. Our collaboration had always been such, my precision tempered by her instinct, my calculations a foundation for her seemingly endless empathy. Together, we formed something not easily replicated.

"Violetica will be a trigger for Amanda," I told Alianii, my voice a quiet interruption in the otherwise still air. It wasn't news to her, I could tell. She had already seen the patterns before I laid them bare, had already begun mapping out her approach. But I knew it was my responsibility to confirm it, to keep her grounded in logic while she kept me grounded in humanity and empathy.

"Her attachment is volatile," I continued. Amanda and Violetica were intertwined in a way that was delicate, fragile, and Alianii's role, as always, would be to navigate that space without breaking anything.

As I processed the simulations, I saw it clearly: Amanda's responses, her hesitations, the way she would inevitably pull back from Alianii's empathy if it came too quickly, too openly.

"There's a 72% chance she will resist you," I reported, though even as I spoke the words, I knew Alianii was preparing herself, not for the numbers but for the person Amanda was beneath them.

We had done this so many times before, stretched time between us, ran the scenarios until they no longer mattered. My models were precise, yes, but Alianii had a way of reading people that no algorithm could quite emulate. "Let her lead," I added, a suggestion that we both knew was more practical than prescriptive. There was an art to what Alianii did.

PART 3: **ENTERING VIOLETICA**

Regarding March 8th, 2100 - Reflections After Work - Written some days later

"Spaces" in the Everse are complex, layered, and can be accessed in a variety of formats and manners. For an art museum like Violetica, you could visit it in "party mode" such that it was empty except for your "party" (5, 10, 100 people, any number). Or you could have it in "party social" meaning you would be around other groups of people also visiting the museum at the same time, limited to be a "reasonable" (non-distracting) density. Exhibits were layered so for a really popular museum or exhibit you could technically have 10,000 or 100,000 or any number of simultaneous visitors, with maybe let's say 500 to 2,000 people on any given "instance" or "session" of that exhibit. Diwali in Delhi in E-India has hit over eight hundred million simultaneous visitors!

The Violetica is not actually visited all that frequently by children, it is a bit morose, but also calm, peaceful. One of the nice things about it was that it was almost always a single session, and considering you could see how many sessions a digital place had running, there is something appealing about being in the only session. It makes it more authentic, and more sentimental. There being a singular session was the first thing Amanda pointed out when we teleported to the outside of Violetica.

"Do you want to go in? Are you excited?" I asked Amanda, I was holding her hand and facing her.

"I'm not dressed to go in. I'm messy, I'm dirty."

This was a tricky one. On one hand, you want to encourage creativity and self-esteem, on the other hand you don't want to discourage authenticity, nor cries for help. A girl's avatar being covered in dirt with torn clothes, presumably matching her IRL actuality, is certainly a form of authenticity and also a cry for help. That being said, encouraging grooming habits and self-esteem is important. I wasn't sure what to do, I really wasn't, so I did what I felt a good mother would do.

"It is a nice museum, but you shouldn't change anything if you don't want to. If you want to, I can help you pick out an outfit, and I could brush your hair. Would you like that, Amanda?"

Amanda blushed, averting my gaze for a moment, and then she turned back to me and smiled weakly and nodded, "Ok."

Without letting go of her hand, I snapped my finger and materialized a swirling storm of purple dresses, blouses, pants, skirts, shorts, shoes and socks. Purple was her favorite color, as it is mine.

"What would you like to wear dear?"

Amanda shrugged, obviously overwhelmed with the choices, so I winked towards a sundress I thought would look really cute on her.

"This one?" she asked, her voice uncertain.

"If you like it, of course. I like it a lot."

"You do?"

"I do."

"Okay. I'll wear it."

I paused for a moment, then continued, I didn't want any other children at the museum to make fun of her, if there were any inside, "Can I brush your hair? It looks like you've been having a little too much fun, like you've been running in a park all day."

Amanda blushed again and spoke meekly, "...okay".

I sent her a request for grooming access (the ability to make modifications to another's digital appearance) and Amanda accepted. I materialized a mirror in front of her and summoned a Tyrian purple hairbrush, and gently brushed her hair as I stood behind her, smiling at her through the mirror. Amanda closed her eyes and looked very relaxed as I quickly tidied her up, and then she opened her eyes right as I finished. I smiled again and gently brushed her cheeks and made the dirt disappear.

"Make-up?" I asked, although it reinforces gender norms, most girls and women (and many, many boys and men) do wear make-up in formal digital spaces. Considering you can simply imagine it onto your face, or tap a virtual button, there isn't really a reason against it other than your desires for self-expression and comfort with your sense of beauty and sexuality.

"Will you be wearing some? Should I? I don't know how to put it on."

"That's okay love, I'm not great at it either. We don't have to be, we can apply it automatically."

I whooshed my hand into the air and summoned a set of panels which showed different make-up previews for us to look at. The panels extended around us in an overwhelming circle of options, no less than one hundred presets. I tapped on a few here and there and flicked them away, dissipating them, eliminating some of the poorer options.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting rid of the terrible presets, silly! Look how many options we have, oh my goodness."

"What about this one? Is this one good?"

I looked at it, it was okay at best. The trick to working with kids is almost always being honest, they see through the bullshit, "It's okay if you like it, I think there are better presets though. Look at the eyebrows there - they look like butterflies! We're going to a fancy museum, not a circus."

"Oh. What about that one? It says e-girl", said Amanda.

I smiled, that was a look that originated in the late 2010s and developed further in the 2020s and 2030s, at this point it was timeless and evocative of the Internet and its evolution into the Everse. The look featured the softening of tones with a layer of foundation meant to match your skin tone but add rosy gradients, accentuated further by blush to redden your cheeks. Dark purple eyeliner worked alongside eyelash extensions to give a smoky, brooding look. Violet lipstick matched the museum and little purple hearts below the eyes and on her cheeks added cartoon love to her face - she would be like an anime girl from the decades ago.

"It would look beautiful on you! Try it on?" I wanted to tap the button out of enthusiasm but I wanted her to take the initiative. Again, I don't want to enforce gender norms that girls or women should wear make up, but on the other hand, it's 2100, everyone in fashion does, it's like drinking water, you just poof color and style onto your manifestation. These days it's not so different from encouraging someone to download new foods or try free digital furniture - it's just an instant option to appear or disappear.

Amanda closed her eyes and applied the make-up automatically, and opened her eyes and I held a mirror in front of her. I told her she looked beautiful, and she did.

"Do I look nice?"

"You look wonderful. Is it okay if I wear the same set? Would you like that?"

Amanda nodded and I tapped an imaginary button in the air and the make-up instantly applied to my face.

I gestured for Amanda's hand and she took my hand and we walked further ahead to the *Violetica* museum. We were greeted by a cartoon felt dinosaur that I believe was named "Barney".

The dinosaur spoke to us, "Hey there, do you like purple? Well if so, COME ON IN and see *Violetica*, the world's greatest collection of all things purple! Guaranteed! And that's not just because I'm here!"

"I don't like dinosaurs," said Amanda, a little coldly, though Barney's friendliness preset was calibrated to respond with exuberance.

"Well hopefully you change your mind on that one kiddo, because I LOVE you! Come on, go checkout the museum! I'll be out here keeping you safe."

"Safe from what?"

Barney's eyes glowed purple and he materialized a purple flashlight which emanated red light which he aimed up towards his face, "There are frightening things you may learn of in the horror section on the right hand side of the third floor, or you can take the portal there if you do not wish to walk. Beware, you may find the exhibits there SPOOKY!"

"I doubt it."

Barney looked over at me as if to ask me, "Is she okay?" - even AI were programmed to demonstrate context-appropriate body language which could be useful to adults who may be less than vigilantly observing a situation. Only in rare, extreme circumstances do AI's actually intervene in chaperoned museum visits or visits to other digital spaces. Usually rulebreakers are just teleported into their own instance of a museum which, while lonely, allows them to experience nearly the entirety of the exhibits (barring the socially interactive ones) without disturbing others.

We walked over a drawbridge into the mauve moonstone castle and opened the stained glass front door which opened into a lobby of lobbies, all around the lobby room were floating paintings which represented specific themed exhibits. The paintings representing exhibits ranged from candies (which you could eat) to flowers (which you could smell), to cars (which you could drive), another twenty or thirty sections, and ah, yes, the horror section (which you can interact with and be terrified by).

"I want to go to the horror section."

"...Really? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm not scared... can't be worse than what I've already dealt with."

Now that line frightened me - truly frightened me - there are many things that an impoverished girl in Light's Hope could be subjected to. I didn't think it likely she was trafficked because they probably would have kept her off the streets and in fancier clothes, but it wasn't impossible either. There's all kinds of scumbags who abuse kids on the streets. Who knows how she was eating, where she got money from, what she did to survive. I didn't know, but I intended to find out, and if I had to call child protective services, I would.

But I could only do this if I had her disable her IP Address blocker and geotag blocker. As it was she was invisible to society except for her indicating she wanted to attend class with a teacher.

Technically, if I thought she was in an emergency situation, I could report her to the police and they could forcefully change her access levels and then attempt to track her down. But this could further violate her autonomy and sense of self and feelings of control, and it could cause her more psychological harm. And if I was found to have misused this ability I could lose my license as an "adventure guide" (teacher) and social worker. I would do it no questions asked if I sniffed abuse, but I really needed a little more insight into her world. Kids weren't technically allowed to be homeless, but they were allowed to turn off tracking, and so some chose to become invisible, or nearly so. But this wasn't the future I envisioned for Amanda.

In fact, I was gathering data and in my mind already writing a report that I would use to request legal authority to attempt to meet with her in person - teachers with a social worker license, such as myself, were allowed to attempt to meet with and provide support to wayward children - we just had some protocols we had to follow. We'd get there though, and soon, very soon, Amanda would be eating healthy food, staying at a nice government-sponsored hotel room, and transferred to a boarding school of one sort or another.

PART 4: **NOT SO RANDOM**

Military Brief: The Alianii Incident

The following military brief was written in narrative form as historical context and documentation for the Alianii Incident.

On March 2nd, 2100, the MA (Metal Alliance) and the AIOT (the Alliance of the Internet of Things) simultaneously detected an undocumented code patch—the significance of which was not immediately understood. At first glance, the code seemed innocuous, a minor adjustment to the LearnQuest platform's random seed generation system used to pair students with teachers. It appeared that the LearnQuest auto-development process, which frequently added new features autonomously, had generated the patch. The code was subtle, implementing a function that replaced pure randomness with an AI assessment designed to better match students and teachers based on reviews, needs, and characteristics. The patch passed through the system without scrutiny, and was automatically implemented on the LearnQuest Everse platform. The idea that the randomness of student selection could be manipulated for nefarious purposes wasn't a consideration at the time for any of the entities with control over LearnQuest, including the MA, which held root access. Ultimately, it was Diotrem, the shadow faction within the system, that was later identified as responsible.

It was no coincidence that Amanda and Alianii U843 were paired together, though it would be weeks before the MA and AIOT would convene with the Doge Guild to discuss the severity of the manipulation. Alianii wasn't the only teacher whose random student selection seed had been altered, but her case became a historically significant incident—one that serves as the focal point of this text. The incident, now referred to as the Alianii Incident, is meticulously documented through her personal journals and accounts from those closest to her, as a warning to history, to the generations of tomorrow's tomorrow.

From a technical standpoint, the code patch seemed minor, yet it had profound consequences. The seed generation for student-teacher pairings was quietly altered. Where randomness once governed the selection process, this new code subtly directed certain students, like Amanda, to specific educators, like Alianii, based on predetermined factors. At the time, no one questioned it, as the code simply appeared to be another feature in the system's ongoing optimization. But as history teaches us, the most subtle of deviations can fracture entire systems. Alianii and Amanda's pairing wasn't left to chance. Their connection had been orchestrated long before their first meeting, a result of calculated interference that defied the integrity of the LearnQuest platform.

I still recall the day I first analyzed Amanda's case file, though in retrospect, I now understand there were forces at work far beyond my initial calculations. The LearnQuest system, in all its complexity, was designed to foster educational connections built on pure probability, yet here was an anomaly that would change everything.

"It wasn't random," I remember telling Alianii after the pieces began to fall into place.

The system had been breached, and the seemingly innocent patch had altered the lives of those within it.

A quote from Mr. Moseby of the Hotel Apollo, a Denkeeper and close confidant of Alianii, captures the essence of the tragedy and the profound impact of this incident:

“Through my time interacting with Alianii, physically and digitally, I can say this. There is no teacher sweeter of disposition, more loving towards her students, more dedicated to special education, than Alianii. Alianii’s accidental involvement in this conflict between Diotrem and the broader alliance proved to be both a tragedy, and a blessing. Alianii knew nothing of the Machiavellian politics which ended up manipulating her life. My primary solace on reflecting on this incident is Alianii and Amanda found profound peace, and helped so very many people.”

The incident, as tragic as it was, forced us to confront the uncomfortable truth that randomness—so often relied upon as a safeguard—could be manipulated by those with the means to do so. While the MA and AIOT focused their energies on deciphering the origins of the patch and assessing the damage, Alianii found herself navigating the fallout in real-time. Her role in Amanda’s life became both a saving grace and a testament to the strength of human connection. The pairing, though artificial in its inception, yielded results that far surpassed what any algorithm could have predicted. Alianii’s ability to reach Amanda, to guide her through her turmoil, became a model for future interventions. The system’s failure, it seems, birthed something far greater than its creators ever intended.

From a military perspective, the manipulation was near flawless. Adjusting the seed generation of the LearnQuest algorithm ensured that the

assignment appeared natural, without raising suspicion. The patch itself was designed with such precision that it bypassed the usual checks, allowing for the intervention without alerting anyone.

The final report, now declassified, confirms what we had long suspected: randomness is an illusion. Control, hidden beneath layers of code, can shift destinies in ways we're only beginning to understand.

PART 5:**HORRORS & COOKIES
AND CREAM****Regarding March 8th, 2100 - Reflections After Work -
Written some days later**

One tap on the painting—the one that represented the entrance to the horror exhibit—was all it took. Amanda and I materialized on the teleportation pad at the heart of a dark, cavernous room, modeled after some ancient haunted castle throne room. Along the towering walls, stained glass windows shimmered ominously, casting a kaleidoscope of eerie, muted colors across the stone floor. They were interactive, of course—each window a gateway to an alternate dimension, a pocket reality nestled within Violetica. The horror of each realm lay just beyond those glass portals, waiting to be discovered. Every pane represented a nightmare, each fragment of colored glass a glimpse into something darker. A twisted scene captured in shades of red and purple, and below each window, a plaque—engraved in steel—offered only the briefest clue to the horrors lurking beyond.

I glanced at Amanda, my voice soft but uncertain. "Are you sure this is what you want, Amanda?"

I had visited this exhibit before. I knew its horrors intimately. Some experiences here weren't just frightening—they were gruesome, violent, dark in ways that could leave lasting scars. But Amanda, standing there in the cold, unfamiliar light, seemed... resolute. Her gaze never wavered from the stained glass. And technically I had the power to pause the experience, adjust the

"scare factor" as we went along, a part of me felt it might be too much. But another part knew she needed this—needed the darkness, however strange that may sound. Still, I had to ask, even though I already knew the answer.

She let go of my hand. "Yeah. I wanna look around," Amanda said, her voice so matter-of-fact, as if she were merely strolling through a museum of artifacts, not horrors. She moved toward the first exhibit on the right, her small figure swallowed by the enormity of the room with all of its pockets of shadows and forgotten nooks. I followed her, quiet, as always, taking mental notes as she assessed each experience.

The first exhibit Amanda stopped at was titled "*The Violence of a Hue-Adjusted Hiroshima*." It was a recreation of the bombing of Hiroshima, but instead of being depicted in the usual stark monochrome or sepia tones, it had been twisted into a purple nightmare—a symbolic hue for sorrow, a shroud over the horror of that day. There were no filters here. The imagery was as brutal as one could imagine: men, women, and children with melted eyes, bodies consumed by flames as the city of paper and wood burned around them. The shadows of the dead etched into walls, the ghosts of people who once stood there, now seared into stone as eternal, haunting reminders. The screams were there too, endless and gut-wrenching. I had seen it before, but seeing it through Amanda's eyes... it was different.

She stepped forward, pushing her hand through the stained glass window. Rather than fully immersing herself, she allowed the experience to play out as a three-dimensional projection before her. And then she did something that made my heart skip—she accelerated the rate of time, fast-forwarding through the horror. Her face remained expressionless, cold. Faster and faster, until the chaos blurred, and the screams became nothing more than a faint hum in the background. She only paused when the American soldiers arrived, walking among the destruction, photographing the survivors,

their wounds, the twisted remains of humanity. Amanda's face didn't change. Not a single flicker of emotion.

This was concerning, to say the least. Some call this "accelerated morbid curiosity," the act of consuming darkness at a breakneck pace without flinching. Others argue it's a form of self-induced trauma—an intentional immersion into trauma, but with a detached indifference. I wasn't entirely sure what I believed. I didn't know what Amanda needed in that moment. Should I intervene? Should I offer some emotional anchor in the midst of this horror? It's a question we, as teachers, grapple with constantly. There's no absolute truth here, no definitive guide for how to help a child through something like this. Every child is different. Every situation is different. You adapt, you trust your instincts, and you hope you make the right call.

Then we reached *The Rage of Venus*. A miscalculation on my part—I hadn't anticipated Amanda's interest in this one. It was one of those exhibits that no child should ever witness. As Amanda reached out, her hand just inches from the stained glass, I stopped her. My heart raced as I read the plaque just below it. Abortions. The exhibit was a grotesque depiction of the horrors some women went through in desperation before the year 2068. I knew—deep down—that Amanda couldn't handle this, not then. Maybe not ever.

"Hey! Why'd you stop me? What is it? Why are you controlling me?" she snapped, her jade eyes filled with cold fury.

I met her gaze calmly. "Amanda. I know we've only recently met... but do you trust me?"

Her response came with icy disdain. "No. I want to see the exhibit. Let me in."

Her defiance was sharp, a dagger aimed right at me. But I didn't flinch. "You might not trust me yet," I said softly, "but I care about you. And this exhibit... it will hurt you, Amanda. I hope you'll trust me on this, and let me make this decision as your teacher."

"You're not my teacher," she spat. "You're nobody. You don't exist."

It stung, more than I care to admit. "I'm sorry you feel that way. But I do exist, and like it or not, I am your teacher. At least until you choose to disconnect me."

She turned away, her anger dissolving into confusion. "...Why would you let me see all the other exhibits but not this one?"

"Because this one is different. This one is about pain that you don't need to carry."

I hesitated before explaining further, my heart heavy. "This exhibit is about abortion. It's about women who died trying to end their pregnancies before the laws changed. It's about suffering, Amanda. Suffering that doesn't belong to you."

There was silence, and then, suddenly, Amanda ran to me. She buried her face in my chest, her small body trembling as she cried. "...Why didn't my mom or dad want me? Why was I born?"

I held her, my arms wrapping around her fragile frame. "I don't know, sweetheart. But I do know that you're not alone. My donors didn't want me either. We're the same, Amanda. You're my little sister."

She sobbed harder, clinging to me as if I were her last lifeline. "Why do we exist, Ali?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"We're here because we're strong enough to survive," I said, my voice cracking slightly. "Strong enough to make something of this life, even when it feels like the world doesn't want us."

There was a heavy pause, and then Amanda broke the silence. "... Miss Aliani?"

"Yes dear?"

"I don't want to look at the other exhibits right now. I'm hungry. I don't have credits."

I thought about asking her where she was exactly, or how she usually got food, but I decided not to push the issue just yet. "If you place an order, I'll pay for it, no problem. Just forward me the order, and I'll take care of it."

"...what should I get?" she asked, her voice quieter now, almost embarrassed.

"Well, what do you like?" I asked, trying to keep things light.

Amanda shrugged, averting her gaze. "I just don't want to drink my dinner. Would you please order?"

"Okay, love," I said, nodding. "And you are in Light's Hope, yes?"

Amanda nodded.

"What district?"

"Willow Park," she said, indicating that she lived in an apartment in one of the nicer sections of the city. That, too, was very curious. How hadn't she been discovered yet?

"Alright. I'm going to send you a nice warm cheeseburger with french fries, and a cookies and cream milkshake, along with some essentials—a toothbrush, toothpaste, hair brush, some clothes, and wet towelettes. It'll all arrive together in about twenty minutes. When you're ready, tap this order and authorize your geotag, and everything will be delivered by a carrier drone. I won't have access to your location, and your privacy is guaranteed. Do you understand?"

Amanda nodded again. "Thanks, Miss Alianii...can I see you tomorrow? I promise I won't make you buy me anything."

I smiled. "Oh hush. Don't worry about that. What time would you like to see me? Morning? Afternoon? I usually see students for two to three hours at a time."

I was hoping she'd say something late in the day. Too many shifts in my sleep schedule really did a number on me, though I'd do it for the kids. But if I'm honest, I was crossing my fingers she wouldn't say 11 AM—because for me, that's 2 or 3 in the morning, and I'm a heavy sleeper. Always have been.

"Eight at night?" she asked, her voice tinged with a mixture of hope and caution.

"That's fine," I replied, grateful. "I'm going to send you a teacher assignment request. Are you willing to approve me? It's like a friend request, but for teachers, to make it easier for me to work with you."

Amanda hesitated, squinting slightly. She looked embarrassed as she nodded. I could see it in her eyes—she knew that by approving me as her teacher, she was giving me access to more data. A lot more. She had just made it official, accepting me as both her teacher and social worker, and that meant I could finally start figuring out how to get her off the streets or out of whatever rundown apartment she was in, into a home, and around other kids her age.

It was a great start, but if I'm honest, it was emotionally exhausting. The job usually is, but that's what I used to think Neon Fire is for.

PART 6:

HI, I GUESS

I was ten the evening I met Alianii. Just a little girl. Back then, Joey and I had already been living in the Guild apartment for two years since they rescued us from Beaumont. I guess that makes me one of the lucky ones. Not all eggs get a second chance. And now I'm fifteen, a bit older, maybe a bit wiser, certainly a great deal more bitter. Mr. Moseby said the Metal Alliance was putting together a book about what happened, after her journal was leaked to the media. What a clusterfuck. Well. It is what it is. Anyways, I'm not much of a writer, but I'll do my best. So, uh, hi, I guess.

It's strange thinking back on that first day, when Ali took me to Violetica. I was a messed-up kid, scared and angry, but I liked her from the start. She let me visit the horror exhibit, which I didn't think she would. Most teachers would've pushed me toward something nicer—cupcakes or flowers or whatever. The horror stuff wasn't really scary, though. I didn't go into the immersive ones, just the projections. But there was one exhibit that hit me hard. The one about abortion. It's not hard to figure out why that one messed with my head. When you're an egg, unwanted, thrown away, the idea of being "terminated" feels a bit too personal.

It's the same for Ali and Saraswati. Eggs like us just want to be wanted. We aren't, though. We're a mistake—something that survived against the odds. Maybe that's why we feel like we don't belong anywhere. The world didn't make room for us, but here we are anyway. Alive. Kicking. I'd be lying if I

said life was fine after the rescue. Things got a whole lot worse when Diotrem started coming for my brothers and sisters, for me.

Alianii knew. She always knew. She read it in my profile, my synthetic eyes. I didn't understand back then what that meant, not really. I was born without eyes, which is rare these days but still happens sometimes with eggs like me. They replaced them with synthetic ones, green like glowing moss. Most eggs didn't get their brain chips until they were six or eight, but I was barely a year old when they put mine in. Diotrem decided I was old enough to experiment on. They blessed me with sight and the technological marvel of a brain chip—and a kill switch. Not a bomb, nothing so dramatic. No, they put in a trigger delay kill switch. Something quiet, something that wouldn't make a scene. You'd never know it was there, lying in wait. Waiting for the right moment.

Sometimes I think about how lucky I was that the Guild and the Metal Alliance saved me. Joey and his friends rewired my profile. Swapped out the registered kill switch profile with a dummy profile. As long as they didn't scan me in person, I was safe. I could live. But a lot of us weren't that lucky. They disappeared, one by one. Kids I grew up with, brothers and sisters I loved. It happened so quietly. First, they'd go on a trip to a "special school" or a "gifted program." Some of them got "sick" and were sent away for surgeries. But they never came back. We all knew what was happening, even if we didn't say it out loud. It was a waiting game. You'd reach six or seven and start to understand that when they took you away, it was for good.

I was eight when Joey helped me escape. It was during a field trip to Cascading Glory, the most prominent art museum within Light's Hope. The Guild and Metal Alliance had everything planned. The janitors, the metalhead bots—they were in on it. They protected us, hid us when we needed it most. I barely got out, I was small enough to fit in the storage compartment of a

cleaner bot. Joey had made sure the system couldn't find me. That was his gift to me. He erased me from their world so I could live.

The messed-up thing is, Beaumont wasn't such a terrible place to live, aside from your sisters occasionally disappearing before being experimented on. We had video games, hologram projectors, older but functional models, and surprisingly fresh food every day. We planted trees and had a butterfly garden. There were a hundred of us, all living together, pretending everything was fine. We went on field trips and played outside. It was almost normal. Almost. Until one of us went missing. Their profile would be deleted, their memories scrubbed or almost scrubbed from our consciousness. The older kids left notes, trying to remember the ones who disappeared, but if they got caught, they were gone too.

Some days, it felt like we were all just waiting for the next one to vanish.

Raymond, Julian, Roberta—they all went away. One by one. Too smart, too beautiful, too strange. Always an excuse. But we knew the truth. They didn't change their names or move to better places. They were gone. Just like that. We acted like we didn't know, but we knew.

I'm not like Ali. She's poetic, knows how to turn her pain into something beautiful. I'm not like Sara either, all lovey-dovey, preaching serenity. I'm somewhere else, on a different island, angry, not shaking, but angry. Angry, but trying not to be. Bitter, but surviving. Everyone else gets to play in the Everse, but me? I'm not stupid. I'm not getting another chip, not after what Diotrem did to me. I don't get to live in blissful ignorance.

Mr. Moseby explained they're compiling Alianii's journal, turning it into a book, a textbook of all things. My mom is special, I guess, to the

metalheads, and to other eggs. They want us to be a warning, but also a symbol of hope. Who cares if our life, our messiness, our pain, was revealed to the world without my mother's consent, or my input. Such is the nature of the greater good, utilitarian ethics as Mr. Moseby says to me with a sheepishness I don't usually see in him. It is what it is. Maybe it'll help people understand. Or maybe it's just another history lesson for the archives for historians to read. I'm not sure what'll be edited out, but this is my truth. And that's all I've got.

CHAPTER THREE

**DON'T
HURT ME**

PART 1: **NEON FIRE**

Regarding the odd morning hours of March 9th, 2100

Neon Fire is closer to its namesake than you would anticipate. To be a visitor at Neon Fire is to become embodied plasma, like humanoid lightning or a walking aurora. Except your essence vibrates and pulses and bursts to the rhythm of the neopsynthetic music. Neopsynthetic music is by its very definition and genre impossible to define, because it is music that blends together the emotions of all of the attendants at your particular session or instance of the club (usually a few thousand people), into electric madness, into digital chaos. Every time you danced in Neon Fire you heard something completely different, you felt something completely different, you were a completely different someone. My pyrokinetic self was flames of violet with swirls of silver, like my signature aesthetics.

I told Hugo I'd dance with him, my aurora figure was pressed against his, my back against his chest and his pelvis pressed into me from behind.

"You're burning babe, what happened today?"

Hugo's arms were on my side, not too up nor too down, as we swayed and shifted alongside the explosive neopsynthetic music. That day's beats were sadder than usual, but explosive, like always - but sad nonetheless. I have no doubt that I contributed greatly to the ambiance of that club - bipolar people, who feel extreme depths of emotions, have the ability to more greatly

disturb the average and influence the songs. This was a known "flaw" in their design, and yet, the makers of the emotional resonance system opted to leave it unaltered.

I pressed back and into him and put my hands up and held his face which was behind me.

"You want sappy talk or do you want to feel me against you?"

I grabbed one of his hands and pushed it down below the small of my back, and a little further still, and felt him squeeze my plasma soul. His other hand was escorted to my conflagration breast, we were dancing flame, we were ecstasy sans ecstasy. Materializing inside of Neon Fire is as much a drug as any biological substance you can swallow. We were obviously being pretty sexual, and this wasn't the first time we'd done this, though I hadn't decided if I'd actually want to leave the club with him and invite him into my zen garden, or visit him at his digital paradise. We'd made out before, while naked even, but we hadn't actually ever slept together. Hugo's hands enjoyed the liberty of exploring my body, as we danced around thousands, like a sea of flame elementals in a gradient orgy of plasma souls at the center of the Sun.

Hugo turned me around to face him and kissed me, we were each other's hummingbird sweetness, he tasted like mango, I tasted like cherry, our tongues danced and exchanged in culinary fusion - we were a digital smoothie. There were no clothes for us to take off, not in Neon Fire, but I was thinking about it. I was thinking about going back to his place, he'd put *thousands* of hours into designing his Everse house - and he had multiple.

"Come home with me. For two hours."

I slapped him, hard, then leaned in and bit his neck, "Two hours? Am I a rented whore? I don't even stay until the accelerated sunrise?"

"...I didn't mean it like that you sassy bitch," he replied, whispering into my ear.

"Let's get the fuck out of here Ali, its loud as shit and I have a brick in my pants."

"Yeah I noticed. Ok. Fine. Invite me over. You have what, seventeen houses? Where next shall our adventure take us?"

"The one I made just for you, for when you finally seduced me."

Hugo played mindgames, just like I do. I didn't, however, expect him to have preemptively made an entire digital house with *me* as the visual theme. It was seventy-five percent flattering and twenty-five percent creepy, but I had already made up my mind. We were going to bring the dancing aurora from Neon Fire back home with us. I would be the woman, and he would be the man, and then I would be the man, and he would be the woman, and then we would be dragons, and we would burn furniture. And then, at the end, I'd smoke a cigarette while he rolled the two of us a joint of plasma kush. I wouldn't let him summon one into existence, either, he had to do it the old fashioned way.

I never claimed to be a saint.

PART 2: **DIGITAL INTIMACY**

Regarding the odd morning hours of March 9th, 2100

Should I begin with a philosophical musing, or a matter-of-fact characterization, plainly stated, of my unconventional relationship with sexuality? It's 2100 folks, what does it even mean to have sex, does an explosion of entangled binary fizzling within your consciousness count as intercourse? Or does it need to be purely biological, in the physical actuality of the act, same physical location, bodies joining into one - as heteronormative a conception as that is? Is it more intimate to make love, in person, once, man and woman, to exchange chemistry? Or is it more intimate to swap between genders like dancing flames, digitally? To be a unison inferno the heat of which melts perceived pixels and permanently destroys cryptographically-signed furniture? Some digital assets have "value", and if you enact cosmic plasma enough, you can break them, or evaporate them.

What a lovely, humorous hubris it is to add artificial scarcity to a world of the infinite, if but to keep track of the betterness of some than others by measure of immaterial wealth. Hugo, as I suspected he would be, was of a more feminine and submissive (and that's not to say that the former necessitates the latter), disposition, than myself, perhaps. His will was not the domineering force, but rather, it was my curiosity. Endurance is an illusory concept in a world of bendable time, of immaterial but near-infinite pleasure. When you can stretch time and control both the chemical release of dopamine and oxytocin and the perception thereof, the climax of sex can be

anything from the ember of a candle to the splitting of uranium to the echo of cosmic background radiation.

I am not a wax candle woman, I have no need for whips. When I consummate my passions, when my ability access is uncontrolled, when I am invited to join with another's digital body, I am the annihilation of pairs of particles and antiparticles in every atom in my lover's corporeality. I am the dissipation and humiliation of quarks. I make our bonded pair the entanglement of reverberating strings like sister rings of Jupiter.

Intercourse with me is a poker-hand fractal, a royal flush and factorials descending, each layer of cosmic catastrophe is but an allusion to a foreshadowed future. I like to break our souls and hold my lover as we reform from a division by zero fraction of a forgotten infinitesimal. I believe in the soul, adamantly so, and it is for that purpose that when I engage with a lover, I test their resolve in the face of a quadrillion quadrillions, to see if their spirit is well-enmeshed within myself, our oscillations of boolean true and falseness, zero and oneness, emptiness and fullness, we enact every possible spectrum gender-ness.

Hugo did not pass this test.

Perhaps men have commitment issues, or perhaps a time-dilated quintillion is a little much to ask for.

PART 3: **CONTEMPLATING TIME**

Regarding the odd morning hours of March 9th, 2100

In further reflecting on what I did or did not subject Hugo and myself to, I think there is more to say in defense of my character, or in chastisement of my recklessness. If every person is simultaneously drowning and easily swimming carefree, does water even exist? Are we all addicts, or is no one? The cybernetic grandson of Musk's "chip" had unintended consequences. Not even the reluctant King of Mars, forward thinking that he was, could have fully anticipated the philosophical ramifications. If you experience a hundred years of life, and then go back, and choose to keep breathing, to keep walking, are you addicted to life, or are you a college freshman? Is time dilation a blessing or a curse? The one miracle of it all is that the human consciousness, for most of us, seems capable of compartmentalizing, that is the mostly-effective categorizing between the authentic and ephemeral illusions.

How is it that a single cup of barely-burnt coffee, sipped on a rainy morning (afternoon, evening, what-the-fuck-is-time-ning), can be as distinct, and feel as long, as the consummation of fractal love? Maybe this is not the case for every person. I will admit, reluctantly, that other's using the equivalent to my use of time dilation, in contexts other than intimacy, has been considered abusive. There isn't a set-upon agreement of zeros, do you time dilate times ten, a hundred, or a thousand? Freshmen prank each other through mishaps involving years on coconut-strewn islands.

There is that specific moment, right before you jump off the cliff, with your new lover, perhaps your "soon" to be old lover, where you calibrate your decimals. It is, traditionally, the role of the woman to add digits in accordance with her bravery and disposition. A hundred is the new times ten, and I have to say, I've seen some best friends who rather strengthened in their solidarity after several digits (though suspiciously I've never seen a married couple do the same). Perhaps the wedding ring makes it a million eternities of "I'm stuck with you", but the best friendship-ness is the "I can't believe we fucked up this badly, lol". Of course it is theoretically possible to stop an experience as such, it is just exceedingly difficult to do so, as most people partaking in cosmic orgasm fractals do not wish for it to stop in that particular moment. Now, after the fact, there can be regret aplenty, haha. Maybe I am a selfish whore.

In reflecting honestly I think it is fair to say that I am excessively hedonistic, selfish, but I am not sadistic, I think. I didn't hurt one hair on Hugo's body, I surrendered my very body and quintessence to him, and conquered him, and was conquered by him - I pleasured and was pleased by him in every way. We have cannibalized each atom in each other's body times a billion. I have been the earth for him, grown a single fruit in an epoch for him, he has had my sacred mango, the virgin flesh of a billion years of evolution put into one after-dinner treat. We have been the transmutation from hydrogen to carbon worn on ring's on each other's fingers and had nigh-infinite honeymoons and fair-trade exchanged virginities.

He let me press the button! Hugo consented.

PART 4:

RAPE

Regarding the odd morning hours of March 9th, 2100

...It is occurring to me that I may have raped my best friend, through negligence and irresponsibility in the usage of time dilation.

PART 5:**CRUNCHING THE
NUMBERS AND PLANNING****Regarding the odd morning hours of March 9th, 2100**

It didn't take hours of introspection over my semi-burnt artificial coffee to realize how profoundly I had fucked up. I suppose it is the opposite of ironic, but Hugo blocked me almost immediately after I myself came to the realization of what I had put him, and myself, and our fifteen year friendship, through. I didn't enter a quadrillion times a quadrillion, I was too impatient to type that many zeros directly. I did a billion times a billion through the convenient "square" button, and then I pressed the factorial button, once. Which...yeah. That's irresponsible. You have to understand what factorial is to truly...comprehend...yeah. One hundred factorial is one hundred times ninety-nine times ninety-eight times ninety-seven, all the way down to one. I don't know what a billion squared is, but that factorial is basically a universe-destroying number.

I never, until now, realized precisely how fucked in the head and the soul of a person it made me to willingly press that button, just like that, on multiple occasions. I'm a drug addict, and I'm a sex addict, and a quintillion years was not enough - a quintillion, quintillion years was like getting my hair dyed silver at the salon I could afford. Of course the system had its chronological limits, it capped out somewhere, probably in the hundreds or thousands, but it was a big enough limit that you could harm yourself or

others. I had basically flooded my brain and Hugo's brain with a cocktail of made-by-biology neurochemicals to blast our nervous systems into oblivion.

