

# *Marked for Eternity*

*Thor's Hamster*

*Horn nü-san*



*Current version:*

*Chapter 5*

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# *Introduction*

*Hello, past (or future) me!*

My name is Leo Nolan, and I am writing this book to help my past (or future) self navigate the crazy events that make up my life.

In my travels, I've experienced numerous episodes of memory loss. It comes with the territory, which is why I've decided to document every choice I make. Note that these are my experiences, and I feel confident that the choices I made led to the best possible outcomes, for everyone involved. But there are many ways that things could have gone differently, and who knows what success I would have had if I had handled things another way? Heed my guidance, if you will, but don't be afraid to try your own path.

I **highlighted** the most important parts; this way you can easily skim through. You can decide for yourself if you want to read my whole account or just check the highlighted parts. You may find the extra detail rather interesting, if you decide to peruse it.

# Chapter 1

It all started September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Well, technically, that's the day *before* everything started to go crazy, but in hindsight, I realize that things were already starting to fall into place. I didn't know that at the time, of course. All I knew then was that I was bored out of my skull. School had been about as mind-numbingly dull as you could imagine, and I was looking forward to chatting with my family when I got home. My stepmom, Stephanie, and my two stepsisters, Isabella and Sarah, were fast asleep on the couch. They woke up when I got home — okay, maybe not right away, but I made sure to announce my arrival extra loudly.

My relationship with my stepsisters at the time was... well, it was okay, but that was about it. Sarah tended to keep to herself and hadn't really opened up to me that much. Isabella and I got along, but sometimes she'd get into these moods. I was so bored that I thought about asking if they wanted to hang out and do something. (Psst... that's your first choice, past — or future — me. **Yes**, you want to hang out with your stepsisters!) Predictably, Sarah brushed me off, but Isabella surprised me by inviting me to watch the new season of the anime she was into. I was a few episodes behind, so I told her I'd get caught up and then watch it with her.



At dinner that night, we were joined by Sarah's friend Anna, who was staying the night. Stephanie made a comment about feeling old — she gets self-conscious from time to time — so I countered by telling her that **she looks perfect**. The conversation turned to my father, James,



who had been in the hospital in a coma for many years. Stephanie almost caught me in a lie I'd told earlier to explain why Isa and Sarah hadn't accompanied me to the hospital to visit him that afternoon. I managed to not panic and **told her I'd had a rough day** and just wanted some time alone. That seemed to placate her, and I think the girls appreciated my efforts — after all, I only lied in the first place to keep them from catching flak.

That night, I binge-watched anime to get caught up to Isa. I was just about to go to bed when I heard Sarah and Anna through the wall. They were talking about girl stuff, I guess, but I perked up when I overheard Anna confess that she had a crush on me! I was flattered, not gonna lie, and I filed away that tidbit to think about later. That night, I had a weird dream — I didn't think too much of it at the time, but in hindsight, I suspect it was more than just random dream stuff.

The next morning I did something a little unusual. Normally I take a shower first thing, but that day I woke up super hungry, so I decided to **eat something first**. I wandered downstairs without even throwing a shirt on, quite forgetting that Anna was probably still in the house. Sure enough, she was sitting at the breakfast table along with Stephanie, Isabella and Sarah. I didn't mean to show off my abs to friends and family, honest... but it seems none of them minded my little display.

I got showered and was about to leave for school when I came across Stephanie looking for something in the kitchen. I found myself admiring her ass. Maybe a little too much. She turned around and noticed me gaping. When she asked me about the dumb look on my face, I decided to be honest and told her that **I was just admiring how stunning she looks**. I think she appreciated my flattery. We shared a nice moment, but then Stephanie made mention of my mom, and it kind of threw me off. I think she berated herself for bringing it up, even though it didn't really bother me as much as she thought it did.

I was pondering the exchange as I walked to school, and that's when the first truly weird event in this whole adventure happened — I accidentally ran headlong into a ninja. (A girl ninja, I noticed right away. Her face may have been covered, but her cleavage was not.) The impact knocked her flat on her ass. I was in the middle of apologizing to her when my buddy Mike showed up. I looked up to say hi to him, and when I turned back, the ninja girl was gone. I was left scratching my head in confusion.

At school, Mike and I met up with Mike's brother Jermaine and our friend Nas. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, and on the way, I happened across Isabella and a friend of hers named Elisa. Elisa seemed surprised that I remembered who she was, given how few interactions we'd had. Me being the wholesome dude I always am, I just told her, **"How could I not remember someone this beautiful?"** I ~~hope~~ know I scored some points with that line.

After saying goodbye to the girls, I stopped in the bathroom, where I heard the most interesting thing. There seemed to be a girl *masturbating* in the 4<sup>th</sup> stall. So, okay, maybe I'm not always a wholesome dude, because I decided to **take a look** and sneaked into the **3<sup>rd</sup> stall** to peek over the divider. (I think the **5<sup>th</sup> stall** would have given me just as good a vantage point. Just remember: if you're going to spy on a masturbating girl, don't try to walk into the stall where she's getting it on!) Imagine

my surprise to find *Addison*, one of the most popular girls in school, finger blasting herself in the stall next to me! Let's just say I got an eyeful, until she looked up and fixed me with a gaze that seemed to penetrate to my very soul. I got completely flustered and tried to **act dumb**. (I probably could have just **made a joke** to diffuse the tension, but you know how I... I mean we... get



when we're nervous.) She seemed more amused than annoyed when she left, so... all's well that ends well, I guess?

After that, it was time for class. We had a new teacher, which was becoming a regular occurrence — for some unknown reason, our teachers kept quitting, sometimes on their first day. Our latest teacher, Diane, turned out to be quite the hottie — so I was very glad that she didn't quit right away. She immediately took an unusual interest in me and asked me to stay after class. That worried me a bit.

The lesson that day was... unusual. Diane led a discussion about “The Marked War”, a topic that only Nas knew anything about. I surely hadn't heard of it — and yet, at the same time, it felt familiar somehow. After class I stayed behind, and Diane told me I should study more. It's not the first time I've had a teacher tell me that, but Diane surprised me by offering to give me private lessons. I would've been a fool to not say **yes** to that offer!

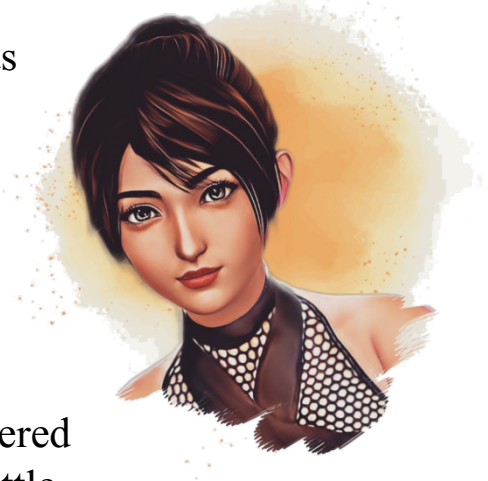
After school, Isabella and I walked to the hospital where my comatose dad receives care. Sarah and Stephanie were already there, as well as one of Dad's nurses, Ella. She asked to talk to me in private and led me into one of the bathrooms. Naturally, I started to get excited about where things were going. But then she told me that something weird was going on. I was tempted to joke about how weird it was that we were sharing a bathroom, but she seemed genuinely concerned about something, so I bit back my humor and encouraged her to **tell me** what was bothering her. She told me about some really mysterious stuff in my dad's medical file. I didn't really know what to do with that information, but she had been my father's nurse for years, and I trusted her completely.

It was pretty late when I got home. Upstairs, I passed Sarah's room and heard her screaming inside. Gave me a scare, honestly. I wanted to make sure she was okay, but I decided to **knock on her door** rather than barge

right in. She told me to come in, and that's when I saw that she was just playing a video game. I swear, that girl gets *way too competitive* with her video games. Anyway, Isabella came by to hang out, and we watched some TV, but... well, things got a little weird. Isabella started acting strange, but I didn't want to embarrass her by calling attention to it, so I decided to **stay quiet**. I did steal a glance in her direction, though, and... well, I'm not sure what exactly I saw her doing, but it sure looked personal! Anyway, she noticed me glancing her way and freaked out. Let's just say the evening ended on a very awkward note.

Fast forward one day later in class: Diane (our new teacher) noticed I wasn't really paying attention. She asked me what today's topic was. I just took a wild guess and answered with **The Great Depression**, which started in **1929**. Diane didn't seem to notice that I had taken a shot in the dark, and she was impressed with how attentive I was. (Ha!)

I had my first private lesson after class; it was more fun than I expected. We played this little quiz where I had to guess the right answers. It's been some time, but I'm pretty sure these were the correct answers: **Yen, Italy, 1945, Canada, The Bible, Vatican City, William Shakespeare, Blue, Empty hand, Bold**. (Curious how I remembered those answers, all these years later? I had a little mnemonic that I used: "Your Invincible 1945 Chevy Truck Becomes Vintage Crap When Suckers Buy Electric Hatch Backs" uh... yeah, never mind, it was a stupid mnemonic.)



At the end, Diane surprised me by asking if I had a girlfriend. I could have tried to dodge the question, but she seemed determined to get something out of me, so I just told her honestly **No**.

On my way out of school, I ran across Elisa again, and we chatted briefly. I invited her to come with me to visit my dad at the hospital, but she wasn't comfortable with that; seems she has bad memories of that hospital. I bid her farewell and headed to the hospital alone. I visited my dad for a while; but damn, it's so hard to keep up a one-sided conversation for any length of time. So I found myself out in the waiting area, just lost in my thoughts. That's where Sarah found me and dropped a bombshell — dad's nurse Ella was missing! After all the suspicious stuff she had uncovered, her disappearance had me incredibly worried. I didn't know what to do, but it turns out my life was about to take a turn in a crazy direction.

When I got home, Elisa was waiting for me in my bedroom, dressed as the ninja that I'd run across the other day. Well, that was one mystery solved — though why Elisa was running around dressed like a ninja was a mystery in itself. According to Elisa, there was a lot more going on in my life than I realized, because I'd lost my memories. (It's sort of a thing with me, as you'll come to realize.) Elisa told me she could help me regain my memories, but it would require an exchange of bodily fluids. What?! That conjured up all sorts of disturbing ideas in my head, but I tried to focus on the least disconcerting of these and asked her if she meant **saliva**. Turns out, yeah, Elisa was saying we needed to share a kiss. I didn't really stop to question how that would help me get my memories back; I was just all like, "Yeah! Let's **do it!**" And let me tell you, past (or future) me: Elisa is quite the kisser. Unfortunately, we got interrupted by a knock at my door a moment later, and Elisa ninja-vanished out of my room almost before I even registered the knock.

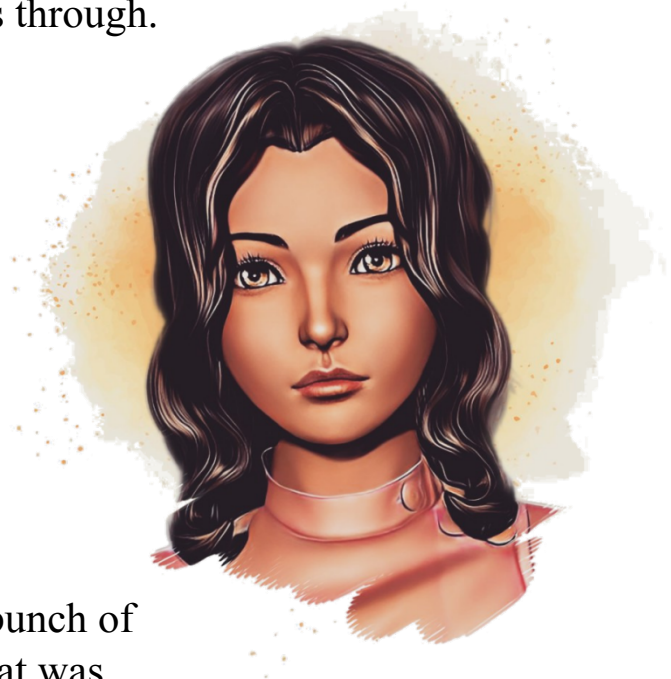
Isabella was at my door; it was still awkward between us after what happened the previous evening, but she was really trying to smooth things over. Unfortunately, I was so preoccupied with everything Elisa had told me that I kind of snapped at her. She was awfully forgiving of my behavior, and even asked me if I would go to the mall to help her



pick out a new bikini for the upcoming school beach trip. Now... I said I'm a wholesome dude... but I have to admit (and I'm sure you will agree, because you're me!) that I found the prospect of seeing Isabella trying on bikinis rather titillating. So I told her that **yes**, I would go with her to the mall.

That's when the first of the episodes hit me. I don't know how to describe this, past (or future) me, but it felt like a crowbar was trying to pry my brain open. The pain that momentarily shot through my head was excruciating, and with it came flashes of... well, let's not get ahead of myself. Isabella was extremely concerned and told me I could talk to her if something was wrong. But... well, everything that was happening was just too damn crazy, and I figured I'd just come off sounding like I was trolling her, so I decided to **not tell her** what was going on. I just needed sleep, and a chance to think things through.

My dreams that night were... unsettled. I remember that much, but I honestly don't remember any of the details now. I just remember a sensation that no matter what I tried to do, the dream ended the same. My... my mother was in the dream, I think. Mom....



I awoke the next morning with a bunch of strange markings on my chest. That was new, and a little worrisome. While I was pondering just what exactly was going on, Sarah came to talk to me, and that's when I got my next big shock: she *knew* about my missing memories! She fucking *knew*, and she didn't tell me anything! When I pressed her about it, she claimed my *father* of all people told her not to tell me. I was understandably upset,

and she wisely decided not to pursue the topic any further; I think she could see I wasn't ready to process it.

At school, my friend Nas stopped me in the hallway before class. He was acting pretty strange, and Nas is ordinarily such a normal dude. He asked me if I'd read the book he had recommended the other day, as if I had time to even start it. He was really insistent that I read it as soon as possible, so I assured him I would check it out.

In class, Diane singled me out again and asked me what the topic of yesterday's discussion was. Of course I told her **The Great Depression**. Again. Now, I'm sure you're thinking I knew the answer because Diane had just asked me the same question the previous day; but if I'm being completely honest here, I literally forgot all about that and took a wild guess. Again.

After class, I encountered Addison in the hallway. I decided to **talk to her** about what happened the day before. We had a good conversation and really cleared the air; it was amusingly ironic that we talked in the very bathroom where I caught her pleasuring herself in the first place. She struck me as being a lot more laid-back than I would have expected for a Miss Popularity contender. In a flash of spontaneous bravery, I decided to **ask her out**. She was pretty flustered, to my surprise, but she actually said yes. We agreed to go to a Chinese restaurant the next day.

I left the school building to meet up with Isabella. I found her on a bench outside, and Drake was trying to hit on her. (Drake the student. Not the artist. Though that would be cool.) Now, this is important, past (or future) me: Drake is not to be trifled with. You make an enemy of him, it will come back to haunt you — mark my words. Besides, Isabella doesn't need some white knight rescuing her from the unwanted advances of a slime-ball like Drake; this wasn't some cheesy visual novel. I knew Isabella was perfectly capable of dealing with Drake on

her own, so I **let them be** and waited until he gave up and left. We went to the mall together, and Isa picked out some swimwear to try on. She looked absolutely **beautiful** in the pieces she chose, but she seemed to have one color that she kept gravitating toward. I encouraged her to try a different color, which she did. And **yes**, it turns out she can pull off more than just the color blue. God, that was a great day...

But it got even better. I came home and heard some strange noises, so I decided to **take a look**. I don't know what I expected to find, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight of Stephanie masturbating furiously in her bedroom! Now, I know I said earlier that I'm a wholesome... ah, ya know what? Screw it. I am not a wholesome dude;

*we are not a wholesome dude, past (or future) me.*

*We are a horny pervert who lurks outside our stepmother's bedroom and spies on her while she's masturbating. Okay fine. But what*

*really shocked the hell out of me was hearing her fantasize about me while masturbating! I must have reacted to that more than I thought, because she suddenly turned to look toward the doorway like she'd heard a noise. I got away just in time.*



I holed up in my room for a while; I didn't want Stephanie to know I'd been in the house while she was... getting to know herself. About an hour later, she called my name from downstairs, so I figured it was safe to come out. She asked me how I was doing; apparently, she heard the news about Ella. When she found out that I already knew Ella was missing, she seemed to be mad that I hadn't told her. I think she was just really worried about Ella and it came out wrong. I hugged her tightly. It was a really nice moment with her, and I managed to not ruin it by thinking about what I had just seen an hour earlier.



That night, my dreams were more clear than ever before. Elisa was in them, and a couple others whose names eluded me. I was giving them orders, as if I was their leader. My memories seemed to be returning, but not enough for me to really make sense of the dream at the time.