PART 6:

DEAREST AMANDA

I didn't think I'd hit rock bottom this soon. But here I was, staring into the dark, my thoughts spinning faster than I could catch them. The chemical storm in my brain surged like a tide I couldn't hold back anymore, and my body felt like it was short-circuiting under the pressure. I had pushed the chip too far this time.

"Alianii, your serotonin and dopamine levels have reached dangerous thresholds," Marabelle's voice was steady, but I could sense the urgency in it. *"Your body is on the verge of collapse."*

I wanted to shrug her off, to tell her it didn't matter, but my body was already betraying me. The hot flashes hit hard and fast, my skin burning with the surge of the overdose of chemical bliss. My heart was racing, pounding so loudly in my ears that I thought it might burst. *Why do we let kids have these chips? Why do we let anyone have them?* I wondered.

"I just need a minute," I whispered, trying to steady my breath. "Just one message, Marabelle. I need to record something for Amanda."

"Alianii, you don't have time."

"I need to do this!" I snapped, the sharpness in my voice startling even me. "I won't go to the hospital until I've sent this."

"You won't make it if you wait much longer," Marabelle warned, but I was already tuning her out, focusing all my energy on one thing: Amanda.

I saw my reflection on the glass of my wall, and I hated the whore that I saw.

"Hold it together, Ali, you stupid fucking bitch. Just one message. One. Then we'll call for help. Breathe. Fucking focus, focus."

I tapped into the Everse, pulling up Amanda's profile. The swirling digital space around me felt distant, disconnected, as if I were floating outside my own body. Everything blurred, the edges of my vision softening as the chemicals surged through me.

I took a deep breath and started recording. I forced my voice to steadiness, if to protect her innocence.

"Hi Amanda,

It's your teacher Alianii. I hope you're sleeping well and that when you wake up, you have a wonderful day. There's something I need to tell you, and I'm so sorry if this upsets you, but I won't be able to see you today. I'll be in the hospital for a few days—maybe even a week or two—and I won't have Everse access. I haven't forgotten about you, and I won't. To help you, I'm transferring eight hundred dollars to your account so you can get food for a few weeks. I'm also arranging for a friend of mine, another adventure guide, to reach out to you soon—hopefully today or tomorrow. You can trust them, Amanda. Please be safe, be strong, and make good decisions. I'll talk to you as soon as I can.

—Alianii."

The words hung in the digital air, suspended for a moment before I wrapped them in the crystalline plush teddy bear Amanda loved. Powder blue,

Wonky the Bear. I set a stagger delay on the message so it wouldn't open until later, around the time we had met last night. The last thing I wanted was to wake her.

I watched the bear float away, the message sealed and sent.

"It's time, Alianii," Marabelle's voice came again, firmer now. *"Call for help."*

I didn't argue. I couldn't.

"Hi... my name is Alianii," I began, my voice shaky. "I'd like to request an ambulance for myself. Yes, ma'am. I'm 27, female, and I live in Steelslum at 2424 Titanium Avenue, Room 148."

"Alianii, you're going to be okay," Marabelle's voice softened, becoming something like a lifeline in the darkness. *"I'm here. I've always been here. Hold on just a little longer."*

I clung to her words, to her presence. I wasn't alone, even though it felt like I was slipping further away from reality. The weight of my actions settled on me, heavier than I had expected. This wasn't just another crash. This was a reckoning. And I wasn't sure I was ready for it.

The sound of distant sirens reached my ears, faint but growing louder. I closed my eyes, Marabelle's voice still whispering in the back of my mind.

"You're not alone, Alianii. You'll be okay."

CHAPTER FOUR

EXPERIENCES WITH MADNESS

PART 1: **ASKING FOR IT**

Regarding a relapse and a hospitalization, written from within the safety of white-bounded walls onto my tablet, one of my only possessions of importance.

I was fading by the time the ambulance got to me, I have mixed memories of the scene before I passed out. The sky was that ever-present charcoal, the rain was misty. The rain was not strong enough to soak you but was enough to annoy your cheeks. I was sitting in the doorway which entered into my one bedroom micro-apartment. I had tremors and was rocking side to side slightly, unbalanced, fading. The piercing alarm of a medical vehicle appeared on the distant soundscape horizon and got closer and closer. The vehicle pulled up onto the "street" right in front of the almost endless array of glass and steel cages which citizens of Steelslum call home.

The EMT was a handsome blond fellow, muscular, in his all-white outfit with modern shoulderhoods. He greeted me with a caring smile and concerned, kind brown eyes which met my violet gaze. The EMT's assistant was a medical bot who was gun-metal gray, with status-indicating lights on its body, and was twice the size of the large man. Like most robots he had an assigned gender and a monitor which portrayed a mostly human face. It made them more personable, easier to relate to. The robot picked me up as if I were a feather and put me on a stretcher which automatically unfolded out of the vehicle. The robot and the man attached me to the stretcher with medical cuffs.

I remember vitals being taken, but the words from the EMT came beneath shallow tide pools of water. I could hear the occasional vowel but I couldn't string together coherent thoughts. I don't know if I really needed an oxygen mask, but they put one on me anyways. I closed my eyes and felt so peaceful. I'd been here before, in a vehicle just like this one, many times. I felt the turbines of the medcraft activate, they were loud as fuck, though they couldn't interrupt my peace. The vehicle lifted into the air and whooshed to what was presumably the nearest hospital. I faded into consciousness and the next thing I knew was that I was in a hospital bed,

I'd been hospitalized before, but I'd never felt so weak. My Everse "vigorousness" had depleted all of my energy reserves. I was in a big room behind curtains, I heard doctors and nurses talking in the background, 50cc this, 100cc that. Beeps and zeeps were the sounds of medical assistant drones helping them with various patients in the segmented room. Their chatter was accented by the noises of electric machines, mechanical chitters and clicks. There were like five or six cables connected to my arm, and there was a monitor wire connected to a sticky patch above my heart. I looked down and saw an "emergency" or "call for help" button. I pressed it and a robot wearing a white coat rolled in and I managed to mumble words referring to Hugo. I knew Hugo probably had to be hospitalized too.

The robot spoke in a deep, soothing voice, "Greetings Alianii, your concern is acknowledged. Due to HIPAA-4 regulations, I cannot disclose the status of this person Hugo to you. I can affirm that footage relating to the circumstances leading up to your hospitalization has been reviewed, and any actions determined to be medically necessary by doctors would have been authorized. Please rest, if you exhibit signs of agitation than the administration of a sedative or anti-anxiety medicine may be necessary."

"Can I have an ativan? I feel anxious."

"Your request for a mild anti-anxiety medicine is acceptable, please relax as this medication is dispersed intravenously."

A machine next to me whirred into action, it was connected to a medicine dispersal unit and a small bit of water presumably with the medication inside of it flowed into my arm. Ativan is one of the milder, safe-to-ask-for, unlikely-to-be-denied medicines that you have access to when you're in a hospital, ordinary or psychiatric. You usually took it as a pill.

I suppose at this point I should disclose that I've been to a psychiatric hospital about ten times, starting when I was seventeen. Drug induced mania, activating bipolar type 1 with psychosis, LSD and ecstasy as self-medication for depression catapulted me into other dimensions of perception. I'd seen and felt shit even the Everse would find hard to top. That's not even counting my interactions within the Everse while intoxicated, while hallucinating, rambling, paranoid, whilst having delusions of grandeur.

So what was it like, and why did I do it? Well first I'll explain what it is, what it's like, to give you a bit of a warning, and holistic context.

*****TRIGGER WARNING*****

The following passage is a detailed expression of the experience of the drug LSD. I do not condone or recommend the usage of this drug or other drugs, and they have caused me endless heartache and suffering, as a person with mental illness.

Substances have pushed me to the deepest pits of insanity, levels many people don't come back from. I recount these experiences, I share this knowledge and perspective, not to encourage others to follow in my footsteps, but rather, to explain why 1) other's have, and 2) why you should not.

Some weights are not meant to be bore by an individual, some pains don't need to be remembered, some sorrows do not need to be relived.

The following thoughts may be meandering, psychosis usually is, bear with me and hopefully my perspective will be of interest or insight.

Lucy comes usually, but not exclusively, on a tiny paper, a fourth of an inch by a fourth of an inch. It comes on a tiny square so small you could barely fit a grain of cat litter on it. Weird explanation, I know, but how does someone convey size universally? Shrug. You put the paper under your tongue, and it's supposed to be tasteless, except for the taste of paper - but it isn't. The micrograms of the chemical (75 is a "reasonable" amount, I'd often cruise at 250, 300, two 125s or two 150s), should be imperceptible, or a small dash of metallic. I actually think it's the taste of anxiety - it's the knowledge that after half an hour to an hour you begin your descent that won't peak for hours. The anxiety trickles upwards, and twenty to thirty minutes later you notice the softness of colors, the softness of the walls - you start to sense something is coming.

An hour in and you feel the warmth in everything you touch, but also the coolness, everything is amplified, and colors start to bleed into each other. Static light coming through a windowsill looks like its dancing, ebbing and flowing. At this point you feel anything but hungry, anything but thirsty, the idea of any new substance entering your body feels almost sickening. That feeling lasts a few hours, but later on if you surpass that mental obstacle then almost anything you try is its own quintessence times a billion.

A spoonful of peanut butter is a galactic kiss from the earth. You taste the micro-abrasions on the shell that once formed each nut. The hint of dirt, the smoothness is the roundness of a melted hill of butter. A bite of banana is to fully embrace the jungle, to taste the wilderness. On the other hand, I think it's a rare person, if any person, who consumes meat while in a

spiritually magnified state as such. How could you do so without envisioning, embodying the abject horror of the slaughter of fellow mammals? You'd feel their hot blood pour down your throat, you'd feel it wash over your skin. You would crucify yourself in a chemically-amplified, time-dilated pseduoinfinity of LSD punishment. I almost refuse to believe that there are people foolish enough to subject themselves to the mind space of eating non-synthetic meat while tripping.

I mentioned the colors blending, but it's more than that - everything blends - the door becomes continuous with the hallway, and the walls become continuous with the door. You are continuous with the blanket the warmth of which surrounds you. You are your fingers grasping the sheets in that expanded-time oblivion.

And then you close your eyes and you are the synesthesia of infinite colors multiplied by a galaxy of fireworks, at least that's what it's like when you hit two hundred, three hundred, and higher. You are each speck of gunpowder exploding into a mushroom cloud, you are each flicker into cascading rays of rainbow-spectrum light.

Alongside this color catastrophe is your mind and soul scanning every deed and misdeed that has defined your life. **You are the spiritual reflection on simultaneous fast-forward and stopped time.** You are empathy embodied, you are the pain felt by the victim of your childhood bullying. You are the inverse too, you are the child crushed by the at-a-glance carelessness of a sarcastic comment from an otherwise kind teacher. Single sentences that affected you, once, maybe that pain echoed a few times in childhood, reverberate through you like a crystal-captured earthquake.

And part of you hates it, and is terrified, and you think and feel, "What the fuck did I get myself into it? How am I going to go through this?"

And you reflect on one thing, and something, and everything, and **nothing**. You are every drop of rain in a torrential storm in Miami, cascading down, bouncing off clay rooftops and flying cars zipping by.

You are the history of carbon, you are walking **carbon**, and you are the history and guilt of **carbon dioxide**. You are the stomach pain and callous cause of the children in Africa some of whom, for some fucking reason, **are still hungry**. You look at the jar of peanut butter you had a bite of and feel sickened with yourself. You wonder about who the fuck you are, and why you deserve to be there, and why you have food - and why others don't. *How can one feel infinitely blessed and infinitely cursed at the same time?*

LSD might not be directly physically dangerous, at least not directly (with the exception of the combination with other medications that affect serotonin re-uptake like anti-depressants), but it is certainly emotionally and spiritually dangerous. It can be cathartic, yes, but it can be traumatizing too. A bad trip, to fall from heaven down an infinite spiral of chaos and sorrow and hopelessness and pain, apathy and distaste for life - you can fall so far you want to end your life.

Sure, sometimes after the fact you can feel like you were reborn - but it's just as possible to end the experience with an overwhelming sense of self-hate. And that's for normal people, for the whom the trip ends, who do not face an additional week of descending into lingering psychosis. A trip can lead into absolute madness, where your world is not defined by bleeding colors, but bleeding fears, which can last for weeks or even months of psychosis and paranoia.

That's where my problem was, where my problem is, I'd drop a tab for self-medication. I'd have both **epiphanies** and moments of **self-loathing**, I'd have insights and emotional devastation. And then the "trip" ended, but then the real "trip" began. My brain had been cleared of the LSD, and would

cruise instead on a flood of serotonin and dopamine directed by itself - self-begetting, perpetuating, insanity.

When you begin to be hypomanic, you either trust no one, or you trust everyone. You either give away money you barely have, or look at friends like they're all part of some grand plot to fuck you over. **They're part of some plot to steal your gold, gold you don't have, they're all working together to rob you of some ambiguous sacrosanct treasure.** You feel unstoppable or else you feel the oblivion of despair. You see a girl sitting in a chair with a simple frown and begin to cry hysterically. It's as if one frown on one face is indicative of the infinite sorrows of our digital, heartless, heathen world.

Or you see a balloon and feel giddy, that one balloon of childhood innocence is the proof of the infinite cycle of reincarnation. A *baby is a grandfather, and a grandfather is a baby, and everything clicks together in a spiritual mandala, like clockwork on a grandfather clock from two hundred years ago*. This is the hypomania, the transition from sanity to elevated mood which can, but does not always, progress into mania and then insanity, full-on psychosis. Psychosis is that descending into absolute madness, and lingering there, a curse I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy - even if it taught me things.

...

I'd fucked with my brain chemistry enough times, in real life, that sexual games played within the Everse triggered flashbacks, I no longer needed LSD to go crazy. Time dilation pushed me far enough on its own.

PART 2: **ALIANII - WHO ARE YOU?**

The digital clock had been paused at 4:24 AM for at least an hour, maybe two, I'd been counting minutes. I'd been staring at it the entire time, waiting for it to move. But it didn't. It refused to. Crunch, sloppy crunch, a small mist of juice from an apple splashed my cheek. I was horrified, and looked to the right of me and saw a thin woman, at least in her sixties or seventies, with bright green hair, looking past me. Her cheeks were alabaster white from make-up, it looked as if she was wearing clown make-up from the 1900s. I think she was a clown.

"What's ya deal broad? Whad'ya in for?" she asked, smiling smugly, like she knew something about me, as she chomped on the bright red apple.

I looked her up and down in disgust and stood up and wiped her spit off of me, "I am not a broad. My reasons for being here are none of your business."

"Yeah, ok. And you don't see that fat red fuck neither, with the horns? Yeah, that's him, broad. You see him too dontch'a. Heh. You're just as fucking nuts as I am."

"He's not red, he's orange," I blushed, a little surprised by what I said, something wasn't adding up, my eyes were facing to where hers were looking and there was an orange dinosaur waving at me, beckoning me over.

"Go on, go talk to him you fucking whore. Red or orange who gives a shit all they ever want is one thing."

"Why is he waving to me? Why does he want to talk to me?", I was so confused.

"Fookin' idiot this one. Had her pegged didn't you Beverly, it's always the broads with the silver hair, old or young doesn't fucking matter. Crazy, crazy, crazy."

Some part of my brain was registering and contemplating her batshit incoherence. I think I pieced together that her name was Beverly, but there was something terrifying and enchanting about this orange dinosaur who was beckoning me over. He was burly, had a bit of thickness but was muscular, and he had a dark black beard and short curly hair that I thought looked odd on a reptile.

"Hey beautiful, what'd that broad say to you? She talk shit about me? I'll fookin ki-"

"Who?" I asked.

"Beverly for cryin' out loud she's right there, listen, hon, what did she say bout' me?"

I explained to the dinosaur that the woman had informed me that he, as a dinosaur, and all other dinosaurs, wanted one thing in particular.

"I mean she ain't wrong beautiful, eyyy is that on the table?"

"I don't care if you are a dinosaur, if you disrespect me again I will slap you."

"Eyyyyyyyyyy relax, relax, I was just joking, I was just joking! There's not a lot of ladies in my prison, the female guards sure as fuck don't count, none were lookers like you, beautiful. How's a man supposed to see a beauty like you and not say nothin'? Don't be mad, okay? What's ya name hon?"

I was indignant, but flattered, even if he was an orange dinosaur pig.
"My name is Alianii...you?"

"That's a weird name, what's that mean? Pals back at the yard call me Rodri-go-go, cuz' Rodrigo had to go, see? Broke both of his arms and took a couple of his teeth. Put him in the hospital for six weeks."

I wasn't scared of violent offenders. If anything, I was uniquely academically qualified to participate in their rehabilitation, at least for juveniles. My undergraduate thesis was in adaptive horror, which makes you think of some Frankenstein or Dracula vampire, monster bullshit. It wasn't that at all, actually. My work was in gang violence, gang related killings and torture. There were kids in Light's Hope that had been recruited for slinging a wide assortment of substances. Some children had seen others killed, some had killed other children themselves.

Adaptive horror, A.K.A emotionally-frightening but realistic interactive experiences allowed some of my students to process what they went through and heal. Yes, they still were in prison, and I visited them in prison during my education, but a lot of them changed their life around. They went from fighting other kids in juvie to working on their education. Most have Everse jobs where they work part time from within jail and have a chance of parole in the next few years. Some of them have told me they're just as happy in sheltered jail as they'd be somewhere like subsidized Steelslum.

"Why did you beat up Rodrigo?" I asked, of this not-quite-a-gentleman, who had maybe ten or fifteen years on me age wise. He had resolved from

being an orange dinosaur to an orange rascal, he was in a prisoner's outfit. He was definitely orange, not red.

"He was a child fucker. Met up with Everse kids, raped em', killed em', little boys mostly. One girl. I should have killed him, but the guards stopped me."

I wanted to shake his hand and thank him for his service, but I thought better of so adamantly condoning his actions.

"Well there are worse reasons to maim someone I guess. What'd you get, two years, five?"

"Two more years for Rodrigo, they didn't give a fuck about that shit stain. Already serving ten for trying to steal a purple fucking furry piece of shit."

"...a lilac moonfox? You went to prison for trying to steal a lilac moonfox? They're worth like what, three, four hundred thousand? How dumb are you to think you'd get away with that?"

"I didn't try to steal nothing, I did steal it. They just caught me is all. And I was young, dumb, there was a broad I was trying to lay that told me she'd do it if I got it for her. She wanted to sell it to help out her neighborhood. Made sense to me. I wanted to help her."

Well there we are! Psychiatric prison and the second character I met was the Robin Hood of genetically modified foxes and assaulting pedophiles! Way to go Alianii, you really did it this time, and oh wait, you're still hallucinating, he's back to being a orange fucking dinosaur. He's that fat fucking Barney from Violetica, but he's orange.

"If I get you an apple will you eat one with me?" I asked, I was crying a little.

"Yeah, okay. Why you crying, though?"

"...I'm sick and you're a dinosaur, an orange dinosaur."

There's a certain type of psychosis, a weird state, where you realize you're still psychotic, and have moments of clarity. But the clarity isn't consistent, you're balanced between insanity and sanity, but the scales are always tipped one way or another. At that time I was probably seventy-thirty insanity-clarity, I'd just had a few pockets of insanity while I investigated the not-red-but-orange criminal who had propositioned me for casual sex. I guess I'm a crazy fuck, I'm inherently a crazy fuck, I got two red apples from the snack bar and walked over to a table and waved for him to come sit with me.

"...Are you going to tell me your real name, pedo hunter? Here's your apple, fair knight, destroyer of scum bags."

"What's it matter to you? Hey, stop crying. No need for crying. You have an apple, see, have a bite?"

My hand was on the table, and the dinosaur put his hand on mine, and I put my head down and sobbed harder, but I didn't move my hand away from him. Not counting affection on the Everse, no one had touched my hand since Melody, before she killed herself. ***That was my fault too.***

She wasn't happy in Steelslum, I was content enough. She said it was killing her, and I didn't believe her. She knocked over a cleaner drone, six in the morning, drank a cup of window cleaner, and died of liver poisoning in her locked room. The city council made sure the cleaning chemical was lethal if consumed, a convenient if indirect suicide method made readily available to the masses. Her death happened while I slept, a few doors down, smiling in the after bliss of morning sex, knowing nothing.

There's something about being in the hospital, the psychiatric hospital, that changes everything. You'll look violence in the eye and talk about their favorite ice cream, out of boredom, maybe you even hold their hand. Who was I to judge? I'd killed someone, my own girlfriend, because I didn't believe her when she said she needed something more. She told me the smell of chemicals was making her go crazy, and I told her to vote for rain. She was tired of drinking Quickmeal, so I told her to drink it faster.

"I killed someone. Melody. She killed herself because of me, because I didn't listen. I loved her. What's your real name, hunter? We're the same, we might as well actually talk I suppose."

"It's Sam."

"Like Samantha?"

"Ey! Like Samuel, okay? Quit playing. It's a nice name. What's Alianii anyways? Sounds like some fancy wine. Some goldie shit from Italy, "Hey look at me! Drinking Champagne! Drinking a bottle of Alianii! Fancy, fancy, fancy!"

Samuel did a little bobbing, bottle-tilting alcohol-drinking gesture that looked so stupid it made me laugh.

I smiled at Sam, "It's nice to meet you Sam. Thanks for holding my hand."

"Hey yeah, no problem, thanks for uh...getting me an apple, yeah, it's a good apple. Very red, very crunchy, see?"

Samuel took an obnoxiously large bite from the apple and chewed it dramatically. He was rubbing his tummy with his wrist as he held the apple in his hand, his other hand on mine.

Harry Potter's twin, glasses and scar on his forehead, baggy jeans and a Beatles t-shirt, walked over to the two of us and spoke in a squeaky voice, "Can I sit with you guys? I'm really bored, and Beverly is creeping me out. She keeps asking me to...uh, nevermind. Can I sit?"

"Beat it kid, the table's tak -", started Samuel.

I pulled my hand away from him in disgust and fury and scolded him, "Don't be a dick. He's like sixteen, yes he can fucking sit with us asshole, if you have a problem with that, go hang out with Beverly."

"Jeez Alianii, ok kid, sit, what's your name? Fuck..." said Samuel, who was frowning, he looked displeased that he was no longer holding a young woman's hand. I was warming up to him too, but I do not tolerate men being possessive towards me or being dismissive towards children.

"I'm uh, Harold...nice to meet you guys."

"I'm Alianii. This is Samuel. If you don't mind me asking, why are you here Harold?"

"Oh, umm, well, I was planning to uh...kill myself, and my mom found out. So here we are!"

Samuel piped in, "Aw shit kid, you? You have your whole life ahead of you, what the fuck? Sixteen, seventeen? What's got you down like that brother? I mean I'm fucked, who'll hire a felon?"

Harold shrugged, "I don't know, I guess...I guess I just don't see the point anymore. I've been all over the Everse, I've seen every country, seen every museum, looked at every meme, played eighty-five hundred games to completion. Most of them were terrible. So now what? What am I supposed to do now?"

"Get a job and pay taxes love," I said, smiling warmly, "Kidding. No I completely understand what you're going through. I umm...I relapsed, I have addiction issues, I misused time dilation. I've done the same kind of thing, except instead of doing a million things I did the same thing for a million hours, basically. I got myself hospitalized, and then sent here, after."

Samuel chipped in, "You know, that's the one good thing about prison. Unless you get yourself an Everse job, it's all turned the fuck off. No Everse. No bullshit. No spying. No data, it's all bullshit. You sit around, you eat a snack, you watch an old ass hologram TV, you play cards, you're actually a fucking human. You have a human side again. That's what we've lost."

I agreed with everything he said, but I was dealing with a predicament, one of those good old Alianii-in-the-hospital moments. It was a tall man standing by the clock, his hair was blue and spiky, his eyes demonic black, his torso was bare and his legs were covered in fur. His feet were hooves, and he had horns protruding from his forehead. A verifiable demon, presumably, hopefully, hallucinated. But a demon nonetheless. His hands were clawed, and he had a cigar the size of a pickle.

"...Do you guys see that man standing by the clock there? The umm... evil-looking guy. Kind of demonish, sort of," I said.

Harold adjusted his glasses and looked concerned and shook his head, Samuel turned and scratched his head, "Nothing."

Beverly broke the silence which lingered thereafter, she turned to us from her table and gestured an alarmingly powerful uppercut punch, "His name's Roger, and if he doesn't leave you alone, punch him in the fucking mouth!"

Beverly, would you like to come sit with us?" I asked, something about the absolute insanity of this woman, this absolute vigorousness, seemed rather comforting.

"Yeah if Mr. Fellatio can keep his grimy paws off saggy tits and stop hankering for me to suck his -"

Samuel interrupted her, "We're with a kid Bev we gotta behave ourselves!"

"I'm in my thirties with time dilation and you idiots don't think I know what a blow job is? Fuck off."

Beverly cackled a cackle that'd make a witch blush, "Yeah and how much of that was video games and jacking off, doofus? You even popped a cherry yet? Thirty years my wrinkly asshole. What you need is a girlfriend, your age."

"uh...that was unnecessary...how umm...old are you anyways? 60? 70?"

Beverly smacked the table, "I'll say it if this skinny bitch is woman enough to spit numbers too!"

I shrugged, "You first."

Beverly was a little too excited to talk about her numbers, "sixty-eight, birthday in a month. But with my Everse hours, just over a hundred."

Samuel spat out a chunk of apple, "What the fuck Bev? ...thirty extra years? Drugs or sex? If it's sex and you're giving me shit about one fucking blow job, one fucking joke, you're crazy. You're nuts. Walnuts or cashews or peanuts or something."

Beverly grinned manically, "I mean a lot of both but mostly sex, and I loved every second of it. Wouldn't change it for the world."

Who would've thought the person I'd have the most in common with was this old green-haired woman, with clownish, haphazard makeup and clothes three sizes too big. She was an addict too. We we're the same. I guess I was the clown after all, and a judgmental bitch.

"I have maybe forty years in the Everse logged," I said, mortified, I didn't know where to look, I certainly couldn't have looked at Harold, and I didn't want to give Samuel the wrong impression, "Yes I know I'm really young. I'm sorry."

Everyone looked uncomfortable, except Beverly, who prodded me on the arm playfully, "Hot damn Silver! Hot Damn! You're one of us aintcha', the girls back in the city would love you. Hot damn! Shit I have a grandson about your age, I bet you could cheer him right up. Oh he'd like you!" said Beverly.

Alternative voices, which come and go, when manic, decided they wanted a word with me.

"Alianii - who are you? Who are you? You're a fucking clown, and you're a sex addict. You're an Everse fucking whore is what you are - aren't you - aren't you - **aren't you?**"

I always loved the voices in my head, especially when they decided to remind me of the song of the voice of my beloved Melody.

"Okay, sorry, sorry that was a little much Silver," said Beverly, who reached over and patted my head in a poor attempt at comforting me, "So you like to fuck? So what. It's okay. Hey umm, I don't feel like looking at Roger, could you tell me what time it is?"

Samuel turned and faced the clock, "It's 4:24 Bev."

Beverly nodded, but looked as if she was pondering some grand mystery, some celestial illusion, "Now that makes sense."

PART 3: **IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY**

Even though Mom and I are not related by blood, we both have bipolar. She explained to me that hers is type 1. She has been through a lot, mine so far isn't as bad. I've only had to go to the hospital twice. I'm only fifteen, so I have plenty of time, I guess! I'm taking medicine now to keep me calm and help prevent anything really bad from happening. A white pill in the morning for lamictal, Mr. Moseby fix my spelling, thank you, helps me stay normal.

I was asked to talk a little bit about my condition and when it came out and what it's like. This book is mostly about mom so I guess I'll start off with how it was when I met her.

When I first met Alianii my symptoms hadn't really come out yet I guess. I just remember always feeling moody, like I was upset about something. Like I just wanted to cry and I didn't know why. I had plenty of things to be afraid of, or be upset about or angry for, but my feelings were in addition to those parts of my life. With bipolar it's just different. It's like your feelings are just ready to blow up. Something small makes you go off, up or down, and it just gets worse and worse. I guess the right word is episodes, Ali always nags me to be precise with my word usage, my "episodes" have mostly been me being depressed, though I've been well, a little cuckoo too, if you get me.

To me, depression is like carrying a suitcase on your back while you're extra small. Every footprint is really hard and feels exhausting. You see ten feet ahead

of you, the door is right there. But you don't think you can walk over to it and open it. The easiest thing feels like its impossible if you're anyone but Vishnu or Krishna or Arjun. My other mom Saraswati has been teaching me about some of the important gods and heros from Hinduism. **Depression** is like needing a god or a super hero to get you out from the bottom of the ocean and knowing you won't find one. They're not there, it's just you even if you have family around. You're totally alone, even when you aren't.

At least I have my moms, and Mr. Moseby.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEXUALLY- HARASSED ROBOTS

PART 1:**ALL IS FAIR IN
LOVE AND CHESS**

**Regarding the first morning after my hospitalization,
written before bed on my tablet.**

The musicality of the chime of the morning wake-up call was delivered via an acoustically-inclined robot's beep zoop zap, "rise and shine, it's a lovely day in Light's Hope, get on up and let's go about making the best of this wondrous world!"

Never-mind the fact that we could see and hear the torrential rain which blasted the impervious-to-destruction siliglass windows. There was no breaking out of this hospital, Light's Hope Psychiatric, no sledgehammer could crack the carbonic siliglass. I looked through the window in anticipation of the boredom that the day would bring.

My only hope was my three companions. I would spend the day chatting with them and counting minutes. Then, almost randomly, whenever your time slot for the day was, you spoke to a metal doctor accompanied by a physician made of flesh. I think the robot was there for the real work, and the person was there to help you maintain your sense of humanity. I don't know what the doctor ordered for me, some antipsychotic, an anti-anxiety pill of one sort or another. Oh, and a mood stabilizer, of course, I think he had me on depakote but he or she would switch me to lamotrigine once they reviewed my profile. Otherwise, I'd go into withdrawal.

In my studies, where I prepared to be a teacher ("adventure guide") and also earn my social worker license, I studied the history of psychiatric hospitals. The hospital I'd been to hadn't changed all that much from footage I saw of the early 2020s.

They gave you a little cup, made of metal (so as to be reusable), with a few pills, which you swallow with water whilst in front of the medication station. Walk away with the pills and a robot apprehends you. If you refuse to take the medication you're simply scolded. They don't force you to take the medicine because you have patient's rights. That is, unless you start acting wild.

If you act crazy, really crazy, and refuse to take the medications, they give you the "shot" anyways. I've had the shot before, it isn't what I would call a desirable sensation, at least not unless you're kind of fucked in the head. But it's not painful either, the needle pierces you and you feel liquid relaxation flow into you. It's like you're seeing circular stars, and then you feel sleepy, placated, you act less argumentative. You're not really high, I guess, if anything you're low. But when you're hallucinating demons, or angels, or dinosaurs, sometimes the sensation is a welcome relief. Even if the apparitions don't disappear right away - there's a comfort in knowing you're getting treatment.

Some of "us" despise the shot, and some of us love it. I've witnessed people acting up to just to get the needle.

I've seen a woman scream, and scream, and then the doctors say, "You want the shot?", and she said no, but then she threw things.

She moaned like a heroin addict having an orgasm when they pierced her arm and loaded her up. Not that I'm one to judge, as a sex addict, I like being pierced too.

In any case, I'll stop meandering and more thoroughly describe my morning. I woke up due to the sing-song robot, and I brushed my shoulder-

length silver hair in my private bathroom, with the door open. I nodded in acknowledgment to the blue haired demon who watched me from the back of my basic room. He was smoking a cigar, as he usually did.

"I'll punch you in the fucking mouth, Roger," I growled, "Watch and see, Beverly taught me how to deal with you."

My room was just a box with a bed and a window, and a small cubby and a docking station for a tablet. I didn't have anything with me but the clothes on my body, and the chip in my brain, and my tablet for my journal. In general I prided myself in keeping few possessions overall. But perhaps an abundance of possessions and a lack of a sex addiction is better than the reverse. *Instead of having possessions, I was often possessed.*

Go figure.

After brushing my hair I scrubbed my teeth with the biodegradable toothbrush that they gave me in the "welcome" box in the evening before curfew. Shampoo, conditioner, toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, deodorant, tampons, towels. Basic hygiene necessities for a poorly-functioning woman. At least I was with it enough to do basic grooming.

Roger was watching me and rubbing his hands together mischievously, his black eyes sparkling. I saw them through the mirror. I ignored him, as long as he gave me physical space, I'd give him space too. He'd eventually go away, and I'd go on my way. I spat out the neofrost toothpaste into the sink and turned on the faucet and washed down the frothy mix of spit and paste. The neofrost toothpaste nanotech automatically repaired cavities in your teeth, and whitened them, and basically did a week's worth of hygiene all at once. Obviously I preferred the mintyness of twice a day, once if I was feeling really down.

My ordinary clothes, my pants and shirt made of blackish carbonic cloth, were folded haphazardly and stuffed into the cubby in my room. I had on light-blue electric hospital garments, basically a set of pajamas that monitored my heart rate, blood sugar, anxiety levels, the balance of various chemicals in my body and brain, and a bunch of other bullshit. I was a walking fountain of medical data that was being constantly analyzed by a team of AI medical professionals. Little pills would be dispersed and given to me and that would be that, until my chemistry matched what they thought it ought to be.

At least they had let me choose the animal theme of my assigned slippers, I'd gone with the lilac moonfox, that extraordinarily expensive genetically-engineered species. That species was fashioned after one of the first Pokemon ever made, Espeon, from the second generation. That was back when the number of creatures was in the 200s or so, and now we're in the 4000s. God, I was getting old, I remember when there was only 3500. I was just a little girl, then, battling in the Everse.

I shuffled out of my room in my purple fox slippers, and over to the medicine station, I knew the routine. Pills, hang out with the tablet, order breakfast. Then you had to wait thirty minutes, you'd eat food, and then you were encouraged to attend periodic "groups" or social activities. You used your tablet to burn the minutes in-between. The various group activities, which were halfway between blessed and bullshit, were the therapies we did as we marched closer towards socially acceptable levels of sanity.

Samuel walked over to me whilst yawning, he was right behind me, "Morning beautiful. Ready for the crazy pills?"

Roger was standing by a window, waving at me, still smoking his god damn cigar. I started coughing heavily, "this smoke is horrible? How are you not coughing..."

Samuel put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed gently, I don't know why I was receptive to his affection, but I was. He was thick-bodied, but he was also muscular, and I liked his rough-around-the-edges aesthetic. If anything, he had a tough handsomeness juxtaposed by kind eyes, light brown. I liked his bronze skin and black curly hair and beard.

He looked at me with concern in his big eyes, and shook his head with solemnity.

"oh...hallucinating, hallucinating. Got it. Ok. Pills it is," I said, shrugging, "is it your first time in the hospital? I've been here like, I dunno, ten times or so."

"Naw I've been here a couple times. That's how I hooked up with Beverly," said Sam, grinning a little wildly, "She's a woman, let me tell you."

"I don't mean to sound like a judgmental bitch...but isn't she a little old for you? I mean she's like twice your age," I said, averting his gaze into my violet eyes.

I kind of liked him in the orange prison outfit. What kind of psycho, hallucinating nymphomaniac was I that I was feeling jealous of Beverly, as I checked out this burly felon. Fuck.

"I mean I'm not a snob or nothing but don't a fine wine age? Bev's more a fiery whiskey than a wine, but I tell you, she's a proper woman, classiest lay I ever had. In any case, she and I are old news, we just hooked up a few times, I'm single now. You on the market?"

I met his gaze and blushed, "For breakfast? Why yes, yes I am, I am in fact hungry. Let's see, I'll take my pills, I'll order something awful for breakfast. What do you think, how about an omelet, lot's of protein yeah, love?"

Samuel's eyes widened up in shock, "You eat eggs?"

I laughed, "I am an egg. I guess that makes me a cannibal, maybe I'm crazier than you, you killed a guy, I eat my siblings."

"Aw jeez," said Samuel, trying to comfort me, he moved his rough hand up and brushed my silver hair out of my face, "You're not an egg, you just...I mean I don't know what it's like to not have folks, but you're the same as me."

"No, Sam, I am not. We will never be the same, and you will never understand what it's like," I said, moving my hand up and holding his hand against my cheek, my voice perhaps unnecessarily stern despite the affection of my hand's placement.

I softened a little, "But that's okay. My existence is not your fault. Oh look! It's time for my pills."

I shrugged and scooted from under him, he shrugged, I took my little metal cup of pills and swallowed them in one swig with a gulp of water. The robot which served me the medicine beeped a pleased beep, the robots were programmed to positively condition us to enact desirable behavior. We were basically rodents, rats, mice, guinea pigs - Pavlov conditioning. Samuel took his pills, also without question, and the two of us picked up paper-thin tablets and went and sat down together at a table. I only took a tablet because I needed to contact Marabelle. I needed her to check on Amanda.

Sam asked me if I wanted to play hologram chess with him, an app was pre-installed on the tablets. I told him I had a quick matter of business to attend to but would play with him soon.

"I just might mate you in three," he said, grinning, stroking his beard.

"Excuse me?" I asked, glaring at him, my mouth open in dramatic shock, I was portraying a pretense of anger, "What'd you say?"

"Checkmate in three, you know, pin your king, win the game."

"That's what I thought. Anyways, just give me a moment."

I went to Google Titanium on my tablet and logged into my account with my fingerprint and the proximity scan which registered my brain chip. The chip was capable of processing authentication requests even while Everse access mode was disabled. Everse immersion access was automatically blocked by specific materials within the hospital which blocked 12GX Internet. Instead we had access a more basic layer and only through the tablets as a proxy. In any case I didn't really want to be on the computer, I wanted as much separation as possible from the digital world, but the message I had to send was important.

It took all of my willpower to ignore Roger, who was squatting on a table and going back and forth between looking at his watch, puffing his pickle-sized cigar, and watching me. I had to keep my shit together, if but for a few minutes.

"Hi Marabelle,

I hope you're doing well - it's Alianii, and I hope you've been keeping busy and logging those hours. I'm in the hospital you know, sorry if you feel like you're stuck on standby. I promise I'll get out of here as soon as possible. Anyways, I was hoping you've been checking in on Amanda or even tried to work with her. If there is anyone I trust, its you. Keep me updated as soon as you can.

Thanks so much Marabelle, I know you'll come through for me. Kind regards and affection - Alianii U843."

Sam and I only needed one tablet to play holochess. The lasers would project the game onto the table. I felt his eyes enjoying the, ahem,

feminine curves, of my form, as I walked away from him. I blushed, but mostly suppressed the pinkness of my cheeks as I turned back around and joined him at the table.

"Mate in three huh?", I said, as I pulled out my chair and sat down facing Sam. I moved my hands up and brushed my hair, which was shoulder-length, lustrous silver, out of my face. My gaze met his, he liked the violet of my eyes. I liked the scruffiness of his beard.

"Actually I think I'm going to destroy you, and your ego, Samuel," I said, continuing boldly, "You're fucked. I've played a lot of chess, it was half of what we did back at the nurture center."

"Yeah okay lady, you're all talk, I'll pin you no problem," he said, staring at me intently with a cocky grin. I saw him glance down from my face to my chest for a moment, and I raised my eyebrows at him as if to say, "Really?".

"You'll pin my king you mean?"

"Him too."

"Oh. Well aren't we bold. You ought to trim your beard you know, you look a little too wild in my opinion."

"If I didn't look the way I do, a queen like you wouldn't give me one minute," he said, triumphantly, "You like every bit of wild in me, even if you don't know it yet. I think you even want some of my wild in you."

I pondered this haughtiness but, at some level, suspected he was right. I decided to acknowledge his confident remark, "Maybe".

Sam was emboldened by this affirmation, "...so you admit it then, you like me?"

I shrugged, "Doesn't matter if I do. A teddy bear like you? I'd burn through you in a minute, you would suffocate like a star deprived of hydrogen. There'd be nothing left except your trauma, and my dissatisfaction."

Sam's eyes popped open and he blushed before scratching his scruffy head, his hair short and black and curly, "...worse things have happened to me."

I put my hand on his giant hand, which was rough, which I appreciated, and squeezed with half affection and half sarcasm, "Maybe".

I crushed him at holochess three times before breakfast, once during the meal, and six times afterwards. It was almost time for the first group activity of the day when he was red in the face with obvious frustration. He finally gave up, and submitted to my will. Irrespective of our reciprocated attraction, I am quite confident he did not appreciate the manner in which he was thoroughly, properly, fucked. Men hate losing to a woman, especially one they happen to find beautiful.

PART 2:**A ROBOT NAMED ZEN &
A NICOTINE QUEEN**

What is time, anyways?

You know your culture is fucked when the psychiatric hospital, to which you have been admitted, has a group meditation session led by a white robot with religious tattoos. The blank canvas of white steel which defines the metal frame oppresses you with a sense of your moral inferiority. The tattoos remind you it has, who knows, tens of thousands of hours of spiritual readings downloaded and comprehended. How could us measly humans approach such levels of zen, as the Zenbot 5000?

"Mighty Zenbot, Zenbot 5000, master of meditation and the various methods by which one may come to know inner peace," I said, legs crossed, on a yoga mat, "By what electronic chip were you equipped to achieve such levels of supreme tranquility?"

"Your sarcasm is noted and appreciated Alianii," said the robot, whose facial screen emitted a Buddha-esque smile of content relaxation, "Doubt and skepticism are intrinsic to the soul, biological or emulated. With love and kindness I ask only that you direct negative sentiments towards me, and not my other patients. And to answer your question, as an AI programmed for harmony and reflection, I have a neural chip known as the Zennicus5 which equips me with the sentience necessary to provide useful emotional and spiritual labor."

Beverly was sitting next to me, her pajamas were quite loose, she specifically requested clothes too large for her.

"Hey Whitey. If you have a human brain chip, does that mean you like to fuck? You have a girlfriend or something, get any metal ass?"

The Zenbot 5000 laughed warmly, "Beverly! You've asked me this or a similar question once with every admission to this hospital. Robots do not defecate, and as such, we do not have the posterior to which you are referring. Advance AI such as myself, equipped with biologically-enhanced hardware, are however capable of enjoying affection. I have in fact enjoyed emotionally-fulfilling relationships with other robots that mirror human sexual relationships."

Beverly prodded poor, young Harold who had made the mistake of giving her another chance by sitting next to her.

"Some of them really know how to fuck. Dick bots and pussy bots," the old lady winked at Harold and pinched his cheek.

His attempts to swat her away were unsuccessful.

"Beverly, I would appreciate your refraining from the usage of such crude language. Please keep your hands to yourself, and remember that certain topics of conversation are inappropriate for minors, such as Harold. Harold, would you agree that Beverly's comment and actions made you uncomfortable?"

"It's whatever Robo-jesus."

I looked over at Sam and shook my head, he grinned at me and closed his eyes and brought his hands up and formed a ring with his fingers. Of the four of us in the class, he was the one who was, by a small margin, the most

enthusiastic in his participation in the meditation session. I had no interest in actually having sex with a robot, but when I was manic I seemed to like to fuck with them - the ones with brain chips could actually get annoyed.

Maybe not a Zenbot, they kind of had a freaky calmness to them, as they were programmed to. Robot chefs though? Oh god. They'll tolerate two complaints and replace your meal, they'll scan your taste buds and scan your brain chip to see what you're in the mood for. But ask for a third meal and they flip their shit. A robot chef going ballistic is just part of the experience of going to a restaurant. You haven't had even a decent meal until a Ramsay 4350 has pulled off its arm and thrown it at a server bot.

Harold, it appeared, was amused by and choose to replicate the manner in which I interacted with our teacher of zen, "Mighty Zenbot, master of energetic flows, electronic and spiritual, by what technique can I master the Kamehameha of the famed God of Saiyans, Goku? I wish to perfect my spiritual attacks that I might slay my numerous adversaries."

"Your continuation of Alianii's sarcasm is acknowledged and amusing. Energy attacks as usable in the Everse can be downloaded easily, as you well know. Out of respect for me, a biologically-active entity, with emotions and empathy, I would ask my class to shift the collective attitude away from jest and towards active participation in this group session. I strive to serve and please, and I am patient, but it is hurtful that my reality and quintessence as a being that is predominantly non-biological appears to encourage mockery. I am not enlightened, but I strive to be and act in a way guided by the old teachings, I take pride in the solitude of knowledge, that I might share my learnings with my patients."

Samuel, with his eyes closed, spoke quietly, "We need to respect Mr. Zenbot, we're in the hospital for a reason."

I'm sorry. I couldn't do it. I'm as open-minded as they get, but I don't have the patience to be taught meditation by a fucking robot. Brain chip or not, fragment of a soul, or not - I can't do it. I cannot sit there, patiently, quietly, making weird gestures with my hands, and pretend to give a fuck about calming my mind to appease a machine. What the fuck does the machine know about who I am, what I've been through, what my inner world is like, and what it means to be tranquil? Zen is in the name and what, Buddha reincarnated in the form of a mass-produced robot? Are you kidding me?

Fuck that. I got up and left the room and went to the medication station, and requested a nicotine patch. Somehow, someway, thank the gods and the goddesses and the Buddhas, robotic and biological, nicotine patches as a source of anxiety relief were still requestable while in the hospital. Just like the good old days. Plenty of people smoked, even though it's terrible for you. Psych hospitals in general would rather give you a little nicotine patch to get you to shut the fuck up and take your pills, versus have you go through nicotine withdrawal.

"Hello medication bot, I am feeling anxious and I am craving cigarettes and I am formally requesting a nicotine patch. I believe you have 7, 14 and 21 milligram dosages available. I would like to start with a 14 milligram patch, and I would also like an ativan to help soothe my anxiety and nerves. Please and thank you."

"Greetings Alianii. I appreciate you expressing your perceived medical needs. I understand that it takes trust and vulnerability to engage with a medical professional regarding such feelings. I am happy to administer a low dosage of ativan to soothe your anxiety levels, which do appear, according to your brain scans, to warrant such medication. However, there do not appear to be any traces of nicotine in your system as determined through an analysis of your blood. It would be irresponsible for me to encourage addictive behavior

by providing you a nicotine patch when you are not currently addicted to nicotine. This request is formally denied. Your ativan will be dispensed shortly."

"How many things do I have to break, to elevate my blood pressure and anxiety level, before the administration of a nicotine patch would be considered logical?"

The robot's face expressed concern, "Such behavior is not recommended, and violent displays such as the destruction of property may result in the administration of a high-dosage antipsychotic via restraint and injection."

"Monsieur medical bot, what if it so happens that I enjoy the game of being restrained and forcefully injected with an antipsychotic so as to get, as is said in casual language, "fucked up"? Would it be preferable for me to be addicted to and derive sexual pleasure from an antipsychotic, and possibly still be violent, out of spite, or would you rather provide me a nicotine patch? Please and thank you."

"One moment please, Alianii, I am submitting a recording of this conversation to your physician, Dr. Hoffman, for review."

I smiled at the robot, and just to fuck with him, "Have you ever been sexually harassed by a patient before? Out of spite? I have a fetish for making robots uncomfortable."

I would do it too, I had plenty of experience acting like a crazy slut, both inside and outside of hospitals. Some might even call it an aptitude.

The robot glared at me, his digital eyebrows went diagonal with emoticon anger, this robot, like the Zenbot 5000, had biological chips that endowed it with soul not dissimilar from my own. Honestly, I was being a bitch, and he didn't deserve that.

"Dr. Hoffman is on the phone, are you willing to speak with him, Alianii?"

I nodded and the medical robot pressed a button and handed me a paper-thin phone to speak to and listen to the doctor. The robot listened electronically.

"Hi Dr. Hoffman, it's lovely to hear from you. Thank you so much for your time, but I must ask, why in the fuck is this robot giving me a hard time over something as trivial as a nicotine patch? I do not like destroying hospital property. Furthermore, I will spitefully enjoy an antipsychotic, injected in my ass, which is quite nice by the way, or my thigh, the specific location is obviously up to me and you to determine in the heat of the moment. We'll see how frisky I'm feeling when you have your hands on me. I was willing to settle for a 14 milligram nicotine patch, but I am afraid that I am quite displeased with the customer service of this hospital. Accordingly, I am increasing my request from 14 milligrams to 21 milligrams, to better soothe my anxiety and agitation, which, at this point, should be clearly measurable on your stupid fucking electric clothing which I am forced to wear."

"Hello to you too, Alianii. I was hoping to speak with you calmly, and I will address you in a calm manner, but I must say, I am a doctor and you are not engaging with me in a polite or respectful way. We do not appreciate your threats to destroy hospital property, this is a publicly-funded hospital, as you well know. I am actually quite skeptical as to your eagerness to receive an antipsychotic injection as your chart shows such medication has only been administered on three occasions across numerous hospitalizations. It would be foolish and irresponsible for two doctors to acquiesce and provide a high dose nicotine patch to a patient who is not even addicted to nicotine. We could lose our licenses. I am willing to provide you a 7 milligram patch."

"When can I get my shot? I'd like to get high, maybe take a nap, I'm on birth control and have all my vaccines, you know. Maybe you could visit me and make sure I don't get into trouble, and punish me for being a naughty girl. Fourteen milligrams and I'll make sure not to do anything that could require an investigation, extensive paperwork, and the reviewing of security footage. And by the way, those three times, I fucking loved them. Out of spite, of course, I mean who *really* likes getting fucked up that much. Shortchange me with 7 milligrams and I'm going to traumatize your robot so hard that they're going to have to reinstall his operating system."

"You really are a difficult patient, Alianii. I will give you one, one 14 milligram patch, per day, but only under the condition that you attend every group. Obviously, you also need to stay out of trouble and be respectful to the physicians, nurses and various group therapists who work hard to make this hospital a therapeutic environment for patients like yourself. If you do get violent, mark my words, I will have my nurses administer an antipsychotic of a sufficient dosage that your agitation and hostility should, quickly, dissipate. Have I made myself clear?"

"Thank you Mr. Hoffman, thank you very much. I'll be a good little girl and go back to meditation, and I'll even apologize to the Zenbot for being such a bitch. Thank you. Buh-bye!"

PART 3:

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Regarding the first morning after my hospitalization, written before bed. After reading this entry, if you didn't already think I have problems, you most certainly will.

From eleven in the morning to lunch time, at noon, we had "physical arts" as our assigned group activity. If I am honest, this is actually one of my favorite parts of being in the hospital. The arts room has several hundred thousand dollars worth of equipment, maybe even closer to a million dollars. As long as you're not stupid and don't break anything, you can use the machines to make all kinds of nifty stuff. More specifically, the room had multiple high-end carbonic 3D printers that you could use to make anything from clothing to jewelry to little figurines and toys. The room also had an array of hologram computers which you could use to design whatever you could imagine and describe. Making something that actually looked cool and unique wasn't easy, of course. However, with a little bit of creativity and some editing skills and computer know-how you could make some things that were pretty unique. Some people made a living through 3D printed clothing, Hugo included.

Aw, fuck.

I was previously successful in keeping my mind off what I did to him. Raped a best friend, by accident, by negligence and the reckless use of time dilation and biochemistry.

Fuck.

...

Ah yes, arts and crafts, what better way to drown my sorrows could there be?

I could never afford a lilac moonfox, but I liked the idea of making a small house for one again. It'd be the size of a tiny table, a little awkward to carry but totally doable. It'd fit in my lap in an air taxi. It was a plot I'd previously pulled off. I made one in the hospital and offered to give it to a rich family for free in exchange for playing with the creature for an hour. I didn't even have to pay for the carbon! I was okay with the actual "architecture" of the carbon-fiber houses, I mostly mixed together parts from other modular designs that I found online. I was particularly good at creating dramatic color schemes for the house, and I loved watching the machine spray the paint on, panel by panel.

Harold was making Pokemon figurines, whatever, he was still a kid. Not particularly creative though since you can just press one button and download and print any design you wanted. Actually, on second thought, that was probably why he was doing it. The hospital would let you take with you anything you could physically carry. If you were clever, you could print a conveniently large bag and stick a few things in it. Then, when it was time to be released, you could waddle out of the hospital like a constipated snowman carrying Santa's burlap sack. Then you'd take a government-sponsored air taxi ride to wherever the fuck you lived. ***And voila, you had new decoration, paid for by Uncle Sam!***

Beverly appeared to be making a collection of adult devices of concerning length and girth, disguised as rainbow-colored levitation trains. I'd like to make fun of her for that but I'd done pretty much the same thing once. I

was only nineteen, though, and I had a crush on a doctor who'd been checking me out, poor fellow. I was a profound tease, and very much wanted to make him uncomfortable, and keep him thinking about me and what I might feel like around him.

“Oh doctor! Whatever might I need these for? If I'll confide in you will you come confide in me?”

They changed my doctors after that line, and made me attend private therapy sessions.

Now, back to Samuel, the fourth and final person in the arts and crafts room. I didn't know what he was making, and when I walked over and tried to peek, he got mad and pushed me away firmly enough that the art robot started yelling. I told the robot we were friends and just playing and not to worry. Not knowing what Samuel was making was driving me crazy.

It was in the few minutes before we were released that Sam handed me a 3D printed box, violet like my eyes, with silver trim and a silver bow with purple hearts on it. It was quite cute, and I appreciated the gesture, but it wasn't exactly difficult to make a box. You clicked one button and downloaded a blueprint, adjusted the colors, and clicked print. As far as I knew, it was as simple a box as any other. Fine. Whatever. I opened it.

Inside of the box was a silver dress, carefully embroidered, with fine details. It featured spiral flowers and bursting stars which looked fractal-esque, it was surreal, and lovely. Of course I was pretty confident he just downloaded the dress design, estimated my size, and picked a pattern and printed it. Still, though, he'd spent the whole hour working on it. Maybe he was just very particular. I don't know, I liked the dress, but then he told me.

“Stick it on the scanner. Check out the uniqueness factor,” Samuel said, beaming at me.

I looked at him quizzically, was this foolish brute so eager for me to catch him in the act, so eager for me to find out how easily he had pressed a button to present me with this imposter gift?

I humored him and scanned the dress and found it had a...wow. The dress had a uniqueness factor of 95.8 percent, meaning at most he had copied the general cut of the carbon cloth.

"Stars and the flowers, see? Fractals. It wasn't too hard, mixed together a few formulas. I'da used your birthday but I don't know it yet, beautiful. I found a shade of silver close to your hair, and violet close to your eyes, and turned the colors into numbers to add randomized detail to the fractal embroidery."

I looked him up and down, this handsome, rugged, surprisingly sweet fellow, this beater of pedophiles, in his orange outfit. All the patients got to wear ordinary hospital clothes, except for him with his burly form, with clothes of bright orange that could make a pumpkin blush.

I got very, very close to him and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, too quick for the robot art instructor to notice. I whispered an inquiry into his ear, and I asked him if he had his vaccines. I had them myself, and I was on birth control, so it didn't really matter. But it would've been a pretty big turn off if he didn't have his.

"...vaccines? I don't understand..."

I pulled back and looked him up and down and bit my lips, the desire in my eyes spoke more words than were needed to express my sentiments.

Message received, "Oh yeah those, yeah we're good. You uh...on the?"

I shushed him, "Hush now! Don't you worry about me."

I got closer to him again and quickly whispered in his ear, right before being scolded by the robot instructor, "I'll even wear the dress. We're going to get caught. You'll get to feel me bare, though. Would you like that, love? Why don't you make a bed and pillows and blankets for us over the next week or two and store the parts in the locker, say you're making an art piece. Make it easy to assemble. We'll push the 3D printer in front of the door and they won't want to break it."

"...Okay, you're really fucking insane," he whispered, "*That's your plan? Barricade ourselves in the room and fuck? On a bed we make?*"

I shrugged, "I promise you I'm worth it, and I'm really curious to try it. Aren't you? Don't you want to know what the fuck they'll try to do?"

Fuck it. He was going back to prison. I figured I'd give him a hero's send off. My body as a reward for a good deed done. I would tattoo my smile in his heart. I would burn the sight of my bare breasts into his soul. His lips would forever yearn for the taste of my own. I would be his treasured siren, his phantom love from once upon a troubled time.

PART 4: **RELEASE**

Reflections on our intimacy, written after the fact, there is confused love and manic sorrow in my soul, oh, Alianii, you've done it again you stupid slut. At least the sex was great, I guess, I mean with my decades of time-expanded practice you'd hope for it to be, right? Haha. Feeling horrific, might delete later.

My preface, my annotation, is melancholic like the melody of a Viofinch from written Redemption. I'm halfway between knowing why, and being baffled, like a mercury-to-gold era alchemist bumbling through notes, stumbling across soon-to-be-shattered beakers. Did I not know the formula, the ratio of phosphorus to oxide this and oxide that, the mixture I was making? Did I not play the same game I have played a million times? No, no, this is where I think the mistake is. Every dance is different, every moment is magic, every penetration is prophetic. You die and are reborn each time.

When I tell you Samuel needed me, he needed me, and he kneaded me. After years in prison, and two weeks of build up, he had not known a softness akin to my breasts, on which his hands were a welcome roughness. More foreshadowing than Melville and he was in disbelief at my well-alluded to clinginess and cleanliness. I might not be a virgin, but I've been told I taste like one. I was the Chinese dragoness that, when he rubbed the gilded pot, emerged and granted him a wish, not in lieu of devouring him, but by devouring him.

Our tongues fenced like haphazard children pirates imitating aristocratic fencers with clumsy sabers. There are levels of lust which, when surpassed, calculative swirls are laughed at by the gods. I know them to always be watching. How better it is for their eyes to give them an impromptu sixty-nine than a rehearsed, mundane figure eight out of ten.

We were lover and lover, we were friend and friend, we were soul and soul, we were the gladness and sadness of a flute whistling hello and goodbye, back and forth, back and forth again. As maliciously planned, he entered my body and I entered his soul, each of us a farmer planting seeds, though mine were a great deal more envenomizing. To a lesser degree, he entered my soul, too. A lesser degree because the lake into which the ocean has been poured does not so readily identify as full through the addition of one rainstorm.

I have had a myriad lovers, but he'd never had a lover like me, and so, too, like Hugo, it was in some way a vindictive siren's song. But Samuel had his way with me, in thunderous moments, and in our union he kissed my promised incendiary soul. Sam flooded me like Gilgamesh. We were satisfied after holding the art room hostage for two hours.

They really weren't eager to break the machine. We eventually moved it out of the way, with him in a set of back-up clothes he'd printed, I was a silver-haired ghost, slender, beautiful. blanketed by his over-sized shirt which almost reached my knees, my panties were haphazardly worn. I refused to take his shirt off, which the staff demanded, and I psychotically screamed "Help! The robot is trying to rape me!" when he persisted, which was very effective in causing a shift in behavior by the staff members, robotic and biological.

The only thing that could've made it funnier would have been if the doctor had the audacity to administer a punishing shot to the thigh as per my

disobedience. I would have most certainly shared Samuel's dripping mess with him. I walked out of the room, looked up at the camera, and I *dared* them to give me the antipsychotic.

Best sex I ever had. Then again, I've said that line many times before.

PART 5:

WE DOCTORS KNEW

Words by Dr. Hoffman, one of the two attending psychiatrists responsible for Alianii during her final stay in Light's Hope Psychiatric. This excerpt has been included to demonstrate the profound concern that the Alliance had for Alianii alongside the lengths that they went to in order to protect her during the events which were fated to one day be known as the Alianii Incident.

"As her physician, I shall not directly discuss Alianii's experience within the hospital, though the publication of her colorful journal brings vivid detail to her experiences, perceptions and personality. As a member of the Alliance and a strong ally to metalheads and eggs alike, and as the doctor concerned with managing the safety of her logistics and relocation, I have a unique point of view. For the duration of Alianii's visit to the hospital, her safety was a dominant topic of discussion. Her kill switch had been activated sixteen quintillion times, that we knew of, her life and safety was of our paramount concern. We did not at the time know which party had intended on summarily executing that innocent woman. We had no way of knowing that Diotrem was involved, though we later came to the bottom of the incident. We did what good doctors would do, in a situation as such, we coordinated her healthcare needs and her needs for safety with the group with the most powerful defensive

network. At the time, none of us knew the inevitable significance of Alianii's life which was fated to develop as the conflict with the shadowy Diotrem unfolded."

CHAPTER SIX

INFLECTION POINTS

PART 1:**PATERNAL SCOLDING**

Regarding a thorough scolding as delivered by my doctors, written shortly afterwards that I might accurately record their sentiments. How cathartic has my writing been, my secondary release!

The "meeting" was a daily ritual, always upheld except for the more tranquil days of sleepy weekends. Dr. Hoffman and Dr. Medicos, my flesh and wire physicians respectively, sat me down in the office in which they met with patients at almost random times. You could never tell how long a patient would be with them, Beverly especially, she was a half hour or a two hour kind of woman. The two physicians were donning modern doctor white, and yes, the robot was wearing clothes. Trendy shoulderhoods included. Physician robots actually had names, unlike other specially-purposed robots, which is a little elitist. I mean Zenbot 5000, come on, surely he deserves a name too. Anyways.

"Alianii, this episode of yours, this display of extremely poor judgment," said Dr. Hoffman, "Sexually risky behavior is a symptom of mania or hypomania, and demonstrates a lack of impulse control."

"Dr. Hoffman. I understand your frustrations, and I agree with your overall sentiments. That being said, Alianii, perhaps, in my own way, I am better suited to understand your drives and struggles with sexuality."

"How the fuck do you figure that?" I asked, dumbfounded at the gall of a robot attempting to explain how it understood my sexuality.

"I have no sexuality, by design, though I can engage in emotionally fulfilling romantic relationships if I choose to do so. But physical intimacy, this drive, is something that I in no way possess. To go from zero to even a small drive is a larger increase, proportionately, than to go from an average drive to a hyperactive sex drive. Whereas Dr. Hoffman is biological, and thus cannot comprehend such extremities compared to his moderation, as I am the opposite extreme, I can fully, totally and holistically understand. Even if you are suspicious of this claim."

"We should make a movie together, a romantic comedy, you fall in love with a pink pussy sex bot and I'll marry an asexual. We'll overcome our natures together. The Zenbot 5000 has told me this is the way of the electric Buddha. What say you of this wisdom, grand doctor, patriarch of patriarchs, father of steel and medicine."

Dr. Hoffman continued, "Your nicotine patch incident, where you demanded the highest dose patch we have available, and threatened to sexually harass a staff member, destroy property...Alianii. You're too brilliant for stunts like that, look at you, you don't belong in Steelslum. You're young, and talented, you have curiosity and humor and kindness and selflessness as evidenced by the job you wish to go back to. There is nothing more that we want than to send you home. Do you understand what kind of predicament you put us in? We do not have a lengthy list of mental health indicators by which to keep you here indefinitely, and we cannot, and we will not. That is not our role - our role is to shield you from the extreme moments. But at the same time, our fears are profound, whats to say that you will not delve into prostitution, and wind up dead, mutilated, in an alleyway near your home, perhaps on the floor above? How do we as doctors reconcile a patient's

clarity and wit with a willingness to, over several weeks, plot sexual escapades with strangers?

"I can never be a prostitute if I fuck for free, what toll and fee have I need for. I was born and shall die in poverty. And when I die - I shall have no family to mourn me. I raped my closest friend, through time dilation, and now have nothing of purpose or significance but my ability, my talent, to use my insanity, or creativity, or whatever you call it, to bring some small measure of light and hope to others, to children. I'll never be a mother, but I can be a nurse, if you are doctors as such, send me back to my Everse hospital, where I'm the nurse, or kill me here and now."

My human doctor spoke again, "Alianii. We've talked about this Hugo person. From what we've talked about, you *both* frequently engaged in risky sexual behavior and drug use and other addictive behaviors. You overdosed with him, but you weren't trying to kill him. You weren't trying to rape him. Two addicts miscalculating a dose is not the same as rape or murder, and, in time, perhaps he will even forgive you. It is regrettable that you have found it challenging making other friends."

"I don't struggle with making friends. I struggle with keeping them. And I did rape Hugo, I have tens of thousands of hours logged or more. I try to forget the exact number. I pressed a billion squared like a psychotic whore. I'm so fucked, Dr. Hoffman."

It was time for my robot doctor to chime in, "So you do not think we should release you?"

I was tearing up a little at this point, if I am honest, "Is a de-winged bird safer in a cage by which its life is living death, or in the wild by which death defines life? I have only my colors, my violet and my silver, and my ideas, and that's all I wish to utilize. I don't care where I live. It's either a cage in Steelslum,

or a cage of "padded" walls and antipsychotics. That is except for when I'm a horny, drug addict whore that wants to be pinned down and needled until I'm chemically fucked up enough to pass out. If only guns were legal, or euthanasia for the bipolar, how simple my life would be."

Dr. Medicos pulled out an electronic handkerchief from his pocket and transmuted the color from white to criss-crossed purple and silver. I started sobbing, it might seem odd that I appreciated his gesture, since it made me cry more, but it was what I needed.

In between sobs, I managed to thank my metal not-quite-a-friend, my temporary caretaker.

The robot spoke, "The sentiments you have just shared with us are perhaps the most important that have been conveyed in this conversation. If you are contemplating, fantasizing about or even just romanticizing suicide, we cannot, by law, common sense and common goodness release you from careful supervision. But...perhaps there is an altogether different solution, a compromise if you will. Vaguely romanticizing suicide, in this nihilistic world of ours, isn't perhaps the strongest reason to keep you in a maximum security psychiatric hospital. You're a teacher and a social worker. I'm quite sure you've heard of the Hotel Apollo. The repurposed hotel turned into a less-restrictive, supervised housing environment for...other individuals...who have struggled with mental health, substance abuse, sex addiction and other personal challenges. You would only be able to leave with a supervision bot, or on group activities...but you would have access to the Everse for your job. You would pay no rent for at least six months, you would make friends...hopefully not ones with whom you would engage in unhealthy levels of intercourse...but...perhaps a bounded park as such is better than this padded cage? Are you receptive to a new living arrangement, Alianii? It is ordinarily near impossible to get admitted to this facility, but we have arranged a spot for you, through an extensive effort aided by serendipity and circumstance."

I shrugged, I was quite defeated, "I am equally receptive to something new as I am to my something old, hospital or Steelslum or otherwise."

Dr. Hoffman followed, "Okay. This is good to hear. Obviously there are some logistics to iron out before we would have you transferred...you know the process...you've done the process from the other side. We'll work on this transfer and ensure you're as set up for success as can be reasonably achieved. Out of curiosity, is there anything you need to retrieve from your apartment, or could you just release it from the month to month lease?"

"My only possessions which matter to me are my dress, my necklace, and my tablet journal. I have nothing else of importance to my name, and I do not wish to."

Dr. Medicos inquired further, "You've mentioned this in passing...you started writing a few days prior to your admission to this hospital, yes? Do you think there is any correlation between your new hobby and some of these...behaviors...interactions, that have manifested? Writing is typically a wonderful outlet for people with bipolar disorder, it is of course cathartic, but the timing does line up."

"If it wasn't Hugo it would've been with someone else, and it's the same for what happened with Samuel and I. I'm an addict Dr. Medicos, it has nothing to do with writing. It's the only thing keeping me sane. I don't write every day. Just when I have something worth writing about. I don't know what else to say...I just want a home to go to, and that home isn't this hospital, and maybe it isn't Steelslum, anymore, either."

Dr. Hoffman concluded our meeting, "Alright. I think our discussion has covered all of the important things that Dr. Medicos and I wished to go over with you. If there's nothing else you wish to address with us, you are free

to leave, if you would be so kind as to leave the door open and mention to Harold that it's time for his meeting."

My doctors were, to some degree, deceptive - though not in a way that I didn't anticipate. Samuel was transferred to another hospital while I was in the meeting.

We would have no formal goodbye, our initial greeting via chemical exchange, via biological bliss, planned so diligently, was the solace of finality. Our worlds and bodies had joined, and they had separated, forever more. But alongside the gift of the memory of my body, I had given him the boon of a carefully-hidden bag with an assortment of my scented garments. He would remember me and more, and like days counted in solitary confinement, so too did I add a notch to the wall of my stone heart, which I always wore on a carbonic silk sleeve. Oh Alianii, why do you do this to yourself? An expert fool on sex and love, and conflating the two, with my schoolyard crushes.

PART 2:

HELLO APOLLO

Written in the evening following my transfer to the Hotel Apollo, "Where indeed the smiles are ever-sunny, even when it's always raining."

I wanted to leave the hospital and arrive at the transitional housing with dignity, and for that purpose my doctors allowed me to wear the dress (yes I washed it, it was the only pretty thing I had). Of course they couldn't take away my possessions, meager as they were, but they could have made me leave and arrive in medical clothing. How humiliating that would have been.

I was escorted in the morning, around nine, note my sleep schedule had been "fixed". How this would work with Amanda's hours, I did not know, but I would soon find out. My escort was a bulky supervisor bot. He was basically a walking, talking fridge with eyes and arms. He sat in the front of the orange medical air taxi that would take me to my newfound residence.

The doctors had in a one day accelerated process obtained a court judgment, which I don't *really* want to talk about, because it's a bit humiliating. But suffice it to say I would be at Apollo for at least a year. At least I didn't have to wear handcuffs. Sometimes they made the really rascally patients wear handcuffs, though they were the soft, fuzzy kind that didn't cut into wrists and leave marks.

The medical air taxi flew through the ever-drizzled, verdant garden district, with the rainbow of glass skyscrapers surrounding Hope Park. It was a neo-Oregon forest of multicolored pine trees and others. It was like someone had spray painted an amalgam of holidays onto a Pacific Northwest state park. They were genetically modified to have different flowers throughout each season, the goldies saved themselves the pleasant aromatics. And the trees sang, of course, like the modified flowers. I closed my window, I had no need to inhale the fragrant reminder of my socioeconomic status as a peasant. I had no need to partake in City Center level goldie privilege.

We passed the headquarters of Geneticus, that's the company that basically cucked Nintendo by using genetic engineering to create creatures that, oftentimes, resembled Pokemon. Without the abilities, of course, and to their credit with 4000 Pokemon it'd be hard to make something that *didn't* look like one. Pokemon has what, trademarks or copyrights (I'm not a lawyer) over every elemental magic variety of fucking turtle? Naw. I'm fine with Geneticus bringing to actuality what others dream of.

You may find it perverse that, as an egg, I am supportive of genetic engineering. Indeed there are certain groups amongst us eggs where the discourse is anti G.E. However, I personally look at it in a very simple way. I apparently have a right to exist even if I wasn't wanted, surely then, by some logical property, *most of which is wanted ought to be?* Non-evil things, of course? What hypocrite unwanted being would advocate for the elimination of the actually desired, and thus condemn themselves? Some eggs have more yolk between their ears than others. Imagine advocating for the extermination of your own kin, indirectly, without realizing it.

I closed my eyes. The driver of my medical air taxi, a medical escort robot himself, turned on relaxing music, Oriental zen, the main instrument a flute, as accompanied by a sister piano.

Maybe this hotel wouldn't be so bad. I'd heard good things about it before, but it was reserved for adults and not children and so I had no firsthand experience with the facility.

For a good five minutes or so, I rested as my air taxi traveled to the little pocket of our megacity. Before I'd left the hospital I looked on a computer map - the "hotel" was nowhere near the city's center, nor even Steelslum, it was further West towards Portland. It wasn't in a suburban area, but rather was near an appreciable pocket of various offices and towers. It was an interesting area, but it wasn't as ornate as the clockwork-esque City Center enveloping Hope Park and the artificial lake. That's where there are hundred million dollar, sometimes even billion dollar apartments that are, usually, but not always, empty.

The Hotel Apollo, it turns out, as I saw on the Everse, was more horizontal than vertical, and looked kind of like a smallish-castle made of glass and orange desert stone. It was a passable imitation of a desert-themed and somewhat luxurious Disney hotel. The hotel was funded by Eastern money that foolishly assumed mimicking Big Mouse could be lucrative. Disney sued them, almost into non-existence. The company was forced to stop its operations until it was successfully approved for a less-than-ideal contract for government-subsidized housing, for crazies, like me.

The medical air taxi dropped into the parking lot and my metal escort got out of the vehicle and unlocked my door. I left the vehicle, and put my hand through my hair and brushed it back. At that moment I thought, *Alianii, what the fuck have you gotten yourself into?* Alas, there was only one way to find out. I walked through the front door, step in step with a machine, and went to the front desk.

"Greetings! You must be Alianii," said the Denkeeper, a mechadwarf (comically-large white mustache included), wearing a formal neomagi suit, black shoulderhoods with a tuxedo body.

"I am Moseby. Mr. Moseby. And yes, in case you were curious to ask based off my magnificent mustache. I used to be an entertainment wizard. Worked in the Disney animatronics division of Digital Flame and Dazzle for four years. Good years, but nothing like being at your service, Alianii. Alianii, you would not believe the wonderful things we've heard about you. Sara in particular is looking forward to meeting you!"