The next day was a busy one, starting with our class trip to the beach. It was a beautiful day for it! I worried that the new markings on my torso would attract questions, so I decided to just pretend I'd gotten a tattoo. Turns out I wasn't the only one sporting an undisclosed tattoo — my buddy Mike had a big chest tat of his own that I'd never known about. Interesting. I chatted with Mike and Nas for a bit before heading over to talk to Isabella and Sarah. They were busy checking out Addison (who was off by herself and dressed in a bikini that was hotter than molten steel). Took me a bit to get their attention, and when I did, Isabella immediately flipped out over my "tattoo". I guess I could see why, so I decided to **apologize** rather than try to rationalize it. Isa calmed down, but made me promise to tell Stephanie as soon as possible.

Sarah, on the other hand, didn't seem to care about the tattoo — or maybe she already knew what it really was about, since she seemed to know a lot about my situation that she had withheld from me. Anyway, she was more concerned with asking me what I thought of Anna. I told her the truth, that Anna was **cute**... or maybe I told her that Anna was **just a friend**, or... hell, **I don't know** what I told her. She didn't seem to care much *what* my answer was. She just told me that Anna was into me (which I already knew thanks to the shitty wall between our rooms) and that I had better not break her heart. Again... flattered. I told her not to worry, and she told me to go meet Anna at a cabin nearby. She also told me she



wanted to talk that evening. I was still kinda pissed off at her, but... well, I needed answers. It's actually pretty scary when you realized there are holes in your memory, and I felt like I needed to get as much information from Sarah as I could. So I agreed to find her that evening.

The cabin Sarah directed me to was in sight of the beach, but somehow I got distracted when I passed Addison — I must have been contemplating how smoking she looked — and I managed to walk right past the cabin and end up in a nearby field. You would think I would have the presence of mind to do a 180; but no, I kept walking, looking for some kind of landmark. Well, I finally happened across the ruins of a small building, and a strange man meditating out front. He introduced himself as Johnny, and he acted like he knew me. I didn't know what to make of him, but he *did* point me in the right direction to get back to the beach.

This time I reached the cabin without issue, and Anna was waiting for me. She looked cute as hell, not gonna lie. I figured she wanted to get me alone so she could confess her feelings or something — so you can imagine my surprise when she immediately proposed to give me a blowjob! I wasn't about to turn her down, but I was so confused that my response was a bit hesitant. That made Anna self-conscious, but I assured her that my hesitation was only because it was **the first time I'd been asked** by a beautiful girl if I wanted a blowjob. (At least, it was the first I knew of, but my memory had more holes than Swiss cheese.) I

think Anna really liked being called beautiful, and she started jerking me off with her hand to get me up and ready. I, uh... didn't even manage to make it through the hand-job, she was that good. Who knew that Anna harbored so much sexiness under her demure exterior? She offered to give me a blowjob "next time", and I was totally looking forward to it!



On the way back to the beach, I met Elisa. I was relieved to see her, because she hadn't been in class yesterday. Turns out, she was busy making preparations for us to find and rescue Ella. My lost memories were the key to finding Ella, apparently, so Elisa was quite keen to know how much had come back to me. We planned to meet up the next morning, but Elisa was vague about the meeting location; she said I would "just know" once my memories came back. Oookay, then.

Back on the beach, I decided to spend some time staring dramatically at the horizon like some sort of movie hero. That's where Mike's brother Jermaine found me. He asked me about my secret to getting women! That really surprised me; Jerry never struck me as being particularly preoccupied with girls. But he seemed in earnest, so I thought about it a bit and then told him to **just be himself**. Sounds a bit corny, now that I think about it, but he seemed genuinely grateful for the advice.

It was a great day at the beach, but I somehow managed to get lost *again* and didn't make it back to the parking lot until well after the class was scheduled to head back. Fortunately, Diane had waited for me, as well as a friendly bus driver who stayed behind to give me a lift. What a cool guy!

I was really looking forward to meeting up with Addison that evening for our first date. I got all dressed up, and on the way out, I came across Stephanie, who was also dressed up to go out. She was tickled that I had a date that night, but a part of me was still thinking about the amazing sight I had seen in her bedroom the previous night. Feeling bold, I told her that I **wished my date was as beautiful as she was**. She thought I was just teasing her, but I insisted I was being genuine. She was touched by my words, and maybe a little flustered as well.

I arrived at the Chinese restaurant before Addison. While I waited for her, I noticed a couple students from our school at a nearby table. They seemed to be getting into a rather heated argument, and it ended with both of them storming out. I didn't have time to ponder the odd scene, because Addison arrived moments later. God, she looked stunning! I had never eaten at the restaurant before, so she ordered for both of us — oh, and get this! Our waiter for the evening was the same bus driver that had waited for me at the beach. At the time, I chalked it up to an uncanny coincidence. (But as you are no doubt starting to appreciate, very little that happens to us is mere coincidence.)



Addison proved to be a really nice girl, and — surprisingly — more shy and nervous than I would have expected for someone who is so sought after at school. We had a really nice conversation at dinner, and I got to walk her home afterward. When we got to her house, I wasn't sure exactly what I should do, but I decided that it would be appropriate to **kiss her** at that point. She looked like she was totally going to let me, but just as we leaned in, her father showed up out of nowhere and interrupted us.

Okay listen, past (or future) me — I don't know what's up with Addison's father, but he is menacing as hell when he wants to be. He was all warm smiles and friendly chatter around Addison, but as soon as she bid me goodnight and went inside, he went full-on intimidation mode and warned me from ever going near Addison again. What was up with that? I was too shocked to even argue; next thing I know, I was dismissed and walking home in confusion.

My confusion only got worse when I encountered some rando in the street, spewing nonsensical shit at me and acting like he knew me. I thought he was just some crackhead — but he knew my name, and he knew about my missing memories. Something he said brought back a memory about a conversation with my dad years ago, and when my attention returned to the present, the mysterious dude was gone. Like a ninja....

It had been a long day, and I really just wanted to get some sleep, but I had promised Sarah we would have a talk that evening. So, I freshened up and headed to her room. She proceeded to lay a whole bunch of revelation on me. You remember that “Marked War” we had discussed in class? Turns out that has something to do with my... *our* ancestry. Sarah told me about my family, and Elisa (who it turns out was some kind of powerful sorceress), and some cult that I was apparently the leader of. I should have found the whole conversation surreal, but... honestly, very little could have shocked me at that point. Sarah seemed to have been privy to a lot of my dad’s secrets. Oh, and she mentioned magic, which was apparently a hallmark of my family legacy. Kick ass!

That night I had the most coherent dream yet. I saw Elisa, and she talked like we were a couple. I saw Johnny, and he offered to teach me the “Path of the Dragon” (whatever that is). I saw myself, consulting with someone whom I couldn’t quite recall. I’m surprised I didn’t wake up more tired than when I went to bed, what with all the dreaming I was doing. But I was surprisingly invigorated and ready to get out there and find Ella.

I also realized that I knew where it was that I needed to meet Elisa; my memories weren’t completely restored, but they were coming back really quickly. I made my way to the ruins I had found the day before, and sure enough, there was Elisa waiting for me. Apparently, this was some kind of a “secret place” for us. Unfortunately, I still hadn’t

regained any memories that might tell us where to find Ella. Elisa had originally told me it would only take a few days for my memories to come back after we shared a kiss — but it turns out that, not only was the “bodily fluids” thing made up just to get me to kiss her, my memories might take a couple *years* to fully return. I probably should have been more upset about how manipulative Elisa was being, but I couldn’t bring myself to get *too* mad at her.

Fortunately, Elisa had one more trick up her sleeve. She had spent the past few days seeking out a book of incantations (powerful sorceress, remember?) and she had found the spell that would lift the curse keeping my father comatose. I could hardly believe it, but we made our way to the hospital, and she proceeded to try the incantation on my father. The air shimmered and a strange sound filled the room when she chanted the ancient words — and when the incantation was complete, my father opened his eyes for the first time in years! I was so overjoyed, I could hardly find the words. But my jubilation was short-lived; the incantation wasn’t entirely successful. Dad was awake, but the curse was still there, and we didn’t have much time. Elisa desperately tried to get the information we needed from him, but in a matter of minutes, he was back in a coma. I was devastated, and Elisa took it pretty hard too — I think she saw it as a personal failure. She vowed to lift my dad’s curse for good one day.



As little as my dad said before falling back into a coma, he managed to relay just enough for us to know where to go next. We made our way back to our “secret place” to find out what other secrets it held. We were just about to go inside when I heard someone from within call for help. Without even thinking, I dashed inside, leaving Elisa behind. Heading down some stone steps, I found a crude basement (more like a cave, really) furnished with old-looking implements that would have fit

perfectly in a medieval dungeon. There was nobody in sight. In stark contrast to the Joan of Arc reenactment props, a baffling futuristic platform sat in the middle of the room. I had no idea what it might be; it wasn't in any of the memories I got back. So like an idiot, I went and stood on top of it. That... was when everything went absolutely fucking insane.



## Chapter 2

By the time you read this, past (or future) me, you may or may not have already experienced the acute disorientation that accompanies time travel. No... “disorientation” is too mild a word to describe it. There is a sense of *dislocation*, a feeling that your very existence is being pulled apart as you navigate the fabric of space-time. It is an overwhelming experience that can wreak havoc on your senses and leave you struggling to even remain conscious, if you’re not accustomed to it.

Oh, and there’s the stabbing pain, like an ice pick just got rammed in your gut. Don’t think too much about that, though!

When I stepped onto the futuristic platform, I was ripped away and transported... somewhere else. I should have been able to handle the trip, but with so many of my memories still locked away, I was utterly unprepared for the shock of the sensation. I passed out and remained unconscious for almost a week. I awoke in the home of a kind woman who had apparently taken me in and cared for me while I was out cold. She asked me my name. By this time I was starting to appreciate the potential danger of the situation I was in, so I **lied about my name** and gave her a fake one to use instead.

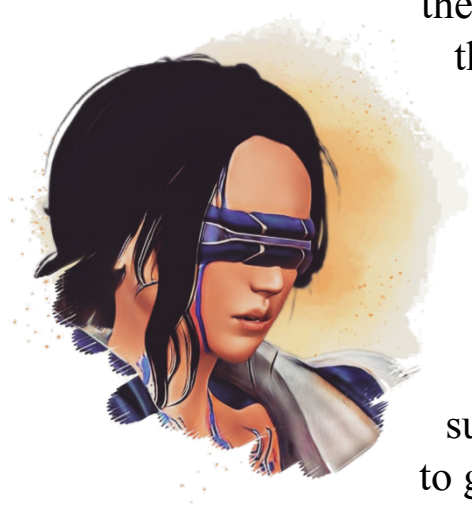
She insisted I rest some more, so I humored her until she left for a bit, and then I threw on my clothes and headed outside to get my bearings. I was surprised to find myself on the same street where Stephanie’s place is. It looked different, though — recognizable, but only just barely.

As I was pondering this, I felt a gun pressed to the back of my head, and a curt female voice demanded my identification. If I had any doubts about the danger of my mission, they were dispelled in that moment. I gave her the fake name I’d made up, but then she asked me for my ID



number. I wracked my brain, trying to think what number she meant. Then I remembered a flash of something I experienced when I was violently transported to this place. Four numbers. **5723**. I recited the numbers to the woman, and after a moment, I felt the gun withdraw. I turned around. The woman (or was she an android?) introduced herself as E.M.I.L.Y. and apologetically acknowledged me as an “agent”. Interesting....

E.M.I.L.Y. was part of a team securing the area for a dignitary, and sure enough, a moment later I found myself face to face with none other than the President of the United States — only it wasn't the president I was expecting. You have to understand, past (or future) me, I didn't yet realize that I had been transported to a different time period. So here before me was a president that I knew nothing about, but surprisingly, the president seemed to know *me*. Well... if he did, he knew me under a different name, so I couldn't be sure. I didn't recognize him, but I was getting used to gaps in my memory.



The president didn't offer much that would help me make sense of my situation, and he had to get moving, so we parted ways. As I continued down the street, I encountered someone I *did* recognize: “H”, the man from my dreams. He seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him, and that's when it came out that I wasn't in my own time period anymore — I had been flung 22 years into the future! I was reeling from the revelation, so H helpfully took me to a nearby café so we could talk more freely.

I ordered a couple beers while H grabbed a booth. The bartender bore a striking resemblance to the friendly bus driver who had waited for me at the school beach trip, so much so that I asked him about it. He said his

father had been a bus driver, and I had no doubt that I was looking at the son of the man who had helped me. The resemblance between father and son was uncanny.

Meeting up with H felt bizarre. I remembered sending him to 2044, but I couldn't remember why, and I couldn't remember most of what had happened to me after that point. H was obviously not expecting me to show up, and he told me that getting back to my time wouldn't be a simple matter. That was okay with me; I was there to **search for Ella**, after all. H said he would start a hunt for the time machine to get me back, and during that time, I could try to find out what happened to Ella.

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a stranger at our table — a young woman who asked for our help for her sick mother. H was ready to shut her down, but I was curious about her story. She said I was “marked” (Sarah had told me the same thing) and I could help remove the curse that her mother was under. I wasn't sure what I could do, but I said that we'd **help her** if we could. And that's how the girl named Violet came to be sitting at our table, telling us a story about missing children and her mother stumbling on a secret and ending up in a coma in the hospital. A lot of her story resonated with my own experience with my father, so I assured her we would do all that we could.



H pointed out that magic would be required to lift a curse. Well, I was a Nolan, right? Magic was my birthright, if only I could find someone who could teach me. H thought he knew someone who could help there, but it was getting too late in the day to go see them. Violet and H engaged in small talk, and I must have been pretty exhausted, because I ended up dozing off while they talked. H woke me up a short time later.

It seems he was looking to party that evening, and he'd already convinced Violet to join him at a club downtown. That was very uncharacteristic of H, whose idea of a wild evening tends to involve an extra packet of curry powder in his ramen noodle cup while watching reruns of "The A Team". I wasn't keen on a night out, but I reluctantly agreed to **go to the club** with them as well.

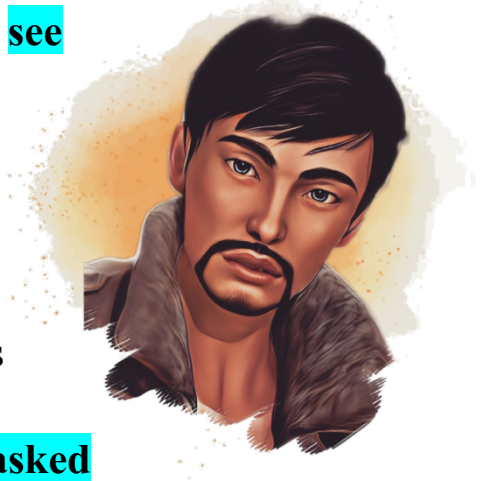
We arrived at the club and split up, but I still wasn't sure what we were really doing there, so I went to **see**

**what H was up to**. I found him sitting at the bar, nursing a strangely glowing drink.

Like, radioactive glowing. I'd never seen anything like it, so I sat down next to him and **asked about his drink**. He told me something about the color of the drink and its relation to the personality of one's soulmate.

Something finally clicked in my head, and I **asked**

**about his love life**. That's when it came out that he was looking for a woman — not just *any* woman, but specifically a woman that he had seen in his dreams. He was convinced he could find her at the club. Any other day, I might have scoffed at such a strange story, but... well, I was having enough dreams that might not be just dreams, myself, so who was I to say that H couldn't find a woman he'd seen in a dream, at a club we'd never visited before? Anyway, it was apparent H didn't want to keep talking about it. He encouraged me to go find someplace else to be, so I left him to his glowstick-fluid concoction and went to **look for Violet**.



Eventually I found her sitting on a couch near the other end of the bar. Some guy was hitting on her, and I was getting a creepy vibe from him, so I decided to **act like her boyfriend** and convince him to leave. He was pretty pissed, but he finally cleared out, and Violet seemed relieved.

We had a nice chat, and I learned some more about her. But I could tell she just wanted a bit of solitude, so I left her alone and headed back to **mingle on the dance floor**.

Not long after I started busting the moves, I encountered the woman who had cared for me, and we stepped outside to chat while she smoked. She introduced herself as Millie. She didn't seem terribly surprised or put out that I had sneaked out of her house when she wasn't looking. Maybe she was half expecting it. Whatever the reason, she took it in stride, and we made small talk for a bit. I learned that she had a sister and a brother, but the brother had gone missing. Before long, she finished her cigarette and bid me goodnight.