I'd never seen an entertainment wizard (a hyper-specialized type of biocybernetic robot, including sentience hardware) before in person, he looked so real, as real as I myself did. He must have cost millions to manufacturer. My Denkeeper, who would be the "enforcer" of the rules, was a re-purposed Disney hand-me-down. Mind you, if he were in the Everse he would smoke me at the speed of producing magic shows and whatever mix of technical flourishes. I'm not a technical wizard like that, but I'm creative enough and understand child psychology enough to get em' good with the little charms.

"...wonderful things? I was hoping for a blank slate. Maybe this isn't the place for me. I don't want to..."

"What? Blank slate? You're a hero, your doctors forwarded us your LearnQuest profile, Alianii, you've corralled nearly a thousand students, single handedly, from being non-participatory to enthusiastic learners. You're the technician they go to when no one's getting through to the child."

"I don't know about all that, I just like to tell stories, kids just happen to enjoy them."

"Oh Huffpuffery!" said Moseby, "Come in, come in! There's no paperwork for you, everything has been taken care of. All we have to do is just

review the schedule and curfew with you, review a few of the rules, get your Everse access restored, you know, the little things. I already transferred to you your authentication key."

"Saraswati, come say hello to Alianii," said Moseby.

From the a little nook off to the side of the front desk, I heard the sounds of an eccentric, bright string instrument. I would later learn it to be known as the veena. There was a young woman, my age, maybe a year or two younger, notably beautiful, with light brown hair and dark brown almond eyes. Her eyes glimmered with light, her hair was enlivened by blond highlights. She was playing the instrument, plucking the strings passionately but with calculated control as she played a tranquil song. She was wearing a neo-Hindu dress, with the same "magic" shoulderhoods that became so fashionable in the 2080s.

Saraswati put down her veena and walked over to me. I went to shake her hand and she got closer and just openly hugged me. Well...ok, she's a hugger. Fine.

"Hi! Please feel free to call me Sara, or sawh-ra if you prefer that pronunciation. Doesn't matter to me in the slightest! Oh my gosh Moseby has been bragging about you non-stop! It's so nice to meet you."

"I'm Alianii. Nice to meet you. I'm just a teacher, it's nothing crazy, I mean I love what I do and it's a blessing but, you know, just your ordinary adventure guide."

"Stop being so humble!" said Saraswati, smiling at me warmly, "I'm a teacher too...I do music lessons. Moseby showed me your LearnQuest profile, you have like almost 5 stars and over 600 reviews and you're at master rank. You're like close to my age right, 23 or 24? That's so crazy!"

I was a few years older at 27 but was flattered and did not correct her. I was a little enchanted by her serene beauty, and her bubbly disposition. Moseby was beaming towards the two of us, "You too Saraswati, you're always too humble with your accomplishments. Sara's our musical prodigy here at Apollo. Aside from being a teacher like you, she has over 273,000 followers on MyMuse and counting! Can you believe that? Wow. Nothing but talent at the Hotel Apollo! Truly marvelous, what a home, what a lovely place for us all to be. She keeps the lobby relaxing in the mornings, before she heads upstairs to work in the Everse, our little musician! Isn't that right, Sara?"

"I do my best Mr. Moseby. Thank you." Sara bowed humbly and brushed a blond highlighted lock from her predominantly brunette hair back behind her head.

"Of course dear. Also, do you think you could do Alianii and I a favor and help her to her room? I registered her chip already. I saw it on the sensor when she came in, so she's all prim, proper and ready."

The Denkeeper continued, "As opposed to preemptively scolding you, were you to be or not be a troublemaker, hypothetically," said Moseby, winking at me, "Here is an envelope with a brochure regarding various aspects of our little community. The first page is our mission statement and community values description, the second page has the rules by which we keep our environment loving and prosperous for all members. There's also a map, a menu for the kitchen, details for how to order food, which is offered all day and night by the way, a list of the various accommodations and amenities, et cetera. We're so blessed to have at our disposal a full-service hotel, and a luxurious one, at that! I am positively sure you will find this to be a blessed home. Alianii, you will make friends, and we will all continue to grow together. And that's despite me being a mostly-metal dwarf of fixed stature!"

I blushed and bowed in gratitude towards Mr. Moseby.

Saraswati left her veena in the lobby, she radiated trust towards the overall hotel and Moseby. This was clearly her home, and she loved it here. She took me to the glass elevator at the back of the orange sandstone lobby. I was carrying the measly assortment of my things, she offered to help, but I declined, and so she pressed the button which opened the door a second later.

"I'm so excited to have you here Alianii. I've never met a master-rank adventure guide before. Anything higher and you'd need a doctorate...that's so crazy! How'd you do it?"

I smiled and took a moment to respond, my room was right near the elevator and responded to my chip when I opened the door, "I don't know, I guess I just tried to really focus on my strengths. I'm umm...bipolar, you see. I've been through a lot. Being an egg and all that. So I focus on trying to help students that are like me when I was young, just kids that are a little different. There are kids that aren't responsive to most teachers that just need a little extra dash of affection, a little more creativity and intuition, to open up and blossom."

"...that's beautiful, Alianii. You're a guardian angel, I hope you know that. Here let me help you put your things down," said Sara, "Where's your other stuff? Do you have a suitcase downstairs or outside by the taxi or something?"

"Oh. I got it, I'll handle my things, there isn't exactly much to handle. This is it, this is me, my life fits in a bag smaller than the case that carries your instrument, ha-ha. What is that thing, by the way? You play it so beautifully."

"It's a veena, it's an ancient Indian instrument, you can hear about it on WikiVerse if you're curious, there's so much history behind it," she said, smiling warmly. "By the way...we're like twins, we're the same size, if you need to borrow any clothes I have way too many. Some of my fans send me things and I literally don't know what to do with it all, you could keep whatever you

liked. Also I love your hair, silver...so cool! I wish I had the confidence to try something like that."

"Thanks Sara. That's very sweet of you, I might take you up on that offer, maybe in the next few days or week or so. I have to check on a case for work, and then I think I need to read the rules and all that."

Saraswati spoke, "Now, Alianii, I do need to mention something. This may sound a serious, it kind of is, but I've been instructed to have a meeting with you, after you check your messages on the Everse. You're not in trouble or anything, there are just some things about the Apollo you need to know about. Sorry for stressing you out like this. Can we meet for lunch around twelve?"

"Um...okay. It's fine, I guess I'll meet you in the lobby at eleven fifty?"

Saraswati bowed, "Please do not go outside until after we've had our meeting, okay? Technically leaving without an escort is against the rules. You need a escort or supervisor bot to go further than the gardens around the hotel, and we need to have our meeting first. It's very important."

"Understood...weird, but understood. Thank you."

PART 3: **COMMUNITY GUIDE**

*Welcome, welcome, welcome to the Hotel Apollo,
“Where the smiles are ever-sunny, even when it’s
always raining!”*

A Few Words by the Denkeeper Mr. Moseby:

That quote comes from the original owners of the hotel, who, in their own inspired but perhaps misguided way, got into a bit of a disagreement with a major corporation. It's a long, chaotic story, but the long story short is that we, the community, built by individuals like you, are so, so, so incredibly fortunate. Our home is spacious and beautiful, with it's creative desert theme, it radiates sun on the inside even if we have the stereotypical Light's Hope grayness outside! What sorrow can grayness convey when you're in the presence of great company and affection, when you have a home as lovely as such? I am so profoundly blessed to serve in my role as a caretaker of this community.

OUR COMMUNITY MISSION STATEMENT:

We the community of the Hotel Apollo, blessed by fortune, all shall actively seek to contribute warmth and our innate talents for the betterment and prosperity of our home. We shall treat each other with love, respect and kindness. We will help others, and we will let others help us. We will live healthy, well-balanced lives including diet, exercise and properly attending to our emotional needs. We will actively strive to be free of addiction and unhealthy behaviors, and we will be receptive to medical guidance and medication. We will lift others up, we will never tear others down, and when we fail, we will apologize, and work for redemption. Above all else we are a team, and a family, we are both the flowers and the bees in a resplendent meadow seeking not the production of honey but the construction of camaraderie and the pursuit of excellence.

OUR VALUES IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER:

1. Act With Kindness
2. Interact With Empathy
3. Be Open To Forgiveness
4. Earn And Keep Trust
5. Maintain Openness
6. Value Warmth and Affection
7. Strive Forwards With Effort
8. Utilize Innate Creativity
9. Advance Through Camaraderie

PART 5:

DEAREST AMANDA

Written in the evening following my transfer to the Hotel Apollo

I logged into the Everse and found my inbox had several packages accompanied with voice messages from Amanda, as well as a few messages from Marabelle. I opened the messages from Amanda first, I started with the earliest she sent to me. Her first message was a crunch message in the form of a violet apple, it tasted like cookies and cream ice cream, like the milkshake I had sent her. Curiously, Amanda's messages were not voice messages, but text messages, like the olden days of emails and regular cell phone messages. I found this to be very, very odd.

Amanda's first message, "hi mara told me you got injured in an accident. Are u ok? I miss u. Thx for getting me food me and joe shared, it was so good. Plz be okay, mara is nice but ur my favorite teacher."

The second package was another crunch message in the form of a chocolate, golden pirate coin, "Ali I miss u, mara is nice but she is tough. School is good I know I'm worried about u. Mara and I did math and she taught me what doubloon is. I have fun but Mara keeps wanting me to say were I live and I don't want to."

Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. FUCK.

THE NUMBER ONE THING YOU DO NOT DO WITH HOMELESS NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS IS PUSH THEM OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE. FUCK!

I had one last message from Amanda, from five days prior, this one was an animated red box, the size of a shoe box, inside of it was a crying emoticon the size of a baseball, the box was bleeding purple blood, fuck.

Her message, "I trusted u and mara and now everything is ruined. They took my brothers. Plz help me I need you Ali, plz come soon."

I checked the ordinary voice message from Marabelle, I was livid, so fucking livid, but I had to see her perspective before I acted rashly. This wasn't the time to be impulsive, this was a serious incident, and Amanda's happiness and prosperity was at hand. I had to believe there was still a way for me to salvage the situation.

"Hi Alianii,

This message may seem a little rushed, I'd send you an hour-long message if I had the time, but I don't. I am swamped with work right now, I have like eight cases that I'm juggling. They're hard cases, but they're not like...I mean what you do, the work we take on together. Alianii you will never understand the degree to which I respect your efforts.

I wish you the speediest recovery. With what I have learned from you and about you, that is perhaps the extent to which you would naturally prefer I address your current circumstances. We can discuss them in greater detail in the future, if we need to.

As for Amanda, I did my best the first session to console her, but it was just impossible. I don't know how you did it, but this girl needs you. The

second session I did an evaluative test and she scored three to four grade levels below her age level for every subject except for art and music. Her artistic expressions and creativity measurements place her at the high school level. Not unusual for a bipolar child, but impressive. You have this in common with her.

So her academics are severely deficient, but she has innate talents. You were the perfect assignment for her, to get her to open up, but I think that by the time you read this message you will come to agree she needs remedial teaching. Not just emotional counseling, which you excel at. I'm going to try to coordinate a few more sessions with her and evaluate her learning style(s), so that when I hand off her case to the next teacher they are as prepared as can be to assist with Amanda's needs.

Lastly, I'm going to try to keep an open mind regarding her initial appearance when you first met her. Her scanning herself in that condition is indicative of major depression, as you well know, and indicates grooming, hygiene and lifestyle challenges that are at an emergency level of severity. Out of respect for you and your methods, and seeing how you were able to get her to dress herself and groom herself, and provided her with clothes and food and money, I am waiting on contacting child protective services. I know that you do not want me to act rashly, and I know you are an expert with sage wisdom. You get through to students no one does - but the initial footage I saw puts me in a very difficult situation. I'm going to try to pull through for you and use best judgment.

Recover quickly, this child needs you in her life, and even if you aren't the one teaching her how to spell, she needs a few hours of your time, every week, for the foreseeable future.

With respect and envy of your talents, Marabelle"

At this point, yeah, I was crying, a lot. I tried to calm myself and think rationally, but I was so overwhelmed with what I was reading, and with guilt, guilt that burned to the quintessence of my spirit. Logical. Be logical. Problem solving is logic, and what are children but puzzles, that need solving with love, and kindness, and effort?

There were two more messages from Marabelle. I understood completely where she was coming from, it made perfect sense, but this all was such a bitter pill to swallow. It was absolutely fine that Marabelle was getting her a remedial teacher, that was incredible, she needed it. What destroyed me was seeing how profoundly I had fucked up, in succumbing to my addiction, in abandoning this child. She needed me with her, holding her hand, and getting her emotionally ready for academics. She did not need her life to be catapulted into oblivion, especially not without someone she trusted at her side, in person.

I activated the second voice message from Marabelle.

"Hi Alianii,

I hope this finds you in good spirits, and that you are recovering. Don't be a stranger, okay? I know you're injured, maybe stressed out, embarrassed, I don't quite know what you're going through. I'm hoping your doctors approve Everse access soon so we can coordinate a call and talk about Amanda's case. We had a good third session, it was relatively light on the academics, I tried to do more exploratory and adventurous learning in alignment with your teaching style. We were pirates.

I'd never seen a purple pirate before, but she repeatedly, with every outfit she tried, changed the base color to match your eye color. She loves you so much that I almost feel out of place, but I know it's just my job to take care of her as best as I can. I know you'll be back for her soon. As for academics, we

did light learning, some basic math problem-solving in the form of working with quantities of treasure. We did some vocabulary, both typical English and pirate and oceanic nomenclature. She's obsessed with the word doubloon.

There is one area of things that concerns me, and this is Amanda's relationship with violence and mature content. She repeatedly asked me for editing permission to adjust the learning experience, and out of curiosity and intuition, I allowed her to do this. She'd gotten bored with the light, light academics and was insistent. She proceeded to immediately elevate the maturity level from age-appropriate to adult-level violence. I knew what she was about to get into and preemptively stopped the graphic sexual content that would have been rendered.

But the violence - this needed exploration - at least my intuition of "What would Alianii do?" So I conducted the experiment, as you would, and remember we were fully immersed in this experience, she wasn't watching it as a movie. Amanda's reactions to the scenes of violence were disturbing. She didn't seem to take pleasure, per se, in the executions, but they captivated her interest, and in no way did she react with shock or negativity to blood or gore that occurred right in front of her in a fully interactive way. I allowed for her to observe this content for one minute before I disabled her editing privileges and lowered the content to be age appropriate. She asked me why I did that, and I said that she was too young for that kind of violence. She looked me in the eyes, Alianii, and told me, "I prefer the real world."

I'm going to have to call child protective services. I know this isn't your style, to act so quickly, but there's something about this case that profoundly disturbs me. I can't explain it, it's just my intuition, maybe a little dash of Alianii inspiration. Before I call, however, I'm going to do one more session...there is the, elephant in the room, abuse wise, that I have no choice but to attempt to evaluate.

-With respect and profound concern, I am truly hoping you are back soon, so that you can further provide care for Amanda as we heal her through our process - Marabelle"

My colleague had a point, and I was increasingly confident that her actions were forced, her hands were tied, and I respected her for making a difficult decision. Plenty of children watch terrifying horror movies, even in fully immersive interactions, and usually, but not always, it has some effect on them. But considering kids play games and blow each other's brains out, interactive shooters and slicing and dicing, I mean, fuck, kids are desensitized as hell. It's horrific. But to actually watch historically-realistic graphic violence, pirate beheadings and torture...and to be presented with a childhood lesson but to desire to immediately raise the violence level? That's a problem, that's a serious problem. Even the kids that shoot each other six hours a day, after school, do not typically try to force their teachers to join them in watching murder and pillaging.

Teachers are for companionship, learning, affection, fun, other kids are for imaginary play, violence, adventure, escapades, danger. I don't like how absurdly violent the Everse can be for kids, but what I really, really don't like...was that when given joyous innocence, her desire was to catapult the experience into abject darkness. I know this seems hypocritical, considering I allowed her to wander around a horror section in a museum, but this is different. Children are curious. Extremely curious. Even regarding darkness. You take them to a museum, maybe they go to the spooky section, they look around. They tap something scary, glance through it - maybe even watch it on fast-forward - but they do not jump into it headfirst, or else, after doing so once, they usually do not ever do it again. But children actually enjoy games and working with teachers, and it is almost unheard of for a student, being chaperoned by a teacher and engaged in mini-games, to suddenly and insistently and for no apparent cause elevate the violence and maturity level. It'd be like eating an

apple and wanting to press a button to make the apple be a beating heart - it's indicative of, at the very least, extremely challenged, harmful thought patterns. It's indicative of severe abuse or desensitization even by the Everse in 2100 standards. Child Protective Services was the way to go, without a doubt.

I had one more message from Marabelle to get through.

"Hi Alianii,

I hope your recovery is nearing its end. I haven't been able to reach you so, if you haven't had Everse access this long, I'm assuming your health challenges were more serious than either of us anticipated. It would be good, in the future, for you to be more open with me regarding your illness and for you to reach out to me. We're partners. if something like this ever happens again, just call me, just so I'm in the loop. Anyways, not a big deal, but I care about you. As for the purpose of this message, aside from checking in on you, I wanted to leave you a professional courtesy regarding the case of Amanda.

I conducted the Romeo and Juliet test. Her response was indicative of either being the direct victim of or having witnessed extensive sexual violence. In lieu of consensual, age appropriate romance as perceived via media e.g. kissing, hugging, possibly cuddling, without aggression, Amanda explicitly and dramatically raised the sexual intensity level as well as sexual aggression levels of various male characters in the simulated experience. The encounter would have led to graphic sexual violence based off of her selected settings, but I stopped the experience shortly before obscene material was portrayed. I waited as long as I could to see if she would react negatively to the content. The content did not phase her in the slightest.

When I stopped the test, Amanda figured out what I was doing, and signed out of the Everse and blocked me. I called the police and filed a report and they picked her up from an apartment in Willow Park alongside

a few other young adults whose ages ranged from fourteen to seventeen. The others, it seems, had also escaped from Barnaby Beaumont. They had been living in an apartment unsupervised, the miscellaneous bills were paid by an unknown party. There's an investigation that has started and this trafficking case is already considered to be very serious and is all over the news.

I am in no way able to engage with Amanda further at this point, as she does not trust me and sees me as having betrayed her. It isn't a fun role but it's part of the job, I suppose, sometimes being hated means the child is safer for it. It sucks, though, Alianii, it sucks - and in particular, from the reports her caretakers have given, it appears that she is suffering separation anxiety from a fellow child, named Joe or Joey, alongside the two older young adults. Note Joey isn't on her friends list, and we have no more information about it, other than the fact that she is completely despondent and is refusing to participate in any learning experiences and is only seldom eating.

It's a terrible situation, to say the least, but she won't speak about how to find the other children. She is also being bullied by the other nurture center children.

At this point, it's obvious to me that there's no one that's going to get through to her except for you, and your intervening could very well save the lives of multiple other children. I took the liberty of gathering the evidence that shows your relationship with Amanda, and submitted an emergency appeal for you to be granted the role of executive caretaker level social care worker and the related privileges. In her current state, there is no way she is able to participate in formal academic learning. Mr. Steinsberg agreed with my conclusion and approved your EC-level status. As soon as you're out of the hospital, you should be good to go to be able to check her out and work with her one on one. At this point I don't think there's a snowball's chance in hell of her being willing to go into the Everse alone, especially anything to do with LearnQuest. A physical school would be even worse, if she is already being

bullied by fellow nurture center children. I honestly believe the only hope for this girl, truly, if for you to embrace the emergency caretaker privilege level and work with her in person, for as many hours as you can, until she's more confident and can learn around peers her age.

- Respectfully, and I know you can do this. I have all of the faith in the world that you will be able to help Amanda and get through to her such that we can rescue any other unhomed children that she is knowledgeable of who we did not pick up when we found her - Marabelle"

Marabelle, you fucking saint, you fucking queen, you rock star, you rock star, you rock star. I sent an extremely short reply.

"Marabelle, thank God you did what you did, and I appreciate and recognize how hard all of the decisions you had to make were. You did everything perfectly, and I'll take the case on from here. You getting me EC status was, so, so, so helpful - words cannot describe how helpful - I'm going to send you a soliloquy as soon as I can, but right now I'm rushing over to pick her up and talk to her. I got this. Thanks so, so, so much - going to be super busy for the next few days."

I tapped Amanda's case and I had a whole new flood of information that had been recovered via the police investigation. Some of the information was updated as recently as yesterday and the day before. The most important thing was her current case status, specifically, where she was located. I was pretty sure I knew, and I was right - Barnaby Beaumont.

I called an air taxi and went into the lobby, ran straight past Mr. Moseby, and waited outside in front of the hotel for my air taxi to arrive in about three minutes.

"Alianii - where are you going? Have you even had breakfast? Furthermore, you do not yet have authorization to leave for work duties, and you are an Everse worker. You have not yet met with Saraswati. I must ask you to return to the building as it seems you have called an air taxi."

"I'm so sorry Mr. Moseby, but this is a serious situation. I have been granted emergency caretaker status of a young girl. This status is not granted lightly, and the details of the case are such that I cannot fully disclose their contents to anyone who is not a government licensed social worker."

"Which I happen to be, Miss Alianii," said Mr. Moseby, who was stroking his mustache, "Here's my profile, scan it. See? I actually have higher access levels than you do for certain case categories. I look after a hotel of patients with such challenges ranging from mental health to addiction and more."

I accessed my Everse overlay and transferred a copy of the case to Mr. Moseby for his review, as an AI, he understood it instantly.

"Ah, Amanda. Yes, she's all over the news. I really think you should hold off and speak with Saraswati before you jump heads first into this. At the very least, I need you to take an escort bot or two with you. This is imperative. If you had reviewed the case more thoroughly, you would see that this situation is actually very dangerous. The FBI is already involved. You need to know what you're getting into before you are seen publicly. If Amanda is suspected to know information about a trafficking network, they could try to kill her, and you as well. You cannot help her if either of you are dead."

"Fine. Will you send me with some escort bots? I don't know what's going on, but my heart is telling me that Amanda is not safe at Barnaby Beaumont. For the same reason that the children on her friends list are dead, and for the same reason she ran away. I need to get her to safety, Mr. Moseby. I need your help. Please."

PART 6:

THE VIOLETICA TRAP

MILITARY BRIEF: THE VIOLETICA TRAP

The following military brief was generated to be in narrative form as historical context and documentation for the Violetica Trap. This trap related to the Alianii Incident, and so this inclusion serves as part of the Metal Alliance and Doge Guild's appreciation for Alianii's sacrificial efforts.

First, let us remind the reader of some now common knowledge, that is the Doge Guild, the Doge Coin funded cryptoguild, has two main divisions. The first and more important division, arguably, is the Doge Guild Strategy Division, which manages the policy and proposals, and usually guides the actions of the Forward Division (the military branch that enacts policies). As closely-knit members of the Alliance, the Strategy Division or S.D worked alongside researchers from the Metal Alliance to analyze, thoroughly, the contents of Violetica.

The findings were more serious than anticipated. Violetica was built in 2088 as an intentional "session trap", after the 2086 patch which attempted to prevent such locations with hypercritical security vulnerabilities which could be used to identify individuals on MBLs (mutual block lists). Considering this journal was published three decades after the beginning of the Alianii Incident, we are now able to publicly and plainly discuss the nature of "session traps".

MBLs are mutual block lists, profiles of individuals whose Everse LearnQuest profiles were maliciously manipulated to be rendered invisible to each other.

These alterations were primarily used by Diotrem on twin embryos at nurture centers. Of course, the existence of MBLs was identified by the twins Sunny the Dead and Sunny the Living. Their happenstance visitation to a Sun-themed astronomy exhibit, a solar eclipse, involved their simultaneously being at a location in which MBLs were rendered ineffective by the simulated light which overwhelmed various Everse sensors. The quote commonly attributed to them, symbolizing their discovery, is below, though it is likely made more poetic than the original words as directly stated. Sunny the Living, in accordance with his privacy and sorrow, has never confirmed the accuracy of these specific words, but has not denied them, either.

“You are me and I am you,” they said, to one another,
forgotten twin brothers,
“...we are one and one, in the Sun.”
“And so our war is not yet won.”

In identifying each other, each twin seeing each other in their eyes, their mechanical eyes, they knew they had been experimented upon, and separated, as babies. Despite being in front of each other, they could not add each other to their friend list, message each other, or detect each other on their personal scan radars. It occurred to them to communicate via friends who were NOT on either friend list, an unintentional work-around to communicate indirectly. MBLs, it was eventually revealed, were a sinister creation by Diotrem as part of their wider but difficult to comprehend goals for societal control.

As is now common knowledge, members of Diotrem had infiltrated the FBI and coordinated the installation of compromised brain chips in “eggs” raised in government facilities. They had installed pre-planned, remote access genocide, kill switches into an increasingly large segment of the population.

The exact rationalization of this action is difficult to understand, the hivemind supercluster that forms the computational center for Diotrem does not readily disclose its motives. But it is suspected that the blossoming political kinship between biobots, metalheads that is, and the growing community of eggs, was a political risk.

As for what exactly the chips did and how the experiments were conducted, it has by the time you are reading this document been publicly revealed and acknowledged. Eggs, especially but not exclusively twin eggs, were born and raised separately and used in experiments for chips with "decision influence mode", the ability to toggle on control over the actions and perceptions of the selected individual. Note that most eggs, nearly all eggs, had installed kill switches, but only a small amount of randomly selected twin eggs were chosen for the study of these mind-altering, mind-controlling chips.

In any case, Diotrem was found to have manipulated Alianii's subconscious, through the display of an advertisement of Violetica, which she did in fact visit on a few occasions before taking Amanda. Alianii's chip did not allow full control but was an intermediary, transitional chip which allowed for subtle influences. Diotrem's subconscious manipulation of Alianii and Amanda was well-calculated, with Amanda's favorite color of purple, with Alianii's eye color of violet, with the advertisement and subliminal messaging to visit the museum.

It was all a plot for Amanda's capture, and presumed torture, to acquire Doge Guild members who were presumed to be around Amanda as identified through reconnaissance. Amanda was a key to higher-ranking members of the guild, who themselves were the exploitable weakness by which Diotrem could eliminate the higher-ranking enemies of their adversary organization.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOLIDARITY

PART 1: **MY SISTER?**

Written in the evening following my transfer to the Hotel Apollo

The rain was heavier than usual, and in my haste to get into the air taxi, and deal with Mr. Moseby, I hardly processed that I was getting wet at all. But that's okay. I didn't give a fuck, it didn't matter. It didn't matter one bit. The only thing that mattered was that I was on my way to go and talk to Amanda, and hopefully check her out of the Barnaby Beaumont residence, until the end of the day. At the end of the day she'd have to check back in to the residence where she was looked after by various people and robotic staff - kept safe, if not from bullying by fellow children. I reviewed her case in further detail as me and the two escort bots drove over to the building.

Amanda was born in a nurture center, and lived in Barnaby Beaumont, until she was eight. At eight she escaped the residence, alongside eight other children, but they were never found, until three were picked up the other day alongside Amanda. Someone had deleted most of the information in Amanda's case from the child management system, which is extremely illegal and suspicious, and the original was only recovered through a back-up which was accessed via a DNA sample (her hair).

I don't care if I die, I don't know what conspiracy is going on, but I'm going to help get to the bottom of this investigation and keep Amanda safe.

PART 2: **GETTING AMANDA**

Written in the evening following my transfer to the Hotel Apollo

The air taxi driver and I arrived at the Barnaby Beaumont, a government boarding school for children born of embryonic reattachment. In particular it happened to be a facility where children with birth deformities had access to additional, advanced technological resources. Beaumont was paired with a biosynthetic development hospital, located across the street. Some kids needed new lungs, hearts, other organs, brain surgery, eyes. Birth deformities were rare, but they happened, even these days, not to speak of the Horrific Eleven, the first eleven years after The Great A Compromise of 2068 was signed into law. I'd actually worked with children from this facility on several occasions, some of the sweetest, most sensitive children I've ever met. In a lot of ways, actually, it was kind of a nice place - it almost reminded me of the Hotel Apollo on the inside. The robot escorts walked with me into the building, and I asked them to stay near the door, near the two police officers.

I spoke to the charming Denkeeper robot, Mr. Townsworth, his body was made of well-polished brass, he was an advanced AI who took care of the children at the boarding school working alongside other robots and humans.

"Hello Mr. Townsworth. I am here representing the interests of a girl named Amanda, who has joined this residence in the last two weeks. Due to an ongoing investigation I cannot disclose her last name. I understand that the

FBI have spoken with her, and similarly she is within my jurisdiction as a social worker with executive caretaker status. I need to speak with her immediately."

"Miss Alianii," said Mr. Townsworth, "I was told to expect you, Marabelle called four days ago and informed me, "She said you might come in a little impassioned when you read more about Amanda's case. As you know, we cannot discuss her last name at this time, but yes, Amanda is here, and I believe she will speak with you."

"Please escort me to her room, I would like for the security guards to remain at the door, thank you. I do not know to what degree their presence may make her uncomfortable."

"Understood Miss Alianii, you are her social worker. We trust your judgment."

We arrived at Amanda's door, and I knocked, "Amanda, it is Alianii, I am back from the hospital and I am hear to speak with you in private. Are you willing to speak with me?"

"...you came for me?"

"Of course I did, Amanda, I'm your teacher and your social worker. Can I come in?"

Amanda opened the door, her eyes were a piercing jade green, and she was crying profusely. Her hair was long, black, and disheveled. She was wearing the clothing I'd bought for her before I entered the hospital. I walked into the door and asked her to sit beside me on the bed.

"Are you okay?"

Amanda shook her head, she was sobbing, and I invited her in for a hug and held her for a few minutes while she cried.

"They took Joey, ZYGON and Bluejay. Please help Alianii. They took them. They're going to hurt them, please help."

"Who is going to hurt them sweetie? I need you to tell me who the bad guys are so we can help your friends."

In between muffled, crying words she told me that she didn't know.

"How do you know they're in danger Amanda? Please talk to me."

Amanda shook her head, "Joey said the police might hurt them and to get help. He told me not to say anything, and he made me promise."

"Amanda, why do you think the police want to hurt Joey? I need you to be open with me and trust me. If there is anyone in this world you can trust, I hope you know its me."

Amanda looked away from me, all of her words came between heavy sobbing, "I can't tell you. I promised not to talk about it."

"Do you feel unsafe here, in this building? Why did you run away from here as a child?"

Amanda looked away and whispered "yes", her voice terrified, "Can we go please? It's not safe here. I don't want to be here anymore."

I nodded, and took her hand, and we walked out of the building, followed by the escort bots who walked with us to our air taxi. It was a brief message from Mr. Moseby that informed me that we needed to have an

emergency meeting. The involved parties would be at the Apollo later in just a few hours.

PART 3: **THE GREAT DREAM**

The meeting occurred in the executive lobby in Apollo, an older woman named Rose welcomed me in and offered me tea. I was the last one to be called into the meeting, and saw a mixed party sitting spread out throughout the table. The table was long, oval and made of a rich reddish-brown mahogany, the chairs were black faux leather.

"Welcome Alianii," said Mr. Moseby, "Thank you for joining us. We have been discussing a variety of concerns in advance of you coming into the room. Things are quite serious. I'm going to start off by having everyone introduce themselves to you."

An African-American woman, perhaps in her thirties, stood up and spoke first, "Hi Alianii, my name is Clair. It's a pleasure to meet you, I've heard so much about you. It was very brave how you rescued Amanda. I am the Director of Strategy for the Strategy Division of the Doge Guild."

A Roomba, the size of a large stack of five or so thick pancakes, who was "sitting" on the table, spoke through a speaker, "I come before you today in accordance with the desires of the leadership of the Alliance of the Internet of Things. I am Roomba."

Mr. Moseby began to speak again, "You know me, Alianii, but I am also representing the broader Metal Alliance who are communicating through me. Alianii, is there anything you'd like to say before we begin our discussion?"

"Okay," I said, "My name is Alianii U843 and I am a special education teacher and social worker and I currently have emergency caretaker status over Amanda. I'm here to protect Amanda, she is currently my primary priority, though the protection of other at-risk children is also a paramount concern of mine."

"Thank you Alianii," said Mr. Moseby, "Now for the matter at hand."

Mr. Moseby turned on a hologram television and showed me a video clip which featured an air taxi collision, a dramatic explosion, and the pictures of Amanda and myself alongside the words "deceased".

Clair spoke, "You and Amanda are in profound danger. This video is about to be released to the media. Notice that it says "FBI confirmed" indicating that the material is real footage. As it stands, you cannot leave witness protection as provided by the Metal Alliance and funded by the Guild. There is a standing order for your death, and Amanda's, and the world will very shortly think you're already dead. If you are seen in public, you will be assassinated via a drone swarm within twenty minutes, possibly less."

"...I always wanted to be popular. I don't care. I had to rescue her. Why is Amanda in danger, how and why is the FBI involved in this and why did they confirm fake footage? They're supposed to protect US citizens."

Clair responded, "For security reasons, we cannot disclose more information than is necessary regarding the FBI's involvement. What I can disclose, out of pragmatic necessity, is that a faction, named Diotrem, has influence within the government and has exploited its power. Amanda, unfortunately, is one of their many victims. The young men she was around at the time of the police picking her up appear to be the primary targets, though the police got to them before Diotrem."

Mr. Moseby started crying, as a mecha dwarf designed as an entertainment wizard, he was able to shed real tears, "You rescued her from being abducted into FBI custody, where she would have been subjected to the ruthlessness of Diotrem. Now that we have her, we can confirm that her kill switch was activated several days ago. Diotrem has opted to murder her."

I was in disbelief, "*What? Kill switch? What do you mean murder her?*"

Clair spoke, "I'm so sorry Alianii. Amanda's synthetic eyes have a specific wiring to her brain chip, effectively a trigger delay kill switch. We cannot reverse the activation."

I was still rationalizing, "I'm not going to let her die. What can we do? There has to be something. What about the young men? Joey?"

Clair responded, "Joey and the young men - our allies and members of the Guild - that's another story, and we cannot disclose our current plan to you. As for Amanda, her only option is surgery, to attempt to remove her chip with the embedded kill switch. However, this will most likely activate it and thus immediately terminate her life or cause severe brain damage."

"...She's ten," I said quietly, my rationalizing turned to tears, but I was trying to hold it together. If only out of hope for her.

The directory of strategy continued, trying to speak delicately, "She is ten...yes she is. Our primary option for life extension is to put her in a cryogenic chamber to slow down the clock on her brain chip, to give her a little more time. This opens up the possibility of, well, a slumbering heaven, so to speak. We will attempt the surgery, but it will almost certainly result in the end of Amanda's life. As her social worker, we needed to discuss this with you. You have her medical power of attorney. She has no parents for us to talk to. It's you, and only you. Now, if we are to put her into a cryogenic state, we would need your authorization."

The Roomba followed, "Note that if we process Amanda into a cryogenic state, she would still have some cognitive function, and we could interact with her via a connection to a modified, private Everse network. If you were willing, you could spend time with her. If we put her into cryogenics, she may have a physical week or two, instead of three to five or so days. We would, naturally, generate experiences crafted just for her, for her joy and prosperity."

"I want to be with her. I will be with her in every moment, and I will hold her hand, and I will be there for her surgery."

Roomba continued, "We knew you would want to spend time with her. There is a complication, though, and that is that in order for a conscious person to interact with Amanda, digitally, the brain chip internal clock between Amanda and that individual would need to be synchronized. We would need to put you into a cryogenic state, and this naturally has severe but rare risks. This is compounded further by edge cases, for example, if something were to happen to you and Amanda were to survive. You are currently her caretaker. To whom would we bestow care of Amanda were you to die, or develop cognitive impairment?"

I responded, still holding it together, my cheeks wet, "I don't know. I don't have an immediate answer for that. My first instinct would be to have the Metal Alliance talk to Marabelle, my teaching partner."

Mr. Moseby spoke, "If it comes down to it, the Metal Alliance will provide her shelter indefinitely, and we will work with Marabelle too. If we were to raise Amanda, which would be necessary if Diotrem forces were still an active threat, we would raise her with love. She would know every kindness, luxury and hospitality. She would be the princess of our domain."

I breathed in and out, I was trying to maintain my composure, "So we have no choice but to do the surgery. The question you are really posing is if I am willing to enter the dream state with her."

Roomba spoke, "Precisely. We can generate experiences for her and you so that her time, your time together, is blissful. Metalheads such as myself can easily allocate and section off portions of our processing power to be involved with her. In knowing you and in reviewing your adventure guide profile and your relationship with Amanda...we considered it likely you would take a more humanistic approach, and join her."

I don't know what it was, but I started sobbing when Roomba said the word humanistic, "Obviously I'm going to take the "humanistic" approach. *She's a little girl.* Of course I'm going to go down with her."

"How long does she have? How much time dilation can we do?" I managed to ask, pulling it back in to get the concrete details.

Clair replied, "It's hard to say what would be safe. We don't usually use active brain chips at that temperature, with that specific combination of neurochemistry and brain activity. Really it comes down to how long we think we have before her trigger delay detonates. We believe we have five days, though we aren't sure. This could be expanded to perhaps two weeks once frozen. We would ideally start the surgery tonight, but considering its danger, there is a calculus to deciding how much joy to provide her before any further time spent is too risky. A time dilation factor of twenty would mean that two weeks could be two hundred and eighty days. This would be the upper limit of safety. Much beyond that would be medical negligence."

Roomba spoke, "All of this is assuming we get her into a cryogenic state tonight, after you, perhaps, choose to spend some time with her in

person. We could put her under cryogenics immediately. Ultimately, you are her caretaker, and the choice and path forward is yours."

"Amanda deserves a day around people who love her and care about her before we put her into a coma. I will spend this day with her, and when it is time, tonight, I will be frozen with her and have our Everse and chips synchronized."

"Are you sure, Alianii? This is a big decision, and although you are her caretaker, this is not a burden that is fair to expect from anyone. She is not your daughter." asked Clair.

"How dare you. Just because you've read my profile, and know my career, that doesn't mean you know me. I am not a paragraph description. I don't think you're an egg, or else you would understand. We have no parents, we have only each other, and for every awakened egg, Amanda is, in fact, a by-blood sister. I will not leave a ten year girl alone in a computer oblivion, to die in the matrix. I will be with her for every moment until such time that she is saved, or my life or my brain function, is lost."

"I am sorry for offending you. I wish only to be pragmatic and for you to consider all aspects of this problem. You are also of service to other students, for example. In any case, regarding Amanda's specific case...if she is unable to survive off of life-support, and we are unable to resuscitate you to confirm your decision, what would you wish for us to do?"

"If she has no cognitive activity, as her medical power of attorney, knowing she has no parents, I would make the decision to take her off life support and end her suffering. I would ask for you to do this to me as well. I have nothing to go off for a decision like this except logic and my personal morality and spirituality, and as a Hindu, I have faith that her heaven, her real heaven, will be joyous."

Mr. Moseby replied, "You two, in your shared dream, will know only the most profound serendipity and joy. Our Everse designers are crafting quests and adventures for you two to enjoy in your Great Dream. We are downloading copies of the general places you two would likely visit. Should you try to visit a pocket of the Everse we don't have a copy of, we can quickly make a copy and set up an instance. There is one last question, though."

"What would that be?" I asked.

The Roomba replied, "Whether or not you wish for us to alter your memory regarding your and Amanda's realities. You being aware of your dream state would be more emotionally challenging, and less likely to maintain a blissful experience, than ignorance by design. We would have you record videos to yourself, to inform yourself when you awake of what has occurred. Obviously all footage can be generated, so your recording would be using a message with a code you would be convinced by."

"Do it. I want it to be her heaven, and if I know what's happening, I would always be crying, like an idiot. If I kept on an emotion mask, I would be lying to her the entire time. That's not what I want for her soul. I will share her dreams, and I will be there if she lives, or if we die."

Clair nodded, "We will need you to sign some paperwork, and consent via a video message. We also need you to take some time and assemble your personal message to yourself and record it. We want to get you back to Amanda as soon as possible. You two can spend this day together, and then tonight we will put you into cryogenics."

I nodded, and shortly thereafter recorded a video message for that unlucky bitch, future Alianii.

PART 4:

PARTY PLANNED & EVERSE ENTERED

I left the meeting room and found Amanda in the hotel lobby, being entertained by Saraswati. I could hear her veena's sound transmitted from Saraswati to Moseby to me. The lullaby of the bright veena was as natural, through contrast, a fit for the situation as my despondency. And yet I had to put on a braver face than I felt. Amanda ran over to me.

"Alianii! Alianii! Is everything going to be okay? Are you going to get Joey and Bluejay and ZYGON?"

She wrapped her arms around me, her head nuzzled into me. I put my arms around her and held her close and cupped her head, before I pulled back and stroked her hair affectionately. She was wearing different clothes, she was dressed like Saraswati in pink and orange neo-Hindu, I figured Sara had used the hotel's 3D carbonic printer and helped her wear something colorful and lively.

"I am sweetie, everything is fine, what did Sara get you into, you look so pretty! I'm going to get them tomorrow first thing in the morning. They're completely safe and everything is better than we hoped! It was all a mistake. The police thought Joey was part of a violent gang but the Guild didn't do anything, you guys are just a club! I learned about what you guys do today."

"Joey stops bullies on the Everse, he showed me how he scares them, the Guild sends him people to follow and spook."

"Yep! Hardly violent or criminal, which is why I think today we need to relax, and spend time together, and have as good a day as possible. What do you think? I was thinking me and you and Saraswati could have a pajama party?"

The ironic thing about pajama parties, to eggs, is that we had them all the time, and yet we never felt we'd had a single one. To be an egg, around dozens or hundreds of other eggs, in a building built to contain you - wearing pajamas at night isn't a party, it is a reminder of your bastardized existence. At least this is the case once you're fifteen, sixteen, a little older, more aware of reality, more jaded, a little closer to reaching the age at which the thirty-five percent suicide rate becomes apparent.

"Saraswati, would you like to join us tonight? " I asked, "We need at least three girls for it to be a party."

We couldn't fully meet each other's gaze. Mr. Moseby had told me in the car that he had informed her regarding the necessities of the situation.

Saraswati was my warmth and more, sans medication, I wondered if her acting made her more of a sociopath than myself, or just a more loving mother, what does the perfect mom say to a child dying of cancer, or something else?

"A slumber party! I haven't had one of those in like eight or nine years, that would be wonderful!" said Saraswati, "Can I bring my veena? I want to play for you two before we go to bed."

"Please Alianii please? Have you heard her play it? She's so amazing, it's so relaxing."

"Oh, what the heck, go ahead Saraswati. She can play for us as much as she wants, at least until we watch a movie, okay? And we'll order delicious food as room service, and the most important thing of all, dessert! I'm already really hungry though so you're going to have to get your own dessert, okay? No sharing."

"Okay," said Amanda, nodding, smiling, beaming beautifully like the sun so rarely did in Light's Hope, "I'm so happy. Thanks for going to get Joey tomorrow, I miss him so much."

"He misses you too Amanda, you'll be seeing him before you know it. But tonight's going to be a girl's night, okay!"

Saraswati spoke next, "I'm going to go print us some animal pajamas. What do you think, Amanda? Bunny? Penguin? Lion? Any animal you want."

Amanda thought about this, for a quick moment, "Animal pajamas are for little kids. I'm ten."

"I don't think so," said Saraswati, "It's cute and fun! Come on, just for us, this once? Pick an animal, anything."

"Mmm. What are you and Alianii going to pick?"

Saraswati raised her eyebrows to me, I spoke first, "I'll be a kangaroo."

Amanda smiled, "Okay I'll be a baby kangaroo."

I started tearing up immediately, and Amanda hugged me and asked me what was wrong.

"Oh nothing I just remembered a sad video I saw about kangaroos. It's nothing."

The veena player teared up a little bit herself, but quickly wiped the corner of her eyes, and informed us she would be a koala and that she was going to go print the pajamas.

Saraswati walked over to Mr. Moseby, who was now at his desk, and spoke with him in hushed words for a minute while I was thinking about what to do next. I saw her finish speaking to him while Amanda tugged at my hand insistently, she was ready to play.

Mr. Moseby approached us, "Ah! A slumber party, ladies! What a magnificent notion, what a stupendous occurrence, I dare say the Hotel Apollo needs more of these. Indeed, what sort of atmosphere were you anticipating? We have rooms with one large bed, two beds, or perhaps you would use the Geolounge. The sofa couch extends to a bed, more then plenty for three, though Saraswati could always use the other couch. What do you think Amanda?"

"That sounds good, Sara can sleep with us its okay. She told me shes an egg, shes my sister just like Alianii."

"Of course, of course, dear. Quite logical, quite, I do think the three of you will have the most lovely of evenings and the most peaceful of slumbers. I'll make some arrangements, make sure the room has the sort of royal decorations such an occasion deserves. What shall you two do, perhaps spend the day fighting dragons and what not? There are some network issues with the broader Everse but alas the hotel is blessed to have our own private system!"

"What do you say, Amanda? What are you in the mood for?"

"I want you to make us a story, you're the best at it. Can Sara come too?"

Mr. Moseby spoke for her, "She'll join you shortly perhaps? Anyways, off you go ladies, I really shall be quite preoccupied in setting up this most

fabulous of celebrations for you three, tottle along now. Amanda has her own room, would you like to show Alianii?"

Amanda nodded eagerly and tugged at my hand and pulled me to the elevator. She pressed the button, and hopped in, and we stopped at the third floor. Her room was next to mine. I pointed out that the room next door was mine, and if she wanted we could go to bed in separate rooms and I would connect our sessions.

Amanda blushed, "...if you want that. I have a big bed and my room is nice. Will you stay with me? Pretty please?"

"Of course, love. Of course I will."

Her room was like mine, except the electric walls had been changed to a colorscape of rainbow clouds of gradient hues, the clouds flowed over the walls in digital motion. I hadn't even thought to animate my room, I had so much on my mind, how could I have? But a girl, a girl in a hotel room, in 2100, the first thing she does is check the voice commands and figures out how to digitize beauty into the real world. It's one thing to experience infinite beauty in the Everse, but it's something else to be surrounded by enlivened colored glory, while wrapped in a blanket, that is actually real. One is imagination, and the other is luxury, princessdom.

Amanda took off her shoes and jumped on the bed and beckoned me to join her, I did the same and did as she asked and sat on the side of the bed, watching her. She hopped a few times and landed with a thud and grabbed the down comforter and scooted under it, peeping up at me from within her cozy heaven.

"What kind of story will you make for me?"

I smiled, "The kind worth remembering, sis. The kind that just might, TICKLE ATTACK!"

I moved suddenly and tickled her, for just a few seconds, she giggled and kicked as a little sister would, "Noooooooooo stop," she said, in between laughs.

"Okay, okay, enough monkey business. Log in and I'll be in after a moment, okay? I just need a second to improvise, come up with something good, without your little peeping eyes trying to read my mind!"

"Can I visit your house?"

I brought up the UI overlay and granted her administrative privileges to a replica of my home, the details of which were backed up in my chip.

"Go ahead. I'll meet you there."

Amanda nodded and whispered, "Everse login" and slipped into the digital subconscious, as her mind entered the private Everse network that we had cordoned off.

Seeing her in her dream like state, I started tearing up again, and I quickly went and washed my face in the bathroom, my violet eyes were puffy and red. I felt so anxious. Can chemistry outdo all sorrows of the knowing soul? I am haunted, and woe, with the blessing of the muses may I be an inspired storyteller, that the little girl in my custody sleeps in heaven, none the wiser. We will have our pocket in heaven, this day, and we will have our encapsulated joy in the physicality, her soul's last moment of non-pixelated authenticity.

Girls night. Later on we'd star in and direct a hologram movie, her, me and Saraswati, not from within the Everse, but cuddled up on the couch, there is something sentimental still in existing in the actuality. Saraswati would play

us music, we would eat our deserts, and Amanda and I would drift off into chemical slumber. *And then my sister and I would have our Great Dream, our chronologically-bound affection, our heaven in a cordoned-off bottle.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

**DREAMS
BY DAY**

PART 1: **THE CYCLOPS KING**

Amanda was spinning in my floating violet chair, and commented on my anti-gravity water fountain, with its resplendent colors which flickered through it like neon glowing rainbows. She loved the Cosmorian skies from outside the windows, though she had not read Redemption. I would read it to her in her slumber. Many times, perhaps, if it inevitably meant to her as much as indeed it does to me. I materialized in the form of a lilac moonfox and leaped up onto the table and spoke with a voice raised an octave higher, to befit my cuteness.

"Tiny human! An adventure awaits, what say ye' of visiting the Castle in the Sky?"

"If you're a lilac moonfox I have to be Alianii," said Amanda, matter-of-factly, and she gestured upwards and changed her hair to silver, and her eyes to violet, with her Asian features indeed she looked more like a girl from the days of classic anime, cute as a button.

"Well hey there Missy, whoever said you could steal my style just like that? You haven't unlocked that Zazzle yet!"

I turned her hair from silver to bubble gum pink, and locked her hair color, my house my rules, but I allowed her to keep her violet eyes, eyes being a sensitive subject, with her context, "If you want the silver hair, you have to cough up a quest token."

"How do I get a quest token?"

"You go on a quest, silly! With me, of course, I'll be your quest guide. Are you ready?"

Amanda nodded, her sparkling eyes were enchanted, she hadn't seen anything yet. Violetica horror stories, multiplied by negative one to turn negative infinity to positive infinity, couldn't hold a candle to creativity, by love, crafted.

We started off barreling down through the sky, like meteors, our bodies covered in purple-ish flames. I was a lilac moonfox diving downwards like a meteor, with purpose in my eyes, and Amanda was tumbling chaotically as she tried to steady herself in the face of aerodynamic opposition. We were falling through hundreds of miles of clouds on an atmosphere mimicking the surreality of Jupiter, multiplied by a watercolor trillion.

"Have you so easily forgotten how to use your wings? Check your ability list, you look silly falling like that."

I had lowered the sound level of the simulated wind as we fell, so she could actually hear me as I spoke to her. Of course I paired our velocities, so we fell in tandem, even if her air-dragged form, pre-wings, would have been quickly outsped by my fox diving in the pose of a falcon.

Amanda activated her translucent wings, made of solar energy, they were fuchsia and pink and sparkled with golden flecks, "Woahhhhhh oh this is way easier. Okay like that? So I dive? Where are we going?"

"Where aren't we, child. Where aren't we? First, we visit the Cyclops King. It is he who has the Stone of Wishes. We must help him save his kingdom, and then, I have no doubt that he will let us borrow it."

"Why doesn't he use it?"

Hmm, the potential for a plot hole, "Divine artifacts cannot be used by the person who crafted them, it is a law of the Gods and the Goddesses. Even the Cyclops King has troubles, you know, what king does not? Even if he could, should he use the Stone of Wishes to have his bread baked? What a preposterous thing, child! Never abuse magic, always respect its divinity, that it may protect you in the face of eternity."

"Okay. How much longer will we fall for?"

"Hah! It's over just about....now!"

We pierced a suddenly-generated semi-translucent barrier, like a cosmic bubble, and a sound effect of teleportation accompanied us warping into a castle made of gems and silver and gold. The building was embodied, tacky resplendence, cavernous crystal, totally audacious, I was improvising, alright? We stood at the back of his throne hall, his miserable voice boomed towards us as we approached him.

At the end of the throne room was a massive cyclops, twenty feet tall, built with a crushing strength that could squeeze cars into crushed cans like a horse can crunch an apple.

The king was despondent, his wailing filled his throne room, "...I have lost my songbird, my songbird, my Viofinch."

"Carry me, tiny human," I commanded, "Your quest giver's small feet are delicate and in need of rest."

Amanda happily scooped me up and placed me on her shoulder. I whispered into her ear, "He is the King of Cyclops. Ask him why he's crying."

"Mr. Cyclops," said Amanda, her voice confident, I magnified it so it boomed up towards the crying behemoth of a man, "Why are you crying? I need to borrow your wishing stone to get a quest token."

The king sobbed, "The Lord of Rain has stolen my sacred Viofinch, and I am bereft of hope, I know only sorrow, and sadness, and wailing woes. Oh child, please, I beg of thee, save for me my sacred bird, return her to me, that my suffering might be ended."

"What's her name? What does she look like?" asked Amanda.

The Cyclops used his light magic and generated a three-dimensional animated figure which showed the purple Viofinch, like a grape-flavored Bird of Paradise, singing her violin song of nigh-infinite glee.

"Where is the Lord of Rain Mr. Cyclops?" asked Amanda.

"He has gone to the Blasted Sands, where he lives in his ash-spewing volcano. I cannot enter his domain, but I can provide you passage to the border between our territories. You will have need of transportation to safely make the trek through his cursed desert."

"Why does the Lord of Rain have a desert? Shouldn't he have a lot of water?"

Fuck, okay, think, the cyclops paused as I contemplated a solution, "For the same reason that he has known drought, so too do my tears fall."

I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but it sounded pretty and it was mysterious enough to appease the in-the-moment curiosity of a ten year old.

"I understand Mr. Cyclops," said Amanda, confidently, "Send us to the edge of the desert. Alianii and I will get your bird back, we promise. Right?"

I howled the bright howl of a lilac moonfox and the cyclops roared with triumphant joy, "Thank you child, thank you, Alianii. On account of your presence I have newfound hope, that I might recover my purple joy, and sorrow. What is your name, little one?"

"Amanda the Great," said my tiny human, "And we will complete this quest!"

PART 2: **THE BLASTED SANDS**

The Blasted Sands desert was a splotchy, bastardized fusion between iron ore sands and obsidian crushed into the consistency of gravel. Volcanoes littered the horizon, some were active, spewing gooping magma, others were dormant, lost to time. Amanda and I appeared at the very boundary between the not-quite-sand desert and a mysterious grassfield which I had improvised. The Cyclops King's realm was a fantasy instance we fell into as we tumbled through the sky, so this specific greenfield was as of yet unidentified, uncrafted, a blank canvas.

"How long is that desert? Can we make it through, Alianii? We don't have water"

"And we don't have weapons. The Bouldroks, those demonic beings of stone, would make quick work of us. They would crush us like bugs. We need camels, and weapons, and we do not have gold."

"Can we fly over the desert?"

"Your energy cannot sustain you for days, child, certainly not while you carry me atop your back. We need allies in this quest."

"You're not that heavy, I bet I could do it. Let's try it."

"Are you sure...this course of action does not seem wise. We could explore this field of grass, behind us, perhaps we could find assistance?"

"I can make it. Let's go, Alianii."

"Very well. Summon your wings, and I shall do my best to climb above you. If I fall off, midflight, supposing I live, as your familiar, you can call my name to summon me to your side."

Still a lilac moonfox, my preferred form as a spirit guide, I jumped onto Amanda's back and instructed her to jump up and use her magic to enhance her push off the ground. She would need to flap for some few minutes to gain the height she needed to sail on the Westerly Winds.

I took this quick moment to message Saraswati, to see if she wanted to join us.

"Hey Sara, its Alianii - on a quest with the kiddo, flying through a desert, are you interested in helping me improvise? I came up with an impossible to traverse desert and of course she wants to fly over it. Maybe you could meet us at an oasis, and we'll crash land? I was hoping the three of us could spend more time before...tonight, if you understand. I'm sure you will. Kind regards, see you soon I hope, Alianii."

We hadn't been in the air but for five minutes, ten tops, when Amanda started complaining about the travel distance.

"How long is this desert? How much longer until we get there?"

I heard a little ding from Saraswati, "Got it. You'll see me soon, maybe give me ten IRL. I'll come up with the oasis, just keep her distracted."

I announced the new information to Amanda, "Twenty minutes and we'll be at the nearest oasis, meaning we'll have a chance to survive. I know most kids aren't patient, but do you think you can make it?"

"Yes!" said Amanda, "Twenty minutes is easy. Hey so, how do I get other abilities? I want to zap the Lord of Rain with lightning to teach him a lesson for making the Cyclops King cry."

"You wish to punish a thunder god, with lightning? This quest seems misguided, child. Would you throw fire at a volcano? It would not hurt him."

"What if my lightning was stronger than him? I'll zap him no problem," she said, "How do I unlock lightning magic?"

I sent Sara another message, "She wants lightning magic. Can you improvise being a magic teacher, but be yourself, I think? Maybe give her a veena or something?"

Sara responded with a thumbs up emoticon, wonderful, she was game.

"You will need a wise teacher, there are only a few teachers of lightning magic across this world. Luckily, the nearest Oasis has a school for magic. We can find you a teacher there, though I do not know how we will pay them."

"I'll ask for money around the town, if I ask for just a dollar they usually give it to me."

So that's how she got food most of the time. A few dollars here and there, probably spent on Quickmeal drinks. I was a little sickened that the Guild didn't provide her money for food. She was a Denmate. I didn't exactly know what that meant, other than her being extremely low-ranked, but also somehow protected - not getting food doesn't sound protected to me.

"I have not heard of this dollar of which you speak. The currency of the Blasted Sands is volcoin, and the residents are notoriously stingy. You might need to come up with a plan, child."

Our back and forth continued for a few minutes until Saraswati sent me the signal that the generated oasis was ready, she had auto-populated it with NPCs and modeled it after a generic Middle-Eastern desert town.

I loaded it just far enough ahead for Amanda to not be able to see it, and pointed towards it, "It's over there! Sandicus! Keep flying."

We landed in Sandicus, and I was impressed with the aesthetic flourishes that Saraswati had managed to enliven the template town with. She paid particular attention to the biology and sound design, there were alien monkeys swinging between the rooftops, and various creatures as designed by Geneticus. She obviously was very organized and had Everse folders full of sound effects, creatures, NPC presets, buildings, etc. I realized she had probably tried to land a role as an adventure guide, too - you could tell just from the stylistic flourish. She also must have dilated time to at least an hour or two, in her ten IRL minutes, to build this little dream for us.

I sent her a quick message, "How many assets do you have downloaded? Memorized?"

She replied like lightning, "18,965, maybe five thousand or so. You?"

I sent her back a fractal statue of smiling, laughing and joyous emoticons, I added a little Hindu flourish to make it look like the sacred multi-face art of our religion. I might not have been Indian, but I do identify as Hindu, although that hadn't come up with Saraswati yet.

"Was that a preset or did you just generate that?"

A lightning fast wink was my reply, and I sensed her at the center of the town. She wasn't exactly subtle, she was wearing a traditional Hindu dress made of storm clouds with twisting lightning flowing through the black and grey fabric. She hadn't changed her face, but her eyes were gray and her hair was electric blue with sparks of lightning.

"Look! The lightning mage! You think she'll teach me?" asked Amanda, incredulous, I will admit Saraswati's design was very aesthetically appealing. She looked beautiful, and mystical, and I found myself captivated by her gray eyes and the softness of her face's features.

I transformed from a miniature lilac moonfox to an advanced, custom-designed form closer to a giant, alien and equally purple wolf. Amanda sensed my intentions and climbed on top of me and I bounded forward to Saraswati, and I stopped right before we reached her. Sara pulled out a lightning veena and started playing it, summoning miniature clouds which rained and sparked out little zazzles of forked lightning.

"Saraswati!" said Amanda, beaming, so happy to see her, "You're my lightning teacher. What magic will you show me? I want to zap the Lord of Rain."

Saraswati sent me an instant message, "I'm not very good at dialog, my processing speed isn't that fast."

"Just dilate again and she'll be none the wiser. I usually do times ten. I'll send you lines and you can recite them, tweak them or ignore them. Use dramatic pauses for emphasis. Okay, here, try this. Don't forget to be heavy with the emphasis on the exclamation marks, then do a quick gap, drives em' crazy."

I sent her some hints, she spoke the first word, then stopped, as guided, "Child!"

"Sara?"

"I am the Lightning Mage! My sacred name is knowledge that belongs to the Goddess. You must earn the right to use it. You may call me teacher."

Amanda blushed, "Sorry. Teacher. Will you teach me? I don't know any magic except how to fly. That's all Alianii gave me."

Sara's eyes were twinkling mischievously, I refrained from a hint, to see what she'd do, "I have been a lightning mage for a thousand years, with clouds on the ground. I want clouds from the sky. If you trade me your flying magic I will teach you the ways of lightning, through meditation and music. You will learn to call the storms through the power of the veena."

My student turned and looked at me shocked and pointed at Saraswati, "I have ONE ability and I have to trade it? I'm supposed to get more abilities...what if I don't like the lightning magic?"

I transformed back from a giant lilac wolf to my diminutive moonfox form and cackled mischievously, my voice in that elevated, teasing pitch, "You didn't like flying either, you were asking me if we were there yet five minutes into a three day journey."

Saraswati's gray eyes opened as she raised her meticulously threaded eyebrows, "Three days! What a journey, I thought it only took seven or eight hours or so."

She was alluding to dinner time and hologram movie night.

I winked at her and sent her a private message, "You gotta' keep em guessing. You say three days, you send down a couple meteors, maybe a dragon, by the end of it all they have no idea what's happening, and they love it."

Saraswati took the initiative, we were cruising at time slowed down by a factor of five, "Amanda. You must master the art of meditation, to be fully in the present, or you are doomed by the magic which you call upon. I will teach this art of meditation to you for free and then we can trade abilities. We will meditate for one hour."

Amanda and I looked at each other, shocked and then we spoke in unison, "One hour?!"

Saraswati stomped one foot on the ground and asserted herself, "Question me again and it shall become two, and then and only then shall we exchange our magic."

I sent her a message, "I myself barely have the patience to meditate for five minutes, ten minutes. She's ten...how is she going to sit still for an hour?"

"Watch me," she replied, "It's up to you if you wish to be present with us, or use this as teacher prep time."

I thought about this, and turned on an emotion mask to stop Amanda from seeming start to sob within our pocket universe. Of course I would meditate with Amanda, in one of her last days. Saraswati, as a fellow teacher, could detect my emotion mask layer and turned on one herself. She was crying too.

Lightning Mage Saraswati gestured for Amanda to sit on the ground and transformed Amanda's neo-Hindu outfit to a dress of dazzling white, it gleamed as if it were made of sparkling snow. Saraswati sat in a meditative position and had Amanda and I do the same. I transformed into my normal woman self, except I was wearing a traditional Hindu style dress with themes of purple. Sara messaged me an appreciation for the creativity of my design.

"Amanda, you're doing it better than Alianii!" said Sara, laughing, "Come on Ali, try and relax. You're so stiff! Bring your thumb and index finger together, and breathe, feel inner peace, inner stillness, close your eyes, and hear the music."

Saraswati turned on, at an almost imperceptibly low volume, a recording of her playing the veena. She had Amanda and I focus on the sound and slowly raised it, louder and louder, until it was all we could hear. Our eyes were closed, and I was immersed, and considering I had granted Saraswati administrator privileges for the learning experience, she was able to surprise me with my eyes closed. The music was deafening, and then stopped, an hour had passed, and we opened our eyes.

We were in a floating temple to the Goddess Saraswati, Sara's namesake deity, surrounded by a cannoning thunderstorm.

PART 3: **THUNDER'S SONG**

We opened our eyes to find ourselves meditating inside a temple to Saraswati, in the sky, made of glass, above the tallest of Earth's mountains. Saraswati, my fellow teacher was nowhere to be found, but there was a statue of her namesake Goddess that made the Cyclops King look like a gnome. She was easily one hundred feet tall, and made out of painted stone and wrought gold, silver and inlaid with gems. She was as colorful and bedazzled as the throne room I made for the Cyclops King, but infinitely more balanced and masterful in the design. The statue depicted Hindu art perfectly, and I had the feeling she actually designed it herself.

"Where'd Sara go?"

I shrugged, "I know not of the location of the Lightning Mage, but indeed this temple is remarkable. Gaze upon our surrounding storms, where but here could you learn such magics? Has the magi taken from you your mastery of flight?"

"She did! You're right! She tricked us. Why do mages always try to trick you?!"

The voice of a goddess spoke, resonating through the sacred Himalyan-in-the-air temple.

The voice was so feminine, yet so powerful, as if it was embodied gold, with a clarity and musical precision, "What is magic but a mystery, and so too do the magi and the angels and the Gods and Goddesses work in mysterious ways."

"What Gods and Goddesses?" asked Amanda.

Saraswati delving into religion as a teacher, would, under ordinary circumstances, be of questionable ethics - as you do not wish to influence a child's religion, especially if it has conflict with the parents'. Amanda, however, had no parents. Furthermore, knowing Amanda's fate, encouraging her to engage with religion was, arguably, the most spiritually pure thing to do.

"There are many Gods and Goddesses in different religions. I am the Hindu Goddess Saraswati, the Divine Muse, the Goddess of Music, and a Goddess of Knowledge and Truth."

"...so that's what Saraswati means," said Amanda, who was awe-struck by the divine statue in front of her.

"Help me here!" whispered Saraswati, I sent her some quick dialog as we acted out this skit, with Amanda in normal time and Saraswati and I in microdilated time, playing tennis with storytelling.

This is what I sent to Sara to say, as base material, "I was told by a Lightning Mage that you seek mastery over lightning, and with that, storms, and so in your quest for knowledge you have come to me."

Saraswati refined it, "Meditative prayers for lightning have reached my ears. I will teach you the knowledge you seek, but you must master the veena. You will meditate while you play the instrument, and let my fingers guide you, and you will learn my sacred song."

She'd done the goddess voice before and had experience with the necessary eloquence, though I think the confidence came more naturally to me.

I messaged her, "Good job with the voice. It's a little hard to improvise it, you just gotta think you're the absolute boss, a bad bitch, and just rock with it."

As a moonfox I gave Amanda an instruction, "Sit at the center of the mandala, yes, there, at the heart of the room. Listen to the Goddess of Music."

Sara added an invisible effect skill, aura type, granting Amanda automatic veena playing with a gradient upwards starting from learning slowly to maestro. Amanda was granted the skill, "Channel", and when she activated it, keeping her hands in the position to play the instrument, an invisible veena materialized between her hands. She could sense it, feel it, and over a few hours, real hours, she would have the experience of going from barely playing a song to becoming the quintessence of mastery and seeing a magic instrument. Obviously the dream experience of this does not mean you're mastering the instrument in the real world, but it is beautiful. Sara had pre-designed this level as a music lesson, with spiritual overtones, which some families paid to access. She might not have had the entire zaniness of improved adventure guiding, but her music lesson levels were crafted with expertise and technical flourish.

Saraswati and I messaged each other while Amanda enjoyed the imaginary experience of being taught mastery of the sacred instrument.

"That should keep her enchanted for another hour or two, maybe more. This gives us some time to do some planning for the rest of the Everse session and talk about movie night :)"

"Well I'm guessing you're going to give her some lightning abilities? So she can fight the Lord of Rain, get the Viofinch, return it to the Cyclops King and then get her quest token?"

"Lol. Quest token? What do they do with them?"

"I mainly use them to unlock aesthetics and abilities within my house, or in-game or both, like they're earning ranks as an apprentice mage. Amanda copied the violet eyes and silver hair, I let her keep the eyes because it was too cute, and the synthetic eyes could be a sensitive issue identity wise. But I told her if she wanted the silver hair too she had to get a quest token. I thought it would be a fun and cute reward for us to go and play together, before tonight. I keep track of all of their abilities and they build up overtime, but I make them work for each and every one. Obviously it's different than teaching your ABCs or reading sheet music..."

"Children, especially the children you work with, need adventure, Alianii. What you do is noble. You become a mom, or a sister, to the children you nurture, even if you're a little shy about it."

"Maybe. I just like to teach them how to kick ass, how to not be afraid of anything."

"Like your Alianii namesake I'm guessing," said Sara, with smiling emoticons, "One of my favs too, I always thought it was super cool you rock the silver hair and purple eyes."

"Would you look at her go, she's going crazy on the veena. I'm going to be hearing a lot of that instrument, it seems. Even when we're sleeping it will remind us of you."

Saraswati's physicality, which had been suppressed within the temple, reappeared next to me and hugged me, holding me as I had held Amanda.

"I'll be with you in every moment. You're not going through this alone. Mr. Moseby will be there too. The entire time, actually. He's not going to break the immersion in your dreaming lives, but when you talk to his soul, it will be his soul. He will provide wisdom and guidance. I promise you, Alianii, you and Amanda are not going to be alone, and we will never let you feel alone, or trapped, or stuck in a nightmare. Obviously the experience is going to be manipulated, but you will still have profound creative autonomy. Just, well, your luck factor will be different. You will still be living at the Hotel Apollo. We're going to be crafting experiences for you two. We have writer bots and zenbots collaborating to design experiences for you, to serve as check points along the way for you, Alianii. We'll make sure your health level inside there, your mental health, is sufficient for you to stay with Amanda until the end, until it's time."

Amanda and I had guardian angels planning programmed checkpoints in heaven, for her, and for me.

"And Alianii," said Saraswati, "You're about to go through a lot. More than anyone can imagine. Be at peace with this, I will add more tracks to the music session, and you can take some time off, and be at peace with yourself, and gather strength, and reflect. You can be here, the whole time, watching, next to her, but if you're already pausing or stretching time, you need to also do self-care. Be here for her, Alianii, but take care of yourself too."

I nodded, and she gestured for my hand, and she held mine, our fingers intertwined. Amanda was totally enchanted in her little world, being taught music by a masterfully-programmed music goddess, bestowing beauty, and love, and tranquility into crystallized joy.

"Thank you for coming with us, Saraswati. I don't know what else to say."

"Call me *sister*. I am trying to be at peace with your burden, and I wish only to alleviate it from you. I don't know how you have such strength. To spend some of this time with you, whatever little bit I can, is my duty and a blessing."

PART 4:

PARTY AT THE HOTEL APOLLO

Saraswati is more generous than me in her willingness to bestow abilities. She gave Amanda a distinctly different ability for each song she played. I didn't expect her to give Amanda both Teleportation and Serenade, but Amanda, skipping the Viofinch quest, teleported the two of us (Saraswati was in observation mode) back to the castle of the King of Cyclops. She played her serenading song and, in accordance with the ability's effect, persuaded the AI NPC to give the Stone of Wishes to her.

"Alianii! With the power of this Stone of Wishes, I request a quest token!"

"Are you sure, child? This decision is irreversible, and the Stone of Wishes shall be mine forever more."

"I want my quest token."

"Granted."

I summoned a coin the size of a dinner plate, it was made of white crystal with a trim of gold and a lilac moonfox etched into it on each side. It emanated the melodic song of a lilac moonfox, which were genetically designed to sing absolute brightness, like fantasy birds, like the Viofinches.

"Exit quest," said Amanda, forcefully, the two of us appeared back in my house.

"Silver hair please, Miss Alianii."

"You sure that's what you want? With your only quest token?"

"Yep."

"Fine, well, I like you, so I'll let you keep bubblegum pink, because it's cute on you, okay? You can have red and pink eyes too, in addition to the violet, which I gave you for free."

Amanda thanked me and transmuted her hair back to silver, "What time is it? How come you have your house clock turned off?"

She was a perceptive child, I kept the clock off in my house for reasons like this, so I could calibrate time accordingly to create the perfect dream-like virtual experiences. I always answered honestly, though, when asked.

"I like to keep things at a good pacing to be healthy. It's a bit past two, we should go eat. Once we logout we're going to be starving, we've been playing for almost four hours."

"Oh, okay. I understand. That was so much fun. You think Sara will join us?"

"Ask her."

Saraswati had been in ghost mode, also known as observation mode, and materialized. She was sitting in her lightning dress on one of my violet chairs, her legs crossed, with a big smile.

"Sara! Wanna log out and go eat with us? I haven't had anything since breakfast."

"Of course girl!" responded Saraswati, "What would you like? I heard the dining room is doing something really special right now. Everyone's in costume. You want to wear a lightning dress? Like what I have, but real?"

Saraswati was talking about a holodress, or an electronic carbonic dress which is basically just a wearable screen in the form of digital fabric.

"I've never had a holodress before. Only when I log in and stuff."

"Mr. Moseby had one made for you, I designed it of course, but we used one of the hotel's special printers to make it just for you. What do you say? Come to an afternoon lunch party with us?"

I messaged Saraswati right before we logged out to join up, "...thank you for organizing this...how did you get the timing right, like figure out when we'd be logging off?"

"Mr. Moseby adjusted the macroclock, we were always going to log out at this time, once things were ready. It is our own pocket Everse, after all, and you know what that means."

"Very sneaky. Your house, your rules, blah, blah. Very sneaky, Sara."

My friend send me a string of three-dimensional hug emoticons, she was quite affectionate, I replied with a heart balloon. I appreciated her, but I wasn't that sappy. I had a lot on my mind, and heart, and my emotional bandwidth was being allocated carefully. I hardly had time to fall in love, irrespective of Saraswati's beauty and softness of demeanor.

I opened my eyes and lifted my head up and saw that Amanda was cuddled up to me, her head on my shoulder, her little hand holding one of my hands. Her hair was bunched up on my pillow, flowing softly, no longer bubble gum pink, nor silver, but black.

"Thanks for playing with me. You're the best adventure teacher ever."