I went back inside the club and **looked at the bar again** to find H, but he was nowhere in sight. Instead, I found myself sitting down next to an attractive woman, and with nothing else to do, I decided to **talk to her**. To my surprise, she immediately offered to order me a drink, my choice. So, she was signaling that she was into me, was she? Well, I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot by ordering something lame, so after careful consideration, I ordered a **whiskey**. (Or was it a **vodka**? I think either one would have impressed her.) She introduced herself as Kana; and seeing that I could hold my liquor, she convinced me that we should both try to **get drunk** as fast and as hard as possible. I don't know what I was thinking (or with which head, if you get my meaning), but I decided to go along. Before I knew it, I was completely hammered. The rest of the evening was a total blur — I don't even remember if I talked to H or Violet again, or how I got home.

But wait... I *wasn't* home. The bed I woke up in — fostering the mother of all hangovers, I might add — was decidedly unfamiliar, not to mention atrociously gaudy. I stumbled out of bed and into the kitchen, where I found Kana fixing breakfast. Somehow, she was looking every

bit as stunning as she had the night before. I tried to **say something about her outfit**, but she just seemed amused at the notion of getting fashion feedback from someone like me. The breakfast she put in front of me looked like some disgusting Dr. Seuss recipe that Kana had conjured into unholy existence, but she insisted it would help with my hangover. I have to say, I wasn't sure what I found more painful — my hangover, or the sight of that discolored heap of organic matter on the plate in front of me — but I finally decided that if this bizarre meal could possibly chase away the splitting headache I had, I might as well **eat it**. Thankfully, it tasted a lot better than it looked, and the positive effect on my hangover was almost immediate.

The minute I finished the meal, Kana was ready to get to work. Apparently, in my drunken stupor the previous night, I had let slip that I needed to learn magic — and Kana, as it happened, could teach me. She was pretty elusive about *how* she knew magic, but if she could get me up to speed, I wasn't about to turn down the opportunity. We headed to the *dōjō* (yes, the woman has a freaking *dōjō* behind her house!), and I was getting pretty excited at the prospect of learning to unleash magical hell on my enemies. Well, the excitement was short-lived. Turns out I had some homework to do before Kana would even start teaching me. She sent me back out into the streets with a mission: learn the Path of the Dragon, and find the book my friend Nas had recommended to me, “Marked for Eternity”.



So there I was on the street with a bizarre to-do list and no idea where to start. That's where H found me. He was just getting ready to embark on his own mission to locate the time machine that could get me back

home, so it was fortunate that we encountered each other before he left. H figured he would need a month to locate the time machine, so we arranged to meet back at the same café we'd gone to the day before. H set off on his hunt, and I pondered how to make headway on my own tasks.

The book "Marked for Eternity" was going to be challenge. Maybe I could find a library that had it? There was no point trying to order a copy on Amazon. I didn't even know if Amazon still existed, and anyway, my phone's data plan had expired (probably two decades ago). I wasn't sure where to find a library these days, so I started walking aimlessly.

The Path of the Dragon... I had heard that before, and I knew exactly who to talk to. My eccentric acquaintance Johnny. Sure, I'd only heard him talk about the Path of the Dragon in a dream, but maybe it wasn't *just* a dream. Maybe it was... I don't know, a surfacing memory or something. Regardless, Johnny was real enough, and if I could find him, I could find out if he was willing to teach me. Then it hit me — I had no idea where Johnny lived, or meditated, or whatever. Hell, I didn't even know if he was still in the area, twenty-plus years later. I started to wonder if I was going to be able to accomplish *either* of the tasks that Kana had given me. In desperation, I briefly considered making my way back to Elisa's and my secret place, the ruins where I had met Johnny for the first time. Because, you know, maybe he was still sitting there out front, cross-legged, meditating, just waiting for me to show up.

Yeah, my sense of logic was starting to get a little frayed.

I was so lost in thought that I almost walked right past an ornate temple of sorts, decorated in a style that bore a resemblance to the garish decor of Kana's bedroom. Something in the back of my mind stopped me in my tracks. The temple itself didn't look familiar to me, and yet... I was



struck with an overwhelming sense that it was exactly where I needed to be. Not quite sure what I expected to find, I made my way into the temple — and *then* everything started to look familiar. The interior was identical to the room I had seen in my dream, when I encountered Johnny and he offered to teach me. This could not be a coincidence! I made my way deeper into the temple, and sure enough, I found Johnny — somewhat older but still fit as ever — meditating toward the back.

Johnny was genuinely surprised to see me.

Surprise turned to suspicion when I asked him to teach me the Path of the Dragon. He wanted to know why I was so interested in learning it.

I pondered whether to **tell him** or **don't tell him** the truth, but in hindsight, I don't think he much cared what my reason was. He just wanted an excuse to spar with me, to make me prove myself

worthy, or some crap. So he challenged me... to a fight to the death.

Okay, what the hell?! A part of me was tempted to **do it** — risk be damned — but a much larger (and more rational) part of me was screaming to **don't do it**, walk away, and find someone less dangerously eccentric to teach me the Path of the Fucking Dragon. I won't tell you what I did, because it didn't matter anyway — Johnny wasn't going to let me off the hook, no matter what I decided to do with his challenge.



There are some people, past (or future) me, to whom you should never turn your back. Johnny is one of those people. The man is freakishly fast. If a fly was buzzing on the other side of the temple, he could probably cross the room and slice it in half with that wicked-looking katana of his before it even had time to ponder that 8,000 eyes *should* have been enough to see that coming. Only it wasn't a fly that Johnny tried to slice in half — it was my *fucking head* he swung for! I barely had time to register a razor-sharp blade invading my personal space

before it passed with uncanny ease through my neck, sending my head rolling across the floor.

All this flashed through my mind in an instant, along with two realizations: (1) my noggin was still firmly attached to my body, thank heavens; and (2) whatever I had seen must have been some weird premonition, because Johnny was swinging for my head *right now*. I dove for the floor a split second before Johnny's katana sliced the air where my neck had been a moment earlier. I lay there, gasping, absolutely furious, and I might have pissed myself just a little — but Johnny was elated. I was a natural talent, he said! He agreed on the spot to teach me the Path of the Dragon. Yeah, um... hooray.

Training started immediately. Unsurprisingly, it began with some boring meditation exercises. I tried to take them seriously, though, and reminded myself that this was my ticket to learning cool magic. Minutes turned into hours, and I found myself becoming attuned to the rhythm of my slow breathing. The world around me faded to infinite nothingness as I cleared my mind of all thought and became one with the... uh, with the...

Okay, fine, I fell asleep. And predictably, I had more dreams. Or memories — I still wasn't sure at that point. There was another vision of my mother, as well as a childhood friend I had not thought about in a very long time. I awoke with a start, and Johnny decided I'd been sitting on my ass for a bit too long. He sent me outside to take a break and clear my head.

Once outside, I got to thinking about how much must have changed in 22 years. Was Stephanie still in the house where I lived? What was she up to now? Did she look as gorgeous as ever? (Okay, focus, Leo.) What about my dad? Was he still in a coma? Had anything changed about his



condition? I decided I might as well take a quick walk to **Dad's hospital** to see how he was doing.

I remember distinctly that a light rain started as I arrived at the hospital. If it could be called a “hospital” anymore. What I found was an abandoned husk of a building, in such a state of disrepair that I figured it must have sat unused for many years. I made my way inside, not really sure what I expected to find. The lobby was run-down, depressing and (with the gloomy light and the rain outside) decidedly creepy. Broken-down furniture and debris were everywhere, and some dust-covered computer monitors were even sitting on the main desk. Whatever had become of the hospital, it did not look like it was closed down in an orderly fashion.

So what had become of my father?

I went around behind the main desk and looked for anything that might shed some light on what had befallen the hospital. I **looked at the files** that were strewn about, but nothing caught my eye. Then I noticed that one of the monitors was still plugged into a computer tucked away under the desk. I **took a look at the computer**, and it was still plugged into an outlet. I couldn't imagine it would still function, but I crossed my fingers and pushed the power button. Amazingly, I was rewarded with... a whole lot of nothing. The place probably hadn't had power for ages. Why should it? Nobody was here.

A sound like a metal pipe hitting the floor rang out from somewhere in the building. I froze... and maybe pissed myself just a little. Again. The creepiness of the place was really starting to get under my skin. But at the same time, my curiosity was on the rise. That noise did not sound like it came from an animal. Maybe there *was* a human skulking about, after all. Fighting back my better judgment, I headed deeper into the creepy hospital to **investigate the sound**.

A moment later, I heard it again. It seemed to be coming from upstairs, so I made my way to the second floor. There I found a surprisingly well preserved room, an office of some sort. The furniture here was intact and neatly arranged, and there was a noticeable lack of dust on the desk and the shelves of the bookcases along the wall. Someone must be keeping the room clean and...

My thought was interrupted by the ominous sound of a pistol hammer being cocked behind me. Considering I'd gone from never having a gun pointed at me in my life (or, you know... not that I could recall) to having a gun aimed at the back of my head twice in as many days, I felt like I was handling these threats to my life with a great deal of composure. I might have even managed to avoid pissing myself a little. Maybe.

A female sporting a predominantly green fashion motif and markings on her skin — like the strange markings I had seen on E.M.I.L.Y. — demanded to know who I was and what I was doing there. I made the dubious decision to **make a joke** instead of simply **tell her the truth**, because... well, that's what I (*we*) do when we're nervous, right? Thankfully, she didn't shoot me in the face, but she threatened too. So I leveled with her: I told her I was looking for my father, and when she asked his name, I decided to **tell the truth**. As soon as I mentioned my father's name, she lowered her pistol — much to my great relief.

The girl's name was L.I.S.A., and apparently she was a squatter in the hospital. A runaway, in fact. An *A.I.-powered android runaway*. The story she told me — how she developed advanced feelings and emotions, how her makers responded by trying to destroy her A.I. programming, and how she fled out of self-preservation — made me marvel at the amazing technological advancements that humankind had made in just twenty years, but also that some things about human behavior never change.

I was impressed with L.I.S.A.'s personality and the way she conversed — she was definitely on a different level than the other A.I. figures I had met so far, and she could have passed for a regular human woman if the surface traces on her body weren't visible. (Speaking of which, it was not lost on me that she'd been given a pretty stunning body, too. I had to check myself multiple times during our conversation to make sure I wasn't staring openly.) For her part, L.I.S.A. seemed to genuinely enjoy talking with me. She was used to guys just trying to use her as a sex toy once they learned what she was. I guess I could understand why she was so suspicious when I first showed up. By the time we ended our conversation and I departed, L.I.S.A. had warmed up to me a lot. I promised to come visit her again.

I figured I had some more time to kill before I returned to Johnny's temple (the "Dragon's Lair", he liked to call it dramatically), so I decided to check out **my old house**. From the hospital, I could practically walk the route blindfolded. I had just turned onto the street in front of my home when I saw a familiar face. Millie was out for a stroll and greeted me. I was keen to get on my way, so I thanked her again for

helping me out and tried to politely disengage from the conversation. But Millie wanted to know

where I was going. Like, seriously persistent about it. She wouldn't let it go. She seemed to know (or suspect) that I was looking for something, and she wanted to know what. It dawned on me that she might be able to point me

in the direction of a library, so I decided to **tell**

**her** about the book I was looking for, "Marked for Eternity".



Her reaction to that name was immediate and intense. She shushed me fervently and told me that the book I was looking for was illegal.

Yeah... that's right, *very* illegal. At this point, I was wondering what the hell Nas was trying to get me to read, and what kind of fucked-up literature club he was a part of. Then I remembered that was 22 years ago — maybe the book hadn't been illegal then. Whatever had transpired, "Marked for Eternity" was now the target of a largely successful book-burning campaign, and my prospects of finding a copy were pretty slim. I started to despair, but then Millie said she could point me to a copy. (If the hackles on your neck are rising, past or future me, then good on you for wondering just why the hell Millie would know how to obtain a highly illegal book. Save that thought for later.) Millie wanted compensated for the information, but I hadn't loaded up on cash for this trip, and I didn't have anything to offer her. I promised her I would pay her later, though I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to make good on that promise. She finally relented and gave me the location of the book.

The location, it turns out, was the high school I went to. My own classroom, specifically. I didn't know what to make of that, but I was beyond thinking anything was a coincidence! I forgot all about checking out my house and instead made my way straight to **my old school**. Out in front, I encountered an older gentleman by the gate. I figured I would need to bluff my way in, so I pretended to be a student, and he bought it easily enough — maybe because I resembled the parent of one of the students. I don't remember how it came out, but I discovered the old gentleman was none other than *Drake*, the slime-ball that had been pestering my stepsister Isabella. It seemed he had really matured in twenty years, and he was the principal of the school now. He let me in without asking too many questions, so I was relieved at how smoothly that went.

Classes were done for the day, and my old classroom was empty when I stepped inside. I headed to the back of the room and started going through the shelves of books along the wall, trying to find "Marked for

Eternity”. After the first couple shelves, I began to worry that the book might have a false jacket or something. I mean, if it was as illegal as Millie made it out to be, it wouldn’t just be sitting on the shelf in plain sight, clearly labeled, right? I might have to open up every single book to figure out if it was the one I was looking for, and that would blow my whole afternoon. I really needed to get back to the Dragon’s Lair soon.

I was so engrossed in my search that I totally did not hear a couple of dudes come up behind me, until one of them said something. I spun around and found myself facing a rather odd duo. I couldn’t tell if they were bullies, and they had a weird way of talking, so I was on my guard. The two introduced themselves as Pivolt and Zero, and they turned out to be pretty chill. When they asked what I was up to, I told them I was looking for a book. That got their attention, and they immediately asked if I was looking for *that* book. They knew exactly what I was after. I should have worried that maybe they would be inclined to report me to the authorities for trying to get my hands on an illegal book, but I was feeling pretty desperate, so I told them **yes**, I was looking for *that* book.

It turns out Zero and Pivolt were “safekeepers” for the book — a term they expected I would know, but I was completely lost. I was only just starting to realize that they were more than just a couple of high school students wandering around after class. They initially refused to share the book with me, but eventually Zero said I could have the book if I could survive their test. I briefly recalled Johnny’s death-challenge earlier and wondered what I was getting myself into, but then I forced myself to relax — surely these two weren’t as twisted as Johnny, right? I hesitantly agreed.

The test, to my relief, was literally just a series of questions. What I found fascinating was that as soon as they started asking questions, Zero’s and Pivolt’s strange style of speech and “bro” behavior evaporated. The questions were not only presented with perfect

elocation, they were surprisingly intellectual. The questions really stuck with me, as did the answers. They were: **Special Relativity Theory**, **All of the above**, **Wormholes**, **1969**, and **Nothing**. (I worked on another mnemonic to help me remember the answers. It goes like this: “Some Random Tourists Always Over Think And Want 69...” uh, I just realized I got as far as “69” and then got distracted. Best of luck to you!)

Pivolt and Zero were impressed with my answers and agreed to give me the book, so long as I kept it out of the hands of other safekeepers. That struck me as a very odd request, but of course I agreed to it. They pointed me to the right shelf before leaving, and sure enough, I found “Marked for Eternity” tucked in between a couple classics, its title prominently displayed on the spine. Just how illegal could this book be, anyway?

I’d ended up staying out a lot longer than I meant to, so I rushed back to the Dragon’s Lair. Johnny set me right back to meditating, and this is how I spent the next several days. I thought I was getting the hang of it, but every time I started to enter a transcendent state of consciousness, Johnny would sneak up behind me and whop me over the head with a wooden training sword. His teaching style was bizarre, to say the least. So now I had to practice meditating *and* be ready to dodge his sneak attacks at a moment’s notice. Fine. If he wanted to test my reflexes, I’d show him I was up to the task.

The next several weeks were a blur. Wake up, exercise, meditate, get whopped over the head, go to sleep, dream my weird dreams, occasionally sneak out to visit L.I.S.A. Eventually, I started to notice the changes in me. I was less winded after my runs. I started to anticipate Johnny’s sneak attacks and prevent them. I became harder, better, faster, stronger. Strangely, the marks that had mysteriously appeared on my chest and back started to fade away. Finally, after I’d managed to stop



Johnny's head bludgeoning consistently for several days straight, he told me I had mastered the Path of the Dragon.

I hadn't anticipated spending a whole three weeks on my training, though Johnny seemed to think I had mastered it in record time. I had the book, and I finally had the training. I needed to get back to Kana's *dōjō* to begin my magic training; I didn't have much time left before H located the time machine, and I still needed to find where Ella was being held.

Kana seemed shocked that I had mastered the Path of the Dragon. It turns out she just needed me to learn the fundamentals, which I could have done in an afternoon. Bruh! She asked if I had the book, and I told her **yes**. With that, I was ready to begin what would no doubt be another battery of intense training sessions. Hopefully Kana didn't have any ideas about knocking me upside the head every thirty minutes.