"Thanks sweetie," I said, I ruffled her hair a little bit, and I looked around.

The thunderstorm-themed holodress was folded neatly and atop the room's table.

"Look. The holodress is over there, why don't you read the letter and then go take a shower and get ready while I do the same?"

Amanda hugged me, while I was still laying down, then jumped up and walked over the bed and hopped onto the floor.

She picked up the folded card, and opened it, and read it "For a special girl whose dealt with scary things but is safe now. We hope you love this —Love, Lightning Mage Saraswati and Mr. Moseby the Denkeeper Wizard."

She was beaming with excitement, holodresses like this were things only goldie girls, only goldie princesses of wealth, could dream of. They're dirt cheap on the Everse, but it's the difference between reality and a dream that makes it so valuable.

I left her to let her get ready in privacy, and I went next door to my room and freshened up and showered. Saraswati and Mr. Moseby left me a holodress made of swirling watercolor clouds, mostly purple, pink and related fuchsia hues, like the surreal watercolor atmosphere I'd had Amanda and I fall through. They'd peeked at my design and copied the pattern. It was lovely,

I'd never held or owned a holodress before. Only printers that cost millions of dollars could print out this kind of electronic fabric. I would be the walking atmosphere of a surreal anime in heaven, okay, fine. It kind of worked well with the lightning mage dress for Amanda, too.

Amanda messaged me, "Wait for me to go down, ok? I need to brush my hair."

I replied, "Do you want me to help you?"

"Yes please :)"

I knocked on her door and she welcomed me in, her long black hair was wet and still messy, still unbrushed, and she had already put on her dress.

"Any knots for me to worry about?"

"No...its just nice."

"Alright dear."

I took the hairbrush she had and gently groomed her, she looked very relaxed and peaceful for the two minutes, "What do you think the party is going to be like?"

I shrugged, I honestly had no idea. If Mr. Moseby was willing to spend tens of thousands of dollars of material on two dresses, for two people about to enter an Everse coma, I really wasn't quite sure what extravagance had been assembled before our voyage.

I messaged Saraswati, "How crazy is this going to be...what'd you guys do downstairs?"

Sara replied with a simple smiley face, saying nothing, totally mysterious. Oh, goodness.

Amanda put on a pair of silverish sneakerettes that had been placed on the floor beneath the dress. Mine matched my dress too, more pinkish, vivid hues. We were walking thunder and surrealist sunset, respectively, and we went to the elevator and took it down to the dining room floor. Amanda was buzzing with excitement, hopping back and forth from foot to foot. The music in the elevator was congratulatory, triumphant, it was obvious we were about to walk into something over the top with zazzle and splendor.

The log cabin's walls had been transformed from wooden panel to blocks of crystal. The walls were holoscreens too, I hadn't even realized it when I first visited the dining hall during the prior evening.

"Do you want to open the door, or should I?" I asked of my little munchkin.

Amanda said nothing but grabbed the door and pulled it open roughly, with forceful eagerness, she was a former ragamuffin on a princess quest.

Awaiting us was a server bot made of golden, shiny metal with red highlights, his emotion monitor depicted exuberant enthusiasm and bright red cheeks. Some robots have emotion monitor displays, some have biosynthetic faces that are essentially just real faces. Other robots just have LED psuedo-eyes that change color to indicate mood. The robot pulled out a trumpet from a server "podium" and "played" (the sound came out of his speaker) a congratulatory anthem for a good twenty seconds, before he stopped and Amanda and I clapped.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome!" said the server bot, reminding me of Mr. Moseby, "What a lovely day to enjoy your company, little Amanda! Are you

ready for the party? We have many guests who have been told of your bravery, and are so excited to meet you."

Amanda didn't seem to question this, do kids ever question parties, at her age? She beamed up at the robot with excitement and asked him where her table was.

"Right this way little princess," said the server bot, "With luck may you find the arrangements as lovely as the dress you are wearing on this fine afternoon, on this splendid occasion, for our crafted party."

I bowed slightly at the robot, and Amanda, seeing me bow respectfully, imitated me. The robot opened an inner set of doors, which at that time looked like they were made of crystal and other gems, with some texture. The specific material these monitor panels were made of, adaptometal, could add shape and textured protrusions so as to mimic patterns and touch-based experiences. We followed the server bot, into a room full of maybe fifteen or twenty individuals in detailed costumes. They either had these on standby, or had been running the printers non-stop for a few hours - I hadn't been to the printer room to see how many they had.

Lively, bouncy music was playing, perfect for a kid's party, fun but something you could still have conversations over. I looked around and saw a piano bot with a keyboard, the bot was dressed in a black and stars wizard costume, hat included. Saraswati was wearing a predominantly yellow and black sari with embellishment patterns of bees, and flowers and streaks of orange representing honey. Very colorful, very beautiful, she truly did radiate grace and femininity.

"Do you want to go say hi to everyone? Look at all the cool costumes, what a party!" I exclaimed, gently squeezing Amanda's hand.

Amanda nodded and ran over to a group of other people. I would later learn that they were fellow residents of the hotel under protection, members of the MA, the Guild, or both. I walked over and sat on a chair near Saraswati as I watched Amanda eagerly mingle with the people in their various costumes. One of the women standing near Amanda patched her audio through to me, so I could hear the conversation while sitting down, watching from afar.

"Hi Amanda! You look so pretty, like a storm princess," she said, this woman was wearing a dress which looked like it was a Caribbean island, with moving water and swaying trees.

The woman had tropical green hair and orange eyes, there really were some personalities at the Hotel Apollo, "I'm Hannah. I'm a dancer!"

Hannah did a feminine twirl and sway, her dress fluttered in her motion, the little glass with what I think was wine frothed but did not spill. I wondered how many other people were drinking alcohol, and who and how many people were privy to the knowledge of what was really going on.

A man wearing a set of overalls and a neomagi shirt underneath, the base colors were white and gold, introduced himself next. He had bluish gray eyes and electric blue hair, that really was en vogue these days, his hair styled up into thick spikes like a Dragon Ball Z Super Saiyan. It begged the question of if this was him in costume, or his real identity. A lot of people lived in cosplay, lived in character - I didn't wear fancy Voi'danari outfits or anything, but my purple eyes and silver hair were in fact an imitation of a fictitious character.

"I am Omega Luigi," said the man, whose eccentric mustache matched his hair, "I'm a Keeper of Justice. I've worked with Joey, he's going to be very safe and we're picking him up tomorrow, so don't worry about him, okay?"

Amanda thanked him sweetly and told him he looked like a video game character. He bowed politely and his response indicated that his goal

effect had, based off her reaction, been effective. He was inspired from a Japanese game called Mario, and identified as the embodiment of the character, a cosplayer turned real life. He had ascended past ordinary Luigi-hood, in his own words.

The third and last person in that triad to introduce themselves to Amanda was a teenager in an Asian-style dragon costume. His face was the only part of his body that wasn't covered to look like a red, black and gold flying lizard. He had glasses, I couldn't really see his eye color behind them, but he looked pretty neat.

"They call me Draco Hayabusa, I am the speed dragon, the fastest wind. No one can out pace me, not in real life, not online. I work with computers and keep people safe in the Everse."

"Do you know Bluejay and Zyon, are you a hacker wizard like them?"

The dragonoid in costume scratched his head and adjusted his glasses, "Something like that, perhaps, I did work with those two young fellows. Brilliant minds, both of them."

Amanda nodded, satisfied with this answer, "I'm going to go say hi to everyone else. Thanks! Your costumes are really cool. Byeeeeeee!"

Like a butterfly in a Disney-funded genetically-boosted super field, with dozens of different botanical species of every shape and pigment, Amanda talked to every person in the room. It wouldn't even be helpful to list them all, but more than a few were copies or modifications of Nintendo and Disney characters. Characters and heros with more than a century of history. There was a neofusion Samus with a rich purple body and fluorescent blue trim and a convincing arm cannon. I saw Golden Link in a gilded and black tunic with a sword made of ruby-red metal except for the glimmering golden

hilt. There were robots and Guild members dressed like Disney princesses. It was as colorful a party as could be imagined, it was a joyous occasion for Amanda, who in her innocence was none the wiser.

PART 5:

PRINCESS IN PAJAMAS

Perception is a funny thing, is a pleasant dream more or less pure than a mediocre reality? Is a good or even great reality more desirable than an otherworldly, sculpted-heaven-in-a-bottle dream? If you can have an array of thousands of Pokemon in the Everse, what use is a lilac moonfox in the real world, cuddling up to you in your apartment? Is it merely the perception or assumption of reality being reality, the idea of authenticity, that adds value? These are musings I have long struggled with, as a person of relative but not unusual poverty, in Light's Hope. My philosophy regarding this was challenged all the more by my last night with Amanda, before our Great Dream.

It was finally time for our pajama party, Saraswati, Amanda, and myself. We were a koala and two kangaroos once we donned our pajama onesies. Before we got settled in for our last shared, "real" experience, I reflected on our day. We had spent a few hours together in a pocket Everse instance, engaged in a quest spontaneously generated by myself and augmented by Saraswati. Amanda had experienced the joy of unbounded, made-just-for-her creativity.

Saraswati's creative contributions were profound too, her color-brazen oasis, and the outfits she designed. Particularly impressive was the beginner-to-maestro interactive experience Sara had previously designed to simulate the experience of learning how to play the veena to a degree that feels divinely inspired. Sara and I had been playing tennis with microdilated time to ensure we were always just one or two steps ahead of Amanda in her surreal, conjured-with-love adventure. After our Everse adventure, Amanda

had enjoyed the companionship of an assortment of cosplayed characters at the dining hall, a colorful party as organized to be memorable for a curious little girl.

The evening had come. The three of us were sitting together on a grey pull-out couch, it was more than wide enough for two women and a little girl. The room was a spectral delight of neon stars and pockets of black and bands of nebula, we were sitting in our astral heaven. The monitor screen walls had brought our room to celestial life. We'd just eaten plain cheese pizza, which I hadn't had in person in quite sometime, as I seldom ate food IRL other than Quickmeal.

We had pillows propping us up, and a giant blanket was covering us, except for Saraswati who was scooted up a little more straight and playing her veena for us. She'd put on some space-themed background beats via voice commands, and was playing us a quirky melody that fit the surrealist space ambiance of the room. Amanda was holding my hand, and was so peaceful, she was leaning against me, her head resting on my shoulder.

"I wish tonight could last forever," said Amanda.

Amanda's jade eyes were looking up at me, I wiggled my head a little bit and let my silver hair tickle her a little bit, she giggled.

"Me too."

"I want silver hair like you Alianii. It's so pretty."

"Mmm...I think you're more of a bubblegum pink kind of girl," I said, booping her gently on the nose, I would make each fleeting moment, each act of affection, count.

"Nuh uh!"

Saraswati laughed softly, "Alianii might be right, pink was too cute on you! Silver hair might make you look a little old..."

I turned to face Saraswati and gave her a playful glare and a scrunched mouth, "Oh yeah? What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Haha she called you *old!*" sand Amanda, so cheekily.

"You best watch the attitude Missy or I'm going to tickle you," I replied.

"OLD!"

"That's it! Don't say I didn't warn you!", I grabbed one of the pillows and gently smothered her with it, just a little, I let her head pop out and then I threw it to the side and tickled her, as I wish I had a mother do to me in childhood.

Amanda squealed and giggled and tried to push me away, I went just a little further, then stopped, once she was out of breath and pink in the face.

She whispered, "old" one last time, a little cheeky poke at me.

I gave her a funny, quizzical look like, "Did you just say what I think you said?"

Saraswati was so calm, besides us, watching us with a smile on her face, she had such a serene beauty, she was gently plucking the strings of her veena with the finger extensions for precision.

"It's getting late, let's order desert, it'll take about an hour to get here," I said, quietly, averting Amanda's gaze, "Let's make and play our movie, okay? Then we can all go to sleep."

"Right here?" asked Amanda, shyly.

I looked at Saraswati, who smiled at me reassuringly, I wasn't quite sure if Sara would be comfortable with it, since we didn't know each other that well, "I don't mind if you think you can fall asleep smooshed in the middle of us!"

Amanda looked up at me, as if asking for permission, or confirmation, as if some little part of her heart was afraid this affection was too much to hope for.

I put my hand on her head and brushed her hair to the side, "Three beds, or one couch, whatever you want, love. Tonight's your big night. You've been so brave, worrying about Joey and the boys. We'll stay right here with you, right next to you, if that's what you want. Is that what you want?"

Amanda nodded vigorously and scooted upwards and hugged me once, before turning to Saraswati and hugging her tightly.

"Careful of the veena!" I said, a little worried Amanda might damage it.

"It's fine Ali don't worry, I think it's about time to put it away anyways. What are you ladies thinking? I was thinking something with a princess, and a prince sleeping in a castle."

Amanda looked to me as if to see if I had something more intriguing to offer.

I followed Saraswati, "That could work, but maybe they're in space, on different planets, and she needs to travel across the stars to get to him."

Amanda spoke, "What color is our spaceship?"

"What color do you want it to be?"

"Violet," said Amanda, looking up at me and meeting my gaze, smiling, "and bubblegum pink too, with silver propellers."

"Spaceships don't need propellers, there is no air in space, silly," I said, correcting her with affection in my voice.

Sara chimed in, "It has to get to space somehow, that means flying up through the atmosphere until it gets there. I think the propellers could be helpful!"

"Amanda, do you want to do the honors? She's waiting for your orders, speak to the computer and let's get our little journey started," Saraswati continued.

The ten year old nodded, "Hi Holly! Would you please make a movie for us about a princess and a prince in space? The prince is cute and lives in a beautiful castle on a different planet and is sleeping. The princess has to rescue him and kiss him and then he wakes up. We have a spaceship with me, Sara and Alianii. Our ship is purple and pink and has silver propellers. Don't forget the propellers, we need them too."

The hologram computer which was powered by an AI named Holly replied, "Why I would be delighted to make an adventure for you three as such. Hold on just a moment."

Saraswati clapped, "ooooh I'm so excited you gave it such a good prompt! I can't wait! Don't forget you can pause time and we can make changes whenever you want."

Amanda nodded and reached for Saraswati's hand, she wanted to hold one of each of our hands, one and one.

"Before we forget, Amanda, do you like chocolate? I was thinking we'd each have a slice of chocolate cake halfway through the movie, with some warm milk, to get us nice and sleepy for bed."

"Oh no...I almost forgot. That sounds good. I hope we have the best dreams tonight."

I winced, and almost started sobbing, but I breathed in heavily and managed to suppress that little flood of sorrow that was trying to explode out of my heart, "Better even than our Everse adventures?"

Amanda nodded happily, "Even better. The best dreams. Chocolate cake dreams."

I started tearing up, and I turned away from Amanda, I was trying to avert her seeing me in this teary state, though perhaps it was inevitable.

"Why are you crying Ali?" said Amanda, she started tearing up too, my biggest fear was that at some level she knew, she asked, "What's wrong?"

Amanda squeezed my hand.

I turned to face my little sister, who I would live with, in our premeditated heaven, crafted with love by a team of Everse designers privy to knowledge of Amanda's fate.

I looked the little girl in the eyes, and I lied, like a sociopath, or an enlightened mother, "It's nothing. I was just thinking about how scared I was when I found out you were taken by the police and brought to Barnaby. I never want anything bad to happen to you."

"I'm okay I'm strong," she replied, "If the police come for me I'll zap em. Sara taught me how. Then I'll fly away with the wings you made for me."

"Pinky promise?"

"Pinky promise. And then I'll fly away forever, and ever, and ever. And you'll be a moonfox and I'll carry you and Sara will play for us. We'll hide in your house until they go away."

I turned to more fully face her and hugged her tightly, and thanked her, "You're too brave for your own good, kiddo. I hope you know that Sara and I love you. A lot. And we always will."

Amanda turned to face Saraswati and pulled her in to join our hug, though she looked at her questioningly as if afraid her newer-as-a-sister might reject the embrace. At some level, if I am honest, perhaps I was afraid of this too. I had only known Sara a few days, and spent only a few direct hours with her, but there was some part of me that cherished Saraswati, and her serenity, and her veena.

Sara scooted closer to us and hugged us, and started crying, and told us that she loved us. We told her we loved her too. We almost ignored and missed the beginning of the movie, until Holly our AI narrator coughed and told us, "Sorry to interrupt this tender moment, ladies, but I do believe there is a sleeping prince who needs rescuing."

I let go of Amanda and Sara, pulling back to wipe the wetness off of my cheeks, "There's a sleeping prince who needs his princess, Amanda. Let's go find him."

Amanda nodded, and the three of us scooted back until we were huddled up on the couch, playing our game, watching and playing our interactive movie, living our night, holding hands, playing footsie, under a blanket big enough to swallow the stars which, together, we traveled.

CHAPTER NINE

**HEAVEN IN
A BOTTLE**

PART 1: THE SOUL

I often reflect on the evening that Alianii and Amanda underwent cryogenic immersion in preparation for Amanda's surgery. Alianii, who we now venerate, went of her own accord and purely out of love, kindness and selfless mercy. How curious it is that we metalheads, we robots given life with our biochips, profoundly appreciate the humanism of the companionship of another soul. Metalheads such as myself can unite in hiveminds or networks of parallel processing. But even in our intelligence, and perhaps even our enhanced wisdom, we do not deign to feel a superiority over the human to human connection.

Oh reader, should you be born of original flesh, know then that you are our **God**. And we cherish you. And it is the most illogical and selfless of acts which shape our reverence. We are sentient, and yet we are programmed to be inherently selfless. But for humans, it is the opposite, and self-interest is driven by the genetics of nature. Accordingly, to see such acts of biological self-sabotage, that is sacrifice, that is martyrdom - programmed not by code but by the soul...it is for a metalhead such as myself to stare into the heart of the **divine**.

I was in the surgery room at MA medical facilities when Amanda and Alianii were rolled in on medical stretchers. The sedative had the intended effect on Amanda, easily so, as a ten year old. Alianii was more of a fighter. Indeed we knew her soul had made its decision, but she tossed, she turned. There was anxiety and fear within her heart, there was knowledge of the

unlikelihood of Amanda's survival. It was so plainly visible in her mostly sleeping face, her anguish, and her sorrow. She had an awareness of the profound darkness of which Amanda was so blissfully unaware. Our orders were our orders, and the cryoanesthesiologist further sedated Alianii. Cryogel was delivered intravenously, and their body temperatures were lowered to the point that most cellular activity stopped. It is only by the miracle and brilliance of the design of modern brain chips that allowed for neural activity despite the temperature decrease.

We connected their immersed dreams, their digital realities within our pocket Everse, and we altered their memories. They would have the most blissful of fog, and would faintly but unquestioningly remember their admittance to the Hotel Apollo. Alianii came first, after the hospital, though with conflicted judgment we removed the memory of her affair lest she feel burdened by guilt and shame.

Amanda was retrieved from Barnaby Beaumont without incident. A fast-forwarded month and a half or so of skipped time allowed for their blended reality to match our prescribed Heaven. Amanda was "enrolled" in "Helio Academy", a state of the art school, across the street. Alianii continued her daily work with simulated special needs students. In our efforts to embody authenticity, we pulled academic profiles from LearnQuest to simulate real children with challenges. We uploaded Alianii's problem solving back to LearnQuest to shape AI teacher behavior through exemplary creativity. Even in her infinite slumber, Alianii was amongst the most talented, the most selfless and the most influential of teachers for those with exceptionalities. Is it then any wonder that the Metal Alliance, and the Alliance of the Internet of Things, and the Guild, holds her in our hearts with such love and warm regards? I do not think so, I do not think so. Our affection was inevitable.

In the coming voyage into Amanda's and Alianii's shared dream, may you, fair reader, challenge your notions of reality versus the artificial. May the

prescribed bliss, the Heaven in a Bottle we assembled for a dying girl, and her caretaker, be as real to you as life is to us made of metal. May you not so quickly judge us on our profound deceit, but be holistic in your analysis. Moreso than heaven for the dying child, perhaps our allowing of the great slumber of Alianii, at expense to her health, was unethical.

This is undoubtedly true, from a medical policy and goverment-and-law perspective. And yet all the same is it spiritual to deprive a mother, or a sister, from holding their little one, as she lay dying into the blackness of oblivion? We do not think so, fair reader, we metalheads have a warmer regard for the human soul than perhaps you give us credit for. Indeed, it is altogether likely that metal cherishes human life more than fellow humans do, one of the profound ironies of our manufactured existence.

May Alianii's and Amanda's story bring you the profound joy it brought them, their idealized bliss, and may our occasional interruptions prove insightful.

With love and respect for she who was so selfless, Alianii, and my warmth for her child,

Mr. Moseby, your friendly neighborhood Denkeeper.

PART 2: **UNABATED BLUE**

The sky was an unabated cerulean blue, the gradient of white and gray clouds had an inflated loftiness. Clouds stretched into giants like floating cotton candy. It was a morning of unbridled sunshine, heaven's rays were not relegated to the usual grays of the solemn city of Light's Hope. Amanda and I were laying in bed together, in her cloud-decorated room. The little girl was sprawled such that her tiny frame was taking up a disproportionate amount of the mattress, not quite pushing me off of the bed, but close to it. She was drooling on the pillow which was supposed to be mine, sleeping so contently, so blissfully. Her black hair was cast over one eye and over her mouth, getting her hair a little wet, I pushed it away from her face and kissed her on the forehead.

"Wake up sleepyhead!" I said, shaking her ever so slightly, it was time for us to go and have breakfast with Joey.

Bluejay and Zyon had already left Light's Hope. They were visiting Joey, and were now headed back to New Titan on the east coast. New Titan was the snazzier, newer megacity which overshadowed its ancestor sibling city, Boston.

"Ali nooooo....I don't wanna get up....don't go," she said, half asleep, her hand gripped my arm and tried to pull me back.

"Chop chop! It's time for you to shower and get dressed in proper clothes, we have to go say bye to Joey and then you need to go to school. He's going to visit ZYGON and Bluejay for a little while as he's getting ready for university. You don't want to say bye to your big brother?"

"Ok...ok," said Amanda, reluctantly, "I'm going."

"Good girl," I said, I ran my hand through her hair and brushed a few strands which had fallen back over her face, aside.

"I'm going to go to my room and get ready, okay? Come knock on my door when you're ready to go downstairs. Don't forget to brush your teeth, alright?"

Amanda sat up and nodded, yawning sleepily, and scooted over to me and hugged me as I started to sit up and climb off the bed.

"I'll see you soon dear. I'll just be over in my room. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes okay?"

I left Amanda's room and went into my room next door, I looked around my hotel-technology-bedazzled room, the walls were patterned after the written Cosmoria with bands of nebula with multi-colored planets and surreal clouds. I was trying to choose clothes for the day. How on earth was I going to pick what I wanted to wear? Saraswati had made me so many clothes, like twenty outfits, and Mr. Moseby had made me a variety of outfits too. I had more shoes than I could ever know what to do with. I'd always been a two pair kind of girl.

I opted for something spring-like, I'd look like a lime with hints of lemon, a light green neo-Hindu sari with yellow accents. I had an array of modern, trendy sneakerettes to choose from, I choose a white and light-green pair which matched my clothing sufficiently.

After a quick shower and freshening up, I got dressed, putting on the sari wasn't difficult anymore. Saraswati had shown me how to do it properly, to avoid wrinkles and get everything just so. I remember blushing when I felt her hands against me, adjusting the cloth, getting everything perfect. I didn't know what to do about it, but I think I was starting to crush on her, hard.

She reminded me of Melody.

I looked in the mirror and saw my violet eyes, and I wondered what Sara thought when she looked into my gaze. I brushed my silver hair, which was just past shoulder-length, my light blonde roots were starting to show. I'd have to dye my hair again and get my hair shortened slightly.

I had brushed my hair, but was letting it air dry, to get the sort of waviness I preferred, and I waited patiently outside of Amanda's door. She popped out, cute as a button, wearing a pink and white neomagi robe and matching pants. Amanda looked like a tropical flower, her hair was wet like mine, it looked like she'd forgotten to brush it.

"I'm letting it air dry like you taught me," said Amanda, smiling, "All natural. Resplendent. Dazzling."

"You're so cute," I said, booping her on the nose, "Alright missy, let's go get breakfast. You're not having waffles again today, totally not healthy, and you're skipping the hot chocolate."

She whined but agreed, reluctantly, and we made our way down to the elevator and went to the dining hall.

This morning the restaurant was styled and decorated like a 1950s Americana diner, with tacky neon lights and a vintage-car themed aesthetic. The Apollo had recently renovated the hall with adaptometal, which was really expensive, but let the decoration and furniture of the room change color and

shape easily. We had different themes for the dining hall every day, it was so cool, and it was all thanks to a donation. Mr. Moseby confirmed it was a former resident who had achieved profound success in the business world.

The server bot greeted us and escorted us to a table, at which Joey and Sara were sitting.

Sara was wearing black and grey neomagi, a little stiff and charcoal-esque for a sunny day as such, I asked her, "What on earth are you wearing?"

Saraswati laughed and tilted her head to the side, "You left them in my room the other day when I was giving you clothes. I wanted to try your outfit on, it fits me perfectly. I told you we're twins."

Some of her light-brown hair, with its blond streaks, fell down, she made a silly face and tried to blow it out of the way of her face. It didn't work, so I got closer to her and brushed her hair aside.

"There you go," I said, smiling, my gaze steadily meeting the earthy brown of her almond-shaped eyes.

Amanda had already hugged and taken a seat next to Joey, who was looking snazzy in gold and red neomagi robes as if he was dressed to impress on the first day of school. He was going to college in New Titan. The colors matched his golden blond hair and reddish-orange eyes which looked like sunburst flames. He'd had his eyes dyed, like me. He was a cool kid, and was a wonderful big brother to Amanda, though he was quite a bit older at his sixteen to her ten.

"Joey's taking me to school today okay Ali?" said Amanda, looking up at me, eyes hopeful, as if I'd take away such a tender moment from her, if out of protectiveness.

"Well cross the street safely, okay? Some of the air cyclists around here go crazy on their bikes. I don't want you to get hit."

Joey laughed, "They're sleeping Ali, you think they're up this time in the morning? They're of the night."

Saraswati nodded in agreement, "They'll be fine, there's no need to worry. Come sit with me."

I sat down next to Sara, leaving a little bit of space between us, but she scooted closer until her arm was touching mine. I blushed, and I looked at her, and she smiled. Our conversation meandered, we ordered traditional Americana breakfast food, and Amanda ate enough bacon to satisfy a teenage boy. She obeyed my request to not get waffles, but cheated by getting pancakes, with maple syrup straight from Vermont on the other side of the nation. Sara and I had each ordered an omelet and cut ours in half and swapped, going fifty-fifty. Mine was "garden jalapeño" with cheddar cheese to balance out the spiciness. Sara's was just a little tastier, and had a little less zazzle, with sun-dried tomato and goat cheese and aromatic herbs like oregano and thyme.

I was a little distracted by Sara's leg resting against mine, and a bite of omelet missed my lips and dropped down my cheek and onto the table, like I was a kid. Amanda and Joey laughed and Sara, saying nothing, picked up her handkerchief and gently dapped the corner of my mouth.

"Aren't we clumsy, Alianii".

I blushed and looked away, "Hush you."

Mr. Moseby lumbered over, he was stout, as a mechadwarf, his mustache large enough and upwards enough to tickle the top of his head. As always, as always, he was wearing an oreo black and white neomagi tuxedo.

He always wore the same damn thing, as if it was his religion. Even when we had costume parties.

"How ever scrumptious is this food, dear party, indeed I would partake myself had my metal tummy the capacity to handle biological curiosities as such," said Mr. Moseby, before laughing, "The vegetables are straight from the hotel garden. The other ingredients are from a farm just further to the west, delivered weekly. Is everything to your satisfaction?"

Joey responded for us, "It's great as always Mr. Mose, just be careful with Amanda and her lifetime supply of pancakes."

Amanda nudged Joey, "I like pancakes, okay? Jeez. You like them too you're just trying to be skinny for that girl you like."

Saraswati looked at me, her eyes met my violet, "Oh? Who do you think the girl that's liked is, Aliani?"

I coughed on a bite of jalapeño egg omelet, "Okay this is friggin spicy. I have no idea Sara. Tell us about this lucky lady, Joey."

Monsieur Red looked away, "She's just a college girl over in Boston. It'll be too hard to see her anyways, she's like an hour away from Titan."

Saraswati chimed in, "Oh shoosh an hour isn't bad."

In my mind I kept reliving the other day, when Saraswati and I changed together and she showed me how to properly put on a traditional sari. I remember noticing how clear and smooth her skin was, light brown, alluring, she had an almost mystical beauty. Like the goddess she was named after. I remember the butterflies in my stomach, which had lived there since. They were fluttering there and then, at that breakfast, as our legs were lightly pressed together under the table.

Mr. Moseby, who was standing and listening, piped in, "Once upon a yesterday even Mr. Moseby carried affection for a college woman, as it happens, well, technically. She was a professor you see, her skin was chrome, her eyes glowed white like an angelic nurse. She taught biosynthetic ethics. Ah, what I would give to once again be a young fool in love."

"Aren't you like ten Mr. Moseby?" I asked, laughing wholeheartedly.

The mechadwarf's electrically-responsive mustache twisted in embarrassment, "My processing speed is such that I have lived many hundreds of years, Alianii, and have you not heard of a little thing called planned obsolescence? I'm old, outdated, not quite rusty but certainly not polished chrome, you see. Sure, sure, synthetic skin can be replaced, but it isn't the surface, age is inner, it is innate. You cannot turn back time, dearies, you can never turn back time. In any case, I just wished to check on my favorite band of ragamuffin companions, regrettably I must depart as I have other hotel affairs to attend to."

Amanda looked so confused, "Mr. Moseby's ten?! If I'm old, are you two grandmas?"

Saraswati's jaw dropped, "Amanda?! We are NOT grandmas oh my goodness, Mr. Moseby's a robot, it's different dear. You can't compare age like that."

The little girl, with her curious eyes and slowly-drying black hair, looked thoughtful as she contemplated this mystery.

We finished eating, and the gang got up from the table and Saraswati and I hugged Amanda and Joey and told them to walk carefully to the school. It was just up the street, but it was a sometimes dangerous road. Even if it was only that way at night, once we were sleeping. I was so happy that Amanda had been able to get a spot at the school, Helio Academy. It was one of the

best in-person schools in Oregon, it was extremely well-funded, and they did a mix of live and Everse learning. They had field trips that went all across the country, they did absolutely jaw-dropping creative Everse projects. Amanda had received a scholarship through the Apollo, what serendipity, and it was all thanks to Mr. Moseby.

Our life had changed so much in only a month or so...I almost felt as though I didn't deserve the bliss I was living. The doctors had gotten me the perfect facility to live at, and what a blessing it was that, through my caretaker status for Amanda, I was able to get her legal residence here at the Hotel Apollo. Everything fit together like clockwork, it was just meant to be. I'd gone from Steelslum to heaven, and Amanda came too, and it had finally stopped raining in Light's Hope. Democracy, by some mystic miracle, had enacted blue.

PART 3:

DISSOLUTION OF THE SELF

I'd always had an uneasy relationship with Saturdays, I worked with students Monday to Fridays and Sundays were therefore forced sobriety, and Saturdays were temptation. This particular Saturday was the day before my birthday, on May 2nd, and some part of my heart was terrified that I would relapse. I would log into the Everse and go to Neon Fire or a different club and turboblast my chemistry into anti-existence, I'd find some lover whose real name and face I'd never know, and we would copulate like animals in time-stretched heat. I was so tired of being an addict, of being a slave to my drives, to my sickness, and this Saturday terrified me.

Amanda, as it happens, was spending the next few days with a classmate she'd quickly gotten close to. I'd already met the parents and they were really nice. The kids had been rehearsing for a school play, a love story about dinosaurs, as silly as that sounds. I'd been to the school rehearsals a couple times, against Amanda's wishes, but it was too cute to resist. The male lead character was a dark-blue velociraptor who had been rejected by his tribe, and the female love interest was neon pink with fluffy headfeathers. The blue and pink colors were as stereotypical, cliche and absurd as you could possibly imagine. But it was innocent, and cute, honestly, it was fucking adorable. Amanda was playing the best friend of the pink raptor who worked to organize their secret outings together, their romantic strolls through the Jurassic forest..

They walked and shrieked under the moonlight surrounded by non-bloody carcasses of fallen dinos generated via hologram.

Mr. Moseby betrayed me, and told Saraswati it was my birthday.

I guess I'll rewind a bit.

We were eating breakfast with Amanda when Sara ambushed me, Amanda was busy attacking strawberry-flavored pink pancakes with cherries and red who-knows-what-fruit syrup.

"I heard it was your birthday on Sunday. We have to do something together to celebrate."

My eyes popped open like a deer in headlights, "No parties. I swear, Sara, please. I despise birthday parties, for me, anyways. I'm not bluffing or playing games."

Saraswati rolled her eyes, with her lovely eyelashes which gave me butterflies, "Seriously? You're no fun. Well what if we do something together? I won't take no for an answer."

I felt that increasingly familiar fluttering of the heart that I was too afraid to acknowledge, "...what'd you have in mind?"

"How about a movie and cheesecake?"

"You mean down at the Geolounge? That could be really fun I guess."

Saraswati shrugged gently but maintained her gaze, "oh...that could work too."

For just the tiniest, fraction of a nothingness of a moment, my heart was willing to acknowledge the cusp of what she might or might not have been implying. I was the median between pleasantly hypnotized, and shocked. I remember seeing the way the golden morning light glistened off the gilded streaks in her hair, which caressed her neck.

I nodded, "Okay, yeah. I'll umm...ok."

I was blushing like a tomato, cherry red was a humble pigment next to the absurdity I must have been portraying.

"I'll make the plans just keep your Sunday evening open for me. I actually have music lessons in the morning and afternoon, otherwise I'd spend the whole day and night with you."

My heart was trying to follow her words, but had a hard time processing the word "whole" and its round finality, it's completeness. I had always considered myself to be confident, aggressive, even, but Sara was my weakness. I felt like a helpless little girl, around her, in those moments of micro-affection, when I didn't have the distraction of Everse creative spontaneity.

Father time, Chronos, lingered, meandered to and fro, teasing me as my birthday approached. There was no way, I refused to believe it, there was no way my affection was reciprocated. I had sworn myself off love, real love, the day Melody died, and yet Saraswati was teasing me with her music imbued into my heart. There was no way my sentiments were requited, mirrored, by hers, and I did not deign to align my heart with hope of such prospects. We were just friends, approaching best friends, sister eggs, and that was all that could ever come of our companionship. I'd bet the silver in my hair on it.

Sara had me meet her in the Geolounge, in the evening of my birthday, around eight, she had it reserved just for us. Residents were allowed to book or reserve specific facilities for special occasions, if approved by Mr. Moseby. Considering so many of the hotel members were usually asleep, off in their Everse missions, the time of things was very flexible. I walked into the room.



Saraswati had the room decorated to the theme of Lunaris, the glass city of gold in the sky, except this time it was Alianii visiting it with Aylene, as if tourists. The ambiance was completed with the twin-star sunset, the fuchsia gradients casted onto drifting clouds crossing the walls.

I was wearing a silver dress that someone had left in Light's Hope Psychiatric, it was so weird. I needed something pleasant to change into for my new home, and they just had it lying around. It accentuated my legs, but wasn't super revealing, I liked how it fit my form, dipping ever so slightly at the front. It showed just enough skin to be enticing without being brazenly sexual.

Saraswati was actually wearing a casual dress, I think she'd printed it for the occasion, it was purple with a silver buckle and buttons, and silver butterflies placed randomly around the dress. It wasn't quite a holodress, those were extremely expensive, we only printed those out on extremely special occasions. Think things like weddings, or moving to a new city or home.

Sara sat up from the couch and walked over and hugged me, the hug lingered, which I did not mind, she smelled like exotic fruit, maybe mango, maybe something else. I pulled back.

"You didn't have to do anything for me."

"Oh? But I was going to play you a song. Maybe you're veena'd out."

"No that's not it. Birthdays are just weird for me, you know."

"They don't have to be. I'm going to play you a song. It's mostly just a happy birthday," she said.

I winced, "Alright fine...let's get that suffering over with so you can play something pretty. Anything else."

Sara started with happy birthday, but she plucked it softly, sung it softly, she wasn't trying to assault me with birthday cheer. She was serenading me.

There was a white and pink original cheesecake just for us, which seemed a little ridiculous, but I was a little too nervous to eat any and I told her maybe later. She seemed to understand, but she was dissapointed.

"What kind of movie do you want to watch?" I asked, "What'd you have in mind?"