Our first exercise was lighting a candle from a distance, using a magical spell. Kana demonstrated the incantation, deftly lighting the candle with precision and finesse. Then she asked me to do it. I think she was certain I wouldn't be successful; she was borderline smug about it. And admittedly, I didn't have any luck whatsoever the first couple times I tried. I thought maybe I was at least getting a small spark to form, but Kana just gave me an infuriating smirk and shook her head. I was starting to get a little annoyed, and I didn't relish the thought of spending an entire week just trying to light a stupid candle. I angrily recited the incantation again — and instantly conjured a lively flame on the wick.

As you read this, past (or future) me, I expect that you have not yet experienced the flow of magic for the first time. Know that you have an innate and powerful talent for it, a hallmark of the Nolan family legacy. I realized, as the candle burst to life, that I had touched something that

was both new to me and infinitely familiar. I was like... like a mermaid that had lived her whole life on land and finally plunged into the ocean for the first time, finding in that moment her natural state of being. The moment I felt the magic flow through me, I understood it viscerally, knew exactly how to channel it. I knew with complete confidence that I could light that candle again and again, no matter how many times Kana demanded I do it. Hell, I knew in that moment that I could set the whole *dōjō* on fire — I mean, you know, if I was inclined to be a reprobate arsonist.

Also, did I just liken myself to a mermaid? We will never speak of this to anyone, swear on your (*our*) mother's grave.

Kana was flabbergasted. Not only had I lit the candle in record time, I hadn't even spoken the incantation properly. She couldn't fathom that, but I understood — the incantation was just a means to coax the magic to the surface, make it easier to grasp. I didn't need that. Once I felt the magic, I could find it anywhere, grab hold of it any time I wanted, with barely more than a thought. Kana concluded that there was nothing more she could teach me, and what was originally going to be a week of intense training ended up being spent with Kana testing and verifying that I pretty much had an intrinsic mastery of any magic she asked me to perform. In between tests, we played console games and just hung out. I found myself really growing fond of Kana's company. We were growing close.

The last night of my training, Kana fixed an extra special dinner for us — like, borderline romantic. Candlelight and everything. (I might have been the one to light the candles, just to show off my magic.) It was a nice send-off, and we had a heartfelt conversation. I told her about my **comatose father**, and she was very sympathetic. I think she admired how much I cared about him. I told her about how I was the **leader of the Marked**, and she found that pretty exciting; apparently the Marked



have quite a fan base among the Fallen, and Kana enthusiastically counted herself as a fan. As we talked, I noticed that Kana seemed to be more and more into me — and I can't lie, I was into her too. So when dinner was over and she invited me to join her in her room later, I knew I would **go to Kana's bedroom** to spend the night.

When I joined her a short while later, Kana had changed and looked absolutely stunning in her nightwear. She seemed pensive when I arrived, but I wasn't there long before she shed the nightwear and treated me to the sight of her naked beauty. I realized for the first time that she had a number of scars across her body, which she said she usually masks with magic. It was a sign of how comfortable she felt around me that she dropped the spell and let me see them. Contrary to finding them ugly, I thought they just enhanced her beauty.

Kana was getting hot and bothered pretty quickly, and before long we were both naked on the bed. She tried to pull a domme routine on me, but I **refused**, insisting on taking the dominant role in our lovemaking. Kana thought that was amusing, and she challenged me to make her cum by eating her out. I was down for that challenge, and that's how I found myself licking her out furiously while she rode my face. It was hot as hell, past (or future) me, and it didn't take long for my tongue action to push her completely over the edge.

She wanted me to wait around while she recovered from her orgasm, but I'd had enough of her trying to dominate me — it was time to show her who was in control. I flipped her onto her back and placed myself over her, and I could tell she was incredibly turned on by my show of confidence. By the time I entered her, she was already starting to beg for it. What followed was an incredible and frenetic bout of fucking, and I couldn't get enough of seeing her bounce under me as I thrust into her. The way she made my cock feel was indescribable, and judging by her moans, I was making her feel pretty incredible too. It wasn't long before

we both neared our climax. She invited me to stay inside her. Well, I won't tell you whether I decided to **cum inside** or **cum outside**; it's one of those things that, when the time comes, you just have to do what feels right in the moment. We were both pretty exhausted after our lovemaking, and we fell asleep shortly after.

The next morning, I expected to have breakfast with Kana before saying goodbye to her and heading out to meet with H and Violet. But when I woke up, Kana was nowhere to be found. As I was putting together my things, I realized that the "Marked for Eternity" book was nowhere to be found, as well. I didn't know what to make of that, but there wasn't much I could do. Kana didn't return, and eventually I had to get going, or H and Violet would think something had happened to me.

At the café, I found Violet and H already waiting for me. H said he had located the time machine, and it wasn't far away. I hadn't forgotten that I promised Violet I would try to help her mother, so we agreed to accompany Violet to her place before we continued our own mission. She brought us to her home and showed me into the room where her mother was lying unconscious — cursed, the way Dad was cursed. I was a little nervous. Yes, I seemed to have a natural mastery of magic and hadn't failed any of the tests Kana had set before me — but I was about to try *lifting a curse* from a living being. My mind kept wanting to conjure up images of all the ways something like that could go wrong. It was only through force of will that I quelled the images and stepped forward to channel the magic that I hoped would cure Violet's mother.

I place out my hand — and I felt her. Her essence, swirling and alive and undulating in the ether that permeates all things. I felt the curse, like a roiling mass latched onto her essence, constricting the flow of it. I felt the boundary between the two, incredibly narrow and yet, to me, as wide as a canyon. I focused, channeling the magic into the curse and deftly *slicing* it away from the essence of Violet's mother.

The effect was immediate: Violet's mother awoke with a loud gasp. I worried that she would quickly fall back into a coma the way my father had, but we waited... and she didn't. She was truly back, and the curse seemed to be lifted for good. Violet was beside herself with joy, and her tears of happiness warmed my heart as I bid them both goodbye and set out with H to the site of the time machine.

When we arrived at the location H had scouted, I recognized the building immediately as something I had seen in one of my dream-memories. I had been there as a child, and I remembered my father being there too. It was strange to see it in person now. By this time, it was full dark, and something seemed to be off. The door to the building stood open, and a light was on inside. I approached the door cautiously, H right behind me. As we reached the steps, a figure jumped into view and shouted at us, "STOP!"

## *Chapter 3*

I think what startled me more than the man's sudden appearance was the fact that I recognized him — he was the same man who had appeared on the street as I was walking home from my date with Addison. He hadn't made much sense then, and he wasn't making much sense now. H seemed to know him; said his name was Spectre. The man was mostly spouting gibberish, which H said was normal for him. There was one phrase that he repeated, and it stuck with me: "The angel of death does not send someone who lost a normal life up the stairs." I had no idea what it meant, but I filed it away to think about later.


H and I proceeded past Spectre and headed... uh, up the stairs. We made our way to the roof of the building, where the time machine sat in front of a huge, ornate clock tower. But that wasn't the only thing we encountered. The Watcher was there as well, and he had Ella with him! Something was wrong; Ella wasn't acting like a woman being kidnapped. She was strangely docile, and The Watcher wasn't even gripping her like she might try to escape. All this flashed through my mind in a second, before I realized that they were about to leave with the time machine. I couldn't let that happen! I summoned the well of magical energy I'd learned to master and focused it into a roaring flame right on top of The Watcher. He seemed surprised — but the flames didn't reach him. He and Ella started to shift out of phase as the time machine activated. In desperation, I leaped toward them... and the time machine carried us all away.

This time, I was prepared. More or less. I managed to stay conscious as the time machine ripped us away on another gut-twisting journey. It probably lasted only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Finally, we came to rest in the middle of a large, open rotunda, and I was thrown

from the time machine. A moment later, the time machine, The Watcher, and Ella disappeared, and I was left prone and disoriented on the floor of the rotunda.

I lay there for a moment to get my bearings. I had been *so close* to getting Ella back, but The Watcher had slipped through my grasp. I needed to find out where they went. But first, I needed to figure out where *I* was — and when, for that matter. I stood up and surveyed the strange scene around me.

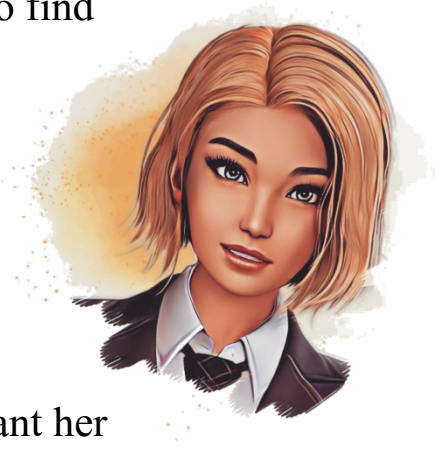
The rotunda stood in the middle of a vast field of strange blue and white roses. Four paths led away from the rotunda in different directions. Well, three paths; the last direction seemed pretty overrun. What I at first took to be an outdoor field turned out to be a large, enclosed garden. All of the paths converged on a single exit point, so you could head in **any direction** and find your way to the exit. Who knows what you might encounter along the way?

Before exiting, on a whim I decided to pick a rose and take it with me. After scanning the nearest flowers, I decided to **take a blue rose** that was conveniently free of nasty thorns. As you read this, past (or future) me, did you think to yourself, “I bet one of the girls in my life would really enjoy the gift of a blue rose”? If you did, you’d be right! I won’t tell you to whom I ended up giving the rose I took. All I will say is this: be on the lookout for opportunities to present your gift to whoever you choose. I recall several opportunities that would have been ideal for presenting a gift, so I’ll try to make note of them as I tell my story. Look for my little drawing of a rose in the margins; those are the most opportune moments to give the rose, the way I see it. 

Having pilfered a blue rose to give to some lucky girl, I stepped through the exit door that was inconspicuously set into the base of the artificial “sky” that extended out over the garden. I emerged into a sort of lounge,

where a young woman greeted me. She introduced herself as Kira and invited me to **have a drink** with her. I agreed, thinking it was the best way to get some information about what time period I was in. Kira was surprised when I asked her the date, but she told me it was September 24<sup>th</sup>. That was the day Elisa and I went to the secret place, the day I got sucked away by the time machine in the first place. That made me realize that if anybody could help me figure out where The Watcher had taken Ella this time, it was Elisa.

I was anxious to get back to the secret place to find Elisa, but Kira wasn't through with me. I had entered the gardens without first buying a ticket from her, and she demanded that I make good on my obligation. When I hesitated, she offered me an alternative: pleasure her without using my dick or hands, and she'd let me off the hook. I was rather shocked at her proposal, but I didn't want her to get in trouble with her superiors. And it's not like we would be fucking, with my dick on the ban list. So I decided to **accept the offer**, and a few minutes later, I was eating her out in an empty conference room. I don't think I realized before that experience, past (or future) me, but we are *really good* at pleasuring the ladies with our tongue. Kira was an absolute puddle of lust by the time she climaxed, and she came *hard*. I was off the hook for the ticket, and Kira even invited me back. I was tempted to take her up on that offer.



Leaving the “Plant Arium” (as Kira called it — some sort of play on the word “planetarium”), I got my bearings and headed back to Elisa's and my secret place. I arrived just in time to see myself rush into the ruins in response to a call for help. Elisa rushed in after, and I made my way up to the ruins to see if I could find where Elisa had gone. I made my way



down the stairs, but when I entered the cave-like basement, Eli got the jump on me from behind and demanded that I tell her who I was and what I was doing there. I was half expecting something like this, though I didn't anticipate Eli holding me at gunpoint. (Well, okay... not exactly gunpoint, but she had her hand out ready to nuke me with magic if I tried any funny business.) I told her who I was, and I patiently explained everything that had happened to me since I stepped into the time machine only moments before (from her perspective).

By the time I finished my story, Elisa was having trouble staying awake. I guess it was a lot to catch up on. She got the gist of what had happened, though, and was thrilled that I had managed to master magic. For my part, the most important thing was that now I could lift the curse that my dad was under, just like I had lifted the curse on Violet's mother. Without further delay, we headed to the hospital to see if I could finally free my father from his imprisonment once and for all.

Once inside my father's hospital room, I took a deep breath and reached out my hand. I could feel my father's essence, and I could feel the curse, but... something felt different than it had with Violet's mother. Nevertheless, I reached out with my magic and started trying to slice it away from my father's essence. It quickly became evident that this was on a whole different level than what I had dealt with before. My father's curse was more resilient, more insidious. As hard as I tried, I could not find a way to vanquish it. Dad began screaming, and I worried that my attempts were killing him. Finally, I released my magic, and Dad fell back into his coma. I left the hospital, heartbroken.

With no clues on where The Watcher went, and no success bringing Dad out of his coma, I was at my wits' end. Elisa asked me to meet her on Monday; she said she had some information to share with me. That meant I would have Sunday to myself. I was a bit relieved; I needed to decompress. Before parting ways, Elisa helpfully reminded me that I

hadn't had facial hair when I left on my time-traveling escapade, and maybe I should shave before anybody else saw me.



Unsurprisingly, my sleep that night was plagued with unsettling dreams again. I saw Sky, and something seemed terribly wrong. Before I could find out what, the scene changed, and I saw Ella from the first day we met. I awoke thinking about her; I hoped she was safe, wherever she was.

Isabella and Sarah were still having breakfast when I came downstairs. Isa seemed to notice that something was different about me, but I managed to deflect her prying. Sarah asked if I still wanted to play a video game with her, and I said yes. After breakfast, she stopped by my room with her controller, and we duked it out on some new console title. While we played, I told Sarah about the month I'd had since talking with her the night before. She took it in stride; I suppose she expected something like this would happen. She encouraged me to find a way to find Ella, and I was grateful for her confidence in me.



After Sarah left, I wanted to spend time with another family member. You could **visit either of them**, but I chose to see what Isabella was up to. I stopped by her bedroom to find her studying for an IT test that I totally did not forget we had at school on Monday. Isa offered to quiz me to get me prepared. Since I know what you (we) are like with quizzes, I'll give you a quick refresher: always start an email by **writing the subject**, there are **8 bits** in a byte, cryptocurrency uses **blockchain** technology to store transactions, **Ubuntu** is an open-source operating system, and one gigabyte is equal to **1024 megabytes**. I remember the look of delight on Isa's face when I managed to answer all the questions correctly. I think it made an impression on her.



Before I left, Isabella informed me that the family would be going out to dinner that evening. I wouldn't want to be late for that. I still had time

for a jog, though, so I donned my running shoes and struck out on the route I had traversed so many times while training in the Path of the Dragon. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the park I ran in the future already existed in this time period as well. As I jogged along the walking path, I encountered Addison, busily helping prepare for the park's grand opening the next day. I was pleased to see her, but somewhat less pleased to discover that her father was nearby as well. (You remember how he threatened us if we ever came near Addison again?) I decided I should clear out before he saw me talking to his princess, so I hastily bid Addison goodbye and ran off. When I felt I was sufficiently far away that Addison's dad wouldn't find me, I stopped to catch my breath — only to find Addison coming up behind me anyway.

Much as I didn't want to have Addison's father catch me with her, I was glad of her company, and we hung out for a bit, quietly admiring the beauty of the park. The moment ignited a spark of attraction, and eventually Addison confessed to me that she was okay with the idea of our sharing more sexy moments like when I first caught her in the bathroom. Her admission got me excited, but I couldn't resist teasing her a little. That led to her issuing me a challenge: she'd tried to get me to cum in under five minutes, and I had to hold out to the end without cumming. Loser had to do whatever the winner said for a day. I eagerly accepted her challenge.

Almost before I knew what was happening, Addison had my dick out and was treating me to a vigorous hand job — and she was *good* at it. She knew how to impart the most pleasure possible, and she was determined to push me over the edge as quickly as she could. But she had no idea who she was dealing with. I felt confident I could hold out for five minutes if I wanted to, so **any option** would be a win for me: cum early and have the pleasure of Addison bossing me around for a day, or resist (and keep resisting!) to get her to do my bidding. I won't

tell you how my time with her turned out; you deal with that girl in your own way, and good luck to you.

Before we said goodbye to each other, Addison invited me to the grand opening of the park the following day. I looked forward to spending time with her again, so I said of course I would **go**.



So far my Sunday was going pretty good. I changed into something nice and joined the family for dinner on the terrace of a fancy restaurant. To my surprise, Stephanie, Isabella and Sarah were all dolled up and looked stunning. I wondered what the special occasion was, but I didn't have to wait long to find out. Stephanie announced that she had received a big promotion at work, and this dinner was a way to celebrate. I was thrilled for Stephe, as were Isa and Sarah, and we enjoyed a really nice meal while we made small talk. Unfortunately, the short notice for dinner meant that Isa and Sarah had other obligations that they had to get to; so eventually, it was just Stephanie and me sharing drinks on the terrace.

There was an awkward lull in the conversation, and eventually, Stephanie asked if I had a girlfriend. Knowing what I did about her secret sexual fantasy, I wondered if it was more than an innocent question. I thought about Addison, but decided that I was **not ready to settle down** yet. Stephanie thought that was good, and she shared some wisdom she had learned from her mother. I had never heard her talk about her mother at length, so I encouraged her to **talk about it some more**. I think she really appreciated having someone to share her memories with. Come to find out, her mom had passed away when Stephanie was just entering adulthood. By that time, Stephanie was already trying to raise a daughter on her own, and the loss of her mother hit her hard. She reminisced about my father and how good he was to her — but even there, she felt like there hadn't been a spark of *true love*. It was more like he was a protector than a husband, a dynamic that

Stephanie could never quite figure out. Knowing what I did about my family's past, it was beginning to make somewhat more sense to me.

I realized that Stephanie was showing a great deal of vulnerability in that moment. She started to get emotional, and I tried to reassure her that she deserved all the love and respect a woman could get. I told her I was there for her if she needed to talk about anything. It occurred to me that I might just be fueling whatever feelings or fantasies she already had about me, but in that moment, I realized I didn't care. I would be there for Stephanie in whatever way she needed me.

We headed home before either of us got too drunk and said (or did) something we might regret later. That night, I had another dream, or... no, these were definitely memories coming back. I saw my dad, and I saw... Sky. Oh god, Sky. My last memory of her hit me like an avalanche. The day Sky died. I remembered it all now. The assassin. The gunshot. The blood everywhere — on the floor, on her dress, on her face. Sky's dying words....

I awoke. And I remembered everything about why I fight this fight.

I needed to break the cycle. I had no idea what that meant, but... what if I could undo the tragedies of this war? Bring my mother back? Bring Sky back? I would do anything to achieve that. I needed to get more information from Elisa. It being Monday, we had agreed to skip school and meet up at our secret place. Elisa was already waiting for me when I arrived.

The first thing she did was bring me up to speed on the Celestial Tools. This was another topic where my memories were hazy. The time machine was a Celestial Tool, as was the watch that my father had given me. It was called the Eternal Watch, and it was actually the key to operating the time machine. There were only a few other Celestial Tools

that Elisa knew about. One of them was called the All Finding Pendant, and it was apparently something I had been keenly interested in finding before I lost my memories. Elisa didn't know why — as leader of The Marked, I had kept a lot of things to myself, and even she wasn't privy to everything I had been working on. But apparently the All Finding Pendant was key to breaking the cycle.


I started to bring up the possibility of saving my mother, but Elisa tried insistently to dissuade me. She said I had tried and failed to save her before. I suppose she wanted to save me some heartache — or just didn't want me to waste my time — but she had to know that if there was even the slightest chance of saving my mother, there was no way I would pass up the opportunity. Reluctantly, she gave me the date of my mother's death. A date that was thirty years in the future.

Elisa promised to locate the time machine for me so that I could look for my mother, but she made me promise that I wouldn't die on her. I knew we were close, but I wondered just *how* close we had been before I lost my memories. I swore to her that I would survive, and to myself, I swore that everyone I loved would be safe as well.


With nothing further to discuss, we made our way to school and quietly sneaked in after first period was over. The next class hadn't even begun before I got the shock of my life — *Violet* walked up to me and said hello. Violet. From twenty years in the future. She looked exactly the same as when I left her after helping her mother. Furthermore, she was dressed in our school uniform (which, if I may be allowed a momentary sidebar, showed off the curves of her body in an extremely flattering way). I was so stunned, I wasn't sure what to say, but Violet just told me to find her after school to talk more. My buddy Mike was no help; he acted like she'd been going to our school for a while now, even though I was quite certain I had never seen her in our classroom before. What was going on?!




Class went by in a blur; I was still thinking about what Violet was doing here. I was so preoccupied that Diane found me still sitting at my desk, lost in thought, long after class was dismissed. She decided it was as good a time as any for another private lesson. This one was a little different; Diane told me a story and asked me to navigate the scenario in the most appropriate manner. At the time, I couldn't fathom the significance of the story she told, so I fumbled around for a bit before I got into the groove of it. If you want to impress Diane, past (or future) me, let me share with you how the story unfolds: an outlaw type approaches you and bemoans that he can't get a drink. Tell him, **"That's Prohibition for you, old sport."** The outlaw goes on to rant about some letter sent out by the Russian government. You should prompt him, **"The call for help?"** At that point, he goes off in a completely different direction, griping about the flappers that are everywhere now. When he asks you if you know about them, tell him, sure, that's **women driving cars**. (Just roll with it, seriously.) The rough-looking fellow takes a shining to you... and that's the end of the story.

While the story itself seemed to have little point, of more significance was what Diane was doing the whole time she was telling it. I noticed it as soon as we started: she kept tapping the desk loudly with her long fingernail. That's an unusual tick for her, and I wondered at first why she had started doing it. It was irregular, too — sometimes there would be a long pause in between taps, and sometimes the pause was very short. It finally dawned on me that it might be some kind of code. I remembered Sarah telling me about Morse code when we were kids, so I memorized the pattern in order to write it down as soon as I left. 

Once outside, I went looking for Violet. On the way, I encountered Anna. I hadn't talked with her since our day on the beach — and considering how that went, we definitely needed to clear the air. Anna apparently felt the same way, because she immediately apologized about

the hand job and tried to assure me she wasn't usually like that. She was actually kind of tripping over her words, alternating between how much she likes me and how she probably scared me off. It took me a few tries to get a word in edgewise, but I was finally able to reassure her that I wasn't put off by our encounter. In fact, I felt this was the perfect opportunity to **ask her out**. She seemed ecstatic, though she tried to play it cool. She invited me to her mom's bowling alley later that week, and I happily agreed to meet her there. 

As Anna left (somewhat more giddy than I think I'd ever seen her), I spotted Violet waiting on one of the benches near the school entrance. Time to find out what in the world she was doing in this time period. Violet told me she came looking for me, to thank me for helping her mother — but also to join The Marked. Knowing the kind of war I'd been engaged in before I lost my memories, I was dead set against that idea. I didn't want to put Violet in harm's way. I... I couldn't bear the thought of her ending up like Sky.

For her part, Violet was adamant that she would make me realize her potential. I didn't want to hear it; I just wanted to know how long she had been in this period, and why I hadn't noticed her before. Violet confirmed what my buddy Mike had mentioned: she had been here for over a year. How was that even possible? I had never noticed her before.  But Violet told me she had been greeting me every day for the past year, and today was the first time I really *saw* her.

Time travel is a tricky thing, past (or future) me. You have probably only just begun to realize what sorts of weirdness can happen when a person's memories don't align to the time period they're in. Believe me, it only gets weirder as you go further down the rabbit hole.

Violet left me with a lot to think about. When I got home, I fished out the bit of Morse code I had jotted down. It was time to find Sarah and

see if she could decipher it. I found Sarah in her room, playing a video game (of course), and asked if she could help out. Being the loving stepsister that she is, Sarah immediately reminded me that I had given her crap as a kid for learning Morse code. Well, okay, that much was true. I had kind of hoped she had forgotten after all these years. But no, she was determined to hold it over my head. I almost thought she wasn't going to help me, but then she offered me a deal: her back was hurting, so if I gave her a massage, she'd help me decipher the Morse code.

I figured it was an easy trade, so I agreed to **massage Sarah**. Then I discovered two things. First, she meant I had to give her a massage *right now*. Second, this wasn't going to be a modest through-the-clothes type of massage. Sarah stripped down to her underwear before lying on her stomach on the bed, and I was momentarily stunned at the sight of my half-naked stepsister lying in front of me. Mustering my concentration (and trying hard to keep blood from flowing to all the wrong places), I started to massage her lower back.

I don't know if you remember this, past (or future) me, but I — we — have given massages in the past, and we have a pretty good touch. My ministrations to Sarah were having quite the effect on her. Before long, she had me move to her upper back, and she barely hesitated when I asked if I could unclasp her bra to get better access. Not long after that, she asked me to **massage her legs**, and I was happy to oblige. At this point, I think she was getting pretty hot and bothered. Truth be told, so was I. Her legs slowly parted as I worked the backs of her thighs, and then suddenly, it happened — my fingers accidentally brushed up against the fleshy folds of her vagina. I think my brain nearly exploded when I realized that not only had I just touched her most private area, she was *really wet*. My accidental contact must have put Sarah on the verge of meltdown as well, because she got flustered and decided that she'd had enough massaging for the day. She told me she'd meet me in

my room in a few minutes after she got dressed; I was barely able to speak coherently as I made my exit.

A few minutes later, the balance of my blood flow was restored (mostly), and Sarah came into my room looking like nothing had happened. I showed her the note I had scribbled, and she immediately... pulled up Google on her phone. Seriously?! I could have done that myself, if uh, you know, if I had actually thought of it. Okay, I guess that was on me. Anyway, one quick Google search later and we had the decoded message: "Forest 2 AM". Sarah was utterly mystified as to what the message might mean, and I was hesitant to tell her where it came from. "Oh, well about that, Sarah. This message was relayed to me by my home room teacher, who tapped it out on a classroom desk while she was giving me private tutoring lessons." Ha! Sarah would never let me hear the end of that, so... no. Let her think I just found the message on the street or something. I could tell Sarah wasn't buying it, but she left without pressing me.

What baffled me about the note was where it came from. Why was *Diane* doing cloak-and-dagger shit like this? Why did she want me out in the forest in the middle of the night? Did she want to do some more "private" tutoring? Nah. Diane lived alone; if she wanted to jump my meat, she would just invite me to her apartment. (I'll pause here to point out, past or future me, that Diane *had* just invited me to her apartment for our next lesson. Oh boy....) Something else must be going on. Was something secret hidden in the forest? How was Diane involved in any of this? In the past few days, I had discovered that many of my friends and family were somehow connected to my past life and this war that was going on, so... why not Diane? It wouldn't surprise me a bit, I realized.

Well, 2 AM was still a long way off, so I pondered how I was going to kill time until then. Fortunately, Isabella stopped by and asked if I

wanted to continue the anime we had been watching. That sounded like a perfect way to knock out a few hours, so I said **sure**. We got comfortable, and then we *binged*. I don't know how many episodes we ended up watching, but somewhere along the way, we both fell asleep sitting up on the bed. When I awoke, it was full dark outside, and Isabella was curled up against me and snoring softly. It was already 1 AM, so I needed to get going. I decided to **leave quietly**, so I carefully lowered Isa onto the bed to continue her slumber.

As I passed Sarah's room to head downstairs, she suddenly stepped out into the hallway, fully dressed and ready to... do what? Did she think she was going to come with me? Just because she decoded the message? Hang on, correction: just because she used *Google* to decode the message? Apparently she thought that was more than enough reason for her to get to go on this trek, and no amount of protesting on my part could sway her. So, reluctantly, I agreed to take her with me.

Listen, past (or future) me, don't *ever* tell Sarah I said this, but I was actually kind of glad to have her with me as I ventured into the very dark, very spooky forest in the wee hours of the morning. I felt like I was just begging for some Blair Witch crap to come mess me up, and I had no idea if my magic or the Path of the Dragon would help me out if that happened. The thought made my skin crawl, and I was glad to have someone else with me. Silly, I know. The *real* concern was that Diane's note hadn't said *where* in the forest I should be looking for something, and it's a pretty big forest. I worried that we might wander all over the woods for hours trying to find whatever we were supposed to find. It would have been nice if we even knew what we were looking for.

Fortunately, we didn't have to bumble about nearly as long as I feared. We hadn't been walking for fifteen minutes when I spotted the last thing I expected to find — The Watcher himself was roaming the woods!

Sarah and I took cover and watched as my arch-nemesis (or so I thought of him these day) slipped through the forest. Curiosity winning out over common sense, we carefully followed him from a distance. Eventually, The Watcher arrived at an unusual structure and quickly disappeared inside.

Well, we had come this far, so there was no backing down now. Sarah and I ventured into the building and moved stealthily down the hallway. Or at least, as stealthily as we could manage when it was pitch black inside and we kept running into each other. Eventually, we saw a light in the distance, and finally we emerged into an ornate, round meeting chamber. All around the chamber, rows upon rows of benches were filled with mysterious, hooded figures; and in the center of it all stood The Watcher, welcoming them in a booming, dramatic voice.



## Chapter 4

Sarah and I managed to slip into the chamber and find a good hiding place that would afford us a clear view of The Watcher. He seemed almost jovial, and it wasn't long before I discovered why. Moments after our arrival, he brought out Ella — still looking as docile as the last time I'd seen her — and introduced her to the mysterious group as the latest “test subject” in some project I had never heard of before.

I nearly leaped out of hiding and wrung his neck, right then and there. Ella wasn't some test subject! She was my dad's nurse! And... and my friend! Of course, it would have been stupid to attack The Watcher just then, surrounded as he was by a small army of sycophants. Sarah must have felt me tense up, because she put a restraining hand on my arm in silent warning. Good thing she insisted on coming along.

The Watcher then turned to another topic, and I momentarily forgot about how nice he would look with my thumbs rammed into his jugular. Apparently, my arch-nemesis had located another Celestial Tool! It was in the possession of the CEO of a company called ThunderCorps, and The Watcher was planning to seize it the coming Saturday.

He mentioned the name of the Celestial Tool, the “All Finding Pendant”, and I was suddenly gripped with another head-splitting flash of something — a pattern or symbol that I didn't quite recognize. The sensation was different from when my memories were returning; it almost felt as if something was *calling* to me. In an instant it was gone, but the pain in my head was enough to elicit a yelp that carried across the chamber. The Watcher was immediately on guard, and Sarah and I had to beat a hasty exit before we were discovered. In the scramble to get away, I barely noticed that the Eternal Watch on my wrist was glowing.

Once safely outside and concealed in the forest, Sarah and I went over what we had learned. Sarah seemed to be quite familiar with Celestial Tools. I realized that I wasn't even surprised; it seems that Sarah had been quite a confidante of my dad's. Anyway, it was critical that we get our hands on the All Finding Pendant before The Watcher could, so we immediately starting orchestrating our master plan to get to the CEO of ThunderCorp first.

Just kidding. It was almost 3 in the morning, and now that the adrenaline of our escapade was wearing off, we both felt exhaustion setting in. We just wanted to get home and crash. Orchestrating a master plan could wait until the next day.

The walk home was uneventful, and Sarah and I quietly parted ways in the hallway. When I entered my room, I found Isabella still sleeping on my bed, snoring softly. She looks really cute when she's asleep. (Don't ever tell her I said that!) I didn't have the heart to wake her up, so I just got undressed and lay down next to her. I was asleep in moments.

Okay... I need to digress for a moment and impart some wisdom to you, past (or future) me. You know how you (*we*) like to go commando sometimes when we sleep, if the weather is too warm? Yeah, *don't* make a habit of that. If you make a habit of going commando, then one day you're going to find yourself crashing at 3 in the morning, and your brain will be on autopilot, and you're going to strip down without even thinking about it, and next thing you know you're passed out on the bed *completely naked* next to your stepsister. Hella awkward.

My short sleep was full of the unsettling dreams I had come to dread. Memories of who I had been, no doubt. I saw Elisa begging me to let her join me in my crusade. I didn't want her to get involved, not after losing Sky. But most unsettling was coming face-to-face with... *myself*. A version of myself that knew how all this would inevitably end. I didn't

understand the warning that my other self tried to give me. (As I write this, its meaning is much clearer, but now is not the time to divulge that.)

I awoke feeling scarcely less tired than when I fell asleep. Isabella was already gone when I woke up. That's when I realized that I was lying there *in the nude* and sporting the mother of all morning wood. I couldn't imagine what Isa must have thought when she awoke, but there's no way she didn't see that. Things were sure to be awkward between us again.

But I couldn't think about that right now. It was time to orchestrate "Operation: Steal The All Finding Pendant From The CEO Of ThunderCorps".\* I started by texting Elisa before history class, and she was down to meet when school got out. Violet was hovering behind me and saw the whole exchange, so she invited herself to the meeting too. I figured arguing with her was a futile endeavor, so I reluctantly agreed.

My buddy Mike was in a good mood, maybe owing to the slick new haircut he was rocking. Honestly, I almost didn't recognize him at first. He had a couple new riddles he wanted to try on me, so I said **sure**, I'd attempt to solve them. He ended up challenging me with, like, three different riddles, because I kept getting frustrated and asking to try a different one. I don't remember what order he presented the riddles to me, but I do remember the answers he explained to me later. If he asks you about candles, the answer is that there are **three** candles left at the end. (Not sure why? Ask Mike for a hint.) If he asks you about legs and heads and tails, the item in question is a **coin**. If he asks you about the Mustard family, there are a total of **nine** people in the family.