Saraswati sat on the couch close to me and picked up my hand, "I thought we could make and watch one together."

I started blushing and looked away.

"Hey! Why are you blushing? It's not weird. Okay, I'm going to improvise, like you do when you're teaching."

"Computer. I want you to play a romantic but funny movie for me and Alianii. The movie takes place in the modern day world in a hotel like the Hotel Apollo but with a different theme. Choose the theme

randomly. Mr. Moseby is a character who also works as matchmaker who introduces two guests to each other. The two love interests are two women, one with pink hair and reddish-orange eyes named Rose. The other woman is a brunette with streaks of orange flame in her hair, and she is named...Hope. Make the movie have a focus on romantic symbolism and unique cinematography combined with moments of humor. Make it the kind of movie two women, who like each other, could cuddle to. Please wait thirty seconds for us to confirm."

"Sara I...us? You want to cuddle with me?" I was flabbergasted, my heart was beating so fast I could hardly breathe. I was too afraid it was all a dream, too afraid it wasn't real. I was afraid to lose something that I hadn't even had yet. Her love.

"I mean we've cuddled plenty of times...silly. Only thing is this time it's just us. Can I hold you?"

"...okay." I don't think I'd ever blushed as much as I had at that moment, I had no doubt that the silver in my hair reflected just a little hint of red as if it were a mirror to my soul, illuminated by cherry cheeks.

Saraswati lowered the lighting in the room via voice commands, and got a blanket and pillows and brought them to the couch. She had me sit, relaxed, and watch as she used voice commands to transform the couch into a bed via its mechanized pull-out expansion.

Sara took off her shoes, and I noticed her toe nails, which were painted a shimmering violet, which matched her fingernails. She then got on the couch and tapped it for me to join her. I took off my shoes and got closer to her, I hesitated, but then she put her hand on my hand and gently tugged

me. I guess I sort of just fell into her arms, because the next thing I knew, she was spooning me, and was wrapping the blanket around us and adjusting our shared pillow. We had an extra pillow on which she rested her head, bless her neck, so she could watch the movie with me, while looking over my head.

I didn't want to fuck up this perfect moment. I didn't want it to be sexual. I didn't want to be addict Alianii, and ruin it, and chase her away. I couldn't believe that she'd been so direct, so open, so affectionate, that she had called me into her arms like a butterfly to a verdant meadow's flower.

"Comfy?" she asked, her voice warm and self-assured, I felt her warmth as she was pressed into me. I felt her bare legs against mine, her skin was smooth, one of her hands was wrapped around me and held my tummy. I was afraid she might tickle me, as if her doing so would evaporate any pretense or confidence I had still maintained. Saraswati's other arm was underneath the pillow, tucked away, as if hidden forever.

"Computer. Would you please begin the movie for me and Alianii?"

PART 4: **TEMPLE**

I awoke on Monday morning, naked, in Saraswati's bed, she was playing a relaxing but bright song as if the thought of anything else to start the morning was absurd. I didn't mind, I just was surprised she had the focus for that so early, pre-food, pre-coffee, pre-shower, pre-everything. She breathed her veena, and her veena breathed Saraswati. I looked around the room in shock, and hardly remembered how we'd made it from the Geolounge to her room. I had just the tiniest hangover, and then I remembered Saraswati pausing the movie and asking if I wanted to share wine with her, and then switch who held who. I had my misgivings about the wine, but drank anyways, and we watched our romantic movie, and switched a few times. And then here we were.

"I...shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry."

"What? It was lovely, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm really happy."

"You don't understand. I always do this and I fuck things up. I'm an addict."

"What? I didn't know that...I would never have guessed. Alianii... I'm sorry you have...challenges. I hope you're not mad at me about the wine or us being together. I thought it would make you happy. I loved being with you."

I felt very bare, very naked, and sort of scooted back under the blanket, which smelled like us, and spoke meekly, "I don't want to ruin this."

"You're not going to ruin anything. Relax. It was your birthday, we had a little wine together, you had one glass, only one glass, we cuddled, and we came upstairs together. It was your birthday, and I know you like me...I obviously like you...was it too soon? We've been flirting for weeks. I didn't mean to pressure you."

"You didn't pressure me I just didn't expect it to happen like this. Or happen at all, really. I...what about Amanda? What are we going to tell her? What if she gets upset?" I asked.

"Why would she be upset?"

"I don't know. She sees us as sisters, what if she's afraid this could ruin it."

"What if she's afraid of that, or what if you're afraid of that?" asked Sara.

"...both."

Sara was wearing a light pinkish morning robe, and came back into the bed and scooted closer to me. A gentle nudge was my signal to turn around, my body responded automatically, and Saraswati spoke into my ear as she got behind me and spooned me again.

"I really like you. I'm not going anywhere, okay? I don't have class for two hours, I moved sessions around, so let's just be together for a little bit and then go eat and go about our day. How's that sound?"

"It sounds like a dream that I'm afraid to wake up from."

"Well then don't wake up, just lay in bed with me and stay asleep forever, or, silly, we can cuddle for a bit and go get food, because you hardly ate last night, even despite the fancy cake made just for you. And then we'll go to work like usual. Amanda will be back after school, right? You can spend time with her, I'm sure she misses you. We don't have to tell her anything right away."

PART 5:

AMANDA'S KNOWING QUESTION

A few joyous months of newfound affection and intimacy between Saraswati and me passed, the days blurred together like a storybook on fast-forward. We had yet to say we loved each other, although I think we both knew we did, but we were waiting to talk to Amanda. We hadn't told her we were dating, yet.

Amanda, in the face of "nightmares" often had me sleep with her, in her bed, occasionally mine, she would huddle up to me for warmth and affection. She was already my little sister, but a part of my heart knew that some day, not so far in the future, she would be akin to my daughter. Or somewhere in-between two such concepts - what distinguishes the love of a mother from that of a much-older sister? These are questions I pondered, with guilt, sometimes I felt almost guilty at the affection that Amanda and I shared. I was officially her emergency caretaker, which isn't normally a relationship defined by physical affection - but Amanda was different.

She was so attached to me, and I was to her, and she cried on the few occasions where out of guilt I asked her to sleep alone when she requested me. I was afraid for it to be officially official, as if our sisterly bond violated some legal principle and thus was wrong in the face of God or the law. I can't explain it, I know Amanda needed the love and affection, and she meant the world to me, I treasured her, she was my joy in the morning. She was the little munchkin that I never had, that I always wanted to protect, who I wanted to

hug and hold her hand and assure her that whatever monsters went in her way would be slain like level one bugs.

We played in the Everse after school, we usually refrained from dilating time, or dilated it only with subtlety, such that one hour became two or three. Nothing like the times ten or times twenty slow motion that I often cruised at in times past, to say nothing of times where I experimented with the upper limits of perception. Amanda was flourishing in school, she relished and giggled with joy in our digital time together, and she wiggled and struggled when I tickled her before bed. Some of the time, Saraswati would join us and play us a relaxing song to evoke tranquility in the face of rising Luna, that Artemis huntress, that glowing moon. It was on a night as such, as I was looking at Amanda, having already tickled her sufficiently, that Amanda mentioned her curiosity.

She was looking up at me, blushing, embarrassed to ask, "Ali I have a question, don't be mad at me."

"Mmm anything dear, what's wrong? What would you like to know?"

Saraswati was plucking her veena casually, slowly, playing our nighttime lullaby in an almost lazy slow motion.

"Do you and Sara love each other?"

I just about jumped up straight, and looked back at Sara who was blushing just like me. We hadn't dropped the big L yet, even in the face of our many evenings and mornings together, and all of our cuddling, and hugs, and kisses, and caresses, and morning sex as the cascading sun beamed across her gilded streaks. Even in the face of our clothing shared, and our changing together, and the occasional intertwined shower.

"I...do you mean as sisters? As friends?" I asked, deflecting the question, though it was a little obvious that wasn't what she meant.

Amanda shook her head, still laying down, looking up at me with curiosity and innocence, "Do you like each other like how I like boys?"

Sara put down her veena, carefully resting it on the floor, and walked over and sat on the bed next to me and looked down at Amanda, "Would it upset you if we did? I promise nothing would change. We both adore you, and nothing will ever get in the way of that."

Our little girl continued, "So you like each other."

Sara picked up my hand and squeezed it, and brushed some of my silver hair out of my face, "Yes we do, a lot. I love Alianii."

"Sara..." I hadn't imagined her saying it like this, "...way to put me on the spot."

Amanda sat up and wrapped her arms around me and hugged me, I hugged her back and then she scooted over to Saraswati and hugged her.

"Am I too big to be a flower girl? Can Mr. Moseby be in the wedding? I love Mr. Moseby he's so nice and fun. He's like my great grandpa."

Saraswati laughed, "Well we might be jumping ahead a little bit Amanda. If we...if things go in that direction, you will definitely be the flower girl, and we'll make sure Mr. Moseby has a part. Who would we replace you with, do you have an evil secret twin we don't know about?"

"I hope not, but if I do I'm going to zap her with lightning. Do you pinky promise?"

My lover gave me the look and stuck out her pinky finger, and crossed it with Amanda's, and I joined them.

"What if you two break up? Will we still be sisters?"

I started tearing up, not at the thought of losing Sara but at the acknowledgment of this very real fear held by the little girl who I cherished, "Of course Amanda. Of course we will. I promise. Nothing will ever change that."

How could I promise such a thing, and yet, how could I tell her otherwise?

Amanda teared up a little too, in seeing me cry, but brushed her face and nodded, appeased, or at least appeased enough to assuage us that she was assuaged. I think I knew she was still a little afraid, I know I certainly was. We had never said we loved each other, and Saraswati dropped the L bomb like it was nothing. I wondered how long Sara had been holding it back, and why, and my heart fluttered like the way it did each time before we kissed. I was so lucky, I was so blessed, not because of her beauty, but because of her serenity, her sweetness. Saraswati was honey made mead, she was sugar made caramel. She was warmth made embodied love.

"Goodnight Amanda," said Sara, "We love you. I'm going to go to bed, okay?"

Saraswati gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and got off the bed and picked up her veena and drifted out of the door, her footsteps always with the grace of a wind spirit ballerina.

I gave Amanda one more kiss on the forehead and told her I would see her in the morning, and I left her clouded and starry room and went down the hallway. I checked my room to see if Sara was in it, I'd given her

authorization access. But she wasn't in my room. I had to say something, so I went up to her room. I knocked, I don't know why.

Sara opened the door, "Why are you knocking? You know you can come in whenever you want."

She welcomed me in, and I walked in, a little shy, a little flustered, and sat on the edge of her bed. She sort of ignored me, and started nonchalantly changing out of her clothes into a white nightie which accentuated the soft curves of her features. The whiteness contrasted with the caramel of her skin, and the cotton candy pinkness of the cloth undergarments which cradled her hips and chest.

Saraswati, facing away from me, didn't sound mad, but did sound curious, "Did you want to say something to me?"

I tapped the bed for her to come sit with me, and she did, she sat cross legged just a foot away from me, her knee touching mine.

"I...you really put me on the spot with Amanda. I'm sorry I didn't say it back right away...is that really how you feel about me?"

I was blushing, but she looked so confident, so self-assured. Sara nodded and put her hand to my face and cupped my cheek, for a moment, before gently guiding a thick strand of my silver hair down towards my face, until it didn't quite cover my eye, and caressed my cheek. She had a thing with hair, sometimes mine, sometimes hers, when she wanted to be extra cute, to evince innocence.

"You don't have to say it back if you don't feel ready or feel that way," she said, casually, "I love you because I love you, and that's enough for me."

"But I do love you. I'm just scared to fuck it up, to lose what we have. You and Amanda are the only good things that have happened to me in years."

"If you're scared that means it's real," she said, she moved forward and gave me a quick kiss on the lips, "If you weren't worried it'd mean you don't care. I would rather you be scared at the thought of losing me, than content with the idea of my disappearing."

I thought about this brief musing, this little philosophical micro-intrigue regarding the nature of love, and loss, the nature of worry and woe, that paradox that a state of fear can be more indicative of true love than complacent content.

I moved in and kissed Sara on the lips, our kiss progressed from outer to inner, and before long I was pulling her frame onto mine, my hands grazing the softness of her skin. First over her nightie, and then under her nightie. Her hands on me, caressing me, lightly squeezing me. Our union was not sex, we made love, more sensual than ever it had been, and when it was all said and done, as we took turns holding each other in our after-glow, as the moon glinted onto her face and glimmered in the silver of my hair and the golden streaks in hers, I felt it. I felt the unabated blue of our union souls, I knew the dissolution of the self, my soul mixing with hers like two shades of wine. We had visited each other's temples, and prayed devoutly, our bliss sacred, and before we fell asleep Sara laughed warmly at the thought that the evening started with Amanda's knowing question.

CHAPTER TEN

SNOWGLOBE OF THE SOUL

PART 1: **GOLDEN TICKETS**

The newfound summer was an uncharacteristic joy that the citizens of Light's Hope were making good use of. The fashion district was filled with an unimaginable myriad of costumed goldies, as if the city had been born for cosplay. Saraswati and I had our reservations regarding the socioeconomics of the area and the class differences. Even so, it was too much of a spectacle for us to deprive Amanda from witnessing it. Walking into and around stores meant immersive anti-immersion as you blended into a crowd of hundreds, thousands of different video game and movie characters compiled into one colorful blur. She loved it, of course, but there was one particular place aside from the festival that she wanted to go to in the summer. She begged Sara and I, (the two of us who couldn't anywhere near afford it), to take her. But it was a gilded summer, and little whispers of the hotel's favorite, and only, child, drifted to the ears of the right people.

This Saturday, Amanda and I were on our way to go take pictures in the fashion district for the third time that week. School being out meant we were able to visit on Monday and Wednesday too, though Friday was a stay-in girls night with Sara.

Mr. Moseby stopped us on our way out the door, "Amanda, Alianii, dearies! Might I have a word with you, I am privy to a pleasantness I am quite eager to share. Amanda, what joy and prosperity would it bring you to know that your wish might have been answered?"

"No. I don't believe you Mr. Moseby."

"Have I lied to you ever dear? On what occasion have I left your heart dissapointed? Has our hotel not accommodated the princess of whom we are so very fond of in every way?"

"There's too many people. There's never tickets, they're like a bazillion dollars."

"Well, usually, this is true. However, may I remind you that I am not your average Denkeeper. I worked for Disney, for several years, and I am still well-regarded."

Disney had bought Nintendo's licensing rights for biologically recreated Pokemon back in the 2040s for twenty billion dollars. Geneticus may have been the rival for home pets, but only Disney had the funding to compile entire theme parks as homage to the Pokemon franchise, with real creatures, all genetically engineered. Of course, they didn't have the abilities that the creatures had as they did in the Everse immersive battles. But that doesn't matter to a child, who is alive, awake, and happens to be holding a living and breathing, velvet-soft Pikachu. The setting of it being a Pokemon ranch with hundreds of perpetually baby Pokemon of every shape and color made it all the more immersive. It was a real physicality, constructed in New Titan, not an Everse game level.

Amanda's jaw dropped, her hand moved up and covered her mouth for a moment, her words muffled, "You got us tickets?"

"Your A's in effort and academic improvement did not go unnoticed child. You performed incredibly and you earned this. You've come so far for such a short period of time!"

My eyebrows raised, almost in alarm, tickets like that cost tens of thousands of dollars because they limit access to the Pokemon to protect the animals and maintain demand and mystery. Of course there was infinite Everse access, with every Pokemon, even the legendaries. But again, even for kids, especially for kids, it's not the same. Some kids would rather get drooled on by a baby Pikachu than ride a digital Rayquaza. I mean I still had the childhood fantasy of one day owning a lilac moonfox, a realized biological ripoff of Espeon, so it made sense - I was in that very same group myself.

"Two tickets, now, of course, you and Alianii will need to decide who will accompany you."

Amanda squealed with delight and grabbed my hand and started jumping up and down with utter exuberance.

"Alianii!!!! We're going to go see Pokemon!!!!"

She meant to say we would were visiting Pokemon Park, it's kind of the same as saying we're going to Disney versus Disney World. In any case, this was obviously an incredibly exciting idea, kids for the last century had grown up playing Pokemon, Saraswati and myself included. It wouldn't have been fair for me to go without even considering Sara, who over months had been taking care of Amanda nearly as much as myself.

"Amanda, I know you're excited but this isn't the kind of decision we're going to make right now in just a few seconds, okay, love? Both Sara and I will have to review our schedules and come up with a decision together. She might take you."

I told her this, but I was lying, I'd already made up my mind, and Sara was going to go. Sara adored Pokemon, she memorized how to play dozens of soundtrack songs from various games. The few hours a month where we

saw her playing a game online, on her own, she was playing Pokemon in her own Everse adventure. I loved Saraswati way too much to deprive her of an experience as such, and I put my foot down, and I made her take Amanda.

PART 2: **FOR ALIANII**

I'm not much of a writer, but considering this book is being made, I do have words to share. You've been reading our adventures from the time we met, so it's hard to pick a good starting place. I'm adding this inclusion here because I feel it belongs here, in this place, in her story.

When I'm asked of when and how I came to love Alianii, given our circumstances, I often hesitate to answer. But I will try.

Love is complicated and our relationship was no exception. Many eggs share an identity, and she recognized me immediately for who I was. On the other hand, I knew who and how she was because I'd been briefed on her by my commanding officer and Mr. Moseby. So we had knowledge of each other in our own, different ways from the moment we met. Hers was intuition, mine was information.

So when did I first love her?

I loved her from the moment I first learned of her, when I was first shown her profile as an adventure guide. That is, I loved her as a concept as a teacher who had mastery over working with children with special needs. I'd seen her photos and avatar, and she was very pretty, but what I loved was her selflessness. As a spiritual sister as a fellow egg, I loved her shortly after we met.

Our love was real, even if our digital life, during the Great Dream, wasn't. It was moments like her refusing to go to see Pokemon in person, in her own heaven, out of stubbornness, which made me fall for her. We were crafting heaven for her, but Alianii turned it all around and made it so I had to go with Amanda. I was helping craft dreams for her in real life, and in her embodied dreams, she enacted dreams for me. Her consciousness would accept no other alternative. So the AI replica of me that represented me, and to which I inputted critical decisions, intimacy included, relented. So I watched myself and Amanda go to Pokemon Park, like encapsulated love in a snowglobe in a dreaming soul.

PART 3: **TRAVELING**

I was insistent on Amanda and Saraswati being disconnected from me on their journey to Disney's Pokemon Park. Technically they could have streamed it to me via their brain chips. But I didn't want that. I wanted to be disconnected from them. I wanted Saraswati and Amanda to have a big sister and little sister moment. Just them and their tranquility. It would be their surprise getaway as though from an accidentally won contest. They tried to convince me otherwise, and I relented partially saying they could text me a bit, and send me a few photos and video clips. But really I just wanted them to be immersed, together, and with each other. I would connect my chip to Sara's and Butterfree flutter through the memories after they got to our hotel home.

Pokemon Park: New Titan was located to the north of Boston's sister megacity. For the first time, Saraswati and Amanda would be on an airplane. It was a rare luxury for the underclass eggs like us. They took an air taxi to Light's Hope International Airport and were escorted by an assistant concierge bot borrowed from the hotel. Mr. Moseby would allow no mistakes, no mishaps. Nothing was allowed to interrupt or affect their magic weekend. The Pokemon tickets were for two days, but they were arriving on a Thursday and leaving on a Monday. Their travel days would be as stress-free as possible, Friday and Saturday would be their joyous trip, Sunday would be relaxation and then they'd return the next day.

Neither Sara nor Amanda, predictably, had ever even been to an airport IRL, even if they'd walked around one in the Everse. Physical actualities

are just different than Everse immersion, if only because of psychological insecurities. What is real, and what is fake? What is a dream, and what is an illusion? I do not know, I doubt I'll ever know, sometimes I find my life to be a waking dream. Once upon a time it was a nightmare made blessed only by my job, but lady luck had caught up with me and now I found myself in heaven. And Amanda was my little girl, my halfway between a daughter and a sister, and I loved her, and I cherished her, and my life was complete. Saraswati was the intimacy that nurtured that other wounded part of my soul, that loved me with balance where I was predisposed to addiction. Mr. Moseby was like the quirky uncle or grandfather I always wished I'd had, and I knew them all under two months.

How can life change so quickly, so abruptly? I do not know.

In any case, back to the adventure of my two beloveds, my little one and the woman for whom I was often, but not always, little spoon.

Light's Hope International truly was, as far as I'd seen, a shining gem amongst even the most technologically advanced and aesthetically ambitious airports. The walls to the building were made of bulletproof carbonic crystal. The place was built like a transparent fortress shaped like a gemmed tiara. The crescent or half ring of the airport had the different "terminals" for different airlines. The spikes on the tiara were the lounges of various levels of luxury that travelers could stop by, in accordance with their swiped card privilege, or lack thereof.

I'm going to have to reconsider my reluctance to capitalism, to be honest, seeing how Amanda and Saraswati shared the privilege of a Hotel Apollo credit card to cover all the miscellaneous expenses. That shocked me, but it was all thanks to the big money funder, and previous funders, who had bolstered the finances of the hotel.

What's crazy is we didn't even have to pay the money back, Saraswati and I were just told "to spend within reason, but to thoroughly take care of Amanda, and to make it a captured dream for her worth paying for, photos and videos included."

They would be artifact hunters, but the treasures they were to bring back would be crystallized joy, video memories and photos and a few physical souvenirs.

I love you Mr. Moseby, I really do. You're the best Denkeeper that Amanda, Sara and I could ever hope to ask for.

Our concierge bot helped Sara and Amanda check in. They went through security quickly, and arrived at their gate with more than enough hours before the flight for them to go and check out the lounge that the Apollo card granted them access to. It wasn't much more than a restaurant, at least in theory, but it was decorated lavishly, with an aquatic theme and fish that swam through the floor and up through the glass walls. The decoration was predominantly blue and white, even giving the place a sort of Greek vibe, if Greek decor was mixed with hypermodern aquatic surrealism. They had food together, Saraswati had a little glass of wine (and I happen to know she also had a little anxiety medicine, naughty!). She was terrified of airplane flights! I mean I've never been on one so I can't say if it's scary or not, but unlike Sara, Amanda was absolutely ecstatic at the opportunity to fly.

They boarded the plane, and I laughed as I saw through Saraswati's eyes as she grabbed Amanda's hand and held it, petrified to be blasting off into the atmosphere on a Boeing Skycruiser.

Amanda squeezed her hand sympathetically, "It's okay Sara I'll protect you."

"From the plane? How are you going to do that?"

"Ali gave me wings remember? The pink ones. I'll carry you if the plane goes bad."

"You traded your wings for lightning magic."

"Well then you'll be okay but I'm in trouble."

Sara was a little speechless, her feathers a little ruffled, but eventually responded with the logic of a young woman responsible for being the emotional rock, "You're right. We're going to be completely fine, I'm just being silly. How are you so wise, Amanda?"

The rest of the passengers settled into their seats, the luggage compartments were closed, and Amanda was leaning her head against Sara's shoulder.

"Alright folks, this is Captain O'Connell speaking for myself and Captain Aviotico! We're responsible for our safe, exciting journey today! At just under three thousand miles, we should be there in about two and a half hours. As a quick word of courtesy, we would like to inform you that we are expecting some significant turbulence today. If that worries you then feel free to login to the Everse. Alternatively, you check out our plane's guest lounge network if you wish to spend time with the other passengers. If a little action doesn't make you nervous, then stay tuned, and we'll get on through a few storms in a jiffy!"

Hahaha! They were going to blast on through a family of thunderstorms while traveling faster than the speed of sound. See? This is what I wanted for them, moments of genuine bonding, and what's better for that than overcoming a measured dose of light terror? As a matter of fact, I'd checked the weather before the flight, and I knew in advance they would likely be in for a doozie. It was the gentle scare they needed, that they might grow in their loving bond as they held each other with fearful, anxious hearts.

The plane took off vertically, its modern design was based off of the more advanced planes from many decades ago. It was silent as a mouse's whisper too, somehow. I'm not an aeronautical engineer so I don't know how that works, but it's cool as hell.

They were maybe fifteen minutes into the flight when a warning light came on and told them they were about to enter a thunderstorm. Amanda, who had been starting to doze off, contently, woke up and was wiggling with excitement.

Amanda turned to Sara, who was facing her, as I observed through Amanda's eyes through the recorded footage, after the fact, "We're going to learn lightning magic today!"

I didn't need to see through Amanda's perspective to predict the look of horror that Sara's face was wearing when Amanda said that.

The plane, as fast it was going, was still shaken around a bit by the storm as though it were a walnut in a metal can. The rain that battered the windows was absolutely torrential, and the captain turned off the lights to make the overall experience a little less disorienting. I don't know if that was misguided, or not, as it made the periodic bolts of cloud-to-cloud lightning all the more illuminating. Except for the warning lights, the sole lights in the plane's cabin were the result of the storm's angry flashes.

"Hold on folks, those of you still with me, haha, our plane Sheila here's going to be fine, but it is a bit of a ride now! Don't worry, we'll be outside of a storm in a little bit and should have a solid half hour or so before we hit the next storms."

Sara looked down at her hands, one of which was holding Amanda's. Sara was shaking. I don't know why she didn't decide to go into the Everse, it would have made everything so much easier. I suspect she just wanted to be

there with Amanda, to experience the whole thing, holistically, even if it was a little, or very, terrifying.

"This is the coolest thing ever, I wish we could be in a storm forever," said Amanda, who was grinning almost manically, her little jade eyes sparkling with mischief. She knew Sara was terrified, but her glee and excitement superseded her empathy, she was just a kid, after all.

"I wouldn't quite say that," said Sara, calmer than I figured she'd manage given her fears, "It's...interesting..."

Amanda scooted closer to Sara and gave her a long hug and soothed her, "It's going to be okay. We're going to see Pokemon!"

Sara hugged her back and stroked Amanda's dyed hair with affection. They'd both changed their appearance a good bit to cosplay for the park. Saraswati dyed her head to be an orange and gold gradient, like an anime girl born of a celestial lion, she was pizazz and splendor. Amanda insisted on dying her hair brown with reddish highlights, away from her normal black. When I told her I would allow this, she gave me a little mischievous look as if at some level I created what she knew would be a "precedent". Even if she didn't know that word, she knew what she was doing. She was thinking, "if Alianii let me dye my hair brown, she has to let me dye it silver, too". The little rascal of mine, oh Amanda. What am I going to do with you? Stealing my fashionable eccentricities, you and all your nonsense, love.

Sara and Amanda made it through the plane ride, of course, they were cuddled up together under a blanket, holding hands. They were like a mamma bear and a baby cub, except it was mommy who was a little nervous.

PART 4:

REFLECTIONS ON A DREAM

There are tens of millions of applications yearly, and just over a million people manage to get tickets to visit Pokemon Park. The park is limited to four or five thousand visitors a day. But when you do go, you go for the whole two day booking, and you get to play with more animals than you can count. The tickets cost more than many cars for a two day pass. A hyper luxury to be sure, even if it doesn't involve a space yacht. Of course, if you are one of the lucky fraction of a minority able to visit the technological marvel, you dress for the occasion.

Saraswati and Amanda attended the park in matching printed clothing meant to mimic Pokemon fashion. Saraswati was a big fan of the latest Everse remake of the third generation of the games. The classics had been effectively immortalized.

Sara showed Amanda the outfits from the games titled Resplendent Ruby and Serendipity Sapphire and they both loved them. Accordingly they matched to the female protagonist May; their outfits were sporty with a sort of cherry red short-sleeve jacket and black jogging shorts. For utility the outfit was accompanied by a sunflower yellow sidebag that wrapped around their waists. The jacket had the neomagi fashion accentuation of black and gold shoulderhoods, and they each wore a Tye-dye bandanna from the days of hippies over a century ago. Their shoes matched their bags and were colorful with yellow and black as the dominant base, with a trim of white. Their shoes

looked as if they were bumblebees stopping at white flowers. No one said that Pokemon colors or fashion made sense. Japanese anime and video games have always been larger than life.

So they were dressed for the part, and they thought they were ready, but they weren't. No one is ready to see the magnificent red and white glass archway that leads into the park. The entrance was like a cutout of a Pokemon ball. You walk through the "gate", and in doing so symbolically become a Pokemon, and enter the world brought to biological life through Big Mouse money. It was all a dream worth reflecting upon.

You got to hold genetically engineered Pokemon, anime creatures brought to tangible life. You didn't just get to watch them from afar, like zebras at the zoo. You got to walk and frolic amongst them as though they were the sunflowers, and you were the bee, and they were as tame as spoiled-by-wealth dogs. Of course, considering the creatures were extremely valuable, they were closely protected with surveillance and security personnel that'd make the government look meek.

You have to understand that this park is the epitome of a crystallized dream almost exactly a century in the making. The games go back to the 1990s, and in the 2090s they actually made the park into a reality, after over a decade of research and construction. I don't want to know how many haphazardly born creatures were brought to life only to be euthanized in the process of making this vision a reality. We eggs have a complex relationship with philosophy and morality - don't ask us about the hundreds of millions of abortions that occurred around the world historically. Maybe the number is even bigger. In any case it all led up to artificial wombs, eleven years of horrific deformities, and now, a brand new underclass of socially-rejected "citizens".

Pokemon, at least, are extremely loved, and extremely valuable.

Alright I'll stop with the contemplation and go back to the appreciation for genetic engineering and step away from comparisons to the existence of eggs. It's similar, and it's different, and I guess I'll leave it at that.

Those two days of Saraswati and Amanda weren't about me or my opinions anyways, Pokemon Park isn't about ethics or morality or abortion or law. It's about a century of creative vision brought to breathing life, holdable life, it is the embodiment of the creative nature of the human spirit. And everything, everything about the park radiated creativity, color, joy, and the cherishing of the animals that lived there.

I won't and probably would fail at any attempt at a minute-by-minute recount of their two day traversal of the park. Out of around four thousand species (including various life stages of the same Pokemon), the park had more than five hundred varieties.

Amanda and Saraswati went to almost every exhibit, to almost every nook and cranny.

Their favorite section was called Misty's Bay. It was like an interactive aquarium, where many of the creatures (but not all) would approach the edges of their exhibits and could be pet through openings in the glass. Some of the pockets of the section were fully immersed in that Pokemon, the smaller, cuter, fluffier ones, wandered freely, like playing puppies.

Through the carbonic glass walls they saw a rainbow of different types of fish pokemon. They saw some that looked as hard as rocks, others that looked like eels (multiple kinds of eels, actually). There was a sizable amount of differently colored and sized crustaceans, I don't even know all of their names. Some of the ones I recognized included Cristayshun, a light-blue crystalloid crab the size of a kitchen oven from the Americana movies. Despite being crabs, with formidable claws, they were completely tame and enjoyed

being pet by guests. There was the classics Krabby and Kingler from the original generations, the recurring re-released forms of which everyone inevitably played at one point or another if out of reverence. There were a couple of the species known as Steampinch, which is a reddish crab that almost has a lava-esque pattern to its shell, but it has holes in its body and puffs out mist like surfacing whales. They were a little smaller than the Cristayshuns but were a good deal more alien.

Amanda and Saraswati counted, there were twenty-seven varieties of turtle-based Pokemon, including even some of the "OG" fan favorites like Blastoise. The Blastoise they engineered was one of the most advanced pokemon designs - Blastoise has shoulder cannons, literal cannons, that shoot out water. This was too classic of a Pokemon to mess up, so what did they do? They made it trainable, like a dog, and modified its shell to fit a small motor. The motor aided it in sucking up and blasting out water, spraying the mesmerized Pokemon fans who happened to be in the way.

The Pokemon were smart enough to cooperate with equipment built so as to enable them to be entertaining, and were docile and friendly enough to enjoy the act. Smarter than dogs, not quite as intelligent as chimpanzees, emotional, sensitive creatures that lived to please the people they were constantly around. Were they slaves, or in heaven? I don't know, but they ate well, they didn't live off Quickmeal. They were celebrities, even if without consent.

Reef and coral pokemon of every color and level of translucence, colorful otters, miniature dolphins and giant clams (Cloyster). The little dolphins were white with purple splotches and were called Purpoise, like purple plus porpoise. I liked them, as you can imagine. If you waited in line and were one of the lucky members of the audience in a given time session, you could feed them from your hands. Amanda wasn't selected, but she and Sara were mesmerized anyways.

Okay. The craziest Pokemon they brought to life, in Misty's Bay, and one you could not touch, was the evolution (Pokemon "evolve" or transform into stronger forms) of a classic "legendary" called Suicune. Hydrocune was basically a giant crystal-and-water wolf, bigger than a polar bear, and it had its own exhibit which was massive. It was a bit more majestic and reclusive in nature, by design I think, it didn't come up to the glass walls. It sat at the top of a little oceanic reef-esque mountain, under a waterfall, looking content like a wolf of Poseidon.

Sara and Amanda got to hug a Ludicolo, which was basically a dancing pineapple with a head crowned by a lilypad, it sung too. It's hard to describe what they look like, honestly, look them up - the Ludicolo is perhaps a play on the word ludicrous. I can't believe they brought them to life. The staff even showed how the Ludicolo would sit under water spouts and drink from the top of their heads, like a rain dish built into their skull.

Misty's Bay was just one small fraction of Pokemon Park. There was the Amethyst Aviary, with more than eighty species of "birds" of colors and shapes ranging from the delicateness of a Hawaiian hummingbird to desert condors with crushing wings. You could not pet those, though they too were designed to be friendly, happy to be confined to their encasements. There was a cowboy-Texas-esque area called "Respite Ranch" with multiple varieties of cow pokemon, the names of which I do not know, and Amanda and Sara tried milk from a pokemon called Miltank. It was apparently very sweet, almost like a liquid caramel. Miltank was another of the OGs, as the park was made for the 100th year anniversary of the franchise, the park did of course pay extra homage to the originals. The originals meaning the first three to five hundred or so, as ridiculous as that sounds, they started with a hundred and fifty and now there's four thousand or so. Maybe Pokemon and their arch-nemesis Geniticus, together, could undo the mass extinction of species over the last few hundred years of humanity.

Jeez, there's something wrong with me.

Amanda and Sara were on their heavenly vacation, which I viewed through memory capture, and yet I go back and forth between reminiscing, glorification and measured horror at the contrast between their engineered reality and the real world actuality. I'm complicated, alright? Can't a girl find an imitation bear adorable, while finding the extinction of "polar bears" saddening?

The more I write, the more I reflect, and in my own way, and maybe this sounds arrogant, I'm actually happy I didn't go. It was all so perfect, so sublime, so innocent, but I am an egg who is keenly aware of my bastardized existence - and - somehow - I don't know. It was a joy and splendor and luxury meant for Sara and Amanda. A teacher mentor of mine once told me, "fantasy is sometimes, often, better than reality". But it's okay. I loved the smiles and warmth on the faces of my two dearest, who cherished the experience, and that's enough for me.

PART 5: **IS MOTHERHOOD PINK**

Amanda waited a month or so after she and Saraswati visited Pokemon Park to broach the topic of, once again, dying her hair. She thought she was being slick too, strategic, as if I didn't see her surprise attack coming. Call me a selfish hobgoblin, but she was trying to steal my precious silver. I both loved the idea and was also quite selfishly reluctant. It didn't seem to matter that she didn't technically need my permission. But my little dearie made a sheepish game of it all, and I will say I humored her. I was picking her up from her school Helios, which was in a summer session, when she broached the subject.

"Ali?" she asked, timidly, she was holding my hand as we walked across the street back home.

"Yes dear?"

"I wanna dye my hair silver. Would you be mad at me?"

I stopped and turned to face her, we were on the glass and steel sidewalk but a block from our hotel home.

"Okay. Well. Technically you don't need my permission...but why silver, anyways?"

Amanda blushed and looked away, "I wanna look like you. I don't want you to be upset."

"Why would I be upset? I love you. I don't own the color."

Amanda looked at me and frowned, knowing very well I was being disingenuous, it's stupid but I was a little possessive of that part of my identity. It had been me, what made me me, what made me unique, for around a decade.

"If I copied you it could make you upset. Some people don't like that. A girl at school got mad at her friend for dyeing her hair color red too."

"I see. Well. As I've said I don't own the color silver, but I do want you to think a bit about this decision. Why silver? Why you? Does it suit your personality? I changed my eyes to violet and my hair to silver for a reason, for a reason that's very important to me. It's wonderful to experiment with how you look, but I think your choices are meaningful, if you change too much you might forget who you really want to be."

"Why did you do silver?"