I'd almost forgotten how much Mike enjoyed a good riddle. I mean, **I feel the same way**, but I'd also forgotten just how bad I am at solving

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\* The name of the operation was a work in progress. Bite me.

them. Anyway, Mike thought we needed to hang out more, and he asked if I was going to the school trip on Friday. (If you're wondering whether I remembered that there was a school trip coming up — of course I did! Yup. Totally remembered.)

After class, Diane reminded me that we were going to do our next private lesson at her apartment. She texted me her home address, but before I headed over to meet her, I needed to find Elisa and Violet. They were waiting for me in front of the school, and I brought them up to speed on what Sarah and I had discovered during our trek through the woods. Eli was elated that we had a lead on a Celestial Tool, and we decided that Thursday would be a good day to try to seize it. There was just one problem: H wasn't around to formulate a brilliant strategy, and our fearless leader (uh... that's me) didn't have any good ideas to offer.

Fortunately — and uncannily — H chose that moment to saunter onto the scene like an actor making an impeccably timed entrance. Elisa had not seen H in quite some time, and she was ecstatic. Violet was pleased to see H as well. As for me... well, I was just confused as heck. How in the world had H managed to time travel when I was the one holding the key to the time machine? For that matter, how did Violet? I tried to get some answers from them, but they were both extremely cagey and wouldn't tell me anything.

At least H's arrival saved me the trouble of having to come up with a plan to get the All Finding Pendant — which was a relief, because my plans are never as clever as the ones H comes up with. With H on the case, I was free to head to my appointment with Diane.

I didn't have any trouble finding Diane's apartment, and it turned out to be a really nice place. I think I remember even telling her, “**Your apartment looks beautiful.**” She appreciated my keen eye for interior decorating, and after exchanging pleasantries, we settled onto her couch.

Diane inquired after my parents, and I had to remind her that one parent was dead and the other was in a coma. In a rare display of candor, she shared with me that her own husband had died several years back. I'm not sure why she told me that, except maybe to express some sort of sympathy for what I was going through. The conversation lulled into awkward silence before Diane changed the subject.

My performance at school was not showing improvement, and Diane was starting to wonder if the private lessons were helping at all. She thought maybe I needed some additional motivation. Now, normally when a teacher says that I need "additional motivation," I start to get very worried about what punitive measures they're plotting. But Diane was actually *smirking*, and she looked almost... flirty? She proposed another quiz, and if I got enough questions right, I could make a single request of her — and whatever I asked, she would fulfill it.

Whatever... I... asked.

I think we established some time ago, past (or future) me, that we are not the wholesome dude that we'd like to think we are. If I had any doubts about that, they were dispelled the moment my mind submitted a rather graphic list of things that I would love to have Diane do, and submitted it so quickly that I suspect my subconscious had been working on said list long before this moment. Only with great effort did I manage to composed myself (and avert a full hard-on) before Diane had a chance to notice how flustered her offer made me. Nevertheless, I was resolved to beat her little quiz!

And so began another test of my history knowledge — and of course, I made sure to remember the answers to the questions for your benefit. The answers to Diane's questions were **Elizabeth I** (the "Virgin Queen", poor girl), **Juan Carlos**, **Charlie Chaplin**, the **Fat Man**, and finally, **Telstar 1**. I recall that Diane tried to trip me up on the last one by asking

me if I was confident about my answer. Don't let her make you doubt yourself! **I am sure** these are the right answers.

Diane was duly impressed with my history knowledge, and so she told me I could make my request of her. My mind immediately brought up the list of ideas again, and I won't lie: having sex with Diane was at the very top of that list. For a brief moment, I entertained the thought of asking her to give herself to me right there on her living room couch. But some part of my brain (the part that wasn't currently being controlled by my trouser snake) warned me that maybe asking for sex was going too far. In fact, I was rather hesitant to request anything too deviant, so I decided to simply ask her to **kiss me**. This seemed to amuse Diane, and she told me I could surely come up with something more bold.

Okay, so now it was clear that she was flirting with me, and I decided fuck it... let's have some fun. I quickly reviewed my mental list of deviant ideas and decided that "**flash your boobs**" sounded titillating but not *too* overboard. Diane didn't even hesitate. Before I had time to register that this was really happening, Diane pulled back her top and exposed the most perfect breasts I had ever witnessed.

I temporarily lost the ability to form any coherent words. I just hope I didn't drool on her couch while my brain overloaded. I somehow managed to compliment her, but after that I could only stare openly. My naked admiration for her body got Diane turned on, and that hard-on I managed to put down earlier was now raging at full strength. The seconds seemed to stretch into heavenly eternity, until Diane finally covered her puppies and — still somewhat flushed — informed me that the lesson was concluded for the day.



I left, still sporting an aching erection. It was totally worth it, though.

There wasn't much time before I needed to meet Addison for the grand opening of Haven Park. I swung by the house just long enough to grab a bite to eat and get changed into some nice clothes, then I headed over to the park. There were a lot more people milling about than I expected, and I wasn't sure how I was going to find Addison in the crowd. Fortunately, she emerged from the throng and got my attention. She had dressed up for the occasion, and she looked incredible. We found a good vantage point to watch the fireworks celebration, and I found my attention alternating between the beauty of the fireworks and the beautiful girl standing next to me.

When the last of the fireworks had lit up the night sky, Addison and I talked. There was still a lot I didn't know about Addison (though that didn't stop me from letting her give me one hell of a handjob the last time we were in the park). She had a mom who had died a few years back, and she had a sister who was seven years old. But what really shocked me was when she told me — wait for it — her sister's name is Kana! My brain calculator kicked into gear upon learning this. Could it be the same Kana that I met and trained with (and, uh, did other things with) when I was in 2044? I decided that the age would probably be about right, and of course, I was beyond thinking that *anything* in my life was mere coincidence. To think that Kana was Addison's sister, though! It was downright surreal.

Our conversation was briefly interrupted by none other than Alan, the friendly but mysterious bus driver. I seemed to be crossing paths with Alan a *lot* these days. To my surprise, I discovered that Addison knew him (friend of her mom's, apparently), and they exchanged pleasantries. But Alan, perhaps sensing that Addison and I were sharing a moment, politely excused himself and left us to our conversation.

As I chatted with Addison, I realized that she wasn't the confident, "with it" girl that I had assumed back before I started dating her. She had her own struggles and insecurities, just like anyone else. I didn't know what to say that might lift her up, but I tried to offer what sympathy and encouragement I could. Everyone struggles in some way, I said, and she didn't have to be so down on herself. My words seemed to really touch her, and we drew closer. She was gazing at me, and I realized that I was getting lost in her gaze — and I liked it. The moment felt right, so I decided to take a chance and **kiss her**.

Addison didn't resist as I drew her to me, and our kiss was long and sweet. And after that... we kissed again, and the second time was as wonderful as the first. As we parted from our second kiss, Addison's breathing was heavy, and my pulse was racing as well. She looked at me for a moment before turning and walking away; and when I hesitated, unsure of what was happening, she reached back and grabbed my tie, pulling her along with her.

That's how I found myself at her place. In her bedroom. Pressing her up against the wall and kissing her passionately while she squirmed out of her clothes. As I ran my hands over her body, she pulled me over to the bed. There she flopped down and spread her legs, giving me a clear view of the wet puddle that was forming under her panties. It was enough to send any man into a frenzy. Nevertheless, I didn't want to appear overeager. Besides, I didn't know how far Addison was willing to go this night. I decided that a little foreplay was in order.

Now, how the foreplay proceeded probably depends. Addison can be either very submissive or very dominating. I suspect that the way in which I handled her handjob challenge in the park had a lot to do with what side of her I saw now that I was in her bedroom. Suffice it to say that our foreplay was incredibly hot, and it wasn't long before I couldn't wait any more — I had to be inside her. Addison tried to demur, but it

was obvious that she was succumbing to intense lust as well. She wanted me to **penetrate her** just as much as I did. And so, with her breathless consent, I slid my cock into the warm folds of her soaked pussy and began to slowly make love to her.

The experience was incredible. To finally be inside of Addison, feeling the walls of her vagina squeezing around my cock as I steadily thrust into her again and again. A part of me had wanted this from the moment I saw her masturbating so energetically in the boy's bathroom at school. As our bodies pressed against each other in rhythm to our lovemaking, I realized it had been too long since I'd been with a woman this way — not since Kana. I needed this badly, and I found myself thrusting into Addison even deeper. As our passions mounted, our pace quickened, and before long Addison was gasping and moaning with every stab of my cock into her. I knew I couldn't last much longer; and Addison, who was on the brink of cumming herself, begged me to cum inside her. I needed no convincing. With a desperate thrust, I stuffed my cock as deep into her as I could and unleashed a torrent of cum into her pussy, as her body writhed in the grip of her own intense orgasm.

We collapsed on the bed, both of us out of breath. I would have stayed there for much longer (and who knows, we might have gone a second round), but Addison started to worry that her father might come home from the park at any time, so she asked me to get dressed and get going before he caught us. After the terrifying ultimatum I received from her father the first time we met, I could only imagine what his reaction would be if he walked in and found his daughter lying there with my cum leaking out of her hole. So, reluctantly, I bid good night to Addison and exited the house into the night.

After all the heat from our bedroom activities, it was nice to get out into the cool evening breeze. I walked slowly, in no hurry to get home. My mind kept replaying the events of the day. H had returned. Diane had

shown me her tits. I got to spend an enjoyable evening with Addison that turned into some incredible sex. All in all, it had been a really good day.

I turned a corner and came across Mike, who was out walking as well. He invited me to drinks, and I told him **sure**, a drink would be the perfect way to round out the day. He guided me to a small but deceptively classy bar a few blocks away. We kicked back, enjoying the ambience and reminiscing about the days when life seemed much simpler. Eventually, Mike glanced over and caught sight of a woman sitting by herself at the bar. His shock was plain. That, he informed me, was none other than the CEO of ThunderCorps. No shit! Of all the gin joints in all the cities in all the world.... (Okay, a bit melodramatic, but still.) I wasn't sure what to make of the woman I was planning to rob in a couple days showing up at the very bar where I was just looking for a quiet drink.

Only... she hadn't shown up after us, had she? It was *us* who had arrived after *her*. There was something to that, but before my brain could latch onto it, Mike was on his feet and walking over to introduce himself. I had no idea *why* he was so keen to strike up a conversation with her, but if he thought he could get lucky with a CEO, I guess it was my duty to be a good wingman.

Besides, this might be an opportunity to gather some intel on the All Finding Pendant. I downed the last of my drink and ambled over to join them.

It turns out that Mike was playing wingman to *me*. By the time I reached them, he was already talking me up to Ms. Vespertine. As I introduced myself, I couldn't help but marvel at how strikingly beautiful she was. Even though she was a fair bit older than Mike and me, she radiated a powerful, refined beauty that many younger woman would envy. She had a fetching British accent, too. As she turned to respond to my

introduction, my eyes were drawn to the elaborate necklace she wore — and whose centerpiece gem was glowing brightly.

I'd... I'd seen that before! It took me a moment, but finally I remembered — Millie's necklace had glowed just like that. I had no idea why it had glowed (and Millie wasn't exactly forthcoming), but I'd learned a lot since then. I was convinced that I was looking at none other than the All Finding Pendant. The pendant that I desperately wanted to acquire. Ms. Vespertine had actually donned it to go out for an evening of drinks! My brain started feverishly trying to figure out a way I might part her from it.

Maybe I could seduce her? I seemed to be having a run of good luck with the ladies recently, so maybe it was worth a try. I started by complimenting her on how nice she looked, and she seemed both pleased and amused. She asked if we made a habit of trying to pick up older ladies at bars. **Older ladies?** She could have passed for my age with looks like hers, so I told her I thought she was the same age as me. She wasn't buying it, but the flattery behind my response seemed to further pique her amusement. She asked me point blank: if I could have sex with her, would I? Her directness put me off balance, and it was all I could do to not blather, "OMG yes, please, absolutely!" like some horny teenage pervert. (Did I just hear you think to yourself, "But you *are* a horny teenage pervert"? That, past or future me, is entirely beside the point.) Instead, I played it cool and told her **yeah**, I would not refuse an offer like that.

It was a pretty suave delivery, and a part of me hoped maybe it would be enough to get Ms. Vespertine to invite me home with her. Instead, she just smirked at me and then posed the same question to Mike. To my surprise, Mike brushed off her tantalizing question by telling her that he was gay. That was news to me! Mike, my best friend, with whom I had spent so much time — and I had no idea that he was gay. The response

confused Ms. Vespertine as well; she was no longer certain of why we had approached her. Then Mike told her he was interested in her necklace.

He was interested... in her necklace? Ms. Vespertine was mildly perplexed, but I was mentally reeling. Was Mike somehow mixed up in all of this? What could possibly be his interest in her necklace? Confusion and suspicion swirled as I tried to work out the surreal direction that this conversation was going.

Mike told Ms. Vespertine that the necklace seemed familiar, but she thought it unlikely that he had ever seen it before. After that, Mike seemed in a hurry to disengage and return to our booth, dragging me along behind him. So much for my plans to execute a brilliant solo heist on the spur of the moment.

It was getting late, so Mike and I parted ways, and I headed home to get some sleep. Another sleep filled with dreams, as my fragmented memories arranged themselves. I saw Elisa, once again pleading with me to let her join me in my mission. I could feel the pain of Sky's death still gripping me, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing someone else dear to me. I pushed her away.

Then I saw... Sarah. She was worried about what would happen to the mission if something befell me. I was holding my cards close to the chest, and she was badgering me to tell her what I had planned.

Then I saw... The Watcher. He was captive, bound to a chair in the very room where Sarah and I were arguing. Bound, but not gagged. He taunted me, and his words were like a thousand cuts to my soul. This was the monster who was responsible for Sky's death! I looked on (in the dream) as I punched him again and again, demanding he tell me what he knew about the Celestial Tools. He wouldn't give me the

satisfaction; instead he goaded me with reminders of Sky. The rage consumed me, and I continued to beat him and punch him and...

...and then I awoke. Still tired, and a bit hungover besides. But the sun was starting to peek through the window, so I figured there was no point going back to sleep. I groggily started getting ready for school.

I caught up with Mike at school and was a bit satisfied to see that he was suffering a hangover as well. We both agreed it was worth it, though. I asked him a bit more about his being gay; it still amazed me that I could have gone this long without having noticed. Turns out he was even interested in some guy named Jacob at school. I had never heard of the dude. Mike seemed to think that was funny. Not only did I know of Jacob, he said, I'd even talked with him before. He had joined school at the same time as Violet.

Oh? That had to be yet another coincidence-that-wasn't-a-coincidence. Who was this Jacob, who had appeared at the same time as Violet? I didn't have to wait long to find out. The man himself walked up behind me and greeted me and Mike (but mostly Mike). I turned around and found myself facing a dude that I'm quite sure I had never seen before in my life. I would have remembered that impeccably groomed shock of neon blue hair! So that was one more item to add to my mental list of "Things I Need to Get to the Bottom Of". Jacob didn't stay long, but headed into the building as Mike gazed appreciatively after him.

It was time for Mike and I to get to our respective classes as well, so we parted ways, and I headed for the classroom that housed my art class. (Yes, I was taking an art class. I don't know what drew me to it, but I felt an inexplicable fascination with art.) When I arrived at the classroom, the only other person I found was Violet. She was busily working on a painting, and I have to say, she was incredibly talented!



She told me she was inspired to start painting by a boy who used to paint every day in the park she frequented when she was a little girl.

I wasn't sure I could come close to Violet's level of skill, but she encouraged me to try painting something anyway. Reluctantly, I situated myself before a blank canvas and tried to figure out what to paint. My muse was annoyingly silent. I could not think of anything I wanted to paint. Finally, I decided to just try painting my neighbor's dog. How hard could that be?

After a half hour of painting, I realized just how bad art without inspiration could be. Violet came over to look at my creation, and though she tried to be diplomatic about it, even I could see that the piece was atrocious. I was ready to throw in the towel, but Violet encouraged me to try again. Don't try to *force* the art, she said, just let the inspiration flow through you.

Her words made me think about how I channel magic. It naturally flows through me, and I don't have to force it. I knew how that sensation feels, so maybe I could use that to channel my artistic side somehow? I decided to give it a try.

It took a bit of time, but eventually an image started to form in my imagination, growing effortlessly, taking on clarity and detail until I could discern every brush stroke. I grabbed my palette and began painting feverishly.

When I finally put down my brush and surveyed my creation, I knew something magical had happened. The scene before me felt fairly *alive*, so intricate were the details. I was exceedingly proud of this attempt, so I called Violet over. She looked over my painting, but instead of being impressed, she seemed... bemused. Where had I seen this, she asked me?

I didn't understand the question, but Violet seemed convinced that what I had drawn was *her* as a little girl.

The boy at the park... it was me. Violet was convinced of it. The boy had painted her once, in a style that was uncannily similar to the painting that we both were now staring at. That boy had been me. I had no memory of painting in a park, but in Violet's mind there was no doubt. The ramifications were staggering. It meant that I grew up in a time that... well, that I'd always thought of as "the future". This time period — the only time period that I had any substantial memory of — was not *my* time period. Another piece clicked into place in this crazy puzzle my life had become.

That reminded me that I still needed to find out how (and why) Violet had suddenly shown up in this time period. In response to my question, Violet told me what happened after I left her in 2044. I had just revived her mother, you'll recall, and Violet was overjoyed. After H and I left, she and her mother had a lot of catching up to do. But her mother, sensing Violet's feelings, insisted that she should go after us. Violet hesitated, but she decided to chase us down, and promised her mother that she would return shortly.

It was the last time Violet saw her mother alive. The Watcher found Violet while she was tailing us, and whatever he said to her, it sent her running back home. She found her mother on the bed, exactly where she had left her — but she had been stabbed with a large kitchen knife, and she was quite dead by the time Violet got to her.

Consumed with grief, Violet collapsed, weeping. But she wasn't alone. A mysterious figure — The Sage, by my reckoning — appeared and told her she could still save her mother, if she came with him. Violet was unsure what happened next, lost as she was in her despair. The next thing she remembered, she was waking up in this time period.

I don't know how Violet could even still function, having endured such a tragedy, but she was obviously determined to save her mother. She was convinced that I was somehow at the center of all this — I suppose that wasn't an unreasonable thing to assume — and she insisted on joining up with me. I was loath to get her involved in anything that might put her in danger, but she would not be swayed. Finally, I gave in and consented to take her on a mission. *One* mission. That's all.

The next class period was about to start soon, so we left it at that, and I headed to history class. At the end of class, Diane asked me to stay behind to talk. She apologized for her conduct during our last private study session. I told her **there's no need for that**, but she was really conflicted about what she had done. She told me that she wanted to cancel our lessons. I was disappointed, of course. The lessons seemed to be helping, and I really didn't think there was anything wrong with what she had done. Nevertheless, I told her **I understand** if she didn't want to continue the lessons. She seemed relieved that I didn't try to argue with her.

On my way out of school, I got a text from Stephanie. She wanted to know if I could swing by the house. I needed to go home and change for my bowling alley date with Anna, so I told her I'd be there shortly.

The minute I got home and saw Stephie's face, I knew something was wrong. She told me there had been a fire that had claimed the lives of a couple students at my school. At first I wasn't sure what to make of the news — but then I remembered that I hadn't seen the two students who sit behind me in history class. Rose and Blake. They were both dead? I didn't know what to think.

Then... something happened. I don't quite know how to describe it. It was like a glitch in the Matrix, but without the black cat walking past. Suddenly Stephie was telling me the exact same news all over again. No,

wait... it wasn't *exactly* the same. There had been a fire that had killed a student. Blake was dead. But... only Blake? I could have sworn Stephie said Rose had died too, but she insisted that Rose was alive. I wasn't sure what just happened, or what I had heard.

As I was pondering this, Stephie asked me if it would be alright for Rose to stay with us. Her mother had also perished in the fire, and now she was without a home or any of her family. Since Rose and Isabella were good friends, Stephie thought it only right to offer her a place to stay, and I agreed. She invited me to join her to visit Rose at the hospital, but I needed to meet with Anna, so I told her I'd talk to Rose later when I got home.

Once in my room, I had a moment alone to ponder what Stephanie had told me. Could it be just a coincidence that Blake had died in a fire? Or was it somehow connected to all the other craziness that was going on around me? I couldn't be sure how, but it just seemed too...

H interrupted my thoughts — and made me nearly jump out of my skin. What the hell was he doing lurking in my bedroom?! Apparently he thought his news couldn't wait. He had finished putting together the plan for “The Swipe”, which was apparently his name for “Operation: Steal The All Finding Pendant From The CEO Of ThunderCorps”. (I have to admit, his name was a lot easier to recite.) He quickly gave me the rundown on the plan — and it was an ambitious plan. I was nervous about how bold it was, but H was of the opinion that we didn't have any other options. And he *was* always better with the strategizing, so I was inclined to trust his assessment.

I had a lot to mull over on my way to the bowling alley, but I soon forgot about “The Swipe” when I arrived and saw Anna. She looked beautiful, and she seemed to be in a particularly good mood. Come to find out, she's a pretty good bowler, and she was looking forward going

head-to-head with me. I figured I could hold my own against her, so we took to the lanes, and I opened with an absolutely killer throw.

Well... if I was trying to kill the gutter. Yeah, my ball listed to one side and hit a whole lot of nothing. I was treated to a rather cheeky (and humiliating) animation on the scoreboard. Anna was heartily amused. She also proceeded to trounce me over the next hour, so I guess there wasn't much I could say in defiance.

Defeat aside, I was really enjoying my time with Anna. After we finished bowling, we sat and talked for a bit. Anna asked me what I would do with my life if I suddenly became a millionaire. It was an interesting question, and I decided that **any answer** that was genuine would be appropriate to share with her. So I told her my honest opinion. Anna thought about my answer, then told me I could ask her a question in return. I didn't want to pose another hypothetical scenario to her, so I asked her something else. (You could **ask her anything** and learn something new about her, I reckon.) It turns out that Anna had a pretty rough family life, and I was impressed with how positive an attitude she maintained despite the shit that she's been through.

Then Anna surprised me with another question — had I ever had sex before? I guess I didn't mind telling her that I had, but then she scooted closer and asked me what it felt like. Confused, I tried to explain that, well, it feels great if it's with the right person in the right circumstances. She just looked at me with an intense curiosity... and hunger? I found myself getting lost in her stare, and the smell of her was growing intoxicating. Almost without thinking, I decided to lean in and **kiss her**.

It was the right move, apparently, because Anna immediately returned the kiss with equal fervency. We lingered for a while before our lips parted, and then Anna stood and nervously slid her dress off her shoulders and let it drop to the floor. I let my gaze wander over her

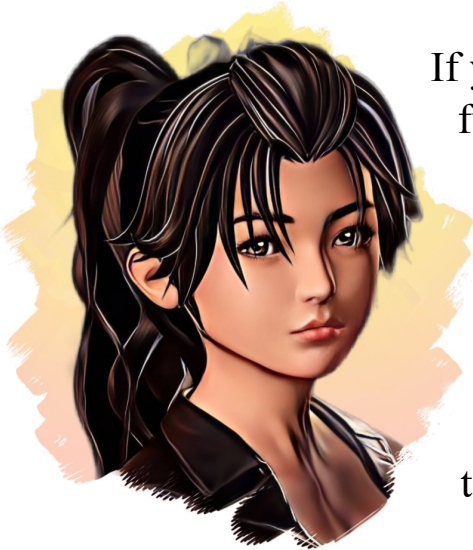
body, clad in nothing but panties and bra, and I felt my erection growing under my pants. I told her she looked beautiful. I don't know if that made her more or less nervous, but she was determined to give me the blowjob that we never got to, that day on the beach.

Before I knew it, my pants were off and my bowling pin was engulfed in the gutter of Anna's mouth. (That was kind of cringe, wasn't it? I promise you, that will be the last bowling analogy I make.) For being inexperienced, Anna was surprisingly good at giving a blowjob. The way she took my cock to the back of her throat, her tongue sliding all over my shaft, was out of this world. She started slowly, tentatively, and I just sat back and enjoyed the view of her ass rocking forward and backward as she knelt on all fours sucking me. Eventually, she began to pick up the pace, and the sensation was enough to drive me crazy. She never stopped to take a breath, and I started to wonder how long she could keep this up. Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, she suddenly went down on me even harder and faster. I gasped at the frenetic motion of her lips and tongue over my dick, and it was enough to push me over the edge. My body tensed as I unloaded into her mouth, filling it with my cum and sending more down her throat.

It was an incredible experience, and I told Anna so. She was glad that I liked it; she was worried about ruining things between us by being so forward. I assured her that wasn't the case, and that I would love to hang out with her again. She invited me to join her and Sarah on Sunday to visit a new bakery that was opening up. I was all for accompanying her, but I was worried that Sarah would feel put out. Anna assured me that she wouldn't. (I found out later that she called up Sarah and sweet-talked her into letting me join them. Well, whatever works!)

It was getting late, so I donned my clothes, said good night to Anna, and made my way home. When I got home, I found Rose sitting in the living room, just staring out the window. I had no idea what to say to her —

what do you say to someone who's just lost their whole family? — but I felt I should make an attempt at conversation, so I sat down next to her. I'm not sure what I expected, but Rose was in no mood to talk, and she curtly told me to mind my own business... more or less. I figured she must still be really hurting, so I left her alone to grieve.



If you've already interacted with Rose, past (or future) me, you've probably noticed that she can be a bit blunt, even biting at times. The thing is, she's dealing with a lot of her own demons. I didn't find out about some of the scars she bears until much later, but I can tell you that what she's been through, I wouldn't wish on anybody. Just remember that, if you ever find yourself tempted to take her mannerisms personally.

As I readied myself for bed — dreading the inevitable dreams that I would have — I noticed something strange: my right bicep seemed to have a tattoo that wasn't there before. It was like the tattoos that formed across my body prior to my mastering the Way of the Dragon, except this wasn't a mystical pattern. It was... a date? Oookay, there was a date tattooed on my arm, sometime in the year 1923. I figured the next time I had an opportunity to time travel, I should probably check it out. It was likely a message from myself, and I'd be a fool to ignore it.

Mercifully, I didn't have any disconcerting dreams that night, and I was feeling pretty good as I slid into my first class at school on Thursday. (History, of course.) Today was the day! The day we planned to carry out "The Swipe" and claim the All Finding Pendant. I had sent H's plan to the team earlier, and they were a little skeptical — as I had been — but we trusted H's judgment.



Just before class started, Elisa texted me to ask if I was mad at her. You know, for keeping me in the dark about my missing memories for so long. I wasn't mad, really; but even if was, I knew I could have given her **any response** and she would take it in stride. Regardless, she felt like we weren't spending much time together, so she invited me for drinks on Sunday. That sounded fun, so I told her **sure**, I was down.

Just then, Diane started the class and reminded us all that we had a test that day. FUCK! Once again, I had completely spaced it. I was so screwed. I briefly considered trying to copy the answers from Mike or Nas — but listen, that's never a good policy. Just **do your best**, and surely everything will work out fine. Right? Turns out the test wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be, so I was glad I didn't resort to cheating.

After the test, Diane once again asked me to hang back while all the other students filed out of the classroom. When it was just the two of us alone, she told me that she had thought more about us, and she didn't really want to stop tutoring me. But it had to be on a strictly platonic level. Her job would be on the line if it came out that she was getting frisky with one of her students. So she was willing to continue the private lessons, provided we keep it professional. I told her that **I understand**, and I didn't want to jeopardize her job. She was relieved and appreciative, and we planned to resume lessons after the school trip (that I totally had not forgotten about).

I had some time after school before the team began to assemble for “The Swipe”, and with nothing else to do, I decided to visit my dad in the hospital. He was as unresponsive as ever, but I sat there and talked to him anyway. Told him how crazy things were in my life. As I did, I realized that even with all the craziness, I wouldn't want to go back to how I was before my past (or future?) started to catch up to me. Now, at

least, I finally felt a sense of *purpose*. I would see this through to the end, whatever came of it.

I was just getting ready to leave when a familiar voice called out my name from behind me. I turned around and found myself staring at the last person I expected to see...

## Chapter 5

Ella stood in the doorway, looking surprised to see me. Not nearly as surprised as I was, though. She was dressed in her nurse uniform, acting as though nothing had happened. I felt like I was losing my mind. Maybe I was. But something felt off about the whole encounter, and so I steered our conversation in a direction that would allow me to catch her in a lie. This was not Ella; it was someone (or *something*, perhaps) that wanted me to think I was seeing Ella — to believe that everything I had seen and everything I was fighting for was nothing but a figment of my imagination. Well, it wasn't going to work. Before the simulacrum had a chance to react, I pinned her by the throat with a burst of magic. As she choked and struggled, I demanded that she reveal her true identity. But it was to no avail. Once she realized I had seen through her ruse, she vanished before I could stop her. Damn it. This did not bode well.

Whoever had posed as Ella must have been in the employ of The Watcher, but try as I might, I couldn't guess at what he was up to. This was what made my — *our* — fight against The Watcher so difficult, even before I lost my memories. He is inscrutable. His motivations are murky. Hell, after all this time, I still didn't know his real name. The only thing I really knew about The Watcher was that he was brutally relentless in his quest to hunt down and obliterate the Fallen. It was what made him so dangerous. I knew we could never let someone like that get their hands on an artifact as powerful as the All Finding Pendant.

And so it was that H, Elisa, Violet and I met in the old hideout that evening and geared up for “The Swipe”. I still had misgivings about the plan that H had come up with, but he was convinced it would all work out fine. That's H for you — his plans tend to rely on an unnerving amount of improvisation. Despite the uncannily high success rate of his

past escapades, I couldn't help but feel uneasy. We were about to break into the headquarters of a multi-billion-dollar company and steal a priceless artifact from the owner herself. It was probably one of the highest-stakes operations we'd ever attempted, and we wouldn't get a second chance — not with The Watcher preparing to steal the All Finding Pendant himself. We *had* to succeed. Elisa felt confident H's plan would work, so I gave up trying to argue the point. I was still distracted by the memory of the fake Ella at the hospital, and I wanted to talk to Elisa about it, but now wasn't the time. Instead, I grabbed my gear, and we headed out to snatch a pendant.

It turns out, breaking into the main offices of a major corporation was a lot more straightforward than I reckoned. I figured we would need a plethora of distractions, misdirections, sleight-of-hand, and maybe even a small explosion or two. Turns out, it wasn't nearly as difficult to get the keycards we needed as I expected. All we needed was an H Plan, a Sorceress, and a Time Traveler (who didn't bring a particular skill set but did manage to distract a security guard with her boobs).

Oh, and my tongue. Hear me out.

Once H got us into the building, and Violet distracted the guard, and Elisa lifted the keycard and handed it off to me, I had full access to the building. I managed to find my way to Ms. Vespertine's office without setting off any alarms. As luck would have it, the All Finding Pendant was sitting on top of her desk in plain sight. That should have made me worry about a trap, but I just wanted to get the pendant and get out of there. Unfortunately, my luck ran out just then, and I heard Ms. Vespertine approaching her office from the other side of the door. I only had a moment to duck under the desk before she came walking in. Her secretary was trying to get her attention, but she sent her away and closed the door. Then she called me out. Damn it — it seems I hadn't been as sneaky as I thought. I desperately tried to improvise, but all I

could manage was to ask her nicely to let me have the pendant. Like that was going to work!

To my surprise, Ms. Vespertine actually considered my request. She must have been thinking back to the first time we met, when she asked me bluntly if I would be inclined to have sex with her if I could, and I told her I would. I figured at the time that she was just messing with Mike and me, but it seems she'd actually been interested in the prospect. Now here we were, alone in her office, and she saw her opportunity. She asked me what I was willing to do for her in order to have her pendant. The look she gave me made it clear she wanted me to **service her**, and I wasn't about to protest. So she had me close my eyes while she divested her outfit, and when I opened them again, I was treated to a heavenly view of her naked body. She was every bit as beautiful as I imagined, and I didn't hesitate to get down on my knees and bury my face between her thighs.



I started working my tongue over the folds of her pussy, and I could tell by the sweet nectar moistening her sex that she was already aroused before I even started in on her. My tongue deftly found her clit, and I began working over it, now back and forth, now in circular motions. She moaned and writhed to the waves of pleasure I sent through her, and my mouth was filled with the intoxicating taste of her juices. As I slowly increased the speed of my tongue action, she bucked harder, quickly approaching her climax, and I gave her no reprieve as I pressed my face into her cunt and snaked my tongue inside her. With a mighty heave, she came in my face and collapsed against the desk as the waves of her orgasm wracked her body.

And that was how I came to acquire the All Finding Pendant. Though in fairness, it might have been more than just the sex that convinced Ms. Vespertine to give it to me. She told me she'd been entrusted with its safekeeping but was told that eventually someone would be along to retrieve it. She felt certain that I was that person, and she had a good feeling about me. I was tempted to ask her more about who had entrusted the pendant to her, but I didn't want to press my luck. I left quickly before she decided to change her mind about giving it to me.