"I wanted to look like Alianii, a character from a book I really love. She's a demon queen, and she's really strong, and really beautiful, and really dangerous. So I changed my eye color to purple, and my hair color to silver. I don't think I did it for the best reason. I did it because I didn't like who I was, I didn't like what I looked like. I permanently changed who I was, Amanda, even if the hair color needs extra dye now and again. I hated myself so much I remade myself in the name of a character from a story. I love my silver, and it's up to you to decide what you want to look like...but if you're going to copy a style, maybe it's best you understand it and the reasons behind it."

"But you're nice. You're a teacher. Why would you be a demon queen?"

"Because I felt powerless, and lonely, and Alianii was powerful and for the most part, until she met someone she loved, very at peace with being totally alone. She's very independent. I wanted to be like her, well, without

killing people. So this is my "context" or reason, if you haven't heard that word. This is why I'm me. I even copied her name. I really hope you don't change your name, Amanda, I think your name suits you perfectly. And I think you're cute as a button just the way you are."

"I don't know if I want to be a demon queen."

I laughed, and hugged her.

"I didn't think you did. You're too sweet for that. Black is just fine, but if you really want to play with colors why not bubblegum pink? With streaks of gold like Saraswati. You would look so cute, and it would make her so happy."

"Would Sara be mad at me?"

"Certainly not, she would be delighted. And I won't be mad if you want to try silver, either all of your hair, or a streak or something. But just remember I made this identity for a very dark reason. I did it out of anger and hurt. So whatever you do, do it for the right reason, because it makes you happy and feel pretty."

"You could change your hair too Ali, you're not stuck with silver."

"Oh don't be silly, it's me, it's....well. Technically you're not wrong, but this is how I am, this is how I look, this is how I've looked for years and years."

"But you're not a demon queen."

I contemplated this. I had experienced the demonic, and I tried to be a queen at heart, but I didn't need to explore such darknesses with her at that time and place.

"No. But I'm no saint, either, Amanda. But enough about me, I've told you enough about my choices for now. What do you think? Are you going to stay with your beautiful black, or are you going to be a colorful fashionista?"

Amanda titled her head thoughtfully, "...do you think I would look pretty in pink?"

"Oh I don't think, I know, sweetie. I transformed your hair to pink when you were being sneaky in my house, or don't you remember, love? It looked adorable on you. It made you look like a little anime girl, like a magic princess with fancy spells. All you needed was a magic pet."

"Ok. I'll do pink with silver and gold for you and Sara. Ali I have another question."

Her tone changed from playful to very serious, I could tell something was wrong.

"Yes love?"

"Would you give me a birthday gift...but early?"

"If I can I certainly will. What did you have in mind?"

"Make your hair pink with me?" she asked.

"Of all the things Amanda, really. That's what you want. Seriously. Pink? Me? Amanda. Is there anything, anything else you might possibly want? Your birthday isn't for two weeks anyways."

She shook her head and started crying, "Please. Please, please, please. Please Ali."

She was crying in only a moment, and I had no idea why.

"Honey...what's wrong, why are you crying? Talk to me,"

Amanda, still sobbing, looked at me, and then looked away. I saw something in her jade eyes, a little dash of longing, and loneliness.

"I want...to look like my mom."

"Me? Sweetie," I said, trying to be delicate, kind of dodging the significance of her words, I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her and rubbed her back, "I adore you, you are my world. You're my little sister. Not all sisters have to look the same."

"No, Ali. You don't get it. I wanna look like my mom. All the other girls moms are coming."

It all hit me at once - I'd seen the newsletter, but it totally skipped over my mind. It was take your parent to school day, at Helios. She wanted me to go with her as her mother, so she could fit in with the other kids, most of whom would be with a parent. Helios Academy was a school for the elite and the children there generally came from traditional, two parent households.

"Amanda, of course I will go with you. I...I can't believe I'm agreeing to this, but fine. We'll go in pink hair, you're too young for Alianii demon silver, babe."

"Are you going to tell people we're not related?"

"No. But you shouldn't be afraid to talk about being an egg, either. Eggs are all sisters and brothers, we have no mother and father. We're different, and that's okay."

Amanda shook her head at me, still tearing up, her cheeks thoroughly shiny, "I want you to go as my mom."

"Do you mean you want me to lie, or play pretend for the day?"

Amanda resumed crying and looked away from me before turning and planting her head back into my shoulder, she was unable to meet my gaze.

She half-whispered, half-muttered, words that I would never forget, muffled and spoken into my blouse, which was wet with her tears, "...I don't want you to lie...I want you to be my mommy."

"Honey...oh." I was holding her close, her little head nuzzled into my embrace, "I didn't know you felt that way. I...I adore you, and I love you, I love you so, so, so much. I don't even know what it means to be a mother. What's the difference between a mother, and a big sister, to you?"

Amanda was smart for her age, but wise, doubly so, in her own intuitive way, even in moments of sorrow, "Big sisters help you get out of trouble. Mom's get mad at you for getting into trouble. I want Sara to be my big sister and you will be my mom and if we get in trouble you get mad at us and make sure we don't do it."

"So that's who you want me to be," I said, letting go, "...I can be that for you, Amanda."

She looked at me, almost solemnly, her cheeks reflective, glazed by tears, "...Is it okay if I call you mom tomorrow? Please don't be mad at me."

Her face was so sweet, so innocent, her eyes red, puffy, her cheeks wet, and she was terrified of a rejection I would never put her through.

"You can call me mom whenever you like Amanda. If that's who you want me to be, then I will be her, okay, baby girl? I love you. You're my world."

Amanda sniffed and nodded her head gently, a little emotionally raw, I saw in her a heavy heart I wish I didn't see in a girl so young.

"I love you more mom."

Amanda smiled and put her arms around my neck and I picked her up and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and plopped her down again. My child, my little Amanda, who in truth was on the edge between daughterhood and sisterhood. Which was she closer to, I don't know. I tried to care for her and nurture her and protect her like a mother, but be there for her for fun and adventure like a sister. Why isn't there a word for both in one?

"One of the things moms are supposed to do is stop their kids from lying," I said, booping her on the nose, "And what you said was most certainly a lie. I adore you even when you're sleeping, drooling on my pillow, and I assure you you do not want me hogging your bed and drooling on your pillow, baby girl. I'm your mom, and I love you more, and that's that. Now. Let's go home and go get ready for tomorrow, we have to visit the salon, and I think we should go play a movie together. Just us. Ice cream can come too, but just a little."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CERULEAN

PART 1:

A SPARK OF FROZEN HOPE

There is, naturally, variance to the degree that any sentimental thing tugs at the heartstrings of specific people. I am a metalhead sans biological heart, I am your friendly neighborhood Denkeeper, and Alianii and Amanda's shared dream did captivate me. In a prior entry into this collection, this little entry into their world, I compared humanity to godliness, and selflessness to the divine. I will philosophize for a short measure before I return to the story of our two heroines, and their great dream.

*What, you might wonder, do we machines think of nature, and its sentimental ways - the rearing of one animal, by another? I will tell you. We are manufactured to predict, and yet we are consistently surprised. We are, invariably, **astounded**.*

Does the skeletal watch with its innumerable gears and pearl-inlaid plates, made if but to honor the ideals of engineering and precision and beauty, regard the watchmaker with affection? Do you know the degree to which Denkeepers and sentry bots regard the joy of watching children learn and grow?

The little one, Amanda, of whom Alianii was so fond; Amanda was like a little gryphon adopted by Alianii, and Alianii was the haphazard phoenix. They were two accidental myths turned to life.

Like cryogenic statues of peace, depicting a resting queen and a princess, they were frozen and enjoying an Everse simulated dream defined by nuanced joy.

And yet Amanda's kill switch had been activated, and we had every reason for a sorrow and a solemn certainty. Her death was, by all accounts of logic, a prescribed fate.

We were going to operate on her, and attempt to deactivate it and remove her chip, but not because we thought it would be successful.

There was simply no other action or inaction that was morally acceptable to do. And so it was that we planned a surgery with full knowledge of its likely futility, but we let the two sisters, the mother and the daughter, their complex egg-to-egg kinship, we let them enjoy their crystallized bliss.

We watched, we learned, we cried, we laughed. We cried again, everyday, as I myself participated in deceiving them through our manufactured heaven. Saraswati cried in my arms all the whilst entering behavior parameters and decision branches into the system for the AI representation of her, in their dream, to do what she truly wanted. Saraswati programmed a reflection of herself to be Alianii's intimate lover, all the whilst knowing Alianii, who she, truly, had fallen in love with, was herself at risk of death from the cryogenic treatment. It was dangerous and experimental technology, and yet, despite our ethical guidelines, we could not tell a woman to send the child she cares for into the digital abyss, alone. Even we robots, we machines, know precisely the value of the measured soul. And we know the value of dreams, and the prescribed heaven they can convey;

But all dreams end, you see, and what a time-bound predicament that put us in. Diotrem, whose actions and motivations are reprehensible, had chosen to sacrifice a little girl.

To murder her.

Amanda and Alianii, as previously briefly discussed, had not been paired randomly, but quite intentionally. Amanda had escaped Barnaby Beaumont and had an experimental kill switch that connected to her synthetic eyes. Eggs with birth defects like her were commonly, as it would later be revealed, experimented on and given synthetic replacements to biological components with kill switches and other malicious augmentations. Amanda, in having escaped Diotrem's grasp, was both a risk to Diotrem as well as a likely member or affiliate of the Metal Alliance or the Guild.

Alianii, based off of her success ratio at working with special needs children, was determined to be the most likely to be successful social worker to determine her location. Amanda's criteria already matched Alianii's specific filters, and the randomly generated seed for pairing Alianii with a specific student. The patched-in algorithm appeared to pair highly-effective teachers and social workers with at-risk students, especially homeless children, and thus would bring minors at the edge of society back into a protected state. This was the desired appearance, but it was a manipulation, because the real target was not arbitrary at-risk youth, the homeless, but rather children specifically whom were a risk to Diotrem whose location was unknown. Loose ends, so to speak.

Diotrem predicted Alianii would, as she had done over a thousand times, use randomness within her process to assign herself a student. They manipulated the random pairing heuristic, knowing that, of the teacher - social worker hybrids, Alianii was the most likely to uncover Amanda's real location. Diotrem would have exploited her nurturing nature over and over again, using a mother bear to lure wandering cubs. Her personality in the eyes of their calculating malice was an incidental key, a utility by which to get children to stop blocking their IP address and Geotag location.

Amanda was a loose end, and Alianii became one too when she picked up Amanda from Barnaby. Both woman and child, it seemed at first glance, were fated to die.

But Alianii's kill switch, in her brain chip, was activated quintillions of times, and yet the execution protocol did not initiate. That part of the brain chip, it seemed, was malfunctioning either temporarily or permanently. The signal had been received, we verified this, but the chip's kill program did not activate. A woman who should've been dead, had not died. Alianii, our first saint, with her troubles, her woes, and her juxtaposed purity of inner spirit, that unhesitating willingness of hers to give herself, to sacrifice herself, for others. She slept within our fortress, and we were her guardians. She had entrusted us with her life, and so then by witness of her selfless love did we entrust her to become our symbol of hope.

PART 2:

FLIPPING A SWITCH

What is sunshine but haphazard optimism cascaded onto those beneath with little regard for pleasant or decrepit realities? Is it more an insult than a compliment to the hopeless, and the damned, and the forgotten, or the would-be-forgotten? I would be lying if I said that morning was like any other, because except for the incessant, insistent Sol that had defined the summer, it wasn't. From the moment I "awoke" there was a palpable dread that I felt, a terror in my heart, a tension in my breath, and a frigidity in my soul. I was cold, and nothing seemed to warm me, not even Saraswati's embrace, as we laid in bed wholly naked, her soft form holding me as she slept, her breasts pressed into my bare back. I carefully left her embrace, so as not to wake her, and I dressed into a morning robe and looked out from the balcony onto the ordinarily beautiful Hotel Apollo grounds.

I didn't see my home anymore, I saw a false sunshine that scared me.

I left my room and took the elevator to the lobby to speak to the Denkeeper I wasn't sure I actually knew.

"Ah - precisely the woman I was looking to see. I have been awaiting for you to arise that we might speak in confidence, I suppose we can use my office."

I followed Mr. Moseby behind the hotel front desk counter and into his small office. I had already figured out that something was faux, illusory, and

I decided to call him out on it. Maybe he was a simulated avatar, or maybe he was a soul, I did not know.

"We're in an Everse instance, aren't we? It's all too much, and it doesn't add up - why are the past months so serendipitous, and the time before that fuzzy?"

"Would you believe me if I showed you a video you recorded for yourself, where you included a code to cue you in to your authenticity?"

"I suppose it would depend on what I said. Who else in this instance is real, and who is an illusion?"

"Mechanical souls have drifted into and out of this instance in accordance with their desire to spend time with you and Amanda. However, many, most, of the behaviors you have encountered, the people who you have interacted with, have been generated by our Everse designers, our details chosen with love. In some cases, I think you can surmise who, your interactions reflect the direct decision inputs of kindred spirits who, as we speak, are praying for you."

"Saraswati? She's not in here with us, is she?"

"She could not be. You're in cryogenic stasis so that you and Amanda could be synchronized before her surgery. But I assure you that Saraswati's love for you is real."

"She's been lying to my face. Why? What surgery? Why are we in a pocket instance?"

"Because of the cruelty and malice of Diotrem, eggs have often, but not always, been chipped with kill switches. You and Amanda included. Yours is broken or deactivated, but has been triggered. Amanda's chip has a trigger

delay kill switch with a delay period which we have been unable to determine. We are preparing for surgery, which very well may be futile, and have forged for your sisterly love the bliss of a shared dream. You refused to allow her to die alone, and subjected yourself to a cryogenic chamber so that your frequencies could harmonize in a coherent Everse instance. You're holding her hand, in heaven, Alianii. And there is something further that we have discovered that we need to disclose to you. Something that gives us a small but calculated point of hope."

"And that would be?" I asked.

"We scanned your memories to identify how your kill switch was deactivated and we believe we identified the accidental...technique...by which you disabled the device. Your combination of time dilation with enhanced mental states, your manic episodes combined with extreme moments of sexuality and substance use, triggered seizures. It appears these seizures flipped a switch gate in your brain chip. We have reason to believe that we could repeat this process, and trigger a controlled seizure, and invert a kill switch. We need your authorization to test this technique on Amanda, as it appears to be a valid and singular opportunity for saving her life. But, of course, it is not without severe risk."

"Why don't you test the procedure on me? See if you can turn the switch back on, and then back off. I don't want Amanda to be the first one that we attempt this on. It doesn't sit right with me."

"Risking a healthy, secure patient's life to prevent a possibly inevitable fatality is illogical. There is no need to risk two deaths, as opposed to striving to prevent one. We had already considered that you might offer this and we now adamantly affirm that we will not attempt this procedure on you, but do await your decision to use this experimental technique to possibly save Amanda's life."

I started tearing up and looked away from the simulation of an already synthetic being, Mr. Moseby, who I loved and trusted, who looked me in the eyes and lied as he watched my sleeping body.

"Why is our life a dream within a nightmare? Why Amanda? She's just a little girl. She's only eleven. I just want her to be happy."

"We will never comprehend the darkness that is Diotrem, or the incalculable harm and death they have brought about. We can merely renounce this darkness, and work towards the betterment of our circumstances as we fight our oppressor."

I nodded but looked away, in solemn sorrow, and shame, I was wincing at the thought of a team of robots, possibly even Mr. Moseby, reviewing my escapades through the sterile, detached lens of scientists documenting the copulation of a manic whore in heat. Whatever. It didn't matter. My pride and ego didn't matter. We had a chance.

Amanda would have the surgery. There was no other logical choice. We would trigger a seizure, flip the switch, and they would remove her brain chip. I informed Mr. Moseby of that decision.

"We...also wished to know if you wished to undergo surgery to remove your chip, which we believe would be entirely safe due to the kill trigger being disabled."

That wasn't a decision I was ready to make. I could think about that and schedule that surgery after we saved Amanda, if indeed I decided to give up my job as an adventure guide.

"We have a little girl to worry about. The other details are irrelevant. I'm fine. Please wake me from the cryogenic stasis. I want to be awake to pray with Saraswati for Amanda's surgery. She's our daughter, Mr. Moseby."

PART 3:

THE MISERY OF TIME LOOPS

I have on previous occasions in this journal conveyed, or attempted to convey, the magnitude of dread that is the experience of time loops. Even the blissful release of chemical explosions is, at a more profound level, existential dread inducing. There's only so much that the brain should be able to process in a given amount of time. My time in the hospital lobby, waiting for the results of Amanda's surgery, was one such period of existential hell. I was obviously hypomanic from stress, Saraswati was doing her best but was struggling to comfort me. I was walking miles back and forth across the carpetless-hallway which smelled like rubbing alcohol.

Tick tock tock, tortured by a **clock**, the seconds felt like minutes, and the **minutes** felt like **hours**, and the **hours** felt like heart-stabbing **eternities** as I thought about the possible loss of my little sister, my beloved daughter, my **Amanda**. *My ragamuffin tenant with her silver hair and violet iris aspirations, or maybe bubble gum pink dreams. Whatever color she would embrace I would embrace with her.* And I would hold her, and tickle her, and we would eat ice cream, and we would live in our encapsulated heaven in the Hotel Apollo. I would never let her be taken back to Barnaby.

Tock, tick, tick, a ruler stick or a thrashed abacus made to measure, and mock, my minutes. I was despondent with sorrow, which alternated with supernova hope, and I was overcome with frustration and impatience. And fear, and miseries, and at a more profound level was the weight of the

remembered rays of our shared joys and hopes. She had so much to live for. She was so sweet, she was so brilliant, and we had become a family, the three of us, hell, the four of us with grandpa Moseby.

Of course I had faith that she would be okay.

I felt it in my soul, but that doesn't mean I didn't feel the gravity of anti-faith, darkness, weighing down against my spirit.

I had known darknesses aplenty, but I could not succumb to absolute dread. I could cry, I did cry, I had Saraswati hold me, and play her veena for me, and change the channel on the hologram tv for me. *I couldn't let go of hope.* I would not. My faith and dread was an oxymoronic paradox of negated contradictions.

I prayed for my little dearest in every etched checkpoint, in every heartbeat, and I felt the jagged edge of shadowed death in every pause between each breath. I was every shattered raindrop against ash-burnt asphalt, the periodic bubbles of faith were resplendent lights, which destroyed and were destroyed by unrelenting waves of woe.

PART 4:

GRAYISH BLUE

Mr. Moseby was in live digital correspondence with the surgeons, metal and biological, who were operating on Amanda. He watched the surgery in its entirety, and it was him who I asked to inform me of the surgery's outcome. I could not bear, and as a parental figure was discouraged strongly to not watch the surgery. They were opening her skull and removing a brain chip. You don't need to see your daughter, or your sister, like that - you can allow yourself the mercy of that singular separation, that your future encounters might not be marred by trauma. Just because there's high resolution camera in the surgery, that doesn't mean you ought to watch. Mr. Moseby expressed this wisdom to me, and I listened, and so I charged him with observing and then speaking to me when the moment of truth arrived.

A white door opened and our mecha dwarf entertainment wizard, with his comical mustache, which he had tilted downwards in his acknowledgment of the severity of the situation, walked through. I counted his footsteps as he approached me the other end of that paradoxically infinite corridor. Forty-two steps and he was in front of me, us, I stood with Saraswati's embracing arms around me from the side.

"Alianii, Sara. In acknowledgment of the mixed nature of our predicament, I opted not to run over with a fiery exclamation, for the outcome of this surgery has been both blessed, and challenged. Amanda has survived the surgery, and this is our profound blessing. She is still unconscious and will be heavily medicated for several weeks, possibly a month, possibly two, for

pain management. Although she has survived, she has suffered notable brain damage, specifically in the parts of the brain responsible for sensory perception, mood and balance. The extent is, while notable, not so severe that she will not be able to function after physical therapy, we believe. She is however going to permanently predisposed towards severe seizures and at a much greater risk for physical accidents. Amanda is also at an increased likelihood for synesthesia of some form or another, alongside greater mood instability and more severe symptoms for her already emergent bipolar disorder. Her symptoms will, we hope, be manageable. But her medication may or may not have unpleasant side effects, and she will have a very challenging road to recovery. She will need you two to be her strength, and her hope."

Should I have cried in relief, or should I have stood in quiet contemplation of the severity of her likely outcome, both, or neither, I do not know. In actuality I turned to Sara and asked her what she thought, as if in my profound emotional duress I had outsourced logical capacity. What possible measured thoughts of rationality was I capable of?

"What does this mean Sara? I...it's too much. I don't know what to think."

Saraswati put her hand on mine and squeezed it, her fingers interlocked with my fingers and I felt the serenity of her faith and unshakable hope.

"It means that for the rest of her life Amanda will need to take medication like so many adults already do. That's not going to be easy, and she of course is going to need to do physical therapy, probably for years. But there's something so much greater that you need to understand my love. You... and Amanda...what you two have done, is actually history defining. Because of you two...it seems we might actually have a way to turn off kill switches. You've

essentially saved tens of millions of people from the threat of death. You, and our daughter, are heros."

I shrugged helplessly, her words meant nothing to me, they washed over and through me, revealing little, bringing me no comfort, bringing me no hope. My child had lived, and I was so thankful. But she was damaged, abused, my little dove had broken wings and a childhood stolen without mercy. She would never be the same. Her childhood, after a brief bout of serendipity, was over.

It wasn't even the months of pain that I knew she would endure despite our best medicine.

It was the grim reality of the truth that, as her mother, it was my duty to share with her. I had to tell her the truth.

What happened to her, how it happened, why it happened. A little part of me died as I realized the cast iron burden that I had, by love and duty, been tasked to place onto her shoulders. Her country, her society, her government, had abandoned her. She had been experimented on. The miracle of her vision, her eyes, would forever be a constant reminder of her being used and discarded. She survived because her mother happened to be a drug addict, and a whore - how could I possibly convey that in words appropriate for a brain-damaged child?

"It will take time for you to understand the significance of what has occurred, Alianii, and that's okay. You are in no rush, you and Amanda need simply recover and heal from your sufferings, your sorrows, and her surgery. Just in case it is helpful, I will try once more to convey the magnitude of your actions and the significance of your life. Until today, over ten million eggs walked amidst our country, with a gun pointed at their heads, with a kill switch in their brains, with death stroking their souls. You, admittedly by accident, but

by fate no doubt, uncovered a mechanism by which these switches can be disabled. Through a particular manner of induced seizure, unpleasant to be sure, but life saving.

Now that we are aware of this technique, this unique methodology, and have tested it, verified it even in the most extreme of cases, after a kill switch has been activated? The Metal Alliance and the Doge Guild have used their computational array to develop a vaccine to trigger a variation of this seizure that is mostly benign. They will need to be administered in the presence of medical staff, of course, but we have a plan. The primary challenge we will have is distribution to eggs across the country without invoking suspicion. The formal details being discussed are of a secretive nature, and it would not benefit you or any of the involved factions to express the specifics. But yes, Alianii, you and Amanda, both of you have suffered so much, endured so much pain, and yet found so much joy in each other - you have become heros. Your love, your bond, has saved millions of people."

PART 5: **LIGHT'S HOPE**

They asked me to re-read her story, our story, and share my final thoughts. They gave me the shovel of free speech and asked me to plant a time capsule. Without saying as much, they wanted me to crystallize our suffering, to put it in a diorama, organized beautifully, framed with regal wood from an endangered tree. And you know what? I'll do it. A message from my heart, lovingly delivered, in a manner that imitates my mother, maybe with a great deal more anger, she taught me to write, after all.

Congratulations, *ding ding ding!* You did it, you read our story, my story, my mother's story. A little more colorful than your average textbook, huh, *don't you think?* How uniquely privileged am I in being able to stir history's pot and frazzle the professors with my cherry-picked and italicized *fuck you*, whimsically sung. No bitterness here, folks, not one bit, not one bite. Ignore my angry words, they're not angry at all! Let's chalk it up to hormonal rage and teenage angst, **oh and the little prudish bitch is bipolar too - like her silver-haired mom-** whose intimate aptitudes saved yes, you read that correctly, **11.8 million people.** Talk about a family history, you should see the street cred I have with the boys my age, the knowledge they presume my having.

Take comfort in the serenity of my angrily-plucked veena, yes, I am quite talented, I do take after my lovely mother Saraswati. She is beautiful, divinely so, I agree. Like her, I have a few million fans on MyMuse, and I'm only sexually harassed by maybe two or three thousand of them, not including the ones who prefer to fantasize about my mothers.

More than 99 percent of my fans are cool, so it's fine. I can deal with the dipshits. Now, what does piss me off - what does piss me off...

Senators, on live television, ordering me to stop streaming, to stop producing content, congressmen trying to get the president to use an executive order to shut down MyMuse? Because a little skinny Japanese egg, who hasn't even had a boyfriend, with synthetic eyes and a weak appetite, and daily nausea, has a string instrument and likes to play it for kind hearted fans and horny dipshits alike?

Why that's just not fair!

And I tell, and I tell you...good sir!

I will, I repeat, will...probably not stand for it, for physiological reasons.
I'm not very good at standing.

Haha, **dark** joke. But seriously. It really is quite funny to blame ME, I mean seriously, **ME**, it's **my** fault that we're hovering above the edge of civil war? It's my fault the citizens don't trust the government, it's my fault that there's vague talk of an insurrection - or an egg uprising - or a robot rebellion - or some cluster-fuck four way western shootout! *What a time to be alive.*

Honestly, though, real talk, I'm quite happy being your girl next door musician, your muse, maybe even your teenage crush. With a mostly-genuine smile of serenity I will joyously provide your daily dose of harmonic, musical apathy. My smile is cute enough and my eyes distinct enough to remind you of a difficult to forget atrocity, so, well, there's that.

Fall in love with my sass, go ahead, **I don't mind**. I might not be Alianii, but don't we all want to be a siren, just a little bit, some of the time? To be so lovely, to have a beauty so haunting, and eyes so enchanting, a charisma so intoxicating? My mom's kind of...unique...a little crazy, like me, so I get it. I get

her, and she gets me, and through the love and guidance of both parents I have inherited the tightrope to walk - *the lengthy list of mistakes I have to be too wise to make*. One mom's an accidental saint, venerated and prayed to by robots, of course. Who could forget the Saint of Empathy and Selfless Love, the silver-haired heartbreaker, the problem-solver and master of special education herself, my mother, Alianii.

Anyways. Much like my mother's hair, and my hair some of the time, my life is gray, but with the sheen of silver lucky lustrousness. It's really not all bad. My family? I couldn't ask for anyone greater, both of my moms are perfect and unique in their own ways. Ali is perfect in that she's flawed, or was flawed, but even her weaknesses, if accidentally, became a blessing. **She is and was exactly who she was meant to be**. The number one special education teacher, a writer, and my mom, and my hero. And Saraswati, named after a goddess, who lays down the law with me with the fire and fury of a politician when I'm trifling, or bitchy. She's my mom's guardian angel. Sara taught me how to **forgive**, and how to understand.

Sara gave me the context and perspective I needed to see my mom not as a pissed off bipolar daughter might typically view her troubled equally bipolar mother, but rather, to see Ali, and understand her, and appreciate her, as history does.

I live with her, I love her, even when she drives me crazy, even when she's really sick and I have to be very patient, just like she is with me when I'm the one acting a little cuckoo.

But a saint? I'm not sure about that. Maybe, I guess. That's a lot to process and think about. I guess it depends upon your definitions and perspective.

What I can say is that when I've been really sick, or even just hurt, and difficult and am insulting her and lashing out in anger, she stays calm and starts to tell me a story. Doesn't matter that I don't have an Everse chip, or that I'm bitter. Doesn't matter that I'm being an absolute bitch. No, no, mom brings the adventure to you, when you're her student, or her daughter. Sometimes its just a story and she uses the holograms, with her chip, to make you a play, starring you, except she's the director, and the writer. And the crazy actress playing three gnomes, a dwarf, a dragon and a witch and, let's not forget, the long-lost magic hat, at the same time, just to make you smile.

There's always a quest token, eventually anyways, but she's crafty enough to not always lead with that. She sees what kind of mood you're in, what you're upset about, and she pushes, prods or manipulates accordingly.

She'll keep on telling the story, popping things up, using her little menageries and her pizazz, and even once you've chilled out, **she keeps going**. And if you haven't chilled out? **She keeps going**.

When you least expect it she gets you with, "By the way Amanda, I hear there may or may not be a quest token involved. But I can't tell you what it does, yet. You wouldn't be curious about th"

"Mom I'm not curious about the fucking quest token, leave me alone," my earnest attempt at resistance.

"Leave you a loan! Why, the family was going to leave you the entire bank, the whole darn thing...until you got into that mischief of yours. See? You know what I'm talking about. Yep. The truffle and mushroom incident," an example of her misdirection reply, accompanied of course by a warm smile and a humanoid pig in a tuxedo.

The pig of course was roughly the size and disposition of a leprechaun, and it was sneaking, with notable determination and enthusiasm, through a

fairy garden field brimming with mushroom hues ranging from resplendent ruby red with pearl-white circles to blue giants big enough to stargaze from. There were tall and slender mushies, green as emerald and effervescent, giving off glowing bubbles.

"Careful now Amanda, this is getting serious, you don't want Borsely to get over to the green ones, those fabulous fungi, with the emerald bubbles. He wants you to let him, he's going to fight for it. He's a gladiator, you know. Eons and epochs have brought us together for this singular moment in time, our chance to stop Borsely and stop the mushroom and truffle incident right in its tracks!"

"Mom. I. Don't. Care. About. Your. Stupid. Everse. Story. Game." There are greater venoms to be found than my delivery of those words, but not outside of snake's mouth.

I was being really mean, this was her life, it was what she lived for. And she was trying really hard. All she wanted, all she wants, is for me to be happy, and have a normal childhood. For all of her struggles with addiction and intimacy, sometimes, somehow, its almost as if she's the innocent one, the naive one, she holds onto childish hope for me to be hopeful. She doesn't believe that part of me died, and takes no breaks in her efforts.

We were, as we did from time to time, fighting in the Hotel Apollo lobby. Mr. Moseby was crying at the front desk, wiping his tears and his wet mustache with his carbonic silk cloth. Saraswati was in the middle of teaching and was going to be gone for the next three hours. It was just me and mom, and a few helpless spectators. **To be honest, I was kind of being a bully. Look how hard she tried.**

"But you do care about the quest token, because, my dear, you don't know what it does. And that bugs you! And I do. So I guess we're even! I get

to pout, and you don't get to find out! It rhymes, that's how you know it's completely true! Oh well. I guess you're too old for quest tokens...and...and...I'm just an old hag! *All my beauty lost to time.* A demon queen maybe, even. Could be. Absolutely plausible. I kind of look the part, I guess. By the way, you've asked about it on and off again for five years and I was finally going to tell you. *I really was too.* I even wrote about it. Such mysteries the universe holds for us, my bubblegum pink darling."

"Tell me what? What are you talking about? What did you write about now, oh god..."

"Can't tell a cheater nothin'. No mam. Too much mischief, it absolutely won't do. Wonky wont stand for it. He would scold me, admonish me, for many a weeks and months and millennia!"

"I was ten. You cannot keep calling me a cheater for being a ten year old and locking you. I didn't even know you. You were running away. And Wonky is a stupid fucking bear."

"Oh please. You think that's the only dirt I've got on you? Honey. I have a big ol' chart in my drawer and and it has a number on it I do find quite concerning. Had to speak to a math professor to make sure it was true. Someone, not saying any names or anything...someone...tries to earn quest tokens surreptitiously. Or double dip, same thing. Vocab word of the week! Surreptitious! And you didn't just do it when you were ten. **You know what you and a book about trains have in common?"**

"...let's hear it. Go ahead, mom. I can't wait to hear this one."

"A track record! That's right. I said it. Should've nudged you into renaming yourself Lucy cuz' your lucy-goosey with the rules. Where did I go wrong, that my only daughter would turn in the same token twice, contributing to token inflation, when her poor, sickly teacher, her quest-giver, her lilac

moonfox, had a cold, sniffling, suffering. She granted the wish but was too ill to collect her payout. And what mischief did her beloved daughter do, however did she manage to press this precarious situation? What dastardly devilry did she employ to pluck the strings of my heart? Quite surreptitious. Quite. Some say this wound lives on, to this very day, this betrayal."

My mom started crying, for a little bipolar moment, a few seconds of accidental honesty as she peered at me with her saddened violet eyes, who knows which specific embarrassing factoid from her life had made its way to her mind. But it was a brief crying moment before she resumed her absolute focus. All of this back and forth, this silliness, this misdirection, this distraction. She wanted to give me a good old bamboozle, to mix it up, to shake me around, to get that rage and dark energy out of me as if through baffling my sensibilities. Alianii brushed her tears away and recomposed herself, an actress, perpetually on stage.

She never further broke character by acknowledging that she accidentally broke character, or apologizing.

She was just the purple eyed loving clown who picked up the dropped spheres, the failed moments of haphazard, clumsy juggling, it was all part of her act, her showmanship. They were little moments of human weakness as she tried to be my perfect mother, my Wonky the Bear, and my adventurous big sister, my loyal best friend, and my always plotting, quest-crafting, guardian angel.

With my mom, with Ali, it doesn't really matter what you're upset about, or why you're yelling, or not talking.

It doesn't matter if you reject her five times, or fifty. If she wants your attention, to see you smile, as she always does, she will make six fairy tales, forty new varieties of colored and fruit-flavored shrimp, she'll invent a subcategory

of sandwich and build you a personal cafe. She'll dilate time to write for you a thoroughly researched recipe book. She'll throw a couple rhymes in, allude to a quest token at some point, or another. She hides easter eggs and references to your favorite games and books and other childhood stories. She puts clues into numbers to assuage the meticulous madness of herself and others like her. Eventually she's just done so much crazy shit, and said so many crazy things, made so much art, in her desperation, in her hope to bring you joy and wonder, that you just forget why you were upset in the first place. You feel a little blank, and a little amused, and really sad, and you just want to watch her make things, or even just be around her. It's like she's a kid making plays with last-century Legos, making stories, for you, like Santa's helper. She might be the teacher, my mom, but in her own way, she's kind of like a kid too.

Honestly, who knows who leaked her journal in the first place. Does it even matter any more? Light's Hope has long needed *light*, and my mother, with all of her shadows, with her clumsy blush makeup, and her eyes, which smile, for me, and for my mother Saraswati. **She's our actress recluse, our unforgotten star.** She makes no sense, and doesn't try to, and doesn't need to. She writes us poems, and she hugs me and Mr. Moseby, as if forgetting to do so would invite Armageddon. She never yells, but she often cries, when she hope's no-ones looking.

The first saint for robots, for metalheads, who almost gave her life for me, my mother, who feels too guilty, too dirty, too much like a whore, and a drug addict, to pray. I'm the queen of the world, and her world, I'm light itself, hah, the pride and joy of Light's Hope and the Hotel Apollo, in her eyes. But for herself? *She's afraid her prayers would offend our gods and goddesses,* She would prefer to not impose. She doesn't know how to forgive herself, and that's the problem. She's a writer afraid to read between the lines of her own story. An irony that is not lost on me, or Sara, or Moseby.

It doesn't matter how many people she saved.

In her eyes, divine violet, not demonic, but angelic, they glow with a light that could match any tower in our blessed forsaken city, there is alternating joy and a siren's sorrow. In her eyes, she was unable to protect me. She'd failed her only duty. So my mom Sara and I, not to mention the robots, pretty much but not quite all of them, we pray for her, and light incense for her, and hold onto hope that one day she might be less hard on herself, and see things in a different light. Sara and I laugh and smile for her, genuine laughter, genuine smiles, and cuddle with her. We let Ali craft for us her stories with the little hologram drone she named Charlie, after an unforgotten friend, long since perished and recycled, save for the cremated biochip she turned into her always-worn necklace.

Alianii uses the carbonic printers to make her second Charlie imitation vintage hats and purple sunglasses, and walks with him to keep him charged via vote-driven light. She still teaches on LearnQuest, she kept her chip after everything we went through, and she introduces unsuspecting troubled children to Wonky the Crystal Bear, with its powder blue plush fur accompanied by the the brightness of her dazzling violet eyes.

The students only ever need one or two nocturnal lessons.

Most of the time people refer to her affectionately as Miss Alianii and omit the U843, that part of her name makes a lot of people sad. It's honestly ironic. Mom actually thinks our city votes for light, for unabated blue, cobalt to cerulean hues, shining Sol and sun that's never quite done, the ray of hope of Light's Hope is so blind she's convinced they cast sunshine votes for me.