H insisted we make our way back to the hideout separately, so I wasn't surprised when I didn't see any of the crew on my way out of the building. When I got back, everyone wanted to know how the final part of The Swipe had gone, but... well, you can imagine that I was not in any hurry to tell them what I had done with Ms. Vespertine. Elisa was naturally vexed at my reticence, but H took it in stride. He proposed we go out and celebrate our success. I was surprised at such an idea coming from H, but he was right. We'd scored a significant victory over The Watcher by obtaining the All Finding Pendant first, and it was as good a reason as ever to party a bit. So when they asked if I was in, even though I had a school trip the next day, I told them, "**Hell yeah!**" Even Violet, who was much more shy than the rest of us, agreed to come along.

The evening turned out to be quite fun, and about the time that H turned in for the night, Elisa, Violet and I got a game of Truth or Dare going. Violet had never played, so we explained the rules to her as we went. First Elisa picked Violet, who opted for Truth. Eli gave her an easy one to start, asking her what her favorite memory was. Violet had a couple of memories, one about her mother — but that served to remind her of the brutal way in which her mother had died. We tried to keep the game moving before she had a chance to grow melancholy. Violet asked Eli what *her* favorite memory was, and Eli recalled an exchange she and I had on the eve before one of our operations. Try as I might, I couldn't

recall the conversation — but given how many gaps I still had in my memory, that was hardly a surprise.

Next Eli picked me, and I chose **Dare**. (I probably could have picked Truth, but knowing Eli, she'd hit with me some really awkward question like when did I last have sex, and I wasn't about to let her put me on the spot like that.) Eli dared me to down another shot, and I probably should have just done it, but I was already feeling pretty tipsy. I didn't want to have a massive hangover at school the next day, so I asked her to **let me do something else**. Eli thought about it for a minute — and then she dared me to kiss Violet.

Violet looked rather flustered by the dare, and I worried that no matter what I told Eli, Violet was going to read something into it. Eli was giving me that look that said I didn't get to back out of the dare *again*, so I decided I would have to go through with it. I figured I would need a bit of alcohol to steady me after the kiss, so I told Elisa I would **kiss Violet and down the shot**. Eli was tickled, and after getting consent from Violet, I sat next to her and slowly bent over to kiss her. She hesitated at first, but eventually she relaxed and leaned into me as she returned the kiss. It was only for the span of a few seconds, but the moment seemed to last much longer. When we finally pulled apart, she was flushed — and I probably was, too. Not wanting to let her see how much her kiss affected me, I quickly downed another shot.

I chose Violet next, and she tried to pick Truth again, but Eli would have none of it. The game is more fun, she said, when you have to pick Dare once in a while. So Violet gave in and chose Dare. I could probably **pick anything** to have her do, but I decided to give her something easy, since she was still flustered from our kiss. Violet carried out my dare with rather more aplomb than I expected, and I could tell she was starting to get into the game.



Violet chose me next. I could see Eli giving me that look that said, “You’re a boring sod if you choose Truth.” So I chose Dare. To my surprise, Violet actually came up with a Dare befitting the game. She told me to choose one of my stepsisters and send them a random — and rather suggestive — text. Elisa was beside herself with glee, but I was concerned about sending something like that to either of my stepsisters. Especially Isabella. I was still worried that she had gotten an eyeful of my morning wood the other day, and I didn’t want to make things even more awkward with a spicy text. Violet saved me the trouble of having to choose by telling me that I could text Stephanie instead. I decided to go that route, and as the girls looked on, I sent Stephie the message that Violet recommended. It was just spicy enough that I started to get nervous about how she would react. After a minute or two, she finally responded and told me not to get too drunk. I breathed a sigh of relief; she seemed to have figured out that I wasn’t being serious.

Then I chose Eli, and when she chose Dare, I decided to get a little bold. I asked her to **kiss me**. She didn’t even hesitate — that is to say, she immediately told me it wasn’t going to happen and to pick something else. Funnily enough, she was smirking as she said it. Whatever. I asked her instead to whisper her biggest secret to Violet. She was surprised I didn’t ask her to tell *me* what her biggest secret was, but I already knew she wouldn’t do it if I asked. She *did* whisper something to Violet, though. Maybe I could get Violet to tell me later.

Elisa picked Violet and had her tell a truth, and then Violet picked Elisa and had her do the same. Violet asked her about a moment that really struck her hard. Elisa thought for a moment and said there were a couple different times she could think of. She asked us which story we wanted to hear. I figured **either story** would be worth hearing, and the story she told us was certainly interesting.

Violet excused herself to retire, and Eli and I did one more round of Truth or Dare. I picked Truth, and Eli asked me to tell her truthfully whether I still loved her. I could see she wasn't just playing now. This meant a lot to her. I gave the question some thought, but I knew the answer almost immediately: **yes**, I still loved her. I may have forgotten who I was for a time, but even then, I'd been drawn to her. And now that I remembered who I was and what we were striving for, I couldn't

imagine fighting this fight with anyone but her by my side. I told her how I felt, and the look of relief that passed across her face made it clear I had lifted a burden that she'd been carrying for a while. She asked if she could kiss me, and of course I told her **yes**.



A pregnant silence formed as we both looked at each other. I decided I would need to make the first move, so I got up and stood in front of her, then bent over to kiss her. She returned my kiss without hesitation, and we stayed like that for several moments, our lips pressed against each other and our tongues tentatively exploring. When we parted at last, we gazed at each other — and then we kissed again. I could feel the heat growing between us, and at last, Elisa pulled away and told me to look the other way for a minute. I didn't know what she wanted to do, but I obliged her. When she told me I could **turn around**, I did so — and found her stripped down to her underwear, looking at me with a flushed face. I said the first thing that came to my mind: “**You look beautiful.**” Eli visibly relaxed when I said this, and then she pointed out that I was now a bit overdressed. That was all the prompting I needed, and in just a few moments, I stood before her completely naked. I wasn't quite sure what she had in mind, but every possibility my imagination conjured was exciting, so I was already sporting an impressive erection. Elisa spent several moments taking in

the view of me, and then she proposed a blowjob. I told her I was all for it!

Before I knew it, Elisa was on her knees and taking my cock in her warm mouth. And not hesitantly — she took it *deep*. I sensed an eagerness in her, a pent-up passion that was finally finding release. I knew what that felt like, because I was feeling it too. After so long together, fighting side by side, separated for a time after I lost my memories, and now finally reunited, we *needed* to let ourselves be free with each other. I savored every sensation as she engulfed my shaft in her mouth and ran her tongue over it, and she moaned as my manhood filled her mouth and pressed all the way to the back of her throat. She started slowly, but as our passion mounted, she started to suck me harder and faster. It was the most incredible sensation, and I knew I wouldn't be able to keep from climaxing soon — much as I wanted it to go on forever. I told Eli I was going to come, but she didn't even slow down. She vigorously worked my cock over with her lips and tongue, pushing me closer and closer until I couldn't hold on any longer. I came hard, exploding into her mouth, and she held my throbbing member between her lips and sucked every last bit of cum I had to give.

We probably could have kept going, but we *were* pretty tired after the events of the day. So Elisa bid me goodnight, and I headed home to get some sleep. Well, you know how well that goes. I continued to have dreams, and they were becoming clearer than ever. Once again, I found myself facing *myself*. It seemed as if I was trying to steer myself away from the path I was on, and I couldn't understand why some version of me would want to dissuade me from ending the cycle of conflict. There was something about this I couldn't see, and my dreams only left me with more questions.

Despite partying the evening before and dealing with unsettling dreams that night, I felt fairly refreshed as our class headed out on its extended field trip. We were headed to the remote town of Willowbrook, a few hours away. We'd be spending the night, sightseeing and enjoying ourselves at the beach. I was really looking forward to it. After all the craziness of the past few days, I just wanted to unwind for a bit. Nas and I chatted on the bus, and though he started to tell me something of what he had learned about the history of West Mountain, we quickly set that aside when Mike joined the conversation. It was nice, just relaxing and shooting the breeze with my best friends. We even met somebody new, a girl named Kim who had just started at the school the day before and was looking for new friends to hang out with. She seemed kind of quirky, and also a bit of a perv. So we reckoned she'd fit in with us just fine.



The hours passed quickly, and before we knew it, we arrived in Willowbrook and the lodge where we'd be staying. As we filed off the bus, Diane gave us our room assignments. Students were paired up in rooms, but Diane didn't tell me who I'd be with. So I made my way into the lodge and located the door to my room, wondering who was going to be my roommate for the night.

I opened the door — and found Drake already unpacking. Slime-ball Drake. The idiot who tried to hit on my stepsister.

Oh no. *Absolutely not.*

I slammed the door and went stalking back down the hallway until I finally located Diane. I begged her to pair me up with someone else — *anyone* else. Diane was sympathetic, but she pointed out that everyone

was already unpacking, and it would be a real inconvenience to ask someone to swap rooms with me now. I would just have to make the best of it, she said.

Isabella came wandering by at that moment, and she pointed out that *she* didn't have a roommate, so I could stay in her room. Diane insisted that she couldn't let us do that. If she let one pair of opposite genders stay in the same room, then other students would get in their heads that *they* could shack up with the opposite sex, and next thing you know the entire lodge would be one big orgy... Okay, maybe she didn't actually say *that*, but you know how grown-ups tend to get worried about the strangest things. Isa said she understood — but as soon as Diane left, she told me to come to her room anyway. No big deal. I didn't want to upset Diane, but I wanted to share a room with slime-ball Drake *even less*, so I gratefully accepted Isa's offer.

Besides... I was kind of curious where it might lead. Isa and I hadn't spoken much since the night she fell asleep in my room, and I still didn't know just how much she had seen of my... well, how much she had seen when she woke up. The fact that she hadn't gone totally weird on me made me wonder if she hadn't seen anything — or if she *had* and she was okay with it. I confess, the thought made me a little excited.

After a short meeting in the cafeteria where Diane briefed the class on the itinerary for the trip, Isa and I made our way back to her room to get ready for an afternoon trek into town. We were in the middle of discussing who would sleep on which side of the bed that night when a knock at the door made us freeze. A moment later, Diane's voice sounded from the other side. In a panic, Isa pushed me into a closet — and then followed me in. We crouched in the dark closet, hoping Diane would move on, but then she opened the door and came in, calling for Isabella. Damn it. I hadn't locked the door when we came back.

Diane seemed confused when she didn't see Isabella anywhere. She looked around the room a bit as we remained pressed up against each other in the closet, trying to stay quiet. We were *really* pressed up against each other. I could feel the warmth of Isa's body, squeezed against mine. It was cramped, but... it was also nice. If Diane didn't leave soon, I was worried that I might get a boner, and then things would get really awkward.

Fortunately, Diane finally left, and we both breathed a sigh of relief. We didn't immediately exit the closet, though. We stayed pressed against each other, the silence growing long in the darkness. I fancied I could hear her heartbeat, and I wondered if it was beating as fast as my own. In that moment, I decided to do something very bold. I decided to **kiss her**. I don't know what thoughts were going through my head (or *which* head was doing the thinking, for that matter), but it felt like the right thing to do in the moment. I asked her if she would mind, and though she hesitated briefly, she said yes.

So I leaned forward, and I kissed her. It wasn't for long. But there was something undeniably magical about it. When at last our lips parted, we were both breathing a little heavier. Something changed between us in that moment. I knew we would need to talk about what had just happened, but now was not the time. We awkwardly exited the closet and got ready to meet the class at the front of the lodge for our trip into town.

As usual, Nas, Mike and I formed up to go exploring around Willowbrook. As we wandered in the direction of a nearby coffee shop, an old woman intercepted us and pointed to me. She offered to give me a reading, free of charge. Some kind of fortune teller, I guess. I was skeptical of her motives. Who gives a free reading with no strings attached? She insisted that I looked like I was in need of some guidance, and with Mike and Nas encouraging me to do it, I decided to humor her.



My friends continued on their way to the coffee shop, and the old woman led me inside what appeared to be her home more than any storefront.

As soon as we were inside, she sat down on the floor and began laying out tarot cards in front of her. Not sure what was happening, I sat down uncertainly opposite her. She flipped over a card, and after studying it, she told me I was holding on to something — something that was preventing me from embracing change and moving forward with my life. It could have meant anything, but somehow, it really struck me. Was I so fixated on my pursuit of The Watcher, and of ending the cycle of conflict, that it was preventing me from finding my own way forward? I wasn't sure.



The old woman then asked me if I would like her to read my future. I figured I might as well get the most out of this free session, so I said **yes**. Without another word, the woman reached out to choose another card to turn over, but then she paused and frowned. After several moments spent in silence, she finally looked up from the untouched cards. Though her gaze was steady, I thought I saw a hint of confusion in her eyes. She could sense... nothing. No hint as to what cards should be turned. What did that mean? I asked her, but she wouldn't tell me anything more specific. I sighed. The whole session was about as useful as I figured it would be. I excused myself to go meet up with my friends, and she didn't try to stop me as I left.

If only I'd known then what it was she really sensed — or who she was in league with. Perhaps I would have chosen to do things differently. Or perhaps not. Empty future or no, I was determined to see things through



to a finish. And so, past (or future) me, I will not presume to divulge what I've since come to understand about what that old woman saw that day. It won't change the course you choose; of this I am certain.

Anyway, I started to make my way to the coffee shop Nas and Mike were headed to; but my sense of direction being as stellar as it is, I managed to get myself completely turned around. Before I knew it, I was in an utterly unfamiliar part of town. As I wandered the streets, I wondered just how big Willowbrook was. Maybe I shouldn't traipse about aimlessly. I was just getting ready to call Nas when I rounded a corner and spied the last thing I expected to see.

The time machine. Sitting in plain sight at the end of an alley.

I stood there, the wheels in my head spinning as I tried to make sense of the sight. What was the time machine doing here? There had to be a reason; I wasn't about to believe that it was a random encounter. Nobody seemed to be about, but I was on my guard as I approached it.

If the time machine was here, I realized I had an opportunity to try to fix all of this, once and for all. I could travel in time and save my mom, potentially breaking the cycle in the process. But... there was also that mystery date that had appeared as a mark on my body. I had no idea what its significance was, but I figured it must be incredibly important somehow. I debated which date I should jump to. A part of me — the rational, cautious part that never seems to get a winning vote in my mental deliberations — realized that I shouldn't do anything without first getting backup. I had no idea what I would be jumping into.

It turns out, **any choice** would have led to the same outcome. Despite how far I had advanced with my magic, I couldn't control the destination of the time machine nearly as well as I thought I could. And had I tried to walk away, well — let's just say that I wasn't alone as I thought.

Someone *wanted* me to step into the time machine, and they weren't going to wait for me to fetch backup.

So I stepped into the machine. I tried to focus on the date I wanted to jump to. But I could tell, in the instant that the time machine activated and I felt the familiar gut-wrenching pull of temporal displacement, that I did not have a solid mental fix on the target I wanted it to go to. Or maybe it had been tampered with. Maybe it didn't matter what I focused on; it was going to take me to the same place regardless.

Reality slipped away as I went hurtling through time. I resisted the nauseating sensation as well as could be expected, though I may have let loose a blood-curdling shriek — just for dramatic effect, you understand. After a few agonizing seconds, I landed (if such a description is appropriate) at a place that did not look at all familiar to me. It was dark. And it was raining. The combination seemed to mute the very colors of the city street that I found myself standing on.

And standing right in front of me was The Watcher.

Acting on instinct, I immediately cast a spell to immolate him. But the flames of my magic seemed to have no effect. I tried to restrain him, but he seemed unfazed. I tried another spell to silence him, but at that moment, a pain washed over me as my skin began to blacken. In a panic, I lost my concentration, and the spells I had cast dissipated. In desperation, I tried to summon yet another spell — but I found that I couldn't even utter the words. My body was overwhelmed by pain, and I felt my connection to my magic growing numb and distant.

The Watcher was observing me coldly. He said I was killing myself, channeling my magic as I was. I wasn't about to listen to his manipulative lies, so I decided to surprise him with a regular physical

attack. I wasn't sure what would be most effective, so I tried **any fight move** I could think of in the moment.

It didn't matter. The Watcher anticipated my move, and he countered with a blow that sent me flat on my back. It felt like a truck had slammed into me. I couldn't move. The Watcher stood over me, but rather than press his advantage, he just kept talking. He told me I couldn't win, not unless I was prepared to give up everything I loved to achieve victory. He showed me a vision — a vision of Elisa, dying, yet another victim of the war we were waging. The sight of it made my blood run cold, but I knew better than to believe his fabrications. With what little strength I could muster, I told him he couldn't be trusted.

With a sigh of frustration, The Watcher reached up and removed his helmet — and for the first time, I finally saw the face of my enemy.

*...to be continued...*